

THE REPRESSED AND EMPOWERED

OTHER

THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND THE OCCULT IN

JOANNE HARRIS'S FICTION

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Introduction

Since the collapse of the medieval Church in England, there has been a conflict between Christianity and the occult (occult meaning, in this context, that which is associated with witchcraft, such as magic, the Tarot, and anything associated with paganism). This conflict has manifested itself within society in various ways over the centuries, most notably in the attempts to eliminate magical ceremony from religious practice with the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, which “presented itself as a deliberate attempt to take the magical elements out of religion”¹, and led directly to the witch hunts of the seventeenth century: “for those Protestants who believed that the age of Christian miracles was over, all supernatural effects necessarily sprang from either fraudulent illusion or the workings of the Devil.”² But no matter what form it has taken, it has always involved an attempt by the Church to obliterate or to control that unknown force which drives occultism.

Joanne Harris has been releasing novels since *The Evil Seed* was published in 1989, and is now a major literary success; a diverse writer who has been labelled as “a foodie writer, a French writer, a writer of magical realism, (and)

a writer of modern fairytales”³. Within several of her novels, Harris explores the conflict between religion and the occult. In particular, she demonstrates the way in which religion can be used for negative purposes and the way occultism can represent its positive, more open-minded counterpart — discussing her stance on religion and magic, she states that, “Historically it’s about the systematic suppression of indigenous beliefs by the early Christian church.”⁴ This dissertation will demonstrate the way in which she uses her concerns with the conflict between religion and the occult to explore a variety of literary issues within the texts *Chocolat*, *Holy Fools* and *Sleep, Pale Sister*.

Chapter One will demonstrate the way in which Harris uses the techniques of the magical realist mode to set up this conflict between religion and the occult. Magical realism is a problematic literary term which offers, according to Maggie Ann Bowers’ *Magic(al) Realism*, “a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of Western philosophy”⁵. First coined in Latin America in the 1920s, the term has become both increasingly popular and increasingly confused in recent years. Much of this confusion is due to the combining of three different and quite separate literary terms: magical realism, magic realism and marvellous realism, all of which refer to, in literature, the coalescence of realist narrative modes and magical events. For the purposes of this dissertation, the chapter will refer only to magical realism, a term which originated in Germany as *Magischer Realismus* and which focuses specifically on “the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings”⁶. For example, in *Chocolat*, the tone of the narrative is matter-of-fact when Vianne describes how they banish the

ghosts from their new house: “for ten minutes we stamped around every room, shouting and singing at the top of our voices — *Out! Out! Out!* — until the walls shook and the outraged ghosts fled”⁷. Magical realism is also, unlike magic realism, the form in which ‘magic’ refers to actual magical happenings as opposed to the “mystery of life”⁸ — such as in *Sleep, Pale Sister*, when Marta is able to take over Effie’s body to the point where Effie is actually barely recognisable as herself: “Oh, there was a superficial resemblance, something in the figure and the shape of the face, but this girl was younger, her hair darker”⁹.

Exploring ideas from *Magic(al) Realism*, such as Bowers’ idea that magical realism is a transgressive mode because writers can use it to challenge currently held beliefs¹⁰, Chapter One will look at the way in which Harris uses magical realism in the chosen texts, not only to set up a conflict between religion and the occult, but to question and devalue the commonly held views on religion.

Chapter Two will focus on the way in which Harris aligns religion with patriarchy within her texts. Using evidence from various supporting texts, it will demonstrate the way in which religion is traditionally seen as a patriarchal system — a system dominated by males — in both sociological and literary terms, and the way in which Harris specifically demonstrates it as such. The chapter will continue by exploring the implications of aligning religion with patriarchy, such as the way in which religion is demonstrated to

be a negative system, and more specifically, a system which suppresses women.

Following from this, Chapter Three will demonstrate that, if religion is aligned with patriarchy in Harris's texts, then the occult is aligned with femininity — and can therefore be used as a vehicle for exploring feminist issues. The chapter will examine the way in which the occult is traditionally associated with the feminine, and the way in which feminist writers have used occult themes to explore the ideas of feminist critics such as Hélène Cixous, Xavière Gauthier and Simone de Beauvoir.

Cixous, Gauthier and de Beauvoir are all French feminists, and therefore their criticism is concerned with the specific area of interest unique to that group of critics. French feminism emerged in France in the 1970s, and although the concerns were widespread, the most notable focus was that of language. The French feminists believed that “our structures of understanding are coded in and by our language”¹¹, and that by focusing on the processes and the way in which we acquire language, they could “deconstruct patriarchal discourses”¹² — in other words, deconstruct the patriarchal ideas which lie behind the language. From this critical focus they developed the idea of the “*écriture féminine*”¹³, or feminine language — something which will be explored in detail in the context of Harris's occult themes. Central to all these ideas is de

Beauvoir's "concept of the 'Woman as Other'"¹⁴ — the woman as repressed, ostracised. In *The Second Sex* she puts forward the idea that Woman is viewed as the counterpart of man's superior One — she is the Other, embodying all the negative equivalents of man's positive qualities — as a demonstration of the way in which women are naturally degraded in a patriarchal society.¹⁵ Chapter Three will explore the way in which Harris expresses the Woman as Other — but as a positive, empowered Other — using the theme of the occult.

Hélène Cixous takes de Beauvoir's concept further, using Freud's idea of the unconscious — the claim that every person has an unconscious mind consisting of repressed desires, which are generally hidden, but manifest themselves in certain behaviours such as slips of the tongue¹⁶ — and claiming that "a 'feminine' text is one that reveals the 'unconscious' or the repressed 'Other'"¹⁷. The ways in which this unconscious is revealed will be examined in Chapter Four, which will be concerned with the ways in which Harris explores psychological ideas within her texts, using the themes of religion and the occult to do so. It will explore the literary devices that Harris uses to express the repressed Other, such as dreams, and will go on to examine the ways in which the psychology of Carl Jung is expressed in Harris's work.

In particular, this chapter will look at Jung's ideas of the "collective unconscious"¹⁸. This is an idea developed from Freud's theory of the

unconscious, but instead of concerning an individual's repressed experiences or desires, it concerns something that is shared by and instinctual to everyone, and is expressed by a universal collection of 'archetypal images'. These images are, according to Jung, drawn from mythology, which he views as being an expression of a "common human instinctual organization"¹⁹ — otherwise known as the collective unconscious.²⁰ Chapter Four will explore the way in which Harris uses devices such as Tarot cards, myths and fairytales to explore these ideas.

So, in essence, this dissertation will give an overview of some of the main issues explored within the fiction of Joanne Harris, focusing on the way in which the conflicting themes of religion and the occult are used to bring these themes to the fore.

Chapter One

Magical Realism

This chapter will demonstrate that Joanne Harris uses magical realist techniques to set up an opposition between religion and the occult within her work. It will outline the particular aspects of magical realism which manifest themselves within her texts, and demonstrate the way in which these relate to the themes of religion and the occult.

It is perhaps best to first outline the specific areas in which Harris's fiction shows itself to be realist. The realist mode is concerned with presenting a portrayal of the world as it is, or at least as the author sees it — and “it is thus not concerned with idealization, with rendering things as beautiful when they are not, or in any way presenting them in any guise as they are not”²¹. This technique is evident throughout Harris's fiction, particularly in the way in which she creates her characters — although there are clearly characters with whom we as readers are meant to sympathise and characters of whom we should disapprove, even the best of characters is flawed in some way, and therefore, human. For example, in *Chocolat*, the protagonist, Vianne, is presented as kind, loving, open-minded and sensible — yet she is also stubborn (in the sense that she deliberately disrupts the quiet community in

which she lives, albeit for good reason), selfish (in that she keeps herself and her daughter on the move, despite the fact that she is aware that her daughter needs some stability in her life), and, at times, interfering. Similarly, in *Holy Fools*, Juliette is presented as logical, caring and devoted to her daughter — but she is also willing to sacrifice the health and sanity of the people around her (most notably when she poisons Clémentine) for the sake of her daughter. Although these characters are easier to sympathise with than their opposing counterparts, they are still presented as human, with human motivations, and therefore they are real. This form of realism is known as “psychological realism”²², meaning that the reader is given “the sense that characters in fictional narratives have realistic ‘interiority’ or complex emotional and intellectual depth.”²³

The realist aspects of Harris’s texts are also evident in the descriptions of the settings and the people. Right from the outset of *Chocolat*, the descriptions are simple and realistic, stripped of any idealising qualities: “the shop was originally a bakery and still carries the baker’s wheatsheaf carved above the narrow doorway, but the floor is thick with a floury dust, and we picked our way across a drift of junk mail as we came in”²⁴. The ‘drift of junk mail’, in particular, gives this sentence a realist feel, as it is an aspect of daily life that we, as readers, are familiar with. This illustrates one of the fundamental aims of the realist genre: to present situations in such a way that “people can see

themselves ... and situations they can relate to.”²⁵ Using details that all readers can relate to allows them to place themselves within the texts, and therefore the text feels more real to them.

It is because of this firm basis in realism, then, that the juxtaposition between the real and the magical is so powerful within Harris’s texts. Magical occurrences — which Maggie Ann Bowers suggests can include “ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents and strange atmospheres”²⁶ — are pervasive throughout all of Harris’s texts. In *Sleep, Pale Sister*, the ghost of Marta returns repeatedly to inhabit the body of Effie, witnessed by all the main characters in the book, while Effie herself floats in some unspecified dimension: “floating among endless, shifting skies with my hair dragging behind me like a comet’s tail”²⁷. In *Holy Fools* and *Chocolat*, the magic is more concrete: spells, cantrips and Tarot readings dominate both texts from the outset. But what is interesting about Harris’s writing is not the fact that she uses magical realism, but the purposes for which she uses it.

Maggie Ann Bowers argues that magical realism has been used by many feminist writers because of its “transgressive and subversive qualities”²⁸; because in magical realism “the magical is presented as a part of ordinary reality, then the distinction between what is magical and what is real is eroded”²⁹. In essence, Bowers is saying that when this distinction is eroded, it

calls into question whether reality is as real as it appears. So, by using magical realism to write about political and social ideas and establishments, writers can cast doubt upon our accepted viewpoints on these things, because “the reader becomes aware that if the category of the real is not definite then all assumptions of truth are also at stake”³⁰.

From this viewpoint, it can be seen that, by using magical realism to blur the distinctions between what is real and what is magical, and by aligning religion with the ‘real’ — as the rest of this chapter will demonstrate — Harris calls into question the validity of certain generally held viewpoints on religion.

It can be seen throughout all the novels this essay examines that Harris sets up an opposition between religion and the occult. One of the primary ways in which she does this is the narrative structure of her novels. In *Chocolat* and *Holy Fools* the narratives are divided fairly equally between two perspectives: one male and one female. In *Chocolat*, the male perspective is that of a priest, while the female perspective is that of a ‘witch’; in *Holy Fools* the female perspective is also that of a witch, while the male perspective is that of a man who, while not actually being religious, is also aligned with the church (as he is acting the part of a confessor). In both novels these characters are directly in opposition with each other, and as they use religion and magic in order to

enact their own private battles, the opposition is essentially between these two institutions.

Sleep, Pale Sister, though it actually encompasses four separate narrative perspectives, works in much the same way. The characters Effie and Fanny, though fighting for different reasons, are both fighting the same man, using the same occult weapons; in fact, one of the weapons Fanny uses is Effie's ability to leave her body. Henry, the man whom they are opposing, attempts to use religious ideals, among other things, to justify the way in which he behaves towards them; thus, he is cast as a strongly religious man, and a spokesman for religious ideals. So, though the narrative structure is complex, the battle between the two themes remains, in essence, the same.

If Harris uses magical realism in the way this chapter has demonstrated, then it follows that, if the main conflict within her texts is between religion and the occult, then one of these themes must take the position of the magical, and the other the real. The discourse of the occult, alongside being magical by definition, is outside of our accepted experience of the world — the majority of readers will not be able to associate it with their own lives, or accept it as being a legitimate part of the world in which they live, and therefore it is aligned with the magical. The discourse of religion, on the other hand, is one that is part of our everyday lives, and therefore we accept it as being part of

the real; even if we do not agree with any of the ideas expressed by religion, we can accept that it is part of the real world. In this sense, then, in a conflict between religion and the occult, it follows that religion would take the position of the real. It is something within our accepted sphere of experience, and, as this chapter has already illustrated, that is a large part of realism: writing about “situations (readers) can *relate to*”³¹.

So, if Harris aligns religion with the ‘real’, then by calling into question the way in which we view reality, she is calling into question the way in which we view religion. She is trying to make the point that religion in itself is not necessarily a good or a bad thing, but it is a system which can be easily used by people with negative motives: “religion ... has been used as an excuse for most of history’s bloodiest wars, its genocidal purges and its greatest moral outrages”³². This argument manifests itself throughout her texts, and it is the conflict between the magical and the real which persistently calls attention to it.

Religion is repeatedly shown to be used as a negative force throughout these texts. In *Chocolat*, priest Reynaud uses religion to justify the killing of gypsies when he burns their boat: “thieves who had desecrated our church, insulted our priest, deserved nothing more”³³. He uses religion to justify his dislike of Vianne, claiming that her chocolate festival is a direct affront on the church: “She must have ... planned it to coincide with the most holy of the Church’s

ceremonies"³⁴. Finally, he uses religion to justify the destruction of the chocolate festival, claiming that he receives "a sign"³⁵ from God.

Similarly, in *Holy Fools*, LeMerle uses religion to manipulate the behaviour of the women in his charge, and therefore to use them as weapons in his private war against his father, the Bishop of Evreux. He turns them against each other, generates hysteria among them, and causes them to actually harm and even, in the case of Antoine and Germaine, kill each other. Though LeMerle is not religious himself, he is aware that religion is a powerful tool for manipulation: "the wonderful thing about the Bible is that there's a quote to justify anything, even lechery, incest and the slaying of infants"³⁶.

In *Sleep, Pale Sister*, Henry uses religion to justify his own actions to himself. He convinces himself that all women are inherently sinful, and that he is only sleeping with prostitutes to keep his wife free from sin: "I knew she had the seeds of debauchery in her, but it was up to me to ensure that they should never be allowed to grow"³⁷. The flashbacks to his childhood reveal that it is religious ideas which have caused him such confusion in adulthood – he believed he was being punished for his sexual experimentation ("God had been there all the time, God had seen it all"³⁸), and therefore became convinced that any expression of sexuality was wrong, and that it was the fault of the women who seduced him. This kind of logic is also how he

justifies murdering Marta: "I knew that whatever her age she was her mother's creature, conceived in sin and bred to pray upon sinners like myself"³⁹.

It is clear from these examples that Harris demonstrates religion as a system which can be used for negative purposes. But although we would be able to recognise this regardless of the magical content of the texts, it is the use of magical realism which highlights the fact that there is no logic in what these characters are doing. It is when we see the religious aspects juxtaposed against the magical aspects that we get a sense of what Harris is really trying to say: these men take the word of God and twist it to justify whatever it is they want to do, and taking their word for anything is illogical. This is brought to our attention most noticeably in the way in which the religious men treat the women who are regarded as 'witches' — they condemn them, claim them to be murderers and to be cavorting with the devil, when we as readers are clearly aware that they are not. Without the magical aspect of the work it would be impossible for the reader to be aware of the true ridiculousness of these accusations: so, it is through the use of magical realism that Harris sets up an opposition between the themes of religion and the occult.

Chapter Two

Religion and Patriarchy

All three of the texts examined within this dissertation are concerned with religion in different cultural contexts. Because they are from drastically different time periods, and therefore have different religious contexts, this chapter will examine each text individually.

Holy Fools is set in France, in the early seventeenth century. In the context of the war between religion and the occult in this time period, religion is generally viewed as an oppressive patriarchal structure. This is largely due to the fact that, in the worldwide witch-hunts of that time, the majority of those accused of witchcraft were women. Looking at sex ratio figures for those accused of witchcraft, Christina Lerner says, "On average, witchcraft, the ultimate in human evil, was sex-related to women in much the same proportion as sanctity, the ultimate in human good, was sex-related to men."⁴⁰

Lerner argues that this is because the values associated with a witch represent the "inverse of the positive values of any given society"⁴¹. Therefore, in a patriarchal society — "a society in which men are dominant in all the positions of power"⁴² — men will define the ideal characteristics of a woman,

and any woman who deviates too far from this ideal will be labelled as a witch.⁴³

Because, as explained in the introduction, it was primarily the Church who were fighting the war against witchcraft at this time — when the Church were trying desperately to establish a divide between primitive magical practices and the more mystical aspects of their own practices — it can be said that it was the Church who established the ‘positive values’ against which witches could be compared, and therefore the Church which was establishing itself as an oppressive patriarchal structure. In a patriarchal society, the Church — being one of the strongest institutions in that society — will always be a patriarchal institution, because it must stand for the values of the general society. But that is not to say that the Church, being patriarchal, is automatically oppressive. This chapter will explore the specific areas of Harris’s texts in which the Church can be seen to suppress women — or where the characters can be seen to wield religion as a tool for the suppression of women — and how this relates to the general attitudes of society in the time periods she examines.

Chapter One has already demonstrated that Harris presents Christianity as a tool which can be used for negative purposes. In *Holy Fools*, the character LeMerle uses his position as a religious spokesman to suppress and

manipulate the women in his charge. He does this symbolically from the moment he arrives, cutting their hair and removing their jewellery so that not only do they lose their individuality, they also lose their femininity. There is already a connection between protagonist Juliette's long hair and her femininity and sexuality, created when she claims, "I can be myself"⁴⁴ when she discards her wimple. She says of her hair that it is "my only beauty"⁴⁵. Similarly, when she views Antoine for the first time without her wimple she says, "the sudden beauty of her thick black hair was a startling revelation."⁴⁶ When LeMerle cuts their hair, he removes this beauty, this signifier of femininity, highlighted by the fact that Clémentine is revealed as "a wanton with the face of a little boy"⁴⁷.

This suppression is taken further by the removal of privileges such as leaving the abbey — "our excursions to the town and to the harbour were to cease at once"⁴⁸ — and by the ceasing of lessons in reading and writing — "To obey the scripture was enough, she said; anything more was dangerous and unnecessary"⁴⁹. The use of the words 'dangerous and unnecessary' is particularly important; it is indicative of the fear that patriarchal institutions have of strong women. According to Christina Lerner, "there is hostility to women who exhibit characteristics normally appropriated to men by men, such as independence and aggression"⁵⁰. It is also particularly noteworthy that it is the use of language that is restricted, as the restriction of language,

particularly written language, has always been a prominent theme within feminism, as will be explored further in Chapter Three. Although it is Mère Isabelle who introduces these changes, she does so while under the control of LeMerle — as is made evident by his reference to her as “my little pupil”⁵¹ — and so, in essence, it is LeMerle who is instigating the changes, and by using religion as a tool for instigating these changes, he is demonstrating that it can be used as an oppressive structure.

Sleep, Pale Sister is set in the late nineteenth century, at a time when, according to Diana Basham, “the notion of the ‘Occult Woman’ was repeatedly represented as the figure that best embodied what was perceived as incoherent and problematic”⁵². Harris explores the theme of the occult woman in nineteenth century culture, aligning religion with science to give the full scope of the way in which women were oppressed at that time.

Right from the beginning of the text, Henry attempts to silence his wife, Effie, refusing her the opportunity to express her opinions or her feelings. Upon discovering she has lost her child, she tries to express her grief, and is told by Henry to “stop that noise!”⁵³ Repeatedly, throughout the text, she is told by Henry that her feelings are invalid, that she is unwell rather than simply unhappy, and when she tries to argue, he tells her that she will feel what she

is told to feel: "If I want you to be an hysteric, then an hysteric is what you will be."⁵⁴

This form of female suppression — particularly in relation to physical and mental health issues — was very common in the nineteenth century. Much of it was related to the condition known as 'hysteria', which was thought to primarily affect women, and was frequently linked with menstruation, which was "a site for anxious discussion about the legendary occult powers of 'Woman'"⁵⁵. Menstruation had special significance in the nineteenth century, linked as it was with both the occult and with conditions such as hysteria, and this can be seen in frequent references within nineteenth century texts. Harris picks up on this theme within *Sleep, Pale Sister*, with references to the cycles of the moon as well as specific references to blood and menstruation. The most noticeable occurrence of menstruation within the text is when Henry first becomes aware of it, as blood soaks the back of a girl's dress while he is in church. Unaware of what exactly it is, he views it as his punishment, "for mocking the Host and for daring to come unshriven to Communion."⁵⁶ He describes how he thought the girl a "monster"⁵⁷, and the connection between menstruation and the way in which Henry views women is clear — he, as did many men in his society, sees menstruation as a sign of woman's 'Otherness'.

With the alignment of science and religion — symbolised by Henry's alignment with Dr Russell ("It occurred to me that in Russell I had a potentially invaluable ally"⁵⁸) — Henry acquires the power to suppress Effie's Otherness. Dr Russell tells Henry of "the various manias to which the female of the species is commonly prone, citing cases of hysterical catalepsy, schizophrenia and nymphomania"⁵⁹. Together these two men keep Effie housebound, and drug her so that she is unable to communicate.

It is clearly demonstrated that it is Henry's religious ideals which lead to this suppression — he talks about the fact that he views women as being the source of "my sin, my guilt"⁶⁰, and claims that if you were to "let a single woman, just one, into the Kingdom of Heaven itself ... she will throw down the blessed one by one."⁶¹ So, he views his oppression of her as something which is good for both of them: he is suppressing her sin, and stopping himself from being tainted. So, Harris once again demonstrates the way in which religion can be used to justify this kind of behaviour, because it is by using religious justification that Henry permits himself to act in the way that he does.

In *Chocolat*, set in a contemporary context, the suppression of women in the name of the church is less drastic, because we live in a culture which is less overtly patriarchal. But still, it is evident — in the fact that Joséphine is

expected to go back to her abusive husband because of “the sacrament of marriage”⁶², and in the way in which Reynaud treats Vianne. From the outset, she is viewed by Reynaud as an outsider due to her exuberance: “she has nothing in common with us”⁶³. Her status as a single mother who refuses to bend to his will exacerbates his view of her, to the point where Reynaud acknowledges that they are essentially at war: “She is only one of the influences against which I must fight every day”⁶⁴. In the name of religion, he takes steps to ruin her business and drive her out of the village — eventually planning to destroy her chocolate festival because it is an attempt to “undermine my authority, to make a mockery of my teachings”⁶⁵. By setting *Chocolat* in a contemporary context, Harris is demonstrating that religion can still be used in the attempt to suppress strong women; by labelling Vianne as a witch and a murderess, Reynaud can justify to himself his treatment of her, convinced that he is doing the community a favour.

So, throughout these texts, Harris demonstrates that religion, while not necessarily an oppressive structure in itself, can be used to harm and suppress women, and to give men some justification for doing so.

Chapter Three

The Occult and Feminism

Occultism — particularly witchcraft — has historically been a feminine domain. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, witch hunts in previous centuries were traditionally directed at women, to the point that when they were searching for witches in Russia in the twelfth century, they “simply began to round up the entire female population”⁶⁶. In the nineteenth century, occult sciences such as mesmerism were primarily concerned with exerting control over the “uncanny medium”⁶⁷ which was seen to originate in the womb — a medium which was a “mode of psychic interaction between people that is deeply disturbing to the concept of individuality”⁶⁸, such as Mesmer’s ‘Universal Fluid’ or Jung’s ‘collective unconscious’. In other words, nineteenth century occult scientists saw women, and more specifically the womb, as the source of all disruption in the human psyche, and developed their sciences in an attempt to control this disruption.

Because of this connection between the occult and the feminine, it has long been a space within literature for exploring feminist issues. Diana Basham explains:

Victorian occult experimentation, 'the new witchcraft' as it was repeatedly called, was particularly important in providing a cultural arena in which the many 'ghosts' and prejudices surrounding the Victorian 'Woman Question' could be summoned and, where possible, confronted.

Diana Basham, *The Trial of Women: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* United Kingdom: Macmillan, 1992, p. 2

In the case of Victorian literature, writers used the occult sciences to explore woman's supposed occult powers, focusing both on the perceived cause of these powers (the womb) and on the perceived symptoms (such as hysteria and schizophrenia). But it is not just the occult sciences which have been used to explore feminist issues — witchcraft has long been seen as a feminist domain. As far back as 1862, Jules Michelet claimed in his *La sorcière* (The Sorceress) that witchcraft was "a revolt of women-as-serfs against their condition"⁶⁹ — in other words, a tool which women wielded to revolt against their suppression. This chapter will demonstrate the way in which Harris uses the occult, and particularly witchcraft, within her texts to explore feminist issues.

One theme which has been explored in a great deal of feminist literary criticism is that of the repression of language, and the need for women to find their own written language with which to express themselves. As Xavière Gauthier said in her "*Existe-t-il une écriture de femme?*":

Throughout the course of history, (women) have been mute, and it is doubtless by virtue of this mutism that men have been able to speak and write. As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write *as men do*, they will enter history subdued and alienated.

Xavière Gauthier, "Existe-t-il une écriture de femme?" in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.), *New French Feminisms* USA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, p. 162-163

Following directly from this, many feminist writers have struggled in the search for an *écriture féminine* with which to express themselves.

In *Holy Fools*, Mère Isabelle, acting on behalf of LeMerle, restricts the novices from learning reading and writing. This has several effects — it stops them from entering into written communication with anyone, and therefore, due to their access to the outside world also being restricted, stops them from communicating with anyone outside the island. But more significantly to feminist criticism, it stops them from expressing themselves. Harris draws attention to this by saying that Mère Isabelle regarded anything other than learning the Scripture as "dangerous and unnecessary"⁷⁰ — in other words, saying that it would be dangerous for them to be able to read anything for themselves, or learn to express themselves in their own way. As the previous chapter has already demonstrated that religion is aligned with patriarchy within Harris's texts, and it is in the name of religion that the right to read and write are being revoked, this highlights the importance placed by

patriarchy on these tools of expression — and the fear of women being able to use them for themselves.

It is therefore of great importance within the text that Juliette is able to read and write. The fact that much of the text is made up of extracts from her journal puts emphasis on the idea that it is only in writing that women are able to truly express themselves — when Juliette attempts to speak freely, she is met with either outright argument or simple disapproval, as when LeMerle observes, “Soeur Auguste seems rather free with her opinions”⁷¹. Juliette learns very quickly that expressing her opinions aloud will only cause her problems — “I should not have spoken”⁷² — and so, it is only through writing in her journal that we have access to her true thoughts and feelings. The power that Juliette herself attaches to her ability to read and write is made clear very early on: “I wonder whether I have brought these visions upon myself by writing so much about him in my journal”⁷³.

The importance of reading and writing, as well as artistic expression, is also explored within *Sleep, Pale Sister*. From the beginning it is clear that Henry has no interest in the true Effie — when she attempts to express her opinions she is rebuked: “Mr Chester’s reply had left me in no doubt as to his own poor opinion of my taste, graphic, literary or otherwise”⁷⁴. One of the ways in which Henry restricts Effie when her condition worsens is by stopping her

from reading, saying, “I had long suspected that she read too much; it gave her fanciful notions”⁷⁵. He goes on to say, “I told her there could be no objection to improving, Christian works, but forbade any more novels, or anything but the lightest kind of poetry”⁷⁶. In this way, he is expressly attempting to restrict her from forming her own opinions, particularly, we can presume from the mention of Christianity, on the subject of religion.

Because Effie is unable to express herself publicly, she begins to write a journal, demonstrating once again the importance of written language for women who wish to express themselves. Effie takes this form of expression a step further than Juliette in *Holy Fools*, by creating her own form of language with which to express herself:

(sting sting sting stingstingstingstingst...)
 (it was henry *henry* killed her *henry* killed)
 Joanne Harris, *Sleep, Pale Sister* (1994) Germany: BCA, 2004, p. 222

This ties in with the idea of the *écriture féminine*, a feminine style of writing which French feminist critics claim can be seen in “absences, ruptures and ‘jouissances’”⁷⁷ within texts. Because Effie is unable to express herself using language as we think of it, she creates her own form of language, which can be seen as a specifically feminine one due to its lack of grammar and coherent structure — its ‘absences’ and ‘ruptures’.

Although written language is not so dominant a theme within *Chocolat*, Harris does focus on the way in which myths and stories which do not express Christian values are suppressed within the community. Specifically, protagonist Vianne tells the local children stories about bells which rain down chocolates at Easter, and introduces them to the idea of Eostre, a “fertility deity from pagan times”⁷⁸. The Church, viewing this as heretical, try to stop her doing this, releasing pamphlets warning people of the dangers of listening to such stories. Here, the focus is on the language used in the attempt at suppression: it is significant that the authors of the pamphlet are female, and that they choose the written language as the most potentially powerful form of expression, rather than speaking to people personally. This, again, highlights the importance Harris places on written language. Vianne’s reaction to the pamphlet is also significant, as she immediately guesses who’s behind it because “it’s exactly their style”⁷⁹, indicating the importance of the individual writing styles of women.

Another way in which Harris uses occultism to express feminist ideas is in the expression of women as the ‘Other’, a concept which was explained in the introduction. In *Chocolat*, Vianne explicitly embraces her sense of Otherness. From the beginning, she deliberately provokes Reynaud into disapproving of and even disliking her: “I smiled sweetly at his disapproval. Something in me continued to court it, perversely”⁸⁰. It is initially her outgoing nature, her

strength and her independence which cause Reynaud to think of her as threatening and unnatural: “we are accustomed to a greater reserve in people around us”⁸¹. Later, his disapproval upon finding out that she is bringing up an illegitimate child reveals how he feels about her doing something which enhances her strength and independence. He claims that “it is the sense of disorder that she brings that so unnerves me”⁸² — but this is a sense of disorder that is created by her doing what she chooses, and encouraging others, such as Joséphine and Armande, to do the same.

But it is not simply her strength and independence which create this sense of otherness. In using the theme of the occult, Harris sets Vianne apart from the other female characters within the book, aligning her already established strength and independence with her skills in witchcraft: “in using these almost forgotten skills I enhance my otherness”⁸³. It is often her use of witchcraft which gives her power over Reynaud, such as when her good-luck sachets make him dizzy: “His hands clutched at the padded surface as if for support. Another surreptitious glance at the bright sachet at the door.”⁸⁴ It is no coincidence that the only other female character within the text who is independent and strong from the beginning — Armande — is also in possession of occult skills, such as an ability to see and predict things which she should not be aware of, demonstrated most evidently when she refers to Vianne’s unborn and, to Armande, unmentioned child: “the other is for the

next one, I think you'll know what I mean."⁸⁵ Joséphine also learns to be strong and independent: with Vianne's help, and while Vianne is teaching her the art of chocolate-making, which is "also a kind of magic"⁸⁶. It is therefore with the acquisition of these occult skills that the female characters in *Chocolat* are given their feminine power.

Similarly, in *Sleep, Pale Sister*, Effie achieves power over Henry through her ability to allow Marta into her body. It is the combined occult powers of Effie, Fanny and Marta which bring him under their control: "What do you want of me, Marta? Tell me what it is and I'll give it to you."⁸⁷ In *Holy Fools*, it is Juliette's interest in witchcraft which sets her apart from the other women: her knowledge of herbs and potions gives her power over LeMerle when it saves his life ("your teachings saved my life, dear witch"⁸⁸) and it gives her the power to poison Clémentine without killing her ("the morning glory seed, though dangerous in use, is far from lethal"⁸⁹). So, in all three texts Harris uses the female characters' occult powers to exacerbate their otherness, and to endow them with power.

Chapter Four

Psychology

This chapter will explore the way in which Harris writes about the repressed Other and other psychological ideas, and the way in which she utilises the theme of the occult in doing this.

As mentioned in the introduction, Hélène Cixous was of the opinion that a text was feminine if it expressed the repressed Other. Her idea was that our knowledge of this Other comes from “dreams, slips of the pen or tongue, and free association, that is, saying or writing whatever comes into our minds without censorship”⁹⁰, and that feminine texts allow the unconscious to break through into consciousness via these methods.

It is evident that Harris uses these methods, among others, to express her characters’ unconscious desires. Dreams play a significant role in all three texts, primarily in telling us of the characters’ desires, but also in uncovering repressed memories.

In *Holy Fools*, Juliette claims, “I must use my dreams, not fear them. Only a fool fears knowledge.”⁹¹ In saying this she is aligning herself with the

common idea that dreams are there to tell us something, and this idea manifests itself within the text as dreams being intended to teach Juliette about herself, and therefore to teach us about Juliette. For example, we learn from her dreams that the person she most fears is LeMerle — “a nightmare hand of flung cards with LeMerle’s face on every one”⁹². But Harris takes this idea further by aligning it with the theme of the occult, so that Juliette’s dreams end up actually becoming true — it is shortly after she dreams about LeMerle that he appears in the flesh. Therefore, the repressed Other is endowed with the power, not only to inform us about ourselves, but to inform us about, and even predict, real events.

This idea is also evident within *Sleep, Pale Sister* and *Chocolat*. In *Chocolat*, dreams are used in a traditional literary sense, to express Vianne’s suppressed fears and desires. She dreams of Reynaud telling her, “This is all your fault, you and your chocolate festival, everything was all right and now everyone’s dying DYING DYING DYING”⁹³. Thus, it is through her dreams that we learn of her fear that she is to blame for the unfortunate events which happen around her, and her fear that everything is not as clear cut (her being good and Reynaud being evil) as she imagines.

Her dreams also make the links between characters more clear: she dreams of Armande dying in the same way her mother did, and speaking in her

mother's voice, making it clear that, in some way, she views Armande as a reincarnation of her mother.

Within *Sleep, Pale Sister*, Effie's dreams are aligned with her ability to leave her body, and thus to release Marta's ghost. It is through lulling Effie into sleep that Fanny is first able to find out who it was that killed Marta: "then I knew him. The terror fell away and I awoke"⁹⁴. Because it is when she is asleep that Effie has access to Marta's memories, they are, in a sense, Effie's dreams — and because it is through the release of these memories or dreams that Henry is eventually destroyed (because Fanny would not have known who he was, let alone have been able to destroy him, without these memories), the unconscious is given a huge amount of power in the real world. But this power is only gained through Harris's use of occult themes — if it wasn't plausible within the context of the book that Effie is able to leave her body and be replaced with the ghost of Marta, then the whole storyline would be invalid.

The power of the unconscious to influence real events is explored even more extensively by the frequent use of Tarot cards throughout Harris's texts. In several places dreams and Tarot cards are actually used together, such as in *Chocolat*: "Then I was falling backwards through the looking glass with cards spraying out in all directions around me — *nine of Swords, DEATH. Three of*

Swords, DEATH."⁹⁵ This makes the link between dreams and Tarot cards and the unconscious even more explicit.

The Tarot can be said to be an expression of C. G. Jung's idea of the collective unconscious, which was explored in the introduction. Because Tarot cards share the same collection of images from one society to another, they are said to be an expression of Jung's archetypal images. The occultist Dr. Arthur Edward Waite claimed that:

The Tarot embodies symbolical presentations of universal ideas, behind which lie all the implicits of the human mind, and it is in this sense that they contain secret doctrine, which is the realization by the few of truths embedded in the consciousness of all.

Robert Mills, <http://www.byzant.com/tarot/jung.asp>,
17/04/06

From this, it is clear that the Tarot is often viewed as a way of unlocking the ideas of the collective unconscious, and thus of revealing to us parts of ourselves which were previously buried. Harris frequently uses the Tarot in this way in her texts, using it as a universally understandable method of representing certain elements of her characters' personalities. In *Chocolat*, she refers explicitly to the ideas of Jung: "there are no demons but a collection of archetypes every civilization has in common"⁹⁶.

So, in *Chocolat*, Reynaud is aligned with the Hermit — “the Hermit is easy enough to identify”⁹⁷ — and therefore, to those familiar with the Tarot, is identified as a “Christian ascetic”⁹⁸ long before his behaviour identifies him as such. Likewise, Henry in *Sleep, Pale Sister* is identified as the Hermit (by the fact that the first chapter, written entirely from his point of view and about him, is entitled *The Hermit*). Not only does this allow the reader an immediate insight into the characters of Henry and Reynaud, but it also highlights the religious aspect of their characters even more clearly, almost going so far as to define them by their religiousness, and thus cause us to view everything they do in the light of their Christian beliefs.

The ideas of Jung are also expressed through Harris’s use of myths and fairytales. As has already been stated, Jungians view mythology, like the Tarot, to be an expression of the collective unconscious. So, Harris uses mythology and fairytales, or tales which are generally familiar to us as a culture, to allude to and exaggerate certain aspects of her characters’ personalities.

In *Sleep, Pale Sister*, Marta is, from Henry’s point of view, aligned with Scheherazade, “the archetypal storyteller, the frame narrator of *One Thousand and One Nights*”⁹⁹. From this we can deduce, without being expressly told, different aspects of both Henry’s and Marta’s characters: we can assume that

Henry views Effie as having been the cause of his disenchantment with women, and that it is this disenchantment which causes his interest in young, innocent girls, because in *One Thousand and One Nights*, “King Shariyar, disenchanted with all women since the proven infidelity of his own wife, selects a new virgin with whom to sleep every night, only to command her execution in the morning”¹⁰⁰. We can also see from the beginning the reasons for Marta telling stories to Henry, and the way in which she entangles him so that he cannot disregard her as he does every other woman — something which is lost on us until much later in the text without this knowledge.

In *Chocolat*, there are many references to different myths and fairy stories. One of the things which Reynaud views as most offensive to the Church is that Vianne tells the children pagan myths about Easter — the fact that a pamphlet warning against Vianne’s chocolate festival describes this storytelling as “involving our children in pagan practices”¹⁰¹ hints at the power which is attached to these myths within the story. Allusions to fairytales such as Hansel and Gretel make us aware of how Reynaud truly views Vianne — as a witch who wants to destroy the good, Christian children.

As with all the issues that have been discussed in this dissertation, it is the conflict between religion and the occult which makes the use of these myths significant — it is the occultism that lies behind the myths which scares the

Christian community, rather than the stories themselves. This fear gives Harris a legitimate reason for using the myths as she does: to reveal or exaggerate aspects of her characters. It would be possible for her to apply the myths to her text anyway, but they would not have the same resonance, in the same way that her use of the Tarot would be far less significant if it were not for the connections between the Hermit card and the Christianity of the characters it applies to.

In this sense, the themes of religion and the occult play a major part in all of the texts discussed within this dissertation, because they give a forum for feminist and psychological issues to be discussed. Without setting up religion as a patriarchal system, as demonstrated in Chapter Two, the feminist power of the occult would not be so significant — it would simply be female characters fighting male characters, as opposed to an exploration of the way in which women have been suppressed and have empowered themselves through literature. Likewise, without utilising the conventions of magical realism, the conflict between religion and the occult would not be so powerful. In this sense, this dissertation has demonstrated the way in which Joanne Harris uses the opposing themes of religion and the occult to express literary and sociological concerns.

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