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Singular *They*: Agreement and Concord

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This paper explores the morphosyntactic features of the phenomenon singular *they*. It distinguishes between epicene and non-binary *they*. The analysis draws on the pronoun's historical development, Agreement and Concord theory, the distribution of the third-person singular inflection *-s*, morphological structure analysis, and morphosyntactic analyses. The findings support that both types of singular *they* are felicitous in discourse.

Keywords: pronouns, they, agreement, concord, phi-features

1 Introduction

Personal pronouns are important elements of a language; they are generally used as substitutes of noun phrases: they stand in for the entities in our discourse without repeating the full noun phrase, as in *Mary is a professor – she teaches British history*. Nowadays, pronouns are even more important with the rising visibility of genderqueer people, as they identify themselves with pronouns, especially in English. In particular, the usage of pronouns has become especially important for those whose pronoun of reference does not conform to the prescribed *he/him* or *she/her*.

The present paper concerns the use of singular *they*. There are two types of singular *they* that are distinguished from one another, namely *epicene they* and *non-binary they* (Bjorkman 2017, 1–2; Konnelly and Cowper 2020, 1). Here, I will use *non-binary* as an umbrella term to describe the uses of the pronoun to refer to those people whose pronoun of reference is *they/them*.

Epicene *they* (or generic *they*) is the pronoun that is sex-indeterminate and refers to an unspecified person or entity, as in (1). An epicene pronoun is a pronoun that may denote individuals of either sex.

(1) Somebody left *their* drink; I hope *they* come back for it.

Epicene *they* has been used in the English language for centuries, first appearing in the 1300s (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2019). This use of the pronoun is certainly

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more accepted and more frequently used by people in general as opposed to non-binary *they*. The epicene use of the pronoun is to refer to a person whose gender is unknown to the speaker(s), is not relevant, or is deliberately hidden (Whitley 1978, 28; Konnelly and Cowper 2020, 2).

Non-binary *they*, however, is relatively new. It is a gender-neutral pronoun of reference for specific individuals, as in (2).

(2) This is Kai, they will present their findings on motivation in L2 learning during the conference.

Non-binary *they* directly refers to a specific person whose gender identity is known to the speaker(s), and this person the speaker is referring to does not identify as a man (*he/him*) or as a woman (*she/her*). As Konnelly and Cowper (2020, 2) state, "Pronouns, along with proper names, are often among the first acts of linguistic self-determination a transgender person makes."

In this paper, I will first discuss the history of the pronoun *they* to show in what form it came into the English language and how history shaped its form and usage; I will then describe its syntactic properties related to agreement and concord, and I will describe the difference between the pronouns *they* and *you*. Furthermore, I will also examine the morphosyntactic features of the pronoun *they* and discuss an interesting phenomenon in some dialects of Newfoundland English, after which I will draw a conclusion.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 The History of the Pronoun They

This section focuses on the history of *they*, more specifically on its usage as a singular pronoun. *They* came into the English language from Old Norse *þeir, þeira, þeim* in the 1300s, according to Cole (2018, 165). *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* claims that the pronoun *they* was regularly used as a singular pronoun by the 1300s. However, grammarians of the 16th century attacked singular *they* and encouraged the use of the singular pronoun *he*.

He was advocated for various reasons. The masculine gender was deemed worthier than the feminine (Poole [1646] 1967, 21), and Kirkby ([1746] 1971, 117) claimed that the masculine gender included the feminine gender as well. In 1850, the Interpretation Act of 1850 legally replaced the previous phrase *he and she* with *he*,

officially including the feminine gender in the masculine. White (1880, 416, cited in Bodine 1975, 137) claimed, "*His* is the representative pronoun, as *mankind* includes both men and women." The inclusion of feminine gender in the masculine is also represented in the verb *to man* and the participle *(un)manned*, which are both used to express the provision of personnel (or *manpower*), regardless of gender.

Grammarians of the 18th century (e.g. Kirkby [1746] 1971) who were opposed to the use of singular *they* argued that the singular use of the pronoun violated the traditional grammar rules, since the pronoun *they* was exclusively plural. If we interpret this as being about concord with the antecedent, then the problem with this argument is that if it is correct, then the same argument should apply to *he* as well. If *they* is only accepted as a plural pronoun referring to a group of individuals and not as a third-person pronoun referring to people of unknown or non-binary gender because it fails to agree in number with a singular, sex-indeterminate antecedent, then *he* should not be accepted either, as it fails to phi-agree in gender with a singular, sex-indeterminate antecedent, since *he* denotes masculine gender, while the gender of the referent may be female or beyond the binary. *He* also fails to agree in number with a plural antecedent, as it is restricted to singular number. However, if these traditional grammar rules are taken to be about agreement with the finite verb, then *they* is the only one that is problematic because its singular reference intuitively clashes with the use of a plural verb form (as in *they are a neurosurgeon*).

In the 19th and 20th century, the masculine gender was no longer deemed as the worthier by the majority of the people; however, the use of *he* as an epicene pronoun was – and still is – widespread. However, *he* as an epicene pronoun fails because of number. See example (3) taken from Pullum (2008), cited in Doyle (2009).

(3a) Everyone knows each other.
(3b) They know each other
(3c) *He knows each other.

In the case of (3a), *everyone*, which is grammatically singular, requiring a singular verb, is semantically plural, thus it can combine with *each other*. Pullum (2008) and Doyle (2009) claim that *he* in (3c) is ungrammatical since it is singular, but *each other* must agree with a plural antecedent because it is semantically plural. On this basis, Pullum states that in English morphosyntactic singularity and semantic plurality are compatible. Note, however, that non-binary *they* also fails with *each other* (as in **They know each other*) since the non-binary use of *they*, which is semantically singular, cannot be the antecedent to *each other* despite the syncretism with the plural version of *they*.

Now in the 21st century, the use of the pronoun *they* is encouraged (American Psychological Association 2025) in order to respect the identities of all people, and also

to avoid the clumsiness of the phrase *he or she*, even though it is deemed unacceptable by many people when anaphoric to a morphologically singular antecedent.

2.2 Agreement and Concord, Plural-agreeing Singular Noun Phrases, the –s Inflection

In this section, I will discuss the Agreement and Concord phi-features of singular *they* as well as its similarity to plural-agreeing noun phrases, and I will also examine the distribution of the present-tense third-person singular inflection *–s*.

2.2.1 Agreement and Concord

The main focus of this paper is the Agreement and Concord phi-features of singular *they*. Phi-features in general are the following: person, number, and gender. Wechsler (2011, 1001) differentiates between *Index phi features*, which are features of referential controllers, responsible for grammatical agreement, and *Concord phi features*, which are those features that are involved in adjective–noun concord, responsible for semantic agreement. One further difference between Index phi features and Concord phi features is that while Index phi features include the person feature, Concord phi features do not.

Wechsler (2011, 1002) claims that those verbs that show Index number agreement also agree in person with the controller, making the following sentence grammatical.

(4) He is a smart boy.

The subject pronoun is third-person singular, and the copula shows third-person singular agreement with the subject.

The agreement of finite verbs is treated as Index agreement. The inflections of finite verb agreement originate from incorporated pronouns. According to Wechsler (2011, 1019), the copula *are* does not carry a referential index, but it rather selects a subject with a plural number index. Finite verbs pattern with bound pronouns whenever the pronoun is in syntactic agreement with the verb, and the pronoun bears a person feature that is exclusive to the Index phi features.

Pronouns are universally specified for Index features. As controllers of agreement, they trigger agreement on all the elements that are targets for Index features; however, according to Wechsler (2011), "nothing in principle requires a pronoun to have Concord phi features" (1001). Consequently, he claims that pronouns only have to be specified for person obligatorily, but not for number and gender.

The relevance of this for this paper is that singular *they* controls plural agreement with the finite verb, but it does not show number concord with predicate nominals.

(5a) All dancers think that they are the best dancers ever.
(5b) Every dancer thinks that they are/*is the best dancer(*s) ever.

In (5b), *Every dancer* and *they* indicate plurality, but *the best dancer* has to be singular in order to be coindexed with *Every*.

According to Wechsler (2011, 1028), pronouns can serve either as targets or controllers of agreement. As targets, they are specified for Index phi-features, namely person, number, and gender. However, he also points out that targets that lack a person feature can vary in their number concord. Since the pronoun *they* is morphologically unmarked for any Index phi-features that could trigger syntactic agreement, it can vary in its number concord, thus making the singular use of the pronoun grammatical.

A similar argument was made by Whitley (1978, 31), who states that "*they* is neutral as to whether the speaker is referring to individuals in a group or to a group of individuals. If so, 'singular' *they* might be said to neutralize not only sex, but also number", as in (6).

(6) The dance ensemble is doing their best to entertain the audience.

2.2.2 Plural-agreeing Singular Noun Phrases

Plural-agreeing singular noun phrases, referred to by den Dikken (2001, 20) as *pluringulars* or *committee-type noun phrases*, show a difference in plural agreement between British and American English. British English allows a formally singular but collective noun to have plural agreement with the finite verb, but American English typically only accepts a singular verb, as in (7).

(7a) The committee has/have decided. (British English)
(7b) The committee has/*have decided. (American English)
(den Dikken 2001, 28)

The head noun of pluringulars is uniformly unmarked for number, so it is ungrammatical to use a plural demonstrative with this type of noun phrases.

(8) This/*These committee has/have concluded.

Den Dikken (2001, 34–36) argues that pluringulars can only agree with a plural verb if they are headed by a silent pronoun (pro). That silent pronoun cannot be an associate of *there*, and in the absence of the silent pronoun, these types of noun phrases are singular which gives rise to singular verb agreement. This explains the ill-formedness of (9) with plural verb inflection.

(9) There is/*are a committee in the room.

(den Dikken 2001, 32)

2.2.3 The Verbal –s *Inflection*

Kayne (1989, 188) claims that the present tense third-person singular inflection *–s* is a number marker and not a person marker. I argue that the distribution of the suffix *–s* is controlled by subjects that are marked with the singular feature (*he*, *she*, *it*), whereas those subjects that are unmarked for number (e.g. *they*) cannot control the suffix.

(10) She is a neurosurgeon; she operates on brains.

In other words, the verbal inflection *–s* is only available for those subjects that are marked for number, and that number is singular. The fact that *they* is unmarked for number in my analysis makes the pronoun *they* possible with reference to single individuals; it also explains that *they* consistently fails to combine with the verbal *–s* inflection, even when it has a singular referent.

(11) This is my favourite character, Kai; they do research on neuroscience.

In light of the fact that the verbal *–s* inflection is only available for those subjects that are explicitly marked third-person singular, I assume that in English the plural verb agreement is the unmarked form, since the plural form of verbs is typically identical with the bare stem.

2.3 Similarities and Differences Between the Pronouns They *and* You

In this section, I will discuss the similarities and differences between the pronouns *you* and *they*, focusing on the acceptance of these pronouns with certain antecedents and of certain forms of these pronouns. The aim here is to shed light on the stigma surrounding the reflexive pronoun *themself*, used in reference to a non-binary individual.

There is an interesting difference between the acceptance of *you* and *they* in general. *You* is accepted with both singular and plural reference while still controlling plural

agreement in copular sentences. *They* also controls plural agreement in copular sentences, but it may also be accepted to refer to singular individuals by some speakers. However, these two pronouns are not treated in the same way, as unlike in the case of *you*, the acceptability of reference to a single individual is subject to variation in the case of *they*.

(12a) You/They are smart children.
(12b) You/%They are a smart person.

The difference between the acceptance of these pronouns is even more striking with the reflexive –*self* pronouns. The reflexives of *you* are *yourself* (singular) and *yourselves* (plural).

(13a) You have clearly overworked yourself. (referring to a single individual)
(13b) You have clearly overworked yourselves. (referring to a group of individuals)

With the reflexive *self*-forms of *they*, however, the tolerance for the singular form is much lower; the form *themself* is rather stigmatised. Despite the low tolerance of *themself*, however, it is not ungrammatical, and it is widely used in various dialects of English, according to *Merriam Webster* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The plural form *themselves* is perfectly fine.

(14a) They have clearly overworked %themself. (referring to a single individual)
(14b) They have clearly overworked themselves. (referring to a group of individuals)

There are two types of personal reflexive pronouns: one in which the bound morpheme *self* combines with a genitive determiner, as in *myself*, *yourself*, *ourselves*, and *yourselves*; and one in which the bound morpheme *self* combines with an accusative pronoun, as in *himself*, *themself*, and *themselves*.

Historically, as the distinctions between the original cases (accusative, dative, genitive) began to collapse in Middle English, the noun *self* (which then was later reanalysed as a bound morpheme) began to fuse with the pronouns since those lost their case endings. There was variation between the Northern and the Southern dialects, since the Southern dialects combined the genitive pronouns with the NP, whereas the Northern dialects combined the accusative pronouns with *self* (van Gelderen 2000, 91).

In the case where a genitive form combines with *self*, the genitive form serves as the possessor of *self*. Since *self* was considered a common noun (van Gelderen 2000, 88), it receives number inflection in the case of a plural antecedent, independently

of the number features of the possessor: there is no phi-feature matching between possessors and possessed nouns in English. In the case of an accusative pronoun combining with *self*, there is a concord relationship between the accusative pronoun and *self* both for case (accusative) and for number.

When *self* takes a common noun or proper name as its possessor, it combines with the Saxon genitive *s* that serves as a linking element between the common noun/proper name and *self*, as in *a person's self* and *John's self*. The reflexive pronouns *myself* and *herself* have no linking element between the genitive determiner and *self*. Their structure is the following: [*my/her+self*]. For the third-person masculine reflexive, one would (on the analogy of *John's self* and *a man's self*) expect the form *hisself*, with the structure [*he+s+self*]. Though the form *hisself* occurs in dialects of English, it is not the standard form. Instead, a non-possessive dependency between accusative *him* and *self* is established in the formation of the third-person singular masculine reflexive pronoun, delivering *himself*.

In plural reflexives, the pronoun combines with the plural copula *r* (cf. *are*) which is the linking element between the pronoun *self*. Their structure is the following: [pronoun+*r*+*self*]. In *ourselves*, the genitive combines with *self*, which gets number-inflected due to number concord. In the case of *yourself* and *yourselves*, the pronoun *you* combines with the plural copula *r*, which then combines with *self*.

For the third-person plural pronoun *they*, the logic of the previous paragraph would lead one to expect [*they+r+self*], yielding *theirself* (cf. *their car*). Though this form occurs in dialects, the standard language uses *themselves*, which differs from *theirself* in three respects: (a) the form of the pronoun (*them* rather than *they*), (b) the absence of the copula *r*, and (c) concord between the pronoun and *self* (*selves*). These three factors combined indicate that *themselves* does not have a possessive syntax. Instead, accusative *them* and *selves* are in a predicational relationship, observing case and number concord.

Their is a genitive, and just like *your* in *yourself*, it is the possessor of *self*. Since most of the reflexive *self*-forms contain a genitive combined with *self*, *theirself* would naturally fit in, having the structure [*they+r+self*]. However, this pronoun is also only dialectal. One may reasonably conjecture that for those speakers who have *theirselves*, it might be entirely fine to use *theirself*.

To sum up, the acceptance of singular *you* and of singular *they* is different, despite both having evolved from plural forms. The pronoun *you* is accepted with both a singular and a plural antecedent, and even its singular and plural reflexive forms are accepted and widely used by speakers. The pronoun *they*, however, is not always tolerated with a singular antecedent, especially when it makes a direct reference to a specific person. The tolerance, or rather the lack of it, for singular *themself* is very different from that for singular *yourself*.

I argue that, in light of the claim that *they* is unmarked for number, *they* should be accepted with both singular and plural antecedents (as in *they are neurosurgeons* and *they are a neurosurgeon*). On this basis, *themself* may also be accepted as the reflexive form of non-binary *they*.

In the following sections, I will discuss the morphosyntax of singular *they* based on the works of Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002), Bjorkman (2017), and Konnelly and Cowper (2020).

2.4 The Morphological Structure of They *in Déchaine and Wiltschko's (2002) Analysis*

Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002, 410) distinguish between three types of pronoun categories: pro-DPs, pro-ΦPs, and pro-NPs. Pro-DPs can function as arguments, they are definite, bear referential properties, they cannot function as bound variables, and they can function as determiners. Their structure is the following: [DP-ΦP-NP]. First and second person pronouns belong to this category. Pro-ΦPs can act either as arguments or predicates, they can be bound variables, so they can be bound outside their local domains, and they bear referential properties. They have the structure [ΦP-NP]. English third-person personal pronouns are categorized as pro-ΦPs. Pro-NPs are predicates, and they are not bound variables. Their structure is [NP-N'-N]. English impersonal *one* belongs there.

Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002, 415) claim that third-person pronouns, which are pro-ΦPs, cannot function as determiners since pro-ΦPs do not make an overt subconstituent available, unlike pro-DPs. They based this claim on the following data:

(15a) we linguists – us linguists
(15b) you linguists – you linguists
(15c) *they linguists – %them linguists

(Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002, 421)

In English, first and second person pronouns can function as determiners; in other words, they can precede nouns, thus the grammaticality of the examples in (15a) and (15b). By contrast, **they linguists* is uniformly ungrammatical, while in some varieties of American English, *them linguists* is available. Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002, 422) argue that *them* in these varieties is decomposed into a bound D-morpheme *th-* and a clitic Φ-morpheme *'em*. The evidence for this decomposition is that third-person pronouns, both singular and plural, have phonologically reduced clitic forms, which are pro-Φ, as in *I like 'im/'em*. However, *'em* is found in all varieties of English, not just in those where *them linguists* is available; so Déchaine and Wiltschko's

decomposition of *them* does not, as it stands, shed light on the variation regarding the acceptability of *them linguists*. The exclusion of **they linguists* is rooted in the fact that (unlike *them*) it cannot be decomposed into *th-* and a phi-element, since *'ey* as a reduced pronoun is ill-formed, and it does not have a distribution outside *they*.

2.5 Singular They *in Bjorkman (2017), and Konnelly and Cowper (2020)*

In this section, I will discuss the works of Bjorkman (2017) and of Konnelly and Cowper (2020) in connection with the uses of the pronoun *they*.

Bjorkman (2017, 3) refers to the new use of *they* with specific, definite antecedents as *innovative they*, as in (16).

(16a) %I like their hair. (while pointing someone out)
(16b) %Somebody left their wallet on the table.
(16c) %Your teaching assistant said that they will be joining us later.

Generally, younger speakers accept the examples in (16), but older speakers may find *they* with a singular antecedent pragmatically wrong or unacceptable.

According to Bjorkman (2017, 3) gender specification should be optional even on pronouns, meaning that the difference between plural *they* and singular *he* and *she* would be lost, making the use of *they* as a pronoun of reference for non-binary individuals grammatically possible. Speakers using innovative *they* accept proper names as antecedents for *they*/*them*, as in *Mary*/*John is a high school teacher, they teach history*. Naturally, the acceptability of *they* with specific, definite antecedents increases with proper names that are associated with more than one binary gender or with last names with non-gender specific titles.

(17a) %Look, there's Kai; their costume is so cool!
(17b) %Professor Shepherd left their coat on the back of the chair.

Bjorkman (2017, 7) assumes that *they* occurs where the absence of the necessary number and gender features would trigger or require another, gender-specific pronoun. She claims that *they* cannot be specified for number, gender, and animacy.

Bjorkman (2017, 4) also speculates that if gender in English is not a contrastive feature, then *they* would be possible with quantificational antecedents. If gender is contrastive, then bound variable pronouns would be obligatorily marked for gender if their domains are restricted to be either feminine or masculine.

For non-innovative speakers, *they* is unacceptable with a gendered antecedent, and gender is obligatory on referential pronouns, meaning that gender must be expressed

whenever the gender of the referent is known to the speaker. For innovative speakers, the expression of gender is optional since for them gender is not a contrastive feature of pronouns, and if gender is absent on a pronoun, it does not mean that the gender of the referent is indeterminate or unknown.

(18a) I like her/%their hair. (while pointing someone out)
(18b) My friend left his/%their wallet in the restaurant.
(18c) Your teaching assistant said she/%they will be joining us later.

Bjorkman (2017, 3) claims that for innovative speakers, the gender is an adjunct feature on referential pronouns, namely <*f*>, and the gender features are notated as <*masc*> for masculine and <*fem*> for feminine. This means that these speakers can choose to (or not to) associate a name or traditionally gendered pronoun (*he*, *she*) with a traditional binary gender (masculine or feminine).

However, most proper names are associated with a gender, so the sentences in (19) are generally deemed ungrammatical and even most innovative speakers would not accept them.

(19a) *Maryi accidentally left theiri sweater at the restaurant.
(19b) *Johni said that theyi will join us later.

The ungrammaticality of the sentences in (19) suggests that there is a linguistic property of *Mary* that is [+F] and of *John* that is [+M]. The notations [±M] and [±F] are different from Bjorkman's (2017) <*masc*> and <*fem*> in that [±M] denoting *male* and [±F] denoting *female* refer to biological sex, while <*masc*> denoting *masculine* and <*fem*> denoting *feminine* refer to gender.

Bjorkman (2017, 10) suggests that there is a contrastive gender property of names, and this is why conservative *they* users would find the sentences in (19) incorrect. She advocates that in order to accept *they* as a singular pronoun of reference, people should unlearn the gender features that are syntactically associated with given names.

Konnelly and Cowper's (2020) work is based on Bjorkman's (2017) paper. They claim that there are three stages of *they*, the last one being innovative/non-binary *they*. At stages 1 and 2, gender is contrastive, but at Stage 3, following Bjorkman (2017), gender is optional, allowing for non-binary *they* to be grammatical when referring to a specific person. According to Konnelly and Cowper (2020, 1), this new use of *they* is to refer to "specific individuals of known (but not necessarily binary) gender".

Stage 1: singular *they* (quantified antecedent, or antecedent of unknown gender)
(20a) Anyonei who thinks theyi need more time should ask for an extension.
(20b) The personi at the door left before I could see who theyi were.

Stage 2: singular *they* (antecedent of known gender, but ungendered description/name)
(21a) Kellyi said theyi were leaving early.
(21b) The strongest studenti will present theiri paper next.

Stage 3: singular *they* (antecedent of any gender, no restriction on description/name)
(22a) Mariai wants to send theiri students on the field trip.
(22b) We heard from Arthuri that theyi need time to think about the idea.
(22c) We asked [the first girl in line]i to introduce themselfi/themselvesi.
(22d) Your brotheri called to say theyi would be late.
(Konnelly and Cowper 2020, 5)

Stage 3 speakers are the same as those called innovative speakers by Bjorkman. For Konnelly and Cowper, *he*, *she*, and *they* are all available as singular, third-person pronouns. For them, *they* is not only available when the referent is of a non-binary gender identity but can also be used to refer to those whose gender and pronouns are not known to the speaker. They use *they* in order to avoid accidental misgendering.

For my study, stages 2 and 3 are the most interesting. There is no change in the status of gender features in the pronoun system between Stage 1 and Stage 2; gender is a contrastive feature (in Konelly and Cowper's (2020) work, [MASC] stands for masculine, [FEM] for feminine, [INANIM] for inanimate). The feature [INANIM] is not a proper gender feature at Stage 1 because it is not realised on the same syntactic head as [MASC] and [FEM], but all three features are in complementary distribution. The features [MASC] and [FEM] are obligatorily realised on the nominal head *n*.

The only differences between stages 1 and 2 are that nouns are specified differently in the speaker's lexicon, and whether the gender-nonspecific nouns that refer to humans are obligatorily assigned a binary gender feature. At Stage 2, there is only a certain set of nouns and proper names that carry contrastive gender features; and the singular pronouns must be either *he* or *she* if the antecedent of the pronoun carries gender, no matter if the gender feature is lexical, assumed, or known.

Konnelly and Cowper (2020, 15) also take into consideration Bjorkman's (2017, 3) argument that for Stage 3 speakers the gender feature becomes optional. This would mean that *they* can be used to refer to any animate singular individual, no

matter if the nominal bears a semantic gender feature, and that *he* and *she* would only be used if the speaker knows the referent's correct pronouns. This would mean that the sentences in (23) are grammatically correct.

(23a) My mother left her coat here.
(23b) Your mother left their coat here.
(23c) Your mother left his coat here.

(Konnelly and Cowper 2020, 16)

(23a) is quite traditional; *my mother* is traditionally referenced by the pronouns *she/her*. In the case of (23b), *your mother* is of unknown gender or of known non-binary gender. In my opinion, the sentence in (23c) is the most controversial one; in that case, *your mother* can either be a transgender individual whose pronoun of reference is *he/him*. What is more, it is even ambiguous because *his* can refer to another individual whose pronoun of reference is *he/him* and has been previously mentioned in the discourse.

The gender feature-adjunction theory of Stage 3 would not only allow singular *they* to be grammatically correct, but it would also make it possible to use it to refer to people who may accept any pronoun (*he*, *she*, or *they*) as their pronoun of reference.

In conclusion, this subsection argued that the gender feature of non-binary *they* is optional. Bjorkman (2017) refers to non-binary *they* as innovative *they*, and her hypothesis concerns the gender specification on pronouns. She speculates that if the gender specification on pronouns was optional, the pronoun *they* would be grammatical when directly referring to a specific person whose pronouns of reference are *they/them* and not the traditional *she/her* or *he/him*. She also claims that for conservative *they*-users, certain proper names like *Mary* or *John* have contrastive gender specifications. She suggests that people should unlearn the gender features syntactically associated with certain given names so that the pronoun *they* can be accepted as a singular pronoun of reference.

3 Singular and Non-binary *They*

3.1 Agreement and Concord, Phi-features of Singular They*, the Verbal* –s *Inflection*

The main claim of this paper is that singular *they* is indeed grammatical. Wechsler (2011, 1001) argues that pronouns are not required to be specified for Concord phi-features, which are number and gender; but they bear Index phi-features, which

are person, number, and gender. Based on this, I would argue that pronouns only have to be specified for the person feature, but not number and gender, which is in favour of the grammaticality of singular *they*.

Plural-agreeing singular noun-phrases are, as den Dikken (2001, 30) claims, uniformly unmarked for number, which I take to mean that they can combine with either a singular or a plural finite verb, even though this largely depends on the language variety in question. I assume that singular *they* is also unmarked for number, so that it can refer to both plural and singular entities.

Evidence for singular *they* being unmarked for number comes from Kayne's (1989, 188) discussion about the distribution of the verbal *–s* inflection. According to him, the suffix *–s* is a number marker, not a person marker, and it is only available for those subjects that are marked for singular: if one were to specify singular *they* as grammatically specified for singular number, one would expect it to be able to combine with singular verb forms (in *–s*); but in actual fact, singular *they* is incompatible with *–s*. Thus, I argue that the pronoun *they* is morphologically unmarked for number, meaning that its morphological number feature is absent. I also claim, based on the distribution of the verbal *–s* inflection, that in English plural verb agreement is the unmarked form, and singular verb agreement is the marked form for the singular number.

3.1.1 Newfoundland English

During my research, I discovered an interesting phenomenon in Newfoundland English via personal communication with a native Newfoundland English-speaker (Kendra Felicity Wheeler, WhatsApp direct message to author, September 28, 2023). Some speakers may prefer the accusative form of a personal pronoun over nominative forms in subject position, as in (24).

(24a) Her is a doctor. (instead of *she is a doctor*)
(24b) Him is a teacher. (instead of *he is a teacher*)

With reference to a non-binary person, *they* as a subject pronoun may default to the accusative form with singular verb agreement, as in (25).

(25a) Them is a student.
(25b) Do them study linguistics?

However, some dialects of Newfoundland English are not only peculiar in that they use an accusative pronoun as subject, but they also sometimes use *them* in

combination with the nominal plural marker *–s* and a singular *–s* form of the finite verb, as in *thems is smart*. In the phrase *thems is smart*, *them* functions as a common noun; the evidence for this is that the plural inflection *–s* can be added to it, since pronouns do not occur with nominal plural *–s*. The fact that it can combine with an *–s*-inflected finite verb is the result of the Northern Subject Rule that allows for plural subject noun phrases to occur with finite verbs that are inflected with the present-tense third-person inflection *–s* (de Haas and van Kemenade 2015, 25). The Northern Subject Rule allows for the following combinations to happen:

(26a) The boys is smart. (meaning 'the boy is smart')
(26b) The pizzas is cold. (meaning 'the pizza is cold')

I have also found *thems* used as a subject pronoun in the following sentences from the book called *The World of Ice* by R. M. Ballantyne.

(27) "Thems is go to bed."
(28) "Thems must get up then come abroad."

(Ballantyne 1859)

Ballantyne was a Scottish author from the 19th-century. What is interesting about Scots English that it explicitly follows the Northern Subject Rule, along with Hiberno-English. Newfoundland English shows several clear linguistic parallels with Hiberno-English.

3.2 Gender Marking of Pronouns

Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) assume that gender is a grammatical feature in the English pronoun system. I suggest, however, that gender in the English pronoun system is natural, as it is in the noun system, and not grammatical. Since there is no gender inflection on pronouns, they function as generalized pronouns. Generalized pronouns refer to animate entities. For [+human] entities, natural gender is obviously more active, since people in general will automatically select the pronoun *he* for males, and the pronoun *she* for females. The selection of gendered pronouns also increases with the appearance of given names that are associated with only one gender; for instance, John will most likely be [+M], and Mary will most likely be [+F] for most people.

3.3 Three Uses of They

I propose that the English language distinguishes between three types of *they* as a personal pronoun, namely *plural they*, *epicene they*, and *non-binary they*. This proposal is based on the works by Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002), Wechsler (2011), and Konnelly and Cowper (2020). It is important to keep in mind that the previous sections presented arguments for why the pronoun *they* is unmarked for number and gender, and why gender in the English language is natural and not grammatical.

Plural *they* is the 'traditional' use of the pronoun. Plural *they* makes a direct reference to multiple specified entities, and it controls plural agreement with the finite verb, as in (29).

(29) Those kids were my students; they all have brilliant minds.

Epicene *they* refers to a singular, unspecified, indeterminate entity that bears a [+human] feature. The speaker refers to a person whose identity and gender are unknown to them. It is used to avoid discrimination (used instead of the pronoun *he*), dehumanization (used instead of the pronoun *it*), and misgendering (used instead of *he or she*). Epicene *they*, just like plural *they*, controls plural agreement with the finite verb, as in (30).

(30) Someone left their drink; I hope they come back for it.

The third and the most recent type is non-binary *they*. It refers to a specific individual whose person, identity and gender are known to the speaker. It is used to directly refer to a person whose pronoun of reference is *they*, respecting this particular person's identity and pronouns, as in (31).

(31) Kai is a talented musician, and they play several instruments with incredible skill.

I propose that all three types of *they* have the same morphological structures, belonging to the pro-ΦP category, as in Déchaine and Wiltschko's (2002) analysis. All three types can function as bound variables, and they bear referential properties, as in (32). They must be pro-ΦP pronouns so that they can be bound outside their local domains and support coreference.

(32a) The boys think they are smart, and the girls do, too. (*plural they*)
(32b) Look at that person over there; they have a cool baseball hat. (*epicene they*)
(32c) Kai always brings great energy to the team, and they help keep everyone motivated. (*non-binary they*)

There is, however, a small difference between their phi-features. They all have a third-person feature, but epicene *they* and non-binary *they* are restricted to a [+human] feature. It is important to distinguish between the [+animate] and the [+human] features since epicene *they* and non-binary *they* typically cannot refer to an animal whose biological sex is not visible to the eye (in such cases, usually, the English language defaults to *he*).

In summary, I propose that there are three types of the pronoun *they*: plural *they*, epicene *they*, and non-binary *they*. Plural *they* refers to plural entities, while both epicene and non-binary *they* make reference to a single person. They differ in their morphological features; all three types are pro-ΦPs, as Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) argued, but while plural *they* is unmarked for both animacy and humanness, epicene *they* and non-binary *they* have a [+human] feature.

4 Conclusion

In my paper, I have discussed the difference between two types of singular *they*, namely epicene *they* and non-binary *they*. Epicene *they* is a sex-indeterminate pronoun that refers to a non-specific person, and non-binary *they* is a gender-neutral pronoun that directly refers to a specific person whose pronoun of reference is *they*/*them*.

I have explored how singular *they* has evolved throughout the centuries, from the 1300s until today. In the 16th century, singular *they* was attacked because the pronoun *they* was claimed to be plural, and grammarians encouraged the use of the singular third-person masculine pronoun *he* as an epicene pronoun. The pronoun *he* was used as an epicene pronoun for centuries, thus including the feminine gender into the masculine. However, the use of *they* as an epicene pronoun has been encouraged since the second half of the 20th century, thanks to the feminist movement and the rising visibility of genderqueer and transgender people.

In connection with the morphosyntax of the pronoun *they*, I argue that the pronoun only has to be marked for third person, and not for number and gender. Evidence for the pronoun *they* being unmarked for number and gender is that the present tense third-person singular inflection *–s* is only available to those subjects that are marked as singular. Since the verbal inflectional suffix *–s* is only available

for the pronouns *he*, *she*, and *it*, I argue that *they*, along with the other personal pronouns, are unmarked for number. Based on the distribution of the verbal *–s* inflection, I claim that singular verb agreement is explicitly marked for singular number, and plural verb agreement is the unmarked form in the English language, as the plural agreement on verbs is usually identical with the bare stem and the infinitival form of the verb.

There is a certain stigma that surrounds the pronoun *they* when it is used in a singular way, and that stigma is very apparent when the similarities and the differences of the pronouns *you* and *they* are looked at. *You* is accepted both in its singular and plural use, despite having plural verb-agreement, which I argue to be the unmarked form. Furthermore, both its singular and plural reflexives are accepted. The pronoun *they* does not receive the same judgement. It is universally accepted with a plural antecedent along with its plural reflexive form. However, singular *they* might be judged as ungrammatical, but the objection against *themself* is even more striking.

Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) distinguish between three types of pronouns: pro-DP pronouns, pro-ΦP pronouns, and pro-NP pronouns. They claim that English third-person personal pronouns belong to the pro-ΦP pronoun category. However, I argue that, while all three uses of the pronoun *they* have the structure of a pro-ΦP pronoun, they differ in their phi-features, as plural *they* is unmarked for animacy, and epicene *they* and non-binary *they* are restricted to the [+human] feature.

The appearance of third-person singular accusative pronouns in subject position in some dialects of Newfoundland English is certainly an interesting phenomenon. I argue that it might be because in such cases, the pronouns, namely *him*, *her*, and *them*, function as common nouns and thus they can control singular verb agreement. What is even more interesting is that *them* can combine with the nominal plural marker *–s* and the singular verb inflection *–s*, as in *thems is smart*. The explanation for this is that *them* functions as a common noun, so it can combine with the plural marker *–s*. The Northern Subject Rule allows plural subject noun phrases to occur with finite verbs with the *–s* inflection. The relevance of this discovery lies in the arguments shown for the grammaticality of singular and non-binary *they*.

I propose that there are three types of *they* that should be distinguished: plural *they*, epicene *they*, and non-binary *they*. Plural *they* directly refers to multiple specified entities; epicene *they* refers to a singular, unspecified entity; and non-binary *they* makes a direct reference to a singular, specific person whose pronouns are *they/them*, having a ΦP-NP structure. However, while plural *they* is unmarked for humanness and animacy, epicene *they* and non-binary *they* have a [+human] feature.

Bjorkman (2017) as well as Konnelly and Cowper (2020) argued that gender specifications that are traditionally associated with certain given names should be unlearned in order to achieve complete gender neutrality. They also argue that

gender specifications on pronouns should be optional so that singular *they* would be grammatical.

In summary, I have argued that both types of singular *they*, i.e. epicene *they* and non-binary *they*, are grammatically correct. The pronoun *they* itself is unspecified for number and gender. Gender in the English language is natural and not grammatical, since there is no gender inflection on verbs or nouns. Plural verb agreement is the unmarked form as it is typically identical with the infinitive form of the verb and the bare stem. Singular verb agreement is specifically marked by the present tense third-person singular inflection *–s*. I have also argued that gender specification is optional on pronouns. Furthermore, gender specifications on names may be optional, as Bjorkman (2017) suggested, so that genderqueer, non-binary, and transgender people can be addressed accordingly despite having a name that is traditionally associated with the gender binary.

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The Encounter of an Elderly Man and a Young Woman in Julia Margaret Cameron's Photography: *Friar Laurence and Juliet* (1865), *Prospero and Miranda* (1865), and *Vivien and Merlin* (1874)

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Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879) is one of the most renowned Victorian photographers, whose innovative oeuvre attests to her penchant for beauty. Not only does her legacy comprise portraits of eminent contemporaries, but she also ventured to create her own staged photographs inspired by literature. *Friar Laurence and Juliet* (1865), *Prospero and Miranda* (1865), and *Vivien and Merlin* (1874) bear a striking resemblance to one another and depict a similar leitmotif: the relationship of an elderly man and a young woman. The present paper explores the connection between the male and female characters by interpreting the photographs' visual language and unveiling the underlying significance of the characters' touches and power relations: it examines the femininity of Juliet, Miranda and Vivien in the Victorian social context to demonstrate how they embody the cultural stereotypes of the *angel in the house* and the *fallen woman*.

Keywords: Victorian photography, Victorian femininity, staged photographs, Shakespearean illustrations, Tennysonian illustrations

1 Introduction

A pictorial photographic trend emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, as Quentin Bajac explains, which proves to be an English peculiarity. This is so-called High Art Photography aimed at imitating the most noble genres of painting, with Oscar Gustav Rejlander, William Lake Price and Henry Peach Robinson being its most significant advocates. Their photographs depicted religious and historical themes or allegories, and drew inspiration from the Italian Renaissance, the contemporary Pre-Raphaelites or the works of William Shakespeare, Walter Scott, or Alfred Tennyson. This trend faded away by the early 1860s, yet amateur photographers such as Lady Clementina Hawarden, Lewis Carroll, and, most importantly, Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879) still produced such narrative scenes in the 1870s (Bajac 2002, 104–8).

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Julia Margaret Cameron was one of the most renowned Victorian photographers, who had a trailblazing career, and left a profound mark on the history of photography. In 1863, she started her career in photography after she had received a camera from her daughter and son-in-law, to embark upon a journey to explore and cement the relationship between art and photography (Prodger 2018, 206). Apart from immersing herself in portraiture, she ventured into creating photographs inspired by literature; as she wrote in a letter to Sir John Herschel, she aspired to "ennoble photography and to secure for it the character & uses of High Art by combining the real & Ideal & sacrificing nothing of truth by all possible devotion to Poetry & beauty" (qtd. in Prodger 2018, 210). As one might observe, Cameron's illustrative works were mainly based on mythological and Biblical themes and were also inspired by literary sources, most notably by Shakespeare and Tennyson (Springer and Weiss 2023, 20).

As Springer and Weiss argue, in the twentieth century Cameron was renowned for being a pioneering portrait photographer, and her staged tableaux, which form a significant portion of her oeuvre, were disdained as paragons of Victorian bad taste. They were "rediscovered" and reassessed in the 1980s, and since then they have been published and exhibited (2023, 8). The authors point out in their recent book *Julia Margaret Cameron – Arresting Beauty* that "the stage is now set for visual exploration of her career, from the portrait of a child dubbed her 'first success' to the ambitious tableaux she created to illustrate Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*" (19). Cameron's photography is imbued with familial relationships, and intimacy between generations through tactility is a recurring theme (18). As Amanda Hopkinson argues, a large number of Cameron's photographs concentrate on the recurring theme of "the inter-relationship between an elderly, venerable and often powerful 'potentate' or 'prelate' juxtaposed with a young maiden, often in an attitude of appeal"[1] since her early works (1986, 140). Cameron was fascinated by young women, and most of the time she contradicted her own principle that "no woman between the ages of eighteen and eighty should allow herself to be photographed" (14–15). She took a different approach with their photographs as opposed to those of men. Excluding a few images that have names of some female acquaintances as titles, her women do not possess names, as they were not well-known. Female figures were featured mostly in her allegories and Cameron empowered them with the significance which they lacked in real life: she frequently provided the photographs with titles later (14–15).

[1] Hopkinson also speculates on what Cameron's underlying reasons could have been for being preoccupied with this particular relationship and treating it with such delicacy, especially in Shakespeare's works. She surmises that the absence of Cameron's father, the lack of male companions in her youth, later being in the company of older and notable men of her time, and eventually marrying a man twenty years her senior might have contributed to placing such relationships at the centre of her photography (1986, 18).

Literature on Cameron tends to investigate her illustrations based on the common literary themes, but not from a visual point of view or in the context of the contemporary cultural scene. The present paper seeks to contribute to this venture of visual exploration, and juxtaposes three of Cameron's photographs inspired by literature, which bear a striking resemblance to one another, centring around a similar leitmotif: the dramatic encounter between an elderly man and a young woman. This is an unprecedented approach in research on Cameron. *Friar Laurence and Juliet* (1865), *Prospero and Miranda* (1865), and *Vivien and Merlin* (1874) explore two Shakespearean and one Tennysonian scene, respectively. The male and female characters, their interactions and their touch are placed at the focal point of each photograph, alluding to a much deeper meaning. Every photograph suggests conscious and meticulous planning. Cameron utilises the light strategically to enhance the details, attesting to dramatic, theatrical features. Her models are visually appealing with convincing physical features for the characters (although finding an appropriate Vivien was a bit cumbersome – an issue that ties in with Victorian concepts of femininity and is to be explored later). At first, the photographs are to be examined individually, decoding the visual toolkit Cameron used to suggest power relations, dominance and dynamics between the characters, and the underlying meaning of their touch is to be analysed. Then, following a brief insight into Victorian England, the female characters' femininity is explored in the Victorian sociocultural context.

Sylvia Wolf, who compiled an entire volume, *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women*, claims at the very beginning that literal illustrations of texts "seem to me the least successful of Cameron's works, resembling the tableaux-vivants of Victorian after-dinner entertainment, just as her beautiful women look less beautiful the more the details of their dress are articulated" (1998, 14). Although tastes might differ, hopefully, this paper achieves its goal and unravels the depth of these images.

2 *Friar Laurence and Juliet*

Take thou this vial, being then in bed,
And this distilled liquor drink thou off;
When presently through all thy veins shall run
A cold and drowsy humour, for no pulse
Shall keep his native progress, but surcease:
No warmth, no breath, shall testify thou livest;
The roses in thy lips and cheeks shall fade
To paly ashes, thy eyes' windows fall,
Like death when he shuts up the day of life;

Each part, depriv'd of supple government,
Shall, stiff and stark and cold, appear like death;
And in this borrow'd likeness of shrunk death
Thou shalt continue two and forty hours,
And then awake as from a pleasant sleep. (Shakespeare [1597] 2010, 4.1.93–106)

Figure 1 *Friar Laurence and Juliet* (1865)

Figure 2 *Friar Laurence and Juliet* (1865)

In 1865, Cameron produced versions on the Friar Laurence and Juliet theme with identical titles, which show slight modifications,[2] probably depicting somewhat different moments of the scene. Two significantly different versions exist, one featuring the vial of potion (fig. 1), and another, in lieu of the potion, representing a more visible Juliet clasping the friar's hand (fig. 2).

The photographs feature Henry Taylor, the renowned dramatist and poet, who portrays Friar Laurence, and Mary Hillier, Cameron's parlour maid, who embodies the youthful Juliet. Cameron captured numerous portraits of Taylor; furthermore, he was eager to contribute to Cameron's narrative photographs by portraying fictional and Biblical figures. As Kirsty Stonell Walker points out, Taylor, in spite of being an eminent poet of the era and a gentleman, was eager to pose with maids,[3] and his

[2] Two versions are scrutinised in the case of each title, the ones that feature the most significant differences.

[3] Cameron's illustrations might even seem a bit radical, as they blurred boundaries between the social classes: "her tableaux are parables of radical democracy, or, seen from a slightly different angle, real-life fairytales: in Cameron's glass house, Cinderella is always becoming a princess" (Wolf 1998, 15). Henry Taylor and Charles Hay Cameron usually portrayed kingly or wise men; at the same time, servant girls could embody the heroines (Hopkinson 1986, 140).

positive attitude also provided Cameron with the opportunity to create powerful staged scenes (2020, 97). As Cameron recounts in her autobiography, *The Annals of My Glass House*:

> Our chief friend, Sir Henry Taylor, lent himself greatly to my early efforts. Regardless of the possible dread that sitting to my fancy might be making a fool of himself, he, with greatness which belongs to unselfish affection, consented to be in turn Friar Laurence with Juliet, Prospero with Miranda, Ahasuerus with Queen Esther, to hold my poker as his sceptre, and do whatever I desired of him.… ([1874] 2016, 55)

The first image (fig. 1) is the photographic rendition of the exact scene quoted above: the friar hands the poison to Juliet saying, "[t]ake thou this vial" and unveiling his contriving plan. The most eye-catching part that might immediately grasp the viewer's attention is the highly lit forehead of Friar Laurence, which dominates the scene. As Nichole J. Fazio implies, this alludes to the friar being the source of wisdom, who Juliet turns to for counsel, and as she receives guidance, her face is illuminated by the light radiating from his forehead. The two faces and the man's hand grasping the vial stand out from the otherwise darker and simple background. Both heads are covered, and both characters wear dark clothes, which enhance their faces. Juliet tilts her head upwards and glances at the wise man: she seems to be a young woman seeking guidance, yet in control of her emotions. The composition of the picture is triangular, emphasising the figures' power-relationship: the friar is seated higher than the woman, thus looks downward at Juliet, creating the impression of a dominating paternal figure (2023, 118).

The second image (fig. 2) distances the two characters, yet it elevates them to almost the same level on the visual plane. Similarly, Friar Laurence's face is well-lit, fully turned towards Juliet, who is photographed in full profile. Instead of the dark robes, Juliet dons a white dress, lending her a more prominent role in the scene. No vial appears here, and their gentle clasp with both hands connects the two figures (Fazio 2023, 120). Thus, the latter photograph radiates more intimacy and tenderness.

3 *Prospero and Miranda*

No harm.
I have done nothing but in care of thee,
Of thee, my dear one, thee, my daughter, who
Art ignorant of what thou art, nought knowing
Of whence I am, nor that I am more better
Than Prospero, master of a full poor cell,
And thy no greater father.
(Shakespeare [1610–1611] 2010, 1.2.15–21)

Figure 3 *Prospero and Miranda* (1865)

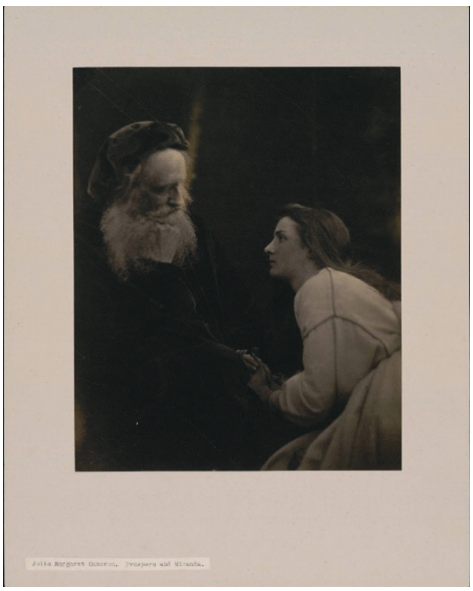

Figure 4 *Prospero and Miranda* (1865)

In the same year as Cameron produced versions of *Friar Laurence and Juliet* (figs. 1 and 2), she also made another series of strikingly similar photos, this time entitled *Prospero and Miranda*. It is Henry Taylor once again who personifies the magician, almost seated the same way as before, but in the role of the young woman Mary Ryan,[4] Cameron's servant, appears, who bears a likeness to Mary Hillier's Juliet. In

[4] As Stonell Walker claims, Cameron found Mary Ryan in the street with her mother, an Irish immigrant. She took Mary home and trained her as a servant, and helped the mother to find work (2020, 65). An intriguing anecdote is attached to these photographs: their making led Henry John Stedman Cotton to propose to Mary Ryan (Springer and Weiss 2023, 188). In Stonell Walker's retelling of the anecdote, the young man, , who was later made a lord, saw the photographs at an exhibition, bought every print that Ryan modelled for, and later was bold enough to show up at the doorstep of Dimbola Lodge,

the *Prospero and Miranda* photographs, Prospero, the magician father, is seated again on the left, looking at his daughter. There is a physical connection between the two figures, firmly holding each other's hands (Fazio 2023, 121), which probably marks the moment when he reveals his past. The only difference between the two versions is that Cameron made minor adjustments to how Prospero holds his head. In one version, he faces Miranda (fig. 3), while in the other one, there is a patronising tilt (fig. 4) that might allude to the line "my daughter, who // Art ignorant of what thou art." The kneeling girl is looking up at her father, and her posture might hint at a certain level of tension. Her hair is let down, uncovered, giving her the appearance of an innocent young girl. The composition again is somewhat triangular, putting Prospero in a higher, superior position with his well-lit forehead, and the kneeling girl gazing up at him.

4 *Vivien and Merlin*

he was mute:
So dark a forethought roll'd about his brain,
As on a dull day in an Ocean cave
The blind wave feeling round his long sea-hall
In silence: wherefore, when she lifted up
A face of sad appeal, and spake and said,
'O Merlin, do ye love me?' and again,
'O Merlin, do ye love me?' and once more,
'Great Master, do ye love me?' he was mute.
And lissome Vivien, holding by his heel,
Writhed toward him, slided up his knee and sat,
Behind his ankle twined her hollow feet
Together, curved an arm about his neck,
Clung like a snake; and letting her left hand
Droop from his mighty shoulder, as a leaf,
Made with her right a comb of pearl to part
The lists of such a board as youth gone out
Had left in ashes: (Tennyson [1869] 2009, 226–43)

where the Camerons lived, to propose to Mary (2020, 124). As Cameron recalled in *The Annals of My Glass House*: "entirely out of the *Prospero and Miranda* picture sprung a marriage which has, I hope, cemented the welfare and well-being of a real King Copethua who, in the Miranda, saw the prize which has proved a jewel in that monarch's crown" ([1874] 2016, 56).

Figure 5 *Vivien and Merlin* (1874)

Figure 6 *Vivien and Merlin* (1874)

Inspired by Tennyson's retelling of the Arthurian legend, *The Idylls of the King* (1859–1885) – for which Tennyson himself commissioned Cameron to produce illustrations – the *Vivien and Merlin* photographs are probably the most dissimilar to the ones introduced above. Sylvia Wolf in *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women* points out that Vivien embodies the archetype of the *femme fatale*, and her character was inspired by Thomas Malory's Nimue (1998, 96). In Tennyson's rendition of the story, it is Merlin who is pursued by Vivien, who – driven by her love of power – seduces Merlin in a forest. Thus, the female figure portrayed in these photographs is not an ingenue (as Miranda and Juliet). It is worth mentioning that given Tennyson's portrayal of Vivien as a vicious woman, even Cameron would have hesitated to have a model of that archetype in her studio (Wolf 1998, 106). Cameron was concerned about how the inherent character manifested in appearance, but she experienced difficulty with the embodiment of Vivien, and seemed perplexed when she reflected on the difficulty of portraying Vivien. She had the impression that though the model was "lissome and graceful and piquante" she was "a sweet girl" perhaps "not wicked eno'" (qtd. in Wolf 1998, 101). The Victorians regarded Vivien as degenerate (Wolf 1998, 103) and as the model for the seductress later reminiscences: "Mrs. Cameron had determined that I was to be Vivien. I very much objected to this, because Vivien did not seem to me to be a very nice character to assume. In addition to my having

to portray the objectionable Vivien, I discovered, to my dismay, that Mrs. Cameron had designed her husband for Merlin – for Mr. Cameron was given to fits of hilarity which always came in the wrong places" (qtd. in Gernsheim 1975, 43).

Vivien, the sorceress, portrayed by Agnes Mangles, is situated on the left side of the picture wearing a light-coloured dress that enhances her presence. Charles Cameron,[5] Julia Margaret Cameron's husband, posing as Merlin, is on the right, seated, and his white hair is set sharply against the background. As Joanne Lukitsh indicates, the photograph depicts the exact moment when Vivien seduces Merlin, the King's ally, and uses her charm to trap him later in an oak tree (2001, 116). Wolf observes that Tennyson portrayed Vivien as the embodiment of the serpent in the poem, which can be observed, for instance, in the French illustrator, Gustave Doré's engraving entitled *Merlin and Vivien Repose* (1868). In Cameron's depictions, however, this serpentine feature cannot be identified (Wolf 1998, 97–98).

In the first image (fig. 5), the composition is yet again triangular. The key moment is depicted when Vivien "writhed toward him, slided up his knee and sat." Wolf points out that although Vivien is placed slightly lower, resolutely touching the wizard's chest and stroking his beard, she seems to be in the superior position within the frame. This photograph is similar to the previous ones: we see a somewhat sensual, yet not too passionate touch, which might be attributed to the decency of the era and to practical circumstances, namely the length of the exposure time. Mangles later recounted that although Charles Cameron, with his countenance and fitting

5 Inevitably, biographical references should not be overlooked: Julia Margaret Cameron's husband, Charles Hay Cameron was twenty years her senior (Olsen 2015, 56). The Camerons shared a loving and fulfilling marriage, as the photographer recounts in her autobiography:

> My husband from first to last has watched every picture with delight, and it is my daily habit to run to him with every glass upon which a fresh glory is newly stamped, and to listen to his enthusiastic applause. This habit of running into the dining-room with my wet picture has stained such an immense quantity of table linen with nitrate of silver, indelible stains, that I should have been banished from any less indulgent household. ([1874] 2016, 55)

Julia Margaret Cameron adored her husband, referring to him as "the most beautiful old man in the world!" (qtd. in Lukitsh 2001, 24). Similarly, in a prayer she herself composed, Cameron expressed her sentiments as follows: "[m]ost blessed Lord… Thou alone dost know how fondly dear This my husband is to me, how great is his tenderness, how true is his love" (*Julia Margaret Cameron* 1996, 14). One might be tempted to speculate that Cameron's personal involvement is the underlying reason for dedicating attention and time to creating photographs that depict the relationship between an elderly man and a younger woman, as well as exploring the different layers of such relationships. The two Shakespearean scenes depict paternal figures and innocent young women, while in the Tennysonian scene a seductress is portrayed with the man being her victim; none of them imply a marital relationship based on mutual support and partnership.

looks, was an ideal model for portraying Merlin, he was prone to laughing, thus hindering the photography sessions, and ruining numerous negatives (qtd. in Wolf 1998, 99). The characters' hands are placed at the same level, Vivien is touching and seducing the man, whilst Merlin is grabbing the top part of the chair but is unable to resist her, and finally succumbs to her temptation (Lukitsh 2001, 116).

The photograph with the same title (fig. 6) features the characters standing. Vivien is closer to the camera and is amidst action: pointing her finger at Merlin's forehead, she is just about to cast the spell (Wolf 1998, 99). Furthermore, an oak tree-like prop is visible behind Merlin. This composition diminishes the character of the magician, as he is just about to be entrapped by the spell.

As Jeff Rosen highlights, Vivien embodies a negative example for women, she sins and, as a consequence, suffers for her deeds. The representation of the anti-heroine appears in the midst of articulating her "moral and social transgressions." Merlin is unable to speak, the very moment is depicted when "he was mute" and bewitched. When he is entrapped in the oak tree, it is another key moment when he becomes speechless: "for Merlin, overtalk'd and overworn, / Had yielded." Using the visual language of photography to imply muteness, Cameron chose to depict the wizard with closed eyes (Rosen 2017, 247–48).

5 Victorian Concepts of Femininity

In Victorian England, the concept of female duality existed, as among others Sarah Kühl points out: the constructs of the *angel in the house* and the *fallen woman* were prevalent. This distinction has Biblical and Christian roots: the first alludes to the Virgin Mary, immaculate, good, the instrument of God; while the latter can be linked to Eve, the seductress, sinful, and responsible for the fall of man (2016, 171–72).

Jan Marsh comments that the gender history in Victorian England has a twofold interpretation: the model of the patriarchy that secured privilege and power for men, and the roots of the "process of determined but gradual female challenge to their exclusion" (2001, 98). Providing a more nuanced vision than this dichotomous view, Lydia Murdoch highlights that there was no uniform life experience for women in Victorian England and resonates with John Stuart Mill's idea that the common features all women had were based on the condition of their subjugation (economic, social and legal). The ideals of femininity depended on social class, besides location, age and religion. Though the Great Reform Act of 1832 denied suffrage to all women, upper- and middle-class women still had the chance to take advantage of their social and financial positions. The aristocracy

and the landed gentry were less than 5% of the population, the middle and working classes formed the vast majority of the society and were distinguished by cultural values and their work alongside their financial status. The core values of the rising middle class were respectability, discipline and morality. Victorian society was also permeated by the separation of the public and private spheres. A clear distinction crystallised between the masculine realm of life (entailing business, politics, empire, warfare) and the feminine realm (domesticity, morality, religion, family life [2013, Introduction]). Suzanne Fagence Cooper recalls an article written for the *Saturday Review* in 1867 that outlines the concept of the separate spheres. It elaborated on the idea that the man's duty is to provide for the wife and family and navigate in the world, whilst it is the woman's responsibility to ensure the domestic background, be in charge of the household, to provide emotional support and to educate the children. In an ideal relationship of this sort, women's chores were valued, yet the husband still preserved his role as the head of the family (2001, 10). Murdoch recalls that this ideal of femininity was cemented by the poem "The Angel in the House" (1854) by Coventry Patmore, which put women on a pedestal, who were destined to be wives and to be devoted to their family. Yet, Murdoch also highlights that the binary division of the matters of life is an oversimplification, as women were preoccupied with matters beyond their homes through, for example, social causes. Though the idea of the New Woman emerged in the 1890s to challenge the *angel in the house* concept, in the middle of the century precursors of the feminist movement appeared. Women who participated in it argued that their contribution to society and politics could be achieved through their feminine characteristics (2013, Introduction). Contrarily to the common belief, Victorian women engaged in numerous activities: they were in charge of running the household, supervising domestic work and the servants, tending to the infants, the elderly and the sick; they were keen needleworkers and had philanthropic duties (Marsh 2001, 102).

The different attitudes to sexuality divided the Victorian mindset and had a profound impact on women's position in society. Fagence Cooper also highlights that protecting women from matters of sex was another sign of their respectability as the feeble feminine body needed perpetual protection as various theories about eroticism, how the female reproductive system worked, conception, or flouting the conventions permeated the Victorian way of thinking. Sexual innocence and chastity were highly valued and signified a well-ordered household, yet in reality, the situation was not that unambiguous. In contrast with the image of the respectable Victorian lady, there was not that much emphasis on morality among the lower classes; looser sexual relations were more common. Many women with seasonal jobs worked as prostitutes when they experienced financial difficulties. Though street

prostitution seemed to be the visible side of extramarital sexual activity, mistresses, models, actresses, barmaids, the so-called *fallen women* were also marginalised in a respectable society; the distinction between innocence and vice was difficult to circumscribe (2001, 12–30).

6 The Femininity of Juliet, Miranda and Vivien

Based on the detailed descriptive analyses of the photographs above, and the Victorian social context, one might argue that the first two themes bear a resemblance to each other. The concept of *the angel in the house*, a tender, subservient woman, who is confined to the domestic sphere, echoes Juliet's and Miranda's character. Juliet seeks guidance, Miranda gets acquainted with her father's past; both of them are rendered as figures of vulnerability and innocence in need of protection and guidance. Although by accepting the vial of poison (fig. 1) or saying farewell (fig. 2) to Friar Laurence, Juliet seems to embrace her fate to some extent, yet Miranda seems slightly more passive (figs. 3 and 4). Friar Laurence and Prospero are both paternal figures, while Juliet and Miranda are innocent young women dependent on them to a certain extent. As Fazio emphasises, while Friar Laurence appears to be a benevolent, wise guardian, Prospero, who binds his daughter to himself with his magic, is more controlling (2023, 121). As Fazio argues, the first version (fig. 1) might allude to the Friar as a gentle, yet rather paternalistic and dominating presence, as opposed to the second version (fig. 2), where, though the two figures appear on the same level, they seem more distant and less intimate. Despite touching each other, they rather seem to be saying goodbye (Fazio 2023, 118). It might be argued which handclasp seems more intimate: the closer one, but with the vial (fig. 1), or the more distant one (fig. 2) without the vial, yet with the figures gently holding each other's hands and bidding farewell. Their touch and the passing of the vial both mark a significant turning point in the play, as they initiate the series of events that lead to the tragic death of the star-crossed lovers, which ends the feud between the Houses of Montague and Capulet. The two photographs can be interpreted as illustrating consecutive moments in the scene: firstly, Juliet seeks guidance and is given the vial, then they bid farewell. Hence the difference in composition.

If we ignore the presence of the vial, it is somewhat difficult to distinguish the father–daughter duos in the four photographs (figs. 1–4). Mike Weaver argues that "Mrs. Cameron's men are, on the whole, authoritarian figures, compulsive and compelling in the manner of Carlyle's heroes" and the father figures are exploitative and dangerous to their children. He continues to claim that Cameron wilfully

operated with "the dark side of male authority," as she was sensitive and wise enough to identify darkness in great men (1986, 58). Rosen expresses an equally harsh opinion and echoes Weaver's idea, then he continues to claim that these allegories depict anti-heroes: "all of them involve harsh, severe, or callous father figures who have placed their virtuous and pure daughters in uncompromising predicaments, or whose overbearing and inflexible character stand in stark contrast to their daughter's kindness and compassion" (2017, 211). His position on the matter is that Friar Laurence is the agent of Romeo and Juliet's destruction, and he claims that Miranda is the "daughter shielded from the world as a reflection of her father's repressive control" (211). As mentioned earlier in the descriptions, Fazio's viewpoint is more permissive and lenient regarding the characters of Friar Laurence and Prospero. One might be inclined to resonate with her viewpoint, given the concept of the angel in the house: wise men being in charge, and pure, young girls turning to them for guidance and support resonate with the ideal of the *Zeitgeist*. The Shakespearean scenes – with their enclosed scenes within the domestic sphere, where women are aided by men – are in unison with the patriarchal *status quo.*

However, the character of Vivien suggests the stereotype of the dangerous *fallen woman*, who challenges the morals of her social environment: she is aware of her sexual power and deliberately utilises it to seduce and entrap the great wizard; there is no trace of an innocent young girl. Thus, by taking advantage of her attractiveness, she embraces her fate: the great wizard is the victim of Vivien's trickery, she is in the superior role. Here, as opposed to the original title of the poem, Cameron swapped the names in her title, thereby implying who dominates the scene: the young sorceress controls the old wizard, in a situation most inglorious for him. In contrast to Friar Laurence and Prospero, here it is the male figure, Merlin, who seems frail and vulnerable, with closed eyes, not emerging as the powerful wizard but as a victim of manipulation and deceit. Conversely, Vivien is the active party in her scene. The Tennysonian scenes are against the *status quo*, the established norms of society based on morality: not only are they dominated by the female figures, but also in the last photograph (fig. 6) an oak tree can be observed, alluding to the forest, a public sphere of action in sharp contrast to the Victorian ideal of female domesticity.

In the first two groups of photographs (figs. 1–4), the aged, wrinkled faces of Friar Laurence and Prospero attest to their wisdom, enhanced by the light cast on their forehead. Their faces are contrasted with the pure and youthful faces of Juliet and Miranda, respectively. Yet, the broken, old Merlin seems defeated as the determined Vivien is about to crawl on his lap (fig. 5) or is forcing him against the tree (fig. 6); there is nothing here to suggest his grandeur. The touch and the appearance of the characters' skin is another shared feature of the entire group of photos. The rugged and wrinkled skin of Friar Laurence, Prospero and Merlin is contrasted with the

soft, flawless skin of Juliet, Miranda and Vivien. However, a distinctive feature arises: in the case of Friar Laurence and Prospero, the aged skin might suggest wisdom, maturity, experience and dominance, as the respective plays contextualise them in the role of paternal figures. In contrast, Merlin's skin creates the impression of a frail, defeated man, who falls for Vivien's seduction, as Tennyson described. Juliet and Miranda have their youthful innocent beauty and charm, while Vivien, fully conscious of her appealing looks, is ready to defeat the magician mage by exerting her feminine charms. This might be another indicator of how the power relations shift between the different characters.

It can be observed that Cameron's photography is filled with creased drapery and conspicuous cascades of loose, long hair (Springer and Weiss 2023, 15); the photographs discussed here are spectacular examples of that feature. The wise men's long, white hair and bushy beards reinforce their masculinity, maturity and experience. While the braided and covered hair of Juliet implies modesty and purity, Miranda's hair flows down her back: as Fazio puts it, "she seems on the brink of flight from her overbearing father." She is "insolent yet redeemable, nevertheless remains subservient to her father, seemingly unable to escape the robes that entangle her despite her desire to assert herself" (2023, 121). Vivien's profusion of hair dominates the photograph where the characters are standing as she is seducing the wizard (fig. 6). These again echo the Victorian concept of femininity, loose hair partly suggests youth, purity, immaturity, while in the case of an adult woman, it suggests moral looseness.

7 Conclusion

The present paper has investigated three of Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs inspired by scenes from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest* and Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, together with their alternative versions: *Friar Laurence and Juliet*, *Prospero and Miranda* and *Vivien and Merlin*. Not only did Cameron harness the opportunities the medium of photography offered, but also she strove to ennoble photography by elevating it to the level of art. Creating literary allegories imbues her photographs with emotional and narrative depth and depicts the complexity of the relationship of the characters. The touch between an elderly man and a younger woman conveys different meanings: paternal guidance, support, control, dominance, and even seduction charged with sexual tension. The deliberate choice of composition, the lighting, the skin, the hair, all contribute to the depiction of power relations. Although all the photographs depict the leitmotif

of the encounter of an elderly man and a younger woman, if an attempt is made to construe the characters' relationships in the context of Victorian femininity, one might conclude that *Friar Laurence and Juliet* and *Prospero and Miranda* operate more or less the same way in that they echo the concept of the *angel in the house*, and show the power relations it entails (though by seeking guidance or using their own charms, the female characters depicted in Cameron's photographs embrace their fates to a certain extent). In contrast, *Vivien and Merlin*, especially the version with the standing characters (fig. 6), conjures up the image of the *fallen woman*, fully aware of her sexual powers, hence taking advantage of men. The deep meanings that these photographs convey immortalise Cameron's genius and sensitivity. As Weaver puts it, "[i]n her fusion of the tragic with the prophetic, the sinful with the pure, and the actual with the typical, she assured herself an immortality in the history of photography as certain as her hope in heaven" (1986, 58).

List of Illustrations

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Angela Carter in a Subversive Dialogue With the Brothers Grimm: The Powerful and Ambiguous Role of Mother Figures in Fairy Tales

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This paper examines the complex roles of mother figures in Angela Carter's subversive fairy tales. The first part contextualises the genre's evolution, the emergence of subversive voices, and Carter's strategies in rewriting canonical tales. Special focus is given to the traditional portrayal of mother figures, and to their role in promoting the patriarchal ideology. The second part examines how Carter challenges the Grimms' agenda through her rewritten mother figures in the "The Snow Child" and "The Bloody Chamber." This study contributes to the discussion of the shifting role of mother figures in contemporary–postmodern fiction.

Keywords: adaptations, archetypal women, fairy tales, post-structuralism, Gothic

1 Introduction

"Each century tends to create or re-create fairy tales after its own taste," writes Kari Lokke (1988, 7), and Angela Carter's subversive fairy tales are no exception. Her provocative collection of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* contains reinterpretations of often-told fairy tales such as "Bluebeard," "Snow White," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Little Red Riding Hood," offering a post-structuralist take on these traditional narratives belonging to the Western canon. One aspect which these twentieth-century fairy tales share with their canonical versions written by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm is the role of parents. Mothers in particular are often perceived as *movens*, to use Max Lüthi's term (1987, 35), which refers to the driving force of the narrative, setting the plot of the fairy tale in motion.

Carter relied on the stability of the fairy tale form, and, as Soman Chainani notes, she remained within the boundaries of the genre, reimagining its themes from a new perspective (2003, 215). Her primary tropes deal with taboos, the question of agency, and the Other; she subverted the fairy tale canon using Gothic imagery, inverted endings, the grotesque, and parody. This "juxtaposition of opposites," such

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as the combination of a baroque tone with a vulgar and mocking one, or the use of grotesque in traditional love stories, confronts readers' expectations, and dismantles the binary system of prescribed socio-political values (Lokke 1988, 7). Her rewriting of the archetypal mother continues to challenge the patriarchal ideologies of the Grimms and Perrault. As Lorna Sage observes, this is linked to Carter's notion that good mothers and evil stepmothers are much like a complementing pair of Justines and Juliettes (1998, 61).

This paper explores the ambivalent role of mother figures in fairy tales, considering their function and portrayal in the canonical versions by the Grimms and Perrault, as well as their development and subversion by Carter. The first section will offer an introduction to the fairy tale genre, contextualising the storyteller's voice and Carter's revision of the genre in the framework of post-structuralist adaptations. It will then analyse a selection of tales by the Grimms and Carter, with a focus on how ambiguous mother figures shape the heroine's journey. In the context of the Grimms the focus is on the narrative purposes of mother figures in the Western canon of fairy tales, exploring how these mainstream figures support ideological agendas. This is followed by a comparative review of the mother's evolution in Carter's rewritten tales, offering a new perspective on how her subversive mother figures shape not only the relationship between mother and daughter, but also the outcome of the narrative, in which mothers become underlying protagonists.

2 Carter's Rewritten Fairy Tales: Context and Strategies

The canon of fairy tales is a living, breathing instrument, which came to emphasise different aspects of social hierarchy and values, in close dialogue with changes in society and history. As Maria Tatar notes, the "social structures, institutions, and economic networks of many fairy tales" are rooted in feudalism, established as much in politics as in the family hierarchy, treating women as commodities and marriage as an economic proposition (2003, 49). These structures reflect medieval society's values, which were woven into fairy tales, seeking to legitimise the patriarchal order.

Firstly, there was a marked difference between expectations towards men and women in fairy tales. While men were depicted as adventurous and brave – in line with Arthurian codes of chivalry – women were encouraged to wait passively. These expectations predict outcomes and happily ever afters for both genders, although the endings for men and women look quite different. "Puss in Boots" illustrates how the cat's well-plotted marriage for his master, the Marquis de Carabas earned him a beautiful wife, a kingdom, and social climbing. The same cannot be said for

Snow White, who had to learn early that the world is full of female rivals, and one can only survive by adopting the desired traits of obedience and silence. Secondly, a range of prescribed characteristics in fairy tales set the standard of behavioural norms, showcasing traits to be rewarded and punished. Listed by Tatar as a sin of heroines, an early lesson in the world of fairy tales is repressing one's curiosity (1993, 95). We need not look further than Eve, Pandora or Bluebeard's wife to see the consequences, which followed without failure. Voicelessness and a lack of autonomy on the other hand came highly recommended, as illustrated by Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty. Such desired traits were rewarded with handsome princes and the wedding of the century. Finally, in the Western fairy tale canon power was associated with male figures, reflecting the prescribed hierarchy between genders for centuries to come. Looking back at myths and legends, power was archetypically in the hands of female characters (Bottigheimer 2014, 119). However, the performative power in the hands of women was an uncomfortable notion in the patriarchal order, and silencing women came to be high on the agenda. With the gender line reinforced, women were marginalised, appearing primarily through their link to a more prominent male character, such as Beauty and her father or the Beast. Those characters who still possessed power were turned into stepmothers and ogres, and were forced to meet their unfortunate ends.

Although female characters were thus marginalised in fairy tales, storytelling itself was traditionally considered a feminine activity, and was ascribed to archetypal figures such as spinsters, nurses, and grandmothers. However, just as Perrault had strategically hidden his narrator under the cape of Mother Goose, the embodiment of "aboriginal female wisdom" (Warner 1990, 22), male storytellers appropriated the female voice and gained fame and control through their retellings (Rowe 2014, 61). This pattern is consistently linked to female figures from a lower social rank transmitting narratives to the male storyteller, who typically belongs to a higher class and retells fairy tales through the male gaze (Warner 1990, 8). The Grimms collected their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* from female storytellers and were known for their heavy-handed editing. Their resulting tales cultivated themes of gendered hierarchy, silenced women, and in turn, powerful men. It was in large part owing to the Grimms' work that the male gaze became so prominent in storytelling. These initiatives of appropriating narratives told by women masked the overriding insecurity and anxiety over the weakening of the perceived superiority of patriarchy (Warner 1996, 212). However, female storytellers were not to be silenced. Post-structuralist and feminist waves in the twentieth century reshaped ideologies within the genre, leading to the emergence of subversive, rebellious adaptations of the Western canon. The emerging trend of the criticism of fairy tale opened new dimensions within the discourse, with these debates also contributing to shaking up the traditional foundations of the genre.

In what Linda Hutcheon refers to as the "postmodern age of cultural recycling," adaptation becomes central to postmodern literature (2006, 3). It is not so much that authors of modern days reuse a text and give it a surface-level twist, but rather they select a narrative of olden times and adjust the context in which it is read and received by a now changed audience, allowing different aspects of the story to resurface. Interpreting adapted texts is much like opening a Russian doll, in which the reader is ideally familiar not only with their own socio-cultural context, but also that of the original author, as only this can lead to a complete decoding of the new meanings within the story. This multi-layered process, labelled by Hutcheon as "palimpsestuous intertextuality," is perhaps easier to digest in forms which heavily rely on visual representation (2006, 21). Disney's fairy worlds lend themselves to more direct interpretation, because the audience is helped by a series of strong visual clues. Similarly, in the fairy tale picture books of Maurice Sendak and Angela Barrett, one notes the links and differences to the original text based on the illustrations. In her picture book *Snow White in New York*, Fiona French plays around with the traditional Snow White story, gathering the key elements and repopulating them in the New York of the roaring twenties.

The twentieth century saw the emergence of subversive fairy tales by Tony Morrison, Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter, among others. These stories are in dialogue with their patriarchal intertexts and are marked by the voice of the reappropriated female storyteller. Fairy tales have also retained their resilience throughout the turbulent twentieth century, never failing to perform their primary function: in today's society they still act as powerful codes of social norms and values, and as such they are capable of simultaneously reflecting on their present socio-political context, while shaping the future (Tatar 1993, 229). If the twentieth-century fairy tale's defining feature was subversiveness, its true storyteller was Carter. Her works opened a dialogue with the texts of Perrault and the Grimms, talking back and "destabilising interpretation by presenting versions that are to be read with and against each other" (Bacchilega 2000, 90). As Marina Warner comments, "Carter was drawn to the fairy tale as a form," but her relationship with the genre goes beyond reusing the traditional schemata of the wonder tale, having created her very own formula built on the post-structuralist pillars of intertextuality, parody, irony, and the grotesque (1996, 193). Her Bluebeard narrative reflects not only on the European versions of the tale, but on French *fin-de-siècle* poetry, and her ornate and elaborate language in "Puss-in-Boots" links her to the seventeenth-century French fairy tale tradition. As Helen Simpson notes, Carter fine-tuned her take on the fairy tale until it became a hybrid of genres: her vivid imagery and provocative use of language links these tales from Edward Lear's nonsense literature, to the pornographic Gothic, and the bawdy and carnivalesque *commedia dell'arte* of sixteenth-century Italy (2006, xix).

Her predominant tropes of the taboo, identity, and agency highlight the deeply rooted issues stemming from patriarchal pressure, urging her reader to question the prevailing ideologies of Perrault's time.

Fairy tales have carried both an inherently Gothic sense of the sinister and the grotesque well before Carter's time. Gruesome scenes, such as the mother eating her daughter in the Grimms' "The Juniper Tree," or Cinderella's cruel sisters reaching for the knife to reshape their feet have long been part of children's bedtime stories. Both the Gothic and the grotesque are important pillars of Carter's style and take shape from the self-mocking and grotesque parody of the old husband in "Puss-in-Boots" to the postmodern Gothic of Bluebeard's fading, flower-like persona. The Gothic is evoked by the archetypal imagery of the ancestral home. The decadent castle with labyrinthine passages, where the outer world no longer exists (the telephone rings empty), invokes the crumbling aristocracy of the Ushers. These Gothic figures conceal a deeper layer of the uncanny, masking family illnesses and sins, for which someone will inevitably atone. Carter's use of the trope of a young woman's entrapment, as in the "The Erl-King" and in "The Bloody Chamber," themes of graphic violence and abuse in the family, the incestuous father of "The Snow Child" come together in this collection, playing with the boundaries of the taboo and uncanny. A fundamentally Gothic notion, referred to by David Punter as "the divisions and doublings of the self" take centre stage in the exploration of the Beast as Other in the "The Tiger's Bride" and in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" (Punter 2004, 51). Carter reinterprets the Gothic and challenges the tradition by "destabilizing the subject," and reimagining the previously known boundaries of the Gothic tradition (Hennelly 2001, 70).

Carter's works are also grounded in the post-structuralist feminist tradition. When projected onto the genre of the fairy tale, post-structuralism picked apart the gendered hierarchy, as well as questioned the use of a combined male gaze and the female voice in order to criticise both "patriarchal literary and cultural practices in Western societies" (Jarvis 2000, 158). Carter's fairy tales contain a wide array of post-structuralist devices. The alternative endings in both "The Snow Child" and "The Bloody Chamber" destabilise readers' assumptions as much as the identity of their characters. Like many fairy tales, Carter's "Snow White" adaptation is short and to the point: in two brief pages Carter builds up the rivalry between the female characters and offers us a view of the stepmother's victory, an ending entirely foreign to Western audiences. Similarly, in her version of "Bluebeard," the mother comes to the rescue of the girl on the brink of decapitation, a role change that moves the narrative out of its traditional line of gendered identities. The juxtaposition of these subversive techniques and the well-established fairy tale structure allow Carter to break down the authoritative, male-centred hierarchy and give way instead to a more pluralistic model.

Intertextuality, irony and parody are at the core of Carter's language, present in a layered web of references, humour, and criticism. Both her collection of fairy tales and her later collection of short stories, *Saints and Strangers*, are filled with mythological, literary, and musical references. Her retelling of "Bluebeard" pays tribute to both Baudelaire through paraphrasing him, and to his symbolist circle with their specific imagery, which is reflected in the Marquis's character (Kaiser 1994, 32). Carter also draws on the myth of Eve and Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, while "The Snow Child" is heavily connected to its Pygmalion intertext. Similarly, irony and parody provide tools to invert meanings and plots to re-examine the narrative through a novel lens. "The Courtship of Mr Lyon," Carter's Rococo fairy tale written in d'Aulnoy's style, stands as a tale of parodic domesticity, in which the two male protagonists are both tamed into domestic happiness. Beauty's father cuts an amenable and benevolent figure, in opposition to the autocratic head of the idealised patriarchal family. As Cristina Bacchilega points out, another source of parody originates in Beauty's conscious acceptance of her reversed position: she has no difficulty taming the Lion into an obedient husband (2020, 101). As Patricia Brooke argues, this behaviour contrasts what the title promises and alludes to the irony of arranged marriages, another tool Carter employs to ridicule and challenge the patriarchal agenda (2006, 70).

One of the most potent ways in which Carter challenges patriarchal notions and patterns is through her approach to the mother's archetypal figure. The mother as a character is rich in symbolism and has gained many layers of meaning over the centuries. Embodying the polarities of both good and dark, her figure has been used to support various ideologies, and as a result fits particularly well into Carter's frequent juxtaposition of the holy and the uncanny, the protector and the morally rotten. Themes typically associated with motherhood, such as nurturing and care on one end of the scale and exerting control and authority on the other, provide the underlying framework in many of Carter's narratives. Nicole Ward Jouve claims that it is her objective approach to the mother that allows Carter to remove the archetype from its pre-existing frames and to criticise what she has been used to portray (2007, 165). She achieves this by inverting the power balance between mother and father figure, "the patriarch is […] shown to be shallow, his power mechanical […]. But the fiercest rebellion is against the mother, what she stands for" (2007, 166). Once traditional framings are broken down, Carter releases the character from her symbolic and historical confines, juxtaposing the various polarised iterations of the archetype. Anna Kérchy notes that Carter's subversion is in line with Teresa De Lauretis's vision of a doubled woman contained in one, as "her heroines become *Woman*, doomed to identify with stereotypes of ideologically-prescribed Femininity," only to then "challenge these compulsory clichés of Womanhood" through the grotesque (2008,

60). Such is the mother in Carter's "Bluebeard" revision, a masculine power with more of a maternal instinct than most other fairy tale mothers possess, and even the parody of the father-turned-doting-mother in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon." The underlying intention of Carter's subversive approach is to demythologise the mother's ambiguous role, as "it is always the dangerously problematic that are mythologized in order to make them less dangerous" (Mackinen 1992, 2–3). As a consequence of challenging the well-established stereotypes, Carter's mothers are allowed to take shape in their unrestricted form and power, neither muted nor dismissed, opening the door to "a new, cheerful, active, duty-free form of mothering" (Ward Jouve 2007, 172).

3 Angels and Monsters: Mother Figures in the Grimms' Fairy Tales

Mother figures are some of the most powerful and ambiguous characters encountered in fairy tales, though their role in the heroine's life is often so obscured that a single reading of the text will not reveal the full picture. Their motives and development must be closely followed in order to understand the complex interplay between mothers and daughters. In Gilbert and Gubar's reading, traditional representations of mother figures can be broadly categorised as "the angel-woman and the monster-woman" (1979, 36). These categories correspond to mother figures' archetypal counterparts: on the one hand, the healing and nurturing good mother who offers moral guidance and provides protection, and on the other hand, the symbol of the dark mother, characterised by her ambition and self-preservation, who means to undermine, control, and eliminate her daughter. However, maternal presence in fairy tales comes in a variety of shapes between these two ends of the scale, from Beauty's absent mother, and the cannibalistic stepmother in the "The Juniper Tree," to the doubled mirror image of Snow White's and Cinderella's absent/stepmother. This analysis will focus primarily on the two polarised categories of the absent and angelic mother as opposed to the plotting and wicked stepmother, while also bringing examples of tales where the lines of a character become blurred to illustrate the duality often underlying these characters. Although similarly to the archetypal mother figure, father figures also often play a significant part in fairy tales, narratives with the father as the central parent figure raise a different set of equally complex issues, and thus take another direction to the one examined here.

Before turning to the analysis of the specific mother figures, however, it is essential to establish the cultural dynamism within which they were constructed – particularly because this context is often overlooked. Fairy tale mothers fell just as much prey to the

patriarchal influence as their young and innocent counterparts, if not more so. Their very existence in the tales is "author(iz)ed by a male voice," legitimising the dominant hierarchy (Bacchilega 1988, 3). Often appearing as transgressive, representing sins of the fairy tale world (Tatar, 1993, 96), and more sinister in their projections of happily ever afters, mothers frequently become portrayed by Perrault and the Grimms as witches, stepmothers, and ogres, in short, the arch villain, as the example of all that goes against the virtues and social codes prescribed by fairy tales. Often it was preferable to erase and silence the mother altogether and replace her with a faded, although beautiful image of the absent mother, sending her daughter supernatural help whenever she was in need of assistance. Both angelic and monstrous prototypes served to promote gendered messages of social conduct, feminine beauty, and the prescribed order of social hierarchy (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003, 714).

Absent mothers are characterised by frequently leaving their dutiful daughters behind, often doing so without further justification, notes Warner (1996, 210). This narrative element has become so widespread that it often occurs to readers only halfway through the tale that the mother of the heroine has been conspicuously absent all along. In her rendition of "Beauty and the Beast" Villeneuve cuts to the chaise and begins her story with the father's misfortunes of losing his riches, making no mention of the mother's early death. Meanwhile the Grimms deal with the matter right at the beginning of the heroine's journey: "And when the child was born, the Queen died" (1993, 249). In the nineteenth century death in childbirth was not a rare occurrence, which grounded this episode of tales in reality. However, there were other, more pressing reasons for making the biological mother's death a cornerstone of fairy tales. Their disappearance is no coincidence, for it has much to do with the patriarchal order, from which the only respectable way to escape is through an early death in childbirth (Fisher and Silber 2000, 126). The daughter left to her own devices must make the best of the situation without her mother's guidance, and navigate the years leading to adolescence, often hindered by stepsisters, the stepmother, and at times even by her incestuous father. While she possesses charm, a kind heart, and an obedient nature, this typically does not suffice, and so the angel mother intervenes in a divine form, in line with her symbolic counterpart, the protective and nurturing good mother.

These kindly mothers are not forgotten by the heroine: throughout the narrative they remain framed as models of obedience and passivity, characteristics highlighted with barely concealed motives by the Grimms, Perrault, and their contemporaries. Such virtues are underlined by the Grimms through the parting words of Cinderella's mother: "'Dear child, be good and pious, and then the good God will always protect you, and I will look down on you from heaven and be near you' […] and [Cinderella] remained pious and good" (1993, 121). Since fairy tales are "gendered

scripts and serve to legitimize and support the dominant gender system" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003, 711), it is unsurprising that the backbone of the fairy tale canon is concerned with female beauty, obedience and passivity. Incidentally, it is these very traits which absent mothers hand down to their daughters, and so their relationship plays out in light of these values. If their daughters follow in their footsteps and heed their advice, or rather take note of what made their mothers angels rather than monsters, they are likely to end up in a similar position by the end of the story. Considering this, it makes one question whether these good mothers are characters in their own right, or rather just shadows of a character, strategically employed tools to underline an ideological message.

In both the Grimms' "Cinderella" and "Snow White," the mother figure gains an ambivalent layer of meanings by its doubled counterpart, the cruel stepmother. While not much is known about Cinderella's mother, we know that Cinderella continues to grieve, visiting her mother's grave and sharing her sorrows and difficulties encountered with the now reigning stepmother and her two vicious stepsisters. Her mother then sends help in the form of an animal helper, which is transformed into the figure of the fairy godmother in later versions (Warner 1996, 204). This divine interference grants Cinderella the requisite beauty and grace, and a coach signifying social status, leading to her marriage to the prince (Grimm and Grimm 1993, 123). In a similar fashion, it is the performative words of Snow White's good mother that gifted her with enviable beauty before she was even born (Grimm and Grimm 1993, 249). It is this quality of Snow White that later prevents the hunter from killing her, and makes the prince get off his high horse upon seeing her in the glass coffin. In short, the good mother has once again paved the way for a safe passage to adulthood in the patriarchal world. Perrault's "Bluebeard," although only fleetingly, mentions the mother figure as a compliant, docile woman, one who is not opposed to marrying any of her daughters off to a strange man whose very presence they all find deeply repulsive (Perrault 2009, 35). This characterisation, too, is in line with Perrault's agenda of keeping women away from decisions concerning the economy of marriage.

As Tatar notes, biological mothers are rarely established as key characters, even though their intangible influence can be felt throughout the story (2003, 142). However, the same cannot be said of their counterpart, the long-established rival of young daughters, the stepmother. In sharp contrast with the angelic mother, who appears as a protecting shadow character of the heroine's journey, the scheming stepmother takes centre stage, controlling both princess and plot (Fisher and Silber 2000, 123). To unveil the attributes of this controversial character and shed light on her complex relationship to the heroine, we must first examine her origins and how she came to occupy such a major part of the scene.

The stepmother originated in the figure of the wicked mother-in-law, later edited out by the Grimms. In the Grimms' "Mother-in-Law," the King's mother developed a carnivorous appetite for the new wife and her offspring. This ogre-like mother-in-law bears a striking similarity to the prince's mother in "Sleeping Beauty" in Perrault's version (Tatar 2003, 138). These instances stand as examples of a time when the stepmother had not yet become the standard portrayal of the archaic female villain. Warner offers an alternative view on the conflicts the heroine faces in the story: perhaps Sleeping Beauty's enchanted sleep and the entrapment of Rapunzel represent not the trials leading up to marriage, but those inevitable conflicts with the mother-in-law which follow the marriage to the handsome prince (1996, 220). These dangerous creatures on the borderlands of woman-turned-ogre fear loss of control, once the young bride enters the scene. By the time the figure of the wicked stepmother replaces the mother-in-law, the character is clearly formed, showcasing characteristics which cut a sinister figure when compared to the heroine's young and innocent nature. These traits are consistent with the archetypal dark mother, who makes up for her lack of maternal instincts and unconditional love for her daughter with equal amounts of ambition and oppressive power. The Grimms' portrayals of Cinderella's neglectful stepmother, the controlling crone in "Rapunzel," and the downright cruel mother of "The Juniper Tree" are iterations of this dark, uncanny character through and through.

The startling difference between heroine and evil stepmother has been in the focus of Disney's adaptation of "Snow White" from the first scene: the titular character, dressed in traditional peasant clothes, broom and bucket in tow, is heavily contrasted with the Queen's rich cloaks, angular face and majestic posture (Sharpsteen et al. 1937, 3:33–4:50). Cinderella's stepmother is portrayed in a similar angle in Disney's version: her sharp expression, towering hairdo and the narrow staircase she is climbing towards Cinderella aligns the reader with the perspective of the heroine, creating terror (Geronimi et al. 1949, 22:00–24:10; Warner 1996, 225). Such visual representations heavily draw on the Grimms' versions and give an accurate portrayal of how this sinister character is shown in the original texts (Grimm and Grimm 1993, 121).

What Disney achieved with visual aids, the Grimms accomplished by bringing the stepmother in contrast with the values embodied by the heroine, thus strategically underlining the stepmother's deeply flawed character traits. These traits were some of the worst imaginable feminine qualities in the patriarchal socio-historical context. Vain and jealous of Snow White's youth and beauty, the Queen cannot bear the idea that there might be someone fairer than her. In the Grimms' "Hansel and Gretel," the doubled character of witch/stepmother is shaped by her gluttony both for money and the children's meat, while possessiveness and wishing to retain control are the

defining features of the old hag keeping Rapunzel captive (Chainani 2003, 213). Curiously, in fairy tales only pre-adolescent girls are dominated by the stepmother; she has no power over males or mature women, which shows a pattern of singling out her targets not only along a gender, but also on a generational divide. An overarching feature, encompassing all these traits, is her deviance from the silenced woman. Often shaped as witches, fairy tale stepmothers are endowed with the ability to perform spells – in short, their words have power. The Grimms, unwelcoming towards female characters whose voice could override the prominent ideological messages, decided to eliminate the stepmother on a structural level.

The push-pull dynamic between the stepmother and the heroine is put into motion by the stepmother's deviance, which in postmodern versions translates into offering an alternative path for the heroine. In the original texts their rivalry served an ideological purpose: females were discouraged, if not barred from being on good terms with each other. In the Grimms' "Mother Holle" the "pretty and industrious" daughter is described from the beginning as "the Cinderella of the house," who was ordered to go down the well by her mother (1993, 133). The same treatment does not apply to the mother's preferred daughter, consequently there is no chance for an alliance between the sisters. There also exists a purposefully placed barrier of values and behavioural norms between the two sisters and Cinderella, one which is artificial and unbreakable. Although "beautiful and fair of face, [the stepsisters were] vile and black of heart," and such differences in values prevent the three sisters from forming a bond (Grimm and Grimm 1993, 121). This unstable and downright threatening dynamic between women confirms to misogynistic norms, an agenda handed down by men.

Hostility between female characters is further amplified by the central tropes of female beauty and the mirror, both of which play a key role in "Snow White" in its various interpretations. As Gilbert and Gubar note, "female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other" (1979, 39). While the conflict is between the two female protagonists, their relationship is constructed on a three-pillar model, as it is the voice of the mirror, masking the male gaze, which sets the tone of their relationship and drives the plot forward. The mirror serves two key functions: firstly, it underscores the importance of feminine beauty, something which "objectifies, devalues, and subordinates women" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003, 711). The Queen, as the older woman of the two, already dreading her beauty fading at the first signs of aging, is desperately trying to gain the attention of the King over his young and beautiful daughter. She soon falls victim to the nagging voice of the mirror. Secondly, fuelling the Queen's hatred and jealousy towards Snow White, the mirror symbolism paves the way for their

ill-fated relationship. It is the mirror's voice raising Snow White to the status of an equal competitor, urging the Queen to single her out as a worthy adversary. The Queen's downfall is ultimately caused by her scheming, similar to the old crone's designs in "Rapunzel." If only the Queen had never listened to her magic mirror, comments Zipes, she might never have been driven to such lengths in her desperate wish to be accepted by the King and eliminate Snow White as competition, and she might even have survived the encounter (2010, 116–17). Interestingly, Snow White remains untouched by the mirror. She knows her path and there is no danger of her straying from it; therefore, she needs no mirror reminding her of the patriarchal agenda in which she is already entrapped.

Villainous mother figures therefore fulfil a particularly important role in Perrault's and the Grimms' fairy tales: their characterisation forces the heroine to distance herself from their influence, and everything they stand for, mirroring instead "the passive, feminine identity of the first queen" (Fisher and Silber 2000, 124). The portrayal of the evil stepmother thus ensures that the heroine remains on the path which she was never meant to stray from and arrives safely in the harbour of a well-planned marriage with the prince. The stepmother, whose presence has a much stronger impact on the outcome of the story than the absent mother, makes sure that "traditional gender roles in the patriarchal state" are respected by offering an anti-patriarchal example (Zipes 1993, 36).

4 The Changing Role of Mothers in Carter's Subversive Tales

While the postmodern fairy tale of the twentieth century did not annihilate the mother figures we have previously encountered, these characters, just like the plots which they shape, have gone through transformations. Absent and monstrous mothers exist all the same in post-structuralist adaptations by Carter and her contemporaries, as the real change in these stories lies elsewhere. The change of perspective, the autonomy of female characters, and alternative endings render the narratives radically different from our expectations, breaking up the patriarchal hierarchy and preconceived notions of what certain characters are capable of achieving.

The briefest tale of the collection, Carter's "The Snow Child" reinvents the mother's relationship with the heroine by making crucial changes in terms of the family structure, the autonomy of female characters, and consequently the ending of the tale. These new perspectives are different from our expectations, since they break up the patriarchal hierarchy and preconceived notions of what certain characters are capable of achieving. "Midwinter – invincible, immaculate" – Carter's flawless,

clear white opening is in sharp contrast with the violent, incestuous plot (2006, 152). The characters are always the same, a trio of mother, father, and daughter; however, the original versions rendered the father into oblivion, a silent observer of the stepmother's cruelty. Carter's Countess, the Snow Child's quasi-stepmother, is not far from the Grimms' portrayal of the evil Queen: "how shall I be rid of her?" was her first thought on the young girl's entering the scene (Carter 2006, 152). The mirror's voice and female rivalry still provide the Countess's inner motivation and dictate her every move. However, the involvement of the father figure in the plot renders the narrative radically different from the Grimms' tale, thus bringing about a number of key changes to the archetypal role of the wicked stepmother.

Firstly, the performative voice is attributed not to Snow White's late mother, but to the father. In the Grimms' version, the patriarch is conspicuously absent, yet autocratic all the same (Marshall 2004, 406). What we know about him factually is relatively little: his angelic wife, who fulfils her own wish of having a beautiful child, departs from his side. Not long after, he decides to bring a new Queen to the palace; however, there is no room for two women by the King's side. Subverting this framework, and in contrast with "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride," which feature between them a pair of polarised depictions of the father archetype and a set of notably absent mothers, Carter makes space for both the female characters and the father, who is no longer a passive participant of the story. Carter's Snow Child is born "on the father's desire," he moulded her in a Pygmalionesque fashion out of the elements of the forest, mirroring the original tale (Chainani 2003, 217). "I wish I had a girl as white as snow" – the Count utters the first part of the ritualistic three-tiered wish, and once the wish was complete, so was the child: "there she stood, beside the road, white skin, red mouth, black hair and stark naked; she was the child of his desire" (Carter 2006, 152). The inversion of roles in the context of performative power is meant to achieve a double effect. It renders the stepmother voiceless, while in canonical tales it was the female voice which dictated the pace of the tale. As a result, Carter switches readers' perspective and criticises the patriarchal model by placing the Count in a position of power, thus holding him responsible for the events which follow. This is a diversion from the Grimms' narrative, which held the stepmother accountable for all evils befalling the daughter. Consequently, the stepmother's voicelessness also hints at the daughter's inability to speak up for herself in the future. For how is she to learn to stand her ground if her mother has not set her a better precedent?

Secondly, while the Grimms' villain was the stepmother, in Carter's revision evil is shared between the Count and the Countess. Once brought into existence following a number of wishes, the Snow Child's short life is a series of trials by the Countess, which culminates in rape by the Count. The themes of rape and incestuous

fathers were consistently edited out of the original tales, mirroring the prominent ideological trends of the nineteenth century (Marshall 2004, 408). Relying on Gothic elements, Carter adds a new, previously censored layer to the Snow White narrative, which focuses on the "dynamics and displacements of the bourgeois family romance" (Hennelly 2001, 73). As a result, in Carter's revision of sharing the blame, the heroine's flight from her home can be just as much a consequence of her father's inappropriate desire as her stepmother's jealousy (Marshall 2004, 407). While this transfer of the evil act from the stepmother (in the Grimms' version ordering Snow White's murder) to the Father does not render her less evil, it certainly underlines the impossibility of her position. Although the Grimms portrayed the Queen as a deviant woman whose suffering is merited and whose power should be eliminated, Carter makes a point of inverting the plot. Here not even the traditionally vile character is able to exert her will and triumph over the daughter, which underlines her lack of power in the greater patriarchal scheme.

Thirdly, "The Snow Child" brings into centre a second relationship, other than the mother–daughter dynamic. The dialogue between the Countess and the mirror takes place behind the scenes, although its presence is just as relevant as in the original tale. Carter puts the plan into motion by contrasting the archetypal, evil stepmother's active, scheming character with one devoid of agency and a voice. While the mirror symbolism representing the male gaze is only indirectly present, it is brought into focus by the triangle of the three characters in which the two female figures are entrapped with the Count being the only one in a position of power. As observed by Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, it is often women wishing to get their way through their beauty who rely most on men's approval (2003, 712). There is no mother wishing for a child in Carter's story, only one whose sole desire is to win the approval of the male gaze, "wrapped in the glittering pelts of black foxes [wearing] high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels" (Carter 2006, 152). The Countess's lack of power in her dynamic with the Count challenges the typical stepmother figure, which carries over to her problematic relationship with the Snow Child.

The final way in which Carter alters the connection between mother and daughter is the lack of direct contact between the two characters. However, this does not mean that the core relationship of the Snow White tale loses depth or significance. Rather, it is hidden behind the more visible ties both characters have to the Count. While in the Grimms' narrative the father is noticeably absent, his patriarchal voice only partially present through the magic mirror, Carter renders his threatening presence an essential pillar of the plot. As a result of the father's active presence, interaction is more distanced between the two women, manifesting primarily through the Count. The character of the Countess is grounded in themes traditionally associated with the evil stepmother, such as oppressive power and the desire to control. Thus, female

rivalry remains a central division of the family structure, and the elimination of the younger female remains the primary aim of the Countess. As noted earlier, this trend is rooted in patriarchal culture, which objectifies women in the reflection of the mirror. The Countess's scheming, fuelled by her murderous jealousy, remains strong as ever, although there is little purpose to it: as soon as the Count had raped the girl, she "began to melt" and order was restored (Carter 2006, 153). Yet, this turn of events brings no happiness to the Countess, for no sooner does the Count hand her the rose – the one bringing about the girl's death – the Countess "touched it, she dropped it. 'It bites' she said" (Carter 2006, 153). While it is not clear whether the Countess will meet the same end as the Snow Child, the rose remains, implying the enduring nature of their rivalry.

This subversive interpretation of the mother figure opens the door to a series of previously unexplored ways in which she impacts the heroine's journey. In the context of the original tale, Shuli Barzilai refers to Snow White's traditional "nothing can happen to me" attitude as a guarantee that she will survive every attempt made by her stepmother to eliminate her (1990, 524). Carter challenges this schema by letting the Countess temporarily win and the Snow Child fall victim to her scheming request of picking her a rose. Although in this inverted plot the stepmother seems to emerge victoriously, her position remains ambiguous, as she gains no power over the Count through her survival. The inversion therefore renders Carter's plot more powerful, by showing that nobody, other than the Count, is capable of winning his own game. Carter's sinister, ironic ending "empowers neither the heroine nor the villainess," portraying instead the polarity of the patriarchal agenda (Chainani 2003, 219).

"The Snow Child" shows the staple figure of the wicked stepmother from a new angle: previously of a rebellious and deviant nature, now just as jealous but paralysed by her dependence on the Count's attentions, the Countess suffers an end that is a cautionary tale in its own right. The Grimms' original ending sees the Queen "put on the red-hot shoes, and dance until she dropped down dead" (1993, 258). The Grimms' agenda is clear: female characters who take matters into their own hands and threaten to push the heroine off the beaten path shall be eliminated. Carter negates the Grimms' intentions of framing the stepmother as a warning example by emphasising the choiceless nature of her position. In a quick turn of events, suddenly it is the Countess who "was bare as a bone and the girl furred and booted" – that is, at a moment's notice the Count robs her of items as intimately tied to her as the very layers of clothes on her body (Carter 2006, 153). Through this asymmetric balance of power Carter challenges the Grimms' notion of inherent evil and redirects it towards the institute of patriarchy. While in the original tale the stepmother's death ensures a better, safer future for the daughter, in Carter's plot there is no future for either female character. By allowing herself to be controlled by

the male gaze, the Countess makes no attempt to bring the system to an end or to show signs of rebellion. The ending thus underscores the fundamental role of the mother figure: a submissive character in the face of an oppressive system – whether angelic and absent, or engaged in petty rivalries – will not empower her daughter to break out from the ties of passivity and obedience.

"The Bloody Chamber" is in many ways the inverse of "The Snow Child." Stretching to the length of a novelette, and told in the first person, it does not play into the natural characteristics of the fairy tale genre. The Bluebeard tale's familiar fairy tale setting of a schematic village in its feudal context is brought into *fin de siècle* France in Carter's decadent, overly detailed rendition. In this post-structuralist inversion, the focus is on extracting the latent grotesque already present in Perrault's "Bluebeard" narrative and on bringing it into a dialogue with the genres of Gothic romance and pornography (Lokke 1988, 7). It is all the more shocking to come across a mother figure so rebellious against the backdrop of a decaying world, fascinated by the aristocracy and playing on the myths of fallen women such as Eve and Pandora. Carter lays out the patriarchal scenery from the very beginning of the narrative, as the Bride is travelling to "that marvellous castle in which [Bluebeard] had been born" (Carter 2006, 5) only to be then taken to the "gilded bed on which he had been conceived" (19). The Marquis is deeply grounded in his ancestral heritage, centuries of unbreakable patriarchal traditions, which set the scene for the arrival of a mother figure never before encountered in fairy tales. Even within her collection of fairy tales, Carter's mother of the Bride cuts a one-of-a-kind character, establishing a new model of mother–daughter dynamic, in contrast with her other subversive tales such as "The Courtship of Mr Lyon," and "The Tiger's Bride," in which mother figures, while substantially reinvented, follow more noticeably the classic models of guiding, nurturing mothers and evil, dangerous stepmothers. Described by her daughter as her scandalous and defiant, "eagle-featured, indomitable mother," who has "grown magnificently eccentric in hardship" (Carter 2006, 2), the Bride's mother could hardly be further away from the Grimms' beautiful and haughty Queen (Grimm and Grimm 1993, 249), who becomes the point of reference by virtue of being present throughout almost the entire story, similarly to the Bride's mother. Traditionally, mother figures in Perrault's and the Grimms' stories are introduced either by reference to their beauty and meek nature, or in the case of wicked stepmothers, their striking presence and arrogance. When it comes to the Bride's mother, Carter chooses to emphasise a different range of qualities: courage, defiance, and a spirit of adventure form the core of her character, with no scheming designs underlying her intentions. While the wicked Queen might carry a poisoned apple in her basket, the Bride's mother "kept [a revolver] in her reticule, in case […] she was surprised by footpads on her way home from the grocer's shop" (Carter 2006, 2–3). Although both mother figures have a deep instinct of self-preservation, their

motivations are vastly different: the archetypal wicked stepmother is the embodiment of danger and rivalry, determined to eliminate her (step)-daughter; while the Bride's mother stands as a symbol of protection and guidance, taking charge only when her daughter truly needs her.

Intention and motivation lie at the heart of Carter's rewritten mother figure, distinguishing her from both the evil stepmother trope, and the absent and demure Angel of the House. What Carter has developed is an altogether different kind of mother, subversive in the way that it subscribes to no ideological aim previously set out in the fairy tale discourse by Perrault and the Grimms. Her role in the heroine's life is set on a new trajectory, as she is not supportive of her daughter in the traditional modes readers expect to encounter. Since the Bride's birth mother is present throughout the entire story, we expect rivalry to enter into their dynamic as in traditional coming-of-age stories, as rivalry is triggered by the heroine's entering into adulthood rather than by her lack of blood relationship to the mother. Carter does not allude to rivalry between the mother and the Bride, instead, the Bride's mother takes on a powerful and dynamic role both in the heroine's life and in amplifying Carter's narrative intention that there is a fine line between good and deviant mothers, and women should no longer be treated as existing only in terms of polarities. If the Grimms' mothers were victims of the system in one way or another, the mother in Carter's rendition of "Bluebeard" is the courageous, strong-minded warrior, labelled by Mary Kaiser as the "woman-as-avenger" (1994, 33), disrupting a long line of mothers written by men with a view to fitting their patriarchal agenda.

In addition to providing the mother figure with different intentions and motivation, Carter made a number of other changes within the plot and the dynamic between the two female characters. Firstly, the fact that the mother has survived long enough – as opposed to traditional biological mothers who depart once the story begins – for readers to meet her as "a woman on her daughter's wedding day" (Carter 2006, 1) implies that she poses no threat to her grown-up daughter's life. Unlike Beauty's absent mother or the old crone from "Rapunzel," the Bride's mother, in an unprecedented turn, is a solid presence throughout her childhood, who knows when to nurture and when to let go. Consequently, the Bride's mother takes on a dual aspect of being present throughout the Bride's adulthood, similarly to evil stepmothers, while providing guidance and support, just like absent, angelic mothers do.

Another aspect of Carter's reimagined mother figure is that she does not suffer the consequences of her agency and courage; on the contrary, these are the very characteristics which make her a hero, someone who can hold her own in a world of dominating and perverse men. The patriarchal codes restricting women into their classic roles of too soon departed or wicked and jealous mothers seem to have no effect on the Bride's mother, making her all the more resilient. This newfound

power of the rewritten mother figure allows her to break through the long-standing tradition of the Marquis decapitating his brides, and on a more symbolic level create a precedent for courageous mother figures coming to the rescue of their daughters.

Since she is not a victim of the patriarchal system, the Bride's mother feels no need to strengthen its agenda by submitting to the Marquis and allowing him to do as he pleases with her daughter. This is visible very early on in the text, when the mother asks the Bride, "Are you sure you love him?" (Carter 2006, 2) – as in no traditional fairy tale is the daughter asked if she would like to marry the old, repulsive monster. The message is that much clearer: Carter's subversive mother will not force her daughter into a marriage that is so plainly perverse and grotesque. Despite seeing the twisted nature of the match and hearing the chilling tales of the Marquis's previous marriages, she does not force her own view on her daughter, but simply asks her once more "Are you sure you love him?" and only sighs following her daughter's evasive answer (Carter 2006, 2). This is a turning point in the development of the subversive mother figure, for instead of the traditional gifts of beauty, good advice and a fairy godmother, she offers something much more valuable to her daughter: she allows her agency in the decision of marriage, while reminding her of the alternatives available. Such a balanced mother never ever existed before in a fairy tale. Although at first glance this might seem as if the Bride is left to her own devices, heading into the lion's den, it is only through her marriage to the Marquis that she faces situations through which she grows curious, explores what is behind locks and gains courage and agency. A mother who can endow her daughter with such traits and give her a choice in the face of the system is a powerful mother indeed.

Despite the unfading mark on her forehead, which "no paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask" (Carter 2006, 61), the Bride now armed with her power and self-preservation inherited from her mother is unafraid of restarting her life as a piano teacher, even as a target of gossip and tales. Lokke refers to both mother and daughter as "powerful, strong-willed, steel-nerved women warriors" (1988, 11), implying that the mother had a strong and lasting impact on her daughter's narrative, turning the Bride into someone who is capable of agency, asking for help and taking control of her story. There are no expectations posed by the mother towards her daughter, no attempts to create a mirror image of herself; instead, she guides the Bride to her own path, one which by the end brings her a happy, fulfilling life.

There is one, more tangible gift of the Mother, which emphasises her lasting, nurturing influence on the heroine's journey. She gives her practical lessons, insisting on musical education being an integral part of the heroine's life, something which later becomes an asset in more than one way. It is her love for music and her piano playing skills that lead the Bride to the blind piano tuner. who becomes her ally.

It is also her musical skills that later give her a career as a piano teacher and the chance for a comfortable life while being married to the man she has finally chosen. Through this series of changes, Carter re-worked Perrault's and the Grimms' traditional mother figure until an Amazon stood in her place, deeply upsetting the prescribed order of mother–daughter dynamic. The alterations to the focal relationship are visible on a number of levels, all of which carry over to the impact the mother figure has on the heroine's journey. Primarily, it is illustrated by the elimination of rivalry, which is replaced by an alliance between mother and daughter. As noted earlier, daughters rarely gain the affection of another female character in traditional fairy tales. The mother as a powerful ally is one of the unknowns of fairy tales, viewed by the Grimms as a dangerous tool, as it can lessen the importance of the male gaze and reduce the power of patriarchal values, such as female beauty and obedience. Not only is the mother an ally, but also she acts as the saviour of the Bride, someone who "without a moment's hesitation […] took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through" the Marquis's head (Carter 2006, 60). Thus, the mother becomes a role model of female agency, contrary to the cautionary model of the stepmother or the passive, objectified mother.

In Carter's narrative the tie between mother and daughter goes deeper than saving one's kin. Fairy tales do not usually rely on bonds manifesting in the shape of the "maternal telepathy that sent [her] mother running headlong from the telephone to the station" (Carter 2006, 60). From the Grimms' perspective, a connection of this nature would no doubt be deemed just as dangerous as the alliance described earlier. Armed with the emotional strength she derives from such a relationship with her mother, the Bride is ready to face what awaits her, which could otherwise easily have been a stigmatised, burdened future. Their deep and long-lasting connection is further reinforced by the narrator's epilogue: "We lead a quiet life, the three of us" and she continues to describe their new life just outside Paris, consistently referring to the newly formed family unit as "the three of us" (Carter 2006, 60). This phrasing suggests that Carter's reinvented mother figure keeps to her position as a pillar of support in her daughter's life, a source of strength she can call on in times of need. Such an ending would be unimaginable in the world of Perrault and the Grimms, where no mother sees her daughter live happily ever after, much less finds joy in the notion. "The Bloody Chamber" is a tale of survival, a "feminist transformation in which for once the maiden is victorious over death itself," and it is owing to the mother's subversive, transformed role that the heroine is liberated, and becomes an active participant in her own story (Lokke 1988, 9).

5 Conclusion

As the fairy tale evolved over the centuries, so did its characters: they too are reflections of socio-political ideology, gendered hierarchy, or, as visible in the twentieth-century narratives, they portray the subversion of such binary lines. While this paper is concerned primarily with mother figures in the Grimms' and Carter's tales and their shift both in function and in the impact they have on the heroine, it is undeniable that father figures and daughters were also subject to a near-complete transformation in post-structuralist intertexts of Western fairy tales. Depictions of motherhood served strict ideological purposes in the Grimms' agenda, which resulted in a series of stereotypical mother images both in their angelic and monstrous forms. Absent mothers, old hags, and jealous stepmothers shaped not only the path which forms the heroine's pre-adolescent years, but also the ending of her story. Good mothers did so by suggesting silence and obedience as desirable traits through their symbolic absence, while deviant stepmothers cut cruel examples with such unfortunate ends that no young heroine in their right mind would consider following them. The endings offered by these tales were unchangeable for a long time, as the pressure of socio-cultural norms anchored dutiful daughters to a stationary position (Chainani 2003, 213).

In comparison, Carter offers a pluralistic approach by retelling narratives through subversive writing, parody, and unveiling tropes previously treated as taboos. Challenging and inverting the Grimms' patterns, Carter's rewritten tales feature a range of subversive and powerful mother figures, some of whom become an empowering presence in their daughter's story and shape her future in a positive way. The mother in "The Bloody Chamber" is rendered more forceful and adventurous than the archetypal good mother of fairy tales, riding in on horseback to save her daughter in the very last minute – a role traditionally filled by a set of brothers. At the same time Carter's narrative intention of shaping the mother–daughter bond as enduring and nurturing presents a quasi-one-of-a-kind occurrence in the world of fairy tales. Even in narratives such as "The Snow Child," where the mother is portrayed in her ambitious, jealous and violent nature, Carter's message is a clear response to the Grimms' agenda: neither mother nor daughter can win in a situation where the male gaze takes control. Although the Countess outlives the Snow Child, Carter's narrative can be interpreted in an open-ended fashion, where it is only a matter of time until all female characters are silenced. By expanding the family structure to include the father in a powerful and controlling position and placing female rivalry within a deeper layer of the narrative structure, Carter brings the oppressive patriarchal system in focus, highlighting the father's actions and role in the outcome of the tale. In both "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Snow Child" there is a direct link between the type of mother portrayed and the ending of the tale.

Neither story ends in "a proper patriarchal conclusion" (Fisher and Silber 2000, 130), which Carter achieved through subverting traditional mother figures, endowing them with the power to change the course of the plot and often determining the outcome of the story. Considering their powerful role in shaping both the plot and the heroine's character, Carter's reimagined mother figures become underlying protagonists of her fairy tales.

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"She is also God": The Violence of Godlike Girlhood in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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The present paper offers a close reading of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* through the lens of girlhood. Known for its twist of revealing one of the main characters, Briony Tallis, as the writer of the novel, *Atonement* calls attention to its own fictional nature, while simultaneously creating micro images of entering and controlling which posit Briony as a godlike quasi-narrator who enacts violence on her creations. The paper analyses these images and considers the modal links between storytelling and girlishness by reading instances in the novel in terms of an intrusion. It relies on girlhood studies to interpret the girl as a menacing, central figure.

Keywords: girlhood studies, intrusion, violence, narratorial voice

> "Briony inhabited an ill-refined transitional space between the nursery and adult worlds which she crossed and recrossed unpredictably." (McEwan 2001, 141)

1 Introduction: Girls and the Novel

This article investigates the conceptions of girlhood and its motivic and narratorial capacities for authoritative violence in the 2001 novel *Atonement* by British author Ian McEwan. Known for its quintessentially postmodernist twist – which reveals one of the characters, Briony Tallis, to be the hidden-in-plain-sight writer, quasi-narrator[1] and focalising factor[2] of all events described –, *Atonement* is a novel about

[1] The revelation of Briony as the author of the novel necessarily restructures the reading experience of *Atonement*. In this article, I interpret Briony's presence as girl storyteller by analysing the narratorial voice, the descriptive narrative voice in Part 1 and Part 2, which retroactively constructs Briony as a focalising factor in every phrasing and word usage long before the infamous twist is known by the reader.

[2] When coining the term focaliser, Gérard Genette posed the question, "who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?" (1980, 186) in order to examine "the regulation of

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fiction which calls attention to its own constructed nature. Yet, not incidentally, it is a work which highlights the role of the girl as a menacing, authoritative and authoritarian figure, whose revelation as secret storyteller contributes and relates to the history of the novel, which insofar has rarely been considered as potentially a girls' domain.

To shed light on the motivic aspects of the girl, a brief examination of girlhood itself is required. A field on its own since the 1990s, girlhood studies has come to view girlhood as a construct, with the understanding that, as Catherine Driscoll puts it, "girls are brought into existence in statements and knowledge" (2002, 5). In everyday usage, the word "girl" tends to refer to young women who are underage and are not yet married; yet even this has been inconstant. Girlhood is time and again constructed and reconstructed, and this has been the case since the latter half of the nineteenth century, when our contemporary ideas of girlhood came into being. Before the Victorian era, the notion of girlhood was largely discussed in terms of daughters and unmarried young women, as richly explored by Paula Marantz Cohen in *The Daughter's Dilemma* (1991). In *Health and Girlhood in Britain, 1874–1920*, Hilary Marland highlights that "the notion of girlhood as a separate stage of existence with its own values, interests [...] evolved from the 1870s onwards." In this conception, the term "girlhood" refers to those "who were neither children nor adult women" (2013, 3). As girlhood evolved as a concept, its various qualities have also broadened in criticism. As put by Mary Ann Harlan, "in the early 1990s the popularity of the text *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls* (Pipher 1994) led to subsequent cultural discussion focused on a narrative of girls at risk," which later gave rise to yet another cultural repurposing of girlhood with the advent of "girlpower" (2017, 54). When studying girls' role in the literary text, this duality of both being at risk and holding power (and thus *posing* risk) must be dealt with, as well as the fact that girlhood itself functions as a mode and construct which may have an impact on the narrative text.

Atonement holds within itself these dualities. In the novel's coda, seventy-seven-year-old Briony Tallis watches the first complete production of *The Trials of Arabella*, a play she had written and aspired to direct at the age of thirteen. The play had fallen apart on the eve of its conception in 1935: Briony's witnessing of her cousin Lola's rape, her indictment of Robbie, and the consequent breakup of the Tallis family made

narrative information" (1988, 41). Studying Briony's girlish and regulation-oriented presence in the narration, I refer to the extent of her implication in the storytelling of *Atonement* as both *more* and *less* than a focalising character or an unproblematic narrator by relying on the terms quasi-narrator and focalising factor in my analysis. With these terms, I aim to indicate the impact her presence bears on the text.

it so that *The Trials of Arabella* could not see the light of day for over sixty years. This time, however, it is a triumph. Briony's young nephews and nieces recite the lines with "a thrilling clarity" (McEwan 2001, 367), and the appropriate applause is given as Briony humbly takes the blame for the original failure of *Arabella*. While this sequence has been noted in the scholarship of *Atonement* as one that forms a frame structure, rhyming with the opening of the novel (Finney 2004, 75), one must not forget its placement in the text. At this point in the plot, Briony has just been revealed as having written (Parts 1 through 3 of) *Atonement*, and readers are obliged to reckon with the knowledge that all they have been shown was always already filtered through Briony's presence in the text as secret quasi-narrator and focalising factor. This revelation restructures the role of the play as a scene of origin, as I will elaborate on later.

In line with the twist for which *Atonement* is most famous, McEwan's text has almost universally been considered a novel about fiction (see Finney 2002; Swan 2007; Robinson 2010). But who does that fiction originate from? Regarding McEwan's novel as a particularly effective example of the postmodern, critics have time and again investigated how the revelation of Briony as true author may reshape the reading experience (Robinson 2010, 484–87). Yet Briony herself has not been given the same amount of attention, nor has a consensus been truly reached about her figure; Brian Finney states that McEwan's novel "employs the narrative voice of a 77-year-old English woman" (2004, 68), while Dominic Head refers to "a record of things the young girl saw and felt (as far as she can now make sense of them), rendered through the adult's vocabulary" (2007, 164). But who is Briony, the one that, as Head points out, is "implicated in the narrative stance" (163)? A girl or an elderly woman? And what is her atonement – a gesture of "final kindness" (McEwan 2001, 372) or rather a form of intrusion?

Taking the final rendition of *The Trials of Arabella* as an origin point via which the entirety of the text may be interpreted, I read *Atonement* as a novel about girlhood, wherein the focalising presence of the girl is continually foreshadowed and (re) constructed long before the twist is revealed to the reader. *The Trials of Arabella* serves as a first and final textual image of this reconstruction, as it problematises the true identity of Briony as a person and quasi-narrator. As her play comes alive before her eyes, Briony sees a vision of her younger self – "Suddenly, she was right there before me, that busy, priggish, conceited little girl" (367) – and the implied distance combined with self-judgment in her words is crystal clear. The indication, however, that Briony Now and Briony Then are markedly different, is a form of deception on the novel's part. As elderly Briony herself states, "I still feel myself to be the exact same person I've always been" (356) – her voice, her figure and her apparatus as writer remain conspicuously unchanged. Briony, who, as Kathleen D'Angelo reminds critics, "herself is a fictional construct" (2009, 88), holds within

herself a constancy that ultimately forms in her an unchanging, perpetual girlhood. She is a voice onto herself, and so her girlishness may be read as a narrative mode utilised by McEwan. Therein lies the significance of *The Trials of Arabella* recurring in the novel's closing. It is a framing device which, rather than revoking Briony's girlish tendencies, reaffirms them and gives them a "tidy finish" (McEwan 2001, 353). Her desires for being celebrated by her brother Leon and the rest of her family are unfulfilled at thirteen but are finally realised in the final pages. Rather than a mere repetition, then, the scene is a chilling completion of what did not occur when it should have, of the applause she deserves. In fact, Part 1 of the novel foreshadows the play's later success and its effect on its creator: "This was precisely why she loved plays, or hers at least; everyone would adore her" (11). The desire for adoration then, the notion of having a shrine erected for her is the impetus behind Briony's writing. From this angle, the presence of the Coda itself (an ending which has been claimed to be gimmicky by reviewers [Moore 2001, 12]), gains additional meaning: it ultimately presents Briony as an Arabella figure, coming out onto the stage to receive her reward. It is an act of a puppeteer showing her hand. A girlish Briony, not an unnamed and impersonal or impartial narrator, is behind the machinations of *Atonement*. "There is nothing outside her" (McEwan 2001, 371), she is the source.

In my view, it follows from the above that the very narrative act – that is, atonement – around which the whole novel is organised essentially stands for a young girl's telling a story and wishing desperately to be validated for doing so. The impossibility and vanity of such a girlish mode of storytelling are explicitly problematised in the final pages, as Briony proceeds to question the results of her youthfully phrased "fifty-nine-year assignment" (369): "how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?" (371). Being positioned as the Judeo-Christian God is an explicit attribute of her identity which is closely linked to her vengefully situated narration: her role as absolutistic narrative god[3] enters into a dialogue with her discursive role as girl – she imagines, fantasises and forces as both.

In order to understand the framework of godlike girlhood in *Atonement*, it is necessary to first briefly consider the processes of feminisation that the novel as a genre has undergone. As the novel rose into prominence in the eighteenth century, its

[3] As Briony herself refers to her own quasi-narratorial powers in terms of a Biblical God and her very act of atonement is embedded within a Judeo-Christian belief discourse, I acknowledge her absolutistic role by capitalising the word God in this article. In other instances, I refer to Briony as "godlike" in order to demonstrate her quasi-narratorial capacity. For further exploration of Briony Tallis as narrative God, see Charles Cornelius Pastoor's 2019 study entitled "Authorial Atonement in Ian McEwan's Atonement and Sweet Tooth."

critical discourse already increasingly considered it feminine.[4] As Nancy Armstrong puts it in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, by the early nineteenth century, "the novel was already known as a female form" (1987, 104). Armstrong's main argument is that the birth of the domestic woman was crucial in the birth of the modern novel. While the novel may have been, and continues to be, feminised, its potential *girlification* is what is at the centre of the work examined in this article. Can the novel be considered (at least partially) a girls' domain? In what way does it affect narrative writing to have a girl as a novel's author and a factor within its narratorial voice? Pondering these queries, it is worth noting that while both the reading and the writing of the novel have undergone feminisation, the girlishness of the former can also be clearly documented. The past few decades have seen the rise of reading as largely a girls' activity. Bozena White discusses the "anxiety regarding the purported gender gap in reading" (2007, 556), while Anne Simpson's study, *Fictions and Facts: An Investigation of the Reading Practices of Girls and Boys* yielded the result that "overall the 13 girls [involved in the study] completed nearly twice as many titles as the boys. Significantly, of the 56 books they finished, 51 were novels. That is, over 90% of the books read by the girls over a period of four weeks were narrative fiction. In contrast the 17 boys completed only 41 books, of which only 53% were novels, and half of these 22 novels were Choose-Your-Own adventure stories" (1996, 270).

The latter – novel writing belonging foremost to the terrain of girls – may be less obvious. Yet it is not without foundation or cultural history – far from it. Without a doubt, there is no shortage of girl narrators in romances and young adult literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, a collection of essays edited by Sara K. Day, explores the rebellious girl protagonist and narrator. In the Introduction, Day writes about "young women [who] in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century dystopian fiction embody liminality, straddling the lines of childhood and adulthood, of individuality and conformity, of empowerment and passivity" (2014, 4). Although they are heavily featured in literature, it is their presence in the canon that is more lacking. In some cases, they might be erroneously discovered, such as in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, in which the ten-year-old Jane at the opening of the novel is merely a focaliser for her adult counterpart. In others, brief instances of embedded narration may serve crucial plot development, such as in Agatha Christie's *Crooked House*.[5] And while

[4] Andreas Huyssen writes about this process in "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other" in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (1986, 44–62), as does Rita Felski in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995, 91–114).

[5] It is crucial in the structuring of Christie's 1949 murder mystery that it reveals, notably via a diary entry, that the gruesome murder was committed by a young girl of twelve, Josephine: "Today I killed grandfather" (Christie 1949, 276.) It ought to be noted, however, that Christie's middlebrow fiction

there are also trends in the current cultural moment which attempt to claim or re-member certain canonised authors as girls,[6] one must also consider exactly the relatively quieter history of journal writing, evoked by Christie and notably used by Dodie Smith in her 1948 Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman *I Capture the Castle* (in many ways a sister text to *Atonement* in its treatment of the observant teenage girl in 1930s England) as a partly girlish tradition.

Atonement by Ian McEwan picks up the tradition of girls' storytelling to both hide it and create an intensive narrative situation in which the girl as a quasi-narratorial voice is embedded in a struggle to be able to tell a story. First published mere days after 9/11, *Atonement* offers a view of girlhood in England in the 1930s that is decidedly richer than the escapist nostalgia of *I Capture the Castle*, a luxury granted at least partly by its historical perspective and by its postmodernist tendencies. Its take on storytelling is naturally also heavily informed by postmodernism; and critics have not been idle in discovering the abundance of intertextual connections that *Atonement* readily offers. Finney makes note of the seemingly unending list of literary reminiscences, including Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehmann, and Agatha Christie (2004, 71–72), and while Juliette Wells explores the extent of the Austenian influence in the novel (2008, 103), Richard Robinson finds Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* and Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* to be the most definitive models for McEwan (2010, 475).

By setting Briony against the postmodernist backdrop of metafiction, McEwan's novel essentially introduces the figure of the quasi girl narratorial voice in a manner which both reflects on the uncertainty of narration as well as the role played by focalisation and the narrator in general, and toys with late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century issues of girlpower. *Atonement* represents, as Brian Richardson remarks in his analysis of McEwan's novel along with other postmodernist works, "a general move away from what was thought to be 'omniscient' third-person narration to limited third-person narration to ever more unreliable first-person narrators" (2006, 13). Briony Tallis may be seen as a quasi-narrator hidden in plain sight, a thirteen-year-old girl whose powers of imagination work to sinister ends, and whose girlish power to tell stories raises her to the transcendental highs of being intrusively godlike.

(of which *Crooked House* is a lesser-known example) still lingers on the edges of the canon, rather than strictly belonging to it.

[6] Fiona Sampson's 2018 biography of Mary Shelley, *In Search of Mary Shelley*, bears the subtitle, "The Girl Who Wrote *Frankenstein*," showcasing the new-found focus on girls. Granted, the cultural reconfiguring of Mary Shelley as a girl is at least somewhat problematic: despite being eighteen years old when she wrote the manuscript of *Frankenstein*, she was already a wife and a mother.

2 Entering Girlhood?

Finney states that *Atonement* is about "the dangers of entering a fictional world" (2004, 69), and it is this precise act of entering that is at work within the frame of girlhood and narrative control. Notably, Briony initially ponders about the forced entry into Cecilia's private world that reading a letter addressed to her entails, thinking that it is "overwhelmingly probable that everyone else had thoughts like hers" (McEwan 2001, 36). Then, her musings are followed by "ripping" open the envelope handed to her by Robbie (113). The manner in which Briony opens the envelope and enters further into her sister's romantic relationship with Robbie signifies the very way Briony is present in this world: through violation.[7] Reading Briony's narrative presence from this angle – one which considers her attributing thoughts and actions to others as a form of intrusion – informs the significance of her childhood play being properly rendered: *Arabella*'s first and final production is a *mise-en-abyme* of all that has come before. As the young actors in *The Trials of Arabella* echo lines fed to them by Briony, so has every single character done in *Atonement*. Cecilia, Robbie, and Emily Tallis have all been brought back to life by Briony. Her mode of resurrecting them is inherently intrusive: she, the narrative deity, blows the breath of life into them, and like a puppeteer in a theatre, places them onto her stage. Her narratorial intrusion is mirrored in her ripping into Robbie's letter. Briony's continual intrusive presence as she enters the fictionalised world of her sister and Robbie manifests her absolute power and sheds light on the concept that her atoning storytelling is an act of violence to begin with. Her crime, in fact, is the same as her solution. Dominic Head, highlighting the origin of the word "atonement" as a religious-dogmatic concept, explores the ethical implications that crime and atonement bestow upon Briony: "the self that Briony is 'at-one' with, in her lifetime of rewriting, is also the self whose desire for order produces her crime – and the life sentence of rewriting" (2007, 174). Her lifetime of rewriting is, then, but a repetition of her original breach. Indeed, the motif of penetration which thus permeates the text organises nearly all instances into miniature images of Briony's intrusive storytelling. In this way, the falling apart of the first production of *Arabella*, the ripping open of Robbie's letter to Cecilia, the interruption of the love scene in the library, and even Lola's rape are all reenactments of the violence Briony imposes onto her characters via her godlike authoritative quasi-narration. In the following,

[7] René Girard has stressed perhaps more than any other commentator the relation between religion and violence. He has said, in fact, that the two are inextricable, that "violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred" and even that "the operations of violence and the sacred are ultimately the same process" (Girard 1977, 258).

I shall read textual instances which mirror Briony's mode of penetration and reveal her invasive presence in this world as a girl God.

3 "The Part of Her that Was Really in Charge"

Briony's storytelling is driven by the dichotomies of order and chaos. Her "desire to have the world just so" (McEwan 2001, 4) effects the spatial positioning of the Tallis estate; the pieces of her furniture are "all facing one way – towards their *owner*" (5, emphasis added), and every single family member in the house is, as Finney puts it, "ruthlessly subordinated" by Briony (2004, 69). The first finished draft of *The Trials of Arabella* is read by her mother "with the author's arm around her shoulder the whole time" (McEwan 2001, 4), and the purpose of the play itself is professed to be "for her brother […] to guide him" (4). Her presence in the novel as a quasi-narratorial voice is thus written into the machinations of the text: she *guides*, she orders, she forces.

Yet small instances of rebellion against Briony appear to rear their head from time to time, all the while exposing her omnipresence. One of the most striking examples of this is the reluctance of the cousins to follow her direction. Lola's insistence to play the part of Arabella instead of Briony herself is decidedly chaotic in its restructuring of the young girl's worldview, and her sense of order is offended by this "catastrophe" (McEwan 2001, 12). As the mutinous cousins are "steadily wrecking Briony's creation" (17), she abandons the project and studies her fingers as though they were separate entities:

> She raised one hand and flexed its fingers and wondered, as she had sometimes before, how this thing, this machine for gripping, this fleshy spider on the end of her arm, came to be hers, entirely at her command. Or did it have some life of its own? She bent her finger and straightened it. The mystery was in the instant before it moved, the dividing moment between not moving and moving, when her intention took effect. (35)

This excerpt on the one hand echoes the natural development of a child reckoning with the realisation that others bear the same complexity as herself, yet it also stands as a miniature of Briony's role as a focalising factor at large. The fingers, although seeming "remote, as though viewed from an immense distance" (35) *belong* to Briony, they are a part of her. The same applies to every utterance, movement and private thought of the novel's characters, marking this scene as a biological-anthropological reenactment of her narration. The first confrontation that Briony faces in *Atonement* thus produces a false discovery of pluralism and intersubjectivity: she mimes the acknowledgment of the "scribble of other minds" (36) and comes

to the conclusion that being Cecilia is "just as vivid an affair as being Briony" (36), all by self-contradictingly turning towards a part of *herself*. This way, her atoning storytelling is flawed at its foundations, it is yet another deception on the novel's part; she never truly gives voice to the resurrected Cecilia and Robbie but rather intrudes into their identities and bodies and speaks in their voices as herself. The text reflects on this mode of self-contradiction early on: "Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character's weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself" (6).

Instances of *ouroboros* like the one above continue to construct sequences that betray Briony's textual presence, of her "describing herself" (McEwan 2001, 6) through others. Cecilia's continual attempts to arrange flowers in a vase indicate a struggle between order and chaos:

> Cecilia went to the kitchen to fill the vase, and carried it up to her bedroom to retrieve the flowers from the handbasin. When she dropped them in they once again refused to fall into the artful disorder she preferred, and instead swung round in the water into a wilful neatness, with the taller stalks evenly distributed around the rim. She lifted the flowers and let them drop again, and they fell into another orderly pattern. (45)

An imposition, an intrusion is at work here: "disorder" and "neatness" wage war with each other through the implicit presence of Briony, who overwrites Cecilia's intention with her own. She guides Cecilia's hand, just as she intends to do with her brother Leon. One may also consider the language of malevolence and aggression that haunts Cecilia's repetitive arranging: the neatness that appears to come from an outside force is "wilful," while the act of trying to arrange the flowers itself is a "thrust" (22), a breaking through the surface.

Akin to the mixed presence of neatness and chaos in the scene above, Cecilia *par excellence* represents a chaos that repulses and attracts Briony's order simultaneously, while posing as a vicarious tool for Briony herself to speak through. As the physical discrepancy between the two girls' rooms (one a shrine while the other disorderly) is noted early on as the spatial imaging of two different ends of the spectrum, Cecilia's life in the adult world is utilised to allow Briony a transitory passage into this world. At the age of thirteen, Briony's lexicon acknowledges that "a good wedding was an unacknowledged representation of the as yet unthinkable – sexual bliss" (McEwan 2001, 9), and such an encounter with sexuality is arranged by Briony during the fountain scene, where she witnesses (and misunderstands) an intense romantic moment between her sister and Robbie. The scene contrasts Cecilia's disorderliness in the breaking of the vase with Briony's quest for meaning. In fact, its primary function is its revelatory nature in Briony's personal worldview; she reflects on the change she feels within herself upon seeing Cecilia resurface in the water of the

fountain: "No more princesses!" (113). Strikingly, she regards the event as a "tableau mounted for her alone" (39), and her following interruption of Robbie and Cecilia's illicit library rendezvous is the perfect encapsulation of her violent, self-describing narrative act: "The scene was so entirely the realization of her worst fears that she sensed that her over-anxious imagination had projected the figures onto the packed spines of books" (123).

Thus, Briony appropriates the intimacy enjoyed by Cecilia and Robbie by understanding their actions as an extension of her own mentality, and so she repositions them into a mode of self-description. This imposed union with the lovers and their ultimate subordination as vicarious tools (which is revealed to the readers in the Coda) is foreshadowed in Part 1. Once Briony tells the authorities of Robbie's crime, she leads them to the library, putting herself in the place of both Robbie and Cecilia: "Briony wedged herself in, with her back to the books to show them how her sister was positioned" (180). Once again, the language of the text betrays Briony's quasi-narratorial position: she wedges herself into their relationship, intruding into it with force. In the same scene, the description calls attention to Briony's violence: she then turns "around to demonstrate *the attacker's stance*" (180, emphasis added). Here, Briony makes a quasi-directorial gesture when she repeats and acts out both parts in the scene; both Robbie's and Cecilia's actions transform into her own, while she inscribes herself into them.

Not incidentally, she does so to prove herself to the adults, to affirm that she is not "a silly girl […] who had wasted everybody's time" (McEwan 2001, 170). Girlishness emerges here as a discourse with negative implications, and this is not the first instance for the novel to place girlishness in a negative context. References are continually made to "girlish intrigue" (5), "ignorance, silly imagining and girlish rectitude" (139), while Briony is deemed a "silly, hysterical little girl" (209) by the text. Girlhood, then, acts as a discursive strategy that is diffused in the narrative. One must not forget that the first rebellion against Briony's dominance is made by another girl: her cousin Lola, who takes the part of Arabella away from Briony. Lola's central role in *Atonement* is undeniable; it is her sexual assault which provides Briony with the opportunity to "finally […] reveal that [Robbie] was the incarnation of evil" (115), and so Lola is implicated in the crime for which the titular atonement is practiced. However, the power dynamic between the two girls that allows Briony to ascend to an authoritative position and essentially defeat Lola plays just as crucial a part in conducting the narrative, and the culmination of this relational dynamic is the rape scene.

4 "The Superior Older Girl": Girlishness in *Atonement*

With Lola's rape, *Atonement* constructs the perfect mirror image of Briony's authoritative, godlike nature in what is surely the climax of Part 1. Even before Lola's assault takes place, Briony's godlike role manifests when she appears before Robbie as a nonhuman entity: "[s]taring at it dissolved its outlines, but within a few paces it had taken on a vaguely human form" (McEwan 2001, 93). The same process occurs in the sequence leading up to Briony's discovery of Lola and a dark tall figure. During the family's search for her young cousins, Jackson and Pierrot, Briony herself wanders the property and, walking by the temple, stumbles upon a "shrub she did not remember" and a duck whose call is "almost human in its breathy downward note" (164). Outlines and shapes in this scene change and dissolve from one line to the next, culminating in "the darker patch on the ground" turning into a person and calling out to Briony by name: "'Briony?' She heard the helplessness in Lola's voice – it was the sound she had thought belonged to a duck – and in an instant, Briony understood completely. She was nauseous with disgust and fear" (164–65). Lola's rape by, as is later revealed, Paul Marshall, is at this point rendered as a creation-evolution scene during which plants transform into animals and gradually into humans, once again reiterating the contrasts between order and chaos – as well as Briony's influence over the construction of order out of chaos. Mirroring the scene in which Cecilia encounters an invisible force as she thrusts the flowers into the vase, Lola's rape is similarly "ordered" by Briony herself. Markedly, the description of the rape scene places Briony at its centre, as the story is "writing itself around" her (166). It is an extreme image of Briony's quasi-narration and her presence within this world as an intrusion, a penetration that takes away the possibility of control from Lola. Similar images of breaking through surfaces can be, as I have stated before, found in *Atonement,* one of them being the scene when she interrupts Cecilia and Robbie in the library, and makes the couple stop mid-coitus, once the awareness of an outside party observing them sets in: "[s]omeone's come in" (138). During Lola's rape, too, the act of coming in and entering where she ought not to be marks Briony as master and conductor of the scene: she is the one who arranges the plants into animals and finally into human form. In fact, the reader's primary source for the scene above being a rape at all is Briony alone – she understands "completely" (165) and directs the events following her interruption to fit her understanding. Her seemingly infinite powers are reiterated by the text itself ("[t]here was nothing she could not describe" [165]), as is her role as godlike creator and director: "[i]t was her own discovery. It was her story" (166).

Via Lola's assault, there emerges a sense of unity and harmony between the two girls, one that surpasses Briony's sense of offense caused by Lola's wrecking the production of her play. "Briony felt a flowering tenderness towards her cousin.

Together they faced real terrors. She and her cousin were close" (McEwan 2001, 165). This closeness between the two girls is a motif which underlies the entire narrative. Comparison to Lola is the primary mode of connection between the two girls. This occurs on the level of wishing to mimic her older cousin's more womanly appearance, on the one hand: "[s]he thought how she should take more care of her appearance, like Lola. It was childish not to" (35). On the other hand, Briony's comparing herself to her cousin and wishing to defeat her may be causally linked to the ultimate act of physical intrusion in the narrative. In fact, Lola's sexual assault may be interpreted as being brought about by Briony in order to defeat the other girl. For Lola is conceived by *Atonement* as an irksome, frustrating entity, one which, by nature, defies Briony's subordination. During the rehearsal for *Arabella*, Briony cannot "*penetrate* Lola's detachment" (35, emphasis added), a dissenting sentiment which is the first to contradict Briony's ego-centrical worldview. Lola's rape then aids to put the other girl in her place, it penetrates where Briony cannot, and it finally positions her cousin into the desired submission. As the text notes, "their respective positions […] were established in these moments by the lake, with Briony's certainty rising whenever her cousin appeared to doubt herself" (167).

It is not just the rape scene itself that emphasises Briony's triumph over Lola: the discursive logic of girlishness (marked in *Atonement* mainly by competition and comparison with other girls as well as a desire for control) is also demonstrated elsewhere in the novel, even by characters who are not themselves young girls. Competition with Lola is not only practiced by Briony; it is an act mirrored by her mother, Emily Tallis, who expresses akin frustrations with her niece. Mother and daughter are already connected in *Atonement* by the above-quoted scene in which Briony observes her fingers and ponders on control. It is paralleled with a later scene, in which Emily Tallis is lying in bed in her dark bedroom, alert to all that goes on, with "a tentacular awareness that reached out from the dimness and moved through the house, unseen and all-knowing" (McEwan 2001, 66). Emily's role as an origin point or *origo* in the house may function as a mode of reflection on Briony's control over all, and in a similar vein, the young girl's disdain for Lola is also practiced by her mother. When attempting to comfort Lola, "an old antagonism afflicts Emily," as she is reminded of her own sister and Lola's mother, Hermione, whom she describes as a "stealer of scenes" (146). The wording of this description mirrors Lola's offense of not wanting to be subdued by Briony's direction in *Arabella*, and it even highlights girlish jealousy as a marked discourse in the book. In light of the facts that Emily, an adult mother, still feels the same frustration with her sister and in fact transfers it onto Lola, another girl, I argue that girlishness is a notion that is not left behind upon having entered into adulthood: Emily, just like Briony, remains girlish throughout her life. Through Emily Tallis's disdain implicitly

expressed by Briony as quasi-narrator, girlishness emerges as a modal logic which affects the focalising, narratorial, and plot elements of *Atonement*. This is why it is a risky statement to claim, as Finney does, that *Atonement* applies the narrative voice of a seventy-seven-year-old woman (2004, 68), for the same antagonisms are diffused in the narrative voice of the novel , even when the very presence of an adult Briony is finally revealed in the Coda.

5 Conclusion

In *Atonement*, Briony's focalising and quasi-narratorial implication in the act of storytelling is decidedly involved with girlish discourses and images of intrusion, which can be tracked far before her revelation as author in the final pages of the novel, and which lead to a sense of victory for her as quasi-narrator. The Coda's Briony makes sense of her atoning manuscript in the same register as a young girl would when she ponders about Lola's role in the eventual publication of her novel: "was I competing with her?" (McEwan 2001, 361), she asks. And then, while noting that her cousin "was always the superior older girl" (361), Briony celebrates the promised triumph that releasing *Atonement* would bring her in her perpetual competition with Lola: "But in that final important matter, I will be ahead of her" (361). Being ahead of Lola and gaining control over her is thus Briony's design, and from this it follows that she as author constructs the whole narrative in the mode of exercising control, with the ultimate aim of winning. With the final return of her aborted play, this is made possible.

The Trials of Arabella is thus a mirror image for the Coda itself: they are both a return and a remedy via which Briony may come out onto the stage and be celebrated, "adored" (McEwan 2001, 11) for her genius. By revealing that she has been behind the scenes all along, Briony rips and wedges herself into the novel that the reader is holding in their hand, following the quasi-traditions of violating the pre-postmodern conventions of narration[8] in a way that has either delighted or appalled critics since the novel's 2001 publication. It is a final act of penetration that, instead of Cecilia, Robbie, Emily or Lola, turns now to the reader and asks for the same applause. Briony's childlike desire to tell a story – highlighted by reviewer

[8] It is perhaps no wonder that some reviewers, as noted above, deemed the ending of McEwan's novel "gimmicky" (Moore 2001, 12), since by 2001 introducing the author as a character was one of the antiques of postmodernism. Early examples of such narratorial twists include *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by John Fowles, or *The Golden Notebook* (1962) by Doris Lessing.

C. C.'s (presumably a fictionalised Cecil Connolly's) suggestion that Briony turn away from pure modernism, as readers have a "childlike desire to be told a story" (314) – means that she wants readers to celebrate her and be in awe of her, acting as both a conceited young girl and as an Old Testament God, morphing into an immortal girl deity.

The closing of the novel becomes haunting once the reader is reminded that Briony's girlish voice is to become semi-eternal due to her eventual loss of memory and her oncoming 'second childhood,' during which she will regress to the prickly young girl whose voice has controlled this narrative. In the final lines, Briony makes a final, quasi-threatening promise that suggests she will do away with any pretence of atonement in her next draft, fully reviving Cecilia and Robbie and forcing them to stand there with the rest of her family, applauding her authorial triumph: "[i]t's not impossible" (371). With her atoning yet damning narration, *Atonement*'s Briony Tallis is an iconic and menacing girl figure of twenty-first century fiction, whose presence in the canon evokes intriguing ideas as to the motivic-discursive capacities of girlhood in the narrative text.

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"For the First Time in My Life, I Don't Know What to Believe": Conspiracy and Gender in *The X-Files*

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The X-Files, from its representation of monsters, aliens, and the government, to its engagement with gender roles, has been thoroughly analysed by scholars and fans alike in the past thirty years. This study aims to tie two elements of the show together: conspiracy theories and gender. Examining the early mythopoeia of the series, I argue that creating conspiracy theories might be read as a primarily masculine prerogative on the show, and that Dana Scully is not fully empowered to join her partner in conspiracy theorising due to her position as a woman at the FBI.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, crime drama, television series, gender studies, media studies

1 Introduction

With its initial run between 1993 and 2002, two feature-length films, and another two seasons in the 2010s, Chris Carter's *The X-Files* is noteworthy both due to the complexity and size of its canon and its longstanding impact on pop-culture. In the past thirty years or so, the show has become both a classic for fandom and the site of a large body of scholarly research. This study seeks to add to this robust scholarship by tying the show's conspiracy narrative to its construction of the femininity and masculinity of its protagonists. I examine the first season of *The X-Files*, exploring how the early mythopoeia of the show might be read, paying particular attention to five key mythology episodes (E1 "Pilot," E2 "Deep Throat," E10 "Fallen Angel," E17 "E.B.E." and E24 "The Erlenmeyer Flask"), as well as an additional, equally important villain-of-the-week instalment (E13 "Beyond the Sea"). There are two reasons for the limitation of the range of episodes covered. First, by the end of the 24-episode run of season one, the initial setup of the government conspiracy was already complete, and audiences were introduced to most of the important players; yet, the conspiracy was still hidden at this point, with viewers only aware of the fact

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that something was going on behind the scenes. This partial reveal of the conspiracy left room for theorising both on the part of the characters and the audience. Second, in season one, Mulder and Scully's dynamic was present at its most unaltered. Later, Scully's role started to transform, and her role as the 'sceptic' became unstable to a degree. Similarly, Mulder would time and again be challenged on his thinking. The selection of these particular mythology episodes is collected in *The X-Files Mythology* (2009) DVD series and the book *The Complete X-Files: Behind the Series, the Myths and the Movies* (Knowles et al. 2008). As opposed to the self-contained episodes that follow the monster-of-the-week format, these contribute to the overarching narrative of the show, with their storyline spanning the whole season (or multiple seasons in some cases), building the lore of the universe of *The X-Files*.

A significant portion of the existing scholarship on the show's two main characters calls attention to the atypicality of Fox Mulder's masculinity and Dana Scully's femininity. Reflecting on these interpretations, I argue that besides the non-traditionality of the characters' genderings, paradoxically, the show also reinforced Mulder's masculinity by validating his paranoid fantasies. I aim to highlight the difference between the narrative-making power of the two protagonists, exploring the intersection of gender and conspiracy theories in the series. I will demonstrate that in the first season of *The X-Files*, conspiracy theory creation might be read as a male privilege; in this gendered context, I aim to analyse the different ways we may read Scully's role as a sceptic, when and how conspiratorial thinking is validated on screen, who can (and who cannot) create conspiracy theories, and finally, how the existence of a real government conspiracy may inform our reading of the series. After reflecting on the critical potential of conspiratorial narratives in fiction and considering the general analysis on the gendered aspects of *The X-Files*, I offer an avenue to connect the two frameworks. I examine Scully's role as an FBI agent on the one hand, and as a (potential) narrator on the other, to demonstrate how her being a woman influences and constrains her behaviour within the show. I argue that although, as previous research highlights, Scully is not a dispossessed character and both protagonists display an ambiguity in terms of their relationship to traditional gender roles, Scully's narrative voice is nonetheless not fully empowered as she cannot join her partner in conspiracy theorising due to her gender. To further illustrate how the embrace of conspiracy theories is not a wholly accessible course of action for her, I explore the ways in which Scully's role might be contrasted with Mulder's and the eccentric Lone Gunmen's. In both cases I argue that the gendered dimension of the series cannot be fully explored without examining the extent to which conspiratorial discourse is available to the characters.

2 Conspiracy, Social Reflection, and *The X-Files*

A conspiracy theory (CT) is a narrative that explains an event as a product of the secret scheming of a group of sinister actors (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 32). This group is consciously trying to further its own goals, which harm the interests of other parts of society. To put another way, a conspiracy theory is best conceptualised as "a hegemonic and systemic political worldview [, or a] theory of power, of its practices and representations in which plots, pacts, secrecy and concealment play a decisive and central part" (Giry and Tika 2020, 114). While there are many different designs to CTs, those that are "deemed both false and dangerous" (Barkun 2003, 83) – as opposed to the ones that are strange but largely harmless (for example the belief that Paul McCartney died in 1966 and was replaced with a body double) – are relegated to the sidelines of or are entirely absent from mainstream discourse (83), as they are not reinforced by "properly constituted epistemic authorities" (Levy 2007, 187). Therefore, we may think of conspiratorial argumentation as a "stigmatized form of knowledge" (Bezalel 2021, 675). That is, generally speaking, conspiracy theories have negative connotations attached to them; the term itself is used by many in a pejorative sense. In *The X-Files*, conspiracy theories are time and again repressed by the authorities, with important consequences for the main characters. At the same time, the plot of the show validates a form of reasoning considered by many to be of the political fringes, as a way to find out the truth that is "out there" is through conspiratorial thinking.

When it comes to conspiracy theories in fiction, the analytical or critical functions of the fictitious representation of conspiracies (and theories about them) are important to highlight. For example, John S. Nelson describes how conspiracies in films are ways to analyse social systems, writing that "conspiracies in movies can be devices for resisting the totalizing politics of systems. Movies use mythic figures of conspiracy to specify systems that otherwise elude popular attention precisely because their politics are structural and pervasive" (2003, 502). As Nelson explains, the on-screen representation of a conspiracy can make tangible "the organizations and operations of distinct systems. The implication is that people can attend more and understand better when complicated structures appear as engaging characters and subtle interactions surface as dramatic deeds" (501).

As far as *The X-Files* is concerned, it captures the post-Watergate mistrust of American people towards their own political institutions. Pew Research Center highlights how the 1960s saw – partly because of the Vietnam War – a steady decline in people's trust in the US government, which would fall even further in the 1970s due to the Watergate scandal and economic struggles ("Public Trust" 2024). By 1974, according to Pew, only 36 percent of Americans said that they "trust the

government to do what is right just about always/most of the time," down from the 77 percent of 1964. The 1980s brought a slight recovery with over 40 percent of Americans trusting their government, but this number fell quickly again between 1991 and 1995. Public trust then steadily climbed and crossed the 50 percent mark for the first time since the 1970s in 2001, but then would drop again sharply in the early 2000s. Overall, Americans have had low trust in their government ever since the late 1960s (2024). In such an environment, it is unsurprising that a TV series whose fundamental premise is that the government is lying to its people would resonate with viewers. "If there is a ghost animating the machinery of *The X-Files*," writes Allison Graham in her reflection on the conspiracy theories on the show, "it is most likely Richard Nixon, the icon of paranoia whose career virtually defined the golden age of American conspiracy theory" (1996, 58). Graham's point is perhaps best illustrated if we turn to a summary of season one's mytharc.

In the first season of *The X-Files*, FBI Agent Dana Scully is assigned to work alongside Agent Fox Mulder and write reports on his investigations into what he believes to be cases connected to extraterrestrials. As the pair set out to solve these so-called X-Files, Mulder makes contact with a mysterious man known as Deep Throat. Deep Throat is closely familiar with the conspiring forces in the show, and in a way initiates Mulder into the conspiracy, too, feeding him pieces of information of the government plot as he seems fit. (Scully, too, comes face to face with Deep Throat eventually, though much later than her partner.) One consequential fact that is revealed in the first season is that the government has been experimenting on humans. Deep Throat is killed in a confrontation (by, viewers later learn, a mysterious group named the Syndicate), and at the end of the season the X-Files unit is shut down. As for later seasons, the main storyline details how the United States government is working to cover up both the existence of alien life and an approaching extraterrestrial invasion of Earth. (The revival of the show would revamp this mythology somewhat, yet a shadowy plot is undoubtedly in existence throughout the canon of *The X-Files*.) The series is set in the 1990s, which situates its characters in the post-Nixon era that Graham highlights. They, like the show's audience, feel the legacy of Watergate. The younger agents grew up in its shadow, while the senior FBI members were adults during the scandal.

At the same time, in a 2002 article for *The New York Times*, Joyce Millman highlighted the peculiarity of the show's success in the United States in an era of relative "security and prosperity". "Alien-invasion fiction usually flourishes in times of national anxiety," Millman wrote, mentioning *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* as a classic example of a Cold War-inspired science fiction horror story that deals with an alien invasion similar to what the Syndicate is preparing for in *The X-Files*. Wondering what could have contributed to the popularity of the

paranoid tone of the series in a post-Cold War environment, Millman concluded that it was "[a]n event that comes once every thousand years": the millennium. "As the '90s unfolded," Millman continued, "superstition about the approaching millennium renewed interest in all things spiritual, from doomsday prophecies to fundamentalism, from the cabala to angels. And *The X-Files* mirrored this hunger to believe." In her understanding, then, the show not only reflected but also supplied Americans with anxious visions – visions that according to Millman they were increasingly keen for before the turn of the century (2002). Indeed, the show is not only a result of the post-Watergate atmosphere of mistrust but also a reflection of broader, more general anxieties regarding contemporary social issues. Katherine Kinney explores how in a globalised world, immigration and consequent nationalist focus on the issue of border security, fears about 'aliens' are bound to resonate with viewers (2001, 54). Broadening the scope of criticism, Kevin Howley argues that the show "addresses fundamental concerns over social, psychological, and political control and is an expression of deep-seated cultural anxieties toward various forms of control technologies" (2001, 258). These arguments, in their highlighting of concrete social phenomena that fictional conspiracy theories reflect on, raise the question of how these fictional narratives utilize alternative discursive practices to not only render but criticise the socio-political context in which they are created.

In this context, the question of mainstreaming must be briefly addressed here. Does conspiracy fiction have a tangible role in neutralising conspiratorial, paranoid thinking for its audiences? As Michael Barkun argues, "the appearance of conspiracy themes in popular culture at least partially destigmatizes those ideas, by associating them with admired stars and propagating them through the most important forms of mass entertainment. […] Popular culture can also reduce the potency of conspiratorial themes by depriving them of some of their allure" (2003, 35). The relationship between *The X-Files* and the issue of stigmatisation/destigmatisation may be read through similar bifocal lenses. Michele Malach, reflecting on Dale Cooper in *Twin Peaks* alongside Mulder and Scully, emphasises that in popular media, "FBI agents typically function to police character and narrative boundaries, thereby reining in desire" (1996, 64). Moreover, in stark contrast to the earlier assertions of this study, Malach highlights that generally speaking, these agents tend to embody normalcy, representing "cultural categories of correctness, acting out what it means to be normal, mainstream, not-marginalized" (64). Although Mulder and Scully "behave in ways that may not always seem rational, as pop-culture FBI agents they still symbolize what our culture considers conventional" (64). In this sense, not only is Mulder allowed conspiratorial thinking due to him being an FBI agent, but conspiracy theorising is rendered acceptable *through* his character.

Joe Bellon argues that *The X-Files* criticises "not science itself, but rather the way authority has invested certain scientists and certain theories with the exclusive right to determine truth" (1999, 144). According to Bellon, the show does not claim that truth itself is unreachable; instead, "Mulder (the believer) and Scully (the sceptic) carry on a debate about the legitimacy of accepted science while simultaneously transforming themselves so that the dichotomy that first characterized them is increasingly questionable" (144). The series is not anti-science, Bellon highlights, but nor is it traditionally pro-authority, as it questions government narratives (146). In the same vein, it is not necessarily pro-CT, but it does critically reflect on the scope of acceptable discourse in society. In an era of, as Pew data revealed, public mistrust toward the government, the question of monopoly over truth is one that is highly relevant. Similarly, Stephanie Kelley-Romano highlights that conspiracy rhetoric "questions everything, particularly the nature of reality and possibility of truth" (2008, 106), and thus "works to question epistemological assumptions through the legitimization of alternative reasoning processes" (115). "The sort of authority that has been invested in science has also been conferred upon government and gender" (1999, 151), writes Bellon, emphasising that the unshakable certainty of all three ("that science is invariably correct, that government must be trusted, that differences in gender are definite and controlling" [151]) are simultaneously deconstructed in the show. This deconstruction, in turn, allows for new formulations of scientific reasoning, power, and gender, and inevitably makes space for conspiratorial thinking, as well. Overall, then, conspiracy fiction can be both an avenue for social reflection and criticism *because* it utilises an alternative (and stigmatised) mode of reasoning that may reveal previously repressed knowledge. In the next section, I examine the gendered associations that arise when considering reason as a concept, and in the context of *The X-Files,* Scully's access to the conspiratorial discursive space.

3 Scully, Mulder, and Gender Roles

As for the show's engagement with femininity and masculinity, generally studies highlight that the two protagonists are not archetypally gendered. Multiple chapters of the influential *"Deny All Knowledge": Reading the X-Files* (1996), edited by David Lavery et al., focus on the gender formulations in the series (for example Wilcox and Williams; Parks; Kubek), as do other researchers (e.g. Silbergleid 2003; Bury 1998; 2003; Braun 2000) who have analysed both the show and its surrounding fandom through a gender studies lens. Overall, most scholars agree that Scully, as

the sceptic party in the pair, stands for science and reason – both metaphorically and as a medical doctor – while Mulder is the believer, who often goes on faith and intuition when investigating cases. The association of reason, and thus science with masculinity and on the 'opposing' end, nature, with femininity lies deep within the Western philosophical tradition (Lloyd 1984, ix; 1). In a patriarchal society, this dichotomy brings with itself the discounting of emotionality (as inferior to reason). As Catherine Lutz summarises, "emotions are fundamentally devalued themselves – as irrational, physical, unintentional, weak, biased, and female" (1986, 301-2). The reversal of this presupposition in Mulder and Scully's dynamic is perhaps best illustrated by the following two exchanges, the first in an early episode titled "Deep Throat," the next nearing the end of the season in "Born Again."

> SCULLY: Mulder, c'mon. You've got two blurry photos, one of them taken almost fifty years ago, and another one you purchased today in a roadside diner. You're going out on a pretty big limb. […] Tell me one good reason why either of these photos is authentic.
> MULDER: You saw exactly what I saw in the sky tonight. What do you think they were?
> SCULLY: Just because I can't explain it, doesn't mean I'm gonna believe they were UFOs.
> MULDER: Unidentified Flying Objects, I think that fits the description pretty well. Tell me I'm crazy.
> SCULLY: Mulder, you're crazy. (S01E02 00:22:01–39)

> MULDER: Why is it still so hard for you to believe, even when all the evidence suggests extraordinary phenomena?
> SCULLY: Because sometimes […] looking for extreme possibilities makes you blind to the probable explanation right in front of you. (S01E22 00:14:13–28)

Scully, the rational scientists, wants concrete evidence to believe in Mulder's theories – two blurry pictures are not sufficient to convince her. Resembling these scenes, throughout the series her commitment to 'hard facts' places her as the level-headed balance to Mulder's steadfast belief. While he is ready to "go out on a limb," Scully is cautious when it comes to "extreme possibilities." Scully begins by being uncompromising in her position, often pushing back against Mulder's theories, but also standing up to her superiors when she feels it necessary. Indeed, as Bellon highlights, "Scully does not signify a passive, intuitive, incompetent woman. She is an aggressive, eager, objective, scientific professional; she is actually the representative of ultimate authority in the partnership, having been asked by her superiors at the FBI to oversee Fox Mulder's investigations" (1999, 149). By contrast, as mentioned above, Mulder, the criminal profiler in the pair, is the 'believer,' who is motivated throughout the series by the need to find his sister, who disappeared when they were children. The personal trauma that his character is caught up in is something that is both manipulated and exploited by Deep Throat. Mulder's main struggle, concurrently, is often to remain objective when faced with dubious evidence.

However, the protagonists' role reversal does not lean into essentialising, either. Mulder is not a blind fanatic when it comes to conspiracy theories. Multiple times the audience sees that his belief in alien life is one that rests on his own mode of scientific reasoning. Already in episode one, he tells Scully: "I am not crazy, Scully, I have the same doubts you do" (S01E01 00:15:50–54). In the previously quoted scene from episode two, he turns Scully's argument against her: they did indeed witness UFOs, despite Scully's scepticism, as a UFO is nothing more than an unidentified flying object – he did not come to his conclusion impulsively, but rationally. Further exploring the complexity of the characters, Bellon points out that Scully "displays flashes of a deep religious faith, and experiences powerful emotions following her father's death" (1999, 150–51). Indeed, Scully does not wholly reject faith as such, and out of the pair, she is the one who is shown to be religious; she does believe, just not in aliens, the first season of the show tells its audience. Moreover, in episode thirteen, titled "Beyond the Sea," it becomes clear that her rejection of the paranormal is not absolute. In a curious role reversal, for an episode Scully becomes the believer and Mulder the sceptic, when a death row inmate claims that he can communicate with Scully's recently passed father. Throughout the episode, Scully is visibly shaken during her encounters with the inmate, Boggs, who at one point recalls a teenage memory from Scully's past. After Boggs tips Scully off on the kidnapping case the agents are working on, she and Mulder argue about her following Boggs's suggestion:

> MULDER: That doesn't matter! That's exactly what Boggs wanted! He could have been setting you up! You could be dead right now! Why did you feel you had to lie in your police report?
> SCULLY: I thought it would be a better explanation under the circumstances.
> MULDER: What you're really saying is that you didn't want to go on record admitting that you believed in Boggs! The Bureau would expect something like that from 'Spooky' Mulder, but not Dana Scully.
> SCULLY: I thought that you'd be pleased that I'd opened myself to extreme possibilities.
> MULDER: Why now? After all we've seen, why Boggs? […] Dana... open yourself up to extreme possibilities only when they're the truth. That goes for Luther Boggs, and your father. As for Luther Boggs, he's the greatest of lies. I know he's working with someone on the outside and they planted that evidence. (S01E13 00:19:23–21:02)

This exchange in particular, and the episode in general, are important to consider for multiple reasons. First, Mulder directly calls upon their differing positions within the FBI, almost admonishing Scully for her actions. 'Spooky' Mulder, as others call him behind his back, is aware that he and Scully are perceived differently – and in this moment, when he tries to protect his partner from harm, he embraces this difference, saying that Scully should stick to her sceptic role. Indeed, his comment

about lying is less about Scully falsifying her report, and more about her searching for "extreme possibilities" alone, in a way that put her in a dangerous position. Second, despite the fact that "Beyond the Sea" is not considered a mytharc episode, it establishes key characteristics of the protagonists that serve as jumping points for their later development. It is shown, much more explicitly than before, that Mulder is not a monomaniac and that Scully is just as capable of having faith as her partner is. The faith/science dichotomy, then, is not absolute: while both characters embody archetypes to a degree, their positions are not set, and they are capable of crossing borders when the occasion calls for it: Scully, in her grief, coloured by the deep love she felt for her father, Mulder in his attempt to protect Scully from disappointment, as he knows Boggs to be someone they cannot trust. Later in the episode, in total opposition to the usual conversations the protagonists have on cases, they discuss:

> MULDER: No matter what, don't believe him. Boggs created this whole charade to get back at me for putting him on death row. You'd be the next best thing.
> SCULLY: Mulder, I never thought I'd say this... but what if there's another explanation?
> MULDER: Don't deal with him. He could be trying to claim you as his last victim. (S01E13 00:35:25–59)

Scully is overcome, her rational system of reasoning seemingly crumbling. Importantly, it is not an alien encounter or a meeting with Deep Throat that sends her on this course – instead, it is a closely personal matter, the passing of her father earlier in the episode. She and Mulder, then, are not so different, despite their opposing approaches to investigations: both are deeply moved by their own personal family trauma, which sets them on a (tentative, in Scully's case) path of belief in something supernatural. Scully has not fully joined the 'other side' yet, though. Near the end of the episode, she seeks to explain how Boggs could have known so much about her, telling Mulder: "I was considering Boggs. If he knew that I was your partner, he could have found out everything he knew about me. About my father...". Mulder stops her and asks: "After all you've seen, after all the evidence, why can't you believe?" Scully, in a final show of vulnerability replies, "I'm afraid. I'm afraid to believe." (S01E13 00:44:04–48)

Mulder and Scully, then, are atypically gendered, the reason/emotion distinction reversed through their primarily characteristics without succumbing to rigidity in these roles. Both have composite relationships with science and faith, which are challenged in various episodes of the first season. This complexity in character building reveals, in part, why the show has gone on to be one of the cult classics of the 1990s and the 2000s, with devoted fans pouring over episodes to unravel both the alien conspiracy and the psyches of the main characters. The ambiguous readings that the show opens up for are evidenced, in part, by the vast amount of

scholarship that focuses on the series. My aim is to add a new perspective to this already existing multiplicity by bridging the gap between the literature on conspiracy theories and scholarship on the representation of women in crime television series, analysing the act of conspiracy narrative creation from a gender studies perspective.

4 Dana Scully, FBI Agent

In order to analyse Scully's role as a federal agent, it is important to examine the media representation of female agents, as popular media have a crucial role in reiterating acceptable forms of gender performance. Tammy S. Garland et al., for example, examined the depiction of female federal law enforcement on screen through the content analysis of prime-time dramas. They found that white males were more frequently depicted as both agents and perpetrators of crimes on the twelve examined series (2018, 617) and that women were often portrayed as less competent or self-confident, having to "become 'one of the boys' to be accepted and perceived as qualified" (618). In an earlier study, Kimberly A. DeTardo-Bora concluded that fictional women in the criminal justice profession were repeatedly represented as young, sexually appealing, in possession of 'feminine' qualities such as nurturance and "subordinat[ion] to authority" (2009, 165). At the same time, they were "were shown to be intelligent, competitive, self-confident, and assertive" (165). Janet T. Davidson similarly highlighted how the "female crime fighters" she examined were routinely depicted as young and were also more likely to be sexualized than their male counterparts, often taking on an assistive role on screen (2015, 1022). Moreover, these women were often unmarried and without children, or their family lives were not harmonious (1022), implying that while the female agent can be successful in her professional life, she cannot "have it all" (Garland et al. 2018, 620).

Scully, as the previous section also highlighted, is a novel female character, not only because she is a scientist but because as an equal partner to Mulder in the agency, she routinely saves him from trouble, as well as standing up to both him and their higher ups. Her competence and self-confidence are repeatedly asserted in the series, and she is not overtly sexualised, although her femininity is often contrasted with that of her superiors. There are multiple scenes where Scully is the only woman at a meeting or involved in an investigation, exposing that within the Bureau, she is an Other. DeTardo-Bora's words, that "[t]here is hope yet that women will continue to be portrayed in a positive light, one that will inspire young women [as] crime dramas are partially breaking away from some of the stereotypical images of women that have traditionally been displayed" (2009, 165), are undoubtedly

applicable to *The X-Files,* as well. Overall, Scully is an active figure in the narrative who has considerable agency, a capable and professional scientist whose voice shapes events in the show. However, her femininity colours the scope of actions accessible to her as an agent. Namely, Scully has to perform a double role in the show, and her scepticism (that is often read as a subversion of restrictive gender roles) might also be taken a sign of her marginality as a female FBI agent. She is not 'entitled' to express conspiratorial opinions the same way Mulder is, as if, were she to take on the conspiracist language, she would be shunned by her superiors.

Scully's role within the FBI and as Mulder's partner is interesting to consider for multiple reasons. Assigned to the X-Files unit to keep an eye on (and discredit) Mulder's theories, she occupies a meta-investigator role. Not only does she deal with the cases but also has to observe the investigative process itself as a disciplinary figure. Importantly, both Mulder and Scully are aware of her twofold position as evidenced in the pilot episode of the series, when the two have this conversation because evidence suggests that a coma patient might inexplicably have been involved in the crime they are investigating:

> MULDER: All right, but I just want you to understand what it is you're saying.
> SCULLY: You said it yourself.
> MULDER: Yeah, but you have to write it down in your report. (S01E01 00:38:24–34)

Scully and Mulder *are* different. While he can posit theories that might contradict official Bureau ideas, 'Spooky' Mulder's theories are ultimately not scrutinised too heavily – he does, after all, have a job at the agency despite his unorthodox claims. Scully, in contrast, has to always keep in mind that her reports go back to their higher-ups, and she will be questioned on their content. And here lies another important point for her character: while she is a partner to Mulder (as of the first season only as a colleague and friend), the requirement to submit the field reports hinders her ability to fully take on the 'believer' (or in other words, conspiracy theorist) role. She could only endorse Mulder's ideas to the detriment of her own position in the FBI, going against the goals of her higher ups. Illustrating the limitations imposed on her, in the same episode, the two agents have the following heated exchange:

> MULDER: There's classified government information I've being trying to access, but someone has been blocking my attempts to get at it. […] Someone at a higher level of power. The only reason I've been allowed to continue with my work is because I've made connections in Congress.
> SCULLY: And they're afraid of what? That, that you'll leak this information?
> MULDER: You're a part of that agenda, you know that.
> SCULLY: I'm not a part of any agenda. You've got to trust me. I'm here just like you, to solve this. (S01E01 00:28:47–29:17)

Mulder, in the heat of the argument, accuses Scully of following FBI goals blindly – something that she rejects outright. But to what extent is this rejection reality, and how much of it is simply a wish on Scully's part? In other words, can she truly declare not to be "part of any agenda" when she is still writing reports on their work? As later scenes would show throughout the series, she is not afraid to oppose their superiors, often coming to her own or Mulder's protection when they try to discredit what the agents saw or experienced during their investigations. Nonetheless, she must linger within certain bounds to keep her job, and to be able to fulfil her role as a 'warden' next to Mulder.

So, while it is true that the logic/emotion dichotomy is reversed in the show through alternative constructions of gender, it is important to acknowledge that Scully must remain a sceptic for her to perform the part of the FBI agent well. She joins the 'boys' club' of the FBI – as mentioned, there are multiple scenes throughout the show where audiences see that there are very few women in positions like hers, and that virtually all of her higher ups are men – and must adhere to its roles to be respected. While hers might be read as a 'hegemonic femininity' that gets ahead through the subversion of some masculinities (for example Mulder's – her initial job, after all, is to keep him in check), I argue that there still is a gendered 'invisible ceiling,' specifically when it comes to narrative-making, which limits her ability to create theory as freely as Mulder does. Importantly, Scully is given a voice in the series. The question to consider for the rest of this study is what exactly shapes how she can use the voice that she has.

5 Dana Scully, Narrator

By the end of the first season of *The X-Files*, there is clear indication that Scully's trust in her FBI superiors is not absolute – her arc over the twenty-four episodes is from cynic to a tentative believer. On a parallel trajectory, she goes from trust to mistrust when it comes to the Bureau. Illustrating this change, in the second episode, she pushes back against Mulder's conspiratorial thinking (although it must be acknowledged that she does often entertain Mulder's ideas throughout the season, even if she personally does not believe them):

> MULDER: […] I think there's a huge conspiracy here Scully. They've got a UFO here, I'm sure of it. And they'll do anything to keep it a secret, including sacrificing lives and minds of those pilots, because what if that secret got out.
> SCULLY: If, if that were true, it would be a national scandal.
> MULDER: No, no, you're not thinking big enough. If it were true, it would be confirmation of the existence of extraterrestrial life.

> SCULLY: Did you ever stop to think that what we saw was simply an experimental plane. Like the stealth bomber or, this Aurora Project. Doesn't the government have a right and a responsibility to protect its secrets?
> MULDER: Yes, but at what cost, when does the human cost become too high for the building of a better machine?
> SCULLY: Look, these are questions we have no business asking. (S01E02 00:29:40–00:30:30)

In contrast, by the last episode ("The Erlenmeyer Flask") she seems to be much closer to his standpoint:

> SCULLY: Mulder? I, I just want to say that I was wrong.
> MULDER: It's all right, don't worry about it.
> SCULLY: No, um... if you had listened to me, we wouldn't be here right now. I should know by now to trust your instincts.
> MULDER: Why? Nobody else does.
> SCULLY: You know, I've always held science as sacred. I've, I've always put my trust in the accepted facts. And what I saw last night... for the first time in my life, I don't know what to believe. (S01E24 00:27:00–33)

There is a stark dissimilitude between the two scenes. Whereas in the first Scully shuts down Mulder's line of reasoning wholly, in a way disempowering them both (they have no business wandering about the dealings of the government, despite the fact that they are, as FBI agents, part of the power apparatus), by the time the latter half of the season comes around, she is not only receptive of Mulder's intuition-based methods, but is questioning her own scientific reasoning, as well.

Overall, these scenes exemplify the tension of Scully's position: although she performs well in her role as the sceptic, ultimately she is proven wrong. It seems that the narrative itself rejects her performance, urging her to change her stances, while Mulder's paranoid fantasies are validated. The idea that science and reason can offer explanations for the world is negated, or at least partially questioned, through Scully's character: she cannot arrive at the truth on her own, but must adopt a new framework to do so. She thus must go outside the discursive mainstream and be Othered for *that* to arrive at the truth that the show seeks. The show's endorsement of Mulder's position is evidenced in its slogan, as well. As Malach also points out, "the program's worldview (captured in the slogan "The Truth Is Out There") is obviously Mulder's. As a believer in paranormal phenomena, he has the advantage over his partner in most episodes" (1996, 74). "Scully, however," Malach continues, "becomes the more flexible character over time, as her experiences seem to change her worldview more than Mulder's do him" (74). So paradoxically, Scully is greatly limited in her ability to enter the conspiracy narrative-making space as a woman, and yet she must do so to arrive at the truth. What is puzzling about this situation is that at first, she is the 'narrator' of the story through her reports, which would

imply her ability to create adequate theories regarding the investigation. Moreover, as Wilcox and Williams point out, "[t]he Mulveyan gaze, too, is sublimated: throughout the series, Mulder and Scully look into each other's eyes in their quest for the truth […]. 'What do you think?' are the words they perhaps most often address to each other, and it seems they really want to know" (1996, 105–6). Scully shares "equal looks" (116) with Mulder, and through her reporting on the cases, she has the discursive power to actively take part in truth-seeking. And yet, despite the looks and the voice, she cannot, through her own means, arrive at the answers that she and Mulder are looking for.

Indeed, an important factor that limits Scully's 'voice' in conspiracy-making is her inability to see much of the proof that Mulder faces in episodes. Despite seeing signs that the government is doing something in secret (though the extraterrestrial part of the plot is at that point largely obscured) by the second episode already, it is only in the very last episode of the season that she encounters concrete evidence of the government plot. Moreover, initially only Mulder makes contact with the informant Deep Throat, keeping their meetings secret from Scully for a significant span of time. It is once again only in the last episode that Scully meaningfully interacts with Deep Throat. In episode ten, Deep Throat explicitly asks Mulder if he is certain that she has not followed them, revealing that Scully is deliberately kept out of the loop. Scully is actively shut out of the theorising space by Deep Throat, as well. As Wilcox and Williams contend, "ironically, their frequent sex role reversals result in Scully's investigative gaze being disempowered. Time and again, Mulder sees evidence of the supernatural that Scully, by the structure of the episode, is disallowed from seeing" (1996, 99). Scully and Mulder, they continue, "are presented as equal. In one area, however, that equality fails: while Scully and Mulder in various senses look at each other as equals, Scully's gaze is disempowered by the text" (117). Therefore, while Scully is "seemingly more aligned with traditional masculine power" (117), she is ultimately marginalised from a space her male colleagues easily enter.

6 "I Want to Believe:" Reflecting on the Figure of the Conspiracy Theorist

Thus far, my analysis focused on Scully and her constrained position in the narrative with regard to conspiratorial thinking. However, Mulder's relationship with power and authorities is also worthwhile to consider. Wilcox and Williams write that Mulder's "insistence on the reality of beings and experiences not acknowledged by patriarchy marks him as Other to many of patriarchy's representatives, thus aligning him with woman" (1996, 118). As Lisa Parks similarly argues,

> [Mulder's] fascination with the paranormal is both feminized (especially as it is articulated through his relationship to his sister) and at the same time turned into a masculine investigatory adventure. Scully, on the other hand, is masculinized through her connection to science yet feminized by her subordination in the FBI's chain of command and by her placement "out of the Bureau mainstream." (1996, 123)

According to Wilcox and Williams, Mulder occupies the position and thus takes on the characteristics of the woman in popular fiction who "sees the monster with a special horror because she recognizes their shared difference from the males of the established power structures. […] 'Spooky' Mulder is identified with the monster in his difference, as even his nickname indicates" (1996, 118). Thus far, my analysis has closely mirrored Wilcox and Williams's, utilising different frameworks to highlight similar points regarding the gendered discourse of the show. However, at this point our arguments seem to diverge. They go on to write that "[b]y the last episode of the second season, Scully is again across the table from the representatives of patriarchy, telling them that her reports validate Mulder's work. She, like Mulder, is threatened with dismissal from a position sponsored by that patriarchy, a position that has enabled the two agents to pursue their investigations more effectively" (119). Conversely, I argue that Scully's position had been threatened from the beginning. While Wilcox and Williams also address her precarious position as a woman in the FBI (119), their focus rests chiefly on Mulder and Scully's interpersonal relationship (and how it is often perceived by other characters as sexual [113]), whereas my interest is in how the outside treats each character differently. In my interpretation, Mulder may symbolically align with the Other (the woman), but he is nonetheless perceived to be a man by society. Moreover, Mulder and Scully may be equal in the eyes of each other, but both the Bureau and the narrative itself, as I explained, seem to (explicitly or implicitly) reject (or at least heavily question) this. It is true that Mulder is relegated to the sidelines of the FBI, with his office located in the basement of the agency's facility symbolically setting him apart from – and below – his colleagues, prompting him to call himself the "FBI's most unwanted" (S01E01 00:05:00–05). At the same time, as creating conspiracy theories is a necessity to finding the truth in the series not only is this alternative discursive strategy foregrounded, but Mulder's embracing of it is validated, too. In other words, his outsider status is ultimately rewarded as it is what allows his investigations to succeed.

However, being a conspiracy theorist is not unequivocally endorsed on the show. In episode 17, titled "E.B.E.," Mulder and Scully meet the Lone Gunmen, a group of conspiracy theorists who run a magazine of unexplained phenomena. While they seem to be in the same business as Mulder, he is sympathetic to the viewers, whereas the Gunmen are presented as aloof and obviously overzealous with their ideas. Describing them to Scully, Mulder says "these guys are like an extreme government

watchdog group. […] Some of their information is first-rate; covert actions, classified weapons. Some of their ideas are downright spooky" (S01E17 00:09:38–49). As mentioned already, "spooky" is an adjective that is most often associated with Mulder, from the very first episode of the show – others called him so behind his back in the Academy, and seemingly the practice stuck in the FBI, as well. The initial similarity and descriptive connection between the Gunmen and Mulder, however, is not bolstered further, and gets reframed during the scene after the agents visit the group in their offices. After their meeting, once again alone, Scully somewhat teasingly says, "[d]id you see the way they answered the telephone? They probably think that every call that they get is monitored and they're followed wherever they go. It's a form of self-delusion. It makes them think that what they're doing is important enough that somebody would" (S01E17 00:12:18–32), only to be cut off as she finds a listening device in her pen.

There are, then, two chief differences between the Gunmen and Mulder and Scully: first, their (or at least Mulder's) theorising is painted in a much less comic light. Second, the Gunmen, the audience understands, are unjustified in their paranoia, while the protagonists ought to be suspicious of their surroundings. Both these points connect to the positions the characters occupy within the narrative, but the difference is not simply a matter of proximity to truth. After all, Mulder tells Scully that some information that the Gunmen have is "first-rate" (S01E17 00:09:38–49). Instead, Mulder's work at the Bureau both makes his claims serious and at the same time troubling and thus warranting control. Mulder, coming from inside the FBI, is legitimised in creating his conspiracy theories – he is, after all, in the business of sleuthing. Ironically, for a show that focuses on governmental power abuses and their coverups, truth-seeking remains largely in the hands of authorities. One can make alternative theories, the show seems to imply, but will be taken seriously – by the narrative and other characters – only if they are part of the institution. At the same time, because Mulder is a figure who is part of law enforcement, his going against accepted political narratives must be carefully controlled and kept under surveillance; this is why Deep Throat feeds only morsels of information to him throughout the season – Mulder may learn enough to satiate some of his curiosity, but never so much that he would pose a real threat to the FBI. In the episode titled "Fallen Angel," Deep Throat explains as much to a colleague:

> I appreciate your frustration, but you and I both know that Mulder's work is a singular passion – poses a most unique dilemma. But his occasional insubordination is in the end, far less dangerous […] [t]han having him exposed to the wrong people. What he knows. What he thinks he knows. Always keep your friends close, Mr. McGrath. But keep your enemies closer." (S01E10 00:44:21–45:02)

Paradoxically, then, Mulder is both more sanctioned to embrace conspiratorial thinking due to his work – when he comes up with outrageous theories, he is to be taken more seriously than the Gunmen when they do –, as well as more constrained, since he is under constant watch of Deep Throat and the conspiring higher-ups.

7 Conclusion

Overall, this study aimed to highlight the tensions within the narrative of the first season of *The X-Files.* My goal was to show that reading Dana Scully as a fully disempowered woman or as wholly flipping gender scripts would both be simplifications of the complexity of her character. Utilising conspiracy theory creation (which I took to be a central driving force of the narrative) as a framework through which to analyse the gender roles of the series, I argued that access to the theorising space was the entitlement of the men of season one of *The X-Files*. While Scully is an active figure in the series and her character is on the one hand subversive, on the other, her voice is greatly limited in its narrative capacity. The performance that is required of her as an FBI agent limits her ability to fully access the truth by stepping into the believer (and conspiracy theorist) role. At the same time, Mulder's position at the FBI is what differentiates him from other conspiracy theorists: him and Scully being part of an institution that functions as an epistemic authority complicates their relationship with the truth and issues of legitimate critical potential considerably. As I argued for the social reflective capabilities of fictional conspiracy narratives, Scully's binary characterisation in the show and her lack of access to a needed conspiracist reasoning highlights the pervasiveness of the patriarchal favouring of "masculine" discourse, even when it is considered to be transgressive. A fruitful endeavour in the future would be to examine how later seasons revise this contention, and to chart Scully's evolution throughout the entirety of the series, seeing how her role within the narrative changes as she takes on more of a believer role.

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Beyond the *Flesh*: Rethinking the Body through Phenomenology in Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* and Waltz's *Körper* and *noBody*

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Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework of embodied perception, this paper examines Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (2000) and Sasha Waltz's *Körper* and *noBody* (early 2000s), focusing on how they destabilise the body's ontological boundaries. By employing Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the *lived body*, the study explores how both works challenge conventional binaries between self/world and subject/object. Kane's text reconfigures psychosis as an alternative mode of being-in-the-world, where hallucinatory visions intensify the body–world dialectic rather than rupturing it. In contrast, Waltz's choreography dissolves corporeal boundaries, revealing the reversibility of perception and the intersubjective nature of embodiment. Despite their divergent media – text-based theatre and movement-based dance – both Kane and Waltz converge on a foundational proposition: perception is inherently participatory, perpetually entangled with the world's Becoming. The paper also integrates Drew Leder's concept of the *absent body* to analyse how both artists explore the ecstatic dissolution of the body, where disappearance becomes a mode of transcendence and reconfiguration. Through phenomenological analysis, this study demonstrates how theatre and dance enact phenomenological principles, blurring the boundaries between physicality and abstraction to redefine corporeal experience.

Keywords: phenomenology, vision–movement, the lived body, ecstatic body, intersubjectivity

1 Introduction

This paper investigates complementary modes of text-based and movement-based performance through two case studies: Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (2000) and Sasha Waltz's choreographic works *Körper*[1] (2000) and *noBody*[2] (early 2002). While Kane's

[1] "*Körper* means body in German" (Waltz 2018). Waltz explains in an interview on the work's focus: "[t]he piece examines the material body, dissecting the physical human body into systems, like the nervous system, the bone or the skeleton" (2018).

[2] The title *noBody* (written as one word with a lowercase 'n' and an internal capital 'B') was intentionally

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work centres on written dialogue and narrative structure, Waltz embraces dance as a dynamic, embodied art form that "always opens up new ways of interpretation as it is a live art" (Waltz 2018). By its very nature, dance, in its essence, is an embodied art that communicates through movement.

Through a phenomenological approach[3] informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's insights on perception[4] and embodied subjectivity as well as his concepts of the *lived body* (Leib)[5] and *flesh* (la chair),[6] this study investigates how the works under study destabilise conventional ontological binaries. It focuses particularly on the distinctions between self and world and between subject and object, exploring how these are challenged through the distinctive performative methods of Kane and Waltz. Merleau-Ponty's framework positions the *lived body* as the fundamental site of meaning-making, making it especially relevant for analysing both theatrical text and embodied dance. The paper argues that psychosis in Kane's text is not

crafted to reflect the work's core exploration of the body's paradoxical presence-in-absence. As Waltz clarifies, "it was the idea of visualising emptiness, as something was there and is gone" (2011, 01:19–28). "In *noBody* the choreographer and 25 dancers take on the challenge of visualizing the non-material and the idea of the spiritual beyond the body, thus questioning the mystery of human existence and death" (videotanz n.d.). As documented on the same website, the piece "was last performed on a Berlin stage in September 2008 at the Schaubühne Berlin. The production was invited to the renowned Festival d'Avignon in 2002 […]. The filmic version of *noBody*, the third and last part of Sasha Waltz's famous *Körper – Trilogy*, was produced in 2000 by nachtaktivfilm, commissioned by ZDF/ARTE."

[3] Phenomenology as defined in the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception* as "[t]he study of essences, and it holds that all problems amount to defining essences, such as the essence of perception or the essence of consciousness. And yet phenomenology is also a philosophy that places essences back within existence and thinks that the only way to understand man and the world is by beginning from their 'facticity.' […] Phenomenology is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' prior to reflection – like an inalienable presence – and whose entire effort is to rediscover this naïve contact with the world in order to finally raise it to a philosophical status" (Landes 2012, lxx).

[4] Merleau-Ponty redefines perception as an embodied, lived experience, rejecting the mind–body dualism of traditional philosophy. Taylor Carman asserts in the foreword to *Phenomenology of Perception*: "[p]erception is both intentional and bodily, both sensory and motor, and so neither merely subjective nor objective, inner nor outer, spiritual nor mechanical" (2012, xiii).

[5] Merleau-Ponty stands apart in phenomenology for centring the body as the locus of subjective experience, which he terms the 'lived body.' As translator Donald A. Landes clarifies in his introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The lived body is not an object among others in the world – it is my body, experienced as the very condition of my being. Yet this 'ownness' does not imply possession, as if the body were separable from existence itself" (2012, xlviii). Based on this, the 'lived body' is the pre-reflective ground through which one perceives, acts, and interprets the world.

[6] Merleau-Ponty states: "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being" (1968, 139).

a form of disembodiment but rather an alternative mode of being-in-the-world, where hallucinatory visions reconfigure the body-world relationship. In contrast, Waltz's choreography dissolves corporeal boundaries to reveal perception's inherent reversibility. Despite operating through opposing principles – the written form versus kinaesthetic experience[7] – both Kane and Waltz converge on the same insight: to perceive is always to participate in the world's Becoming.

Both artists emerged from parallel artistic revolutions in 1990s European theatre and dance, each using radical formal experimentation to interrogate the boundaries of human consciousness. Through its fragmented structure and elliptical language, *4.48 Psychosis* engages in a phenomenological inquiry into the body's perceptual limits, revealing how the mental and physical intersect in the lived experience of the self. Kane's publisher observes the text's ambiguous form: "On the page, the piece looks like a poem. No characters are named, and even their number is unspecified. It could be a journey through one person's mind, or an interview between a doctor and his patient" (Kane 2000, front matter). Similarly, Waltz's *Körper* and *noBody* explore the material and perceptual limits of the body as described in the program notes for Waltz's *Körper*, this work marks a pivotal moment in her exploration of the human body: "In *Körper* […] she investigates the anatomy and the physical appearance of the human being, relating her dancers' bodies to architecture, science, and history. […]. *noBody* asks about the metaphysical existence of humanity" (Arthaus Musik). The present paper examines two pivotal moments from Waltz's *Körper* that materialise Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the *flesh*: the nude duet separated by glass in *Körper* and the cloud sequence in *noBody*. These scenes reveal how Waltz stages the body's material and perceptual limits.

By integrating textual analysis with phenomenological interpretation of recorded performances and staging, this paper highlights how theatre and dance, as distinct yet complementary mediums, illuminate shared phenomenological concerns. Key concepts such as presence, absence, materiality, and embodiment frame this analysis, demonstrating how Kane and Waltz enact phenomenology through their art, blurring boundaries between physicality and abstraction to redefine corporeal experience.

[7] Kinaesthetic experience refers to the sensory perception of bodily movement, position, and physical interaction with the environment, emphasising the role of touch, motion, and proprioception in shaping understanding or engagement.

2 The Body–World Enigma: 4.48 Chiasm[8] in Kane's Theatre of Reversible *Flesh*

4.48 Psychosis was written during Kane's final months; as the publisher's description notes, "throughout the autumn and winter of 1998–99 as Kane battled with one of her recurrent bouts of depression. On February 20, 1999, aged 28, the playwright committed suicide" (Kane 2000, front matter). Critics such as Michael Billington have interpreted Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* as a "sombre, poetic meditation on suicide," emphasising its portrayal of "sheer disconnectedness" (2000). However, Kane's agent offered a contrasting view, stating: "I do not think she was depressed, I think it was deeper than that. I think she felt something more like existential despair – which is what makes many artists tick" (qtd. in Gentleman 1999). The second perspective reframes Kane's writing not as a symptom of illness, but as an artistic confrontation with the void, suggesting that her work is a deliberate philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence. Accordingly, moving beyond the limitations imposed by her suicide or her struggles with depression, this paper examines Kane's work divorced from biographical assumptions about her mental health. This analytical shift from reading Kane through the lens of pathology to viewing her work through embodiment signals an intentional focus on the lived, visceral aspects of being, highlighting the significance of physical interaction and presence in shaping meaning and identity. Through this insight, what initially appears as despair transforms into a profound meditation on existence itself. To expand this view, this part first argues that Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* can be read as dramatising psychosis in terms of Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic *flesh* – the reversible entanglement of body and world. Building on this, psychosis, in this reading, operates as hyper-embodied reality-construction, where the speaker[9] does not dissolve into their surroundings but engages with them

[8] The concept of the chiasm is defined as a "new conception of the body, as a *chiasm* or crossing-over (the term comes from the Greek letter chi) which combines subjective experience and objective existence. The term for this new conception of the body is *flesh*, an ultimate notion; a concrete emblem of a general manner of being; which provides access both to subjective experience and objective existence" (Baldwin 2004, 2). "The chiasm, then, is an image describing how this overlapping and encroachment takes place between a pair that nevertheless retains a divergence – touching and being touched being plainly nonidentical" (Reynolds 2000, 68). In this paper, I engage with both Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenology of embodied perception (*Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962) and his later ontology of *flesh* and intertwining (*Le Visible et l'invisible*, 1964; *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1968), tracing his shift from analysing bodily subjectivity to exploring the primordial, chiasmic structure of Being itself.

[9] The text provides no character names, gender markers, or speaker attributions, shifting unpredictably between *I*, *you*, *we*, and *she*. With no stage directions assigning lines, the voices remain deliberately ambiguous. Following Kane's intentional indeterminacy, I will refer to all vocalisations collectively as *the speaker*, using singular *they* for pronoun reference.

through amplified sensory immediacy. Finally, the study exposes perception as an inherently kinetic and reversible process, reframing mental breakdown as a distinct mode of being-in-the-world.

This intensified being-in-the-world manifests in the speaker's hallucinations, which are not a rupture from reality but an alternative mode of embodied perception. As the speaker declares, "I'm seeing things/ I'm hearing things/ I don't know who I am" (Kane 2000, 18). This state dramatises Merleau-Ponty's premise that "the body is our general medium for having a world" (1962, 169). For Merleau-Ponty, the *lived body* is not a passive object but a dynamic "nexus of living meanings" (175) engaged in a constant, "pre-reflective dialogue of corporeal existence" (2004, 39) with its environment. Kane's speaker embodies this principle literally: their perceptions actively reshape their reality. The play's visceral imagery demonstrates that the body's materiality is the primary site where meaning is constituted and renegotiated through raw, corporeal immediacy. Thus, psychosis in Kane's text is not a disembodiment but a different way of being a body-in-the-world, where the perceived world is intensely and unsettlingly enacted through the *flesh*. It is this embodied grounding that is the basis for Merleau-Ponty's claim that "we need neither to measure nor to calculate in order to gain access to this world" (2004, 39). This claim is vividly enacted by Kane's speaker, for whom hallucination collapses the internal and external binary, constituting a reality where, crucially, perception is never passive observation but always active embodiment. The speaker's sensory crises – "seeing things" – are enactments of Merleau-Ponty's core thesis: that all perception resists intellectual abstraction, manifesting instead through what he describes as the simple, yet profound act of "opening one's eyes" (2004, 39). Thus, the speaker's very existence becomes entangled with their perceptions, continuously remaking world boundaries through corporeal experience.

Contrary to traditional medical models that frame the psychotic body as disembodied or incoherent, this analysis contends that psychosis in Kane's text does not fracture embodied subjectivity but rewires its dialogue with reality. Psychosis is revealed as actively reconstituting reality, precisely through the collapse of subject–world distinctions. Here lies the enigma of embodiment in which the body exists as a material entity within the world, while the world simultaneously manifests within the body through sensation and lived experience. This reciprocity dissolves the illusion of separation, exposing existence as an entangled phenomenon where neither body nor world can be defined without the other. The psychotic body, then, does not retreat from reality but reconfigures it, becoming a mode of 'writing' oneself into existence. When the speaker declares, "I don't know who I am" (Kane 2000, 18) – emerging from their earlier sensory openness to the world, as expressed in "I'm seeing things/I'm hearing things" (18) – this shift signals an ontological transformation in their mode

of Being. Their access to reality is altered, and what they see/hear become their truth. The body, in this state, is but the ground of a new way of knowing, simultaneously reflecting and shaping perception through lived experience.

This enigma, where the body and world merge through perception, manifests most strikingly in the speaker's connection to their own physical self. The speaker's knowledge and perception of their body relate directly to their vision, exposing a profound connection between self-awareness and physical existence. This is vividly captured in the lines later when the speaker states: "I am here/I can see myself" (Kane 2000, 21) or in the lines "I know myself/I see myself" (23). This repeated visual self-recognition suggests that the speaker's understanding of the world emerges primarily through bodily experience. Like Merleau-Ponty's *flesh*, their physical forms become the essential ground for negotiating identity and place within the world. Here, Kane and Merleau-Ponty converge: the philosopher argues that perception is irrevocably tied to bodily existence, and the play dramatises this principle. The speaker's primary encounter with their own form occurs through looking, as in "I can see myself or I know myself" (Kane 2000, 23), a phenomenological act that simultaneously reveals the self and opens toward the world. Merleau-Ponty characterises this openness or dynamic as a mystical intertwining, where body and perception merge into a single phenomenological fabric. His meditation on chromatic experience illustrates this vividly:

> As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it "thinks itself within me," I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue. (1962, 249)

This passage epitomises the chiasmic dialogue he calls the *flesh*: perception is not a subject–object encounter but a reversible exchange where the sky's blueness "thinks itself within me" (249). To see is to be visible; to touch is to be touched. The gaze becomes immersion – a surrender that erases boundaries between seer/seen, revealing perception as the very process through which body and world co-emerge. In Kane's play, psychosis literalises this intertwining: the speaker's hallucinations are hyper-embodied reconstructions, where the flesh of the world and the flesh of the body ceaselessly reconfigure one another.

In Kane's work, reversibility extends not only between the body and the world but within the body itself – organs become both subjects and objects of perception. The speaker literalises this reversibility – their body is at once perceiving and perceived by their own vision, as in "[h]ere I am and there is my body" (Kane 2000, 21). The body is both 'seen' and 'seeing'; moreover, the *I* that observes is the same *I* that is observed,

each aspect rendered alien to the other through the very act of perception. Crucially, this alienation does not signify dissolution; both the observing and observed aspects remain undeniably of the same flesh, revealing the body's fundamental paradox – it is at once intimately familiar and profoundly foreign. Through this dynamic, the body becomes simultaneously alien and hyper-self-aware through intensified looking. Additionally, Kane's deliberate erasure of speaker identity – the unassigned shifts between *I*, *you*, *we*, and *she* – performs Merleau-Ponty's chiasm at the linguistic level. This pronominal instability is an embodied reversibility made textual, where the speaking body exists simultaneously as perceiver (*I* who sees/hears), perceived (*you* addressed as object) and collective *flesh* (*we* as shared embodiment).

Psychosis in Kane's work exposes the way the body and world co-constitute one another through vision and the ceaseless exchange of being-in-the-world. Her theatre becomes a phenomenological experiment, revealing what normative perception obscures: that to exist as a body is to be perpetually undone and remade in the act of perception itself. As Merleau-Ponty asserts in his essay, "Eye and Mind," "vision is attached to movement" (1964, 162) – a claim Kane's visceral imagery literalises, depicting bodies that dissolve and re-cohere within their environments. For instance, the recurring lines "[h]atch opens/Stark light/and Nothing/Nothing/see Nothing/What am I like?" (Kane 2000, 28) frame the body as an unstable interplay of movement and vision. The speaker in *4.48 Psychosis* experiences their body as a mobile entity – one that moves within the world yet exists in a state of flux. The phrase "hatch opens" (28) signifies both action and emergence, suggesting a perpetual recreation of being. Appearing four times in the play, this refrain marks moments of transition, signalling rebirth or rupture for the speaker. Here, Kane reveals the body as something called into being through motion. It mirrors Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body, as the nexus of vision and movement, engages with the world through looking and motion. In "Eye and Mind" (1964; "L'Œil et l'esprit," 1961), Merleau-Ponty asserts this interdependence: "[t]he visible world and the world of my motor projects are both total parts of the same Being" (162). For him, the body and its movements are the primary agents of perceptual experience, anchoring the subject in the world. Crucially, movement depends on the body – it unfolds through the body, which in turn shapes perception. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the body as a "mobile object" can "interpret perceptual appearance and construct the object as it truly is" (1962, 236). Thus, movement, body, and world are inextricably linked in the construction of meaning.

Kane's speaker exists in a liminal state of becoming. The "hatch opens" (Kane 2000, 28) motif evokes both birth and disintegration, exposing the body's dependence on movement and spatial negotiation. Yet this instability is fraught with violence. In one passage, the speaker describes a clinical space where their medicated bodies

feel alien: "the child of negation/out of one torture chamber into another/a vile succession of errors without remission/every step of the way I've fallen" (28). The hospital becomes another "torture chamber" (28), a site where the body is rendered strange, even monstrous, by external forces.

This disintegration of bodily autonomy escalates as the speaker's identity dissolves into collective historical trauma. They occupy multiple spaces and temporalities, their visions merging with global atrocities, as in: "I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs, I fucked small children while they begged for mercy, the killing fields are mine, everyone left the party because of me" (Kane 2000, 19). The body, here, is no longer a discrete entity or confined to individual experience, but expands into a vessel of shared violence – a post-apocalyptic world where the *I* collapses into a *we*. The speaker's flesh becomes collective flesh, absorbing the weight of historical horrors. Kane's work, then, does not merely depict psychosis but enacts it, destabilising the boundaries between body and world, self and history, perception and reality.

Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* dismantles the illusion of a stable self, revealing existence as a chiasmic entanglement, where body and world, vision and movement, collapse into a single, reversible *flesh*. The psychotic body does not retreat from reality but rewrites it, becoming both the site and the architect of its own hyper-embodied truth. In this phenomenological reading, despair transforms into a defiant act of perception: to hallucinate is not to lose the world, but to remake it, pulse by pulse, in the body's unending dialogue with itself.

3 The Reversibility Theory: Waltz through the Looking-*Flesh*

While *4.48 Psychosis* explores the embodied reciprocity between body and world, Waltz's *Körper* interrogates the body's relationship to the Other. This section argues that *Körper* materialises Merleau-Ponty's concept of *flesh*: the chiasmic intertwining of self and world. Drawing on his theory of reversibility, where vision, touch, and movement collapse the subject–object divide, Waltz stages embodiment as a dialectical process: perception and existence co-constituted through the mutual exchange between bodies. Having established vision and movement as the foundational axes of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology where seeing is always already a form of bodily participation, this framework raises an important question: if perception binds the corporeal self and the world, how does it mediate the encounter with the Other? Waltz explores this question most notably in *Körper.* In a seminal moment, a nude female and male dancer confront each other, separated only by a transparent pane

of glass (2000, 55:00–30). By analysing Waltz's choreographic use of the glass pane as a performative chiasm, the study demonstrates how artistic practice materialises Merleau-Ponty's claim that the body is neither purely subject nor object, but a reversible *flesh* that simultaneously sees and is seen. The glass, functioning as both barrier and conduit, stages the paradox of intersubjectivity. In dismantling the illusion of autonomous selfhood, reversibility theory ultimately proposes that to perceive is always already to be perceived, and to encounter the Other is to recognise oneself as Other-to-the-Other.

This striking composition, the glass pane segment, creates three simultaneous layers of visibility. First, the literal exposure: the glass's transparency forces complete visual access to both bodies, eliminating any possibility of concealment and creating a raw confrontation with physical vulnerability. Second, the gaze as active connection: the dancers maintain direct eye contact, transforming looking from passive observation into reciprocal engagement. Their locked gaze becomes the primary medium of connection despite physical separation. Third, the glass as phenomenological threshold: the transparent barrier serves as both divider and unifier – materially separating the bodies while enabling their visual intertwining. The dancers' mutual gaze creates intersubjective validation, for this perceptual exchange reveals how presence emerges through being seen, balancing vulnerability with social connection. The sequence reveals perception's active role in shaping intersubjective understanding. Through this minimalist configuration – naked bodies, glass, and sustained eye contact – Waltz demonstrates how performance can articulate the fundamental dynamics of perception: that sight is never neutral, that presence is co-constituted through visibility, and that human connection persists even across divides.

This performative interplay of seeing and being seen is best understood through Merleau-Ponty's concept of the glance-vision, which reframes sight as embodied movement rather than passive observation. Central to his philosophy is the body as the "intertwining of vision and movement" (1964, 162). This means "the gaze is merely a modality of its [the body's] movement" (1962, 78) which reveals how perception actively constructs reality through kinetic engagement. This is why the glance requires bodily movement to render the invisible visible, making the body both perceiver and gateway to the world. Merleau-Ponty captures this body's dual role perfectly, noting that while "[v]isible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world," it is precisely "because it moves itself and sees" that it actively shapes its reality and "holds things in a circle around itself" (1964, 163).

This theoretical framework provides the key to analysing how the dancers in Waltz's work negotiate visibility and connection, not as static observers, but as moving, perceiving subjects actively inscribing themselves into a shared space. Waltz materialises this philosophy, choreographing the very process through which, as Merleau-Ponty

argues, the moving subject inscribes itself into the world and becomes visible to others. The body comes to know the Other through its moving towards it, since "vision is attached to movement" (1964, 162). In this respect, the body moves only towards what it looks at, as shown in Waltz's *Körper*, where the two dancers' approach to each other is linked to their sight. Therefore, vision triggers many questions regarding the existence of the Other. Whereas, finding answers and obtaining knowledge are reached through the body, since it is a mobile thing that moves and opens itself towards the Other, "the vision is the question, and the movement is the answer" (Di Fazio 2015, 151). Respectively, in *Körper* the act of looking opens the two dancers towards speculating a totally different body's formulation and conception from their own bodies. Hence, vision draws questions towards exposing the enigma of the self–body system and of the Other's body. This exploration is evident in how the two dancers examine each other's bodies with scrutinizing gazes, reflecting their quest to uncover the essence of the anonymous Other.

Moreover, the body through its movement initiates intermingling reflections of its image on both the female dancer's face and the male dancer's face, which is exposed in the transparent glass situated between them. This fusion and hybridity between these two images makes it impossible to determine which one is looking at the other and which one is the Other. "A woman and a man face each other, separated only by a pane of glass that reflects something our eyes have trouble focusing on; sometimes we see the man, sometimes the woman, and sometimes a hybrid of both" (Werner 2002). This fusion shows that the two dancers mirror each other's bodies to reveal that their body is similar and identical to all people. By this, the body of the woman and that of the man form one unit and are thus a completion of one system. The *lived body*[10] is open, reflexive and interactive, it shifts perspectives between itself and the Other. The two performers exchange the role between either (looking) or (looked at). Gradually, the body is exposed as a (perceiver) and a (perceived) at the same time. As Merleau-Ponty states, "[t]he enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen" (1964, 162). Significantly, the body as a mobile thing is an intertwining between the self and the Other. The body reflects the man's face on the woman's and vice versa, demonstrating that the body possesses a quality of reversibility. On this basis, I will be drawing on Merleau-Ponty's theory of reversibility and alterity

[10] The terms the *lived body* or *the phenomenal body* have the same meaning, which is the body as it experiences the world from within, and they are used alternatively by Merleau-Ponty as he certainly focuses on the subjective and embodied way in living the experience. Merleau-Ponty's *lived body* has both subjective and objective presence and they both overlap at certain occasions. Sometimes the body is viewed regarding its physical appearance as *a body among other bodies*, and sometimes it is lived subjectively, from the inside, with no regard to its objective presence, "I am not in front of my body, I am in it or rather I am it" (1962, 173).

for the purpose of explaining the enigma of the body in its relation to the self and to the Other in this scene.

Merleau-Ponty's reversibility theory emerges from the vision–movement system, where perception operates through intersubjective exchange. This framework positions the Other not as separate but as understood "by analogy with my own" existence (1962, 406). In this dynamic, the perceiver and perceived become reciprocal; the Other functions as an extension of myself, forming what Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* calls the *we-subject*. This fundamental reversibility dissolves traditional subject–object distinctions, creating an intersubjective continuum where self and Other co-constitute one another through embodied perception. Merleau-Ponty's model of intersubjectivity is founded on this principle of internal alterity, arguing that "because I can always transcend myself, be another for myself, or experience Otherness within myself, I can be open to the Otherness of another person" (Ware 509). This foundational capacity for self-transcendence is precisely what is illustrated by the reflection of the woman's face on the man's, demonstrating how her body escapes its own boundaries. The reflection of the woman's face on the man's shows that the woman's body transcends itself to be located in the man's, while the man's body, in return, transcends itself to emerge in the woman's body. This openness allows for the alterity of the Other to coordinate with the self. Merleau-Ponty explains the reversibility or intersubjective theory through a simple example of one hand touching another's:

> When I touch my right hand with my left, my right hand, as an object, has the strange property of being able to feel too. We have just seen that the two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and touching to each other. When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of 'touching' and being 'touched'. What was meant by talking about 'double sensations' is that, in passing from one role to the other, I can identify the hand touched as the same one which will in a moment be touching. In other words, in this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the integument or incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile. (1962, 106)

This reversibility discards the pure and radical subjectivity possessed in either the tangibility of the body or the touching. This is because it is impossible for a person to touch somebody without being touched in return, which reveals that the body is both a subject and object at the same time. Based on this, reversibility defines the relationship between one dichotomy and another as the Other is not merely an object, but it is of the same substance of the body. Dan Zahavi, accordingly, states, "I can only encounter the Other if I am beyond myself from the very beginning; thus, I can only experience the Other if I am already a possible Other in relation to

myself, and could always appear to myself as Other" (qtd. in Ware 509). Moreover, Levinas remarks, "the I–You relation […would be] transcended in the relation of the subject to the Other, who would be much more than a you, apparently. The Other would be alterity itself, and an unattainable alterity" (1999, 100). In this case, it shows that the scene of the female dancer and the male dancer is an example of blurring the boundaries between the non-subjective/objective split and between the self and the Other, and the body and the other's body.

The pane of glass, positioned between the two dancers, functions as a reflexive surface which reveals the reversal roles of both performers. Significantly, the glass embodies the chiasm, representing the intertwining of self and Other. While it resembles a mirror in its reflective capacity, Merleau-Ponty clarifies that a mirror's reflexivity arises only through the presence of a visible observer: "[t]he mirror appears because I am seeing–visible [*voyant–visible*], because there is a reflexivity of the sensible; the mirror translates and reproduces that reflexivity" (1964, 168). Thus, the glass challenges the false dichotomy between the self and the Other, blurring the distinctions that typically separate them. Rather than acting solely as a reflective surface, the glass operates as a transparent medium through which the self and Other can engage directly, revealing their interdependence. In this way, the performance enacts Merleau-Ponty's concept of perception as inherently relational, where self and Other are intertwined rather than strictly separated. Merleau-Ponty remarks:

> The mirror's ghost lies outside my body, and by the same token my own body's "invisibility" can invest the other bodies I see. Hence my body can assume segments derived from the body of another, just as my substance passes into them; man is mirror for man. The mirror itself is the instrument of a universal magic that changes things into a spectacle, spectacles into things, myself into another, and another into myself. (1964, 168)

Based on this, the mirror works as a gap and a reflexive surface of the self–Other relationship which gradually reveals the enigma of the body as it is a subject and an object at the same time. Moreover, the mirror manifests two levels of the body's existence, starting by projecting it as a physicality and moving towards revealing it as a lived one: "the Other is first of all perceived as a body, but this body is not the objective body or the body of biology that consists of bones, cells and flesh, but it is the lived body, the body that moves and sees" (Ware 507). Merleau-Ponty concludes in *Phenomenology of Perception* that my body and the Other's body are both subject and object simultaneously characterised by reversibility; "[b]etween this phenomenal body of mine and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system" (1962, 410). The mirror thus epitomises Merleau-Ponty's reversible body: a liminal space where physical reflection gives way to lived intersubjectivity. In framing the Other as

both object and completion of the self, it proves that perception is never solitary – it is a dialogue where seeing and being seen collapse into one *flesh*.

Waltz's choreography materialises perception's fundamental paradox; the body is never merely subject or object, but always both, caught in an endless exchange where touching and being touched, seeing and being seen, are one intertwined movement. Dance transcends representation, it does not depict reversibility but becomes it, proving that to move, to perceive, is always already to be undone and remade in the presence of the Other.

4 The *Ecstatic Body* in Kane and Waltz

"The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself."
(Merleau-Ponty 1962, 474)

The *ecstatic body* – as defined by Drew Leder through Heidegger's *ek-stasis* – describes a mode of embodiment where the body vanishes from explicit awareness to merge with the world. This paradoxical state, in which absence enables a deeper spatial and perceptual immersion, is dramatised in Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* and Waltz's *noBody*, where fragmented and disappearing bodies challenge the boundaries between self and environment. In this way, ecstatic absence is revealed as a condition of transcendent embodiment.

Similarly to Merleau-Ponty, Leder believes that "it is through the bodily surface that I first engage with the world. Only because my eyes and ears lie on the surface of my body are they capable of disclosing the events taking place around me" (1990, 11). However, the latter radicalises this by examining the body's paradoxical disappearance in acts of absorption. From that perspective, the body is the object of perception, yet the body, conversely, changes to be the structure of appearance. Thus, it recedes from awareness precisely when it is most functionally engaged. Therefore, this process is not a negation of embodiment but its ecstatic culmination: a Heideggerian *standing-outside-oneself* (*ek-stasis*) that reveals the *lived body*'s capacity for self-transcendence. Leder develops his notion of the *absent body* into that of the *ecstatic body*, clarifying:

> The lived body, as ecstatic in nature, is that which is away from itself. Yet this absence is not equivalent to a simple void, a mere lack of being. The notion of being is after all present in the very word absence. The body could not be away, stand outside, unless it had a being and stance to being with. It is thus never fully eradicated from the experiential world. Otherwise I would not even know I had a body. (22)

Leder defines the meaning of absence by returning to its Latin root, "the word *absence* comes from the Latin *esse*, or *being*, and *ab*, meaning *away*. An absence is the being-away of something" (22). In this mode, the body disappears from attention and become invisible and delves into the background, causing a bodily self-effacement, which consequently causes the appearance of the natural world. Based on this, the body is defined by its dynamic oscillation between presence and absence. These two bodily modes, presence and absence, are fleshed out from the body's relationship to the environment, as "the body could not be away, stand outside, unless it had a being and stance to begin with" (22). Bodily absence can be understood as a functional withdrawal: when the body–mind unity is absorbed in an activity, the body recedes from thematic awareness, becoming absent precisely because it is actively participating in the world. Conversely, the body returns to presence when made an object of conscious reflection, like focusing on one's breath during meditation. Therefore, the body's absence is not a lack but a mode of ecological attunement – a necessary vanishing that enables immersive experience while always retaining latent capacity for reappearance. The body is not a thematic object, and it does not think of its motion or location in space anymore, but it is spatially an extended entity.

This functional disappearance is vividly illustrated in the middle of an action, whether as complicated as driving a car or as simple as turning on a light switch. In such moments, the body is not the object of attention but the transparent medium of action. For example, the hand flipping a switch becomes experientially transparent; consciousness is focused on the goal (illuminating the room), not on the bodily mechanics required to achieve it, this is why Leder terms it the *absent body*. The healthy body enacts a flight from itself, as the subject becomes wholly caught up in the world of engagement. As Leder observes, synthesizing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology: "[w]e can understand neither the origin, orientation, nor texture of the perceptual field without reference to the absent presence of the perceiving body" (1990, 13). In this framework, bodily absence is the very condition that enables a deeper engagement with the world.

This framework of bodily disappearance and ecstatic absence provides a powerful lens for analysing the corporeal imagery in Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. The play makes this dissolution of the self-world boundary tangible:

> A consolidated consciousness resides in a darkened banqueting hall near the ceiling of a mind whose floor shifts as ten thousand cockroaches when a shaft of light enters as all thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellent as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no one ever utters. (Kane 2000, 3)

Here, the speaker's body merges with the environment where spatial dimensions become extensions of corporeal experience, as seen in Kane's physicalised metaphors "ceiling of a mind" and "floor shifts" (3). The external world is no longer separate but is instead rendered as bodily space. This is not mere metaphor but a phenomenological collapse. In this interplay, space becomes physicalised, while the body extends itself spatially, blurring the boundaries between the two. According to Liu Shengli:

> The process of communication between body and world is simultaneously that of mutual constitution between body and space […]. It is not 'a body in space,' but a body 'inhabits space' or 'of space' they act as the necessary condition of constitution for each other and become correlated in this constitution. (2009, 136)

In this state, the body recedes into the background to allow the visual field to emerge. Leder terms this phenomenon *background disappearance*, which he defines as the process whereby "[b]odily regions can disappear because they are not the focal origin of our sensorimotor engagements but are backgrounded in the corporeal gestalt: that is they are for the moment relegated to a supportive role, involved in irrelevant movement, or simply put out of play" (1990, 26). As the body transcends its materiality, it becomes weightless, almost floating – rendering itself transparent, a medium through which everything comes into being. This is echoed in the lines, "watch me vanish, watch me" (Kane 2000, 34). The act of "vanishing" here is a transformation – a theme Kane herself articulates when defining madness as "a split between one's consciousness and one's physical being" (qtd. in Saunders 2002, 113). This schism between self and body recurs throughout the text, most strikingly in the lines, "here I am, and there is my body" (Kane 2000, 31). The speaker's body, no longer felt as an integrated part of their being, becomes an alien object – something observed at a distance rather than inhabited. Yet this detachment does not erase bodily existence entirely; rather, it signals a profound reconfiguration of embodiment itself.

The body transforms into a liminal space, a threshold where the boundaries between self and world dissolve. In *4.48 Psychosis*, this ontological instability surfaces in the speaker's desperate questioning, "where do I start? Where do I stop?" (Kane 2000, 18). The lines between internal and external, subject and object, blur until even basic distinctions collapse. Kane's personal notes underscore this intentional disintegration of boundaries: "if I was psychotic I would literally not know the difference between myself, this table, and Dan" (qtd. in Saunders 2002, 112). Here, the body ceases to operate as a container for identity and instead becomes a site of psychotic entanglement – where the self emerges into the world, and the world invades the self. Therefore, the speaker's body in Kane's text does not vanish but dissolves into the world, challenging the very distinction between inner and outer.

The play's formal experimentation performs the very bodily disappearance it describes. Kane's fragmented language enacts this vanishing; for instance, the imperative "watch me vanish" (Kane 2000, 34) is scattered across the page, its words broken into separate lines and isolated by negative space. In effect, this visual dispersal performs the speaker's corporeal dissolution. This culminates in the ultimate textual vanishing: a blank page that paradoxically affirms emergence rather than annihilation. As Leder observes through Merleau-Ponty: "to be situated within a certain point of view necessarily involves not seeing that point of view" (qtd. in Leder 1990, 12). This explains the speaker's ontological paradox – the body cannot appear to itself as an object precisely because it is the condition for appearing. Thus, *4.48 Psychosis* does not depict a mere loss of body but a paradoxical hyper-embodiment – where the self, unmoored from fixed boundaries, merges with the world in a fluid, pre-reflective state. The play's true tension lies not in the absence of the body but in its unbounded presence, where vanishing becomes a mode of becoming.

Unlike *4.48 Psychosis*, where the body–world relationship unfolds through language, Waltz's *noBody* articulates this dynamic through movement. At the heart of this articulation is her use of a white blanket, which billows into a large, cloud-like structure on stage (Waltz [2002] 2014, 1:14:23–22:32). This blanket divides the space into two distinct dimensions. First, there is the internal sphere, where the dancers are enveloped within the blanket, their bodies invisible to the audience except for fleeting shadows. In contrast, the external dimension consists of the empty stage, where the only visible element is the cloud itself – its shifting surface offering glimpses of the dancers' movements inside. Reflecting on the existential themes in Waltz's work, composer Hans Peter Kuhn observes:

> The performance addresses the absence of the body, and it confronts the viewer with feelings aroused by the realisation of being mortal. What does being human mean beyond having a body? Which part of us is immortal? In *noBody*, the choreographer, accompanied by dancers, faces the challenge of rendering the non-physical visible through the physical body itself. (2000)

These existential tensions between being and non-being find their choreographic expression through the central device, the cloud. The cloud functions as a transcendental gate, blurring the line between inside and outside, presence and absence. The dancers' bodies appear and disappear, depending on their movement and the audience's perspective. When inside, they dissolve into ghostly, weightless forms, as if freed from physical limits. Yet when they emerge, their bodies regain solidity, becoming fully visible and tangible.

This constant oscillation between disappearance and appearance challenges rigid notions of presence and absence. Instead, the body occupies a liminal state – merging with its environment at one moment, then asserting itself in the material world the

next. This mirrors Leder's notion of the *ecstatic body* – where the body steps out of itself through perceptual immersion. In Waltz's work, ecstasy is not escape but radical entanglement: the dancers' bodies vanish only to re-emerge as extensions of the cloud's fabric, their agency distributed across material and ethereal realms. Waltz "magically, renders the non-physical visible through the physical body itself" (Arthaus Musik), transforming the cloud into a curtain that alternately conceals and reveals, turning the dancers into spirits one moment and human beings the next. The performance creates a space where the line between living and non-living dissolves. David Gere captures this ambiguity perfectly:

> Here we are on the other side of life, sensing the life inside the so-called inanimate. Waltz leaves us with a delicious ambiguity: the floating dancer could represent someone who has again found levity after a long period of being weighted down by grief. Alternatively, she could herself be the phantom, freed from terrestrial gravity and suffering. (qtd. in Shaw 2015, 8)

This ethereal quality extends to the dancers' very presence—as Caitlin Sidney observes, "in the piece we get the feeling of another world behind the dancers like they are not present in this particular world, like they are connected with the spiritual world" (2002). This duality is encapsulated in the title *noBody* – a paradox that rejects literal disembodiment to instead explore how the body immerses itself in the world. Self-awareness fades as the body opens outward; transcendence here is not an escape from the body but a throwing of the corporeal self into the world. The 'I' no longer resides within the body but emerges through its interaction with the world. It is a dialectical dance where the body oscillates between ecstasy and absence. In its flight toward the world, the body's disappearance does not signal negation but a deeper form of embodiment: a merging with the very fabric of perception. Thus, the world reveals itself to the body, just as the body opens itself to the world through sight. This reciprocity positions the body as a bridge, fluidly transitioning between physical and metaphysical realms.

The performance fundamentally challenges static modes of perception. It shows that phenomena are not static images but continuous processes of becoming. Ultimately, Waltz reflects on the significance of the corporeal body within her performance, emphasising that the body is not a static entity; rather, it is engaged in a continuous dialogue with its environment. In short, Kane and Waltz dismantle the illusion of bodily autonomy, showing how disappearance – whether through psychotic fragmentation or choreographic dissolution – becomes an ecstatic mode of embodiment. Their works do not stage absence, but the body's infinite capacity for reconfiguration within the perceptual field.

5 Conclusion

This paper highlights the profound connection between vision and movement as explored by Sarah Kane and Sasha Waltz, each offering unique and complementary insights into the phenomenological body. Kane's exploration of psychosis presents a compelling framework for examining the intricacies of embodied existence within the world. Conversely, in Waltz's choreographic cycles, the dynamic relationship between the corporeal self and the Other is revealed, allowing for a deeper understanding of the intersubjective nature of corporeal existence. Moreover, the paper tackles two main ideas in the aforementioned works: the idea of the body's absence and the idea of the ecstatic floating body, both of which are explored through Drew Leder's theory. Weaving together these perspectives fosters a richer understanding of the *lived body* while embracing the transformative potential of corporeal awareness in both art and life. Ultimately, the works of Kane and Waltz serve as powerful reminders of the intricate dance between mind, body, and world, inspiring us to engage more deeply with the essence of what it means to be human. This exploration, in turn, questions the very limits of physical being, challenging conventional understandings of boundaries and the ways in which individuals engage with their surroundings.

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Spectres of Reason: Promethean Horrors of Modernity in David Ashford's *A Book of Monsters*

A Book of Monsters: Promethean Horror in Modern Literature and Culture. By David Ashford. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024. Pp. 236. ISBN 9781526170866.

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David Ashford is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at the University of Groningen, with previous positions at City, University of London, and the University of Surrey. Earning his doctorate from the University of Cambridge, he has pursued research in various fields, including modernism, postmodernism, posthumanism, imperialism, cultural geography, and poetics. His extensive publication record includes three monographs and five poetry books, with contributions to Liverpool University Press, Bloomsbury, and Philip Tew's Milletae Press, as well as various academic journals. For over a decade, he has been the General Editor of the poetry press Contraband Books. Ashford's third monograph, *A Book of Monsters: Promethean Horror in Modern Literature and Culture*, is a collection of essays compiled from his previously published work and also expanding on it. It explores the cultural history of Promethean themes in the twentieth century across multiple fields and genres, including Gothic, fantasy, and science fiction literature and cinema, as well as linguistics, architecture, economics, and more. The central aim of the book is to investigate how postmodern writers have reimagined modernism's opposition to neo-gothic irrationality as a source of uncanny horror, contributing to an alternative Gothic tradition (11).

The opening chapter, "The Modern Prometheus: A Brief Introduction to the Horror of Enlightenment," begins by clarifying Victor Frankenstein's ambition, which is not to conquer death but to uncover "the cause of generation and life" (2). Ashford emphasises Frankenstein's early influences, quoting Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus, and identifies the monster as a homunculus, linking the novel to a Renaissance literary tradition he terms "Promethean horror: cautionary tales in which promises of vastly increased power over natural limits are countervailed by fears about being overwhelmed by the products of our own ingenuity" (8). Drawing on Kevin LaGrandeur's work,[1]

[1] Kevin LaGrandeur, *Androids and Intelligent Networks in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Artificial Slaves* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

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Ashford connects this tradition to early representations of humanoid servants in *The Iliad* and Aristotle's *Politics*, as well as to modern science fiction, including Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950), and Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, dir. Stanley Kubrick). He argues that the resurgence of Promethean motifs in nineteenth-century Gothic horror reflects a Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. *Frankenstein*, in this light, becomes Britain's contribution to a Gothic tradition that fears not the medieval past, but the perils of modernity and reason itself.

In the next chapter, "Architects of the Occult: London's Alternative 'Gothic' Tradition," Ashford expands on Guy Debord's concept of psycho-geography, identifying what he calls "paranoid psycho-geographical fantasies" in a range of twentieth-century fiction he categorises as anti-gothic, such as Iain Sinclair's poems, novels by Peter Ackroyd, essays by Stewart Home, and graphic novels by Alan Moore. He argues that while Hawksmoor's churches in Ackroyd's eponymous novel (1985) reflect neo-classical aspects of the Enlightenment; they are, in fact, bricolages that draw on elements from the ancient world, blending the rational and the occult, challenging the perception that the era is dominated by reason. Though fundamentally unlike Gothic architecture, these churches are reimagined within Gothic narratives, revealing a cultural tension between rationality and the uncanny. Ashford further examines this dynamic through the work of Christopher Wren and the reconstruction of London after the Great Fire. The chapter concludes by highlighting a shift in late twentieth-century English Gothic fiction, which increasingly engages with conspiratorial sources of uncanny supernatural terror, such as the Freemasons and the Illuminati, which were prominent in Germanic Gothic literature. This shift coincides with the emergence of postmodernist architecture, in which baroque elements and a deliberate embrace of inauthenticity expose deeper anxieties about form and function.

The chapter "Gorillas in the House of Light: Inter-war Modernism as Crisis Management at London Zoo" focuses on Berthold Lubetkin's Gorilla House at London Zoo as a critique of the Cartesian philosophy underlying modernist architecture. Ashford situates the building within what Jacques Derrida identified as a broader "crisis in humanism" (47). He elaborates on this crisis through depictions of gorillas in literature and film, such as *King Kong* (1933, dir. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack) and *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932, dir. Robert Florey), which challenge the Cartesian divide between human and animal that is reflected in the Gorilla House, blurring the line between man and beast. Ashford further explores this drive to assert control over blurred boundaries in Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (1917–1969), where in his reading the violent subjugation and display of Hanno's gorillas symbolise modernist attempts to impose order, reflecting broader themes of imperialism, knowledge, and power. The chapter proposes that modernism may be best understood as a synthetic

phase in a larger historical dialectic, attempting to merge the opposing intellectual frameworks of Marxist materialism and Freudian psychoanalysis.

In chapter four, "Orc-Talk: Spectres of Marx in Tolkien's Middle Earth," Ashford investigates Tolkien's role in the culture war between "two estranged philosophies that defined the era of High Modernism" (11). Helen Macfarlane's peculiar translation of the *Communist Manifesto*'s (1950) "spectre" as "hobgoblin" frames the chapter, with its broader cultural and philosophical implications. An argument is laid out that, while Tolkien's Orcs and their Black Speech might resist Marxist class allegory, through their philological and anthropological roots, they echo Marx's commodity fetish and Derrida's spectre, offering a lens to reinterpret the haunting forces of capital in modernity. A subchapter is dedicated to the conlang Black Speech, exploring its design to reflect evil and linguistic corruption, drawing on languages such as Hurrian and possibly influenced by the politically charged Soviet linguistics theories of the time, namely Nikolai Yakovlevich Marr's New Linguistic Doctrine and Josef Stalin's paper "Marxism and Linguistics" (1950). The chapter closes by returning to Macfarlane's hobgoblin as a symbol of peasant resistance and elite fear, tying together Marx's commodity fetish, Orcish art, and the Tlingit shame totem as satirical representations of despised powers.

The fifth chapter, "Pandora's Box: The Insidious Appeal of the Brutalist Dystopia," presents the post-war period from 1950 to 1975 as an overlooked "golden age" of modernist innovation (112). Ashford outlines four phases of postmodern critique of Brutalism and uses J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975) to explore Brutalism's cultural and psychological effects rooted in the uncanny and societal anxieties. Drawing on Herbert Read's phrase "the geometry of fear," he interprets the Dalek City from the novelised adaptation of *Doctor Who* (1964) as a symbol of public unease, fascination, and discomfort with late modernist architecture (121). A case study is conducted on the origins, design, purpose, and later critique of "the house of the mad," otherwise known as Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille (127). Ashford suggests that much of what is labelled postmodernism is deeply rooted in late modernist thought and proposes that the term postmodernism be more narrowly reserved for theory and practice shaped by the linguistic turn of the 1970s. He explores how Huxley's and Orwell's literary critiques reflect concerns about the Keynesian economic foundations of the Golden Age of Capitalism, later derided as voodoo economics by neoliberal critics, who saw it as wasteful and overly interventionist. The chapter concludes with a personal meditation on the rise and fall of postwar modernist buildings, drawing on Colm McCarthy's film adaptation (2016) of M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014), as it relates to social decay, generational change, and hope.

In "The Mechanical Turk: Enduring Misapprehensions Concerning Artificial Intelligence," Ashford unpacks Walter Benjamin's metaphors of the Angel of History

and the Mechanical Turk's deceptive system of mirrors to reveal how modern, postmodern, and neoliberal ideologies obscure the true workings of history by presenting catastrophe and progress as inevitable, masking the possibility of change in the present. He traces the symbolic and historical evolution of the Mechanical Turk through Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine to artificial intelligence, emphasising how these technologies provoke uncanny anxieties by blurring the line between animate and inanimate. Ashford clarifies common misunderstandings of Alan Turing's Imitation Game, asserting that it tests behavioural imitation rather than cognition or consciousness. The analysis also highlights the Turing Test's broader utility as a general framework for evaluating simulations beyond AI. Ashford critiques the systems that seek to reduce human behaviour to predictable equations through Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy* (1942-1953) and real-world economics, highlighting the tension between agency and determinism, warning about the reliance on computational models. He ends the chapter with a reflection on Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990) and its film adaptation by Steven Spielberg (1993), to critique neoliberalism's overengineered systems, which create seductive illusions of order and chaos in predictive models that limit human agency.

The final chapter, "The Promethean Altar: Prospects of Atonement in Twenty-First-Century Science Fiction," analyses the subversion of the Prometheus myth in Amiri Baraka's play *A Black Mass* (1966), the Earth's sentient rebellion in Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopaedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008), the transformation of Enlightenment materialism and Christian heresy into Promethean horror and Lovecraftian cosmos in Stephen King's the *Revival* (2014), and the connection between Donna Haraway's term the Chthulucene and Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014). His projection through these analyses is that "Promethean horror will continue to retain its purchase for as long as legacies of the Enlightenment remain contested" (200). The book closes with a reflection on the Prometheus myth itself, suggesting that the gift which once uplifted humanity may also lead to its undoing. Thus, Prometheus becomes a symbol not just of rebellion but also responsibility, calling for humility.

David Ashford's *A Book of Monsters* utilises Promethean horror as a lens for understanding modernity's uncanny tensions through a wide array of twentieth-century thought and art. A dense and theory-rich work, it illuminates how Enlightenment rationality breeds monstrous anxieties, challenging modernism's rationalist narrative. Ashford's interdisciplinary approach, spanning linguistics to urban design, offers insightful reinterpretations and challenges to mainstream perspectives on debated issues in modernism and postmodernism, revealing their lasting significance. The chapters on architecture could have benefited from further illustrations to offer additional support for the arguments through visual aids, and a formal conclusion would have helped to synthesise the findings and inspire further

research. Nevertheless, this monograph will appeal to a wide range of scholars, especially those interested in modernist and postmodernist literature and art, as well as researchers of the Gothic. By framing the story of Prometheus as a cautionary plea for responsibility, Ashford illuminates the enduring relevance of the Titan in today's discourse on human ambition and humility in the age of AI.

The Seven Labours of Hercules: Volume Five and the Complete Series of the Hungarian History of English Literature

Az angol irodalom története. 5. kötet. A viktoriánus és a modernista időszak ['History of English Literature. Vol. 5. The Victorian and the Modernist Periods']. Edited by Tamás Bényei, Angelika Reichmann and Nóra Séllei. Editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay. Budapest: Kijárat, 2024. Pp. 760. ISBN 978-615-5160-93-6.

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After the appearance of the first volume in 2020, and with the publication of the fifth volume of the Hungarian History of English Literature in the autumn of 2024, the series has been completed. Just to indicate the sheer scale of the Herculean task the editors and the authors have undertaken: the whole series is comprised of seven volumes (volumes six and seven were published in 2022 and 2023, respectively). Their length varies between 331 and 760 pages, the whole series is almost 3,900 pages altogether, spanning almost 1,500 years, and is the work of nearly fifty contributors, experts on British literature from all around the country's English Departments. This project, which started around 2010, and has recently been closed, after nearly fifteen years, is the most outstanding endeavour of the Hungarian community of scholars dealing with British literature. Students, teachers, researchers, and others participating in academic life have had to wait nearly half a century, since the publication of a one-volume history of English literature in Hungarian in 1972 by Miklós Szenczi, Tibor Szobotka and Anna Katona, to put on their shelves a complete and definitive summary of the history of English literature. The work was hindered by several difficulties, including the passing away of the original editor-in-chief, Géza Kállay, in 2017, after which Tamás Bényei took over the responsibilities of coordinating this gigantic project.

The series, including this volume, is new in several respects. The editors and authors had to make numerous important decisions as to what this new history of English literature should look like (for more on this, see the Foreword, the Introduction at the beginning of the first volume by Tamás Bényei [9–25] and Géza Kállay's study

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at the end of that volume [361–72]).[1] I think the entire series, and the fifth volume in particular, can be best characterised by pointing out what they are not. First of all, they are not intended as a reference book or encyclopaedia-like summary of the most important selected authors and their works. However, as is inevitable, prominent authors are given separate chapters in each volume, including the present book: Charles Dickens, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Lewis Carroll, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, as well as the modernist writers generally treated as canonical (William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence) are discussed in separate chapters of varying length. In spite of the fact that the primary aim of the series was not to set up a new canon, the incredibly rich texts discuss authors, besides the 'great' ones, whom I believe have never even been mentioned in any general Hungarian literary history on English literature: for instance Vera Brittain, Sara Grand, Neil Munro, James Stephens, Charlotte Yonge and Dinah Craik, just to mention a few.

Secondly, the series, consequently, is not oeuvre-focused. Like the rest of the series, volume five does not make an effort to arrange authors in a hierarchic manner, suggesting a canonising gesture of selecting 'major' writers and briefly mentioning the 'minor' masters, as it is seen from the highlighted writers above. Pertaining to this, the series is not centred on oeuvres of writers, a traditional but by now highly questionable and limiting approach to literary history writing (the novelty of volume three, for instance, is that it arranges poets between 1640 and 1830 according to 'authorial circles').[2] That the volume is not author-focused is well evidenced by the fact that, for instance, canonical authors such as the Brontë sisters are not given a separate chapter but are treated in various sub-chapters from diverse perspectives, such as in 'The Victorian Novel: Versions of Realism' by Tamás Bényei (56–105), 'Female Authorship in the Victorian Era' (154–64) also by him, and 'The Prose of the World: The Victorian Bildungsroman' (106–16) co-authored by Tamás Bényei and Nóra Séllei, only to mention the most prominent places where the Brontës surface. Conversely, Yeats is scrutinised in two separate chapters: first his dramatic works in a chapter by Csilla Bertha on the Irish Literary Renaissance (518–32) and then his poetry in a subsequent chapter devoted exclusively to that topic by Zsolt Komáromy (533–53). It was also a unique decision to allot two separate short chapters to Joyce, one to *Dubliners* (1914) – the chapter titled 'Poetics of Fiction:

[1] *Az angol irodalom története*, 1. kötet, *A középkor* ['History of English Literature, Vol. 1, The Middle Ages'], edited by Tamás Karáth and Katalin Halácsy, editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay (Budapest: Kijárat, 2020).

[2] *Az angol irodalom története*, 3. és 4. kötet, *Az 1640-es évektől az 1830-as évekig* ['History of English Literature, Vols. 3 and 4, From the 1640s to the 1830s'], 2 vols., edited by Zsolt Komáromy, Bálint Gárdos and Miklós Péti, editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay (Budapest: Kijárat, 2021).

The Shorter Fiction of James Joyce' – and the other to *Ulysses* (1922), both by one of the eminent Joyce scholars and translators, Marianna Gula.

Although it has been pointed out that the volume is not author-centred, after two excellent introductory chapters, one by Angelika Reichmann on the concept of modernism and its literary historical constructions (465–88) and a jointly written chapter by Reichmann and Bényei on the institutions and networks of English modernism (489–517), the middle section of Part III on modernism provides what we could call sketches of modernist authors and works. Besides the above-mentioned ones, a chapter can be found on Eliot by András Kappanyos (554–61), Henry James by Ágnes Pokol-Hayhurst (562–70), Joseph Conrad by Angelika Reichmann (571–76), Ford Madox Ford, Katherine Mansfield and literary impressionism by Tamás Bényei and József Fagyal (587–98), Virginia Woolf (599–609) by Tamás Bényei and Nóra Séllei and D. H. Lawrence (610–5) by Bényei again. The chapters on prose are always introduced by the title 'Poetics of Fiction' and are typically devoted to one or two representative works of these authors. I think it hugely benefits the volume that it has avoided mechanically going through the canonical authors of the period, devoting, let us say, twenty pages to each – the whole section on individual voices under the heading 'Poetics of Fiction' and Yeats's and Eliot's poetry is eighty-two pages out of the entire 203-page third part on modernism.

What the series really focuses on is what the laconically simple title promises: it is a (hi)story of literature. More precisely, it attempts to narrate and arrange the different (micro-)histories that arise from, on the one hand, the significance of a given author or work in the period, the network of the texts of which the given work is part in a specific era, and on the other hand from the ramifications and effects of the work in later epochs. To cite one characteristic example from the present volume, the chapter on the Edwardian novel, authored by Bényei (371–95), starts with the discussion of how the Edwardian period was constructed in popular memory retrospectively and how later authors (for instance L. P. Hartley, Elizabeth Bowen, Rebecca West or Anthony Powell) reflected on this era several decades later. Yet, it also includes references to contemporary authors like Fay Weldon, Sadie Jones or Jane Harris (372) in the same respect. It is also important that this sub-chapter offers the reader points of further entries to other sites featuring the authors mentioned here, for example pointing out that Hartley will resurface in a chapter on the country house novel and Powell in a section on the *roman-fleuve*, both in volume six, or that the reader might want to jump back to volumes one and two to read about the genre of the pageant mentioned here in connection with *The Forsyte Saga* (1906–21) and Vita Sackville-West's *The Edwardians* (1930; 373).

Thus, thirdly, it is apparent what this volume and the series is not intended to be a linear and monolithic story of literature. It is linear in the sense of its chronological

arrangement, since this project is, regardless of its many novelties, traditional in keeping the basic idea of a 'story,' i.e. it unfolds in time, meaning going 'forward.' However, it was a fundamental concept behind the work that it rejects selecting one story line (not to mention the concept of 'development,' having been overridden a long time ago), at the expense of others deemed less important. Thus, somewhat similarly to George Eliot's polyphonic novels, the volume strives to make the reader feel the complexity and interconnectedness of a given era. Besides, it does not suggest or expect linear reading. The reader is invited to jump back and forth between chapters and even volumes. The boxes inserted into the text serve this purpose, as if they functioned as hyperlinks, and the reader has to train themselves to master a different kind of reading strategy than they were used to, often stopping during the journey to select between paths that these junctions offer.

By saying that the volume and the series are not monolithic, I mean that there must have been hardly any underlying expectation towards the authors as to value judgment or tone. This volume, like the others, is a wonderfully heterogeneous, yet unified, piece, with the distinct voices and approaches of sixteen different authors. There is one voice, however, that dominates the volume, especially in the part on Victorian literature, namely that of the editor-in-chief, Tamás Bényei. Out of the forty-three chapters of volume five, he either authored or co-authored twenty-five, nearly sixty percent (and that ratio is exactly the same in the later volumes, the sixth and the seventh, out of whose sixty-three chapters he wrote thirty-eight).

Furthermore, the claim that the series and the volume is not monolithic is also justified by the fact that it is not 'elitist' in any manner. This is manifested in at least two ways. It does not only target the professionals of the academia, hence the texts are moderately theoretic and consumable for the average reader, as well. Secondly, there is always an attempt to display the plurality of various gender, national and regional discourses, genres and other fields of art, something that would have been unimaginable in the previous, 1972 edition of the history of English literature. There are separate chapters on the material production of Victorian literature (42–55) by Bényei, including publishers, periodicals and illustrations, on the Scottishness of Victorian literature (213–16) by Gertrúd Szamosi, on Lewis Carroll's Alice tales (217–19) by Anna Kérchy, and on Victorian tales and children's literature (220–29) by Bényei, albeit the sections on Edwardian and modernist literature focus on more canonical topics. The volume also highlights the sensitivity to gender roles and national literatures, approaching Victorian literature from a gender perspective, giving separate chapters, for instance, to male and female poets (and a chapter of his own to Gerard Manly Hopkins, by Tekla Mecsnóber) in the Victorian times, or discussing the interrelatedness of gender and modernism (616–44).

Scottish literature is also represented in the volume, as mentioned above, by Getrúd Szamosi's chapter, as well as by Attila Dósa's discussion of Scottish literature at the turn of the century (419–29). Although it would chronologically belong to volume five, the Scottish Renaissance and the Scottish literature of the first half of the twentieth century was given a place in volume six (109–43),[3] dealing with the middle third of the twentieth century, similarly to the chapter on post-war Scottish literature up to the 1970s (538–54), both the works of Dósa. The idea that certain trends overarch artificial categories and chronological boundaries is clearly indicated by the fact that volume seven, which surveys British literature from the 1970s to the present day,[4] also hosts a section on (English-language) Welsh literature from its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century by Angelika Reichmann (350–62). Volume five does not miss out regional varieties of English literature, either, as is indicated by a chapter on regionalism, provincialism and the pastoral in the second half of the nineteenth-century and a chapter on Thomas Hardy's regionalism by Bényei (230–61), as well as a section on Englishness and regionalism at the turn of the century (400–18), also by Bényei. Additionally, three further chapters in the three main sections enlarge the scope of British literature, including the British Empire in the discourse of Victorianism, the Edwardian age and the modernist period (262–84, 336–46, and 645–68, respectively), all three by Bényei.

Finally, the series is also unique in the sense that it does not only concentrate on British literature *per se*, but occasionally offers the reader information on the Hungarian (or even Central European) significance and reception of the literature of the British Isles. To illustrate this, let me quote three passages from the present volume. The chapter on utopia and science fiction at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth by Károly Pintér (359–70) ends with a revealing 'information box' on the Hungarian reception of H. G. Wells, listing his translators between the two world wars, recalling the demise of his literary reputation after 1945 and calling attention to the deficiencies in the translation of his works up to the present day (370). Drawing a parallel between the Austro-Hungarian compromise of 1867 and the partition of Ireland in 1921, as well as the Hungarian reform age literature and the Irish Renaissance, Csilla Bertha points out that culture and national literature played a similar part in taking the responsibility for achieving independence in the two countries (518). Finally, Bényei points out that "the English

[3] *Az angol irodalom története*, 6. kötet, *1930-tól napjainkig, Első rész* ['History of English Literature, Vol. 6, From 1930 to the Present, Part 1'], edited by Tamás Bényei, co-edited by István D. Rácz and Judit Friedrich, editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay (Budapest: Kijárat, 2022).

[4] *Az angol irodalom története*, 7. kötet, *1930-tól napjainkig, Második rész* ['History of English Literature, Vol. 7, From 1930 to the Present. Part 2'], edited by Tamás Bényei, co-edited by István D. Rácz and Judit Friedrich, editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay (Budapest: Kijárat, 2023).

literature of the First World War has no Švejk" (446, my translation), emphasising that no other literature, perhaps with the exception of the Czech, features a comic character in first-world-war literature, alluding to the possible exception of Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That* from 1929.

Perhaps the most difficult decision the editors had to make is how to draw a boundary between the literary periods. As for volumes three and four, it was certainly a unique decision on the editors' part to treat the years 1640 and 1830 as the temporal limits of the two volumes. While in the case of the first two books, the names of periods – namely *the Middle Ages* and *the Early Modern Period* – were readily available, with volumes three and four it was a conscious decision by the editors to go against well-known periodisation, such as the *Baroque Age*, *Neoclassicism*, *Romanticism* and so on. As Komáromy explains in the general introduction of the third volume: "One of the aims of our divergence from traditional divisions was to dislocate the reader from the habit of being oriented according to periods. The reason we are doing this is precisely to avoid presumptions suggested by periods" (13, my translation), namely that periods are homogeneous and imply some kind of historical essentialism.

In volume five, the editors go back to period names (Victorian Age and modernism), partly because these concepts have been used as a matter of course in any history of English literature, partly because they form an interesting juxtaposition, the former being the name of a cultural and historical period, the latter of an artistic trend (see Foreword, 11). The more traditional solution would have been to include Romanticism and the Victorian Age in one volume (practically from 1798 to 1901), thus creating a separate volume for the nineteenth century, and possibly creating three further volumes for the twentieth century and the first two decades of our century. This is precisely what the editors wanted to avoid, emphasising the fact that there are innumerable links connecting the Victorian period, especially the *fin-de-siècle*, with Edwardian literature and the era of modernism. This decision has, in fact, resulted in the longest volume of the series.

It is also a novelty of the volume that it treats the Edwardian Age in Part II separately and in unprecedented detail, though the decade has so far been practically relegated to the status of an invisible 'transition,' with hardly any significant names between the two great periods. Part II also includes two chapters on the fiction of/about the First World War (Bényei) and on war poetry (István D. Rácz), respectively. Out of the 653 pages of the volume (excluding the Foreword, the Works Cited and the Index), 173 pages are devoted to this era. It is also important to emphasise that naturally, the discussion of modernism does not end in this volume but is continued in the next one from the 1930s onward.

All in all, the voice of the Hungarian community of scholars of British literature can be one of awe and gratitude. A truly Herculean task, volume five of the

Hungarian history of English literature – and the whole seven-volume series – is an invaluable contribution to the discipline in Hungary, in Hungarian, creating a new and up-to-date medium to be able to talk about the 1,500-year history of British literature in the future.

Shaw through the Lens of a Contemporary Feminist

The Feminist Shaw: Shaw and the Contemporary Literary Theories of Feminism. By Nishtha Mishra. New York: Routledge India, 2023. Pp. 176. ISBN 978-1-032-16195-2.

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The Feminist Shaw: Shaw and the Contemporary Literary Theories of Feminism examines George Bernard Shaw's legacy as the "forgotten feminist" (Mishra 2023, 3) and offers an engaging reading for both academics and general readers. The book begins by noting second-wave feminist Germaine Greer's dismissal of Shaw as "less irreverent than irrelevant" (qtd. in Mishra 2023, viii). Nishtha Mishra studies diverse perspectives and contemporary theories which go beyond both second-wave feminist criticism and traditional feminist readings. The book explores Shaw's contribution to first-wave feminism and moves beyond Eurocentric or Oriental interpretations, highlighting how his legacy and views resonate with contemporary theories, including Islamic and Black feminism, Marxist theory, postcolonial theory, psychoanalytic criticism, ecofeminism, and LGBTQ+ studies.

The book is divided into two main parts. Part One, titled "History, Philosophy, and Influence," summarises the theoretical and historical foundations of Shavian studies and feminist criticism, containing three chapters: "George Bernard Shaw, the Forgotten Feminist"; "Oppression/Representation of Literary Myths"; and "Decoding Life Force and Recognising 'Shavian Superman.'"

The first chapter provides a theoretical, historical overview of feminism, starting from medieval and Shakespearean depictions of women to the contributions of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, and explains how Ibsen's influence and Shaw's unconventional mother and progressive marriage inspired his Shavian New Woman and political views. The chapter does not display innovative ideas but lays down the volume's theoretical foundations.

The second chapter builds upon these foundations, exploring Shaw's contributions to gender equality, which he promoted through his publications and humanised New Woman characters. This chapter proceeds with the book's idea of reading Shaw from contemporary and non-Eurocentric perspectives. Regarding Shaw's genius, Mishra mentions the progressive application of Freudian understandings in Shaw's plays, including the notions of psychosexual stages, and praises how "minutely" (32) Shaw nurtured the creation of his characters. Furthermore, Mishra argues for

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Shaw's contemporary relevance by paralleling Shaw's evolved female stock characters' nature to cultural symbols presented in his plays, which helped to redefine both the stereotypical Victorian images of femininity and the formerly restrictive mythical images of women as portrayed by male writers. For example, Shaw utilised the archetypal relationship between lunar and menstrual cycles, the virginity myth, and Greek mythology in shaping his female characters (Mishra 2023, 45–53). Mishra also describes how the Shavian stock characters represent different overlapping stages of femininity, shaped by religious practices and beliefs such as Hinduism, Christianity, Celtic lore, and Greek mythology. These myths and religions intrigued Shaw and prompted him to think beyond Eurocentrism. As an example, Mishra mentions *Back to Methuselah* (1921/1922)[1], in which Shaw reinterprets Lilith, the classical temptress, as the peace-seeking Creatrix of Earth, destroyed by aggression and imperialist approaches. In *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934/1935) and *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (1932), Mishra contends, Shaw refutes that spiritual leadership is incompatible with motherhood and marriage and the limited role of black women as slaves or prostitutes. Eventually, Mishra argues that spirituality and connection with mythologies layer Shavian characters.

The above is explored in the third chapter, in which Mishra details how Shaw promoted the notion of *Creative Evolution* over Darwin's Evolution Theory and was affected by the Yogan philosophy of *prana* or *Life Force*, which gave mothers a more active and empowering role. Partly inspired by embodiments of creative energy in Hinduism, like Yogmaya or Shakti, and the God of Jainism (Mishra 2023, 43), Shaw thought that the empowered female role model involved the right and the responsibility for women to choose whom to produce offspring with (Mishra 2023, 59). Instead of finding the perfect mate, the mother of *Superman* must avoid oppression (59). While Mishra refers to Ann Whitefield (*Man and Superman* (1903/1905)) as the perfect mother (61), she deems Vivie Warren (*Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893/1902)), for example, too cold and lacking harmony with nature and peace (69) for the role. Moreover, Higgins (*Pygmalion* (1912/1913)), due to his attachment to his mother, cannot fulfil the roles of the *Superman* or the *Superman*'s father, making Freddy the suitable choice for Eliza (*Pygmalion*) (63; 67).

Shaw's fascination with diverse religions, his critical attitude towards Christianity and 'traditional' values, and his idea of female independence also support his relevance to Marxist theory, ecofeminism, and postcolonial theory, which is apparent in the second main part of Mishra's monograph. Titled "Ideology," it reinterprets Shavian works in the framework of Islamic, Marxist, and Black feminisms, as well as postcolonial theory,

[1] Here and in the rest of the review, the first date in the brackets denotes the date of the first publication, while the second date refers to the date of the first staging.

ecofeminism, and LGBTQ studies. It is divided into four chapters: "The Shavian New Woman: Redefining Femininity," "Shavian Women on Marxist Feminism," "Platonic Sisterhood of Ecofeminist Interests," and "The Third Wave Women Questions: the Concerns of Black Feminism, Postcolonial Feminism, and LGBTQ Theory."

The first chapter of "Ideology" contemplates the origins of the New Woman and discusses her essential characteristics: Shaw considered financial independence, the refusal of subservience, and involvement in public life (Mishra 2023, 82) among these. Shavian New Women, Mishra highlights, are not "confirmed" spinsters, might seek marriage, and are not necessarily educated or affluent; however, they are quick-witted and assertive (80–82).

In the second chapter, Mishra notes Shaw's relevance to Marxist Theory. Marxism, aiming for a classless society, maintains, in accordance with Feminism, that the subordination of oppressed classes (including women) is not biologically determined, but is rooted in economic forces, and serves the interests of capital (men). Marxism wants to destroy the system that is based on underpaid work and elitism, the former of which is illustrated in Shaw's plays in the form of the unpaid work of Eliza (*Pygmalion*), Raina (*Arms and the Man* [1898/1894]), and the eponymous heroine in *Candida* (1898/1894)). Elitism is demonstrated by the Church and authorities when they refuse to recognise Joan in *Saint Joan* (1923/1923) as a soldier (a position reserved for men), and by the commodification of marriage, which parallels prostitution, as well as the poor working conditions in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

The third chapter of "Ideology" reinforces Mishra's argument about Shaw's relevance in the framework of ecofeminism: "Platonic Sisterhood of Ecofeminist Interests" suggests that the bond between Shavian women and nature offers an opportunity for his contemporary reinterpretation. Mishra refers back to the idea that religions and myths recognise values and traits traditionally associated with women and marginalised groups (116–117; 119). She singles out *Back to Methuselah* and *The Black Girl in Her Search for God* and reinterprets the plays through the lens of ecofeminism. Eve and Lilith from *Back to Methuselah* seek to live in harmony with nature and resent aggression. As minor examples, Mishra notes Candida's undervalued feminine traits, Joan's relationship with the land and peace as the leader of the marginalised, oppressed village, Eliza's longing for cultivation (Higgins), then escaping from cultivation, and Vivie's refusal to adopt femininity or anything rural or nature-connected (124–129). In this chapter, while Mishra notes feminists' refusal to read Shaw as a sympathiser or representative of their own ideologies, simply because he was a male dramatist, she argues for recognising Shaw as a "champion" for Victorian women's liberation (122).

The fourth chapter explores Shaw's plays in the frameworks overlooked by second-wave feminists, such as Black, Islamic and Queer feminisms, to display Shaw as a

male writer who broke with traditional patterns about scheming women to promote sisterhood. Mishra mentions Shaw's public stances towards slavery, marginalised groups, and homosexuality, as well as his open-minded attitude towards marriage (149), which surfaced for instance in his public support of a minister involved in a same-sex scandal in 1889, his rebuke of the ironic snobbism displayed against the natives in India in a 1914 essay, and his radio address about South Africa exploiting slaves in 1932. The chapter touches upon the previous ideas of the *Life Force*, Lilith as the reinterpreted imperfect Creatrix, and the first *Superman* or mother of *Superman*, the refutation of the incompatibility of spiritual leadership with motherhood and marriage, and the limited role of black women as slaves, prostitutes, or married mothers. Mishra advances the view that the title character of *The Black Girl in Search for God* embodies an early understanding of postcolonialism, Black and third-wave feminism, and addresses misconceptions about Islamic and African cultures spread across Eurocentric societies. In *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, Shaw's views on sisterhood, queerness, and "superfamilies" (Mishra 2023, 148) are illustrated by an implied lesbian relationship between two half-sisters accompanied by a man. A Shavian sisterhood is further displayed amongst other female characters, such as Eliza and Mrs Higgins, while its presence is also palpable in Vivie's initial companionship with her mother and later empathy towards prostitutes, demonstrating support and alliance beyond the idea of creating superfamilies. Mishra notes that this supportive portrayal contrasted with those of Shaw's fellow writers who painted women as spiteful and jealous. In conclusion, Mishra thinks that feminists who dismissed Shaw as simply a male writer portraying female characters overlooked both the contemporary issues – gender equality, marginalised groups, and same-sex relationships – he highlighted and how his contemporaries wrote about women.

Mishra's *The Feminist Shaw: Shaw and Contemporary Literary Theories of Feminism* offers an insightful study that emphasises Shaw's relevance to contemporary literary theories, despite certain feminists' dismissal due to his restrictive ideas about women, especially as a male dramatist. Logically structured and thoroughly researched, the book also demonstrates scholarly depth. Likewise, it offers a refreshing, non-Eurocentric approach, and it highlights other cultural and spiritual perspectives of Shavian studies such as ecofeminism, Black feminism, Queer theory, and Hinduism. It is accessible to both the general audience and the academic field, but the main argument, Shaw's relevance in contemporary studies, sometimes becomes somewhat weakened by the rich theoretical framework, and some chapters tend to be less focused. Nevertheless, the volume's rich theoretical underpinnings provide informative data for both the general audience and academics who seek to delve into contemporary Shavian studies.

"A Little Bit of Every Woman's Rage": Feminist Violence on Screen

The Female Avenger, Women's Anger, and Rape-Revenge Film and Television. By Margrethe Bruun Vaage. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024. Pp. 206. ISBN 9781399532112.

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Traditionally, violence and anger are associated with masculinity rather than femininity, and therefore, so is their depiction. Representing rape on screen, or taking revenge for said rape is naturally transgressive, but the method of depicting it greatly affects not only the result but also audience's reactions. In the socio-cultural *Zeitgeist* that includes the #MeToo movement (and its ramifications), the fourth wave of feminism, and their backlash somewhat simultaneously, addressing such a controversial theme as rape-revenge narratives is a challenging task. Margrethe Bruun Vaage's monograph titled *The Female Avenger, Women's Anger and Rape-Revenge Film and Television* examines what she terms as the rape-revenge convention, across genres, decades, and directors, and offers comprehensive, convincing readings of the emotional, affective aspects of rape-revenge films.

The volume already at first glance manages to offer a glimpse into the complexities of these narratives. The cover image from Coralie Fargeat's *Revenge* (2017), also used as a poster for the film itself, shows Matilda Lutz in the role of the protagonist, Jen, pointing a shotgun towards the camera. She is visibly shaken – with tears in her eyes – as she stands in the desert; and yet, a big, pink, star-shaped earring is hanging from her left ear. The image outlines the sharp contrast between the angry, violent narratives, on the one hand, and the female protagonists – often victims – on the other. In Bruun Vaage's reading, Jen is already transformed into the avenger she needs to become to survive, and the image thus marks the most crucial motif linking the films that the author discusses. Bruun Vaage also points out the clear associations between *Revenge* and the #MeToo movement that heavily shaped rape-revenge narratives, which further reinforces the connections between the well-chosen, representative cover image and the themes discussed in the volume.

Bruun Vaage almost effortlessly navigates the line of discussing films, including *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (dir. David Fincher, 2011), *Twilight Portrait* (dir. Angelina Nikonova, 2011), *Women Talking* (dir. Sarah Polley, 2022), *The Nightingale* (dir. Jennifer Kent, 2018), *Blue Steel* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 1990), *Promising Young*

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Woman (dir. Emeral Fennell, 2020), *Irreversible* (dir. Gaspar Noé, 2002), and *Holiday* (dir. Isabella Eklöf, 2018); and television series such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019) and *I May Destroy You* (2020). This list, however, is far from complete: although the corpus is already extensive and maybe somewhat overwhelming, the author manages to showcase an impressively deep and overarching knowledge of the topic as she mentions films and series wherever appropriate and applicable, without that becoming a burden to the volume. Although the volume is sometimes heavy-handed with plot descriptions, the author aptly highlights the emotional and affective nuances of rape-revenge narratives, especially in the context of the contemporary feminist wave.

While the effects of different assaults, including rape, have been well-researched across numerous fields, female anger, especially vindictive anger serves as the overarching theme, a key notion for Bruun Vaage. She observes the transformation female protagonists need to go through in order to leave behind their victimhood and "[live] out the contradiction experienced by many women as they try to make sense of femininity and feminism" (2024, 49). Arguing that female avengers inherently exist in gendered contradictions, the author showcases numerous theories and filmic tools representing these complexities in order to point out that the tools and the literature all focus on the rape-avenger characters' fight being eroticised. She also contends that even though these struggles seem to be unalienable from the convention itself, recent films still manage to break away from this tradition. Vindictive anger is positioned as a catalyst for the protagonist's transformation and a clear separation from traditional femininity; it is an emotion that "communicates how violated she feels" and a proof that the protagonist is not echoing the usual, victim-blaming chants from society but is "directing her anger at the rapist" (89). Bruun Vaage's fundamental claim is that vindictive anger is the "core to the affective structure of the rape-revenge film" (90), and she builds a consistent, persuasive argument throughout her volume to make that point.

In relation to the emotions which the rape-revenge conventions evoke in the viewers, Bruun Vaage explains that audiences might experience a visceral aversion at the representation of rape, at an intensity that murder or other violent acts might not evoke. She highlights that, within narratives, rape is often reduced to a mere plot device or a simple mark of a character being a villain. However, she concludes that this reduction is sharply contrasted by reality, where authorities are rarely able to react to rape in favour of the victim and that social responses are "more unsettled and muddled" (161) than they are to murder or torture. However, Bruun Vaage neglects to touch upon arguments about the actresses who have to act out being raped, the questionable on-set dynamics that are difficult to navigate even though intimacy coordinators are employed and becoming standard practice was one of the

most significant achievements of the #MeToo movement. Bruun Vaage also fails to mention that rape is one of, if not the only, crime that in no way can be justified; but she does mention that rape used to be "silenced and ignored" (163), implying that audiences might not be so used to seeing it on screen or even discussing it.

Bruun Vaage's comprehensive knowledge of rape-revenge narratives, however, allows for the understanding of changing tendencies in the industry. Thus, she points out that recent films can be positioned within the Feminist New Wave, arguing that these films, especially female filmmakers tend to imply rape – rather than representing it on-screen – or use more subversive methods; therefore, rape ceases to be the centre of attention, allowing the film to focus on the characters and emotions, rather than the violence of the act itself.

Unable to avoid the inherent difficulties of writing about rape-revenge narratives, such as overusing the term or running into tautologies such as "rapists rape" (Bruun Vaage 161), the author still manages to convincingly explore the convention with a corpus that spans decades, genres, tropes, and filmmakers. As for the occasional shortcomings, Bruun Vaage makes up for them in a vast array of theories to support her claims, for which she argues firmly, even though rape as a topic is by default difficult to see from one perspective. Taking into account different aspects and arguments, Bruun Vaage effectively bridges affect, film, and feminist studies to provide multi-faceted, sensitive analyses about a plethora of films. The monograph serves as an important, essential piece of literature in feminist film theory, and possibly a soon-to-be staple of course materials.

Age Is Just a Number... Or Is It? A Timely Debate on Age and Ageism

Negotiating Age: Aging and Ageism in Contemporary Literature and Theatre. Edited by Mária Kurdi. Debrecen and Warsaw: Debrecen University Press and Sciendo, 2023. Pp. 328. ISBN 978-83-67405-42-3.

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The emergence of age studies – driven by demographic changes – reflects societal and cultural shifts in perceptions of ageing. This turn has not only prompted a critical examination of ageism, but also raised awareness towards the intersectionality of age with other identity factors. By revealing a multifaceted reconsideration of a topic, often relegated to the margins of literary and theatrical discourse, this scholarly discussion edited by Mária Kurdi offers a valuable contribution to the growing field of age studies that began to take shape in the late twentieth century. Particularly, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with Kathleen Woodward, age representations in literature came to be recognised as a distinct field of study. As for this current century, Kurdi in her edited volume, *Negotiating Age* (2023), seeks to bring our attention to a wide-ranging exploration of age and ageing across various cultural and literary contexts. Reading this compelling collection is like witnessing a lively debate on this topic, whose scholars (referenced in this book) speak to each other, unpacking various perspectives on this subject.

Age Studies is a relatively recent humanistic discourse "which, necessarily, is prone to explore crosscurrents between aging, feminism, gender, intersectionality, postcolonialism, class, dis/ability, and so on" (Kurdi 2023, 13).[1] Thereon, the primary lens through which the book looks at ageing is *theoretical*; the authors of this book employ contemporary theories to inquire into earlier works while reflecting on how the issue of age exists in today's society. The authors highlight how ingrained ageist stereotypes persist in contemporary British, Irish, and American literature and drama, often portraying elderly adults as debilitated or undesirable. However, these works also reveal character complexities that can challenge or reinforce these stereotypes. In response, the scholars in *Negotiating Age* advocate for a more nuanced and equitable understanding of ageing. To further emphasise varied insights into ageing, Kurdi

[1] If need be, the references to the various chapters of *Negotiating Age* include the author's name in an acknowledgement of their contribution.

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assembles in her book a range of voices – both female and male – from global regions, who analyse male-authored works that feature ageing protagonists of both genders.

This volume – co-published by DUPress and Sciendo – brings together eleven insightful essays, preceded by an introduction from the editor and followed by the coda of Donald E. Morse's essay on a more recent work on ageing. The book is organised into four parts, each one to be read as a reflection upon some aspects of ageing as presented in drama and fiction.

In the introduction, Kurdi sets up her premise that "age is performative in nature" (15). Similarly, the scholars contributing to the book share the common ground of building their argument on the assumptions that age extends beyond mere chronology or biology; further, it is a dynamic interplay between individual experience and social context (15). Kurdi argues that while the interdisciplinary scope of age studies is essential for understanding age-related issues, its potential drawbacks reside in the fact that it may, at times, oversimplify the complexities inherent in these intersections. Therefore, the predominant association of ageing with decline and invisibility could make direct comparisons to gender and race, which can also be sources of empowerment and resistance, less applicable. While Kurdi identifies the rise of academic journals within age studies as a pivotal catalyst for the advancement of sociological and psychological discourse surrounding ageing, there is little discussion of how these efforts might still uphold prevailing biases rather than challenge them. Additionally, the fact that most research in age studies is conducted by women, "suggest[s] that aging and its corollary might count as a gendered subject in both society and the world of letters or the performing arts" (16). With this in mind, Kurdi expands an initial group of women authors to include male contributors, thereby enhancing the variety of perspectives and representations of ageing across different age groups. Yet, despite her efforts for balance, the gender makeup of the volume – ten women authors to six men – raises concerns about an overly gendered perspective. Ultimately, this makeup may weaken the field's argument by inadvertently confirming that ageing is studied mainly by and about women; a potential blind spot the discipline needs to address.

Part I, "Contemporary Adaptations of Shakespeare," begins with two essays that examine the appropriation of Shakespeare's works in contemporary British theatre. In the first essay, Kevin De Ornellas and Dónall Mac Cathmhaoill identify a loose trilogy that unites Edward Bond's works – *Lear* (1971), *Bingo* (1973), and *The Worlds* (1979) – advising that his plays attend to societal attitudes towards aged males, and often portray contempt or marginalisation. The authors argue that Bond deliberately avoids any positive depictions of ageing, emphasising that "good aging cannot be bought" (28). This statement suggests that respect for older adults should be based on their inherent value as people rather than superficial measures. In the second essay,

Kinga Földváry's focus revolves around "aging characters in an environment where age brings vulnerability rather than wisdom" (65), specifically in Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser* (1980). She critiques the narrow focus of some ageism studies while asserting how Shakespeare's works reveal age-related discrimination. The scholar posits that while Harwood's characters grapple with their faltering abilities, they simultaneously reflect the connection between memory and identity, wherein the audience's perceptions are shaped by both age and performance (48). Thus, Földváry reflects that not only does *The Dresser* echo Shakespeare's exploration of age, but also serves as a platform to critique contemporary attitudes toward ageing, exposing the unfair stereotypes of older individuals in a youth-centric society.

Part II focuses on the topic of ageing in the context of Irish drama. The editor's background in Irish literature is strongly reflected in the book's sizable Irish section, which in a way frames the narrative around specific cultural contexts and interpretations of ageing. In his analysis of Samuel Beckett, Christopher Murray argues that the Irish playwright's drama marks a "'new age' [… that] defies the conventions of realism" (72). The author highlights Beckett's departure from the *senex* trope – often depicting older characters as comedic – which is considered overly reductive. By aligning with the Theatre of Cruelty, Beckett is said to move beyond the 'bourgeois' confines of traditional narratives about age and identity (73). However, this statement by Murray disregards how realism can also engage meaningfully with existential themes surrounding ageing. In the subsequent essay, Csilla Bertha's critique of the Mommo archetype continues to dismantle cultural stereotypes of ageing as linked to specific national or ethnic identities. This placement might set the stage for a broader understanding of ageing that moves beyond simplistic, pre-defined categories. Bertha aligns her interpretations with Lars Tornstam's notion of *gerotranscendence*, through the figure of Mommo, demonstrating a shift to a cosmic and transcendent view of the world (Bertha 2023, 94). Essays of Brian Friel (Giovanna Tallone) and Martin McDonagh (Mária Kurdi and David Clare) introduce more multifaceted characters and reveal the nuances of ageing, including presence/absence, and how patriarchal and postcolonial contexts shape the ageing experience. This progression helps to explore the impact of time and historical circumstances on individuals. The paradox of ageing, described by Simone de Beauvoir as both "expected and unforeseen" (Alatawi and Jordan 2023, 167), serves as a backdrop for Maha Alatawi and Eamonn Jordan's analysis. They argue that Conor McPherson's work provides a nuanced exploration of ageing that anticipates it thoughtfully and notably includes both female and male perspectives on ageing. The authors' work, with its focus on gendered ageing and relationships, provides an integrating, intersectional perspective. This inclusion of the male viewpoint stands in contrast to Kurdi's assertion that much of the critical literature on ageing tends to focus primarily on women's experiences.

Part III examines American drama: the editor's choice to pair Réka M. Cristian's and Ambika Singh's essays illustrates the development of American theatre's portrayal of ageing. Cristian effectively uses Margaret Morganroth Gullette's *agewise* framework to examine ageing and death in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* (1960). She moves on to argue that there is not just physical decline, but also an emotional and social journey in Tennessee Williams's *Milktrain* (1963), centring the argument around elderly female characters, Grandma and Mrs. Goforth. In Singh's essay on Arthur Miller's *Mr. Peters' Connections* (1998), the exploration of ageism is undeniably significant, given the play's explicit critique of societal attitudes toward ageing. While Singh's focus on gerontological theory offers a compelling lens for Peters's psychological state, the essay leaves room to explore how Miller's formal choices, particularly the play's circular dialogue and surreal setting, theatrically embody the fragmentation of ageing. A synthesis of these structural elements with the essay's existing themes could further illuminate how ageism distorts not only narratives about the elderly but also the very structures that contain them.

The shift to fiction in Part IV offers a broader perspective on ageing. Angelika Reichmann's exploration of intertextuality in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) is particularly insightful, revealing as Kurdi puts it in her introduction "the anxieties of the middle-aged intellectual protagonist" (22). However, Reichmann argues that "*Disgrace* in many ways is about death, and not only does it represent aging as a problem of middle-aged men but also uses it as the image of the shared human condition, it meditates on whether life […] is anything else but the disgraceful ante-room of death" (244). While this view is less optimistic, it challenges narrow interpretations of Lurie's character development. Reichmann highlights how Lurie's role as an "unreliable focalizer" (244) reveals the distorting effects of personal biases and ageist stereotypes. The essay confronts the unsettling realities of mortality and the existential burdens of ageing in post-apartheid South Africa, urging readers to engage with their complexities rather than romanticise them. Noémi Albert's essay explores how David Mitchell uses speculative elements, such as immortality, reincarnation, and the manipulation of time to represent the human attitude to ageing.

The collection concludes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a coda by Donald E. Morse on Frank McGuinness's *The Visiting Hour* (2021). The editor offers a contemporary lens that roots the collection in today's society. Morse argues that ageing is a complex process of narrative construction, characterised by communication breakdowns, memory loss, and echoes of pandemic-era isolation, as illustrated by the father's reminiscences complicated by dementia in McGuinness's play (Morse 2023, 299). While Morse's essay foregrounds the challenging intersection of ageing and dementia – which could risk presenting a unilateral narrative of decline – his attention to enduring human connections avoids this potential limitation. The father's musical

memories (301) and McGuinness's refusal of a "bleak assessment" (Morse 2023, 304) provide crucial counterpoints that align with the volume's broader project. Like Kurdi and other contributors, Morse ultimately transcends reductive frameworks, using dementia not as shorthand for deterioration but as a lens to examine fundamental questions of human dignity. His approach thus complements, rather than contradicts, the collection's nuanced treatment of ageing – though readers might note that dementia remains a particularly acute manifestation of ageing's challenges rather than its defining feature. Essentially, Morse's analysis together with the other essays compels us to confront 'what it truly means to be human,' beyond the facade of age.

Overall, *Negotiating Age* is a valuable contribution to the field of age studies, and it is suitable for both scholars and students interested in age studies, literary criticism, and theatre studies. The book successfully demonstrates the importance of critically examining cultural attitudes towards ageing and the need for more nuanced and compassionate portrayals of elderly characters in literature and theatre. Moreover, it provides a timely reminder that the issues surrounding ageing are deeply personal, socially significant, and urgently in need of attention.

Dystopian Theory Reinvented

Critical Theory and Dystopia. By Patricia McManus. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022. Pp 224. ISBN 978-5261-3973-3.

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Patricia McManus's book re-explores the evolution of dystopian literature from the twentieth century into the present. In McManus's words, "[t]he aim is to arrive at an understanding of the odd shapes of dystopia historically, and from this to build an understanding of the pervasiveness of dystopian fictions in our own moment" (7). It covers a wide range of influential works, including Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series (2000s and 2010s). The book focuses on the applications of the Frankfurt School of critical theory and in particular Theodor Adorno's work to uncover the political implications and transformations that have shaped the course of dystopian literature through its relatively short history.

The book offers a plethora of stimulating ideas regarding dystopian literature, its implications, its textual habits, and its relationship with or comparison to utopian literature. McManus argues that dystopia is not an "inheritor of the utopian narrative form, […] nor is it a simple antagonist" (5). Historically, before the term *dystopia* became widely used, such works were often called *anti-utopias* or simply, *negative utopias*; as McManus explains, "[i]n Adorno's essay on Huxley's *Brave New World*, for example, the term 'negative utopia'" (5) appears. Instead, dystopia occupies a special space, in which it is sustained in limbo, never stepping far into the future and maintaining a textual distance from its present. This means that the overall approach of the book is centred around the hypothetical (time) gap between the dystopian work and the reader. In dystopian fiction, MacManus argues, there is nothing to support "the reader through the shift from present to future" (13). This means that the reader is "addressed by the dystopian text as someone who is *in* this new world […, not] from the reports of fictional witnesses to whom it also might have come as a novel or shocking place" (13). McManus combines Adorno's theories of power and language and Darko Suvin's concepts of the *novum* and *cognitive estrangement* to approach this gap. Thus, *Critical Theory and Dystopia* examines how dystopian fiction reflects on the limits of modernity, the collapse of social structures, and the tension between individual agency and the power of institutions.

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In the first chapter, "Negative Commitment at Work," McManus introduces the difference between the classical dystopias and the dystopias of our time. For this purpose, she explores E.M Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909), Frederik Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* (1952) and Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks: A Novel* (2018). According to McManus, "[t]he early forms of the classical dystopia had a relationship to their present which saw it [the future] threatened by epochal-altering shifts in technology or discoveries in psychology" (167), in contrast with contemporary dystopias, which "have sloughed off the structural need for distance or are denied it by the dailiness of the situations they trace" (59). The first chapter also provides the clearest explanation of the term *negative commitment*, which is central to McManus's argument, by drawing on Tom Moylan's observation that in dystopias the "social values" of the narrator and the dystopian society are oppositional. McManus argues that "the structural presence and narrative impossibility of those same 'values' […] is the ground of negative commitment" (39). The first chapter is integral to the overall structure of McManus's claims by establishing the terminologies through which she reads dystopia.

The second chapter, "Orwell and the Classic Dystopia," explores Orwell's impact on the genre. Referring to the most canonical dystopia of the twentieth century, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, McManus demonstrates the *novum*, *negative commitment* and the disassociation from the past that is characteristic of classical dystopia. There are moments at which McManus's extensive and complex writing style eludes the reader, making it difficult to keep track of how *negative commitment* works within the sampled primary texts throughout the book. McManus's theoretical application of *negative commitment* is dense. This complexity is evident when discussing George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where McManus states:

> Orwell wrote a novel in which his commitment to warning of the vulnerability of truth, its tendency to dissolve when subjected to political contests, overcame his own political commitment to democratic socialism. The novel has only the negative commitment enabled or demanded by the regime it despises. (94)

This intricate layering of the concept suggests that the novel's world is 'wrong' not because it loses something, but because it suppresses the "unimaginable" or abolishes the truth that can only be defined by the "hard limits of fact" (McManus, 94). Furthermore, McManus then highlights that "Orwell's novel surrenders truth to fact because it cannot bear admitting the social and historical antinomies of belief and of value into a realm of truth which, because it has to be protected from them, has become so vulnerably brittle" (97). Such nuanced and abstract explanation of how *negative commitment* functions within the narrative form, while insightful, can require considerable effort from the reader to fully disentangle and follow.

The third and fourth chapters are "Dystopia and the Past," and "Michel Houellebecq and the End of Dystopia?" respectively. In the third chapter, McManus uses the term *hollow space* (105) to describe the history of dystopia throughout its infancy, asserting that Adorno's phrase aptly describes how early twentieth-century works contribute to remembering the past, yet erasing from memory some of its crucial features – such as forms of systemic oppression (104) and the *hollow space* it textually occupied in the past. This chapter demonstrates the capacity of the dystopian narrative to comment and reflect on social issues of the past to critique the present. There is also a great deal of analysis devoted to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, and how the genre "must estrange the present to create itself" (109). The fourth chapter offers a new perspective through a discussion of the contemporary dystopia *Submission* (2015) by Michel Houellebecq. According to McManus, the novel offers a form of "aggressive assimilation to unified yet 'moderate' Islam as a 'solution' to the unhappiness and exhaustion of the contemporary 'Western' family" (136). This chapter reflects the death of modernity as McManus concludes that the reader's own civilisation "the 'civilisation' at stake [in the novel] is itself long gone" (154).

The fifth and final chapter, "American Dystopia," focuses on Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (2009), Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), and Lionel Shriver's *The Mandibles* (2016). McManus seeks answers to the question of what the future of dystopia is, and she argues that the above-mentioned novels demonstrate that dystopian fiction no longer describes a 'future' but the present. In fact, we are now living in a new dystopia, as the genre continuously closes the gap with the future following each global political and economic crisis.

Across the book, McManus tries to establish a new critical approach to dystopian literature and to study the shift from anti-utopian ideas towards contemporary dystopias. She notes, drawing on Fredric Jameson's observation, that there has been an)as cited by McManus) "overwhelming increase in all manner of conceivable dystopias, most of which look monotonously alike" (5). To explain this "monotony" in contemporary dystopia McManus engages in a dialogue with Mark Bould who suggests that one reason for the "'monotony' may be the totalisation of the present or the present's success at presenting itself as such a totality, closed and pragmatic and inevitable" (6). Bould argues that if our present reality already feels unavoidable, then dystopian texts struggle to gain sufficient distance to generate the cognitive estrangement that is essential for an effective political critique (6).

Through the interpretative framework of the textual gap, a rhetorical opening created within a narrative, McManus demonstrates the 'openness' of contemporary dystopias and her choice of primary texts is wide-ranging. However, the book is a challenge to read as it assumes a requisite, detailed knowledge of the texts and critical theory, leaving the reader lost in the intricate network of references. With

the introduction of new vocabularies and a wide-ranging analysis of a variety of primary texts, from Orwell to Houellebeq, McManus demonstrates her command of the field of dystopian literature. Although the density of the book may be a barrier for some readers, it provides the reader with new perspectives on the genre and its future, and is a refreshing read for experts interested in utopian and dystopian studies.

Posthuman Pages, Human Questions: A Review of Joseph Tabbi's *The Cambridge Introduction To Literary Posthumanism* (2024)

The Cambridge Introduction to Literary Posthumanism. By Joseph Tabbi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. 236. ISBN 9781009256452.

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Joseph Tabbi's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literary Posthumanism* offers a timely and comprehensive overview of how posthumanist thought intersects with literary studies. Tabbi, a seasoned scholar of experimental literature and digital media, here synthesises a broad range of texts and theories to chart a "through-line" of literary posthumanism from the nineteenth century to the digital age. The result is a scholarly, conceptually rich introduction that not only defines key terms and debates but also demonstrates what literary posthumanism offers to the humanities. This review considers how Tabbi's account of literary posthumanism brings together historical range and theoretical insights, and what this combination offers to ongoing discussions in the humanities.

Tabbi's central premise is that posthumanism in literature is "not just another period" or a transient genre trend, but a critical orientation that reconfigures how we read and understand texts (1). From the outset, he distinguishes critical posthumanism from simplistic notions of the "posthuman" as a futuristic condition. In the introduction, Tabbi aligns literary posthumanism with the longstanding impulse of literary theory to defamiliarise our understanding of the world. He argues that both literary theory and posthumanist thought are marked by "a *defamiliarizing* tendency" (4, emphasis in original) rather than an extension of human dominance or technocratic power. He mentions that literary posthumanism does not seek to enhance human agency but instead "studies and deflects" the entrenched "[p]ower relations […] that have historically situated the human above other life forms" (4). By decentring the human subject, literature can expose and challenge the hierarchy that places humans at the apex of existence. This stance sets the tone for the book's critical project: examining how literature invites us to know the world differently, beyond the familiar human-centred frameworks.

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One of the book's strengths is its historical and textual breadth. Tabbi constructs a narrative from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to contemporary digital literature, illustrating that posthumanist concerns have been present in literary imagination for over two centuries. Chapter 2, for example, pairs Shelley's classic novel with Shelley Jackson's hypertext novella *Patchwork Girl* (1995), dubbing Jackson's work a "postmodern Prometheus," as Jackson herself is an author who stitches together fragments of text into a living interactive whole in a deliberate analogy to Victor's own actions in *Frankenstein*. Through close reading, Tabbi shows how these texts engage with questions of creation, identity, and the boundaries of the human. Notably, he highlights the role of gender and creativity: it is "precisely this acceptance, and celebration, of female imagination that distinguishes a literary posthumanism; which is to say: an aesthetic that patiently explores rather than transcends powers that inhere in nature – powers, and unforeseen assemblages that we humans would do well to let be" (45). In Shelley's and Jackson's respective works, female authorship envisions forms of life and storytelling that resist the masculine drive to control or "transcend" nature (56). This insight illustrates Tabbi's broader point that literary posthumanism often emerges through acts of refusal or re-imagination within the humanist tradition. Throughout the book, he identifies such "humanist refusals" (2) in literature, from Melville's Bartleby, whose famous refrain "I would prefer not to" (qtd. in 91) subverts the imperatives of a humanist work ethic, to Thomas Pynchon's playful surrogates that evade the cult of authorial genius. By including modern and contemporary writers like William Gibson, Tom McCarthy, Colson Whitehead, Jeanette Winterson, and Claire-Louise Bennett, Tabbi demonstrates how narrative experiments and evasions continue to unsettle human-centred perspectives in twenty-first-century fiction. These diverse examples support his argument that literary posthumanism is not confined to science fiction tropes but permeates various genres and modes of writing, wherever authors interrogate the limits of human identity and knowledge.

Crucially, Tabbi frames literary posthumanism as a response to the technological and intellectual conditions of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Chapter 1, "Beyond the Two Cultures?", he revisits C. P. Snow's famous divide between the sciences and the humanities in the "Two Cultures" debate (24–26), suggesting that posthumanism can bridge this gap. He explores the growing tension (and potential dialogue) between technoscientific visions of the posthuman and critical-humanistic posthumanist approaches that extend posthumanist thought into ecological and ethical fields. On one side are futurist or transhumanist narratives of radical enhancement and "evental change" (e.g. the emergence of an AI-powered posthuman species); on the other side are the more reflective critiques that imagine a "postanthropocentric subjectivity of beings still human" (Boldizsár Simon qtd. in 14).

Tabbi's discussion clearly differentiates transhumanism's tendency to extend human-centric narratives from posthumanism's effort to rethink our place among nonhuman agents. For instance, in Chapter 3, he observes that the "transhuman" perspective often reinforces existing frameworks: "extending, strengthening, and repurposing human (and humanist) concepts" – without opening new ways to imagine community or agency beyond the human (49). By contrast, the posthumanist literary outlook seeks to imagine genuinely new relationships and "reimagined" communities that include technological, animal, or ecological others. Tabbi supports this point by citing contemporary novelist Tom McCarthy's concern that ubiquitous data and algorithms are forcing writers "to rethink their whole role and function, to remap their entire universe" (qtd. in 48). Such examples underscore the book's argument that literature must adapt in an age when nonhuman systems (from Big Data networks to AI) increasingly shape narratives. Tabbi coins the term "postperiodization" (48) to argue that, unlike earlier literary movements, posthumanism is not confined to a historical period with clear boundaries. Instead, it arises in tandem with exponential changes in media and technology that challenge the very notion of discrete literary eras. The analysis spans from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the epic tradition to the contemporary Era of AI, discussed in Chapter 7, implying that posthuman impulses can be traced in many epochs but have taken on new urgency today.

In Chapter 2, Tabbi emphasises materiality and embodiment: he highlights how literature can make abstract networks palpable or give voice to nonhuman processes. His analysis of Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, for instance, celebrates the "multiplicity of the feminine" and the physical patchwork of textual bodies (45), aligning with feminist new materialist critiques of any singular, disembodied "god's eye" perspective. This theoretical layering means that not only does the book survey literary examples but also offers conceptual tools for scholars. Tabbi's commentary often doubles as a guide to using posthumanist theory in practical literary interpretation.

In the fourth chapter, "Posthuman Sublime," Tabbi revisits the aesthetic category of the sublime, the experience of awe and terror at forces beyond human comprehension, and reinterprets it through a posthuman lens. By drawing on ancient authors like Longinus and Sappho, alongside modern theorists, like Pieter Vermeulen, Tabbi suggests a continuity between classical attempts to articulate the inhuman or overwhelming and contemporary efforts to grapple with nonhuman agency. Vermeulen mentions that the experience of terror is compensated by the realisation that the human capacity has not been overwhelmed, thus serving as a "tremendous ego booster" that "triumphantly reaffirm[s] the human" (62), which refers to "posthuman affects" to move beyond this ego-affirming structure. This long view enriches literary posthumanism by rooting it in familiar aesthetic traditions even as it transforms them.

In addition to its theoretical breadth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literary Posthumanism* engages with the rapidly evolving digital and media landscape, which is a crucial aspect of posthumanist literature. Tabbi's background in electronic literature is evident in the chapters devoted to born-digital fiction and the "cognitive turn." He devotes an interlude to N. Katherine Hayles's work, acknowledging her influential role in bridging literature, technology, and cognitive science. In the later chapters, the book discusses digital poetry, hypertext fiction, and even the implications of artificial intelligence for narrative (Chapter 7, "Posthuman Epic in the Era of AI"). By examining electronic literature and AI narratives, Tabbi extends literary posthumanism beyond print culture, suggesting that the "literary" itself is being redefined in the age of algorithms and platforms. The epilogue, "Platform (Post?) Pandemic," brings the discussion up to the present moment, considering how the COVID-19 pandemic and our reliance on digital platforms might accelerate posthumanist cultural shifts.

While surveying literary works, Tabbi engages deeply with posthumanist theory, making the book especially valuable for scholars. Readers will find succinct introductions to major thinkers such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, among others. Rather than treating theory as an abstract background, Tabbi weaves these ideas into his literary readings. For example, he invokes Hayles's concept of distributed cognition and the blurring of human-machine boundaries to frame how posthumanism is "not a historical period" but a "field of interactions" across biological, technical, and textual realms (4). He also follows Wolfe in insisting on a rigorously critical posthumanism that rejects any simple human–machine hybrid narrative. By grounding his analysis in such theoretical perspectives, Tabbi demonstrates a thorough command of posthumanist discourse and brings clarity to its often diffuse debates. Notably, he distinguishes critical posthumanism from transhumanism (or naive celebratory posthumanism) at every turn; a clarification that is crucial for literary scholars who might be new to these terms. This conceptual precision is one of the book's key contributions: it delineates the stakes of posthumanist thought for literature, ensuring that readers understand posthumanism as a critical reorientation of humanism rather than a mere speculative theme about robots or cyborgs. Another significant contribution is Tabbi's integration of new materialist and ecological insights into literary analysis. Few introductions manage to incorporate such contemporary context, and this inclusion underscores the relevance of Tabbi's insights: he shows that literary posthumanism is not an esoteric theory but a framework for understanding literature's role, particularly for scholars and students in literary and cultural studies, posthumanist studies and digital humanities who are interested in tracing how the concept of the posthuman shapes both narrative form and intellectual discourse.