

Spring 2021

**“What can there be but witchcraft?”: History, Women, and Witches  
in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Lolly Willowes* and Graham Swift’s  
*Waterland***

Thomas Bedenbaugh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Bedenbaugh, T.(2021). *“What can there be but witchcraft?”: History, Women, and Witches in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s Lolly Willowes and Graham Swift’s Waterland*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/6217>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

“What can there be but witchcraft?": History, Women, and Witches in Sylvia Townsend  
Warner's *Lolly Willowes* and Graham Swift's *Waterland*

by

Thomas Bedenbaugh

Bachelor of Arts  
University of South Carolina, 2018

---

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2021

Accepted by:

Debra Rae Cohen, Director of Thesis

Catherine Keyser, Reader

Tracey L. Weldon, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

© Copyright by Thomas Bedenbaugh, 2021  
All Rights Reserved.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Dr. Debra Rae Cohen for reading multiple drafts of this thesis, and for her encouragement and guidance throughout my academic career.

## ABSTRACT

The ambiguous relationship between history, women and witchcraft in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* and Graham Swift's *Waterland* foregrounds the constructedness of historical narratives while also recuperating women's marginalized positions within history. Both novels link historical narratives with the received ideas upon which norms of gender, sexuality, and the nation are constructed. Through this, both authors challenge monolithic male-centered historical discourses, revealing them to be stories which, totalizing as it may be, are not in fact "natural." While many women in both novels are configured as haunting figures - women who confuse the boundary separation presence from absence - their liminal position draws attention to and ironizes their exclusion from historical narratives. In both novels, these exclusions are recuperated through the figure of the witch, a character who gestures beyond these oppressive narratives, but who also challenges the distinctions that separate history from fantasy and past from present. History is then reframed; it is revealed as not only a narrative construction, but a way of organizing and defining bodies. Both Warner and Swift use the figure of the witch to explore the many ambiguities contained within historical narratives and to reveal how tenuous and oppressive these narratives are.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Space and History: Challenging the Reproduction of Gender .....	6
Chapter 2: Women as Liminal Figures.....	20
Chapter 3: Witches as Specters of Alternative Possibilities.....	37
Conclusion .....	53
Works Cited .....	56

## INTRODUCTION

Although published nearly 60 years apart, Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* and Graham Swift's *Waterland* are similarly concerned with how stories become histories, the power that these narratives possess, and what the implications are for those people who are marginalized or placed outside of the scope of such narratives. The project of history is one that is predicated on imposing order over that which is inherently disordered; to recognize and ascribe meaning to the events of the past, and to fit them into a logical progression. Both Warner and Swift problematize how these narratives are "naturalized"; they interrogate the artificiality of historical narratives by focusing how women, in particular are constructed as absences within them. By focusing on these absences, an internal paradox arises which both authors exploit: within a narrative of progress which is founded upon the accumulation of work and bodies, the "female reproductive body" comes to be identified with "child-bearing, evolutionary progress, and national purity" (Garrity 2), yet is simultaneously erased within these masculine projects.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I examine how Warner and Swift undermine the detached point of view from which history is supposedly written by foregrounding the tenuous separation of the past from the present in their respective novels. *Lolly Willowes* gestures toward this ambiguity through the persistence of idealized notions of femininity across successive generations of the family line of the titular character Laura Willowes.

Indeed, there seems to be very little that tangibly separates the repressive, Victorian sensibilities of earlier generations of the Willowes family from Laura's immediate family in the early twentieth century: images of colonial domination or the family brewery which is passed through the hands of the men of the family are not left in the past, as Warner foregrounds their recurrence up into the novel's present day. Laura Willowes herself stands in a complicated relationship to the normative, prescribed ways of life that define both her family's history and their present. As a spinster she is othered within prescribed familial and legal discourses, but the novel reclaims her marginalization through the figure of the witch, inverting the negative connotations of the spinster within historical discourse, and investing Laura with a freedom and agency which has previously been denied her.

Akin to how Warner problematizes constructions of history, Swift's novel foregrounds and exploits the ambiguous boundary separating history from fiction. Global historical events are superimposed over the personal stories, fairy-tales, and digressions which the protagonist Tom Crick weaves together for his history students, while the stories that he tells are constantly fragmenting, and repeating. The structure of the novel itself is displaced onto the Fens, the region of England where Tom grows up and where much of the plot takes place. Like the constant tension in Tom's narration between history and fiction, between progression and regression, the landscape itself is indelibly shaped by the tension between the effort of Tom's ancestors to impose control over the land and the inevitable return of water. Flooding of the Leem and Ouse rivers threatens to destroy the town of Gildsey, where his ancestors live, and the brewing empire that they construct. On a narrative level, the dichotomy between land and water - between order



and chaos - finds an echo in how fairy-tales are constructed so as to narrate the excesses to historiography, those events which are not fully captured by historical narratives. For Tom, both history and fairy-tales are modes through which he might impose order over reality, but both seem to coalesce around the women of his narrative and how they are constructed by Tom as haunting figures.

Both texts revolve around the presence and absence of women within historical narratives; their erasure within dominant historical discourse is ironized by the liminal status of many of the women in both texts. In the second chapter of this thesis, I argue that their presences, absences, and erasures within history become central to both authors' attempts to realign how we understand and interact with the past, of how the organization of events, bodies, and spaces is undergirded by a patriarchal desire for control. By drawing attention to these exclusions, both Warner and Swift challenge not only women's paradoxical absence from history, but also those gendered historical inheritances that are imposed upon and silence them.

Laura Willowes's family lineage is populated with female figures who define acceptable standards of femininity, standards which are registered through the objects and attitudes which are inherited across successive generations of the family. Women's objectification, their alignment with objects and the deprivation of their agency, render them as portable possessions to be passed around to different male members of the family. The specters of the women who came before her are configured as a monolith of acceptable womanhood, an inheritance which is sharply contrasted with the property, status, and agency which is inherited by the men of the family; and while subsumed into these inheritances initially, throughout the novel Laura distances herself from and

disdains them. The many women of Tom Crick's family, like those of Laura's, are configured as specters whose position within Tom's story closely aligns them with the traumas which structure it. Whereas Warner's novel centers Laura's experiences within and flight from the Willowes family history, Swift's novel is narrated by a man who himself is deeply enmeshed within the history of his family, who in a sense cannot escape those stories and inheritances that have passed through successive generations. The women who appear throughout his story are associated with what Tom terms the "Here and Now" - traumatic occurrences which resist being fit into an organizational or interpretive frame, which by the traumas they engender resist narration.

In the third chapter of this thesis, I argue that the figure of the witch crystallizes the challenges to history that these women represent, and who, in both novels, recuperates the experiences and lives of these marginalized women, granting them the autonomy to narrate themselves outside the confines of masculine modes of narrativization. In both novels, the witch is tied to spaces and narratives that are "beyond" locatable and narratable historical life. They are associated with breaks and ruptures within the narratives of both novels, which not only foreground the constructedness of the narratives and institutions by which women are othered within certain totalizing discourses, but they are also indicative of alternative possibilities as a result of their resonances with the fantastic and the subversive.

The relationships of women to space, history, and the fantastic are interconnected in both novels; their erasure from the former two discourses is challenged and recuperated by the centrality of the fantastic to Warner and Swift's novels. Temporal ambiguity is foregrounded by women, as they not only suggest the persistence of the past

into the present, but also gesture beyond the strictures of historical narrativization altogether, in essence recuperating women's position from outside of historical discourse. Women's own position at the periphery of both texts becomes a site of resistance, one in which masculinizing narratives of progress are revealed as fraught, incomplete, and inherently bound up with ideological considerations of power.

## CHAPTER 1

### SPACE AND HISTORY: SUBVERTING THE REPRODUCTION OF GENDER

The geographies of *Lolly Willowes* and *Waterland* are deeply intertwined with how both novels interrogate the production of historical narratives. Both history and geography can be conceived of as attempts to impose order onto those things which are inherently chaotic, disorganized, and fragmentary. However, the writing of history, from its creation as an academic discipline in the 19th century, has been predicated on centering the gaze of white Western men as the subjects of history. Those events, people, and spaces which are taken for granted or made invisible are just as significant to the production of historical narratives and ordered geographic spaces as those which are included. Foundational to the historical project is the ability to narrativize space and history, which implies that historians have control over both: to render the past legible via a linear narrative is akin to rendering spaces legible in the form of maps, navigation, or the manipulation of bodies of water and landmasses in that they seek to impose order over that which is inherently disordered.

The intersection of history and space in both *Lolly Willowes* and *Waterland* provides a focal point for the subversion of history, geography, and women's placement within these discourses. Figured within broader narratives of history, women quite literally reproduce history, but in this process are reproduced *as women*, as the "unhistorical other of history," in Christina Crosby's words, existing "above, below, or

beyond proper historical or political life” (Crosby 1). Both novels explore how histories differentially attach themselves to certain bodies and spaces, but Warner and Swift resist reproducing exclusionary and totalizing historical narratives. *Lolly Willowes* follows Laura Willowes’s life from childhood in her rural home at Lady Place to living in London with her family before, finally, moving to the country hamlet of Great Mop to escape from the oppressive conditions of her life in the city. Swift’s novel is narrated by the protagonist Tom Crick, a history teacher in London, as he recounts to his students the various interconnected stories of his life and his ancestors’ lives, from his childhood in the Fenlands of Eastern England through to the present day. In their respective novels, Warner and Swift problematize naturalizing discourses of space and history by showing both to be tenuous, predicated on exclusion, and mutually imbricated in the production of marginalized bodies. Women in their manifold haunting guises suggest the specter of alternative spaces that resist male-centric narratives of historical progress, in essence gesturing outside of history and “locatable” space.

The spatial bifurcation of Warner’s novel would seem to set up Great Mop as an alternative to the Victorian settings of Laura Willowes’s childhood home at Lady Place and Apsley Terrace, the London home of her brother Henry and his wife Caroline. This contrast produces a tension between London and Great Mop, a space that is seemingly “outside” of history yet still connected to it. However, as opposed to being a utopian escape from the confines of history, Great Mop itself is still open to masculine reinscriptions and coercive communal relationships which Laura decidedly rejects. It is in her witch-hood and her pact with Satan, at novel’s end, that she finds true freedom. In *Waterland*, the contradictions of narrativization are closely bound up with the geography

of the novel's primary setting, the Fens. The cyclical tension between the destructive capacities of the Leem and Ouse rivers and the land itself mirror the ways in which Tom Crick's own story breaks and repeats itself - narrative complications that foreground the ambiguous boundary separating history from fairy-tale.

The countryside had been for *Lolly Willowes*'s Laura a space of relative freedom from the strictures of history, however caught up in these narratives it might be. Lady Place, Laura's childhood home in rural Somerset, and the brewery it is attached to, form part of the constellation of familial objects that are passed around after Laura's father Everard and brother James die - a constellation that includes Laura herself. She is excluded from the masculine line of inheritance; after her brother James dies, Lady Place must be rented out until her nephew Titus "should be of an age to resume the tenure" (Warner 58). Although caught up in Victorian notions of sex, gender, and property, Lady Place also offers Laura a degree of freedom which complicates normative scripts of femininity. Here she is free to pursue her own interests, such as brewing simples, reading books on law and witchcraft, or publishing a book on the benefits of "old fashioned simples and healing herbs" (Warner 31). These activities clearly foreshadow her pact with Satan in Part Three, but they also subtly subvert and appropriate her family's traditional occupation as brewers, an occupation that is only open to the men of the family.

Apsley Terrace is a space that is primarily marked by its devotion to the past, by the reproduction of Victorian models of masculinity, history, and sex into both Edwardian and post-WWI England. This is registered by familial relics, such as great-great-great aunt Salome's prayer book and marmalade recipe - relics that, like Laura,

travel from Lady Place to Apsley Terrace. Time is regulated by the family's regular attendance at church, but also by the grandfather clock which Henry winds up every Sunday; Laura watches as the leaden weights hang "sullenly over the abyss of time wherein they were to make their descent during the seven days following" (Warner 47). Jane Marcus notes that London, for Warner, is a space that is conducive to certain bourgeois sensibilities of time and family that Laura initially conforms to, as one of the family objects or heirlooms to be passed from one location to another, by "forming herself to aunthood" (Marcus 150).

Laura's refusal to get married strands her at Apsley Terrace; but in this she is also resisting her objectification, resisting being passed around the houses of different male authority figures. She refuses all of the suitors that Henry and Carolina present to her, referring to them as "undertakers" (Warner 52); she is bored by the Church and Caroline's religious devotion which imbues it with such significance, and resents being called "Aunt Lolly" by her family. Apsley Terrace configures history as the folding of the past into the present via the possession, rearrangement, and inheritance of familial objects. Indeed, the first scene of the novel finds Caroline fretting over Laura's room at Apsley Terrace: where she will put the writing table, the walnut bureau, what pieces of furniture will arrive with Laura. The need to organize space, and those people and objects that fill it, signifies ownership, and for the Willoweses, ownership necessitates ordering the present in accordance with what has come before. Even after the end of the First World War, as Laura observes that "the younger members of the family had moved into new positions. And she herself ... had strained against her moorings, as fast and far sunk as they were" (Warner 66), Henry and Caroline attempt to preserve as closely as possible

the familiar Willows traditions. The destruction of the war passes with little notice, and any substantive challenge it might have posed to the family hierarchy is diffused.

The novel's historical references are noticeably foregrounded in Laura's time at both Lady Place and Apsley Terrace, indicating how tethered both spaces are to the imposition of time and narrativization, and their unwillingness to see beyond or outside of it. Indeed, the first half of Part One has the narrator recount the Willows family history, itself replete with "those old institutions, [that] dated from long before Laura was born" (Warner 29). The novel often ties time and history to masculinizing projects of possession and domination, notably at the end of Part One where Laura goes to work in a parcel room in order to support the war effort, though she is not swayed by the sentimental appeals to nationality made by recruitment posters.<sup>1</sup> The experience of the war produces two seemingly divergent models of postwar femininity, as Warner contrasts Laura's time in the parcel room with her niece Fancy's going to France to "drive motor lorries" (Warner 63), and remarrying after her husband is killed in the war out of "patriotic motives" (Warner 9). However, Warner ironizes Fancy's actions as ultimately affirming an illusory idea of Britannia that is used to justify violent, even jingoistic ends. Fancy criticizes her "unenterprising" Aunt Lolly, remarking that "she could find nothing better to do than to settle down with mum and dad" (Warner 9). Fancy ultimately

---

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt has argued that the recruitment posters signal the double bind faced by English women of the period: "as embodiments of the nation, women demand sacrifice, but they are also passive objects unified bodily with the territory to be defended. In this double bind, women embody a nation and its policies, while simultaneously being the silenced reference justifying those policies," (Nesbitt 21). This renders Laura, as a spinster, an intensely ambiguous subject with respect to her Englishness; so much so that even as she rebukes the cheap symbolism and rhetoric of the recruiting posters, she thinks "however despairing her disapproval, blood was being shed for her" (Warner 64).



conforms to the family hierarchy, one which is dependent upon capital accumulation and compulsory heterosexuality; Laura thinks, upon looking at Fancy's two children with her second husband "here was a new generation to call her Aunt Lolly and find her as indispensable as the last" (Warner 67). Laura attempts to extricate herself from the confines of the Willowes traditions by fleeing to Great Mop, which offers her distance from the patriarchal narratives that govern Lady Place and Apsley Terrace.

It is important to note that the spatial bifurcation of the novel does not entail a binary separation of the "premodern" countryside from London as an industrialized modern metropolis,<sup>2</sup> even though Warner subtly locates Laura's time there within the context of post-World War I England through her use of dates.<sup>3</sup> I am primarily interested in how this historicization elaborates the boundaries of a historical project that Laura extricates herself from by moving from Apsley Terrace to Great Mop. Rather than existing in opposition to London, as a sentimental, ahistorical construction of the countryside,<sup>4</sup> Great Mop seems to sit outside of narrative impositions of history and space.

---

<sup>2</sup> Recent attempts to center regional or rural modernisms, such as Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey's *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention* or Neal Alexander and James Moran's *Regional Modernisms*, show precisely the ways in which the cosmopolitan aesthetics of many modernist texts are imbued with reference to, even dependent on, rural spaces.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Garrity has written on the significance of Warner's use of dates in the novel, arguing that they function both as an analogue to the progression of the suffragette movement in England (signaling Laura's burgeoning feminist impulses), and as a way to historicize Laura's erotic awakening once she makes her pact with Satan.

<sup>4</sup> Discussing the evolution of the pastoral genre in his book *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams argues that as the genre developed, many writers emitted a desire to return to a past, mythic England. Coterminous with this development was the incorporation of bourgeois imagery and norms into many pastoral texts, rendering it a mode of writing aspiring to a mythic, timeless Arcadia, but which is nonetheless entangled with the context in which it was produced.

Great Mop exists as an eddy where received norms of gender, history, and space are shown to be oppressive as well as empty. The name Great Mop itself ironizes norms of gender and sexuality: while, as Jane Garrity points out, the name at once signifies the folkloric witch's broomstick as well as Laura's expanded erotic horizons,<sup>5</sup> it also gestures toward the housework performed by characters like Nannie Quantrell, Caroline, and the owner of Laura's cottage, Mrs. Leak. The name signals the constructions of domesticity which held women "beyond history," in Crosby's words, but displaces these strictures onto a landscape where they are unravelled, giving Laura the freedom to refuse the scripts of masculine possession. When she casts the map of Great Mop and an accompanying guidebook into a well, she rejects imposing order onto the village, instead positioning her relationship to the village via her "identification with the beauty of the landscape" (Garrity 161).<sup>6</sup>

The arrival of Titus, Laura's nephew, at Great Mop threatens to introduce patriarchal possession over her and the landscape, in effect folding Great Mop into normative narratives of gender and imperialism. His arrival is a disturbing intrusion for Laura; she thinks to herself as they walk around the hamlet together that his love for the countryside was "comfortable, it was portable, it was a reasonable, appreciative appetite, a possessive and masculine love ... He loved the countryside as if it were a body" (Warner 147). For Laura, Titus's encounter with the landscape resembles domination and possession; indeed, immediately before this moment Laura compares him to a "usurping

---

<sup>5</sup> See Garrity, p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> Nesbitt argues that in this moment Laura simply embraces a "newly empowered female" geography, a move that "reaffirms her comfort with received geographies" and opens her up to "reinscription, as her family, represented by her nephew Titus, can easily follow her tracks" (Nesbitt 11).

monarch” (Warner 145).<sup>7</sup> However, congruent with his unwitting usurpation is what is perhaps Titus’s defining characteristic, his obliviousness; he is unaware of his effect on Laura, as well as of his own privileged position within a hierarchical English society.<sup>8</sup> His obliviousness gestures toward how patriarchy enables the imposition of order over spaces, while simultaneously configuring this order as “natural.”

Warner contrasts Titus’s portable, masculine “possession” of the land with Laura’s own “possession” of Great Mop; for her the landscape seems, initially, to “hold” her within it, “fold[ing] ... round her like the fingers of a hand” (Warner 117), and she envisions it as her “domain” (Warner 159). Titus’s portable love of the landscape is, importantly, transferrable - Laura thinks that it “was no more to him than any other likeable country lap ... his comfort apart, it was a place like any other place” (Warner 148); whereas Laura’s love for the landscape is portrayed as almost reciprocal, Titus’s is purely possessive. The village of Great Mop is not a place that is entirely free from masculine reinscription; indeed, as the narrative unfolds it becomes clear that Laura’s freedom was not dependent on her coming to Great Mop, but the landscape that it is surrounded by itself seems to be deeply connected to her relationship with Satan.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jacqueline Shin claims that Titus’s presence and unconscious claims over the land can be read as an attempt to render Great Mop portable and narratable within the context of Warner’s use of art and objects to subvert “the gaze of patriarchal possession” by “conjuring, animating, and re-animating two dimensional images” (710). Laura’s pact with Satan, she argues, allows her to step outside of an imposed, almost predetermined pastoral landscape.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, while conversing with Laura about the book he is writing on Fuseli, Titus declares that “the secret of writing a good book is to be cut off from access to the reading-room at the British Museum” to which Laura responds that he “might have stayed in Bloomsbury and written his book on Good Fridays” (Warner 145).

Laura admits as the novel progresses that she “could not say” (Warner 161) whether she had come to Great Mop of her own volition, or whether “her coming had been foreseen, her way had been prepared” (Warner 154). Indeed, she looks back at the whole of her life and realizes that she “was a witch by vocation” (Warner 160); it is as if Laura’s witch-hood and her pact with Satan were already predetermined and give her the ability to narrate her life and experiences properly, outside of the frame of the Willowes traditions. Living specifically in Great Mop is not a pre-condition for Laura’s freedom, nor even for her witch-hood necessarily. As she remarks to Satan near the novel's end, “I needn’t really have come here to meet you, then ... I thought I came here to be in the country, and to escape being an aunt” (Warner 208). Her “nine months” (Warner 161) in the village before becoming a witch recall the nine months a baby spends in the womb before being born; Great Mop seems to, initially, hold and protect Laura until “the loving huntsman” brings her into his servitude and offers his protection.

Similar to how Warner’s novel provides a space for Laura to extricate herself from patriarchal history and gender codes, Tom Crick’s imperfect, fragmentary, and serpentine narration in *Waterland* recognizes and challenges normative constructions of history, and the spaces and narratives which comprise it. While *Waterland* also enacts a juxtaposition between the countryside Fens where Tom grows up and London, where he now teaches history and recounts his story to his students, the former becomes both a site of and vessel for Tom and the novel to subvert the imposition of linear histories over places and people. The Fens are described by Tom as “nothingness”: flat, empty, reclaimed land that is in a constant state of tension between the bodies of water that surround it, “land that was once water and, even today, is not quite solid” (Swift 8). This porosity provides the

novel with its central metaphor, of attempting to control and narrativize the Fens in an effort to produce history and advance a narrative of human progress. But this also calls attention to the ambiguity which lies therein: of the impossibility of overarching historical narratives, and the tenuous distinction between history and fiction.

Swift's novel is exemplary of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction," novels that "ask us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions are historically determined and vary with time" (Hutcheon 105). The instability of these definitions is written into the landscape of the Fens, a space which Tom refers to on the novel's first page as a "fairy-tale place ... far away from the wide world" (Swift 1). The Fens' emptiness and flatness, their fecundity<sup>9</sup> and openness to constant rearticulation, manipulation, and change, challenge the epistemological primacy of history,<sup>10</sup> as well as which actors are granted agency within historical narratives.

Tom's description of the Fens as a "fairy-tale land" signals the porosity of the boundary separating history from fiction, a boundary that his narrative foregrounds and repeatedly confuses. The Fens manifests the tension inherent in this distinction, but also opens up these labels to subversion and rearticulation; not only is the primacy of historical narrative disrupted, but the Fens as a space rests upon the cyclical tension

---

<sup>9</sup> Critics such as Pamela Cooper have argued that the significance of the simultaneously empty yet fertile Fens, the space of both land and water, signifies the absence of any inherent meaning attributable to the chaos of events, onto which one can project, or in this case construct, narratives.

<sup>10</sup> However, although the novel subverts the hegemony of overarching narratives of history, as well as their epistemological primacy, this does not entail an endorsement of historical or philosophical relativism. Hutcheon herself argues that historiographic metafiction "reject[s] projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past" while also recognizing that "we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know the past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process" (Hutcheon 122).

between the reclaimed land upon which history is produced and things are made to happen, and water, chaotic eruptions of which threaten to wipe away or overpower those narratives. Fairy tales seem to exist as a means to recognize the limits of historiography by narrativizing those events which exceed the normative bounds of historiographic representation, a tension which Tom is well aware of and exploits. Tom himself manifests the ambiguous boundary between history and storytelling in his own ancestry, descending on his maternal side from the Atkinsons who “made history” and on his paternal side the Cricks who “spun yarns” (Swift 17).<sup>11</sup> He sits at a complicated nexus within the text: he is a history teacher tasked with reproducing and passing on an overarching narrative of history to his students that he himself doesn’t believe in, and consistently calls into question. Yet he is of course not entirely free from those strictures of narrativization which exclude, marginalize, or erase many of the women who populate his story (strictures which I will elaborate on in sections two and three of this thesis).

Fairy tales can be read as a way to render what Tom refers to as the “Here and Now,” those irruptions of an unbearable reality that resist narrativization or comprehension.<sup>12</sup> These fairy tales connect to the two conflicting definitions of reality that Tom gives to his students, as either a “hallucination” which “only visits us for a brief while” (Swift 40, 33) or as the experience of “uneventfulness, vacancy, flatness. Reality is that nothing happens” (Swift 40). These conflicting definitions of reality themselves

---

<sup>11</sup> Kate Mitchell has argued that what fundamentally separates the Cricks and the Atkinsons is that the former recognizes the stories they tell as fiction, while the latter come to believe, over successive generations of consolidating power and accumulation, that the stories they have constructed constitute reality.

<sup>12</sup> See Stef Craps and Mitchell on the relationship between history, trauma and the “Here and Now” to the imposition of narrative over a series of unfolding events which resist narration.

gesture toward the limits of narrativization which Tom works to expose, reflecting an inability to articulate a single definition of reality to give to his students and the inability of history to fit the mundanity and extremities of life into a convenient interpretive and organizational frame. Fairy tales seem to register these excesses, providing Tom one narrative mode amidst many with which to pursue his desirous inquiry into the past.<sup>13</sup> But fairy tales are often linked with women and their liminal, even “otherworldly” position in Tom’s narrative.

Many of the women in Tom’s story are linked, too, to the Fens, indeed to the natural world itself. The geography of the Fens is repeatedly gendered feminine by several characters in the novel; this gendering intersects with the ways in which Tom’s narrative foregrounds how capital accumulation and imperial domination have built history, this “noble and impersonal Idea of Progress” (Swift 92) over the landscape.

“Women,” Tom says to his students:

“Are equipped with a miniature model of reality: an empty but fillable vessel. A vessel in which much can be made to happen, and much to issue in consequence. In which dramas can be brewed, things can be hatched out of nothing” (Swift 42)

---

<sup>13</sup> Craps, Mitchell, and Robert K. Irish argue that desire propels both Tom’s narrative inquiry and the way Swift structures the novel as fragmentary and incomplete. This desire is closely linked with the traumas that structure his narrative, as it is his desire to excavate and narrate these “unnarratable” events which break up and fragment his story. Tom’s desire and, just as importantly, Mary Metcalf’s (eventual) lack of it position them differently as subjects of historical inquiry and bring into focus the relationship between desire/curiosity with who is included in narratives of history, and who is expelled to its margins, rendered as “excessive” to this narrative.

Women are aligned with the contradictions of “reality” as Tom conceives of them, but also with the landscape of the Fens itself, that empty space where history is constructed and negated. Tom’s narrative here mirrors how patriarchal historical narratives construct women's bodies as vessels in which the contradictions of narrativization play out in the reproduction of history, and as a passive body to which history happens and upon which certain narratives are inscribed. But many women exceed or disrupt these narrative bounds, creating ruptures within Tom’s narrative by existing or acting outside of the normative bounds of history and of Tom’s own narration. The past is ruptured, is folded into or reappears in the present in a cyclical fashion - at one moment Tom describes history as “the record of decline. What we wish upon the future is very often the image of some lost, imagined past” (Swift 141). Whereas in *Lolly Willowes* Laura attempts to extricate herself from normative narratives of gender and sexuality by fleeing to Great Mop, many of the women in Swift’s novel are aligned with narrative ruptures and recurrences. They sit in something of a paradoxical position: at once pushed to the narrative’s margins, they cast an outsized influence over Tom's narrative through their absences. And while Great Mop is not depicted as a utopian space that is free from history, many of the spaces in *Waterland* which resist narrativization are figured in terms of their relationship to the traumas of the “Here and Now.”

The intersection of space and history produces women as figures to which history happens, but who also, in the scope of Tom’s narrative, are afforded a certain degree of agency as normative gender codes are subverted within those spaces and events which rupture Tom's narration. In the novel’s longest chapter, “About the Rise of the Atkinsons,” Tom’s circuitous narration parodies Victorian ideals of history, gender, and



sexuality.<sup>14</sup> For Kate Mitchell, the novel's evocation of Victorian literature and culture is but one mode through which the novel foregrounds the circularity of human constructions of history, portraying how elements and ideas of the past arise in the different eras the novel presents. She argues that these Victorian sensibilities form "a monolith, albeit an unstable one, against which Tom propounds his alternative vision of history and reality" (Mitchell 64). In his relentless historical inquiry, and his attempted recuperation of the women from his past and present, Tom's narrative folds history into the present. When narrating Sarah Atkinson's influence over town of Gildsey long after she dies, or of his wife Mary Metcalf's inheritance of the madness and otherness with which Sarah is imbued, these Victorian norms persist across time and are projected onto women of subsequent generations. The women of Tom's narrative are defined "by the stories that attach themselves to them" (Mitchell 87); but while the images, archetypes, and historical figures he draws upon to recuperate them are recognizable, the very fact of their recurrence foregrounds these images and the silences they engender in the women they come to describe. These women haunt the narrative; and while not necessarily the cause of those traumas which introduce breaks into Tom's narration, women come to be aligned with those events and stories which historical narratives do not, or cannot, fully capture or narrate.

---

<sup>14</sup> Pamela Cooper has argued that Dickens's *Great Expectations* is an intertextual referent when examining this chapter, and Raphael Ingelbien has similarly observed how Swift compresses the plot of a Victorian novel so as to subvert the ways in which Victorian England is held up as a totem through which to access an essentialized idea of "Englishness".

## CHAPTER 2

### WOMEN AS LIMINAL FIGURES

Many of the women in both *Lolly Willowes* and *Waterland* create ruptures in temporality that confuse past and present, and that render prescribed narratives of history and gender tenuous, if not impossible. Temporal confusion is registered across the two novels not just as the failure of reproducing the past in the present, but also in the ways women are constructed as liminal figures who gesture to alternatives outside of history. Relegated to the margins of narrative space, many women paradoxically undermine patriarchal narratives which render them as little more than vessels for reproduction. The inheritances of history - whether capital in the form of property or land or the gendered inheritance of a predetermined position in society - are often the primary mode by which both Warner and Swift ironize women's static position outside of it. In this sense, the persistence of the past within the present, of Victorian ideals of gender and sexuality, or even the imposition of a linear narrative of progress over chaotic events, is configured as an outcome of a masculine narrativization that is totalizing, naturalized, and dominant.

Both Warner and Swift ironize these gendered inheritances and naturalized narratives through the ways in which women from both novels are configured as spectral characters who confuse and invert the boundary separating presence from absence. Their presences are figured as absences within, or removal from, patriarchal spaces and narratives, while those women who are not physically present have their absences

registered, almost recuperated, by the ways in which naturalized discourses of history and gender are complicated and shown to fail. This temporal confusion gestures toward the marginalization of women, the ways in which they are abstracted from their bodies into symbols of maternity and of the nation,<sup>15</sup> but also the failures of history to fully recuperate and narrate women. The intersection of space and history as a site for the production of gendered bodies is opened up to rearticulation, while this temporal confusion undermines the means by which hegemonic narratives of progress and gender are naturalized, thus suggesting alternatives to certain prescriptive modes of being.

By locating certain women beyond or outside of these hegemonic narratives, Warner and Swift ironize the contradictions of prioritizing a male subject of history “by virtue of locating women elsewhere” (Crosby 2). For my purposes, this “elsewhere” to which Crosby refers can be conceived of as the narrative periphery, the primary tension arising from the fact that both authors position women and maternal figures at once away from or beyond the narrative center while anchoring the plots around their absences. However, maternal erasure and recuperation differentially act on the bodies of women across the two texts, for while Warner seeks to challenge institutional hierarchies and naturalized binaries of sexuality, space, and gender, Swift’s narrative foregrounds the overattachment of symbols to women’s bodies. This symbolic overloading presents

---

<sup>15</sup> For example, Jane Garrity argues that in the interwar period, many British women modernists attempted to mediate the contradictory position of women as at once mothers of the British race and/or empire with their conception of themselves as, in Virginia Woolf’s term, “step-daughters” of the nation. Though, as Garrity points out, this contradiction is inherently bound up with women’s position within, and contradictory feelings toward, a British imperial hierarchy. She argues that “as mothers, [women’s] bodies were disciplined and regulated (by laws, sexual science, cultural conventions, etc.); but, as figures symbolic of British territory, their bodies were expansive, limitless, and aligned with acquisitiveness” (Garrity 4).

women as the *product* of storytelling, as characters who are consumed by the stories that are projected onto them by Tom and the characters whose narratives he relays. Women's spectral position in both novels comes from their status as an object of history - never as the subject of history. As objects, as stories, women in both novels confuse these boundaries of presence and absence, but at the same time are aligned with narratives and spaces that rest "outside" of normative scripts of gender and history.

By subverting Laura's "inheritance" of normative scripts of femininity and compulsory heterosexuality, Warner, in *Lolly Willowses*, ironizes the conservative familial narratives by which these inheritances are reproduced, calling into question those "old fashioned ways" (Warner 10) that structure the lives and subjectivities of the Willowses family as they move into the twentieth century. While several characters deviate slightly from these familial expectations, many of these deviations are ultimately portrayed as being in service of the continuation and maintenance of pre-existing hierarchies. Perhaps most notably, Laura's brother Henry refuses the inheritance of their father Everard's brewery, instead going to London in order to study law. Everard remarks that "times are changed ... a country business doesn't look the same as it did to a young man in my day" (Warner 23). Yet his remark begs to be read within the context of the family narrative that is being outlined: what *has* changed aside from the occupation of the eldest son? Later in the novel, Titus also gestures toward this question; initially set on learning the family trade of brewing beer, he suddenly abandons this, moving to Great Mop instead to write a book on the Swiss painter Fuseli, which he declares to be the true "ambition of his life" (Warner 145). Within a narrative that stresses "respect for the good sense of their forebears" (10), Warner suggests that the shifting configuration of masculine dominance

is one of its defining features, its ability to differentially reproduce itself across locales and times.

Warner takes pains to gesture toward the peripheral position occupied by many of the women in the Willowses history; to Laura, they appear as ghostly characters who haunt the margins of the family line, who signal the inheritances of femininity which would engender silence and acquiescence. Laura's great-great-aunt Salome, though not physically present within the space of the novel, dominates how femininity is constructed within the family as part of an idealistic past that is inherited and reproduced across generations. Her recipe for puff pastry wins praise from King George III, and by the time Laura is born she is remembered as a "loyal subject, a devout churchwoman, and a good housewife . . . the Willowses were properly proud of her" (Warner 11). The image of great-great-aunt Salome as an ideal model for normative codes of femininity, nationalism, and devotion places as much constraint on the women of the family as does the masculine imposition of historical narrative, which Warner playfully suggests are merely two sides of the same coin.

Salome's life and subjectivity are confined to these objects with which she is associated: she is invoked solely through her recipe and prayer book, objects which are (significantly) given to Caroline, who very much embodies these symbols of domesticity. Salome and Caroline differ from Laura's great-great aunt Emma, who Laura imagines as a "gentle ghost" (Warner 12). Though her presence is also rendered via an object, in this case her harp, Emma is humanized for Laura upon discovering the harp and the lock of her hair that is embroidered into a willow tree upon it; Laura expresses sorrow over Emma who "it seemed to her, of all her relations had had the misfortune to die" (Warner

12).<sup>16</sup> This moment foreshadows the increasingly supernatural second and third parts of the novel but also, in the contrast of Emma with Salome, elucidates the ways in which ghostly, absent women haunt the novel's margins as figures of received normativity, while also gesturing outside of them into the fantastical.

The novel opens with Laura's move to Apsley Terrace after Everard's death, but draws attention to the objects and things that she brings with her. By aligning Laura's movement with furniture she brings with her, Warner foregrounds Laura's objectification, and how time, history and tradition are mediated through objects for the Willowses; Laura feels at one point that as though she "were a piece of property forgotten in the will" (Warner 10). From here, the novel transitions into the history of the Willows family up until Laura's childhood, subtly hinting that this objectification was present even at Lady Place. When she is born, her father buys a string of pearls to be enlarged year by year so as to eventually encircle "the neck of a grown up young woman at her first ball" (Warner 15) as opposed to the port he lays down at the birth of Henry and James. When actually ushered into the space of the ball, Laura expresses ambivalence about it, referring to the occasion as being "subdued into young ladyhood" (Warner 20) while remarking on the seeming paradox of the term "coming out," thinking that the

---

<sup>16</sup> The near doubling of names between Laura's great-great-aunt Emma and her aunt Emmy should be noted here, the latter of whom wants to whisk Laura away to India so as to improve her chances of marriage. Garrity and Nesbitt have noted the language of imperialism sedimented in the descriptions of "parrots flying through the jungle" or "ayahs with rubies in their nostrils" (Warner 28) while connecting them to certain historical practices, but looking at Emmy and Emma in tandem, Warner seems to caricature Emmy's enthusiasm for India in the very exoticizing language she uses to describe it. Emma, on the other hand, blurs the boundary between life and death, between past and present, which humanizes her for Laura, whereas Emmy signals a future that rests upon colonialism and compulsory heterosexuality.

occasion would be better thought of as “going in,” spatializing her entrance into ladyhood and the gendered expectations which go along with it. The images of the necklace and the ball reappear when Laura attends the Witches’ Sabbath in Part Three, where she sees within the throat of the young author masquerading as Satan “a flicker of life, a small regular pulse, small and regular as if a pearl necklace slid by under the skin” (Warner 182-83), signaling the specter of the oppressive contours of the Willowes tradition. The pearl necklace is an object, even potential heirloom in the vein of Salome’s familial relics, which marks Laura’s entrance in society while being also a means of marking and measuring out time. The image of its ingestion at the Witches’ Sabbath suggests that the Sabbath is not an authentic, complete rebellion, that the society at Great Mop is not fully distinct from the patriarchal traditions from which it stands at a remove.

Laura’s identities as a spinster and later as a witch are closely linked to her objectification and her ambiguous status as a historical subject in both the Willowes family and the nation. By linking her witch-hood and spinsterhood, Warner ironizes women’s traditional figuration as “mothers of the British Race” (Garrity 1), recasting Laura as a woman who is not beholden to reproduce patriarchal myths that would render her as the historical “other.” Both Jane Garrity and Barbara Brothers note that throughout the novel, heterosexual marriage is portrayed as a kind of “living death” (Garrity 158)<sup>17</sup> as Warner plays with images and traits traditionally projected onto spinsters by applying

---

<sup>17</sup> Garrity argues that the persistent death imagery is linked to how the figure of the spinster is used to dissimulate “Laura’s lesbian identification” (Garrity 158), while Brothers contends that the figure of the spinster is inverted; stereotypical characteristics of older single women are now projected onto women who enter into heterosexual unions, turning these women into “mere shadows of themselves” (Brothers 203).

them to figures like Laura's sister-in-law Sibyl,<sup>18</sup> who in her submissive silence has a face resembling a "refined and waxen mask" and who, Laura imagines, struggles internally over who, and what, she really is:

"[She] must have spent many long afternoons in silence, learning this unexpected beauty, preparing her face for the last look of death. What had been her thoughts? Why was she so different when she spoke? Which, what, was the real Sibyl: the greedy, agile little ferret or this memorial urn?" (Warner 85).

Laura's sister-in-law Caroline is similarly described with death-like imagery; she is taciturn and never reveals much of herself to Laura. When Laura remarks on the orderliness of how her clothes are arranged, Caroline answers "'We have our example. . . . The grave clothes were folded in the tomb'" (Warner 48). She embodies the Victorian image of the angel in the house, and the imagery of death which surrounds her seems to almost ironize this image of a woman who actively polices the boundaries of acceptable standards of femininity. Laura in one moment configures Henry and Caroline's bodies as a prison: "[Lolly] was safe in their hands. They could look after Lolly. Henry was like a wall, and Caroline's breasts were like towers" while Laura wouldn't have to worry about "money matters" (Warner 76). Warner castigates not only the systems and values which coerce women into subservient domesticated roles in a heterosexual union, but also those women who actively maintain it. And while the spinster label might not be inherently

---

<sup>18</sup> Scholars such as Alex Murray have argued that Warner subverts images of the witch and the spinster even after Laura moves to Great Mop; Miss Carloe, Murray argues, is someone "who would be thought of by others as a "typical witch" when in reality she is "'the typical genteel spinster who's spent herself being useful to people who don't want her'" (Murray 434).



freeing for Laura, it gestures toward new modes of existence that aren't underwritten by reproductive heterosexuality.

Laura's mother is Warner's most blatant condemnation of the angel in the house, an image which nominally conjures the image of death while seeming to literally and figuratively place women beyond the bounds of narratable historical life.<sup>19</sup> She is referred to only as "Mrs. Willowes," anticipating Laura's time in Apsley Terrace where she is known as "Aunt Lolly" or "Miss Willowes," depending on the context. But the anonymity of Mrs. Willowes is compounded by how she is described in very spectral terms: as a mother who "made a poor recovery after Laura's birth. As time went on she became more and more invalidish, though always pleasantly so" (Warner 18). But Warner uses this character to both ironize the expectations of femininity and heterosexuality and depict a mode of resistance to these expectations from within the narrative of the Willowes family, a resistance which subtly engenders Laura's future rejection of these norms. "During the last few years of her life," the narrator tells us,

"Mrs. Willowes grew continually more skilled in evading responsibilities, and her death seemed but a final perfected expression of this skill. It was as if she had said, yawning a

---

<sup>19</sup> The image of the angel in the house not only conjures the image of a ghostly woman beyond the bounds of temporality, but also is a historically locatable masculine construction. Virginia Woolf popularized the term, ironically invoking Coventry Patmore's 1862 verse novel of the same name which itself gave rise to the image of an idealized wife as "the presiding hearth angel of the Victorian social myth" (Langland 290). In her lecture "Professions for Women" Woolf characterized the angel in the house as an image of female perfection, a woman who "never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize above all with the minds and wishes of others" (Woolf 237). This image, she suggests, strips women of bodily experiences, passions, and sensations while the existence of such things is "avoided, denied, or suppressed" (Showalter 342).

delicate little cat's yawn, 'I think I will go to my grave now,' and had left the room, her white shawl trailing behind her." (Warner 19)

Her illness and eventual death allow Laura to grow up outside of the strictures of femininity which the neighboring women impose on their own daughters, and which they fear Laura is missing, lamenting to Mrs. Willowes that she might grow up "eccentric" if not raised a certain way or having playmates closer to her own age.

The women who haunt the narrative are victims of masculinizing erasure; they are bidden by conformity to reproduce those "natural" conditions in which their bodies become devalued, paradoxically so: at once abstracted into symbols of femininity and maternity, they are also firmly attached to objects which define the contours of accepted heterosexual femininity, all of which Laura rejects in her flight to Great Mop. When thinking about the women who populate Tom Crick's winding narrative in *Waterland*, their abstraction into symbols of femininity, maternity, and the nation similarly place them at the periphery of Tom's story: actors whose agency is undermined by their symbolic overdetermination.<sup>20</sup> Women are primarily defined by the stories and symbols to which they become attached, which in the scope of Tom's narrative remove them from the desirous inquiry which is associated with historiography and making things happen; but some, specifically Tom's mother, come to be aligned with storytelling as an

---

<sup>20</sup> Much scholarship has been written about how the narrative symbolically overdefines or overloads the women whom Tom narrates - see Cooper, Ashley Orr, and Katrina Powell for analyses of how this overloading reveals many of the contradictions inherent to how Tom's female ancestors fit into the narrative: as at once beyond yet firmly ensconced within historiographic narratives, and who resist Tom's curious and desirous inquiry into the past.

alternative to history. The link between maternity and storytelling is established in the opening of the novel, as Tom's father tells him that "whatever you learn about people, however bad they turn out, remember that each one of them has a heart, and each one of them was once a tiny baby sucking his mother's milk . . .," words which Tom refers to as "fairy-tale advice" (Swift 1); mothers are at once figures who give and sustain life, are consumed by the fairy-tales in which they figure, yet also, as we come to find out, tell stories in order to give shape to the traumas of history. As opposed to *Lolly Willowes*, where the women of Laura's family hang in tension between presence and absence so as to ironize women's construction *as absences* in patriarchal spaces and histories, the women in *Waterland* quite literally overpower the strictures of narrativization and temporality. Challenges to received narratives of history and reproductive heterosexuality are registered through women like Sarah and Helen Atkinson, Mary Metcalf and even Martha Clay, women whose almost hallucinatory presences disrupt narrative imposition, cause breaks in temporality, placing them "outside the reach of male influence" (Orr 89).

In section one of this thesis, I argued that Swift's manipulation of space and history in *Waterland* exploits the boundary separating history from fairy-tale; building on this, I want to examine how the "gendered inheritance[s]" of "madness" (Orr 87) and sacredness figure as modes of feminine abstraction that Swift exploits in a similar vein to that of the angel in the house. However, whereas Warner critiques how some women conform to and reproduce oppressive gender norms by ironizing the image of an idealized domesticated wife, Swift imbues the women who are identified as "holy" or "mad" with an agency which the angels in Warner's novel are not. The town of Gildsey is where much of the plot in the Fens is set; it is the town where Tom's maternal

ancestors build their brewing empire, upon land which they carefully manipulate so as to allow for the ideal conditions in which to grow barley and transport it down the Rivers Leem and Ouse. But as Tom notes near the beginning of the novel, the town is named after St. Gunnhilda, “our local patroness” who, “surviving on nothing but her prayers heard the voice of God, founded a church, and gave her name ... to a town” (Swift 18). Gunnhilda, while not physically present in the novel, provides an image of religious devotion and asceticism which finds resonances in Mary Metcalf’s eventual retreat inward - her explorations of religion and piety, her rejection, as Tom sees it, of the “itch of [sexual] curiosity” (Swift 51). But the figure of Gunnhilda is important for two reasons: by lending her name to the town of Gildsey, she projects Tom’s assertion that women are an “empty but fillable vessel” (Swift 42) onto the landscape itself while providing an almost ancestral figure to whom the sacredness and madness by which certain women in the novel are labeled can be traced.<sup>21</sup>

Tom projects sacredness and madness onto many of the women he describes; indeed their spectral positions in his narrative arise from how they are swallowed by the fictions and stories that surround them.<sup>22</sup> Being at once necessary for the reproduction of a historical narrative yet simultaneously removed from this story, the women in Crick’s

---

<sup>21</sup> Phyllis Chesler and Jane M. Ussher have done important work in outlining how madness, as a historically gendered diagnosis, “pathologis[es] femininity” (Ussher 65), and marks women as the “other.”

<sup>22</sup> Mitchell argues that both Helen Crick and Mary Metcalf are removed quite literally from the narrative by stories; however, she makes no mention of Sarah Atkinson’s relationship to stories, an oversight which I will address. Mitchell makes this assertion in the context of a broader argument regarding the ways that Tom’s narrative figures historical inquiry as desire, specifically the ways in which sexuality and the female body are leveraged as metaphors for her assertion that his historical inquiry is inherently desirous.

narrative form a constellation of images, archetypes, and characteristics which place them outside of or beyond historical time. From the narrative periphery, women collapse the distinctions separating past and present from one another, and are configured as slippery, spectral presences who are “both marginal to [the novel], and, equally, fill it” (Mitchell 88). Sarah Atkinson is perhaps the central female ancestor whom Tom repeatedly invokes, a figure that he subtly aligns with eruptions of the “Here and Now” in his narrative. Her life is chronicled in the chapter “About the Rise of the Atkinsons” as the “Brewer’s Daughter from Gildsey” (Swift 118) who marries Thomas Atkinson and bears him three sons, two of whom grow into adulthood. Nestled within the story of their marriage is Tom’s remark to his students about a theory of history known as the “theory of hubris”: “there can be no success with impunity, no great achievement without accompanying loss; that no Napoleon can go carving up the map of Europe without getting his comeuppance” (Swift 72). The tension between land reclamation and the “obstinacy of water” (Swift 69) finds a parallel in this idea of history as imbued with a cyclical tension between progression and regression; Sarah’s position in the novel is tied to moments of “regression,” of chaos that threatens to undermine or wipe away the Atkinson narrative of progress.

Sarah’s association with challenges to the continuation of a patriarchal narrative of history is rooted in her own marginalization within narrative space. Growing paranoid about the affairs he thinks she is having, Thomas one day strikes her, and as she falls she hits her head on the corner of a table, “never again recover[ing] her wits” (Swift 77). This act of violence overtly marginalizes Sarah within the Atkinson family story: she is confined to an upper room in their house, she doesn’t speak anymore - though Tom casts

doubt on whether this is an agential act or an outcome of the injury - and spends all of her time looking out over the central road of Gildsey, the aptly named Water Street. But concomitant with her marginalization is the spread amongst the townspeople of rumors and stories about Sarah: tales of her supposed predilection for seeing into and predicting the future, rumors that it was she who, after Thomas's death, directed sons George and Alfred Atkinson on how to run the business, the story that she is, in the final years of her life, confined to an asylum built by George and Alfred. Sarah is a character who closely resembles the Fens themselves, as at once a woman who is tasked above all with "begetting heirs" (Swift 69) to a history of accumulation, and one who is herself flattened into a vessel emptied of subjectivity, to be filled by others.

In Tom's narrative she figures as a character who challenges the idea of history as progress, even as she is transfigured in the imagination of the townspeople into an extra-temporal figure, a harbinger of an ever-expanding imperial venture:

"Who ... is now required to add to her various guises - Guardian  
Angel, Holy Mother, Saint Gunnhilda-come-again - yet another.  
To take in her left hand a trident and in her right a shield, to  
submit her wrinkled scalp and thin white locks to a plumed  
helmet, to allow her blue velvet chair to be transformed into a  
seagirt rock and to evoke an intrepid Britannia, staring, staring -  
To where?" (Swift 94)

She becomes consumed by the fictions and speculations which surround her, most importantly for my own argument as a madwoman in the attic who would from time to time exhibit "a singular form of animation ... utter[ing] the only words specifically

attributed to her in the years following her husband's dreadful fit of rage. Namely 'Smoke!', 'Fire!', 'Burning!'" (Swift 84). The narrative suggests that these images and archetypes, while not one and the same, are connected to one another, all coalescing in the image of "an intrepid Britannia" standing at the "zenith" of the Atkinson empire which has been forged via the accumulation of land, wealth, and bodies. Tom seems to ask if these archetypes and narratives can reproduce themselves into an unknown and unknowable future if history itself is cyclical, going backward even as it goes forward.<sup>23</sup> But we should not mistake Tom's theory of hubris as the "official" way in which to construct and interpret history: it is simply another mode of imposing order over a chaotic and ultimately empty reality, only one way in which he attempts to structure the interlocking narratives which make up his story. It is in this construction that I find the removal of women worth investigating: recurrence and reproduction suggest an order to history, something which Tom decidedly rejects, yet madness recurs as a story that he projects onto successive generations of women. This maternal line of inherited madness and otherness engulfs Sarah Atkinson and, later, Mary Metcalf, aligning these women with the traumatic excesses of history, and those events that Tom tries to recuperate throughout his story.

This cyclical theory of history converges with the liminal status accorded to women as Tom narrates the story of his mother Helen Atkinson, later Helen Crick; as a figure she too, like Sarah, is a spectral presence who, although dead at the time Tom

---

<sup>23</sup> See Del Ivan Janik for an examination of how Tom's narrative itself rests upon the tension between history and the Here and Now, and how his story reflects his own dictum that history consists of revolutions: breaks in the narrative that forecast a new start but also constantly refer and return to the past.

recounts his story, reappears and is reconfigured in characters like his wife Mary Metcalf. Helen's absence not only gestures toward maternal erasure within historical narratives - notice that Mary's mother is also dead - but also foregrounds the relationship between storytelling and maternity.<sup>24</sup> Helen is both cloaked in the symbolism and narratives of an idealized maternity tasked with reproducing the contradictions of reality, and also quite literally manifests Tom's idea of history as consisting of revolutions and recurrences. Coerced into an incestuous affair with her father Ernest Atkinson, himself a man suspected of being mad, she bears Tom's half-brother Dick whom Ernest thinks will be "the saviour of the world" (Swift 229). Tom describes their union as "like tying up into a knot the thread that runs into the future, it's like a stream wanting to flow backwards" (Swift 228). Helen's idealized maternity is subverted here; this moment seems to mark the nadir of the Atkinson family history, a nadir which has its roots in how Ernest's obsessive retreat inward parallels the contraction of the Atkinson brewing empire.

Helen, like Sarah Atkinson, is consumed by the stories that are projected onto her but is in turn a figure who tells stories as an antidote to reality; she is both story and storyteller. As a nurse at the Kessling Home for Neurasthenics she is configured as mother, nurse, and healer, telling her future husband Henry Crick, to whom she ministers while working there, to address his trauma from fighting in World War I by narrativizing it: "No, don't forget it. Don't erase it. You can't erase it. But make it into a story. Just a story" (Swift 225). Helen is seen as an "angel in a nurse's uniform, that white-aproned goddess" (Swift 224) while, in the throes of self-destructive misanthropy, Ernest

---

<sup>24</sup> Yet, as Katrina Powell has pointed out, motherhood is a narrative which casts women as central yet marginal to the narrative, the mother as a "privileged" figure who is nonetheless "excluded as a subject" (Powell 72).



Atkinson idealizes her into the embodiment of Beauty, the “most Platonic” of the ideals (Swift 219). For Ernest she is a woman whose beauty “counters” the destructive future of history and has the power to “disrupt” a “future-destroying war” (Mitchell 80); but in the end she is engulfed by the stories that are projected onto her by both Ernest and Tom himself. Her liminal, almost hallucinatory presence elucidates how fairy-tales come to be aligned with those confrontations with the Here and Now that inherently resist narrativization.

Tom’s wife Mary Metcalf is folded into the lineage of female figures that have come before her. She is a figure who, for Tom, interrupts the neat chronological structure of history, most clearly seen by his constant reference to her as a “future history teacher’s wife.” Within the broader scope of the narrative, she inherits the madness attributed to Sarah Atkinson, being committed to an asylum, and is ultimately consumed by stories, both those that she tells herself and those that are imposed upon her. After discovering she has stolen a child from the Safeways because “God told me [to]” (Swift 268), Tom attempts to take the baby away from her only to feel as if he is “pulling away part of his wife. He is tearing the life out of her” (Swift 267). The stolen child crystallizes the image of Mary as a Madonna holding her child, an image that Tom references throughout the novel. This imagery aligns her with the religion which Mary embraces at the expense of her curiosity, a retreat into herself which Tom dismisses as but another attempt to impose order and meaning on to the emptiness of reality. Mary’s relationship to children, her body, and the future will be examined in more depth in the next section; for now, let me note that the tension between history and the Here and Now is quite literally inscribed

onto her body and bound up with her inability to conceive, rendering the future of Tom's story uncertain.

## CHAPTER 3

### WITCHES AS SPECTERS OF ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

Reproducing and conforming to norms of gender and sexuality consigns many of the women in both *Lolly Willowses* and *Waterland* to the margins of history; but the margins of history are distinct from the narrative margins of the novels. Figures such as Laura Willowses's mother and great-great-aunt Salome from Warner's novel, and Sarah and Helen Atkinson from Swift's novel are positioned at the narrative periphery so that they "haunt" their respective novels, blurring the boundary between presence and absence. But in this blurring, both Warner and Swift draw attention to women's construction as absences and/or as fictions within narratives of history that center a masculine point of view, narratives that are underwritten by continual processes of accumulation and progression. Subsumed into the archetypes, stories, and prescribed norms of femininity that are imposed upon them, these women paradoxically gesture toward the unnaturalness of this way of organizing and defining bodies.

The issue of reconceptualizing women's identities in relation to history and the nation is foregrounded in the figure of the witch; in both novels, witches and witchcraft signify women's agency to live and define themselves apart from, and in contrast to, coerced narratives of femininity and heterosexuality that undergird the construction of history. They appear as figures who are aligned with moments of historical and narrative rupture, and who gesture toward storytelling and the fantastic - the latter being narrative

modes which work to place them “outside” the bounds of history. Indeed, the witches in both novels seem to draw on, and ironize, certain historical resonances associated with witchcraft, such as images of nonconforming women who exist outside of, or actively subvert, capitalist accumulation and patriarchal Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

Witches are figures who subvert normative impositions of history and temporality, but they are portrayed as agential characters differently across the two novels, as their position in relation to the narrative center is inherently bound up with *who* is telling the story. For Tom Crick, witches are figures who suspend considerations of the future while also threatening to annihilate the present, aligning them with the “Here and Now,” those experiences of reality which resist narrativization, in a sense cannot be narrated.<sup>26</sup> As characters who register what is excess to historiography - being aligned

---

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia 2004) and *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (PM Press 2018). Federici argues that the European witch hunts, alongside colonialism, the slave trade, and land enclosures, were foundational for the rise of modern capitalism, the establishment of a proletarian class, and the roots of modern misogyny that “still characterize institutional practice” (*Caliban* 164). Her arguments are resonant here for her assertion that witchcraft was specifically a “female crime” (*Caliban* 179). By the 16th and 17th centuries, charges of witchcraft became increasingly centered around women’s bodies; these charges were often used in cases of infanticide, homosexuality, and the use of birth control, which effectively institutionalized, she argues, “the state’s control over the female body” (*Caliban* 185). But charges of witchcraft were also directed at women who signaled the persistence of pre-capitalist ways of life, such as different forms of community, medicine, and religious beliefs. Federici is useful for my argument in her assertion that witchcraft represented a threat to emerging bourgeois ideals of femininity and the organization of bodies into different spheres of influence. If we look at how both Warner and Swift characterize witches as being out of step with, and challengers of, history we can see Federici’s theses apply to figures like Laura, Martha Clay, and Sarah Atkinson, as women whose refusal of patriarchal impositions of history, accumulation and normative sexual and reproductive practices “others” them within the world of the novels.

<sup>26</sup> It should also be noted that Tom’s students are themselves worried about “the final Answer ... that end of history”: about how nuclear war threatens to annihilate the “ICBM

primarily with fairy-tales, the interruption of history, or the folding of the past into the present - they confuse the boundary separating life from death, history from fantasy, and past from present. By confusing distinctions, the witches that Tom describes challenge his ability to conceptualize the future while also granting these women a certain form of agency over the narrative, in effect resisting their own marginalization. This is not to say that every woman in *Waterland* is a witch, but those whom we can conceive of as witches - Martha Clay and Sarah Atkinson, for example - are intimately linked with the historical traumas which structure Tom's narrative.

The witches in Warner's novel, similar to Swift's, are not in fact fantastical characters who have supernatural abilities, but rather figures whose ties to British metropolitan life in the wake of the First World War have been severed. However, Warner is careful to show that this separation from an urban center does not entail the wholesale abandonment of a patriarchal organization of life, as seen most clearly when Laura attends the Witches' Sabbath; rather it is Laura's pact with Satan that is truly liberatory, as witch-hood then becomes an identificatory label which allows Laura to exist and narrate herself outside of bourgeois expectations of femininity.<sup>27</sup> Once in his service, Laura's relationship to patriarchal constructions of history, gender, and sexuality are reframed and problematized, and similar to how the witches in Tom Crick's story create narrative ruptures, so too does Laura's witch-hood foreground the constructedness of certain patriarchal institutions, while also recuperating her liminal position within such

---

generation" (Decoste 379), prompting Price to claim that the only thing that matters is the "Here and Now."

<sup>27</sup> See Kate Macdonald for an analysis of how Warner utilizes witchcraft's fashionability in contemporary British culture in order to ask socially radical questions via the witches in her novel.

institutional narratives by placing her firmly outside of the confines of the Willowes family history.

When Laura moves to Great Mop, she is rather contented with her newfound privacy and independence, preferring to live in relative solitude while “admitt[ing] that there was something about [the townspeople] which she could not fathom, but she was content to remain outside the secret” (Warner 117). Up until her flight to Great Mop, she is characterized as a private, passive figure by her family, as the “unenterprising” Aunt Lolly; however, Laura’s own internal experiences suggest that what her family reads as passivity and “unproductive” behavior is in fact suggestive of Laura’s own feelings of self-contentment within the “secret country of her mind” (Warner 123). We see this all the way back in Laura’s childhood when, upon being tied to a tree and left by her brothers while playing a game, she is discovered by her father “singing herself a story” (Warner 17), and even after she moves to London she ventures out on “secret expeditions” to purchase small self-indulgences to combat the dreariness of the autumnal season. But the capitalistic language of productivity that surrounds and is used to scorn “Lolly” is bound up not only with her contentment, but her spinsterhood as well. When standing in the triangular field as she comes under Satan's possession, she laments that with Titus staying in Great Mop she is once again in the “employment of being Aunt Lolly” (Warner 149); indeed, Laura’s spinsterhood and the language of productivity seem to be conditioned by the State, for when Henry asks her to witness some documents for him, Laura writes down her official occupation as “spinster.” Warner seems to subtly ironize the distinction between “productivity” and “reproduction,” aligning them with one

another as conditions and narratives of life that mark the spinster as “other,” as one whose failure to live up to the “productive” norms of femininity marginalizes them.

Once in Satan's service, Laura's sense of self-contentment is affirmed; he gives her “the dangerous black night to stretch [her] wings in, and poisonous berries to feed on, and a nest of bones and thorns, perched high up in danger where no one can climb up to it” (Warner 214). This moment of descriptive liberation subtly recalls Laura’s description of Satan when he asks her what she thinks of him; in her words he resembles “a kind of black knight, wandering about and succoring decayed gentlewomen” (Warner 211). Satan is subtly spatialized here, as not only an agent who grants Laura freedom and autonomy through his possession, but also as a space in which Laura can live out her newly gained independence. His liberatory possession is not limited to his physical possession alone, indeed, his appearance is foreshadowed in Laura’s surroundings throughout the novel. She feels what she later recognizes as his presence in London at the greengrocer’s on Moscow Road, a sensation which seems to remove her from the shop and place her “alone in a darkening orchard, her feet in the grass, her arms stretched up to the patterns of leaves and fruit” (Warner 80), and then again as she stands outside Great Mop atop Cubbey Ridge listening to the sound of a goods train, a sound which she feels “expresses something eternally outcast and reprobate by man, stealthily trafficking by night, unseen in the dark clefts of the hills” (Warner 123). The geographical dislocation of these encounters - Laura's visions of the orchard and of the goods yard at Paddington in the latter scene - seem to become endemic to Satanic possession, for it cannot be localized to a single space. Importantly, Laura only recognizes Satan’s nearness to her in these moments retrospectively, after she has become a witch, affording her a form of

knowledge<sup>28</sup> with which to reinterpret her life up until that point and to properly narrate these intense experiences of displacement, these moments that seem to remove her from the timelines and narratives that she is enmeshed in.

Satan's possession of Laura is figured as "natural"; as he exclaims to Laura in their final conversation, "you are in my power. No servant of mine can feel remorse, or doubt, or surprise" (Warner 210). As a witch in his service, Laura's relationship to the narratives and institutions upon which patriarchal narratives reproduce themselves become refracted through the tension between memory and forgiveness. While wandering in a field of cowslips, Laura recognizes that she was "changed ... humbler, and more simple" (Warner 136) since coming to Great Mop, ceasing to draw satisfaction from the disapproval she aroused in her family on announcing her intention to leave. To forgive her family she recognizes that she must also forgive those ideas which produced and maintained the Willows tradition:

"If she were to start forgiving she must needs forgive Society, the Law, the Church, the History of Europe, the Old Testament, great-great-aunt Salome and her prayer book, the Bank of England, Prostitution, the Architect of Apsley Terrace, and a half dozen other useful props of civilization. All she could do was go on forgetting them." (Warner 136)

---

<sup>28</sup> See Gillian Beer for an analysis of how Laura's pact with Satan also resembles an inversion of the Faustian bargain, where masculine knowledge can only be attained at the "moment of death" whereas female knowledge is experienced as "independent life" (Beer 18).



This moment closely resembles Laura's epiphany in her final conversation with Satan that "not one of the monuments and tinkering of man could impose on the satanic mind" (Warner 208); he "sees through" the Vatican and the Crystal Palace, through all of the modern constructions and institutions of humanity from his vantage point outside of history. His unflinching memory is aligned with how Laura seems to "naturally" forget the iniquities done to her and to shed the satisfaction she receives from remembering her family's protestations over her move. History, memory, institutional narratives and constructs of religion and gender all seem to be diffused from Satan's extra-temporal vantage point, but this diffusion is not primarily experienced as a result of forgiveness or even forgetfulness for Laura, but rather through a recognition of their constructedness and finitude, of just how unnatural they are.

At the "Witches' Sabbath" (Warner 170) Warner ironizes many of the identificatory narratives in which Laura has found herself enmeshed up until now while also calling attention to their "unnatural" persistence in this supposedly rebellious space. Unwittingly led by Mrs. Leak to a field just outside the village, Laura is surrounded by villagers who are "lit from below," their elongated bodies "extending into the darkness as if in emulation of their gigantic upcast shadows" (Warner 177) in a moment which plays with the border separating realism from fantasy. Laura experiences the sabbath in much the same way as the balls she attended as a young woman, thinking at one point that "her first Sabbath was not going to open livelier vistas than were opened by her first ball ... she watched the dancers go by and wondered what the enchantment was that they felt and she did not" (Warner 174). The ball marks a woman's entrance into "young ladyhood," locating it along a timeline of a woman's life and development within a patriarchal

British society; thus the subversive potential of the sabbath is undercut, as Warner mocks its superficiality and reproduction of patriarchal forms of sociability and sexuality. Laura compares the gathering to a “Primrose League gala and fête,” (Warner 171), and the specters of the Willowes family are reintroduced when Miss Larpent remarks to Laura that she ““had the great pleasure of meeting your great-uncle, Commodore Willowes ... at Cowes” (Warner 172-73). The novel here posits that the true act of rebellion does not lie in the (here caricatured) worship of Satan,<sup>29</sup> but in the recognition that those institutions and narratives which disseminate and rest upon restrictive norms of gender, sexuality, history, and accumulation are to be challenged, to be revealed as artificial.

Warner here seems to elaborate upon the ways in which masculine dominance shifts in appearance and manifestation by conjuring a space which, though appearing to be subversive, in fact reifies patriarchal narratives of Christianity, heterosexuality, and sociability. By aligning her gaze with Satan’s extra-temporal perspective, Laura positions herself as a truly subversive subject for not only does she align herself with his relationship to history, she recognizes that Satan is only an evil specter for certain people from a certain point of view. She remarks that “at one stage of civilization, people said he was the embodiment of all evil, and then a little later on that he didn't exist” (Warner 221). Witchcraft, for Laura, is not predicated on acts of malice, performative gestures of Satanic devotion, or even egregious self-effacement or servitude; rather, “it's to escape all

---

<sup>29</sup> See Mimi Winick, who argues that the Sabbath parodies conceptions of pre-Christian witch cults described by Margaret Murray in her book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921). Murray argued that such rituals were predicated on both heterosexuality and certain norms of sociability. For Winick, Warner “emphasizes the very different place of sociability and heterosexual sex in her version of witchcraft” (Winick 581-82) in which Laura avoids the former while outright rejecting the latter.

that - to have a life of one's own, not an existence doled out to you by others” (Warner 215). It is neither a practice nor a tactic for revenge - rather it is a vocation, one which decidedly rejects masculine impositions of productivity, reproduction, and gender in any form or configuration that they might assume.

Witchcraft in *Lolly Willowes* subverts Laura’s ambiguous position within narratives of history as a spinster; it is almost as if as a witch she is able to stand apart from the Willowes tradition and the patriarchal culture it mirrors and recognize its unnaturalness. In *Waterland*, the witch is a figure who almost by definition resists the narrativizing impulses of history, given its connotations of the fantastic. They, like the space of the Fens, foreground the porous boundary separating history from fiction, in that the contradictions of attempting to impose narrative order over reality are played out in the temporal ruptures, narrative breaks and repetitions with which they come to be associated. For Tom, they seem to act extra-temporally, providing a focal point through which his “theory of hubris” can attach significance to certain “revolutionary” events - events which signal a rupture with his narrative and gesture toward a new beginning, but simultaneously are positioned within a narrative which itself depends on circularity, on the recurrence of traits, characters, and bodies. Witches then are not only aligned with threats to the historical, but with the ways in which the traumas of the narrative come to be associated with these characters. The recurrence across generations of witches or of madwomen suggests that Tom tells this story of recurrence and witchcraft in order to impose order over his own narrative in the face of an uncertain, almost unknowable future.

In Swift's novel, the witch is a character who almost by definition resists the narrativizing impulses of history, given the witch's connotations of the fantastic. Tom retrospectively recognizes that Martha Clay, the only character in the novel labeled as a witch, is simply an elderly woman living in the marshlands deep in the middle of the Fens; however, when narrating the story from the point of view of his younger self, both she and her cottage are literal embodiments of the fantastic and otherworldly. Locating her away from Gildsey positions her and her cottage in a spatial and temporal limbo, sitting in between past and present, water and land, history and fairy-tale. The stories surrounding Martha and her husband Bill Clay cast them as mythical characters; Tom recounts that after Thomas Atkinson attacked Sarah, he sought out "one of those ancestors of Bill Clay" only to be told that "no magic in the world could bring [Sarah] out of the state which she herself ... wished to remain in" (Swift 80). Over 90 years after this event, Bill Clay and Martha occupy the liminal space of Wash Fen Mere, in a sense inheriting a marginalized position, something which Tom draws our attention to in the scene where he and Mary seek out Martha to perform an abortion. Martha even remarks to Tom upon first seeing him and Mary that "Martha don' git many callers at this time o' day. Martha don't git many callers at all" (Swift 301).

In the novel's present, Tom points out that Martha Clay is not an actual witch who is capable of casting spells or performing magic, but she is a character to whom these stories become attached, in part because of her role in subverting the norms of reproductive heterosexuality. Magic, as Tom would conceive of it, is but another way to provide a fantastic explanation for worldly phenomena, and Martha and Bill Clay live in "dire poverty" while the abortion itself is "devoid of any fairy-tale magic" (Acheson 93).

Yet the space of Martha's cottage is one which confuses temporality, collapsing the past into the present while quite literally throwing the future into uncertainty for Tom.<sup>30</sup> He describes the scene to his students as "another world ... where Now and Long Ago are the same and time seems to be going on in some other place" (Swift 303). He calls attention to how Martha's cottage, and even Martha herself, signal the sedimentation of the past in the present.

However, there is an interesting tension between this folding together of temporalities and Mary's own reticence, in this moment, to fit into certain prescribed narratives of femininity and maternity. In Tom's eyes, by refusing to "produce a story" (Powell 66), Mary in a sense refuses to reproduce history and its gendered inheritances. As temporal distinctions collapse for the younger Tom, the stories he constructs around and about Mary come undone, a subversion which recurs throughout the novel such as when, upon meeting once again after the end of the Second World War, Tom expects to find "a nun, a Magdalen, a fanatic, a hysterical, an invalid" but in fact recognizes "a women (no girl) who impresses him with her appearance of toughness, endurance, as if she has made the decision to live henceforth without any kind prop or refuge" (Swift 120).

But Mary's refusal to produce (or conform to) one story leads to her being swallowed by another; Martha's botched abortion not only signals the end of her and Tom's "prehistoric" (Swift 52) adolescent love affair, it also renders Mary unable to bear children. The scene in Martha Clay's cottage is imbued with a supernatural oddness that

---

<sup>30</sup> For an analysis of how the scene in Martha Clay's cottage signals a posthistorical conception of a future beyond capitalism, see John Schad.

culminates in Tom's hallucinatory "dream" while sitting outside plucking a hen. He envisions his mother, while the hen he plucks lays a "copious, unending stream of eggs" and Mary "screams and then says she's the mother of God" (Swift 307), once more connecting Mary to his own mother as he does throughout the text. In this moment, timelines, symbols, stories, and characters are mixed up and re-presented as happening all at once. The cottage at Wash Fen Mere then not only rests between history and fairy-tale, but fuses them together in an eruption of the Here and Now that thrusts past, present, and future into limbo. Seemingly outside of time, Mary challenges Tom's claim that women are an "empty but fillable vessel"; she manifests Tom's contradictory definitions of reality even as his story configures her act of agency as one which breaks the stories that he constructs around her, the "mother-wife" Madonna (Swift 131). The stories Tom tells about her collapse and re-form, crystallizing the image of Mary as a madwoman in a lineage stretching back to St. Gunnhilda.

By the end of the novel Mary more and more comes to resemble Sarah Atkinson. Mary's institutionalization near the novel's end manifests this thematic recurrence, with Tom remarking that "in another age, in olden times, they might have called her holy (or else have burnt her as a witch). One who hears the voice of - One to whom -" (Swift 330). Her contact with the ineffable, those "fairy-tales" of religious belief that Tom so ardently rebukes, removes her from narrative space, aligning her with Sarah Atkinson and St. Gunnhilda; in a moment reminiscent of Sarah's vigil from the upper room in her house on Water Street, Mary "stares, vigilantly and knowingly (the common ruse of the

inmate: it's *they* who are mad, not me), at those frail playground children" (Swift 330) from the asylum as Tom leaves.<sup>31</sup>

At this particular moment in the narrative, Tom stresses historical recurrences, "revolutions" as he calls them; he references how stories are mutable or "culturally contingent" (Orr 87), how at one historical moment madness as identified in a woman would have registered as holiness or witchcraft but which here is determined through the justice system that convicts Mary and the psychiatrists who diagnose her. He thinks that in the past "they might have allowed her the full scope of her mania: her anchorite's cell, her ascetic's liberties, her visions and ravings ... Now she gets the benefit of psychiatry" (Swift 330). While she is not labeled a witch, the implication here is that madness and accusations of witchcraft are closely linked as historical narratives that are projected onto women who deviate from established norms of femininity, or who resist their totalizing alienation from historical discourses. Mary's encounter with Martha Clay "disrupts teleological history" (Mitchell 81); her madness, as Tom's narrative would seem to posit, arises from this moment and other encounters with the Here and Now, such as the death of Freddie Parr. In Martha Clay's cottage, history and fairy-tales are collapsed into one another and the past becomes indistinguishable from the present, paralleling the recurrence of the "madwoman": how women signal the "apocalyptic" interplay of history

---

<sup>31</sup> For Cooper, this "spectrum of linkages" produces a reflexive gesture toward the vacancy of reality, recalling again how Tom links women with reality as they are an "empty vessel." Interestingly for my own argument, Cooper also focuses on how Mary's position as an inheritor of these narratives and images (or signifiers) draws attention to questions of narrative power and primacy, and the problems it raises of "identity and otherness" (Cooper 387). We can then think of the witch as a figure not only of a mutable, inherited "madness" but also as a figure whose witch-hood removes them from narrative space while also allowing for agential acts.

and fairy-tale, often through an inheritance of alterity and experiences of narrative violence and removal.

Centered within this mingling of the historical and the fantastic is the figure of the witch, women who at once signal narrative recurrence and just how tenuous temporal and historical distinctions are. While witchcraft here doesn't have the liberatory potential that it does for Laura in Warner's novel, it similarly gestures toward spaces and narratives beyond patriarchal constructions of gender, history and sexuality. Sarah Atkinson is a witch in all but name, as she shares many of the narrative-bending characteristics of Martha Clay, yet unlike Martha she is imbued with supernatural powers by Tom and the townspeople of Gildsey. She is a woman who, over the course of his narrative, progresses from being characterized as a brewer's wife to a seer to eventually a ghost, and almost seems to be an extra-temporal force who acts upon Tom's narrative. She is constituted by story, including the unspoken story of witchcraft and all of the significations of subverting history and accumulation contained therein. Similar to how her stories and characteristics get mapped onto Mary, Sarah's spectral reappearances throughout Tom's narrative gesture toward his grand conclusion that history is a series of revolutions - through inheritance and reappearance. Thinking that history is constituted of revolutions is but one mode of Tom's narrative inquiry, but it is one which fills the future with ambiguity; for if the future is merely the recurrence of the past, and if those revolutionary moments or events which promise new beginnings are actually moments of regression, how might we conceptualize this future without the distanced, "objective" view of traditional historical narratives?



This sense of recurrence as history flowing backwards manifests quite literally during the flood of 1874, itself an encounter with the Here and Now. On the day of Sarah's funeral, the Leem and the Ouse rivers flood simultaneously which, Tom observes, causes the Ouse to "flow back on itself" (Swift 99). But it is in the midst of the flood that Sarah turns from a seen yet unseen figuration of the "madwoman" into something resembling a witch; as Tom notes, "rumour was unleashed with the floodwaters" (Swift 101) as the townspeople begin to speculate whether or not Sarah had a hand in this, or if she had been seen. One villager claims that Sarah actually escaped from the Wetherfield Asylum days before her funeral only to be seen on the banks of the Ouse in the midst of the flood, where she "dived 'like a very mermaid' beneath the water, never to be seen again" (Swift 104). This image aligns her with Tom's "amphibious" half-brother Dick Crick and his own eventual leap into the Ouse at the novel's end, but it also aligns her with Martha Clay, who lives in the marshy space in between the water and the land. Sarah is also reported to have been seen during the fire which burns down the Atkinson brewery, seen in an upper room at Kessling Hall, "saying with a grin on her face and a pertinence that had eluded, long ago, her husband and two devoted sons: 'Fire! Smoke! Burning!'" (Swift 178). Sarah here not only recurs in a ghostly visage, but the one image or story which she tells after being struck by Thomas manifests is the destruction of the Atkinson brewery. Within Tom's story, Sarah foregrounds the slippery distinction separating history from fairy-tale and past from present as fantastical stories are folded into the historical narrative of the Atkinson empire.

Rumor, heresy, and fairy tale coalesce around the women of the novel from their disruption of narrative imposition. They gesture outside of or beyond it, to the untamed

marshlands at the heart of the Fens, outside of narratable time, toward God and his empty promises or toward the persistence of storytelling, of registering the excesses of history as an arena to which women are relegated. The witch crystallizes spaces and narratives which exist outside of or actively subvert patriarchal time. Across both texts, witches become bound to different rhythms of life and experiences of temporality that resist their marginalization as characters and foreground the constructedness of the historically specific institutions and narratives by which they are othered.

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between historical narratives and witches is somewhat contradictory: they are associated at once with the fantastic and the extra-temporal, and with the historical, with pre-Christian and pre-capitalist modes of labor, religious worship, and communal formations. The witch herself makes the distinction between the historical and the fantastic ambiguous; through the witch's historical resonances, their association with an era which predates the rise of patriarchal capitalism, and their association with the supernatural they problematize the binary between the natural/historical and the fantastic. Witches reveal the artificiality and constructedness of "naturalized" historiographies, but this foregrounds how they act as vehicles to challenge the hegemony of patriarchal historical narratives. Both Warner and Swift seem to draw on these different resonances in how they construct the relationship between the witches in their novels to the historiographies from which these characters stand at a remove. Whereas Swift exploits this tension through the inheritance of a culturally contingent set of descriptors for these women - holy women, madwomen, witches - Laura's pact with Satan in *Lolly Willowes* is used as a means to place her at a distance from the historical narratives of her family, in the service of one who predates and will long outlast their existence.

The witch not only gestures toward these fraught histories but suggests different modes by which women might define themselves within or outside of these narratives

through an agential feminist storytelling. As Tom Crick's witches are associated with narrative rupture, with attempting to explain the unexplainable via reference to the supernatural, we can read Laura's own exit from the Willows line as a moment of narrative rupture in which she rejects the roles and norms prescribed for her, quite literally removing herself (to the consternation of her family) from this narrative. For Laura, after making her pact with Satan the future was "but little altered from what she had hoped and planned" (Warner 160), and secure in Satan's possession, she is free to be "a little odd in [her] ways" (Warner 222). The future for Tom Crick is uncertain in many ways; indeed, the impending loss of his job and Mary's being committed to an asylum place him in an ambiguous position with respect to the cyclical theory of history he relays to his students. But the witches of his narrative both seem to gesture beyond this cycle and are imbued with significance by Tom as a way of organizing, of explaining his past and his present in an attempt to situate himself within his family's history. While securing Laura's future by allowing her to continue living as she pleases, for Tom witches are constructed as a story that attempts to explain what history cannot; but it is a story, much like the broader story of his narrative, over which he has little control.

By having their witches interrupt and comment on prevailing historical narratives, both Warner and Swift denaturalize the omniscience of the historian, recuperate women's placement beyond the bounds of these discourses, and problematize the clean separation between past and present. In Swift's novel, the witch is literally a character who recurs under different guises - madwoman, storyteller, etc. - and this recurrence aligns with how Tom's narrative breaks and pivots around those traumas which have occurred in his past, almost structuring his contemporaneous attempts to excavate and narrate them. In *Lolly*

*Willowes* the past and present coexist and co mingle throughout Laura's time with her family, while her witch-hood suggests the persistence of the past into the present as she recognizes the signs of her witch-hood and Satan's presence throughout her life. But both Swift and Warner realize that the idea of a history which partitions out times and ideas distinctly from one another is impossible: Tom Crick's theory of historical hubris recognizes that various cultural formations and images of the past are reproduced into the present in a constant tension between moving forward and flowing backward. For Warner, the historical project itself seems to be farcical, for within the confines of these normative scripts Laura cannot escape the past. Embodied by women like her great-great-aunt Salome, the past seems not to be a record of human progression, but the continuation, reproduction, or shifting configuration of pre-existing hierarchies of dominance. The witch destabilizes these hierarchies, throwing into high relief how history - the norms, institutions, and oppressions which uphold it - is not a useless project, but one which is just as defined by what it erases or excludes as what it recognizes.

## WORKS CITED

- Acheson, James. "Historia and Guilt: Graham Swift's *Waterland*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2005, pp. 90-100.
- Beer, Gillian. "Sylvia Townsend Warner: The Centrifugal Kick" *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2004, pp. 18-31.
- Brothers, Barbara. "Flying the Nets at Forty: *Lolly Willowes* as Female Bildungsroman." *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel*, ed. Laura L. Doan. University of Illinois Press, 1991, pp. 195-212.
- Cooper, Pamela. "Imperial Topographies: The Spaces of History in *Waterland*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1996, pp. 371-396.
- Crosby, Christina. *The Ends of History: Victorians and the Woman Question*. Routledge, 1991.
- Decoste, Damon Marcel. "Question and Apocalypse: The Endlessness of *Historia* in Graham Swift's *Waterland*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2002, pp. 377-399.
- Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. Autonomedia, 2004.
- Garrity, Jane. *Step-Daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary*. Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.
- Langland, Elizabeth. "Nobody's Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle Class Women in the Victorian Novel." *PMLA*, vol. 102, no. 2, 1992, pp. 290-304.
- Marcus, Jane. "A Wilderness of One's Own: Feminist Fantasy Novels of the Twenties: Rebecca West and Sylvia Townsend Warner." *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*. ed. Susan Merrill Squier. University of Tennessee Press, 1984, pp. 134-160.

- Mitchell, Kate. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Murray, Alex. "Jerusalem Building: *Lolly Willowes*, Blake, and Rural Politics." *Modernist Cultures*, vol. 15, no. 5, pp. 419-441.
- Nesbitt, Jennifer Poulos. *Narrative Settlements: Geographies of British Women's Fiction Between the Wars*. University of Toronto Press, 2005.
- Orr, Ashley. "Bodily Fluids: Female Corporeality as Neo-Victorian Agency in Graham Swift's *Waterland*." *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2016, pp. 85-93.
- Powell, Katrina M. "Mary Metcalf's Attempt at Reclamation: Maternal Representation in Graham Swift's *Waterland*." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2003, pp. 59-77.
- Shin, Jacqueline. "*Lolly Willowes* and the Arts of Dispossession." *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2009, pp. 709-725.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers." *The Antioch Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1972, pp. 339-353.
- Swift, Graham. *Waterland*. 1983. First Vintage Canada, 1998.
- Ussher, Jane M. *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience*. Routledge, 2011.
- Warner, Sylvia Townsend. *Lolly Willowes: or the Loving Huntsman*. 1926. New York Review of Books, 1999.
- Winick, Mimi. "Modernist Feminist Witchcraft: Margaret Murray's Fantastic Scholarship and Sylvia Townsend Warner's Realist Fantasy." *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2015, pp. 565-592.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970.