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Her Kind: A Discovery of Witches in Women's Poetry

by

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ABSTRACT

ENGLISH AND CREATIVE WRITING

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HER KIND: A DISCOVERY OF WITCHES IN WOMEN'S POETRY

Zoe Marie Mitchell

The witch is a primarily negative stereotype of women embedded in the cultural imagination. This poetry collection inspired by witches is accompanied by a critical thesis considering the presentation of witches in women's poetry. Close study of this topic highlights the patriarchal ideology at the foundation of the symbolic order and the sexist motivations behind the designation of the witch as a villain.

The critical study focuses on a close analysis of poems by Margaret Atwood, Louise Glück, Audre Lorde, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton which use the figure of the witch to reclaim a previously negative image and expose the ideology behind it. This analysis is supplemented by reference to the wider literature on witches in history and mythology as well as relevant critical disciplines including semiotics and feminism. An understanding of these poems, together with desk and field research on witches and witchcraft, informed my own creative practice when writing the collection Untold Fortunes.

Female poets' reframing of the witch has a positive and liberating impact on female creative practice. Exploiting poetic tension to create greater authenticity for more diverse voices in poetry demonstrates how the existing Western, patriarchal symbolic order may be dismantled. It also allows for exploration of

intersectionality, outsider and marginalised groups and tensions between women. A close analysis of female poets' work on witches, together with a critical understanding of the operation of the symbolic order, reveals three key themes – the figure of the witch as a means of exposing patriarchal social structure; the relationship between language and power; and the witch as an emblem of female subjectivity.

This study of powerful women has been personally and creatively transformative. Witches bring together the personal and the political, forcing me to confront both in my work and my understanding of literature. The work of female poets in dismantling the negative associations between women and power provides a foundation for more authentic and diverse female expression and has wider implications beyond the presentation of witches or women.

KEYWORDS: Witches, Poetry, Margaret Atwood, Louise Glück, Audre Lorde, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Witchcraft, Mythology, Semiotics, Feminism, Creative Writing, Creative practice.

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UNTOLD FORTUNES

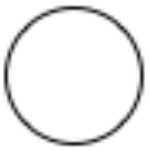
Zoe Mitchell

For My Mum, Pam Mitchell.

“And though she be but little, she is fierce.”

Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act III, Scene 2

Lunar Phases

	**New Moon**	Initial urges. Instinct. Projection.
	**Waxing Crescent**	Activation. Striving. Future.
	**First Quarter**	Clearing. Building. Action.
	**Waxing Gibbous**	Perfecting. Analysis. Interpretation.
	**Full Moon**	Completion. Perfection. Illumination.
	**Waning Gibbous**	Imparting. Dissemination. Conveying awareness.
	**Last Quarter**	Readjustment. Disillusionment. Elimination
	**Waning Crescent**	Incubation. Closure. Surrender

New Moon

The moon knows a fresh start
may not feel anything
like a revelation or an opportunity.

What arises from the black fabric
is not always an improvement.
You could lose a job and people will talk

about doors closing and opening as if
it's ever that simple. You could gain
an unwanted gift, a new burden.

Change comes from the moment
when all that is altered is something
inside you, something in the dark.

This is just the beginning.
No one can see you, you aren't
really here, there or anywhere yet.

Look up to the sky and seek
the slimmest curve of pale light –
one day, none of this will matter.

Forecast

On my first night on earth, there was a halo around the moon.
No one bathed in hospital strip lights could see it;
this was the moment of my arrival, no one was looking out.

This is the moon I was born under; I started screaming in a fever
but what could I have known then? A change in the weather,
a fear of the dark, a sense of becoming my own disruption.

In the grey wash of December, the blanket of night is never quite
thrown off and the winter moon remains, patient and ghostly,
watching the real work of our days as well as our dreams.

She is always there; her milky eye blinks slowly as I fumble
and stumble on cold pebbled beaches and rutted pathways.
She was there when I laughed and sang myself home,

there too on the night when I had to quicken my pace.
There she was, watching and doing nothing.
The moon expands with my secrets, contracts with the days

in a month, the months in a year, the years in a lifetime.
Her indifferent surveillance is constant and holds
an unknown purpose that is neither romance nor

disappointment. I sometimes forget what I was born
knowing – a full fat baby, soothed with pale lunar milk,
blood streaking through my veins like a wild hare.

Origin Story

There was a young woman, beautiful
in the way they all are, almost interchangeable
with their gentle, painfully human concerns.

She thought about potential suitors,
her next meal, different ways
to untangle a knot in silken hair.

Before, she hadn't even thought
about the future but she held faith
in its benevolence within her soft skin.

After, she testified that people watched
as she fled from a brawny, gill-necked deity.
She remembers uproarious laughter.

She can't recall what she was wearing,
it's not etched with enough depth for her,
but lawyers will scratch that fact

with acid. The crime is not enough
for the court; she will be burned
by the lines of her dress and flowing hair

as if they matter more than a sanctuary
defiled, or a woman. Athena witnessed
the rape at her altar and had rage enough

to topple a whole council of gods,
but no power to tackle this one,
who held the pull of the tides and took

whatever he wanted. No one spoke of that
when the verdict was given, or how they expected
a mortal to do what a goddess couldn't.

The hand over young Medusa's mouth
wasn't shame – it was the venomous snake
of a story that turns people to stone.

The Vale of Ancient Trees

Persephone stands in the arrival lounge from the underworld:
ancient yews twisted with everything they've ever seen,

lurched into an archway of darkness, a triumph hard as iron
wrapped in poisonous foliage, budded with arils that promise

sudden death among the blooming. Treading with care
through the hushed corridor, she carries the baggage

of another new season, the scent of wildflowers her passport
to the light. She greets the shadows of animals trapped

in tree bark who guard the bare earth, awaiting her return.
The skeletons of dead trees on the steep down remind her

of darker seasons, when the forest writhes around her and stubborn
tree trunks transform into the inevitable red frame

of a departure gate. When the time comes, she will check
her pockets for anything that won't travel – a nursing juniper,

an excess of April showers, carefree laughter – then descend
with chalk dust on her boot, back to the birdless grove once more.

Carriage of Justice

I raise my former lover from the dead.
I wipe the earth from his desiccated skin;

copper coins fall from his eyelids. I unpick
the stitches that hold his lips in a hard line

even though I don't intend to let him speak.
I prop him up on soft pillows in our old bed

as tenderly as I would have for our own son.
Minutes crawl around the clock in darkness,

it takes time for him to remember. Until then,
he stares, silent as he is in his grave, impassive

as an arrogant sunrise bringing another day.
Slowly he turns his head and sees me standing

in a rough circle marked out by tiny bones and
apple seeds, framed in curls of willow bark.

I follow his eyes, raise my skirt to show the blood
running down my legs again, pooling at my feet.

He lets out a sour breath while I turn my back
to undress, reaches out a rotting hand to my hips

and I face him full bodied, his eyes level with my stomach
which is scored and branded, inside and out, with scars.

Once again, he has remembered. I put aside the tiny
half-formed skull of our son, raise the knife and kill him again.

Divination

We light candles against our fear of the dark,
spill blood, shuffle cards, kiss the crystals,
watch the skies and above all, we dream.

We ask questions the future cannot answer.
Success and failure are all the same there,
neither are the search you're meant for.

We never learn what rests in our question –
the future whispers in our ears but we never listen.
It's right there.

You Never Know

We were the sort of family that was always
early to the airport; children whose mother
packed a spare jumper and some tissues.

To expel what she saw as inevitable, Mum
would turn all the worst possible outcomes
inside out, run the iron over them, right them again.

A compulsive ticket checker, a cautious
predictor of traffic jams, obstacles and unseasonal
weather – rosary prayers against unwanted things.

She would keep quiet when her careful plans
weren't needed, remind us when she got the chance
of all the things that had to be done *just in case*

because *you never know*. As a child,
I was never late, lost or, under her watchful eye,
close to anything approaching danger.

The adult world is hinged, with jagged teeth.
I step on the bloodied path, keep on walking
and still always let her know I've made it home

but nothing will ease her mind. Over time,
her predictions of mild disaster have become
impassable obstructions, a chorus of wardens

calling out their proof over and over, closing down
the reason to make any plans, or to eat, or to sleep,
even if you can keep one eye open.

Waxing Crescent

Spend an afternoon in a bar
with a friend, remember everything
you've lost. Press on the bruise

of all your failures, learn
to smile at them because
they are smiling at you.

Feed your heart's furnace,
paint colour on your pale cheeks,
stand at your fullest height.

Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry

My mother taught me how to be a witch.
Her silent craft didn't manifest to me
until it was too late to reject the lessons

and by then I had no wish to unlearn them.
In my last year of school, I was sent home
with a note about my skirt, resting 1.3cm

above my knee. Mum read the rules carefully
then bought the longest skirt she could find
in school colours, even though the hem frayed

and caught under the tread of my DMs.
In the face of the administrator I saw
the moment my mother's soundless curse hit home.

She mustered in me a mute defiance, a cure
for petty regulation and arbitrary limits
and she did it all without ever saying a word.

Her best tricks always took time to exert their power.
When my older sister studied at that same school,
she didn't own a big coat and one cold day

she wore a denim jacket under her blazer.
Mum knew it was against the rules and wrote
a note explaining that it was all she had

but detention followed anyway.
For years, every time Mum visited the school
for any of her three daughters, she wore

a denim jacket and looked every teacher
square in the eye. I could tell you more –
times when she stood taller than her usual five foot two,

when she wouldn't move an inch, and the full extent
of her long memory. From her I've learned to brew
fermented curses, proven inside the barrel staves

of every time she took a stand or stewed
in a cauldron filled with moments when she wouldn't
let go of doing what was right for her daughters.

Spell for a Better Day

The shrill horror of the alarm clock.
The stubbed toe,
the toothpaste stain on your shirt,

the smell of hot coffee breath
from a man standing too close on the train,
the routine delays.

The bruised and already overripe banana,
the bitter taste of a swallowed scream,
the surprise deadlines.

The spot forming on your chin,
the number on the scales,
your split ends, your split family.

The hairline crack of pressure,
the moment you had to smile
through your tears,

the way light fell on your face
to spotlight all your flaws,
the shadow of an angry moon.

Wrap this day into a tight ball,
swallow it with red wine at midnight.
Keep it with all the other days;

each one wrapped in a violet ribbon
embroidered by silver needles in gold thread
with the words ‘fuck you, I’m still here’.

Night Mothers

The race to capture the sun begins
at dusk. Old women wriggle on scabrous
bellies and crawl out from under mountains.

They run or fly frantic in forests, they search
city rooftops and under the foundations
of village homes, they call to each other

as the stars appear, they turn over stones.
Each crone brandishes a brace of vipers,
asps or adders in an attempt to rattle the sun

but darkness always prevails. Defeated by black
silence, they slither into a dry well, leaving
their scaly bouquets behind. The night mothers

are deep underground by daybreak.
Last night they failed but they are patient.
The sun must set. It will try to rise again.

Madame Blavatsky, Queen of Cuffs

Behold, we have before us something unremarkable –
a baby girl, not worth educating, born into corsets

and codes of conduct. Now look at our great Madame,
who took that punch in the stomach and never flinched.

The blows kept on coming – a dour look, two bulging eyes,
an excess of chins – but she stayed on her nimble feet.

Next came the gold ring that manacled her to a man
more than twice her age. She tore through those bonds

as if they were paper, unlocked the door to a library
and found so many other worlds in those books –

some you can reach by crossing an ocean if you dare,
but others lie back in the unfathomable past or beyond a veil.

Not content to dream, our Madame woke up and went in search
of new gods from the East, who blessed her freedom.

Watch her now, waving her hands as she speaks of spirits;
light fractures through the rubies and garnets on her rings.

Has she travelled to occult lands, conversed with otherwise
mute apparitions? Ladies and gents, we must try to unravel

the conundrum – does she have power beyond the mortal realm?
This much we know: here was a most unpromising woman,

stout and untidy, and she cast her azure eyes across continents,
lived with lovers, smoked cigarettes and hash with abandon,

wrote books as if no one had ever tried to cinch her in. Perhaps
she had dubious morality, but she gave comfort to soldiers

when they needed it most, cured mothers and beloveds
sick with horror at otherwise irreparable loss.

We can't say it was all hokem when she unwound every rope
that tried to bind her, held her breath in the water tank

of whispered gossip and flat accusation, escaped every time
someone strapped her in a straitjacket.

Notes on Mistletoe

Mistletoe is an evergreen parasite.
The sticky seeds can burrow deep into the trunk
until a tree is nothing but a prop

with its heart plumbed dry.
This plant can hollow the crown of its host
and yet carries all possible life on a wing.

Some stories suggest it can keep you safe
from enchantment but those tales
are working their own charming illusion.

A man may kiss any woman he pleases under
the smooth-edged leaves and waxy white berries.
Bad luck befalls any woman who refuses.

The juniper bush thrives under mistletoe;
meanwhile, the oak tree dies where it stands.

Homewrecker

By day, every smile and gesture
is a part of my plan to wrap all men
in the folds of my velvet cloak

but I do my best work at night.
As soon as the sun goes down, I split
myself into pieces until I am

everywhere, curved with lush
temptation and cooled by the dark air.
All the women cry witch as they see

me in flight, insinuating my way
with heated enchantment and naked pleasure.
They think they know the truth,

they think they see me licking
the sweat of satisfaction from yet another
man's skin, but that's not my true

power. I have drunk lascivious
nightmares so often that I've grown voluptuous
in the hum of impossible magic.

I have kissed so many men
from inside the mouths of other women
and they always kiss me back.

First Quarter

There is grace in the night sky. Look up,
make plans, imagine what life
would be like if it were fair.

Now accept that it isn't.
Book the ticket anyway. Even if
you don't have the time or energy, apply.

Write it all down, solemn
as a childhood promise and tick tasks
off the list, one by one. The stars weep

for you so don't slow down
for something as insignificant
as your own tears.

Maria Sibylla Merian and the Goliath Bird-Eating Spider

I: A half-blind beginning

You are a 52-year old woman.
Plant your feet as wide as your hips,
set your jaw in a determined line
and stand at the Amsterdam docks
as the 17th century draws to a close.

You have endured much to get here –
the loss of a father, the disappointment of a husband,
long lessons in Latin, sniffing pity from women.

You spent your childhood raising caterpillars and silkworms,
patiently waiting for a chrysalis to split apart.

As a young woman, you avoided embroidery
by painting canvases for other women to sew
and kept on sketching butterfliers
with a scientific eye all the way
to marriage and motherhood.

Fate also gave you daughters and more
than your allotted share of gumption.

You worked to feed your family
and before your mind was blunted
by too many rules, your art took you
to the jungle of South America, even though
you were told you wouldn't survive the journey
and there was nothing there to see.

Interlude: The Sibyl's Spider Acrostic

The largest spider not yet known to man
  hunches over a hummingbird, it's weight a pressing
    ecstasy of death. You hold your breath. Articulated legs
      reach around the prey, barbed hairs
        affixed beneath bright blue
          plumage. The bird enters the long night of the marshes
            high in a tree, its once keen eyes
              opaque – wings crushed, tongue dry of nectar – feeling all,
                seeing nothing. A wild, winged talisman drained of its power
                  as it lapped at the jungle's hot cruelty.

Beyond that bird's knowing, something more is written on
  leaves, in the branches. For you, more than life and death
    observed. You paint on in silence as the spider advances and seizes
      nested eggs. Each shell splinters, each new life
        dying before hope can reach the air,
          imploding in capture and fertile despair.

II: A legacy's scattered leaves

You are now a 54-year old woman
and you have knowledge of another world.

Years of jungle heat have left you in a fever
but your mouth is unfrenzied,
your trunks are stuffed with specimens.

You detail your discoveries,
share the art you created as you sat
patient and attentive on the forest floor.

Self-appointed experts crawl all over your work,
take a dry bite, call your unadorned research delirium.

It's as if you're standing in a bell jar
and there's no air to carry your voice
far enough into the future.

You are left with no choice but to sell
those extraordinary plants and paintings piecemeal
and you die slowly, almost forgotten.

Men have wings to soar like the hummingbird,
their every move claims power
and the force of authority
but they are all too busy
grubbing about in the mud.

Those men don't know what you know,
what you almost took to your grave.
History can wait for approval
but a woman doesn't have that luxury.

You know what you saw, and you painted the truth:
sometimes what the world deems a lesser creature
can cut down one imbued with the power of flight.

Feeding Mum Peony Seeds

I read somewhere that people used to believe
peony seeds could dispel nightmares.
Their petals bask in the heat of the midday sun
and stay awake to drink in the shine of the moon.
The glow is said to be contagious;
a luminous approach to a short life in bloom
holds a lesson and a healing.

Each fat seed is coloured with the promise
of the earth; rich beads of memory hold on
to sunshine and enchanted moonlight
that tastes of summer flowers.

I fill a salad bowl with the blooms –
purple, red, white and yellow –
and plead with Mum to eat.

I feed her a radiant daily portion, hoping
their swallowed glow will help her feel closer
to the darkness she holds inside her
and sense how it connects to the light.

I don't know if they hold any real magic
but when I push the seeds between her lips,
I think of all she fed my childhood,
how she made me feel so safe with little more
than quiet patience and warm milk.

I wonder
if she emptied out her bag of tricks
for her daughters and left no spell of her own

She spits out petals and seeds.
I pick them up.
I will keep feeding her, one by one.

Miss Shilling's Orifice

The Merlin engine had the war disease, a distinct lack
of magic. It would not allow men to dive or swoop
away from an attack and left them in thrall to g-force
as the flooded carburettor took them far from any hope

of Avalon. Young men in winged armour plummeted
into oceans of fire and water; one brief shining moment
of elemental awe before each Spitfire and Hurricane
was caught by yawning gravity. The pilots learned

too late that there never was a Camelot; wartime women
already knew this truth. One among them shrugged off
the shackle of chivalry and with unrepentant brevity
and a gruff demeanour, wearing oil-smeared overalls,

changed the course of the war. Men laughed
when she arrived at an airbase, but not for very long.
They called her Tilly like the chugging army pick-ups
they drove their troops around in, but never to her face.

Miss Shilling, engineer, found a way to joust with German
fuel injection using a modest brass thimble with a small hole
that became her namesake. A woman who had already tinkered
with her destiny had no problem fixing a simpler engine.

Tool-laden, she braze-welded brass collars to the planes
herself, not caring that she had no place at the officers' table.
Off she would roar on her Norton motorbike, heading
for the next airbase, leaving the pilots in her dust.

All True

Agenda item one: A synopsis of the book club novel
is available at the sign-in desk for anyone
who didn't read it.
Please at least read the overview:
we must avoid blowing our cover.

Anyone who does wish to discuss the book,
speak to the grimoire officer.

Agenda item two: List of men that women
have decided not to have sex with.
It gets longer every month, exponential growth
means that it will now be stored digitally.
No man will be taken off the list this month.

Agenda item three: Promotions achieved by playing
the woman card total 56 this month.
Reminder – anyone who needs a woman card
must collect from the treasurer.
Used cards must be returned.

Agenda item four: Destruction of male childhood.
Plans are progressing for a major actress
to reboot another eighties franchise with female characters.
An estimated 8.4 million boyhoods will be ruined.

Agenda item five: Dark magic.
We appreciate that many wish to embrace the freedom
of night flight and the vengeance of cursing
but this does arouse suspicion.
See addenda for a list of academics
and public figures intent on exposing our scheme.

Agenda item six: Castration fantasies.
Noted that it is tempting to use a rusty knife,
but we cannot risk early exposure
of the ongoing plan for magical wholesale castration.
Nut harvest sub-committee
to report back next month with Gantt chart of timelines.

AOB: Annual Sabbat.
Anyone wishing to sign their soul to the devil
must compete the extended health and safety form.
Those planning to observe only must sign
a confidentiality agreement.
The dress code is, as always, naked –

Free Pilates classes and an early morning boot camp
being next week for those wishing to tone up
before stripping off and howling at the blood-soaked moon.

Waxing Gibbous

Lace up your boots so the cords
are even and tie a bow
that won't come undone.

Eat your evening meal slowly
and don't starve yourself:
you're not that hungry or that alone.

Go for a swim, expose pale
and cratered flesh to the air. Breathe
in time to the water's music.

Immerse yourself in all you loved
before you learned too much.
Trust in the coming, rounded

certainty that all you are has room
to grow. You know where you're going,
don't leave yourself behind.

Step

"No one controls my life but me… if there's something in there I don't like, I'm going to change it." Tonya Harding

Don't tell me you hadn't already made your mind up
when I first put my blades onto the ice. When I skate,

your fairy-tale imagination murmurs to your eager eyes
asking for proof and it doesn't take long to find it –

big hair, electric blue eyeliner, a frayed costume and music
blaring so loud you know without listening that like me,

it will be sweating and wicked. If you started earlier in the story,
you'd see what it took to get here, you'd know how thick make-up

hides scars and bruises, broken nails are a sign of hard work
and every missed stitch and sequin comes from a hand shaking

after a long shift. It's not ladylike for you to know anything
so inconvenient and your ethics never extend to anyone

who doesn't look like you. I wasn't plotting anything more
than to hide those flaws, a pristine score to wear like a pelt.

It doesn't matter that I try to hide the join, it will be circled
like a foundation tidemark around my neck. When you see

what you think is a cheap woman grow rich with talent,
you take her for a brazen new bride to a hapless man, an unwanted

ugly step-sister born with a swinging hammer in her hand. Admit it:
you had me cast as a villain long before a princess arrived on the scene.

Tut and mutter over the notion of fair play if you must, and tell yourself
the gaudy interloper deserved it – a competitor but not a natural,

you'll whisper, then hiss, *not one of us*. I always knew that.
I read the same stories you did and watched the same movies,

the only difference is that I didn't have to wait for your indictment.
I already knew how stubborn this story would be – but so am I.

Heat those iron shoes in a fire brash as a tabloid, strap them
on my feet and I'll dance. That's not spite, honey. It's survival.

Robin, Son of Art

Dame Alice Kytler was familiar with power;
a gombeen with the estate of four dead husbands

and an understanding of how to wield magic.
The demon Robin was a sleight of hand
she used to slip her bonds and her country:
mistress of the art of leaving other women to explain
the shadows cast in the scheming darkness of fire.

To follow her example, stoke a blaze of oak-logs
and place the skull of a decapitated thief above it.

Fill the empty vessel with worms,
entrails, dead men's nails, shreds of the cerements
of unbaptised buried boys.
Add a pinch of herbs mixed
in a way you've kept to yourself.

Whisper incantations over the brew
in a hot dark room of hunched women.

The art will emerge in the flicker of candlelight,
pillars made with horrors and wicks
aflame with an acrid hair-burning smell
that brings the demon who loosens
your tongue, your limbs, your every inhibition.

Shtriga

My mother is now a Disney villain;
the sun has become an insult. She should
be fitted with a blood-black velvet cape.

Pale blue eyes in a hard-set face stare out
from a levered hospital bed. If she opened
those pursed lips now, I would reach down

her throat and rip out whatever is gnawing
at her from the inside with teeth
as sharp and rotten as broken promises.

I want to scatter crumbs of pure white salt,
make the sign that will ward off the glutton
that eats her into disorder. A creature has beetled

into her mind, burrowed deep fathoms
into her marrow and flits around twilight recesses
on brittle wings. It got in after a click

of bare wet twigs on a thin glass window,
thorny fingers beckoning toward the night.
I can't unsee the bone-etched handprint

on my mother's back, I know can't recover
every drop drained but I can't stop trying, either.
I must touch my trembling fingers to my eyelids,

my lips, the pit of my stomach and both
chambers of my heart in the right order,
throw some of that salt in a fire and smoke

the evil out. I will leave vases of flowers
that look like purple clover and hope
it won't notice their blooms hold garlic seeds.

I will steal her greyscale kaleidoscope,
give up every silver coin
I have to fashion an amulet of doctors and nurses.

I will whisper prayers to protect us both.
Now I have learned about creatures that lurk
in the dark, I can't ever unknow them,

their leaden shapes. Wizened fingers grip my throat:
I know before I see my Mum again, before
I kill this wraith, I must look them both in the eye.

Sensational: The Art of Pixie Coleman-Smith

The future sounds green.
Artichokes, brussels sprouts,
parakeets, pears, rosemary,
frogs, leprechauns, tourmaline,
alligators, cucumbers.
Moss. Grass. Trees.

The future feels yellow.
Canaries, bananas,
butter, Big Bird, sulphur,
turmeric, post-it notes, submarines,
pacman, lemons,
Flames. Cards. Sun.

The future smells blue.
Orchids, peacocks,
lagoons, smurfs, robin eggs,
sad songs, Neptune, sapphires,
blueberries, topaz.
Sea. Sky. Eyes.

The future tastes red.
Strawberries, tomatoes,
phone boxes, roses, lipsticks,
apples, stop signs, peppers,
ketchup, fire engines.
Wine. Blood. Hearts.

Making Medea: A Recipe by Belle Gunness, Murderess

Start with a world where men
are in charge of everything,
including a woman's value.

Make that decorative.
Make quiet devotion, gentle
good looks and the ability

to bear children essential –
you need to make more men
to keep this cooking.

If a woman doesn't measure up,
ignore her. If she grows strong
enough to help herself, laugh.

Simmer this situation for years.
If children disappear, don't stir
the pot in case you end up

having to feed them or ask
where they came from.
It's best not to know.

You will find men may also
disappear. Assume coincidence –
you've already decided

that men wouldn't go with
a woman like that.
At the last moment, you will see

she had a recipe of her own:
a bottle of poison, a hacksaw,
a hammer, a pit.

Set a fire and ask yourself
if she died in the blaze
or whether you hope

she withstood the heat
in the kitchen, slipped out
and ascended towards the sun.

Full Moon

This is the moment
you've been expecting – or dreading.
Howl if you want to, let it all go.

Keep on screaming. Pick a fight
or fall in love - with yourself,
with someone else, or with all

your many careful choices.
This is a test. Either hide in your house,
pretend it's too cold outside

and you're too busy or
put on a new blue jumper and drink
iced cocktails with no thought

of work in the morning.
The light you live under is tidal;
it rises on the whim of an ocean.

Whether or not you're living
the life you hoped for,
you can't blame the moon.

Maybe she’s born with it

These walls have ears and eyeballs and limbs
and organs embedded in the brickwork.
The bloody countess stained the foundation,
contoured the bailey with buried bodies

and tossed others in locked rooms no one
ever thought or dared to check. Thick stone
muffled the screams and while whispers travelled
further than they should, it wasn’t quite far

enough. Elizabeth Bathory gave the masonry
a waterline, walls wept as her dark desire insinuated
overlines into each of the four towers
and smoothed the wrinkles around her iced eyes.

She was chatelaine to chains, hot metal
and sharp implements, queen of the last cut.
She watched in panting fascination while
women were stripped raw, doused in cold water

or honey, left to freeze or be eaten alive.
She bathed in the gore, her face smeared
with human greasepaint, kohl-ringed eyes drawn on
with blackened, charred remains. Her victims’

names were perfume, infusing her with longing.
She bore the fatal slap of vanity until
she was bricked up against a world of reflections
and died alone with her pitiless beauty.

Chanctonbury Ring

I wonder, as I lie peaceful on the rabbit-cropped turf,
looking at the wreckage of implanted trees
that never should have been there,
how anyone could think that a hill was haunted,
inhabited by demons or that it hated anyone.

There are stories of the devil stealing souls here,
of Caesar and his army appearing,
treasure seekers, lost children, a woman in white.
Perhaps this is a place for understanding loss,
the part it plays in our history of gains.

Reports of ghosts and broken nights come from men –
men who are tough, men who know better
or didn't know before then exactly what they were,
how vulnerable in nature, how afraid
of screaming women in the empty dark air.

Away from the city, away from cars and phone signals,
away from the artificial world, something else
finds a voice. I know they're not witches, they're women
in pain, ignored until they find
their roofless home on an ancient hill.

Blonde Bombshell

Blonde hair, lush curves and sweetly parted lips.
Ogive breasts, clipped boat-tail shoes and hips
like the earth piled in front of trench territory.

She knew that with youth came bankable beauty,
with money came power. She was ensnared
with her eyes open, drank from the chalice

of fame poisoned with barbiturates, the crystal
glass of formaldehyde to fix her as a force of nature.
Detonation became an inevitability;

she wrote the spell that killed her, conjured
out of commodities and consumed like hot dogs,
apple pie and baseball cards. She had been strong

and safe inside the outline of an unreal woman,
but that skin could not age with her. She stepped away
with a tilted walk, a fixed smile and her power.

Periwinkle

When he first gave me periwinkles, blue
like my eyes, I saw an evergreen love,
one that tasted like smoky lavender.
We picked a pair of leaves from the same stem,
cast a spell designed to last forever.

We made a home and planted blue buttons
all along the border. They remind me
of the promise I made, my destiny
served to me on those salver-shaped petals,
those blooms that thrived among the narcissi.

Under the blue bruise of a summer sky,
those petals grew violet like his eyes,
the colour of dusk gathering darkness
when pink light sinks into heaven's palette
and before night locks the door.

Long trailing stems spread across the garden,
choking out all other bulbed or leafy varieties.
I know now that crushed leaf of periwinkle halts
a bloody nose, the crimson of a split lip,
any flow from a woman's body.

Phaeton's Legacy

There is nothing the earth can say;
steaming and hissing from oppressive heat
she leans into the caverns of the dead.

This is what comes from fighting fire with fire –
a scourged soul wrenched from a bruised
body, cooked-ripe, everything scorched

by the same flamed fingers that snatched
every cloud from the sky. She knows better
than to turn her gaze to heaven. The gods

are nothing without thunderbolts and rain.
A mother uses ravenous fire to light her way
as she picks through the ruins. She seeks pieces

of her son – even a stripped bone would at least
give a home to her tears. Ceaseless weeping
from the daughters of the sun does nothing

more than bring them all to the suffocating tomb
of a man who thought he could outrun nature.
Seven sisters meet in despair, grief rips at their hair

and their skin, their nails broken and bloody
from raw scoring on their souls. One tries to fall,
lie still and wait to die but finds herself calcified

upright. Another tries to help but her feet
are rooted into the ground. A powerless, frantic third
looks on and pulls leaves freshly sprouted on her skull,

where her hair had been. Soon their legs are encased
in wood, their pleading upraised arms sway as branches.
Bark circles their waists, their thighs; the rough skin

of the earth's lungs smothers their breasts, their hands
and between their legs. Only their mouths are left free
for splintered cries to their mother, who tries to haul

them out until their grieving screams turn pleading.
The bodies of the sister-trees are one with each trunk;
they tell their mother of the savage, ripping pain

of savage, ripping hands until their voices are felled
by the stiff rind on their new forms. Men mourn
their personal losses, they kindle hate as if

they were alone in losing a son. Or light. Or air.
All of men's yearning is cut down by the earth's
relentless necessity. Grief cedes to the service

a mother demands and men bitterly whip
the sun into rising again, lashing out at the fiery
god and a dry world strewn with bodies.

Such are the spoils of man's ambition.
The earth's hopes are whispered between
women; they weep amber tears, their

sorrow soluble only in oil. Knotted poplar
trees bear witness to the soft wood of sisters,
the promise carried along the bright river.

Untold Fortunes

Beware of the past, it changes.
Death may be a constant
but the shade of recollection can shift
until all you see are a string of memories
like unpatterned beads -

catching the eye with iridescence
and appearing as different colours
depending on the light.
So very enchanting
until they slip their ribbon
to bob about in dark water.

All of your happy-ever-afters
are two-sided cards.
The world may promise
to sit in the palm of your hand
but it will keep on spinning in darkness.

Accept that the future has you
in an unbreakable contract.
Sign your name and mean it:
the price of any alternative is your life.

Seek the truth in the present,
the now you're breathing in.
A bowl of ice cream is truth.
A niggling ache, a brush of hands,
a fading bruise.

Time unfolds second by second:
this moment is entirely honest.

Waning Gibbous

The night can sometimes form a blanket
of soft light. Take off those boots,
cancel your plans and rest with a book.

A reading light holds enough warmth,
a ceramic tea pot will pour the perfect cup
every time. There's no need to feel guilty

about any of your pleasures.
The night may bring a ringing phone
that pulls you away until you're sitting

in a hospital waiting room with someone
who isn't sick but does need attention.
Even when you're hollowed out,

you will keep answering those calls.
Back home, the tea is long cold,
but so many pages are waiting.

Mrs Duncan Won’t Keep Mum

During the Blitz, the air hummed with voices
and women listened.
You might say that what we did back then
was indistinguishable from magic.

Mrs Duncan overstepped when she chose
grand performance halls over drafty huts.

It’s nothing against the woman – her sort
weren’t brought up like that. A factory girl
may keep her word just as well as any
in the aristocracy, but not her.

A self-made woman would sooner give up
her new fur coat than obey anyone.

The crater of damage she caused claiming
the angels brought her black-edged telegrams
was vast. She pressed on bruised hearts, made them bleed,
charged a fee while releasing state secrets.

That was why they dusted off the old rule,
an ancient label to cover her mouth.

A lenient charge compared to treason
when that would have seen her hanged. We all lost
some liberty in those days, all of us
at work in the shadow of the gallows.

The cardinal rule: when women blab,
men will die. She conjured her own prison.

Olga Hunt's Broomstick

I was eighteen, camping with friends
on Dartmoor. Exams behind us, we knew
everything then, thought our vivid certainty
would last forever. We sat around a fire,

poked at poorly baked potatoes, persevered
with cheap sweet wine until it tasted
of our laughter. Night gathered us closer
and we shared stories suited to the shadows,

seeking a reason to clasp a cold hand
and cluster in pairs. One boy told the tale
of the Hound Tor rocks, eyes bright swaggering
as he recounted vicious dogs tooth by sharp tooth.

Ripping through the fabric of the stories
and darkness, a woman appeared among us;
her wry, wrinkled face displayed fathomless
age, her eyes brimmed with ingenuity and mischief.

She danced with a broomstick bridled
across her shoulders; the husks of the brush
tied on with coarse ribbons of bright colours.
We were as still as the surrounding granite.

She let out a cuckoo laugh and waltzed
into the sinister black beyond the night sky,
brandishing her broom at the moon.
We each went to our separate tents after that.

Now I have a job I'm good at. I wear suits
and earn promotions. Each working day
I am spat out by the hot mouth of the tube
into a cool high-rise beetling with indifference.

On a day like so many before and ahead,
the memory comes back to me full tilt –
the taste of bad wine and first kisses,
intense connections, flames licking at the dark.

Much else has faded but I would still swear
that as she left us, I saw Olga Hunt
take a quick, nimble step over her broomstick
and, quite impossibly, take flight.

Jenny Greenteeth

In a certain light, anyone can see it –
the sickly green of her skin, the film of algae
behind her eyes, the sour olive of her breath,
the leaves of flaked skin at her elbows.

The dull silver of her shadow can stalk you
and like her, it knows children never listen,
that the elderly and frail will always fall.
I must warn you to keep her at arm's length –

she'll push you in the water, laugh
while you're drowning, torture you
for hours if she feels like it, finish you off
with her sharp jade teeth in a single bite.

She scratches, pierces, drowns and devours,
she cackles and dances then she basks
in the water, her hair splayed – a violent neon
frame for her nauseating pea face –

and she's sated for a while. This woman,
this razor-toothed, grudge-infected
river hag who was only ever meant to be
a soggy cautionary tale, she is my sister.

I used to live with her by an emerald riverbed
churning with the possibility of falling
into the water and landing on malachite rocks
slick with moss and her brackish malice.

My only hope is to sever myself from her.
I swim in blue pools with safe straight lines
and chlorinated water, watching for pond scum
and gathering plankton in the corners.

Lies Will Weigh Them Down

"She'll come back as fire / to burn all the liars, / leave a blanket of ash on the ground."
Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle – Kurt Cobain

Rapes, rats and other horrors.
Dirt floors and hosepipe baths
to punctuate the days between outrages.

That's what the public wants –
a victim, a martyr, an actress but
never just a woman.

Frances picks the petals
from a primrose flower,
and then sets them all aflame

to render any lies about her
to ash. She haunts the world
as a thorny witch to prick

a liar's conscience. She stays, too,
for those who know her truth
and what it is to face the madness

of sedated and screaming reality
in an antiseptic beige walkway,
the wrong side of a heavy locked door.

Sunday Coven

We weren't a church family but on Sunday, my Dad
would impart his version of an evening sermon

on the decks. Stevie Nicks uttered husky incantations,
whirling her shawl as she drew invisible sigils in the air.

Then Debbie Harry spat rage into a cracked bottle
of bleach and turned it back on the world, threefold.

Dad would say she wasn't the first. As delicate and practised
as any ritual, he would blow the dust off another vinyl.

We learned how lynched people became strange fruit
and Aretha demanded respect as she pulled out all her pain

and revealed herself a queen. Such cunning in the rich octaves
these women travelled that when I was younger, I didn't know

there were other ways to sing than to belt out a tune
from the base of my belly, filling my lungs with enough air

for immolation. Above all, Dad revered Bonnie Raitt,
ranked her up there with BB and Jimi. He would say, look Zoe –

she's a redhead like you, as if he was passing on a secret.
Later, I brought offerings – the soft understanding

of The Bangles, the trials of Natalie Merchant,
the sorcery of Kim Gordon. Lessons had been conjured

from songs until I could spin my own black circles.
A few years ago, I bought Dad 'Foreverly' by Norah Jones

and he played it so often his carers thought he'd lost his mind.
He laughed that off, enchanted – heartbreak and guitars, stories

and harmonies – in our family, these are the most sincere prayers.
At his funeral, I knew I shouldn't choose a song about romance

when people expect high heaven and solemn duty. I didn't care.
I am still my father's daughter.

Ella Fitzgerald's tender voice filled that sterile crematorium
with a love that carried no pinch of regret. I hear all the Sundays

of my childhood cued up like a treasured album and I want
the whole world to see: they can't take that away from me.

Last Quarter

Pretend all you want.
Craft a mask of red lips
and winged eyeliner – you know

that what you're doing is bad for you.
Don't waste any more time.
Face a mirror in wavering light,

look yourself in the eye and accept
your own apology. You will wake up
in the morning and go to work,

but for now, the moon knows
that you are sorry
and you are trying your best.

A Day Three Story

Act I: Apollo's Retribution

We interrupt all our standard broadcasts
to bring news of a senseless attack.

Police are keeping the media back
from the scene where many innocents died

but there are reports that a beardless youth
with ancient eyes detonated a bomb

packed with a biological agent.
Cruel arrows of fire and poison rained down

on the docile crowd. A plague descended
like a hungry wolf from a mountaintop.

Act II: Dying Declaration

Nemo moriturus praesumitur mentiri

When you look at what I've done, know that she
conspired with ravens and made me do it.

That's the way the world works, spun into war
by the ingratitude of weak women.
That's why men, women and children die.

Such treachery - I saw it all coming
and struck before another hammer fell.

This has happened before and will happen
again, until everyone understands
that a man must show his leonine face,

strike and ascend on eagle wings, or die
in the righteous attempt, bearing his teeth.

Act III: The Town Square

It's day three. After the devastation
we turn now to some men to talk this through.

The man's wife was brought in by police
and then released after reports emerged

that he beat her. If I can start with you,
sir, she claims she didn't know his plans, claims

that his cries that she made him do it were lies
he told himself but there are whispers that

she knew. Does that add up for you?
There's protection for women like her,

she chose not to take it. Our children died here.
We can't know for sure what's true without proof

of what really happened behind closed doors.
She must accept that couples argue, that's a fact.

If we're looking to lay blame, some must fall
on her. *She saw this horror coming and did nothing*.

Act IV: Official Caution

You brought me here after my brother called
and told you that I knew the man. It's true,
I knew him and his violence. I knew
and I must look at what I knew he'd do.

When we met, his bright charm enthralled me,
so handsome it was like staring at the sun.
He appeared to me elegant as music
and offered me a future. But too soon,

seduction turned to frustration. He spat in my face.
You ask why I didn't leave sooner.
It starts with the slightest misalignment –
a small spill dries and brushes off like sand

until it piles up in every corner
and blocks the door. I was as afraid
of the outside world as the simmering
pot of home. I was one line of defence.

My upturned palms are scored with what came next,
my body is a map you can survey.
Scars point their jagged arrows to future
detonations, my bruises boom caution.

The truth courses through my limbs, leaks a red
warning from each fresh wound. I absorbed
all I could and tried to muffle the blows
and now I know, too late, that it's too late.

Act V: Exile

Where I am now is no better, or worse.
Nothing makes much difference. He said
I made him do it and people take him
at his word, see it as my fate to bear

his rage behind closed doors. No one minds
savage hands when they aren't touched by the blows.
I knew that the time would come when
my body was not enough territory -

violence is insatiable. This truth coiled
around my throat like a snake and choked me
back to silence. Tell me what I should have said,
and how? What theatrics should I have used?

Now they rape my memories with such force,
stone statues would turn their cold eyes away
in pity. He said I made him do it
and people have chosen again to believe him.

Of course, I saw all of this coming –
how men choose to ignore all the tears
salted with warnings; they never listen
to women's voices. I understand.

If I exhaled the breath inside my chest
it could drive people mad. Still my lungs
keep on wheezing spent air. Have mercy.
I am one woman living in Cassandra's body.

Paying the Toll

Perhaps I deserve to be locked in here.
I don't understand the clamour of creation
but these thick stone walls make sense to me.

It is not the cold that makes them damp,
it is so many years of women weeping, soaked
into the foundations before rising up

as barriers that muffle the world and keep
the other people out. When a tired prisoner
is bumped up the steep steps towards

a dank cell with a low ceiling, blood
can erupt from a stone. The sharp edges
wear smooth from use but a bruise

contains as much blood as a cut might
and colours itself with a greater grief.
I am never quite alone – politics and nuance

squeeze themselves through the barred windows,
debtors and criminals take their places
on a bare floor as if they belong here.

The walls of this prison are lost on me:
wherever I'm taken, I will keep returning here.
My heart was built for a love I never found –

I can't fly or find a platform to leap from,
chains rust on my limbs, rattle in the wind
and stop me from reaching up, or out.

Waning Crescent

Before you head back to darkness,
see a movie that makes you laugh
at the horror. Have an early night.

Don’t scratch any itches, you will shed
your skin soon but what’s underneath
is too tender for this night air.

The moon will know the right moment.
Let sleep curl against your spine
and keep you warm in dreamless sleep.

Beldame

When I was young, I didn't have a body
that I thought of, other than how it could
propel me to climb up trees, walk me
to the library or swim towards my potential.

When I became a woman, my body belonged
to other people. It was a target of disgust
and lust, a benchmark, a scarlet streak
ribboned with soft curves.

The older I get, the heavier my body becomes.
Am I nothing more than a caretaker to a factory
destined for demolition? My thick blood meets
the sharp cold machinery of the world

until my body belongs to a witch.
The mechanics of torture will prevail
and my body will be a dead thing for the living
to look on, an unnerving effigy with blinded eyes.

The Bell Witch Makes a Friend of Darkness

I was born among the petty jealousies
of a village overrun by feckless men,
spurned women and bored children.

I became the implicit threat of darkness,
the creeping dread in an unlit hallway,
the absence of any other explanation.

I got out when I could, moved on
to the fertile landscape of ghost stories
in search of something like rebirth.

No devil came and bid me serve;
people did that. I was followed here.
They cast me in a pit. I clawed my way out.

Now I take flight in the night sky,
rest in the dimmest, half-hidden corners
and patiently wait in a sullen cave.

I can slip between shifting cloud,
tramp crisp autumn leaves underfoot,
take form in a beam of moonlight.

These days (and nights) I haunt as I please
and this misty existence leaves me free
because I was never here.

There is a poem that I want to write…

… that will be filled with swirling witches
spinning sulphur and cobwebs
around a woman until she breaks their spell.

In this poem, she remembers
her own inimitable power. She smiles once
at the hovering hags at their work

and then, like a cat, shrugs them off.
She will brush dust and ash from her clothes
and walk herself into this poem

that I want to write because my heart
wants to feel that triumph. I want
to walk with this woman into white space.

Unforgiven

I keep my past under my pointed hat, it's nothing
to be ashamed of but I don't know,
can't know when the wind might change

and the embers of an angry fire might catch the hem
of my skirt. Time is so unyielding. It's too late
to allow for nuance when the stocks have been set out

in the village square, when a rope hangs ready
from permanent gallows. It's already too late
for too many and only the executioner stands

to gain anything substantial. I used to think it mattered
if you had right on your side, but too many accidents
are condemned, too many lessons left unlearned.

There are too few reasons to change anything now.
Everyone has their tribe, their version of right
and there's no room on any side for a mistake.

I am afraid to live in an age without redemption,
when even sweeping up the ashes from the latest
witch-burning pyre doesn't raise a single question.

We're living in the watchful season when you must
stay concealed when you look out of the window;
glance carefully over your shoulder; pick up every stitch.

Witches and Whisky

I took the bus, walked through an archway of autumn trees
and watched my step on a path crackling with fallen leaves,
checking the undergrowth for adders through the shivelights.

She was waiting – sitting outside a pub in defiant sunshine,
somewhere miraculous in its placement in a gentle valley.
The cadence of the place felt safe enough. I ordered a drink.

I had a lot of questions about how she cursed me. I asked
if she'd decided not to blind me or if her spells only reached
as far as to weaken my eyes enough to cost my balance.

She shrugged her way through my catalogue of complaints,
smirked at the failings she sprinkled on me and my sisters
to brew some drama, shook her head when I spoke of grief.

I ordered another double as dusk gathered around us, a dram
of oak-smoked fire against her blue and ghoulish humour,
a glass of water untouched so as not to douse the flames.

She let me finish, then pointed at my red hair, the cigarette
in my left hand. She leaned back and cackled, tipping her face
to the haphazard stars in the certain cold of a highland sky.

HER KIND:

A Discovery of Witches in Women's Poetry

Zoe Mitchell

Introduction: A deed without a name

This thesis comprises a creative submission of a book of poems and an accompanying critical commentary, both on the topic of witches. The aim of this study is to examine how – and why – female poets use witch figures within their poetry. Despite the negative connotations of the role, the witch within a narrative has agency and often a complex psychological motivation; as a villain, a witch may get the best storyline, even if it is one of betrayal and revenge. The question becomes whether the symbolic and narrative order that casts the witch in a negative light can be transformed into something more empowering for women. This in turn raises the question of whether it is possible to effect change from within the existing political and symbolic order. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that it is possible due to the power of the witch, of poetic language and of female subjectivity.

Writer and activist Audre Lorde suggests that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." (Lorde, 2017, p.127) While this is certainly the case on a structural level and in the arena of white female academics to which Lorde was referring, she herself saw poetry as a weapon of self-empowerment. In addition, while the witch may have been created as one of the master's symbolic tools to oppress women, she does work to dismantle the master's house from the inside. Even as a victim – as history shows an accused witch often is – she has the power to reject her persecutors and reveal their hypocrisy, although it may cost her life. While this may not seem like genuine change, the creation of a female perspective using existing tropes and language turns one of the master's tools against itself. The cumulative effect of female

writers reclaiming images that are considered negative or evil in pursuit of female expression outside of the established norm is more than a temporary victory. There is still a price to pay, but as Virginia Woolf notes, it may be "unpleasant to be locked out… it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in" (Woolf, 2002, p.16) and the witch has the power to open the door to female subjectivity.

The space for interpretation and ambiguity within poetry provides a medium for exploring the paradox at the heart of the witch trope. Language is more than simply a means of self-expression, or a limited symbolic order that prioritises patriarchal norms over the female experience. It is, like the witch figure, both and neither all at once. In the essay 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', Adrienne Rich asserted that "our language has trapped as well as liberated us, … the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and … we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh." (Rich, 1972, pp.18) The ambiguity within poetry, together with Lorde's view that it is an empowering force creates a tension that female poets can exploit to expose the limitations of the witch as a stock figure and breaks through the structural boundaries of language.

In this thesis I will be looking at the creation and significance of the witch figure – Chapter I considers the history of the witch and its political significance, Chapter II examines the role of the witch in mythology and fairy tales and the final chapter looks beyond the figure of the witch to demonstrate how understanding this specific trope can support authentic and revolutionary forms of expression for female poets. Three key themes emerged throughout this study which highlight the importance of the figure of the witch in poetry. The first is how the figure of the witch exposes the patriarchal social structure. From the hypocrisy of prosecutors to the fault lines within mythological narratives – such as an all-powerful witch

defeated by a mortal hero to serve the ideological function of that narrative – the witch stands in opposition to patriarchal hegemony in both a metaphorical and literal sense. Closely connected to this is the second theme of the relationship between language and power. History provides a concrete example – the language of the law can be used to strip women of power by labelling them as witches. The power of language it integral to the figure of the witch herself, whose use of language in spells to change reality represents a form of power just as the use of language in poetry can be used to alter perspectives on experience. Understanding the relationship between language and power allows female poets to reclaim the power denied to them through established patriarchal discourse. The third theme emerges from the first two and may provide the key to understanding the appeal of the witch to female poets – the witch as an emblem of female subjectivity. More than any other female figure, the witch has the power to speak and is not constrained by social or ideological conventions. Sexuality, strength, female anger and intersectional issues relating to race and difference are all taboo subjects within traditional patriarchal discourse but are within the scope of the witch[1].

In order to narrow the scope of the work, I selected five poems from female poets which serve to represent the vast body of work from female poets on the subject of witches. All of the chosen poems address the three key themes and prioritise female subjectivity using the figure of the witch. Additional poems and poets are referenced throughout to provide the context within which these poems

[1] This thesis is focused primarily on the experience of biological women assigned as female at birth, and particularly on the impact this has had on my creative development as a white heterosexual woman. However, a female writer of colour would have a very different perspective on these issues of race and difference. The witch also holds significance in relation to LGBTQ+ issues relating to gender and sexuality. These areas had little impact on my creative development but may prove to be more significant to other writers. Covens, sisterhood and the shape-shifting nature of the witch may provide a powerful way to explore such issues but without direct experience to inform my creative work, I felt it was outside of the scope of this study.

exist, but the primary focus remains on the selected works to provide a concise view. The poems were also chosen because I felt a personal connection with each one and thus the poems chosen supported not only the critical study but also my creative development. In the course of this analysis I will demonstrate how my consideration of the figure of the witch not only supported a greater understanding of the poems studied, but also provided insight into my own creative process. This in turn allowed me to expand my creative skills to explore female subjectivity in greater detail and to create more personal work. My own work is discussed throughout in the context of each chapter's specific topic, but there is a greater focus on other poets' work in the first two chapters to provide background for the third and final chapter, which has a stronger focus on my own creative development and completed collection.

The study includes close analysis on the following selected poems:

- 'Half-Hanged Mary' – Margaret Atwood;
- 'Circe's Power' – Louise Glück;
- 'A Woman Speaks' – Audre Lorde;
- 'Lady Lazarus' - Sylvia Plath;
- 'Her Kind' - Anne Sexton.

The following short overview of each poem provides an initial reference point and will be followed by further consideration within this thesis.

Half-Hanged Mary – Margaret Atwood

'Half-Hanged Mary' is a dramatic monologue published in the collection *Morning in the Burned House* (Atwood, 1995, p.58-69). The poem relates to the true story of Mary Webster, accused and hanged for witchcraft in a Puritan Massachusetts town in the 1680s. Webster survived the hanging and was reported to have walked through the village after her botched execution. Historical accounts vary on the

length of her survival – in some reports, she died later the next day of her wounds, and in others she lived for another eleven years. The poem adopts Mary's voice and is divided into ten sections by time, starting at 7pm when the records show Mary was hanged, through the long hours of the night and up to 8am the next morning. A final section considers Mary's life after the hanging.

This poem exposes the patriarchal social structures which facilitate witch persecution and Atwood explicitly makes the link between language and power. The pain of her hanging, for example, is considered in terms of Mary's ability to express herself – the rope cuts off 'words and air;' and she holds in the blood pounding in her head through 'clenched teeth'. She sees her persecution as pressure to 'give up my words for myself,' and links her refusal to comply with restrictive social mores to language. In the final section, 'Later', Mary describes her life after the hanging. Her freedom, experience and power are all expressed in terms of language – 'mouth full of juicy adjectives', 'blasphemies / gleam and burst in my wake', 'I speak in tongues.' The poem concludes with a stanza that creates a clear link between Mary's use of language and her new-found power:

The words boil out of me,
coil after coil of sinuous possibility.
The cosmos unravels from my mouth,
all fullness, all vacancy.

This poem will be examined in greater detail in Chapter I as an historical example of witch persecution. As well as the clear links between language and power within the poem, Mary's perspective brings to light the hypocrisy behind this persecution and prioritises female subjectivity. Further consideration of this poem will be found in Chapter III when considering how to move beyond the witch.

Circe's Power – Louise Glück

'Circe's Power' is one of three poems in Louise Glück's collection *Meadowlands* (Glück, 1997, p.37) written from the perspective of the powerful enchantress from Greek mythology. It is a free verse poem written in the voice of Circe as she watches Odysseus depart from Aeaea and from her. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Circe was said to have vanished at this point in the story. The poem shows Circe standing on the shore watching the Greeks leave on the 'crying and pounding sea'. She does not conveniently disappear at the point when she no longer serves the narrative. Instead, Circe mounts a defence – 'I never turned anyone into a pig.' Her continued presence is, in a mythic context, an opportunity for Glück to rewrite a story embedded into the cultural discourse and expose the patriarchal assumptions behind it.

The poem is considered in more detail in Chapter II because it exposes the challenges that female writers face when rewriting myths. The poem is instructive in exposing how the witch figure within mythology reduces female characters to villains or obstacles for the hero to overcome. Glück's alternative narrative puts the spotlight on the paradox at the heart of the story and her role in it – Circe cannot be both all-powerful and the victim of her circumstances as an abandoned woman. In this poem, she acknowledges the paradox directly and suggests it is inevitable – 'nobody sees essence who can't / Face limitation.' The free verse form suggests a means of unravelling magic to get to the heart of a woman who is 'a pragmatist at heart.' By exposing the motive behind the narrative – maintaining patriarchal social norms – and realising the potential power of language to embrace ambiguity, Glück demonstrates how poetry can be used to undermine entrenched ideas and prioritise female subjectivity. Circe's articulation of her abandonment demonstrates the link

between language and power in terms of whose stories are told and why they might be told. Traditional Greek myths were created to serve the patriarchal order; Glück's subversion exposes this as a motive for the story and prioritises female subjectivity over that order and the hero's journey.

A Woman Speaks – Audre Lorde

'A Woman Speaks' was published in 1978 in Audre Lorde's collection, *The Black Unicorn*. (Lorde, 2019, p.5-6) The poem prioritises female subjectivity and does not flinch from showing the human cost of doing so. In the poem, comprised of three stanzas, witchcraft and magic are invoked to claim the speaker's identity. In the first stanza, the speaker moves rapidly from African to Greek mythology and deploys extensive and mysterious lyricism – 'when the sea turns back / it will leave my shape behind' – to suggest that true articulation remains out of reach. The second stanza balances the speaker's personal history with her place within social history as a woman of colour. This shines a light on the role of ancestry, history and circumstance in the creation of her identity, even though the speaker claims 'I do not dwell / within my birth nor my divinities.' In the final stanza, the speaker has found her voice and it is 'treacherous with old magic / and the noon's new fury.' In this poem, language is a vehicle for the expression of female empowerment. The speaker's power is situated in the contradictory elements that form the means of her oppression. Lorde reclaims her humanity alongside her perceived otherness, finally claiming her identity in the final lines:

> I am
> woman
> and not white.

The poem addresses many contradictions and challenges for female writers, including the central idea that language plays a role in both the oppression and the empowerment of women. Consideration of this poem can be found in all three chapters because it has political and historical significance, explores the potential of mythology and prioritises female subjectivity. In addition, a study of Lorde's poem demonstrates the importance of intersectionality with regard to a thorough an examination of witches. Witches are often female figures who are not just outcast from society, but also from other women. In this context, 'A Woman Speaks' is a poem which isn't just Lorde claiming her power; it is speaking for and about women from marginalised groups who continue to be silenced. This is an important reminder of all the silence that continues to echo through the history of witches – and of women – and the need for further detailed scholarship in this area. From a creative perspective, it also demonstrates the wider relevance and political importance of personal experience which has informed my own work in relation to witches.

Lady Lazarus - Sylvia Plath

'Lady Lazarus' was published in the 1965 collection *Ariel* (Plath, 2007, p.14-17), two years after Sylvia Plath's suicide. Of all the poems featured in this thesis, this poem does not announce its subject as witchcraft or its speaker as a witch – but in this dramatic monologue comprised of 28 three-line stanzas with varying line lengths, Plath enacts both the magic and the considerable power of the witch. Death and resurrection, seductive misdirection and the aural quality of incantation all point to the voice of a powerful sorceress. By using the tropes and actions of a

witch, the speaker can move between a variety of roles and postures, allowing Plath to vary her style, tone and approach in order to assert a woman's self and identity.

In an interview with the Peter Orr at the BBC in 1962, Plath herself described this reworking of the Lazarus myth in a female voice as "light verse… [about] a good, plain, resourceful woman," but there is nothing plain about Lady Lazarus. The artistry of the poem begins with the alliteration and assonance of the title; the repeated shifts in tone and style show off the seductive artifice of her façade whilst concealing her true agenda. Overall, the poem creates a snaking column which shifts between different ideas as the speaker addresses her rapt audience. There is a sense of the speaker drawing her listeners closer before providing a shocking revelation with a very deliberate theatricality. Lady Lazarus' 'big strip tease' is a carefully controlled emotional and psychological exposé of her own psyche which culminates in her violent and triumphant rebirth.

In Chapter II of this thesis, the poem is considered for the way that language holds the power to subvert the mythology surrounding Lazarus and women. The explosive use of language within the poem also served to influence my own creative development and particularly in understanding the balance between personal poetry and technical craft. The use of rhyme and repetition, the rapid transition between images and jarring changes in tone and subject matter all point to a female speaker in full control of her words and her personal power. Lady Lazarus is monstrous in many ways, brutally beautiful in others and triumphant as she enacts her witchcraft without apology.

Her Kind - Anne Sexton

The poem which gave this study its title, 'Her Kind' (Sexton, 1999, p.15-16), was published in 1960 in Anne Sexton's collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back.* Divided into three stanzas, the poem examines various images of witches and witchcraft and how these may relate to female identity. In the first stanza, the witch is the stereotypical hag of fairy tales – 'haunting the black air', 'dreaming evil', deformed and 'out of mind.' In the second, she is the earth goddess found in many empowering images of witches, a nurturing figure living in 'the warm caves in the woods' and in tune with nature. The final stanza presents the tragic figure of the witch as a victim of persecution, torture and execution with a disturbing undercurrent of eroticism – 'where your flames still bite my thigh.' Each stanza ends with the same refrain – 'I have been her kind' – despite the fact that the women presented are very different.

'Her Kind' is examined in Chapter I of this thesis as a powerful example of how a female writer can take ownership of the negative or disempowering stereotype of the witch and expose the role this stereotype has played in society and the influence it continues to have in modern culture. It is given further consideration in Chapter III in demonstrating how female poets can move beyond the witch to embrace multi-faceted female subjectivity. The contrast between the expectations embedded in the stereotype and Sexton's presentation of the fallible and sometimes contradictory women of each stanza make 'her kind' difficult to categorise, and this provides a valuable insight into the value of the witch figure in exposing the limitations of female stereotypes.

The poem 'Her Kind' acknowledges and challenges a range of images associated with the witch figure and how these relate to the female experience,

supporting both the critical argument of this thesis and my personal creative development. As shown in the poem, each of the associated images – hag, earth-goddess and victim – has its strengths and limitations; all are exposed through poetic devices. Within a strict form and patterned rhyme scheme, the poem invites disorder and revolution, asking the reader to question what might otherwise be taken for granted – in this case, a culturally understood stereotype of a witch. 'Her Kind' is not just about witches and women; it is an example of how poetry can be used to transform the neat categorisation of a limiting symbol to something more complex and empowering.

To conclude, the following thesis explores the historical, political, symbolic and narrative significance of the witch in women's poetry. The thesis will include close analysis of the poems discussed above in this context and the three key themes which provide insight into the appeal of witches for female poets will emerge. These themes are the exposure of the underlying patriarchal social structure which oppresses not just witches, but all women; the relationship between language and power, including the importance of both spells and poems to enact magic; and the witch as an expression of female subjectivity, including the taboo subject of female anger. The witches in Macbeth may speak of a deed without a name to hide their power but female poets seek to name these deeds as a demonstration of it. Both studying and writing poetry on the subject of witches can, for female poets including myself, be a way to claim greater authority in the narrative of our lives by demonstrating mastery of words and language and reclaiming the disruptive and dark power of the outsider.

Chapter I: History and Politics

A history of women

The history of witchcraft and witch trials paints a grim picture. Between 1400 and 1800 there were an estimated 110,000 witch trials in the Western world and half of those resulted in convictions, adding up to an estimated 140 convictions each year. Ten women were hanged following the Pendle trials alone, but while the executions are recorded in history, a larger story goes untold. During the infamous Salem witch trials in the US, for example, 20 of the accused were executed but many more died in prison awaiting trial or soon after release, having lost their homes and their wealth. These victims are not counted in the official death toll of witch trials, but their deaths could be laid at the feet of those trials just the same. Another discomforting fact is that while in the popular imagination, witches are consigned to the past and attributed to ill-informed people and ancient superstition, belief in them persists today. Witch hunts continue to take place in Ecuador, India, Papua New Guinea and Sub-Saharan Africa.[2] Belief in witchcraft continues to lead to the persecution and murder of many, including the tragic case of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié, murdered in London on 25th February 2000 because her guardians believed she had been possessed by the devil (Littlemore, 2003).

[2] There are many possible reasons for the persistence of belief in witches across the world. There could be a link with poverty – people with no socioeconomic power may grasp at spiritual power – but the two don't have a direct correlation because witch trials are not held in every impoverished nation. Additionally, the beliefs can persist in certain cultures even when people are not in poverty. Any spiritual belief is complex in origin. Societies that persist in these beliefs in the modern world are neither ignorant nor superstitious and the same applies for past societies that held witch trials. Their existence is analogous to any person today with faith in a religion nor, despite the horrors of these trials, are these beliefs any more harmful than modern practices such as "curing" people of homosexuality, demonising people of a certain race or policing the reproductive rights of women. We cannot simplify and condemn one society for continuing with witch trials when practices with much the same dynamic continue in wealthy, Westernised countries.

It is important to acknowledge the weight of history when it comes to witchcraft in order to appreciate the scope and relevance of the subject for female poets. Historical events demonstrate the structural challenges that women continue to face within patriarchal society. In the past, the social order was more explicitly weighted against women and it is easier to see the dynamics at work. An examination of how perceived witches were treated can expose the contradictory nature of that social structure. Poetry can be used to evoke history, raise questions and highlight hypocrisy. Above all, speaking as an oppressed but potentially powerful figure allows female poets to explore the distribution of power and their anger at being placed in this social trap. An angry woman is often presented as unwomanly – a non-woman, a witch. In creating vivid, living voices through dramatic monologues and lyric poetry, there is room for more ambiguity.

The history of witchcraft is fraught with paradox and contradiction. As witches, women are at once all-powerful monsters and yet powerless against the judicial system; invincible in their magic but inhabiting vulnerable bodies; operating outside an established moral code and yet very much trapped within it. In the past, people often sought out magical cures to defend themselves against witchcraft and saw no dissonance between this reliance on magic and the persecution of a witch believed to have magical powers. The varied roles of witches in history are important because they can be used to reflect the nature of the oppression that women have faced. If, as Carol F Karlsen (1998, p.xiii) suggests, “the history of witchcraft is primarily a history of women,” this is perhaps one of the key factors that has drawn female poets to the subject.

The extreme nature of the oppression of witches brings the structural challenges for women within a patriarchal society into the light. The political

implications, particularly in exemplifying the systemic oppression of women, remain relevant today. Stories and circumstances from history provide a means for female poets to articulate their own experiences and the form allows for ambiguity and tension, contrasting the past with the present and considering lived female experience from historical accounts. The poets discussed here are not seeking to rewrite history, just to explore its horrors and contradictions in order to present a more complete picture.

I can see their fear

Margaret Atwood's poem 'Half-Hanged Mary' considers the patriarchal structure which enables the persecution of women and witch trials to function. In the first section, Mary speaks of how she came to be accused and observes the scene of her hanging. It was the second time she had been tried, and this perhaps accounts for the tone of cynicism Atwood adopts for Mary's voice:

> I was hanged for living alone
> for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin,
> tattered skirts, few buttons,
> a weedy farm in my own name,
> and a surefire cure for warts;
>
> Oh yes, and breasts,
> and a sweet pear hidden in my body.
> Whenever there's talk of demons
> these come in handy.

The second section provides vivid and brutal detail – 'Trussed hands, rag in my mouth,' – on her capture and hanging, including the thrill her persecutors appear to derive from her pain – 'The men of the town stalk homeward, / excited by their show of hate'. In the third section, starting at nine o'clock, Mary turns her attention

to the complicity of the watching crowd. Her observations provide a glimpse of the patriarchal society that facilitated the witch trials. The level of detail in Mary's acute observations not only show her intelligence but demonstrate how fear of witches could be seen across all strata of society. Mary's rejection of all social norms by the end of the poem marks her triumphant survival not only in the literal sense, but as a victory over the forces within the society that brutalized her.

Historical records show that accusers were often women, but a woman facilitating this misogyny is less proof of a lack of patriarchal structures than evidence of how pervasive that culture is across all strata of society. In the poem, Atwood shows female faces in the crowd and the final line of the same stanza – 'I can see their fear' – emphasises the nature of women's complicity in the persecution of female witches. It is not enough to simply blame male authority or female accusers for perpetuating the situation. Patriarchal control through witch trials extended beyond the original target because there were implications for the behaviour of all women. The threat of an accusation served as a caution for any woman considering a move towards greater independence or authority. In this way, the gloating crowd are also victims, as trapped in their roles as Mary. By honing in on the female faces in the crowd – 'The bonnets came to stare, / the dark skirts also,' – Atwood suggests that fashionable, frivolous and virtuous women all have their roles to play in society and that all female roles are designed to keep women in their place.

Atwood allows no space for the possibility of magical powers within the poem, which rejects all traditional associations with witchcraft just as the speaker does. Mary appears to have no power other than to survive against all odds and reject the role society has projected onto her. It is only this almost miraculous

survival that allows her to raise her voice against the silence of implacable social rules. Mary may be a victim, but the extraordinary circumstances of her survival allow Atwood to give her poem a defiant tone. The speaker explicitly rejects both the accusation and submission to the punishment, reflecting on ‘a crime I will not / acknowledge leaves and wind / hold onto me / I will not give in’. Atwood reclaims Mary’s voice from the silence and her tale from a footnote in history. In the poem, Mary represents a woman who refuses to submit to authority. She rejects the role of the witch in the systematic oppression of women until, as I explore in the next section, she finally claims the title through her survival and ultimate empowerment.

My own words for myself

As time passes and the poem progresses, Mary’s thoughts move from wider society to the importance of language as a tool of that society and a means of reclaiming her power. Throughout, language is the key to power and slurs such as “witch” are a tool of society’s strictures. By ten o’clock in the poem, Mary has turned her attention to God, questioning the nature of free will and her own culpability before bitterly rejecting any idea of God’s grace. At midnight, Mary details her physical pain, her throat is ‘taut against the rope’ and she finds herself ‘reduced to knotted muscle. / Blood bulges in my skull.’ In her agony, Mary feels the approach of death, seeing it first as a bird of prey, then a judge ‘muttering about sluts and punishment / and licking his lips’, mirroring the thrill of the men who bound Mary at the start of the poem. Death is presented as the society that judged her before appearing as a dark angel. Her punishment and oppression are expressed in terms of language and a sense that she is being silenced as the persecuted Mary considers:

> A temptation, to sink down
> into these definitions.

To become the martyr in reverse,
or food, or trash.

To give up my own words for myself,
my own refusals.
To give up knowing.
To give up pain.
To let go.

Language is also at the heart of the 2am section as Mary considers the nature of prayer; she likens it to 'being strangled…a gasp for air,' and a desperate will to live more than a wish to communicate with God. By 3am it is the natural world that appears to be attacking Mary, but it is more that nature is taking its course. In this section, there is no punctuation, suggesting Mary's breathless desperation and that whatever Mary feels, this is not to be her conclusion because there is no full stop. Once again, Mary's dilemma and persecution are expressed and presented in terms of her slipping command of language. The poem then skips to 6am and her endurance appears to have given her wisdom and a dark and wry sense of humour as she speaks of being 'three inches taller' and 'At the end of my rope'. Personal expression is shown to be secondary to her survival – 'I testify to silence.' – and yet her greater command of language through word play and humour are signs of her new-found power.

In the 8am section when Mary is cut down, the poem takes on a lightness that reflects her relief, demonstrated in the colloquial tone and the use of whimsical rhymes –

surprise, surprise:
I was still alive.

Tough luck, folks,
I know the law:

> you can't execute me twice
> for the same thing. How nice.

Mary embraces her power through language. She has survived the patriarchal structure that oppressed and tortured her and having survived the ordeal, she cannot be threatened with the same punishment again. As a result of this, she is free from the strictures of a society that uses that threat to prevent women from having independence. Previously, she saw the role of the witch as something projected on her by society – 'evil turned inside out like a glove,' – and through her ordeal, she learns that personal expression can lead to empowerment. By the end of the poem, she is free to express herself and she opts for a position of female power – 'Before, I was not a witch. / But now I am one.'

Assuming our identity

Atwood's poem 'Half-Hanged Mary' shows how the witch can be seen to play a role in the systemic oppression of women – a cautionary tale to keep other women in line. It is possible, however, to explore the history and political significance of witches without casting women as villains or victims, as Atwood demonstrates. Female poets have the opportunity to embrace the power of endurance, give voice to the previously silenced and explore the structural elements at play in a society that creates the role of a witch as a means of controlling women. The intensity of the poetic language can be a means of reclaiming power; as Purkiss (2016) states:

> the main difference between a magician and a witch… [in the Early Modern period] was books. Witches do magic with their bodies, or sometimes with other people's bodies, but magicians do magic with words.

Poetry can reframe such existing beliefs outlined by Purkiss and claim greater authority in the narrative by demonstrating mastery of words and language. One of the methods female poets can employ to overturn the use of the witch as a means of disempowering women is to have her speak. The dramatic monologue literally gives women and witches a powerful voice. Within the form, she cannot be interrupted or contradicted. Poetry can be used to dismantle the systemic oppression that witch trials represent by allowing women to speak up and claim personal autonomy.

In 'Her Kind' (Sexton, 1999, p.15), we see the power of endurance demonstrated in Atwood's poem through a different lens. 'Her Kind' is a powerful example of how a female writer can navigate the paradox of the witch by demonstrating the power of endurance against immeasurable – and stacked – odds. In her introduction to the collection *The Double Image*, Sexton wrote, "The great theme we all share is that of becoming ourselves… of assuming our identities somehow." (Sexton & Ames [Ed.], 2004, p.28) Sexton finds her solution in combining the witch's outsider perspective with her art. As Sexton noted in one of her letters, "the difference between confession and poetry… is art," (Sexton & Ames [Ed.], 2004, p.44) and in this poem, the confession is deliberately overwritten and overshadowed by the artistry. In 'Her Kind', three identities are assumed – one for each stanza – each one straining at the constraints of expectation on both the witch and the writer. The nuance and detail within the poem expose the flimsiness of witch stereotypes, the real woman beneath the witch and the extensive craft of female survival in a patriarchal world.

A real and present dilemma

'Her Kind' embraces the many faces of the witch and imbue the stereotype with humanity. The poem is comprised of three stanzas and, working together, the presentation of the witch in each makes it difficult for the reader to decide exactly what 'her kind' is. The poem moves from traditional ideas of the witch as a 'deformed' and 'lonely' woman flying across the night sky in the first stanza to a more domestic picture of living in 'warm caves'. This idyll is crammed with detail which moves from being nourishing and homely to something more sinister. Sexton uses domestic imagery to demonstrate the essential wildness of the woman and makes the traditional female role of the woman-as-homemaker seem witch-like and unnatural in her actions. The final stanza suggests persecution, but with an undercurrent of unremorseful adultery. In Sexton's hands, the picture becomes erotic and, rather than appearing defeated, the woman appears to revel in her situation. Far from being a supernatural presence, Sexton's witches are unerringly human, filled with contradictions, passions and insecurities. There are no easy answers to be found within the poem.

The sense of unease that the poem delivers is part of its point. The overall sense of abjection that the poem conveys reinforces the idea that the witch is, in part, "a masculine projection of female sexuality." (Bovenschen et al. 1978, p.96) However, this idea doesn't represent the full symbolic and poetic potential of the witch. As Diane Purkiss notes,

> the witch is not solely or simply the creation of the patriarchy […] women also invested in the figure as a fantasy which allows them to express and manage otherwise unspeakable fears and desires. (Purkiss, 1996, p.3)

Women – and witches – operate within patriarchy even as they rebel against it. Sexton clearly identifies with the witch because she 'has been her kind': a woman who strays from acceptable boundaries. The language of the witch offers a greater level of self-expression and truth-telling than convention may allow women in many arenas. If a female poet wishes to use the voice of the witch to express female power, she must perhaps accept that sometimes witches may misbehave.

The vivid imagery and intimate physical details within the poem, coupled with the poem's refusal to pin these to a specific meaning, defy simple categorisation. Sexton's use of the witch as a symbol for these experiences is deliberately provocative and the poem repeatedly subverts traditional (and restrictive) stereotypes of women. The villainous witch 'haunting the black air' seems lost and lonely, the domestic picture of the second stanza is made sinister with 'the worms and the elves', the persecution that concludes the poem both terrifying and erotic 'where your flames still bite my thigh.' The poem's refrain, 'I have been her kind,' is both an admission and a defiance. The ambiguity of poetry and the power of language are both shown to triumph over simplistic views of the witch.

Sexton created a fiction to rewrite or undercut the image of the witch as either purely evil or as a victim but as Bovenschen et al. (1978, p.87) note, "in the image of the witch, elements of the past and myth oscillate, but along with them, elements of a real and present dilemma as well." While the effect of these images of the witch may be empowering, they run the risk of ignoring the brutal history lying behind witch beliefs. In her letters, Sexton said, "Writing is life in capsule and the writer must feel every bump edge scratch in order to know the real furniture of his capsule." (Sexton, 2004, p.105) There are certainly a lot of sharp edges in

'Her Kind' but the poem could be perceived as avoiding inconvenient facts and eroticising violence and torture in the line, 'and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.' (Sexton, 1999, p.15) This may be attributed to Sexton's personal experience; despite the challenges she faced with her mental health, as an affluent white woman, she would have been less familiar with real violence, pushing the pain-filled history into the abstract. For Sexton, the torture is metaphorical, her kind are tortured by their attempt and failure to meet the standards of a male-dominated society. This appropriation of past violence can be seen in poetry today. Amanda Lovelace's *the witch doesn't burn in this one* (Lovelace, 2018), for example, transforms the violence of the witch trials and ignores historical accuracy in favour of powerful – but largely empty – rhetoric, such as quoting inaccurately inflated numbers regarding the scale of witch trials for dramatic effect. Something more complex is at play in 'Her Kind'. Embedded into the poem, with its strict structure and linguistic ties through rhyme, is the possibility that Sexton was playing on the history of the witch trials not to draw a parallel to herself, but to challenge the audience. Regardless of how Sexton herself frames the circumstances, it's clear that the audience has some complicity in sexualising the torture and execution of women accused of witchcraft. Sexton may not have captured every "bump edge scratch" of the violence behind witch trials, but she has captured the potential for that violence and the complicity of the crowd in her poem.

While Sexton articulates the challenge that female writers face, she does not seek to solve the dilemma that the witch presents. The creation of the witch as an evil and disobedient woman is a function of a patriarchal society that seeks to control women and their bodies. In 'Her Kind', the shifting identity of the witch

and the speaker's defiant identification with the abject figures of each stanza bring the issue into the light. There may be no simple answers, but Sexton demonstrates the importance and power of raising the question.

Reclaiming the word

Witches allow political poets such as Audre Lorde to force a new conversation because in witchcraft and in poetry, language is power. The philosopher Wittgenstein (2009) considered his work to be a battle against the bewitchment (verhexung) on intelligence by language. Activist and writer Starhawk (1999, p.7) states that "to reclaim the word witch is to reclaim our right, as women, to be powerful." At the heart of any presentation of the witch is a woman with power and this gives extensive scope for female poets to embrace depth, contradiction and growth.

Audre Lorde's seminal essay 'Poetry is not a Luxury' (2017, p.48) states how the articulation of experience relates to female power:

> For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.

Although Auden's poem 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' contains the assertion that 'poetry makes nothing happen,' (1986, pp241-243) there is a clear tradition of linking poetry to magic and for many, including feminist thinkers, a link between words and actions. As Audre Lorde (2017, p.48) suggests:

> Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The furthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are

> cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

In Lorde's view, naming the female experience through poetry leads eventually to personal power and the potential for radical change. Her poem 'A Woman Speaks' shows her ideas about the function of poetry in action; images of witchcraft and magic are invoked to reinforce the focus of the title. Like poetry, the image of the witch may provide a means for women to articulate their experiences – and by extension, themselves – as a means of creating new connections with other women. The witch can be a woman with many names, and many more ideas, emotions and deeds.

Studying witches also reminds us of the importance of an intersectional approach to critical studies because witches are not only alienated from society in both an institutional and social sense, but also from other women. The experience of being ostracised or demonised increases exponentially for women of colour and other marginalised groups. Factors such as race or sexual orientation may mark a woman as "other" and given that a fear of witches amounts to a fear of the unknown, it is clear that bigotry and racism have a role to play in the creation of witch myths. This is an area which requires more consideration than is featured here and should intersect with cultural examinations of witch myths and witch belief beyond the Westernised world.[3]

[3] Although there is some scholarship on the presence of witches beyond white Western culture, it is nowhere near as comprehensive and often written about as a culture that is either side-lined or defined in terms that use white Western culture as the standard for comparison. While I have read about both witches of colour and issues of race in the course of this study, as the bibliography demonstrates, the complex interplay of issues and considerations require more depth of investigation than the scope of this study allows.
As stated earlier, the aim of this study was to explore what the figure of the witch could offer me as a writer. As a straight, white, female writer, it is important for me to acknowledge that while this topic was an important and necessary consideration, it has had less impact on my creative development than a black female writer may have reading Audre Lorde or, for example, Maryse Conde's novel *I Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (2009).

I am a woman and not white

Atwood's poem looks at the messiness of history; Audre Lorde's poem 'A Woman Speaks' shows the human cost of the structures behind witch beliefs in the modern Western world, even after the trials had ceased. Lorde shows that the structures that supported those beliefs have not disappeared with the trials, and they are as pervasive, unyielding and brutal as instruments of torture. The poem also brings the dilemma into the present day, referencing the ongoing challenges of women still excluded from power. The poem, like Lorde's entire body of work, champions the importance of intersectionality as a means of defeating the structures of oppression. 'A Woman Speaks' reaches beyond proven historical facts towards mythology, but it is also rooted firmly within Lorde's experience and her anger. Lorde uses this rage as a source of strength with as much force as language to realise her empowerment.

The power of female anger and its relationship to witchcraft is something that Audre Lorde explored extensively in her poetry and her essays. Female anger is often presented as corrosive, linked in mythology to stories such as the furious retribution of Medea. In her essay 'The Uses of Anger', Lorde portrays female anger as a necessary response to systemic racism and sexism. Far from being unnatural or unwomanly, she presents anger as a force that can be nurturing – "I have suckled the wolf's lip of anger, and I have used it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there was no light, no food, no sisters, no quarter." (Lorde, 2017, p.52) In reframing anger as a positive political force, Lorde opens the door to claiming more of the witch's power on her own terms.

In 'A Woman Speaks', Lorde harnesses female anger and makes a broader political point by linking the figure of the witch to mythology, the history of

oppression and a desire for retribution. Some of the woman's power in the poem stems from her anger; in the final stanza the warning that the speaker is 'treacherous with old magic' is presented as a previously unacknowledged power within women, coupled as it is with the 'noon's new fury' of the present. In an interview with Karla Hammond, Lorde acknowledged that the line relates to "power, strength, what is old and what is new being very much the same." (Hammond, K & Lorde, A. 1980, p.19) For Lorde, her anger comes not just from her exclusion as a woman but also because of her race. Reni Eddo-Lodge has examined the experience of living without white privilege in her book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* and suggests it is an "exclusion from the narrative of being human." (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p.86) In 'A Woman Speaks', Lorde reclaims her humanity alongside her perceived otherness, evoking both history and mythology to make a political point.

The poem demonstrates how both the physical and the symbolic interact and Lorde rejects either as an absolute expression of truth, stating in the second stanza, 'I do not dwell / within my birth nor my divinities.' In embracing 'my sisters / witches in Dahomey', Lorde pays a debt to historical witches and real women alongside their symbolic counterparts. Historically, the women of Dahomey were seen as warriors rather than witches, but Lorde adds a supernatural dimension, demonstrating how powerful women are often simplistically presented, but complicating the image with her own spirituality. This exploration and dissolution of boundaries is both a demonstration of the woman's power as a witch and the witch's power as a woman because Lorde presents the speaker as being both of the body and the spirit. While the poem may acknowledge conventional Western

narratives, the speaker resists characterisation in such simple terms. As academic bell hooks (2014, p.44) asserted,

> the black female voice that was deemed 'authentic' was the voice of pain; only in the sound of hurting could be heard. No narrative of resistance was voice and respected in this setting.

The female speaker in Lorde's poem does not seek pity but understanding. While her experience is rooted in the historical pain as a woman of colour that hooks refers to her in her essay, she rejects this as a way of understanding herself:

> and if you would know me
> look into the entrails of Uranus
> where the restless oceans pound.

Lorde's blend of African and Western mythology is explored in greater detail in Chapter II, but in this poem, history and myth, like the past and the present, coalesce to provide an image of a woman who is outside society, autonomously claiming her right to speak, demonstrating the power of language and taking ownership of her rage.

Lorde's poem 'The Black Unicorn' (Lorde, 2017, p.4) articulates similar ideas to those of 'A Woman Speaks'. The unicorn is identified as female as well as magical but in the world of this poem, the anger is not unleashed. She is 'taken / through a cold country / where mist painted mockeries / of my fury.' The unicorn is not made completely real – 'mistaken / for a shadow or symbol' – and most importantly, 'the black unicorn is not / free.' The oppression of the black unicorn, underscored by Lorde's choice to end the poem with freedom residing on a separate line, contrasts with the first-person perspective of 'A Woman Speaks' which resolutely claims her identity in the final lines, 'I am / woman / and not white.' Even in this empowered final statement, the shadow of the black unicorn remains. If the black unicorn represents the magic residing within women of colour and the

history of systemic persecution, the speaker in ‘A Woman Speaks’ embodies that magic, but she still has limits placed upon her, such as the negative definition of herself not as black, but as ‘not white’. Both poems harness the power of female anger as a powerful force which adds a further dimension to the history of witchcraft and elevates women from the seemingly passive victims of the past.

Not content to dream

When writing my own work inspired by the history of witchcraft, I have been aware of both the opportunities and the pitfalls of the subject. As a symbol, the witch is malleable and presents an opportunity to give a female figure agency. However, there is a tragic history behind witchcraft and women were – and still are – subject to often horrific violence during witch persecution. I was wary of using historical violence against women solely as a poetic device and wanted to tread carefully through the history of witchcraft out of respect from the many women who were tortured and executed because of a belief in witches. When addressing the history of witchcraft, I wanted to expose the patriarchal social structure which not only persecuted women as witches, but also positioned exceptional or unusual women as supernatural. The resulting poems consider how and why women have been persecuted or presented as witches and the ways in which history can sometimes conspire against a woman’s reputation to create an enduring myth.

At work in the shadow of the gallows

The poem ‘Mrs Duncan Won’t Keep Mum’ considers an example of a less-than-sympathetic witch who was prosecuted – but not executed – and how this incident may be reconciled with the iniquity of the bulk of historic witch trials. In a way,

this poem resembles Atwood's in that it is the exception that proves the rule – in the case of Mary Webster, she is a survivor of a system that brutalized her. In my poem, the protagonist is an accused witch who could be said to be guilty of using her words to cause harm. My original intent had been to write about the unfairness of witch trials using an example of a relatively recent prosecution from the 1940s, but I had unexpected empathy for the prosecutors once I delved into the facts of the case. Helen Duncan was tried, convicted and imprisoned for witchcraft during World War II. She was a practising medium and made her living by giving private readings and holding seances in theatres across the UK. As she grew in notoriety, she came to be known by the authorities because she was telling her customers in private consultations and sold-out theatre performances about the loss of their loved ones. In many cases, she revealed official secrets of significant losses that were being withheld from the enemy and may have put the country at risk.

The challenge I faced was that I do not believe in magic, or any means of contacting the dead but Mrs Duncan herself did. Her accuracy was significant enough to gain the attention of the authorities and regardless of whether or not she could speak with the dead, ultimately many people did believe her. That faith in her abilities meant that Helen Duncan was a powerful woman. The difficulty was greater than my own distaste for mediums – who I feel exploit the grief of others for their own gain – and related to the specific circumstances. While I could feel sympathy for Duncan as a woman who had risen from poverty to make her way in the world – and accepted that she was sincere in her belief of her supernatural abilities – the Second World War was a time when there was a lot of importance placed on not revealing secrets. The title refers to an advertising campaign which ran at the time – "Be Like Dad, Keep Mum" – emphasising the importance of not

speaking of things that may be revealed to the enemy. Like the phrase, “loose lips sink ships” which gained popularity around the same time, a great deal of importance was placed on not being vulnerable to the spies who were believed to be operating across the country. Given the importance in this analysis on the power of language, and the links between words and witchcraft, this felt like a significant topic to address.

The events surrounding Helen Duncan’s trial and subsequent imprisonment serve as a powerful contrast to the vast majority of witch trials. The records show that far from being a result of hysteria or superstitious witch-panic, the trial was a considerate and strategic step by the authorities. Legal action was considered the only way to stop Duncan releasing state secrets to the public after an appeal to the greater good failed to have an effect. Officials had the letter, if not the spirit of the law on their side because the exact wording of the statute covered not only acts of witchcraft but also claims of witchcraft and talking to the dead. Taking the law literally, Helen Duncan was guilty as charged and could not deny that she made such claims when they were displayed on posters at theatres across the country. The statute was repealed soon after due to the significant attention the case received in the press and outrage over what was considered an antiquated law being exercised by British authorities.

Given the brutal and unjust history of witch trials, I didn’t want to give too much credit to the courts, but the story did put me in mind of another aspect of World War II history – Bletchley Park, staffed primarily by women. There were clear parallels between Helen Duncan talking to the dead and the women of Bletchley intercepting radio transmissions, it was a time when ‘the air hummed with voices / and women listened.’ The difference lay in the fact that the work at

Bletchley Park was carried out in absolute secrecy – the women who worked there were threatened with hanging for treason if they revealed the nature of their work or anything they learned while carrying out their duties. The threat was so effective and the secret so well-kept that even after the records were unsealed many years later, some women continue to this day to refuse to speak of what they had done at the code breaking centre. Bletchley Park employed women from across the social strata, from the aristocracy to the working class, so in my view, Helen Duncan cannot be fully excused for her crimes by claiming poverty. The story reflects the ambiguity of the witch's position; she can be unfairly accused, but she may also be a criminal. The speaker of the poem was similarly censored and unable to speak freely – indeed the threatened punishment of hanging was more severe than the imprisonment which befell Helen Duncan. While Duncan made much of her status as a victim to the legal system, many women 'lost / some liberty in those days, all of us / at work in the shadow of the gallows.'

In the history of witch trials, Helen Duncan is almost the exception that proves the rule. She was not trapped by an assumption of guilt or prosecuted without reason. She was convicted of acts that she herself claimed to carry out. The authorities were not particularly comfortable with bringing the case against her but did so after all other options had been exhausted. This is a far cry from the superstition and hearsay of traditional witch trials. The trial generated a significant amount of publicity, but, outrage over the law itself still being on the statute books aside, the public was mostly on the side of the courts. Most people at the time believed and adhered to the frequent government messages about the importance of keeping secrets and placed this above Helen Duncan's right to speak freely. Again, the powerful impact of words and of women speaking out emerged as a

theme. In this sense, Helen Duncan 'conjured her own prison' and the poem shows Duncan as someone who paid the price for her actions but had free will to make her choices.

While Duncan has little in common with Atwood's Mary Webster – who was unfairly accused and subjected to barbaric punishment based on rumour – like Mary, she assumed the title of a witch after her trial. The court case only gave her greater credibility to those seeking a genuine medium and she made much capital of the fact of her imprisonment after her release. Helen Duncan's story shows the resilient power of the witch, but the poem suggests that just because it is possible to defy authority, it's not always the best course. The idea is underscored by the contrast to the many anonymous women of Bletchley. The poem also refers to Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." (Clarke, 1973, p.36) In recasting the code-breaking women as witches themselves, my aim was to allow for a sense of ambiguity in the poem's condemnation of Helen Duncan without suggesting general approval for the witch trials. The structure of the poem, in alternating stanzas of four and two lines, moves the focus between the women of Bletchley in the four-line stanzas and Duncan's experience in the shorter stanzas. The aim was to show that while Duncan may have been out of step with her peers, the wider context shows that perhaps this isolation was justified to an extent, or at least understandable in the circumstances.

I am not here

The symbolic potential of the witch is embedded into historical discourse – from victims such as Mary Webster to legends such as the Bell Witch which began as a historical incident – and the symbolic interacts with the world to create a hostile

environment for women. The relationship between language and power is clear – whoever remains to write history holds the power. 'The Bell Witch Makes a Friend of Darkness' explores how the symbol of the witch can be as powerful in her absence as her presence.

The legend of the Bell Witch is an example of how historical events can be reframed and retold to become something closer to myth. The story centres on the Bell family of Robertson County in Tennessee, USA and took place in the 19th Century. Newspaper reports and accounts from the time suggest that John Bell and his family were haunted from 1817 – 1821 by a mostly invisible entity. At the time, the witch was believed to have been the spectre of an unpopular and cantankerous woman in the village known as "Old Kate Batts" but nothing was ever proven.

The story in itself is not unique; similar stories and beliefs could be found across the UK and the US at the time but what is interesting about the Bell Witch is how the story has become embellished. The story itself lends itself to this: the Bell Witch was said to have the ability to shapeshift, cross long distances at great speed and be in more than one place at a time as well as possessing the gift of clairvoyance. This collection of attributes makes the Bell Witch an ideal scapegoat for any number of crimes and disturbances. As my poem states,

> I became the implicit threat of darkness,
> the creeping dread in an unlit hallway,
> the absence of any other explanation.

The Bell Witch thus performs the function of the symbolic figure of the witch; she is the other, the dark side of a society. The poem examines how the Bell Witch legend grew – and continues to grow. There is now a tourist destination in Tennessee, Bell Witch Cave, where it is said that the spirit of the witch lives. There is nothing in the history to ever suggest Kate Batts or any other suspect was living

in a cave or even associated with one. As Atwood exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of a witch-panic, my poem suggests that the witch is a victim of society, which needs a figure to blame: 'No devil came / and bid me serve; people did that.' Evil does not come from a devil, or a witch, but from a society that looks for someone – or something – to demonise in order to maintain the status quo, just as the accusations of witchcraft in Atwood's poem 'Half-Hanged Mary' are the result of her looks, her knowledge and above all, her status as an independent woman. The Bell Witch and the Mary Webster of Atwood's poem share a wry understanding of the rank hypocrisy of a society that seeks to oppress than.

The legend of the Bell Witch continues to grow; it was the inspiration for the film *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick & Sánchez, 1999), songs have been written about her and tourists continue to visit the cave and report supernatural events. The strange paradox at the heart of the history of the Bell Witch is that she is at her most powerful – and free – when she doesn't exist and even then, she is still exploited. Far from offering an example of a powerful woman from history, the story shows just how far a woman has to travel from the real world to exert any power. In this case, the Bell Witch continues to gain power in the popular imagination because her attributes make her impossible to pin down. This is similar to Sexton's view of the shifting witch figure in 'Her Kind' and reconciles the bloody history of witchcraft with an opportunity for female empowerment. This is reflected in the closing lines of the poem:

> I can slip between shifting clouds,
> tramp crisp autumn leaves underfoot,
> take form in a beam of moonlight.
>
> These days (and nights) I haunt as I please
> and this misty existence leaves me free

because I am not here.

What the poem doesn't explicitly express is a sense of the speaker's anger at exclusion. I felt that in this circumstance, perhaps the exclusion from society and metamorphosis into an immortal witch comes as a relief. However, the absence of anger shows the difficulty women have in being presented as angry, even justifiably so, without being demonised. Writing about this subject in an article for the New York Times, Leslie Jamison discussed a recent occurrence when actress Uma Thurman was questioned about sexual abuse in Hollywood and she replied that she would speak on the subject when she was less angry about it. As Jamison (2018) notes:

> By withholding the specific story of whatever made her angry, Thurman made her anger itself the story – and the raw force of her struggle not to get angry on that red carpet summoned the force of her anger even more powerfully than its full explosion would have, just as the monster in a movie is most frightening when it only appears offscreen.

In the poem, the Bell Witch may not express it, but she becomes the embodiment of her own anger – absent and all the more powerful for it. We are left to question how she feels about her circumstances and whether she might have the power – and the inclination – to do something about it. While both absence and silence can be used to powerful effect, I am aware that it is a convenient response for both society and the symbolic order, which prizes the silent endurance of passive women and selfless mothers. The contradictory nature of any speaker stating 'I am not here' as a way to close a poem filled with references to her presence in the landscape is an attempt to reconcile that discomfort. This line is shorter than all the other lines of the poem, which is arranged in tercets; in breaking from the form of the poem, the Bell Witch ends her speech with several beats of menacing silence. The Bell Witch

has not completely disappeared, and her silence and lack of expressed anger can be viewed as a drawn-out threat regarding her potential.

Moving from history to mythology

The figure of the witch can give women the freedom to speak up, which is an important aspect of challenging the established order. As Cultural anthropologist and Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston stated, "If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it." (2006, p.121) The difficulty for female writers in the creation of angry feminine personae is that an expression of anger from a woman, however justified, often casts her as a villain, or a witch. Audre Lorde addressed this by meeting the subject head on, claiming and embodying justified anger:

> The magic woman in 'A Woman Speaks' does not wait for authorization to speak. She embodies authorization not despite but because of being a woman. (Morris, 2002, p.177)

Margaret Atwood takes a different approach in 'Half-Hanged Mary', using her anger to fuel the sly asides in the poem which shine a cynical light on the motivations of a society which hangs women for choosing not to accept the established order. There are many ways to address female anger that allow these voices to be heard and poetry provides a means of exploring the root of their fury. The power of language and the ambiguity within poetry both play a role. The voice of the witch can, in these circumstances, become the voice of reason; in a world where the supposed natural order is so clearly unjust, it requires a supernatural figure to put the situation into perspective.

However, we cannot simply view witches from a historical viewpoint because they refuse to die; we cannot take a simple political or ideological stance

on them because they refuse to stand still and take their punishment. Both the negative stereotype and victimised women can be reclaimed as a means of a woman exercising, as well as expressing, her power through poetry. We may see how historical incidents were created by – and contributed to – dominant myths, but there is no simple way to untangle the two because they are so closely intertwined. The nature of the witch means that she can cross boundaries, and this includes the boundaries of history. The next chapter considers the role of dominant mythologies in creating patriarchal power structures and, like Lorde's poem 'A Woman Speaks', considers how history and mythology are intertwined in a way that oppresses women and seeks to silence their words.

Chapter II: Mythology and Fairy Tales

The Mythical Norm

The social and political structures of patriarchy are underpinned and perpetuated by mythological narratives. As Barthes (2009) highlights, myths are ubiquitous and thus become internalised. At the heart of these narratives is a "pervasive cultural mythology" (Kolbenschlag, 1981, p.112) which has been awarded high literary status and casts independent and powerful women as evil. Fairy tales have a similar impact, as Marilyn Lieberman (1972, p.186) noted:

> Only the best-known stories, those that everyone has read or heard, indeed, those that Disney has popularized, have affected the masses of children in our culture. Cinderella, the Sleeping Beauty and Snow White are mythic figures who have replaced the old Greek and Norse gods, goddesses and heroes for most children.

As a result of the impact of these narratives on the cultural imagination, when we think of a witch, we think of the evil old crone causing harm, the seductive siren looking to cause trouble or the sinister outsider. The ubiquity and internalised nature of these stories serves to create a mistrust of powerful women because each story reinforces a demonization of women who are independent or living outside the cultural mores dictated and reinforced by myths and fairy tales. The material impact of these images is shown in the previous chapter, which touches on the brutal history of witch persecution and how the threat of punishment as a witch serves to oppress women. This chapter examines the ideological structures of myths and fairy tales, how and why female poets seek to undermine and dismantle those narratives and why poetry is particularly well suited to achieving those aims.

Once upon a time, long ago

Fairy tales are included alongside mythology in this chapter because they operate, on a cultural and symbolic level, much the same way as myths. The fact that fairy tales are intended for children makes some of the aspects more explicit; they present a world with clear boundaries and an unstated but very definite moral code, operating as "sanctuaries of cultural myth" (Haase, 2000, p.33). In Propp's view of fairy tales (1968), there are seven spheres of action which can be characterised as the villain, the donor or provider, the helper, the sought-for person and her father, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero. Lévi-Strauss (1995) reduces the structure further, suggesting that the fairy tale works with pairs of opposites, the primary being the hero and the villain, which all rely on each other for definition. While myths and fairy tales change over time to adapt to cultural norms, the underlying structure means that regardless of minor variations, any resistance to the established power structure is presented as an irreducible opposite; any resistance to the hero, for example, means being cast as a villain. Poetry provides a means for holding the procrustean nature of myths to account because it generates an ambiguity of meaning that interrogates the symbols and structures behind them. Stories can be changed or rewritten with the characters recast in different roles; poets can choose to write in the voice of a different narrator or give a voice to characters traditionally kept silent. However, poetry is not unique in this approach. Academics such as Marina Warner have used the feminist perspective to re-examine ancient mythology and fairy tales. Many of Angela Carter's short stories perform the same function as the poems discussed, for example, and as well as prose fiction, screenplays can also introduce this feminist perspective. The 2015 film *The Witch*, written and directed by Robert Eggers, demonstrates that it is not

even essential to be a female creative to address or subvert the symbolic meaning of the witch figure. But the way that female poets subvert and develop these narratives moves beyond the story and its structures. While narratives in any form can explore subjectivity and create empathy for a witch more typically cast as a villain, poetry is particularly well placed to expose and fully explore the contradictions inherent in the witch as a symbol because poetry is closely related to magic through the medium of spells. A female poet writing in the voice of a witch can not only change the perspective from which the story is told, she can write a spell. The quality of ambiguity within poetic language means that female poets can not only describe the witch's power to disrupt, distort and potentially destroy accepted norms, but also enact that same power.

In both myths and fairy tales, the witch is often an outsider and while this has oppressive consequences for women, the witch can therefore be used to expose hypocrisy at the heart of an established society or narrative. In looking closer at what is cast as outside the symbolic and established narrative order we can start to see the structural and ideological elements of that order more clearly. Introducing a witch may disrupt these distinctions because while the symbol is part of the structural order, witches within a narrative do not respect boundaries, they were created to cause trouble on a supernatural scale. The symbol may have been created as a warning to women not to stray, but limitless power must include the power to step out of an established narrative. Taking on the perspective of the witch allows female writers to challenge the criteria for being considered an outsider. Furthermore, once a female poet creates a figure of a powerful, disruptive woman, her misbehaviour exposes the fact that her outsider status only serves a patriarchal narrative. In some stories, the female villain is a stepmother or stepsister, an

outsider to the family unit – in these cases, she may not always have supernatural powers but she is still presented as somehow unnatural, an affront to the natural order that these narratives seek to perpetuate.

Putting a spotlight on the witch shows ideological structures and assumptions in action. But by giving the witch a motive, a measure of humanity or even simply the right to put across her version of a story, female poets can dissolve boundaries and binary presentations of gender, character or status. If we have some sympathy for the witch and believe she is not "all bad" then perhaps the hero is not "all good". Once we start to question binary definitions and ideologically constructed and ordered symbols, they become less effective and the witch, as a mass of contradictions, can be the agent of their dissolution.

It is not just sexism that can be found at the root of these mythic and fairy tale narrative structures which cast the witch as an outsider, but an inherent racism and prejudice against people from cultures which differ from the ideals presented in Western myths. In Greek mythology, for example, Medea was a princess of Colchis and her witchcraft and her foreignness are intertwined. As Madeline Miller (2018) explained in an article for *The Guardian*,

> This type of nativism also pops up in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Sycorax, the witch mother of Caliban, is from Algiers, and though she never appears in the play, she is a harrowing, hideous figure, a "blue-eyed hag", who is hunched over with "age and envy". She was cast out from Algiers (the implication is that she was too wicked even for them) and came to the island where she "litter[ed]" her deformed son, practised her magic and worshipped her pagan-sounding god, Setebos.

The foreign quality of witches brings into focus exactly who decides such labels. As Sara Ahmed (Lorde, 2017, p.ix) notes in the introduction to a recent reissue of

Audre Lorde's collected essays and poems, "speaking as a black woman matters in a world that takes the white man as a 'mythical norm' (to borrow her important term)." In prioritising the voice and perspective of the witch, female poets can challenge that mythical norm of white male supremacy.

The story is ruthless

Putting a spotlight on the ideological – largely patriarchal and white supremacist – agenda of Western myths and fairy tales allows for an exploration of both the roots of each story and the malleability of such narratives. These stories are not absolute; they have been appropriated to serve an intractable patriarchal agenda but a change in the perspective changes the story. Alice Ostriker (1982, p.72) sees this process as a necessity – "the old vessel filled with new wine, … initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible." This could be considered an extension of Audre Lorde's idea of naming the nameless – telling the untold tales. In some cases, that doesn't mean changing the narrative so much as showing the flaws in its logic.

A different perspective can be a departure from the clear moral code that the myth represents; poetry can be used to expose and explore these new ambiguities. In many cases, female writers reimagine or rewrite the standard narrative and even if the story remains the same, the subjectivity of a female speaker can disrupt the ideological foundations by providing commentary on the situation. In the 'Circe / Mud' sequence of poems, Margaret Atwood makes this process explicit – 'You leave in the story and the story is ruthless, … /…the events run themselves through / almost without us.' (Atwood, 2010, p.201-223) The events and actions within the myth are presented in Atwood's sequence as

inevitable to the point of being ruthless or even absurd. Circe is explicitly shown to have a designated role in the story and no choice but to play her part and this insight provides a clearer view of the ideological structure of myths. Circe has no choice but to play her role as a witch and Atwood brings this patriarchal structure into the light. From this perspective, Circe is a victim of this structure and her presentation as a villain is under question.

What these disruptions to the established narrative demonstrate is that, far from being tales of universal experience with a benign, omniscient narrator, myths are stories with agendas – and agendas can be changed. This is at the heart of the attraction for female poets and why the seemingly misogynist narrative structures of Western classical myths are addressed by feminist poets. Heroes, victims and perceived villains alike can be awarded humanity through a retelling of their stories. If, as Lévi-Strauss (1995) asserts, a myth is constructed of all its versions, these new iterations don't simply comment on the text, they add to and alter each story irrevocably. Fiona Benson's use of the Medusa myth in her collection *Vertigo and Ghost* (Benson, 2019) alters our view of Medusa from a villain to a victim. The traditional view of Medusa is as a monstrous gorgon with hair of venomous snakes who could turn her victims to stone. As a villain, she was eventually defeated by the Greek hero Perseus, but Benson considers her origins as a rape victim. According to the Roman poet Ovid's retelling in the *Metamorphoses*, Medusa was raped by Poseidon in the temple of Athena. She was condemned to become a monster for the crime of defiling the sanctuary of a temple with a rape that she had no power to prevent. This adds further depth and complexity to Cixous' view (1976) that she is triumphant with laughter. In Benson's work, it is not her power but her lack of power that is placed in focus. Her story and the

imagery associated with it is reimagined as a means of considering the silence of women and the distortion of established narratives. In some poems, Benson makes her point explicit:

> Poseidon the sea god
> raped Medusa
> …
> and Athena
> cursed the girl
> …
> I came to understand
> rape is cultural,
> pervasive;
> that in this world
>
> the woman is blamed.

In other instances within the collection, Benson draws parallels with oppressed women in history and from different cultures, such as 'shunned girls sent / to the Magdalene laundries' and the 'Daughter bound / and doused / in petrol' due to an honour killing which is linked back to the myth through 'Her screaming flesh. // Her hair's bright snakes.' Female writers may still face the idea that their work can be dismissed as personal or confessional. Using and developing myths to relate the experience of women is a defiance against the assumed collective wisdom enshrined in myths. Benson's work demonstrates how patriarchal ideologies reinforce oppressive structures such as rape culture on a global scale. Benson presents societies in which rape is pervasive and normalised due to societal attitudes about gender and sexuality; her work isn't just casting a critical eye on the myth of Medusa and her creation as a villain, but on the embedded social structures that make her story still relevant today.

I'm sick of your world

Barthes (2009, p.117) stated that "myth has… a double function. It points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us." Like Benson's collection, Louise Glück's poem 'Circe's Power' (1998, p.37) also exposes the challenges that female writers face when rewriting myths; showing how, like Medusa, Circe was trapped within a pre-set narrative. In the second stanza, Circe exclaims, 'I'm sick of your world / That lets the outside disguise the inside.' The same could be said for myths themselves, stories of romance and adventure disguising a distinctly patriarchal view that shuts out and often punishes powerful women like Circe. The narrative of the story serves as a dramatisation of how Glück as a poet could be trapped within the limiting ideological structures of mythology but uses language to navigate away from those limitations. As the first witch to appear in Western literature in Homer's *Odyssey*, Circe's fate serves as a template for many more powerful women who follow in her footsteps. Heroes can hide villainous actions behind a handsome façade but the absence of Odysseus in the poem suggests some justification for Circe's actions. She has been cast as a discarded witch and abandoned on an island; her voice is meant to be unheard, off the page, while the hero's story continues.

The most significant variation from the Homeric myth that Glück employs is to show Circe in her abandonment. Odysseus doesn't leave her as a punishment as much as he leaves to follow his own narrative, but the poem clearly shows how Circe is denied the same opportunity. In *The Odyssey*, Circe is said to have vanished when Odysseus departs, leaving a black ewe and ram in her place. This means that in Homer's narrative, her story ceases the moment Odysseus leaves, and she is held in this final moment in the mythic imagination. In Glück's poem,

there is a sense that Circe is standing on the shore and watching the Greeks leave her island. The rhythm of the poem echoes that of waves breaking on the shore, with crescendos of noise and fury – 'I'm sick of your world' – and softer moments of tenderness – 'I saw / we could be happy here.' The presence of the sea is also underscored by her description of the sea as 'crying' and 'pounding', placing the metaphor for her grief and her physical presence in the same location. In this version, Circe is no longer the witch who conveniently disappears when she no longer serves the narrative. The reader is rooted to the same spot as Circe, watching the hero sail away rather than following him on his journey. This shift in perspective adds a fresh layer of humanity to Circe's presentation and serves to provoke sympathy in the reader. Her continued presence is, in a mythic context, an opportunity to rewrite a story embedded into the cultural discourse.

I make them look like pigs

Atwood presents Circe as trapped within her role; Louise Glück allows her to break away from it. In 'Circe's Power', it may seem that love has stripped Circe of her power but in fact it is this vulnerability that lies at the heart of her supernatural presence. 'Circe's Power' is one of three poems about Circe in Glück's collection *Meadowlands*. The other two are 'Circe's Torment' and 'Circe's Grief'; her humanity, more than her culpability is on display in all the poems. Alice Ostriker (1982, p.78) noted that "female power to do evil is a direct function of the fact that they're powerless to do anything else." Circe, however, is not evil and has not been rendered powerless in this poem. It is love – and her implied humanity – that gives Circe the power to explode the whole myth, which rests on the paradox of her role in the narrative. She has the power to imprison Odysseus but the narrative demands

that the hero triumphs and this means she must be cast as a villain and vanquished. While the Greek myth moves on from Circe, Glück explores its contradictions. As she states in the poem, her effect on Odysseus and his men is a positive one:

> Under the care of
> Me and my ladies, they
> Sweetened right up.
>
> Then I reversed the spell, showing you my goodness
> As well as my power.

She is presented as a woman with the magical ability to get whatever she wants. In Homer's version, she is an obstacle to the hero, and therefore a villain. This is the role she must play to serve the narrative – her magical powers make her evil, but to ensure that the hero triumphs, she must not use those abilities beyond helping him on his way. On the surface, it appears that love has weakened Circe in that she has lost the inclination to use her power, but the title isn't putting her power into question. There is an interaction between the title and the poem which signifies revisionist mythmaking. To that end, the poem is more concerned with what that power is and how circumstances arising from the demands of the mythic narrative render her powerless. As Audre Lorde (2017) notes in her essay 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power',

> As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world.

Circe's story could be read as a cautionary tale that embodies that warning. In Homer's canonised version she is a witch, a non-woman. For her attempts to exercise power, she is cast as another monstrous Sycorax, even as a goddess on her

own island. Glück's poem suggests Circe only had good intentions and shows her to have fallible humanity and vulnerability:

> We could be happy here,
> As men and women are
> When their needs are simple.

The demands of the narrative are far from simple, but redemption can be found in the subjective perspective that Glück presents as she returns and restores Circe's power – it may not change the story, but this power is demonstrably Circe's to own and embody.

Circe's power is not particularly magical in Glück's poem; it is linked more closely to her perspicacity as someone who 'sees essence' and her spells are presented in this light:

> I never turned anyone into a pig.
> Some people are pigs; I make them
> Look like pigs.

Circe is shown to see the truth at the heart of the men in the same way that she sees the truth at the heart of her situation. This is an important aspect of her presentation because the lack of magic strips away some of her implied villainy, as does her empathy – 'Your men weren't bad men; / Undisciplined life / Did that to them.' This makes the story a more relatable and universal story from the female perspective, it introduces the idea that Circe isn't given the opportunity to use her witchcraft for her own benefit. Her power only exists to serve the mythic narrative. It is not that her love weakens her –there is simply no role in the story for a powerful woman in love. Circe wishes for Odysseus to stay because she loves him; she has the power to compel him to stay but her love makes her wish for him to remain of his own free will. Her declaration in the final line – 'I could hold you prisoner' – is less of a threat than it is a wish to hold him as anything other than a prisoner.

Circe is not entirely trapped in her role as a witch. She can recognise and articulate the boundaries of her narrative, even if she is unable to break them because she loves Odysseus. Her love is not a weakness, though, it is a vulnerability that enables Glück to present her as a woman trapped in a patriarchal narrative. As she states in the seventh stanza, 'Every sorceress is / A pragmatist at heart;' and as she addresses the limitations of her power, her determination to speak up within these constraints gives her voice and her perspective greater authenticity.

An enemy glamour

Employing personal subjectivity and competing mythologies also provides a way to present an alternative view of a story or a character by providing context for their actions that is missing, or only hinted at, in the original narrative. In the poem 'Portrait of the Snow Queen as a Young Bitch' (Foyle, 2008, p.16), Naomi Foyle presents the Snow Queen prior to the events of the fairy tale. At first glance, the Snow Princess is presented in much the same way as she is in the fairy tale – beautiful, calculating and cold. However, the truth lies in the details. The 'rigid crystals' of her jewellery 'deflowered my earlobes,' and there is a sad inevitability about a 'colourless fashion that would never last.' Although she is seen to be an antagonist, she is none the less portrayed as someone vulnerable, choosing to frost the tips of her breasts and accentuating her 'skate-blade hips' – images which suggest a measure of pain and frailty alongside the traditional associations with emotional coldness – while her sister 'tinkled in icy heels'. The sisters are the same, but not the same. There is an implied violence in both sisters' actions, but while the Snow Queen experiences violence to her body, the sister appears to escape the

violation while living in a brutal world, her suitor giving her ‘a cape cut from two baby seals’.

The Snow Queen is presented as a force of nature, her ‘cold and majestic returns’ as inevitable as winter. However, the context shows that the inevitability is not as simple as it appears – she is not simply presented as winter to contrast with summer in a binary view. She is shown to be a mass of contradictions, not wanting her suitor but upset when he moves on to her sister. It’s possible, given her general indifference to the man, that she’s more upset about the loss of status as an older, unmarried sibling. She appears to be largely ignored by her stepmother and her father, left in a power vacuum as she retreats into the cold as a form of defence. The environment underscores her vulnerability; she is at odds with her family and the world she inhabits; after she learns to sing, music becomes ‘a new front in the war,’ and one that requires her sister to remain silent. She is not presented as talented in the magical way that witches in fairy tales often are, she is hard-working as she ‘scrubbed at the rust’ on the harmonium and resourceful as she works on her plan, ‘wielding a blowtorch, a miniature fork-lift and a textbook on sound engineering.’ She is not a magical woman – a witch – but a product of her environment.

Her final triumph in the poem appears to be that she wreaks her revenge and assumes her rule. However, it is more than that; her actions force her sister to move from being a passive figure symbolic of the ideal woman in a patriarchal society to a real, flesh and blood woman as ‘blood pelted down the white legs of my sister.’ The Snow Queen in this poem doesn’t simply lift herself out of the flat, binary narrative of the fairy tale, she takes all the characters with her. She has ‘castrated every last sycophantic buffoon’ and brought about what she sees as the

inevitable conclusion to her current circumstances. The Snow Queen does not disrupt the peace, she shows that for her, there never was any peace and she was simply seeking to gain more control in a violent world. This doesn't mean that her actions in the fairy tale can all be forgiven, but it does show them in a new light. Like Glück's Circe, the Snow Queen in Foyle's poem exposes the structural ideology at the story's foundation as well as the hypocrisy of the society in which she lives. The added dimensions of the Snow Queen in the poem, together with the fact that the world presented is largely stripped of the magic suggest that her actions, though extreme, are not without motive. The Snow Queen has not been diminished in terms of her brutality; she is still clearly a villain but a villain with motivations that question whether the old order and peace was all it seemed to be.

Look into the entrails of Uranus

Dominant myths from Western mythology have influenced the Western literary canon, reinforcing a patriarchal structural order, embedded with white privilege. While Glück's Circe demonstrates the importance of subjectivity in creating a narrative more sympathetic to women, this is not the only option. Another way to expose and alter myths is to blend stories from different cultures and challenge Western's mythology's status as the one "true" symbolic order. This can be seen in Audre Lorde's poem 'A Woman Speaks' which invokes West African religious traditions. Speaking as a woman who is 'moon marked and touched by the sun', Lorde references the Dahomean sky goddess-god Mawulísa who represents night and day. While this myth shares some similarities with Western myths that set up binary definitions – male / female, day / night or good / evil – the nature of the myth adds a greater level of complexity. In the Dahomean myth, Mawu created the

world; she is the female principle and mother to all, including all other deities or orisha (Bakshi, 2014). Among those deities is her counterpart, Lísa, who represents the male principle and to whom Mawu is bound as his twin or his mother. The magic of these deities and the power of the 'witches in Dahomey' – better known as warriors from a historical standpoint – may be unwritten in terms of the Western literary canon, but they exist just the same and provide a counterpoint to patriarchal structures of Western mythology and fairy tales.

The first stanza blends this Dahomean mythology with Greek mythology by referencing the 'entrails of Uranus'. In ancient Greek mythology, Uranus is also associated with the sky; husband to Gaia or Mother Earth, Uranus is said to be the father of the Titans and most Greek gods. When Uranus was castrated by Cronus, the myth states that his blood fell to earth and this gave birth to giants, nymphs, the Muses and the Furies. The references to the ocean in this stanza, in lines three to four – 'but when the sea turns back / it will leave my shape behind' – and the end of this first stanza – 'look into the entrails of Uranus / where the restless oceans pound' – also refer to the birth of Aphrodite; in some creation myths the goddess grew from the white foam which spread after Uranus' genitals were thrown into the sea by Cronus. In this first stanza, therefore, the speaker claims authority by referencing not only the African mythology of her ancestry but also Greek mythology, which has a higher literary status in Western culture. In a few lines, Lorde has conjured her ancestry and a complex mythology which includes divine beings representing vengeance (the Furies), love (Aphrodite) and poetry (the Muses). Giving poetry the same mythological parentage as love and vengeance adds greater significance to the title 'A Woman Speaks'. The significance of this

woman speaking is multi-faceted and crosses cultures as it encompasses vengeance, love and poetry.

Blending established, patriarchal myths from Western culture with African mythology demonstrates Lorde's identity is complex – she is a woman of colour in a Western society. She is also a woman with extensive knowledge and poetic skill. As the title suggests, language can be a source of power and a woman's use of language can be a way to challenge the existing symbolic order. In Lorde's case, she suggests there are symbolic and mythological structures which contradict Western myths. These stories can be blended to create something new and poetry can be the way to explore this synergy by tying together the personal and the political as well as the historical and the mythological. In the first stanza, line 13, 'if you would know me' rhymes with the reference returning to Dahomey in line six of the second stanza. The vivid use of sound throughout the poem is reminiscent of spells and incantations – the sibilance of 'restless oceans' in the first stanza and 'noon's new fury' in the third, the alliteration in the second stanza of 'moon marked… magic', 'coiled cloths' and 'mother did mourning'. As well as exploiting the incantatory nature of spells and language, the aural links between words and ideas tie all the varied elements together. This is where the speaker's identity rests – not solely in her 'birth' or 'divinities' but as she states, in a blend of all the aspects of her ancestry and identity, together with the powerful effect of speaking the truth of her experience.

There is a fluidity to her identity; she is 'half-grown / and still seeking / my sisters / witches in Dahomey' as if her quest is not over, and the construction suggests that as much as she may be seeking this connection, the witches may also

be seeking her. There is a sense of mutual longing; as M.K. Morris (2002, p.177) notes:

> Lorde devotes her life's work to questioning whether it is necessary for subjects to come into being based on the hostile repudiation of the Other. It is in order to make this challenge that she posits her body as a sign of Otherness and yet, through the rhetoric of her presentation, convinces us that the Other is essential, not to constitute ourselves through exclusion but through the creative dynamics of difference.

As Alice Ostriker suggested, women's revisionist myths are not characterised by a single voice but by "multiple intertwined voices" or more specifically, "divided voices evok[ing] divided selves… challeng[ing] the validity of the 'I', of any 'I'". (Ostriker, 1982, p.88) This sense of fluidity, then, is integral to the assertive conclusion of the poem – 'not white' – which, together with the definitive nature of the plosive 't' sound, assumes absolute authority. Subjectivity – sometimes contradictory, often complex – is at the heart of female power. While Gilbert and Gubar's seminal study of nineteenth century female writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2002) posits a "troubled and even tormented relationship to female identity" and gender as a "painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy", to Lorde, black womanhood is a wellspring of power. In this poem, Lorde ties together the various elements of mythology, ancestry and personal experience to enact her own empowerment, claiming the power of the witch for herself.

A miracle that knocks me out

The voice of the witch is hard to pin down, even within the structured form of the myth, but therein lies some of her power. In the poem 'Lady Lazarus', (Plath, 2004, p.14-17) Sylvia Plath gives her speaker a powerful command of language. She is

characterised by most unladylike rage, and the short lines of the tercets suggest a psychological shorthand and an impatience with her audience. The language of the poem deconstructs established myths and prioritises female subjectivity in an aggressive and unapologetic way. The rapid shifts in tone and style, together with the various poetic devices deployed throughout to unsettle the reader show active hostility through the jarring collision of words and images. Every aspect of the poem – the shocking imagery ('Bright as a Nazi lampshade', 'The pure gold baby // That melts to a shriek.') intertwined with the lyricism ('I rocked shut // As a sea shell'); the repetition; the blunt line breaks and the musicality – all conjure a woman claiming power through language like a magic spell. Plath reworks the Lazarus myth from a female perspective and in doing so, undermines the Christian, patriarchal story from the Bible. In the original myth, Lazarus is resurrected by Jesus in a story that is presented as the pinnacle of his achievement of miracles. Lazarus himself may be the embodiment of a miracle, but he is a passive figure. In contrast, Lady Lazarus needs no such saviour, and her resurrection is not a one-off. As Gilbert notes, she is an active, if erratic, player:

> She enacts as well as dissects her suffering, her rage, her anxiety… even at her most objective she feels eccentric, not representative; peripheral, not central. (1997, p.445)

She is an outsider and therefore a witch. She reclaims this potentially negative view of her subjectivity because her power is presented as something she possesses as a woman – 'I a smiling woman', 'the same identical woman', 'I do it', 'I rise' – in defiance of society and the natural order of life and death. As Rosenblatt (2018) notes:

> Plath's poetry originates in ritual and the poems enact a process of transformation from a static, trance-like deathly state into metamorphosis.

Lady Lazarus has not been cast in the role of a witch to serve an external narrative; instead, she has claimed the supernatural power of the witch to create her own.

At the start of the poem, the speaker assumes the spotlight – 'I have done it again.' – and then immediately undercuts the glamour or sense of ceremony regarding her arrival with grotesque images of the holocaust – 'Bright as a Nazi lampshade,' – and a catalogue of body parts which highlight the dehumanising quality of the male gaze. In this poem, Plath sets up, subverts and denies the male gaze. The creepy and repulsive sound patterning of her description of her body as 'the flesh / The grave cave ate,' is dismissed as 'a trash' two stanzas later; the removal of a shroud from a corpse – a detail the speaker shares with the original Lazarus – is compared to an erotic strip tease. Stanza 13 begins a lyrical section which draws the reader back in; the image of Lady Lazarus 'rocked shut / As a seashell' seems tender and sincere, but what immediately follows is colloquial language – 'I do it so it feels like hell.' – and a tone and style that resembles a nursery rhyme – 'I guess you could say I've a call. // It's easy enough to do it in a cell. / It's easy enough to do it and stay put.'

The poem gathers momentum as Lady Lazarus details her 'Comeback in broad day,' and the repetition of 'there is a charge… there is a charge… And there is a charge, a very large charge,' takes on a variety of meanings, from the electrical jolt bringing life to the painful cost of her resurrection to the erotic thrill of the audience. At this point, Lady Lazarus isn't simply addressing her audience, she is addressing her enemies – all male – and the use of 'Herr Doktor', 'Herr Enemy', 'Herr God', 'Herr Lucifer' reminds the reader of the Holocaust references at the beginning of the poem. The speaker has a split sense of self and her public face is

defined in relation to others; it is a performance which facilitates the second self at the root of her power:

> The female poet's second self, however, is associated with her secret name, her rebellious longings, her rage against imposed definitions, her creative passions, her anxiety and – yes – her art. (Gilbert, 1977, p.451)

For all the rapid shifts in tone and subject matter throughout the dramatic monologue, this is clearly a very well thought out, artful and carefully constructed speech by Lady Lazarus. The lulling, incantatory quality of the stanza,

> Ash, ash –
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there –

is the speaker's final moment of seduction, which gives the sense that the penultimate stanza and its warning – 'Beware / Beware.' are uttered in a sinister whisper which draws the audience closer. She is not just a 'walking miracle' or a symbol, she is made terrifyingly real. At last Lady Lazarus arises from death like a phoenix 'Out of the ash' and utters her final threat with the casual confidence of a woman who views her survival and revenge as a fait accompli. Lady Lazarus is monstrous in many ways, brutally beautiful in others and triumphant as she enacts her witchcraft without apology in front of a willing audience of what appear to be her next victims.

Throughout this poem, language is the tool that the speaker uses to enact her witchcraft, undermine the Lazarus myth and demonstrate her power. For example, Plath uses rhyme not just to contrast images and ideas, but also to demonstrate that – the circumstances of the poem's posthumous publication notwithstanding – her work is more than hysterical or heightened autobiography. Nor is the work a simple re-writing of a patriarchal myth with a female protagonist.

Plath has deployed her intelligence and artistry to create a carefully thought out, stylised monologue. In the context of this poem, the speaker's punishment, her pain and even her death only serve to make her stronger but Alice Ostriker notes that in the poetry of both Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, "wherever in these two poets we find images of compelling dread, there we also find images of muteness, blindness, paralysis, the condition of being manipulated." (Ostriker, 1982, p.77). Ostriker is correct in that Lady Lazarus, for all her power, is certainly not free and is manipulated by the world around her. In this state, she is closer to the passive Lazarus of the original myth, but this isn't the whole picture. Her endurance and her anger make her more like Mary Webster from Atwood's poem, and her seduction of the audience suggest she is aware that she is being manipulated and knows how to work within that system. She steps into her role even though it comes at a cost – 'a very large charge'. The sense of constriction is presented as partly inevitable; it is the price she pays for some measure of power and control over her life. The space for interpretation and ambiguity within poetry provides a medium for exploring the paradox at the heart of the witch. Language is more than simply a means of self-expression, or a limited symbolic order that prioritises patriarchal norms over the female experience. It is, like the witch, both and neither all at once. Plath exploits the ambiguity of language to give her speaker control of even the most dire circumstances and raises questions which serve to undermine the biblical myth. In the original story, the male Lazarus is resurrected by God. Plath creates a female Lazarus in control of her own resurrection.

The inalienable meaning of things

In exploring mythology in my own work, I was keen to examine the humanity behind supernatural women, the role witches play in myths and their relationship to presentations and perceptions of women in society. Terence Hawkes (2005) claimed that "Man constructs the myths, the social institutions, virtually the whole world as he perceives it, and in so doing he constructs himself." This does not appear to leave much room for women. Poems in my collection seek to examine how and why myths are made, and how so many ancient stories of heroism rest on violence against women.

The mythology of the news cycle

The sequence of poems entitled 'A Day Three Story' recasts the Cassandra myth in a modern context. Cassandra was gifted the ability to tell the future but cursed with the fact that no one would ever believe her warnings. She is both a powerful priestess / witch and a tragic victim of her society. I found there to be a parallel between the fate of Cassandra and the fact that when a mass atrocity is committed, it is revealed at a later date – usually day three of the news cycle after the most sensational headlines have subsided and the public has moved on – that the attacker had a history of domestic violence. For example, in the US, the perpetrators of the 2014 shooting in a Louisiana movie theatre and 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Florida as well as the alleged Planned Parenthood shooter in 2015 were all accused, and in some cases convicted, of domestic violence.[4] As was seen in the Pulse

[4] The links between terrorism and domestic violence are well-documented in Joan Smith's book *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence Turns Men into Terrorists* (2019) and statistics are monitored and reported by charities seeking to reduce domestic violence, such as the US educational charity One Love: https://www.joinonelove.org/learn/the-surprising-link-between-mass-shootings-and-domestic-violence-and-what-you-can-do-about-it/. The links are significant enough that US President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris included a campaign promise to "establish a new Task

nightclub shooting, sometimes these women are vilified as accomplices, which compounds the horror.[5] They are like women trapped in the role of the evil witch to serve the narrative of a myth which aggrandises the male hero, the mythical norm. The structure of these media narratives follows a similar model to that of mythology, reinforcing the same patriarchal ideologies and cultural norms.

In bringing together the Cassandra myth with the modern incidence of mass atrocities and their presentation, I was seeking to explore the parallels not only with the individual roles within a myth but also the parallels with cultural institutions, such as the media, and ideologies. In her examination of the links between domestic violence and terrorism, Joan Smith (2019, p.48) suggested that:

> The failure of gun control tends to mask the fact that America's weapons culture is an ideology in itself, associated with ideas about the importance of the individual over the state, a right to self-defence which encourages paranoid attitudes to outsiders and a notion of guns as a symbol of manhood.

This sequence suggests that within this cultural ideology, women may become modern Cassandras, ignored by society while their bruised bodies foretell much greater violence to come. The media is thus an institution that is complicit in the violence, one which perpetuates and is facilitated by the dominant patriarchal ideology. For this reason, in the poem sequence, the attack is attributed to Apollo. In Greek and Roman mythology, as well as being the god of logic and social order, he is the god who initially cursed Cassandra and therefore seemed appropriate as the man at the root of all the violence.

Force on Online Harassment and Abuse to focus on the connection between mass shootings, online harassment, extremism, and violence against women."

[5] The perpetrator's wife, Noor Salman, was charged with aiding and abetting and obstruction of justice but eventually acquitted after two years.

The first poem in the sequence, 'Apollo's Retribution' takes the style of a news report – 'We interrupt all our standard broadcasts' – showing how the media sensationalise violence – 'fire and poison rained down // on the docile crowd' – to create a mythic platform for attackers. It is still the norm that in any mass attack, the media will focus on the attackers, whether gunmen or bombers, and yet the victims are left unmentioned. While this has been changing in recent years, the media still plays a role in glamorising any mass attack. There is now a dangerous precedent in that attackers take inspiration from previous perpetrators, seeing them as heroes and martyrs to a cause. The second poem in the sequence, 'Dying Declaration', suggests how this myth-making contributes to the cycle by providing a platform for the perpetrator as he seeks to justify and glorify his actions. The voice speaking is clearly deluded, blaming his wife for his action and calling it a pre-emptory strike against a greater treachery – 'she / conspired with ravens and made me do it' – and yet this is presented as a motive in the media without critical commentary. In Apollo's mind, the world is 'spun into war / by the ingratitude of weak women.' The speaker adopts the more glamorous and powerful traits of Apollo – 'a leonine face', 'eagle wings' – to gloss over the violence. The media and wider society play a role in allowing this opinion of himself to remain unchallenged.

As the story develops, 'The Town Square' looks at the role of public opinion in mythologizing violence against women and blaming victims for their own suffering. There is a measure of shock at play – 'Our children died here' – but much as previous societies looked for a witch to blame for their misfortune, the group discussing the attack jump very quickly on the man's partner as a villain, instead of a victim. In the poem, 'we turn now to some men to talk this through'

and the language – slick, dismissive media discourse which jumps from voice to voice, all espousing the same views – reflects how society can ignore, dismiss and even justify domestic violence.

> … If I can start with you,
> sir, she claims she didn't know his plans, claims
>
> that his cries that she made him do it were lies
> he told himself but there are whispers that
>
> she knew. Does that add up for you?
> There's protection for women like her,
>
> she chose not to take it. …

Different speakers are found inhabiting the same stanza in a call and response that sees them echoing each other's views. Just as mythology provides the structural ideology for patriarchal rape culture, the media also reinforces stereotypes and beliefs that oppress women, in this case airing something presented as a discussion in which the outcome and conclusion are clearly choreographed and pre-ordained. In this scenario, the woman is trapped within society and the media narrative; she is blamed for not stopping the attacker and judged complicit in his crimes. In truth, she is his first victim and after enduring so much, there is more to come when an angry crowd, desperate for justice, seeks to lay the blame at her feet. The media fuels this need for justice by providing a narrative that casts the woman as evil and then seeks her punishment. The cycle is self-fulfilling, in the same way that myths "prove" the pre-eminence of patriarchal structures by casting any powerful woman as criminal or immoral. Cassandra is not a powerful woman, but she is viewed with suspicion because of her prophetic powers. Her presence is problematic for the established symbolic order; it demonstrates the failure of society to protect her. She

must be cast as a villain, or at least complicit in the crime – 'If we're looking to lay blame, some must fall / on her.' – by the media or else those failures and faults in society must be addressed. The line break after fall suggests both that the accusation is one that bears significant weight and works as a rhetorical device to suggest a measure of deliberation that isn't present in the rest of their discussion. In this way, the speakers present themselves as being objective and considered. The form supports this presentation just as the actions of a hero punishing a witch are justified by the structure and ideology of myth.

He said I made him do it

The last two poems in 'A Day Three Story' finally allow Cassandra to speak and counter the way she has been constructed in the story. The poems show how social structures and cultural norms are internalised by women, even those that are damaging. In 'Official Caution' she is speaking to the police, and in 'Exile' she is apart from society, free to speak and explain her situation but with no clear listener present beyond the silent reader. In both poems she is still subject to the dominant, pervasive mythology that oppresses her. The first of these poems allows Cassandra to explore her own sense of guilt – 'It's true, / I knew him and his violence.' In her statement, she explains both why she was attracted to the attacker and how domestic violence bubbled up and became a trap which closed very slowly around her. She also shows how few alternatives she has; she knows she will be disbelieved if she reports her partner for domestic violence and it's likely that in her ever-shrinking world, she is told by her domineering partner that no one would believe her. Unfortunately, the facts of domestic violence cases often bear this out, making Cassandra 'as afraid / of the outside world as the simmering / pot of home.'

Particularly given her understanding that the violence inflicted on her is a sign of much worse to come, Cassandra assumes some of the guilt she is assigned.

In the final poem, 'Exile', Cassandra has been able to reflect on her experience but still seems in thrall to Apollo's ideas. This is because society acts just as her partner predicts; he warns her against defying him because 'He said / I made him do it and people take him / at his word.' In these poems, it's clear that society does not attempt to return to her the autonomy she has relinquished to Apollo under duress. Her fears are justified because they are realised. As she anticipated, her experiences have been dismissed while his were broadcast as motivation; in short, he is believed to be sincere in his justifications – however abhorrent the act – and she is not.[6] The idea that society reinforces his narrative whilst silencing hers is suggested in the poem to be a form of haunting as she hears his words and accusations and is tempted to agree to end the torment. Her treatment after the event is simply one more violation, perhaps the worst of all because it's done in the name of righteous justice. 'Now they rape my memories with such force, / stone statues would turn their cold eyes away / in pity.' The line break after 'force' leaves a space for violence of unimaginable scope and turns the reader away from it, also seen in the following line where 'pity' is on a different line to the 'cold eyes' that turn away. Even in exile, her reputation and her experience are denied, ignored and misrepresented and the audience, like the media, is complicit in this oppression.

[6] Statistics show that in a 14-month period analysed by the UK Crown Prosecution Service in 2012, there were 35 prosecutions for false allegations from alleged victims and 5,651 prosecutions for rape in the same period. Given the vagaries and challenges of any justice system, these statistics alone cannot offer absolute proof, and cannot include the many unreported assaults or threats of a false report, but the stark contrast showing the number of false allegations at just 0.6% of the prosecutions certainly tells a different story to the dominant cultural narrative which suggests that women lie to punish men.

The sequence addresses the original myth of Cassandra and also the problematic way that the media sensationalises and mythologises mass attacks. I had some concerns about casting a woman so clearly in the role of victim, but I felt that only by letting this drama play out could the wider point be made. Roland Barthes (2009, p.135) claims that:

> It is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside: for the very effort one makes in order to escape its stranglehold becomes in its turn the prey of myth: myth can always, as a last resort, signify the resistance which is brought to bear against it. Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology.

This sequence was an attempt to "mythify" the media narrative around mass killings and expose the hypocrisy at the heart of it. The poem concludes with a plea for mercy, but also an acknowledgement that the speaker is not alone in her suffering and her circumstance is not unique. 'I am one woman living in Cassandra's body.' The Cassandra myth thus provides a way to express that the story is timeless. Like Fiona Benson's exploration of how rape culture is embedded into the mythology of Medusa, Cassandra's narrative acts as a template for the many stories of women oppressed by cultural norms and assumptions. Hers is a story that is doomed to be repeated as long as the overarching narrative of female responsibility for male violence remains a part of the cultural discourse.

She had a recipe of her own

The idea that powerful women are inherently monstrous is deeply embedded in our culture and myths and fairy tales play a significant role in bringing this about. As the classicist Mary Beard demonstrated in her recent book *Women and Power*,

(Beard, 2017) associations with the deadly Medusa, seductive sirens and bitter crones appear difficult for women to shake, particularly when considering their relationship to power and personal autonomy. Female poets can address this issue through using the nature of poetry itself to interrogate the myth. As Barthes (2009, p.134) states:

> Poetry occupies a position which is the reverse of that of myth: myth is a semiological system which has the pretension of transcending itself into a factual system; poetry is a semiological system which has the pretension of contracting into an essential system.

While myths may create our understanding of the world and ourselves, poems only create the world of the poem.

In the structure of both myths and fairy tales, the witch is often a figure who is an outsider, intent on the destruction of the social order. This presents an opportunity for reframing the myth because an outsider has a different perspective and, as a result, particular insight which allows them to comment on the hypocrisies of a society. The witch may be a way of addressing the complex contradictions and ambiguities within the established narrative structure as well as the symbolic and social order. The ancient figure of Medea is an excellent example of how the witch exposes these frailties and hypocrisies. Medea's witchcraft is never hidden and at no point in the narrative does she hide her nature. When her magic proves useful to Jason, the hero of the story, her monstrous actions (including fratricide) are presented as a means to an end for the hero to achieve his goal. When Jason abandons Medea for another woman and she wreaks her terrible revenge by murdering their sons, this is a continuation of the same behaviour that Jason – and the audience – once condoned. Medea is involved in Jason's success and his destruction, but at the end of the story, he retains his political and economic

standing while Medea is left destitute and reviled. In *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2017) Silvia Federici examined witches in the context of capitalism and the female body as exploitable capital. For Medea, all her capital is spent on her witchcraft and the murder of her sons. Despite her terrible actions, most versions of the Medea myth show her escaping punishment at the end of the story, subverting the expected narrative of crime and punishment. This deviation of the expected narrative suggests that Medea cannot be wholly condemned; Jason must bear some of the blame for her actions if he continues to reap their rewards. Medea may be a witch because of her dark spells and unwomanly acts of murder, but she is an honest villain.

In her essay 'Becoming Medea', Deborah Boedeker (1997) explores how Medea assumes identities – she doesn't simply comment on or punish society, she destroys her enemies by becoming more like them. Society is shown to play a role in the creation of her villainy. In Seneca's play, this is summed up in the line, 'Medea fiam' (Boyle [Ed.], 2014) or, I become / am made Medea. The dual meaning of "fiam" in Latin intimates that Medea has been created by her society and that identity is metamorphic. The question then moves from whether Medea herself is cruel to whether she is becoming part of a cruel society. In light of Jason's abandonment after she married him at significant personal cost, can we also consider Jason to be cruel? Perhaps the audience considers that his punishment is too severe for the crime, but an alternative view is that the problem with his punishment is that it is Medea, the witch, the foreign outsider, who is exacting it instead of established society.

The intention behind my poem 'Making Medea: A Recipe by Belle Gunness, Murderess' was to create a world in which a woman could be seen as

simultaneously monstrous and sympathetic, like Medea. Belle Gunness was one of the most prolific serial killers to have ever operated in the US.[7] In the world of the poem, the reader can find some understanding of both Medea's and Gunness' motivations. This is not the same as condoning the actions of either, but it allows an exploration of the nature of narrative and the role this plays in our perception of characters. Like Foyle's poem on the Snow Queen, the addition of background and context creates a sense of empathy. Belle Gunness was a mass murderer, a truly monstrous person, but she had no supernatural power and also experienced significant hardship and alienation. In another context, her resourceful nature, strength and practicality may have been a recipe for success, rather than murder. The fact that she was ill-treated does not excuse the fact that she killed so many but suggests how society was complicit not only in making her the way she was but because people turned a blind eye to her crimes. The society is rigid, with seemingly arbitrary and unfair decisions about what is right and wrong –

> If a woman doesn't measure up,
> ignore her. If she grows strong
> enough to help herself, laugh.

[7] Brynhild "Belle" Gunness (1859-c.1908) was a Norwegian-American serial killer who was active in Illinois and Indiana in the US between 1884 and 1908. She is thought to have killed at least 14 people, although many speculate that the number is closer to 40. To put this in context, this is more than the confirmed murders of notorious American serial killers such as Ted Bundy (35) and Jeffrey Dahmer (17). Her motive appears to be largely financial, killing a spouse for the insurance money or luring men to her farm with the promise of an investment opportunity before killing them and taking their money. After successfully poisoning her husband for the insurance money, she later moved to more direct violence, killing her victims by beating them with a hammer and using a hacksaw to cut the bodies into pieces for burial. She also killed children in her care, seemingly to protect her grisly secrets.
She remained largely undetected and although suspicions were mounting in later years, her crimes only came to light after a fire at her house in 1908. The subsequent investigation led to the discovery of the bodies and personal items belonging to people who had gone missing after visiting Gunness at her farm. After the fire and revelation of the mass graves, her farm became a tourist attraction for visitors across the country seeking souvenirs and a closer look at the site. Although the headless body of a woman was found in the ashes of the fire, it is popularly believed that she faked her own death to escape punishment. Recent DNA tests on her remains were inconclusive.

Part of the aim of the poem was to expose the hypocrisy and double standards in operation within the mythological narrative and also how this serves to put social order in peril. The thinking is so fixed that it was impossible for anyone to imagine that the murders could be taking place and Gunness evaded suspicion even though her only cover was that she was a woman.

Another aim of the poem was to contrast Gunness' reputation and actions with the presentation of witches. Witches are a distillation of the view of women as evil, agents of chaos and enemies to the symbolic order. Casting Belle Gunness as a witch allowed me to examine how much of this essential evil she truly displayed. While some of her actions could be considered analogous to witchcraft – particularly her use of language to seduce her male victims to visit her with charming letters and promises of marriage and ownership of her farm – she is not a witch at all. Absent the poison that was found in early cases before she developed her later technique, Gunness uses brute force to murder men and hide the bodies, in contrast to witches who are said to do harm through spell craft and language alone. Furthermore, she doesn't evade suspicion because she has created a glamour or a smoke screen to cover her tracks as a witch might, it's simply that no one was looking. She had been so easily dismissed, so early in her life that she is able to operate under the radar. She turns this vulnerability into a strength and like Medea, never seems to be anything other than honest about herself both in terms of her actions and her presence as a self-made woman.

Medea is the focus of male fears, perhaps even their embodiment. She is described as every wandering husband's nightmare and what appears to make Medea truly monstrous is that she murders her own children and puts her needs above those of a man. The link to Medea towards the end of the poem and the

suggestion that she may have escaped the punishment of fire not only moves Gunness away from the traditional punishment of a witch by fire but suggests that she ascends towards the sun as Medea does, escaping punishment. In Medea's case, this is due to her supernatural connections and her magic but Gunness may be able to escape her fate because, while the community searches for a witch, no one is looking for 'a woman like that'. This echoes the many faces of the witch presented in Sexton's 'Her Kind'; like Sexton's witches, Gunness is dismissed and disempowered, and required to become a shapeshifter as she adapts to the environment around her. The final stanzas are phrased as a question because of the dilemma and the moral ambiguity of wishing for her capture and punishment for abhorrent deeds and at the same time, hoping for her escape. Both options are problematic and only a full understanding of the context of her particular evil can yield anything close to an answer. In this poem, the evil woman is not entirely a witch and the witch is not an entirely evil woman.

Enacting the magic of the female perspective

To conclude, in rewriting traditional myths, female poets can expose the fault lines within the structural and ideological elements of mythology. The introduction of female subjectivity and context, or competing mythologies as seen in Lorde's work, serve to deconstruct the myths that present witches as evil. Drawing a comparison between media narratives and traditional mythology allowed me to demonstrate how patriarchal structures are perpetuated in narratives today. Exploring the nature of evil in the poem on Belle Gunness allowed me to demonstrate that an evil woman does not have to be particularly witchlike. Gunness is not supernatural or a 'non-woman' but a serial killer with a particularly ruthless

– or perhaps pragmatic – outlook. While these stories can be reinvented in a variety of literary genres, poets can use the immediacy and ambiguity of poetry to reveal the contradictory nature of the witch figure as well as the essential humanity of women cast as witches. Gunness' condemnation is wholly deserved given the scale of her crimes, just as Medea is monstrous for the murder of her sons, but in both cases, it is a judgement against their actions, not their power. There is nothing inherently evil about a woman taking control of her own destiny in a society that seeks to disempower her – the means may be evil, but the motive may also be sound. Language can be used to enact and embody a form of magic, recreating reality as seen through female eyes. This also serves to push the cultural needle closer to equality. In the standard versions of many of these narratives, witches appear to cause trouble with no ascribed motive and receive their punishment as a conclusion to the story. In reimagining these stories to ask whether the women may have been justified in their violent deeds or if they deserved their fate, female poets can expose hidden agendas and return humanity to the witches of myth and fairy tale. Poetry can explore the paradox at the heart of the witch because it can acknowledge the humanity of the witch without ceding any of her power. This is partly because of the quality of ambiguity in poetry and also the intensity of language and potentially incantatory effect of poetic devices allows for the enactment and realisation of the witch's occult powers. This, in turn, allows female poets to claim a position of authority and move beyond the witch, as the final chapter will demonstrate.

Chapter III: Beyond the witch

In this final chapter I consider the significance of the witch as a supernatural figure and ways to move beyond the figure of the witch that acknowledge the importance of that role in female expression. As the two previous chapters have demonstrated, female poets can harness the power of the witch whilst also acknowledging her limitations. While the two previous chapters focussed on the work of other writers, this chapter considers my own work in greater detail because one of the key aims of this PhD was to develop and enrich my creative practice. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, the figure of the witch can be a means of discovering a more authentic and empowering means of expression for female writers. In the course of my studies, I learned that the rehabilitation of a previously reviled figure can unearth some of the structural iniquities of linguistic and narrative structure. In addition, the power of the witch as a woman and as a symbol is supernatural. This gives an added dimension where much of the value lies for creative writing: magic and spell work allow for vivid imagery and the opportunity to transcend reality in pursuit of a metaphor. The magical status of the witch can also be used to create ambiguity and poetic tension within a presented female identity. This is seen in the contradictions within Louise Glück's presentation of Circe, which transcends the Classical presentation by showing a witch whose magical, witch-like power only extends as far as it can serve an overarching narrative. In Glück's reimagining, Circe's power is not diminished by the departure of the hero because her true powers lie in her vulnerability and her compassion. As an atheist with no belief in magic, I was interested in how the figure of the witch – to me, nothing more than a fabricated fairy tale – might support my own creative development. This chapter demonstrates that the three key elements identified earlier in the study – the

relationship between language and power, the exposure of the patriarchal order and the presentation of female subjectivity – aren't exclusive to the witch or believers in witchcraft.

Strip off and howl at the blood-soaked moon

In looking at the relationship between language and power, I was keen to explore how the language of power could be exploited. A witch can cause disruption and discomfort within the world she inhabits and within a poem, as shown in Circe's inconvenient presence in Louise Glück's poem or the wry commentary of Margaret Atwood's presentation of Mary Webster. The next logical step, once established patriarchal structures have been upturned, is for the witch to assume a position of power. For that reason, my poem 'All True' adopts the format and bureaucratic language of the minutes of a meeting, a medium at the heart of commercial and patriarchal power. The premise of the poem is that a monthly book club is a cover for women to plot against men using witchcraft. I wanted to explore some of the negative images associated with witches and witchcraft and use humour to undercut them. I believe humour to be an element of chaos, like the witch – something that can transgress boundaries and frustrate expectations. In her germinal article 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Helene Cixous (1976) discusses the disruptive potential of female laughter and an apocryphal quote attributed to Margaret Atwood – "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them." – highlights how deep-seated the fear of female laughter may be in the male psyche. It also reinforces what is at stake. Presenting extreme ideas in such a business-like manner shows their absurdity but while the

women in the poem are clearly in control of their destinies, they still fear exposure and subsequent punishment.

The potentially hard edge to humour and the possibilities to use humour in poetry to explore anger issues is put to effective use in Patricia Lockwood's poem 'Rape Joke' (2013) which examines the circumstances of a sexual assault, casting a critical eye over the potential for humour and dissecting the situation to reveal the absurdity of a society that produces and perpetuates such violence. Lockwood acknowledges the horror alongside the black humour of the speaker's search for the joke and places the pain both bodily and in a geography which sees the speaker cast as insane, without place or time:

> The rape joke is that you were crazy for the next five years, and had to move cities, and had to move states, and whole days went down into the sinkhole of thinking about why it happened. Like you went to look at your backyard and suddenly it wasn't there, and you were looking down into the center of the earth, which played the same red event perpetually.
> …
> The rape joke is that this is just how it happened.
>
> The rape joke is that the next day he gave you Pet Sounds. No really. Pet Sounds. He said he was sorry and then he gave you Pet Sounds. Come on, that's a little bit funny.
>
> Admit it.

Any woman seeking to break from the constraints that society imposes on her may be driven mad or cast as a witch or a conspirator. Even in a place where she can exercise her power, the roots of that misogyny run so deep that there is still a sense that there is nowhere she can go, and her body is being judged by an external standard which has become internalised. Lockwood's poem is, in part, a search to

find the humour as a way to diffuse the horror; both are necessary to communicate her defiant survival. The anger is not blunted by this quest to find the rape joke, as perhaps the demand 'admit it' suggests. Instead, her fury is sharpened to a point which strikes at the heart of her experience as a way of marking her survival.

The inspiration for the poem came, in part, from creative research which led me to examine the growing 'Incel' movement.[8] The movement is fuelled by troubling pronouncements from seemingly respectable academics such as Jordan Peterson, who perpetuates the view of women as witch-like in essence and calls for a return to the more traditional – and for women, considerably more oppressive – values of the past. (Bowles 2018) While Peterson claims his aim is to prevent such violence as committed by far-right terrorists, his rhetoric suggests otherwise; he discusses "women's proclivity to say no" and how "women select men" as if this were a fault, calling for "enforced monogamy" and a redistribution of women to frustrated men to quell the violence. (Peterson, 2019) There is no place for powerful women in this philosophy and even less room for disobedient women, whom Peterson sees as a threat akin to witches. In his book, he makes direct links between women, nature and chaos – both elements that have been historically associated with witches – and the subtitle of his book, "An Antidote to Chaos" give an indication of how he sees women – and witches. In a recent interview, he stated "It makes sense that a witch lives in a swamp. … because those things hang together at a very deep level." (Bowles 2018)[9] In this world view, the symbolic, patriarchal order is absolute truth and not to be questioned.

[8] The incel movement is a largely online subculture of young men, self-proclaimed 'incels' (involuntary celibates), who believe that women conspire against them to prevent them from being sexually active. This group has obvious misogynist roots and is also characterised by racism, homophobia, a sense of entitlement and the endorsement of violence against people who aren't celibate, particularly women.
[9] To a modern, progressive audience, these ideas may seem laughable, but the violence inherent in the incel movement is more than a disturbing undertone, it has spilled over into real life. This male

The growth of this misogynist sub-culture is, according to Rebecca Solnit, "an extreme version of sex under capitalism" (2018) and serves to create a dangerous environment for women. As she explains:

> What's at the bottom of the incel worldview: sex is a commodity, accumulation of this commodity enhances a man's status, and every man has a right to accumulation, but women are in some mysterious way obstacles to this, and they are therefore the enemy as well as the commodity. They want high-status women, are furious with their own low status, but don't question the system that allocates status and commodifies us all in ways that are painful and dehumanizing.

I was keen to address this subject in my poetry, particularly because of the parallels this movement draws between witches and women, but it was a challenge to find an outlet for my anger at the situation. In this context, direct fury or claiming the role of the witch as Audre Lorde does so effectively almost confirms their repellent world view. Subtlety in the style of Margaret Atwood's wry and knowing tone for Mary Webster seemed insufficient when the damage these beliefs have wrought has been so vast. In addition, as Solnit notes, although this is an extreme world view, it does have some roots in truth about the way society operates. Not all men are incels, but most do benefit from the patriarchal culture that underpins this movement. For example, if men choose not to interact with women in a business context to avoid any potential for impropriety, this may be presented as a way to protect women, but it serves to perpetuate and consolidate an old boys' network that keeps women apart from centres of power. In the same way, men benefit from the designation of unruly or powerful women as witches as a method of control. Whether a woman is

supremacy movement has, to date, resulted in at least four mass murders and 45 deaths having been committed in North America alone by self-identified incels and those who follow key figures associated with the movement. This belief in women as evil witches could be dismissed as absurd were it not for the very real danger that this movement presents.

condemned as a witch or lives in fear of being called one, the system has material implications for the behaviour of women in a way that is structured to benefit men.

I chose to use humour in the poem 'All True' to expose the absurdity of this movement's beliefs as well as those less extreme – but still damaging – ideas which permeate society. As in the Lockwood poem, this use of humour is not to suggest that this is a subject to be taken lightly, nor does it lessen the sense of anger. The *reductio ad absurdum* approach of the poem, which implies that a female reading group is a cover story for a sinister coven, is itself an expression of fury. The poem refers to some of the incel beliefs – such as the conspiracy of women to withhold sex – but rather than rebutting the claim itself, considers the administrative work required to maintain such a conspiracy using the language of capitalism: 'exponential growth / means it will now be stored digitally.' The poem moves from playful nods to some of the more prevalent theories of feminism as a means of undermining men to darker ideas of witchcraft. The poem concludes with a return to the more realistic world but coupled with the world of witches in an annual sabbat. The closing lines suggest that while the incel world view may be wildly inaccurate, it is the dangerous culmination of a society that seeks to impose standards on women:

> The dress code is, as always, naked.
> Free Pilates classes and an early morning boot camp
> begin next week for those wishing to tone up
> before they strip off and howl at the blood-soaked moon.

While humorous in approach, the poem is an attempt to express my own sense of anger, not just at the horrific acts of the incel movement but also the wider implications of social control. This poem was published in Banshee literary magazine; I did have queries from both the editor of the magazine and readers once

the poem was published about suggesting such powerful women would be concerned about their weight or looks. I felt this was an important aspect to include because it demonstrates that implicit social control – I know many intelligent, capable and theoretically powerful women who nevertheless worry about their weight, going grey and any number of issues that are rooted in a patriarchal designation of a woman's value. The witches in this poem may have grand plans to execute from their agenda, but there is clearly more work for them to do before they can truly assume power.

The monstrous feminine

'All True' suggests that supernatural power such as the witch possesses may not be a magic bullet to fell the patriarchal social order. The magical powers of the witch are nevertheless important. The discipline of semiotics, and Roland Barthes' concept of jouissance in literature (Barthes, 2009) point to the significance of the supernatural in poetry. Described as the type of enjoyment or bliss that comes from a sense of breakdown in the normal order, jouissance in literature could itself be a form of magic. This linguistic concept can be seen as a way of describing the opportunity that witches – both as human and supernatural figures – present to female writers, particularly in relation to language and power. The witch figure can represent a fissure in the established social order; her presence in a society that seeks to marginalise her makes the witch not only powerfully disruptive, but also triumphant and often joyful. Semiotics also provides a theoretical context within which to discuss the fluidity of witch images and a possible indication of their enduring appeal and importance for female writers.

Semiotics considers not only signs and symbols, such as the symbol of the witch, but also their contextual use and interpretation. This broader perspective – contrasted with the assumed approach of taking the existing patriarchal symbolic order as an absolute truth – exposes the opportunity for female writers when it comes to the witch. Julia Kristeva links fixed identities and ideas to the male symbolic order, but within that order, the figure of the witch still resists a single, fixed meaning and that's why the witch is so important. Disruption and the crossing of borders within images and symbols are not just key components of the witch symbol. For Kristeva, femininity is closely linked with exile and being foreign – both common associations with witches – and as a result of these links between femininity and exile, Kristeva asserts that these are qualities inherent in the female voice expressing and challenging the established symbolic order. The semiotic perspective, which considers not just a system of signs but also their usage, transmission and interpretation, suggests that there is the potential for revolution within the symbolic order. The witch is both an archetype within which women are trapped and a means of escaping that same order because she is powerful and magical; she stands apart without shame or apology and shows that the standard rules and symbolic ordering which disempowers women need not always apply.

The presentation of witches and women relates to Kristeva's theory on the nature of abjection. Abjection relates closely to the figure of the witch because the combination of power and vulnerability creates tension at the heart of the abject:

> We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of

> condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. (Kristeva, 1984, p.11)

The word abject is derived from the Latin ‘abicere’, which literally means to throw away or to reject. However we define abject – reviled, cast-off, self-abasing or a rejected outsider – this is a passive construction; women cannot choose this for themselves. If they are thrown away, someone – or something – must be throwing them. Women may choose to stray from gender norms which reflect the patriarchal symbolic and social order and be cast aside, or they may be kept in their place as secondary to men. A woman who toes the line as a decorative and nurturing wife and mother is as trapped by the witch myth – and the threat of being thrown away – as the witch herself. From this perspective, women are not abject by nature, but created as such when they stray from their attributed roles within the existing symbolic order.

The idea that women are presented as inherently abject within the symbolic order – something ‘other’ and potentially sinister - is something that film critic Barbara Creed examines in greater detail, relating Kristeva’s theory of abjection to her own presentation of the monstrous feminine. She suggests that even as an active figure in a horror narrative, “the monstrous feminine speaks to us more about male fears than female desires or feminine subjectivity.” (Creed, 1993, p.48) The symbolic order presents and maintains a decidedly male perspective, and the woman’s role as a subordinate, or abject figure, is built into the system. Creed examines the figure of the witch within psychoanalytic theory, positioned as the oral sadistic mother and the phallic woman. This view maintains the patriarchal symbolic order and the view of the witch as a threat. Using examples of female witch villains in film, Creed demonstrates how the monstrous feminine is something other than simply a female version of a male monster because she exposes the frailty of the symbolic order by

evoking a "natural, animal order" (Creed, 1993, p.49) of the human life cycle from birth to death. The witch was constructed as a means of oppressing women, but she performs her role of troublemaker so well that she can disrupt the very system designed to oppress her:

> The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her evil powers are seen as part of her 'feminine' nature: she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms. (Creed, 1993, p.76)

To review, the symbolic value of the witch is as an outsider, a troublemaker and as the embodiment of female evil. A woman with power is presented as unnatural, often ugly (although sometimes beautifully seductive to the point of sinister) and harmful to children. In short, she is unfeminine, the cautionary tale no woman would wish to be, the anti-woman. None of this explains why female writers would be attracted to writing about, or in the voice of witches. Kristeva's central ideas – that identification is the key to understanding and elaborating meaning, and that the semiotic interacts with the symbolic – suggest that the witch in poetry may represent the poet herself. If meaning is derived from identification, no woman could identify with magical powers or simplistic presentations of an evil, monstrous witch, but they can identify with the social structures that place a woman in this position – either she cedes her personal power or accepts the label of the witch.

The symbolic is presented as an absolute – the hero is good; the witch opposes the hero and is therefore evil – but the semiotic approach considers the creation and communication of meaning. From a semiotic perspective, women are placed in this role against their will, simply because they deviate from the mythic

norm of the male hero at the centre of every story. Once we consider the creation and communication of the symbolic meaning of the witch, the symbol itself changes because our understanding has been altered. Like a witch in a story causing mischief and destruction, female poets can perform the same function in their poems, pointing out the tension and ambiguity within narratives that show the disparity between lived female experience and the traditional presentation of abject women. The witch was created to serve the symbolic order, but by changing the method and tone of the figure's communication – the remorseless defiance of Lady Lazarus and the grief of Circe, for example, or in Lorde's perspective as a black woman and Sexton's playful manoeuvring through various incarnations of the witch – the symbol has become irrevocably altered.

Night voice on a broomstick

While the critical lens of semiotics provides insight into the nature of the symbolic order and the role of the witch within it, when looking at the role of the witch in creative practice, this is only half of the story. As well as the potentially revolutionary impact on the symbolic order that the witch may possess, there may be more personal reasons why female writers choose to write about witches and witchcraft. This links not only to ideas about language and power but also the expression of female subjectivity.

The implied power of words within witchcraft and the potential for self-expression generates a close link between creative writing and magic. Sylvia Plath associated her creativity to a sense of the dark unknown beyond her articulated experience, noting in her journal that "fury jams the gullet and spreads poison, but, as soon as I start to write, dissipates." (Plath, 1998, p.228) Later in the journals,

Plath (1998, p.279) articulates the link in her imagination between her mental illness, creativity and witchcraft, stating:

> How can I get rid of this depression: by refusing to believe she has any power over me, like the old witches for whom ones sets out plates of milk and honey.

For Plath, her mental illness was both a witch within her to be defeated and at the root of some of her creative impulses. Plath as a poet is a witch-hunter – or at the least, aims to placate the witches of depression – whilst also embracing the creative potential of the witch figure within her work. As Joyce Carol Oates noted, "the artist both creates and is created by art." (Alexander [Ed.] 1985, p.44) Through poetry, Oates suggests that Plath:

> performs a kind of reversed magic, a desacralizing ritual… reification, rubricization. Absolute, dramatic boundaries are set up between the 'I' and all others, and there is a peculiar refusal to distinguish between those who mean well, those who mean ill and those who are neutral.

A similar, and often sinister, approach can be seen in the recent collection by Rebecca Tamás, *Witch* (2019), which disrupts language and expectation. It features extensive and irregular spacing as if much is still left unsaid and is all the more telling, and perhaps sinister, for it. There are still experiences and perspectives that words themselves cannot convey as effectively as silence can. To put it another way, the witch and the female writer are continually let down by the existing symbolic order. In Tamás' collection, there are unexpected turns in the poems with startling juxtapositions that show not only the freedom of witches and the power that can be harnessed in their name, but also the human cost of a belief in witches as a material element of the world. In 'Spell for the Witch's Hammer' (Tamás, 2019):

witches go astray
carnality swooping and fluttering like a ragged flag

they laugh so much
covered in purple bruises
teaching tricks GPS of the eternal flagellant light always
going home.

Tamás' poems show Kristeva's theory about the abjection of the witch in action. As an abject figure, the witch "disturbs identity, system, order… does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Kristeva, 1984, p.13) In this poem by Tamás, the witches may laugh, but there are long silences between the bursts of laughter, their 'carnality' is not triumphant but 'like a ragged flag' and they are guided by a 'flagellant' light that suggests this constant choice to go astray comes as at a cost. This could be seen as much as an expression of the dilemma of the female poet, balancing the desire for authentic expression with the fear of social censure.

It is possible to view Anne Sexton's poem 'Her Kind' as an examination of this creative practice and the journey of a female writer in finding her voice. The original title – 'Night Voice on a Broomstick' – made this more explicit. The first stanza could be read as a writer beginning to learn their craft, possessed by the voices of those artists they admire. Writers often begin to write by imitating other writers and this is hinted at here; she is 'out of mind' and talks of this as a 'hitch', a necessary apprenticeship to learn her craft. In addition, there is not only a sense of isolation but being actively shut out, which reflects an artist's early experience of trying to understand and become more involved with the literary establishment. The second stanza moves to the more personal side of a writer's development; Sexton mines her personal experience as a housewife and mother here, fixing

suppers in her home filled with ‘skillets, carvings, shelves’, but also shows its limitations and frustrations. Connecting with the personal was a key stage in her development as a writer, but for Sexton it is not the whole story. The technical skill learned from imitation and the defiant conclusion suggest that neither Sexton’s work nor Sexton herself ascribed to unfiltered emotional outpourings. There is more control in the witch’s chaotic magic and her senseless persecution than may appear. The final stanza shows judgement – from the driver, from the potential shame of ‘nude arms’ waved at villagers, the torture of ‘flames still bite my thigh / and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.’ and the eventual death sentence. This could be read as the writer’s work being presented to the public - it is the only stanza that includes a direct address as the speaker engages with the world. The stanza is both thrilling and painful, empowering and intimidating in equal measure. This could, for Sexton, reflect the experience of publishing her work to a mixed response.

The choice of the witch as a symbol and the repeated, deliberate identification of the speaker as a witch imply this is a female experience. While male writers may undertake a similar process of imitation, personal discovery and public response, this experience is less likely to be as heightened. A straight white male writer (i.e. the mythical norm), for example, will be less likely to find himself shut out of society. He is required to work much less on his emotional development and, in most cases, with fewer personal responsibilities encumbering him. He is less likely to be persecuted for expressing heteronormative desire or political defiance, unless he is living in a country with an oppressive regime. There is an argument that the poem could reflect the journey of an artist from any marginalised group – certainly people of colour, members of the working class or LGBTQ+

writers will face similar obstacles. In this poem, the perspective is resolutely female. It is not the witch symbol alone that achieves this; the supernatural woman is presented alongside her own fallible humanity. The assertion that 'A woman like that is not a woman, quite.' shows the level of obstruction female artists face, having their gender erased by the symbolic order like the archetype of the non-woman, the witch. While others, including some men, do have comparable experiences, women have historically faced unique difficulties when entering the literary world or any artistic sphere and the witch figure is a way to articulate this.

Fuck you, I'm still here

I wanted to explore the power of the supernatural and the potential for claiming power and authority in my own work. This includes both how the language of the poems and the use of poetic devices contribute to the sense of magic within language but also how that magic introduces an element of power. As noted earlier, the spell craft of the witch is not effective as a magic bullet to bring down the patriarchal order. If, as Kristeva asserts, meaning derives from identification, presenting a world far from reality, where a potion or a collection of words can alter the fabric of society or personal challenges, will not be effective because it is not a world the reader can identify with. Glück's Circe poems demonstrate that the witch and her magic may have limitations but that doesn't mean that she lacks power. In my own work, I used the symbolism of witchcraft and witch beliefs as a premise for an exploration of situations that seem far from the reach of magical intervention or cure. Form and rhythm played a crucial role in exploring both the potential power of magic and the stark lack of it. As Carol Rumens notes, "the basic art of prosody is the art of working with and against an implied regularity."

(Rumens, 2007, p.52) Little is more irregular than witchcraft and poetic language can be used to convey this. For example, the witches in Macbeth speak in rhyming couplets when the rest of the play is mostly unrhymed verse, marking them as outsiders. In addition, the iambic metre is interrupted when the witches speak in a trochaic metre to add to the sense of foreboding and the eerie sense that the witches are not of this world and may be intent on causing harm. Shakespeare's use of form in Macbeth suggests that the witches are a distortion of nature; a closer exploration of the relationship between language and power suggest that the world has already been distorted by language and the patriarchal symbolic order that underpins it. Although the subject matter of my poems is clearly focussed on witches and witchcraft, the form and language of the poems has been another way to explore the potential and the limitations of the witch. A disruption to a regular form, an abrupt line break or a change in rhythm can signal magical powers or a sense of their failure.

Given the close connection that I found between poetry and magic, I wanted to include the writing of a spell in my creative practice. I studied spell-work in history books and spells as they are described in various myths and legends and found that they are often an accumulation of ingredients and objects from the mundane to the fantastic and more esoteric elements. This became the starting point for the poem 'Spell for a Better Day'. Rather than taking ingredients from the natural world, the spell is comprised of elements from modern life – alarm clocks, toothpaste stains, delayed trains – and combines them with circumstances or situations that relate more to emotions – a man standing too close on the train, or the speaker's weight. As the poem develops, less tangible ingredients are added to the list, culminating in 'the shadow of an angry moon.' While it takes on the form

of a traditional spell, the substitution of modern ingredients together with the esoteric element hints at the impossibility of casting such as spell even while conjuring a sense of it by grounding it in the real world.

The aim of the poem is to consider that any spell to improve a person's life does not involve erasing the past through the flick of a wand or relying on magic. Trials and challenges can build up personal resilience; reciting a litany of past challenges that have been overcome can help to generate a sense of personal strength. I wanted to deviate from the idea that it was possible to wave a magic wand or cast a spell over life to make improvements, or that reciting certain words in a specific order would automatically result in empowerment. At the same time, the poem presents the possibility of magic. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) suggests that altering our thoughts and behaviour can have an impact on our emotions, and there is some power in words and also in our perspective and framing of our experience. In an attempt to balance the cynicism of the everyday trials of life with something approaching faith, the spell is cast at midnight, partly because this is the official end of the day and also because it adds to the sense of atmosphere. The day is wrapped up in a ceremonial manner; I used colour – red wine, violet ribbons – precious metals – silver needles, gold thread – to heighten this sense. This is to make a deliberate contrast with the blunt delivery of the final line – 'fuck you, I'm still here.' Ultimately, the poem suggests that witchcraft is not an essential requirement for empowerment; endurance, resilience and defiance may be found in the figure of the witch but they are also non-magical personal traits. All three can all work their own magic within a poem, a spell or a life. The trick is in the framing and the perception of those traits and in that case, harnessing the hypnotic

spell craft of the witch can reinforce more prosaic or pragmatic personal empowerment.

Motivated forms

As shown in the previous chapter, myths and fairy tales use the established symbolic order and subsequent patriarchal social order to create narratives which reinforce them. As Barthes (2009, p.126) highlights, this is no accident; in his words "there is no myth without motivated form". In the poem 'Step' I wanted to explore the motivation behind both fairy tales and media mythologies in terms of class barriers. The poem assumes the voice of Tonya Harding, the figure skater who was accused of orchestrating an attack on her rival Nancy Kerrigan. Whether or not Harding committed this crime, an examination of her story suggests that she was cast in a negative light long before the attack took place due to the cultural climate. Her public image as an interloper, or someone "not good enough" for the sport was framed by sensational media presenting and maintaining classist views. This appeared to me an example of motivated form – Tonya Harding as the brash outsider, the wicked stepsister, the cause of all the trouble – due to indicators of class. This poem is written in the first person, from the perspective of Harding, as a way to address the issue. The poem lists that the reasons she is considered inferior or villainous are largely surface – 'big hair, electric blue eyeliner, a frayed costume'. Showing the criteria which mark her as an unworthy member of a lower class demonstrates the judgemental agenda at work. It also gives room for the speaker to list all the other elements that are left out to create that caricature – 'scars and bruises' – including poverty and hardship. Just as a stepmother or stepsister may appear in a fairy tale with no other purpose than to disrupt a heroine's life, so

too is Harding cast in a similar role. All her vulnerabilities and the reality of her upbringing are ignored.

It appears that the speaker wishes to live within the fairy tale as Cinderella but cannot achieve it due to class barriers. Even her endurance is presented as proof of her villainy, despite the fact that she has no choice but to accept her situation. Her motivation is not to cause anyone harm, but to succeed in order to lift herself out of poverty. She is seeking 'a pristine score to wear like a pelt.' At every turn she is frustrated because fairy tales aren't constructed to work in that way – if we start to understand the potential vulnerability of the supposedly wicked step-mother as an outsider, for example, then we will question the justification of the symbolic order on which the fairy tale rests. Just as providing a witch with a motive or some humanity in mythological tales can provide a means to disrupt the symbolic order, so too can telling a fuller account of the story. The media involvement in the Harding/Kerrigan story bears a close relationship to fairy tales in that the narrative is presented in absolutes. Stepmothers and stepsisters are outsiders, unnatural and unwelcome. Tonya Harding was similarly presented as an interloper by the media. In the original version of Cinderella, the stepmother is forced to wear iron shoes that have been heated in the fire and she is condemned to dance until she dies. I saw a link between this image and the metal blades of ice skates, but also in the idea that Harding's punishment was, within the media, presented as entertainment for others.

The characters of the stepmother or stepsister in fairy tales do not always perform the same function as the witch but are often similar in their presentation as an obstacle to the heroine. Like a witch in a story, both the fairy tale stepmother and Harding disrupt the social and symbolic order because it doesn't work for them.

In the recent film about Harding – 'I, Tonya' (Gillespie, 2017) – characters repeatedly break the fourth wall to address the audience. This serves to interrogate the structural elements of the narrative and indicates the motivation behind them by introducing the idea that there are different versions of the same events. Drawing a comparison between fairy-tale villains and Tonya Harding's story serves the same function. The poem also shows how the ideology can internalised – she starts out trying to be beautiful and to succeed on the terms set out by society. She changes herself to fit society's ideal but is dismissed and demonised by the media and society both for her gender and her class. Tonya Harding's oppression doesn't occur in a vacuum, it is the product of the society which set her up to fail and which needs her experience as a cautionary tale that reinforces the existing social order. The question is not whether the speaker is 'good' or 'bad', it is whether she was ever given a fair chance to be either.

The inspiration for this poem was, despite the political commentary on class barriers, quite personal to me and initially came from an early scene in the film 'I, Tonya'. In one of her early routines, she is shown skating to the ZZ Top song 'Sleeping Bag' (Beard, Gibbons & Hill, 1985); the implication is that the song is, as the poem states, 'sweating and wicked' and meant to reflect how Harding doesn't belong with the rest of the skaters, who chose more socially acceptable pieces of classical music. This had a personal resonance with me because it was one of my father's favourite bands and was the type of music I heard growing up. For me, their disgust at her choice seemed personal and closely related to how I sometimes feel as a working-class writer who may not know or appreciate the cultural references required to fit in with literary circles. The dominant narrative, for me, is based on a largely arbitrary judgement about what good art is, often

founded on prejudice and designed to maintain the existing social order. Understanding how this music was framed – as a judgement on Harding's character and background – I took the association personally. I identified with Tonya Harding's attempts to break into the world of figure skating as I have had a similar experience as a working-class writer, with similar financial constraints and a general sense of not belonging or being unwelcome in the literary milieu. I felt Harding's fury and frustration, and I found her story and the experience of those perennial fairy tale outsiders – stepmothers and stepsisters – to be analogous to my own. The poem began with an idea about the political and social motivation of form, but it became clear that the political cannot be entirely divorced from the personal because of the material implications. This link between the political and the personal is seen throughout Audre Lorde's work in poems such as 'A Woman Speaks' and 'The Black Unicorn' and the depth and complexity of her work provided me with a way of connecting the two spheres. These links highlight the importance of interrogating the motivation behind forms and narratives. We are all primed to hate the stepmother or stepsister as an interloper, to ignore their vulnerabilities because it doesn't suit the designated narrative. Uncovering the motivation behind the mythology demonstrates the importance of studying these texts because it offers new opportunities for female writers like myself who may never be cast as Cinderella and may have more in common with the villain of the story. The figure of the witch, or reviled woman, is a key element in this discovery because she demonstrates that deference to power is very different to personal empowerment. Like the moment of recognition during the film 'I, Tonya' when the music of my childhood was played, writing this poem taught me that I may

never be Cinderella – and indeed, I never aspired to be – but my story is still worth telling, my lived experience still valid.

My mother taught me how to be a witch

The most transformative aspect of this course of study from a creative perspective has been the emergence of more personal work in the final poetry collection. The voice and the symbolic potential of the witch has been integral to my exploration of female subjectivity, not only as a subject for critical analysis but also a personal and creative examination of my own subjective experience as a female writer. In some cases, this has been in the form of small touchstones, such as the example above with Tonya Harding's choice of music. However, as well as finding personal connections in the political and historical studies, I also used my knowledge of witchcraft to write about more personal experiences; this is a significant departure for my creative practice. While I have always used my personal experience to inform my own poetry, I had rarely written directly about my experience, and particularly not anything that I was currently experiencing. Writing about a heartbreak from many years ago was, prior to this consideration of witches, much more achievable than seeking to address anything happening in my life right now. The contradictory nature of the witch with all her power and limitations gave me permission to create speakers who were flawed. The power of the witch and the glamour of spell work also gave me a safe platform to explore the possibility of writing more personal poems – I felt less personally exposed and vulnerable when hiding behind the cloak of magic.

Several of the poems in the collection relate to one particular area of my personal life. Throughout my time as a PhD student, my mother has been gravely

ill with severe depression and an eating disorder. Despite the support of a professional care team, the challenge to care for her – and some days simply keep her alive – has been significant and traumatic. I can't know with certainty whether the witch figure has facilitated this move towards more personal work about my relationship with her. The extreme nature of the situation may mean that the emergence of this subject was inevitable because it occupies so much of my time and my thoughts. However, I do feel that the witch allowed me to explore contradictions – caring deeply for my mother and yet sometimes resenting the pressure placed on me, for example – and the language of magic allowed me to show a contrast between the quick fix of a spell compared with the much slower progress of her recovery. Some of these more personal poems are acts of conjuration. 'Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry', for example, creates a picture of earlier times when my mother was well and able to bring about her own empowerment. As I write this, my mother is still very unwell, and her health continues to be at risk. In facing this personal challenge, I found the witch a valuable figure to explore – there are no neat endings for the witch, any answers raise further questions and suggestions of magic only point to its limitations.

Poetry and the magic of language

Much of my personal experience relating to caring for my mother can be found in my poem 'Feeding Mum Peony Seeds'. I chose to employ neither rhyme nor any strict form to this poem and this is to suggest a complete lack of magic. The poem was written as a result of my experience as a carer and explores the sense of powerlessness that comes from attempting to help and having no effect. The poem

also explores my own sense of empathy with those who have magical beliefs; the image of the peony seeds, reputed to be a magical cure for depression, is in part about the desperation of being unable to help a loved one. Despite all I know about my mother's illness after three years, I am still grasping at any possibilities that offer hope. The aim of the poem is to use a magical idea – peony seeds as a cure for depression – to express the complete lack of magic in the circumstances. The onset of depression is attributed to the fact that 'she emptied out her bag of tricks / for her daughters and left / no spell of her own.' The line break between 'left' and 'no spell' represents the long wait before the disappointment that no magical cure is found and the silence following the departure of my mother as I once knew her. The speaker considers the possibility of magic as a cure and examines the properties of the peony but while 'Each fat seed is coloured with the promise / of the earth' it is an empty promise because the hoped-for cure isn't delivered.

In a workshop discussing an earlier draft of this poem, one writer commented on the abrupt brutality of suggesting that 'She spits out the seeds.' The essence of the feedback was that this seemed incongruous with the tenderness seen elsewhere in the poem, particularly the recollection of a parent who 'made me feel so safe with little more / than quiet patience and warm milk.' I reflected on the feedback but felt this was an essential element of the poem which showed not only the failure of magic, but also how depression can take over and distort someone's personality. The peony is presented as attractive because it is a potential cure for depression – but its failure and my mother's rejection was a deliberate choice. However attractive a cure might appear, it still may not be effective, or even welcomed by the patient. The contrast between the tenderness of the mother-

daughter relationship and the action of spitting also shows how sometimes, magic and love can both fail.

The poem is less about depression or magic and more about the experience of being a carer in a difficult and sometimes desperate situation. The poem was informed by personal experience and influenced by the Kei Miller poem 'Unsung' which suggests that 'There should be a song for the man who does not sing / himself.' (Miller, 2010, p.42) Miller's poem considers how a carer can disappear into a world where there is neither music nor magic but is instead formed of routine and some small hope that those efforts might yield some positive results. I felt that the peony seeds didn't just serve the poem as a magical cure for depression; they also represent the many, increasingly desperate attempts to effect change in a difficult situation. As I worked on the final draft of this thesis, the country went into lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic. For a time, I attempted to provide care for my mother from a distance because all community care came to a halt. When this failed, she returned to hospital and then to a care home but as yet there has been no significant progress in her mental health. My experience during lockdown compounded my sense of powerlessness and frustration. Like Miller, I feel that there ought to be a song, and a magic spell, for carers facing such impossible odds and difficult situations. My poem may not conjure a world where depression can be cured simply, but to do so would be a disservice to the many people afflicted by it. What the poem does provide is a space for the complex and often overwhelming challenge to be recognised.

Self-portrait of the poet as a failed witch

The failure of magic became a recurring theme in my work as I continued to deal with setbacks in my mother's health. 'There is a poem that I want to write…' is an exploration of the poem as an act of conjuration or wish-fulfilment. The poem considers how effective words can be as a means of altering reality in the same way that a witch alters the world through spells and questions the effectiveness of visualisation both as a magical process and as a means of changing the outcome of a circumstance. The key to this poem is ambiguity and the lack of a conclusion. The title and the conditional tense all suggest that the poem has yet to be written and yet it appears on the page. If the female artist can claim kinship with the witch, it is in the creation of worlds. While the world of the poem may not quite transfer to reality, it is rising up to meet the possibility of change.

The poem is another exploration of my experience as a carer and directly addresses the dissonance between witchcraft and poetry. Wishing to write a poem, or cast a spell, does not bring about the circumstances in which they become concrete in the world. At the same time, the focus of the poem is on recovery. After the first stanza representing the current challenging circumstances – 'swirling witches / spinning sulphur and cobwebs' – the rest of the poem concentrates on the recovery, adding more detail to provide greater clarity. In the poem, the woman is fighting back against the witches and the darkness, she 'smiles once' before brushing off the challenges 'like a cat' and walking away. The title suggests that this is something that has yet to happen in the real world, something the speaker of the poem would like to explore as a lived experience prior to writing the wished-for poem.

The final stanza considers why the speaker wishes to write the poem – 'because my heart / wants to feel that triumph.' In this poem, experience, emotion and poetry are linked in a way that disrupts the natural chronological or factual order of events. If the poem is a spell, then perhaps the poem can generate the requisite emotion that leads, ultimately, to the experience. Like the peony seeds, the move to magic has the scent of desperation. The first line runs on from the title, sentences run on between stanzas to give a sense of breathless desperation. The penultimate sentence is broken across two stanzas:

> She will brush dust and ash from her clothes
> and walk herself into this poem
>
> that I want to write because my heart
> wants to feel that triumph.

These lines are also a repetition from the title, a reminder that this is a poem that has not been written, to give a sense of desperation and the impossibility of such a wish. The deliberate jarring and breaking of sentences across stanzas also serve to reinforce the artificiality of magic and poetry. Throughout, the speaker is discussing a poem they wish to write, within a poem that has been written. The whole poem is something of a conundrum, a puzzle that is impossible to solve and this also serves to demonstrate the almost insurmountable nature of the challenge that the speaker faces.

This poem considers spell work and techniques such as visualisation as a form of empowerment and acknowledges both the appeal and the limitations of magic. This is something I have considered at great length; despite my rational beliefs, I am aware that almost everyone has a level of magical thinking and I am not immune to this. This may not take the form of religion or witchcraft but can be visible in "lucky" items that are kept for sentimental or superstitious reasons and

in ideas such as, “if this happens, that was meant to be.” While I do not believe in magic, I have a lot of empathy for those with magical beliefs. My scepticism is related to my lived experience; this poem and others in the collection are an attempt to explore and tap into my empathy with other beliefs and how they could be used to understand and share my own experience. Whether or not the poem can bring about the desired outcome is beside the point; it floats the possibility of recovery and allows the speaker to dwell, if only for a moment, on a more positive future.

Language and ideas lead to action

To conclude this chapter, the consideration of the symbolic order – and the role of the witch within it – suggests how poetry about witches relates to both female empowerment and artistic development. The witch resists definition; in *The Witch in the Western Imagination*, Lyndall Roper rejects discourse analysis – studying language in relation to its social context – as a meaningful methodology because it may have “limited and distorted our understanding” of the topic and also cannot fully account for “how language and ideas lead to action.” (Roper, 2012, p.15) This linkage between language, ideas and action can be seen throughout Audre Lorde’s work, where her roles as a writer and an activist were intertwined. Her poetry and scholarship was matched with more direct activism such as protesting and the personal, artistic and political often coalesced in essays such as ‘Poetry is not a luxury’ which highlights the importance of personal and artistic expression as a necessary aspect of political activism. This example contributed to my own development as a writer because I chose to stop avoiding subjects which might expose my class. The imagery and symbolic power of the witch provided me with a means to examine a range of topics, from the political to the personal, but above

all the perspective was resolutely female. The witch figure provoked me to interrogate the disparity between structural and ideological ideas and human experience. The language of the witch provided a way to talk about issues that seemed otherwise impossible to articulate. The potential that a witch possesses – a powerful women to whom the normal rules appear not to apply – is vast and opens up future opportunities for creative expression.

In order to move beyond the witch, I had to fully embrace her potential. From an examination of witches in history and myth, I moved to poems which examined the lives of extraordinary women – women without magical powers – using the language of witchcraft. The power of language in spell work allowed me to explore my experiences as a carer and a woman. Poetry provided me with a medium for speaking the previously unspeakable and exploring the potential of naming my experience. Appreciating the value and malleability of the symbolic power of the witch opens up new avenues of expression which can disrupt the symbolic order. Once the witch has shown the cracks in the edifice of ideological foundations, it is possible to explore new opportunities for disruption. From authentic self-expression to political poems, moving beyond the witch does not mean leaving her behind. Doing so is more about opening up the magic of the witch, such as it is, and, as I will discuss in my conclusion, poetry is particularly well placed to examine this power.

Conclusion: Are you a good witch or a bad witch?

Having examined closely the history, mythology and poetry of witchcraft, I still do not believe in magic, but I do believe in the power of witches. Even in the modern, secular world, witches proliferate. Women continue to be demonised in all walks of life when choosing independence or any measure of power. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (Institoris, H. and Mackay, C. [Eds], 2012) may be outmoded, but the assertion that "when a women thinks alone, she thinks evil thoughts" continues throughout society, where powerful or outspoken women are often condemned due to social and structural rules underpinned by ancient mythology. Even a cursory internet search will present images of female politicians such as Hillary Clinton or Theresa May as witches – while they may have worked from different points in the political spectrum, as women with a measure of power they are both marked the same way. A closer examination of witches within poetry creates a more empowering dynamic for women that explores and debunks some of the negative connotations of the witch figure.

Of course, one could argue that there are many good witches to identify with, but I chose to focus on negative presentations of witches because it appeared to me that good witches had little to offer me as a means of personal expression. A good witch may be closer in nature to a woman in many cases, but she has few of her vulnerabilities and contradictions. I also wanted to focus in particular on how and why female poets transformed a negative stereotype into something empowering, and how the figure was used to expose the tension created by the patriarchal symbolic order. Being a good witch seems almost too easy a solution for a poem – there is little tension if issues can be resolved with the flick of a wand or the twitch of a nose, particularly if she serves to maintain the status quo. There

are perhaps fewer good witches presented in poetry by women because she is often very close to the idea of Woolf's angel in the house, the impossible-ideal wife and mother against which other women are measured. While there is an opportunity to explore this idea further, I chose to maintain a focus on negative presentations of witches to adhere closely to the initial question of how a negative stereotype may be transformed through poetry.

Negative presentations of witches also allow greater scope to expose the structure of a society or the fallacy at the heart of certain beliefs. For example, my poem 'Homewrecker' takes a defiant approach to address the idea that society's perception of a woman as a witch does not make her one. In this poem, the idea of the witch as a seductive siren is used to explore how single women can be presented in the realm of gossip. Like many of the poems in the collection, this was written based on personal experience and a reflection on the many – often outrageous, frequently logistically impossible – claims that gossips have made about me and my love life. For a long time, I have sought to escape this label but I think perhaps my exploration of female power and reclamation of subjectivity through witchcraft images – together with perhaps a tipping point that enough was enough – led me to write as if I was taking ownership of all the claims against me, even while exposing their impossibility. As Gilbert (1977) states:

> The female poet must come to terms with the fact that as a female she is that which is mythologized, the incarnation of otherness (to use de Beauvoir's terminology) … Many of her hypotheses about herself are therefore, in one way or another, replies to prevalent definitions of her femininity, replies expressing either her distress at the disparity between male myths about her and her own sense of self, or else her triumphant repudiation of those myths.

Embracing this idea demonstrated that the witch is an exciting role to assume; she can ruin relationships, seduce men at will, be everywhere at once and exert considerable power even if, like the Bell Witch, she does not really exist. There is much that the presentation of witches can teach us about how mythology and unstated symbolic values impact social views.

Linking poetic devices to the occult can also perform a dramatic function and create tension and ambiguity within a female identity. In an article for 'The White Review', Rebecca Tamás (2019) has suggested that:

> occult elements [in poetry] seem to offer something that speaks particularly to the nature of and difficulties of poetry itself – to what it might be possible to make language do, to what might be made possible through language.

This shows not only the enduring presence of the witch, but also her appeal to female poets as a means of exploring female subjectivity. The elasticity of language within poetry allows for the creation of magic, and magical effects through literary devices. It is poetry, not magic, that allows Plath to speak as a resurrected suicide, that places Glück on the shore with an abandoned Circe, that provides half-hanged Mary Webster with a voice long after hers has been taken from her. Poetry allows Sexton to change masks as often as she pleases and gives authorization for Lorde to speak in a world that seeks to silence her. Just as Lorde asserts that poetry may provide a means for women to articulate their experience, and by extension, themselves, so too does the image of the witch, who can be a woman with many names, and many more ideas, emotions and deeds.

By writing about witches, female poets can show that the conventional figure of the witch, like any female stereotype, can be shown to be lacking – a flimsy substitute for a representation of authentic female subjectivity. Poetry has

immense scope to expose and explore such contradictions; “according to Jakobson, poetry is a deliberate ‘deformation’ of ordinary language. To Erlich it is “organised violence committed on ordinary speech.” (Hawkes, 2005, p.71). These views in Hawkes’ overview of structuralism and semiotics suggest that there is something specific about the potential elasticity of poetry to exploit the power of the language and, in turn, of the witch within the symbolic order.

One aspect of the witch that I have found equally delightful and frustrating is the witch’s capacity for mischief. On one hand, a semiotic view shows how the witch creates tension and mischief wherever she goes, not just within a narrative but beyond it. This is certainly inspiring as a woman and as a poet, but it made the thesis very difficult to gather into a coherent order. My witches wouldn’t stay still, dancing their way between chapters and themes with no regard for logic and order. Of course, considerably less was at stake for me writing a thesis than a woman practising witchcraft (or indeed, being independent) despite the threat of execution, but it brought to mind this observation from historian Malcolm Gaskill (2010, p.34) about the appeal and cost of witchcraft:

> Witches creep along the boundaries between order and chaos, purity and corruption, attraction and revulsion, natural and supernatural, the real and the surreal. Uninvited lords of misrule, they are first projected in the mind and then sometimes… tragically reified.

I found it worthwhile to embrace the creative potential of the witch figure and all she represents in exchange for some challenges within the critical study, but Gaskill’s observation demonstrates how witches not only break through boundaries, they often balance themselves on the very fine line between often dangerous and triumphant opposites. This daring is perhaps why, despite all there

is to admire about them, they still feel subversive. We can uncover the narrative and symbolic structures which can cast a woman as a witch against her will – but that doesn't necessarily mean that evil doesn't lurk underneath. An authentic woman is as likely to be bad as she is good. The label of 'witch' may be unfair, but it may also be earned and accurate. The important point about the witch is that she doesn't care. She will stay true to her nature, whatever that is, regardless of how she is labelled and categorised and that, while frustrating for writing a thesis, is something to admire and embrace in creative practice.

The question of whether a woman is one of 'her kind', or indeed whether she is a good or a bad witch is immaterial – she is a woman with power. That power – for the witch, the poet and the woman – is rooted in language. Poetry can expose the contradictions and inequalities built into the existing symbolic order; the failure of language to deliver authentic expression without the glamour of poetry is in part because it deals in absolutes dictated by the patriarchal symbolic order. The power of language and of poetry provide the opportunity to explore female subjectivity and otherwise taboo subjects such as female anger. It also allows for another facet of the witch figure – unbridled joy. One of the quotes that has been hanging over my desk – one that I returned to over and over again as I tried to order my thoughts – struck at the heart of why I began this project:

> Why witches? Because witches dance. They dance in the moonlight. Lunar, lunatic women, stricken they say with periodic madness. Swollen with lightning-like revolt, bursting with anger, with desire, they dance wild dances on the wild moors. Witches can fly for they are light – they submit to no law, least of all that of gravity… Why witches? Because witches are alive. Because they are in direct contact with the life of their own bodies and bodies of others, with the life force itself… If the figure of the

> witch appears wicked, it is because she poses a real danger to phallocratic society. (X. Gauthier, 2007)

For me, this served as a reminder of the radical potential of the witch. Embracing the figure of the witch allows a female writer to move away from the certainty of heroes and villains, witches and maidens and ask questions not just about her own experience, but how these are framed, judged and created by society. A witch may also teach a female writer what she most certainly taught me – to care a little less about the judgement of society, to be true to myself and to dance and laugh whenever I can, no matter the cost.

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Appendix I: Publication Listing

Debut collection, Hag, published by Indigo Dreams, March 2019

Journals

‘The Boys of Summer’, *192*, December 2020

‘Making Medea’, *The Wild Word*, October 2020

‘All True’, *Banshee,* September 2020

‘Sunday Coven’, *Good Dadhood*, June 2020

‘Through the Fog’, *Marble Poetry*, June 2020

‘Shtriga’, *Ink, Sweat and Tears*, February 2020

‘Chanctonbury Ring’, *The Wild Word*, November 2019

‘Cassandra’s Body’, *Dodging The Rain*, October 2019

‘A Matter of Common Talk’, *Fly on the Wall Press*, July 2019

‘Anatomy’, *Brittle Star*, June 2019

‘Poppets’, *BFS Horizons #9*, June 2019

‘Shiv’, *Coffin Bell*, March 2019

‘The Slow Hanging’, *Coffin Bell*, March 2019

‘Sycamore Gap’, *Words for the Wild*, February 2019

‘Ghost Train on the Mobius Strip’, *BFS Horizons #8*, February 2019

‘The Song of Sally Weaver’, *Riggwelter Press*, January 2019

‘Nicolas Flamel and the Parisian Housewives’, *Ink, Sweat and Tears*, December 2018

‘Selkie’, *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, November 2018

‘Awake’, *Three Drops from a Cauldron Samhain 2018 Special Issue*, October 2018

‘Judge Sewall’s Day of Penance’, *Pussy Magic All Hallow’s Eve Special Issue*, October 2018

‘Slant’, *Marble Poetry*, October 2018

‘All Apologies’, *Dear Damsels*, September 2018

‘Goddess of a Thousand Works’, *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, August 2018

‘What the Landscape Saw’, *A Restricted View from Under the Hedge*, July 2018

‘Everything He Left Behind’, *A Restricted View from Under the Hedge*, July 2018

‘The Scarlet Mark’, *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, May 2018

‘The Augur in Autumn’, *A Restricted View from Under the Hedge*, March 2018

‘Camhanaich’, *A Restricted View from Under the Hedge*, March 2018

‘Night Watch’, *The Dawn Treader*, January 2018

‘Blood Curse’, *Dodging the Rain*, October 2017

‘Hex’, *The Dawn Treader*, October 2017

‘Caledonian Road’, *Beautiful Losers*, September 2017

‘Lines from a Single Dad’, *Beautiful Losers*, September 2017

‘Driving the Coast’, *The Moth Magazine*, September 2017

‘The Hero Loves As Well’, *Confingo Magazine*, April 2017

‘Another Thing With Feathers’, *The Dawn Treader*, January 2017

‘Eclipse’, *New Walk Magazine*, December 2016

‘Séance’, *...And Other Poems*, December 2016

‘Scenes from the Muses’ Cutting Room Floor’, *The Literateur*, October 2016

‘Invasion’, *The Literateur*, October 2016

‘Untitled’, *The Literateur*, October 2016

‘Lamia Revisited’, *The Literateur*, October 2016

‘The Keeper of the Watchword’, *The Cannon’s Mouth*, June 2016

‘Testudo’, *The Cannon’s Mouth*, June 2016

‘Ballachulish Goddess and the Lindow Man’, *The Cannon’s Mouth*, June 2016

‘Pictish Beast’, *The London Magazine*, April 2016

‘La Petite Mort’, *Brittle Star*, October 2015

‘The Noise of the Tide Brings Silence’, *The Rialto*, March 2015

Anthologies

‘Sycamore Gap’, *Places of Poetry*, The Poetry Society, October 2020

‘Origin Story’, *The Medusa Project*, Mooky Chick, October 2020

‘The Song of Sally Weaver’, *For The Silent,* Indigo Dreams Publishing, 2019

‘The Strange Children’, ‘As I Like It’, ‘Seven Sisters’, Commissioned and published in the *Chalk Poets Anthology* for Winchester Poetry Festival 2016.

Appendix II: Achievements and Educational Activities

Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning, 2019.

Debut collection, *Hag*, placed on the preliminary ballot for the Horror Writers' Association Bram Stoker Award for superior achievement in a poetry collection, 2020.

Conference Presentations and Educational Talks

Fear and Loathing in Poetry, *National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) Annual Conference*, November 2019

Near and Real: The role of poetry in remembering the history of witchcraft and witch trials, *Creative Histories Conference*, University of Bristol, July 2019.

A Deed Without a Name: Witchcraft in modern poetry and the role of the witch in creative practice, *The Museum of Witchcraft Annual Conference*, May 2019

Excavating the Past for Poetry (presentation and workshop), *West Sussex Writers*, November 2018.

Thou Shalt Not Suffer a Witch to Live: Disobedient women in the era of #MeToo and #TimesUp, *The Great Writing Conference 2018*, Imperial College London, June 2018.

Creative Development Activities

May 2020	Neptune's Glitter House for Wayward Poets, online poetry series, Headline reader
Dec 2019	Co-judge of undergraduate poetry competition with Carol Rumens.
Sept 2019	Loose Muse Women's Writing Group, London. Headline reader.
April 2019	Ambiguous Representations: Witches, Women and Power in Literature in Critical Theory conference, University of Tuebingen, Germany. Delegate.
Oct 2018	British Fantasy Society Conference 2018. Delegate.

Appendix III: Focus poems featured in the thesis

Half-Hanged Mary – Margaret Atwood

This poem is available in the collection *Morning in the Burned House* (Atwood, 1995). A copy of the poem's text is available online at: http://lhsela.weebly.com/uploads/7/9/0/8/7908073/_half_hanged_mary.pdf

Circe's Power – Louise Glück

This poem is available in the collection *Meadowlands* (Glück, 1998). A copy of the poem's text is available online at: https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/circe-s-power/

A Woman Speaks – Audre Lorde

This poem is available in the collection *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (Lorde, 2017). A copy of the poem's text is available online at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42583/a-woman-speaks

Lady Lazarus – Sylvia Plath

This poem is available in *The Complete Poems of Sylvia Plath* (Plath, 1992). A copy of the poem's text is available online at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49000/lady-lazarus

Her Kind – Anne Sexton

This poem is available in *The Complete Poems* (Sexton, 1999). A copy of the poem's text is available online at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42560/her-kind

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Zoe Mitchell

declare that the thesis entitled

Her Kind: A Discovery of Witches in Women's Poetry

and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission, or [delete as appropriate] parts of this work have been published as: [please list references]

Signed: ……..
Date:…….

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My Dad, Harry Mitchell, may no longer be alive but his influence can be seen throughout this work. I am so grateful to him for filling my childhood with music, laughter, stories, poems and all the right kinds of nonsense.

Above all, I wish to acknowledge my Mum, Pam Mitchell. The poems in this collection may explore her current illness but it is her strength, her humour and her stubborn determination to stand up for what she believes in that all shine throughout this work.