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The Maids, Mother and “The Other One” of the Discworld: Exploring the magical aspect of Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg, Magrat Garlick, and Agnes Nitt.

Jacquelyn Bent and Helen Gavin

Abstract

Fantasy novelist Terry Pratchett’s Discworld is inhabited by a very diverse group of characters ranging from Death and his horse Binky, Cut-Me-Own-Throat-Dibbler, purveyor of the ‘pork pie’, the Wizard faculty of the Unseen University and an unofficial ‘coven’ of three witches. ‘Because three was the right number for witches...providing they are the right sort of type’, according to Nanny Ogg.¹ Magic features prominently on the Discworld; so much so that there are a host of long term side effects the inhabitants of the Discworld have come to expect from being in proximity to this powerful force. Phenomena that to others might seem strange or unusual are typical, even expected on the Discworld. The use of magic, for good or ill, is often a prominent theme in Pratchett’s Discworld novels. This paper focuses on the Pratchett’s portrayal of magic as used by resident witches Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg, Magrat Garlick and eventually Agnes Nitt who replaces Magrat when she assumes the title of queen. This will include the role each witch assumes as the Maiden, Mother and Crone, as well as the unique relationship each witch has forged with magic. The witches’ use of ‘headology’, which bears a striking similarity to the magic we know as psychology, will similarly be explored. Finally, the consequences of magic use are discussed.

WARNING: As there are competing views on what magic is on the Discworld, and it is wise to avoid getting on the wrong side of a witch in selecting a particular position that may lack a certain ‘rightness’ to it, we will leave it to the prudence of the reader to make a sound judgment on the basis of what follows. If your morphic field suddenly resonates with that of a duck however, you must realise you have run “afoul” of some magical influence and the writers are not responsible in any way.

Key Words: Magic, Discworld, witches, maid, mother, crone, “the other one”, headology.

1. Magic on the Discworld

The Discworld is a flat, swirling, brightly coloured collection of land and sea travelling through space on the backs of four elephants. Do not

worry, the elephants are safe, they are travelling on the back of an astronomical turtle known as the Great A'tuin. According to Pratchett, “Magic glues the Discworld together – magic generated by the turning of the world itself, magic wound like silk out of the underlying structure of existence to suture the wounds of reality.”² However, he also points out that there was a time that ‘raw magic’ controlled the world, and this was a terrible thing, that would cause the whole framework of reality to tremble.³ This was before people such as wizards and witches began to ‘control’ magic. It is now harnessed by, presumably, responsible men and women, and the problem of raw magic is largely a thing of the past...

Not entirely dissimilar to atomic radiation, ‘background magic’ leaves behind residuals that have some fairly interesting effects on the land and people of the Disc. For example, roosters sometimes lay eggs. Not to be outdone, some chickens may lay the same egg three times. Rains of shrimp are not uncommon, trees are upwardly mobile and a cow giving birth to a 7 headed snake is considered typical.⁴ Magic plays a pivotal role in Discworld affairs; it is a tool of great power, wisdom and strength. The greatest wisdom, however, is knowing when not to use it. Those not heeding the warnings risk being consumed and corrupted by it.

We are about to examine the use of magic from the perspective of the Discworld’s most notable witches, Esmeralda ‘Granny’ Weatherwax, Gytha ‘Nanny’ Ogg, Magrat Garlick, and Agnes ‘Perdita X. Dream’ Nitt. Perdita, (or Agnes), is more or less known by this name only during a brief singing career in Ankh Morpork. Magrat has not been witching long enough to develop a nickname, though “wet hen” would readily come to (Granny’s) mind due to her soppy nature and earnest belief in things like “getting in touch with one’s self” and “folk music.”⁵

One quickly realizes that there is no clear-cut definition of magic on the Discworld. It means many different things. The witches themselves vary on their opinion on what magic is. Essentially, it would seem that what one believes in, including believing in self, influences the outcome that may be achieved with magical workings; this is an invaluable lesson.

2. The Witches of the Ramtops and Witchcraft

The Ramtops are in the crossfire of so much magical energy that many of the Discworld’s witches are born and bred in this location simply by being in proximity to so much residual power. Being a witch, however, requires a great deal more than simply being born in a region known for magical side effects. It is a vocation that requires great resilience, intelligence, intestinal fortitude (for the scumble, mostly) and a lack of fear.

Another attribute afforded the witches is having “the true witch’s ability to be confidently expert on the basis of no experience whatsoever.”⁶ In can be expected that the witches will share this expertise - whether you asked for it or not. According to Granny Weatherwax, being a witch also means bowing to no one, regardless of their position; that would include kings and other “royalty”.⁷ Suffice to say, being a witch requires a great deal of self confidence, nosiness, and being adept at subtle yet effective bullying, when necessary.

These witches are often called upon to right wrongs, such as insuring that the rightful heir, or at least someone the kingdom will accept, is made king, ensuring ‘equal rites’ for a young girl whose only fault was being born the eighth ‘son’ of an eighth son and now has wizarding abilities despite being female, fighting vampyres (sic), and changing the course of a story so that rather than inflicting a ‘happy ending’ on a princess, she has the free will to choose her own path. This is in addition to the more mundane tasks, such as chiropracty, midwifery and preparing an outstanding gumbo that one could also use for scrying purposes.⁸

As explained above, witchcraft is not just the use of magic, it is also knowing when not to use magic. In fact, one of the hardest lessons the young witches must come to terms with is the hard work witching entails and lack of ‘real magic’ that gets used on a day to day basis. Both Garlick and Nitt make similar lamentations about how Nanny and Granny frequently rely upon the superstitions, beliefs and gullibility of the local people rather than actually use magic to resolve problems. This does not sit well with Magrat who complains to Nanny Ogg about Granny Weatherwax lack of willingness to use real magic, to which Nanny kindly explains, “you can’t help people with real magic. Not properly...By doing real things you help people.”⁹ This is a lesson echoed time and again by the witches, for two very important reasons: there are limits on what magic can be used for, and any magical undertaking has consequences. The more you use magic, the more you will become reliant upon using it. Another consequence is that you can gradually become corrupted by the power of magic. So if you intend to use magic, you best be damned sure there is no other alternative, and that you are willing to accept any of the consequences for having done so.

As might be expected there is a very serious side to witching. Witches straddle the space between life and death. Pratchett explains there are certain times and certain circumstances when a witch must make the decisions when others are not able or willing.¹⁰ There are numerous examples where Granny Weatherwax, in particular, is required to make decisions about whether or not a mother or child dies, or a murderer is exposed and tried for his crimes, for example.

This is what it means to have the power and the responsibility of being a witch. As Granny explains, “real witchcraft, the true stuff, out of the

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blood and the bone and out of the head...it don't allow for mercy.”¹¹ The witch's role is varied; rewarding, thankless, terrifying, mundane, and trying. Often all at the same time. For all of these reasons witches are given a healthy level of respect, awe and, in the case of Granny Weatherwax, true fear. It therefore seems sensible for us to examine who, or what, these women are.

3. The Witch's Coven: Maid, Mother and 'The Other One'

It would seem that the convention of the Maid, Mother and Crone, is actually a fairly modern construction, the origins of which are both literary and cultural. According to Simpson, “Cambridge scholar, Jane Ellen Harrison, who decided that all the many goddesses in ancient religions could be tidily sorted out into three aspects of one great Earth Goddess: the Maiden, the Mother and a third she did not name.”¹² Simpson also explains that the Crone was given further morphic resonance by Aleister Crowley in his 1921 novel “Moonchild”¹³, where he both named her and attributed to her some nasty aspects, and the poet Graves, whose 1948 poem “The White Goddess” balanced out her desire for death and destruction with the hope of reward and renewal.¹⁴

Pratchett, a great proponent of folklore and satire¹⁵ was also inspired by Shakespeare's witches who meet with Macbeth, as well as the Fates seen in several cultures ranging from the Norns of the Scandinavian countries to the Fates of Greece and Rome. Interestingly, and it is unclear if this is intentional, Nanny, Granny and Magrat/Agnes also seem to correspond to Freud's concept of self. The Id, Ego, and Super Ego. Nanny, whom Pratchett describes as impulsive, shameless and libidinous, is all about gratification. She loves food, drink, and a good time and, as such, represents the Id. Magrat/Agnes seem to represent the Ego, as they are the most balanced between drives/desires and are often responsible in their behaviour and actions. While Agnes does have Perdita, her gothic persona, to contend with, she keeps her in check to a great extent. Granny represents the Super Ego; she is rigid and unyielding in her quest to be “good”. It has been revealed by Pratchett that this is largely due to her natural inclination towards being “bad”.¹⁶

According to Nanny Ogg, three witches are ideal because as a unit, they can get up to considerable trouble which is infinitely more fun than getting on one another's nerves, which became a problem when there was only two of them.¹⁷ Aside from this, on the Discworld, three witches represent a timeless tradition the origins of which are unclear. In more contemplative times, Nanny considered the fact that, while she was most

definitely 'Mother' material due to her expansive and impressive brood, Granny encompassed all three aspects, Maid (as far as she knew), Crone and, Mother... (rhymes with trucker), especially for anyone so unfortunate to try and cross her.¹⁸ Before Magrat became queen and gave birth to Esmeralda Margaret Note Spelling of Lancre, she was the Maiden, a role eventually claimed by Agnes and her inner thin Goth persona, Perdita.

Each witch excels at magic in her own way. While Granny is expert at 'headology' and anything related to getting into the minds of others, Magrat is adept with herbs and healing. Agnes/Perdita is a bit too novice to determine what precisely she's best at, though she's got great hair, and an uncanny voice that enables her to harmonise with herself. She is of two minds about everything thanks to the presence of Perdita, so she gets twice as much thinking and observing done as others. Nanny Ogg has an uncanny ability to like and be liked by others. She has the capacity to become friends with virtually anyone, gain their confidence and their trust and make it seem as though she had been there all along. Plus she is the maker of scumble and knows the many aphrodisiac purposes of food, including the legendary Carrot and Oyster pie. While this may not seem particularly magical, at least in what we would consider the 'mystical' sense, these attributes are considered magical, nevertheless.

Pratchett explains that the typical witches' sabbat is not often depicted accurately by most artists or writers. There is no naked dancing, as that is patently absurd given the number of environmental hazards, including inclement weather and hedgehogs. While unofficial, it is generally accepted that witches credo is, "Don't do what you will, do what I say."¹⁹ This is generally accepted by anyone smart enough to realize that anything a witch has to say is worth listening to, and any advice she offers is worth adhering to. Or else. As Pratchett points out succinctly, "when people were in serious trouble, they went to a witch. Sometimes, of course, to say, "Please stop doing it."²⁰

4. Headology

Headology is universally used by witches as it is infinitely more practical than attempting real feats of magic. In brief, it requires you have an understanding of how people think, and to be willing to exploit that, including gullibility and superstition. That is not to say it is used with malice, just that the witches know that, more often than not, people can help themselves better, if given a good 'push', be it mental or literal, in the right direction. Knowing the mind of others well enough to gently navigate their will towards a particular goal is essentially headology. The person wants to get better, and will, if they believe in a witch's abilities, and have the will to overcome whatever it is that is troubling them.

According to Pratchett, there are similarities between headology and psychiatry and psychology. However, Pratchett points out that the witches would have no use for them “as some arts are too black even for a witch”.²¹ Pratchett explains that the fundamental difference between psychiatry and headology is that a psychiatrist would assume a fear of being chased by monsters is due to an overactive imagination and attempt to eradicate the erroneous belief. Granny, of course, knows better, and would provide her client with a chair and a heavy stick.²²

5. Price for Magical usage and Cackling

To use magic, you have to accept that you are taking it from other places and that there will be a price. Granny Weatherwax understands all too well the use of power, and the price therein. But she also asks, “if you were worried about the price, then why were you in the shop?”²³ This is why witches are so reluctant to use magic unless absolutely necessary. Witches understand the importance of not misusing or abusing magic. If one assumes the responsibility for its use, one must also assume the consequences therein, including the temptations associated with wielding such power, such as cackling. Cackling is a side effect of a witch spending too much time alone, taking on too much responsibility, handling other people’s problems and relying heavily on her power. It is the time when a witch begins tottering more and more over the edge, losing her balance, or “going to the dark” and then a gingerbread cottage and slamming oven doors can feature prominently in the unhinged witch’s future.²⁴

Magic is potent on the Discworld, but it comes with a price, particularly for those who are extremely adept at using it. A practitioner must not only have a strong belief in the power of magic and what might be achieved with its usage, but must also believe in herself, and her capabilities, for it to be successful. What is perceived magic to be shapes how it is used. She must accept that magic requires balance, skill, cunning, and knowledge that many others cannot bear to live with, and that she must know when not to use magic, and if unsure, it is best not to meddle at all. A basic hint? More often than not, it should not be used. Magic is not a panacea. It is there for when there is no other choice, for when actions necessitate, and the user is willing to accept the consequences without thanks or expectation of reward.

Notes

- ¹ T. Pratchett, *Maskerade*, London, Corgi Books, 1995
- ² T. Pratchett, *Wyrd Sisters*, London, Corgi Books, 1988, p. 6
- ³ T. Pratchett, *Sourcery*, London, Corgi Books, 1988, p. 94
- ⁴ T. Pratchett, *Lords and Ladies*, London, Corgi Books, 1992, p. 65 and T. Pratchett, op. cit.
- ⁵ T. Pratchett, *Witches Abroad*, London, Corgi Books, 1991, p. 159
- ⁶ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 153
- ⁷ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 85
- ⁸ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 91
- ⁹ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 108
- ¹⁰ T. Pratchett, *Carpe Jugulum*, London, Corgi Books, 1998
- ¹¹ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 140
- ¹² T. Pratchett, and J. Simpson, *The Folklore of the Discworld*. Corgi Books: London, 2008, p. 205
- ¹³ A. Crowley, *Moonchild*, n.d. cited in *ibid.*, p. 206
- ¹⁴ R. Graves, *The White Goddess*, 1948, cited op. cit., p. 206
- ¹⁵ T. Pratchett, 'Imaginary Worlds, Real Stores' in *Folklore*, Vol. 111, Oct. 2000, p. 159-168
- ¹⁶ T. Pratchett, *ibid*, p. 160
- ¹⁷ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 48
- ¹⁸ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 48
- ¹⁹ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 19
- ²⁰ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 19
- ²¹ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 345
- ²² T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 345
- ²³ T. Pratchett, op. cit., p. 76
- ²⁴ T. Pratchett, *Wintersmith*, London, Corgi Books, 2006, p. 28