"Liberating the Inner Goddess: the Witch Reconsidered in Libba Bray's Neo-Victorian Gemma Doyle trilogy"

By Danielle Russell, Glendon College, York University, Canada

Abstract:

Jackson's perceptive assertion that fantasy is a "literature of desire" which "traces the unsaid and unseen of culture" is particularly applicable to Libba Bray's neo-Victorian trilogy. In these narratives, what "has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" in the primary world, is foregrounded in the secondary world. The act of mothering, as opposed to the institution of motherhood, is a key element of the fantasy world. Raised in India for sixteen years, the central character Gemma Doyle is brought to England to establish herself as a Lady. The detailed description of Victorian England is from an outsider's perspective—one who cannot, and will not, be typecast as the damsel in distress despite her increasing social and physical vulnerability. Plunged into the politics of polite society, she must navigate its demands while struggling to meet the concomitant demands of her family. The process is further complicated by the fact that Gemma is not just a daughter and a debutante but a High Priestess. Bray incorporates a magical realm where all things seem possible. The shift from powerless to all-powerful raises a utopia/dystopia comparison between the matriarchal realms and patriarchal London. Gemma discovers, however, that all choices come at a price and oppression is practised by both men and women. The figure of the mother—biological and surrogate—dominates in the trilogy. Mothers who betray their daughters under the guise of protecting them abound. Tension and suspicion distort the mother/daughter dynamic and yet the desire for that bond haunts Gemma and her friends. Indeed, the dark forces of the realms use the illusion of her mother to lure Gemma. Desired but elusive, the idealized mother is exposed as being unattainable. Social demands render the mothers powerless; (willingly or reluctantly) they become agents of patriarchy, policing their own daughters. Families in Bray's texts are damaged and damaging. Fathers are charming but self-absorbed; mothers are largely absent and yet both are longed for with an almost ferocious intensity. Bray's depiction of the Victorian family critiques a particular kind of family: one constructed in a way that permits abuse. The trilogy offers an endorsement of alternative definitions of family in general and mothers in particular: families of choice built upon mutual respect, affection, and compassion, and active mothering. Bray implicitly extends her interrogation of the family beyond the Victorian period; her pointed criticisms resonate in the twenty-first century.

> I don't yet know what power feels like. But this is surely what it looks like, and I think I'm beginning to understand why those ancient women had to hide in caves. Why our parents and teachers and suitors want us to behave properly and predictably. It's not that they want to protect us; it's that they fear us.
> (Bray, *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, 207)

1 Gemma Doyle's epiphany about the Victorian discomfort with powerful women implicitly invokes the fears surrounding the figure of the witch. Gemma is the central character in Libba Bray's best-selling neo-Victorian trilogy: *A Great and Terrible Beauty* (2003), *Rebel*

Angels (2005), and *The Sweet Far Thing* (2007). Raised in India for sixteen years, she is brought to England (following her mother's death) to establish herself as a Lady. As a consequence, her description of Victorian England is from an outsider's perspective—one who cannot, and will not, be typecast as the damsel-in-distress despite her increasing social and physical vulnerability. Plunged into the politics of polite society and Spence Academy (a finishing school), Gemma must navigate their demands while struggling to meet the concomitant demands of her family. The process is further complicated by the fact that Gemma is not just a daughter and a debutante but a High Priestess.

2 Despite the fact that the trilogy encompasses both real world settings and a magical realm, the revelation occurs in the non-magical landscape as Gemma's friend, Felicity, defies a group of men surrounding them. In this instance, the specific term witch is not employed but it, and other labels—crone, sorceress, priestess—will be used throughout the narratives to describe women who wield magic—Gemma and previous members of the matriarchal Order of priestesses who control the realms. Bray incorporates anxieties focused on (and through) the stock literary representation of the witch as a social outsider, transgressor of societal norms, and threat to the patriarchal order. She also explores the corrective possibilities of the witch: the subversive potential to challenge and transform that oppressive social order. Mothering—the act of engaged nurturing—as opposed to the institution of motherhood—as defined by patriarchal voices—is linked with a new concept of witchcraft/magic in Bray's trilogy. The willingness to assume responsibility for the well-being of others ameliorates the magical woman. It permits a reconceptualization of the relationship between power and femininity. Gemma will discover the missing ancestors—the hidden goddesses—who will help her escape the burden encoded in the label *witch* and embrace her own inner power.

3 The daughter of a witch and the prophesized restorer of the matriarchal Order who once controlled the magical realms, Gemma Doyle births a new, more democratic world in the final book. Bray links the ambiguity of the witch with the maternal throughout the trilogy. Witchcraft and motherhood have a long literary tradition of clashing. Annette Schimmelpfennig, referring to the witch in "Hansel and Gretel" and Snow White's stepmother, points out, "the role of the mother as the child's nurturer and guardian is perverted. Instead of nurturing the children the witch feeds on them…" (paragraph 8). The scenarios in the fairy tales are extreme but the "role as mother makes the witch even more menacing as a monster because it is a betrayal of

confidence…" (paragraph 16). The threatening nature of the witch negates her motherhood; the menace she represents, however, is not limited to the witch's own pregnancy. Historically, mothers-to-be were viewed as physically and psychologically vulnerable to manipulation by witches, concludes Diana Purkiss, but they also had the potential to distort (or even abort) their own unborn children (100). The mother must avoid

> unfeminine feelings of rage, frustration and fury [associated with witches] if she is to avoid miscarriage. These feelings characterise the witch as the opposite of what the early modern woman should be…the witch is the dark other of the early modern woman, expressing and acting on desires that other women must repress to construct their identities as mothers. (100)

In a telling twist, Bray depicts mothers within patriarchy who do adhere to the pressures to subdue the very emotions identified by Purkiss; in doing so, they fail to nurture their daughters.

4 The figure of the mother—biological and surrogate—dominates in the trilogy. Mothers who betray their daughters under the guise of protecting them abound: Gemma's mother fails to prepare her for her role by withholding potentially dangerous knowledge; Felicity's mother fails to protect her from sexual abuse at the hands of her father in order to maintain the family's social status; and Pippa's mother barters her off (in marriage) to the much older Mr. Bumble in order to hide Pippa's 'bad blood' (she has epilepsy) and pay off her father's gambling debts. Tension and suspicion distort the mother/daughter dynamic and yet the desire for that bond haunts Gemma and her friends. Indeed, the dark forces of the realms use the illusion of her mother to lure Gemma. Desired but elusive, the idealized mother is exposed as being unattainable. Social demands render the mothers powerless; (wittingly or reluctantly) they become agents of patriarchy, policing their own daughters.

5 Freedom from surveillance is found in the secondary (magical) world; it provides the opportunities denied to women in the primary (real) world. More than the absence of being controlled, however, the realms offer the ability to exercise control, to exert power; it is (at least initially) a space of wish fulfillment. In response to Gemma's questioning what the realms are, her mother explains they are "a world between worlds. A place where all things are possible" (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 254). It is a transformative and creative space she clarifies: "'it's where the Order came to reflect, to hone their magic and themselves, to come through the fire and be made new. Everyone comes here from time to time—in dreams, when ideas are born.' She pauses. 'In death'" (254). For the non-magical, the realms are a dreamscape and the space

where they transition from the living to the dead. They function as a space which facilitates escape. Indeed, fantasy as a literary genre has often been called escapist—a kind of vicarious wish fulfillment for the reader.[1] Bray plays with this expectation. She initially employs this (potentially) simplistic model of contrasting spaces of power and powerlessness but it soon proves to be a more complicated issue in the trilogy.

6 Fantasy as a form of escape or emotional/psychological compensation need not be a negative but it is a rather limited definition. Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* offers insight into the varied potential of fantasy. Jackson argues "fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" (3). Compensate does suggest wish fulfillment but Jackson's subsequent assertion that "the fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" raises another possibility (3). Fantasy can articulate counter-narratives; it gives voice to the silent and shines a spotlight on the hidden. More than compensating for what is not, fantasy draws attention to what could be. As a vehicle for cultural criticism, works of fantasy can engage with real world issues, not simply to "make up" for them, but to draw attention to the need for change (or at least informed debate). The mechanism is identified by Jackson as the "introduction of the 'unreal'" being "set against the category of the 'real'—a category which the fantastic interrogates by its difference" (4). Contrast serves as catalyst.

7 Fantasy, Ursula Le Guin insists, "is true….It isn't factual, but it is true" (44). Le Guin acknowledges that the truths fantasy reveals can be uncomfortable—"its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phoney, unnecessary, and trivial in the life [adults] have let themselves be forced into living"—but it is necessary (44). In this context, fantasy holds us accountable for our own (witting or otherwise) complicity in creating and/or sustaining the conditions fantasy critiques. "All fantasy," Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint argue, "is political"; either as a conscious choice or by virtue of the fact that it, "like any cultural text," reproduces "dominant ideology" (102). Bray's works of fantasy encode the dominant ideology of the Victorian period in order to decode the dominant ideology of the 21st century. The choice of

[1] For a further discussion of this issue, see Eric Rabkin's *The Fantastic in Literature*, Brian Attebery's *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, or Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James' *A Short History of Fantasy*.

fantasy and a different historical period create a degree of detachment from the 'real' world of the reader. Distance, oddly enough, can permit closer examination.

8 Despite being named for a British monarch, neo-Victorian novels have a transatlantic appeal and are a particularly effective vehicle for social criticism of 21st century, Western society. Alexia Bowler and Jessica Cox address this seeming paradox in "Introduction to Adapting the Nineteenth Century: Revisiting, Revising and Rewriting the Past":

> While adaptation(s) can be thought of as inhabited by literary and cultural 'ghosts,' this echoing of voices and ideas performs an intertextual weaving with the present moment and exhibits a simultaneous recognition of and departure from that past, allowing us the space in which to grapple with the renewed crises we face in negotiating our (past) modern identities. (3)

The past informs our present, not only in terms of its continuing legacies, but also by creating a space in which to explore possible outcomes of current problems or anxieties. Marie-Luise Kohlke cautions that "to make a claim for the neo-Victorian as some sort of inherently radical political project would be too ambitious" (10). She points out, however, that the neo-Victorian does repeatedly raise important questions of social justice and may yet prove instrumental in interrogating, perhaps even changing, current attitudes and influencing historical consciousness in the future" (10). Diana Birch's *Our Victorian Education* offers a similar insight into the continuing relevance of, and potential for change generated by, the Victorian period. Birch reasons, "Victorian ideas can give us a clearer understanding of the origins of our present problems, showing how our tangles over education and class, gender and religion took root in the first place" (144). More significantly perhaps, "they can serve a still more useful purpose in suggesting ways in which we can begin to extricate ourselves from our difficulties" (144). "Passionate voices," Birch concludes, "warned Victorian educators [of the need for] a flexibility that can make room for the individual pupil [and] we should still be listening" (145). Cries for a respect for individuality and understanding of the construction of prescriptive categories such as (but not limited to) class and gender were largely unheeded in the Victorian period. By infusing magic into the Victorian period and, implicitly, drawing upon 21st century, real world conditions as a basis of comparison, Bray is able to interrogate those very conditions.

9 The magical realms seemingly offer a matriarchal utopia. Bray incorporates a world where all things seem possible to Gemma and her friends—a direct opposition to their restricted lives in Victorian England. The shift from powerless to all-powerful raises a dystopia/utopia

comparison between patriarchal England and the matriarchal realms ruled by the Order. Gemma discovers, however, that all choices come at a price and oppression is practised by both men and women. The Order is defined as "a powerful group of sorceresses who'd been around since the dawn of time. Supposedly they had access to the mystical world beyond this one, a place of many realms where they could work their magic" (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 129). At this point, the information provided by Miss Moore is treated as folklore—mere story—but Gemma and her friends recognize its veracity. Unbeknownst to the girls, Miss Moore, is more than an unconventional new teacher at Spence Academy; she will subsequently be exposed as a former member of the Order willing to do anything to regain her lost magical power. The girls do, however, have the insight that the desire for power has corrupted the entire Order who are also determined to maintain control no matter the cost to anyone else. It soon becomes clear that the oppressive power structure has merely been inverted, not eradicated. The task of transforming the realms falls to Gemma and "all who wish to have a say"; they "shall work together to forge a constitution of sorts, a document and a government to guide the realms" (*The Sweet Far Thing* 802). Gemma is transformed by the magic but she also transforms the magic: rather than being the privilege of a chosen few, it will be the prerogative of all. This focus on inclusivity counters the traditional depiction of the witch. Justyna Sempruch notes,

> witches have been construed as dangerously polluting the universal 'norm'. Projected as homeless, they both expose and are exposed to inappropriate and noncanonical bodily forms, through which they mediate their cultural vulnerability…Defined as an awareness or consciousness of un/belonging that manifests itself as an openness (vulnerability) to heresy and deviation, the witch comes to represent not what is contained and sustained by traditional identity but rather what is transgressed… (127)

Isolation is the common condition of the witch in this context; Gemma's insistence on community defies this tradition. The witch is no longer a social outcast; she is the catalyst for a just and egalitarian society.

10 The path to that communal role, however, is fraught with prejudice and danger linked to Gemma's magical status. While her friends quickly embrace the positive aspects of magic, Gemma cannot escape the stigma encoded in the traditional label used to identify female wielders of magic: witch. "Despite the subtleties of radical feminists, historians and modern witches," Purkiss laments, "the dominant image of the witch is still of a shrieking hag on a broomstick, the Wicked Witch of the West" (276). Negative connotations dominate when the

figure of the witch is invoked. Gemma and the earlier members of the Order do not fit this model but they cannot entirely escape it. "The image of the witch," Schimmelpfenning points out, "is etched on the memory from childhood on, characterised by her portrayal in fairy tales and shaped by popular culture" (paragraph 1). Bray does draw upon fairy tales. "Hansel and Gretel" is performed in the second novel. The witch, played by a man, favours the comical over the demonic in this rendition: "the witch turns to the audience with a knowing wink" and the students "boo and hiss on cue" (*Rebel Angels*, 57). It is an interactive, non-threatening performance intensified by the witch pulling "Hansel hard into her enormous false bosom, nearly suffocating him" (ibid). When the witch's "diabolical plan to fatten the children and roast them" is revealed, it "gives everyone the chills" (58). Comical shifts to chilling as the magic shifts from seductive to destructive.

11 The fairy tale witch returns as a comical element later in the book. Seeking assistance from a former teacher—Miss Moore—Gemma and her friends reveal their distrust of her replacement:

> 'Gemma is convinced she's a witch,' Felicity confesses. 'Really? Did you spy her broomstick, Miss Doyle?' 'I never said she was a witch,' I protest. Ann jumps in, nearly breathless. She loves demonic intrigue. 'Gemma told us she arrived at Spence in the dead of night—just as a terrible storm raged!' Miss Moore's eyes go wide. 'Heavens! Extreme rain? In December? In England? A sign of witchery, to be sure.' They all share a laugh at my expense. 'Do go on. I want to hear the point where Miss McCleethy feeds children into her oven.' (155)

The seemingly playful exchange discomforts Gemma; it undermines her tenuous confidence. It relies on and reinforces the popular image of the witch. Miss Moore's stance will subsequently be exposed as deceptive: a skillful misdirection to mask the fact that she is Circe, one of Gemma's competitors for control of the realms.

12 The comical and nonthreatening depiction of the witch is increasingly present in popular culture but the 'good' witch is not common; the norm (of this abnormal figure) seems to be the (evil) abuser of power. This assessment is at the heart of the use of the derogatory label at several points in Bray's trilogy. The Rakshana—the patriarchal organization who previously guarded the members of the Order—plot to seize the magic for themselves but cannot enter the realms because "that was the witches' punishment" for an earlier rebellion (*Rebel Angels* 9). At this point, the appellation could be neutral—merely descriptive rather than prescriptive; however, the Rakshana's strongman, Fowlson uses the term in a manner which cannot be misconstrued.

Gemma draws upon magic to prevent his attack provoking the exclamation: "wot are you doing to me, you witch!" (*The Sweet Far Thing* 462). Given that Fowlson was physically threatening Gemma in an attempt to extort her, his anger is, to say the least, quite hypocritical. The subsequent threat "I'll come for you, you little witch" reflects his feeling of being disempowered; the echo of the derogative term *bitch* in *witch* suggest a misogynistic meaning behind the expression. Hatred and outrage prompt Fowlson to hurl this insult at Gemma.

13 While it is tempting to read men as hurling the insult *witch*, female characters are also prone to using it. A counter definition of the witch is raised in the first book in the trilogy as a teacher explains the images of goddesses found in a cave near the school:

> 'The quite remarkable thing about this cave is that these are depictions of all sorts of goddesses here. It isn't just the Pagan or Roman but, the Norse, the German, the Celtic. Most likely, this was a place known to travelers who heard they could practice their magic in safety here.' 'Magic?' Elizabeth asks. 'They were witches?' 'Not as we've come to think of witches. They would have been mystics and healers, women who worked with herbs and delivered babies. But it would have made them suspect. Women who have power are always feared'… (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 126)

It is the exercise of the power, not its nature, which has led to the label of the witch. It becomes clear in the final book that the lesson is lost on most of her audience.

14 Unsettled by strange events around their school, the students of Spence Academy speculate about the presence of witches. Suspicion falls upon Brigid, the housekeeper:

> 'What if she's really a witch?' 'She does know a lot about fairies and such,' Martha says wide eyed. It's becoming a game, this suspicion. Felicity's eyes match Martha's. She leans close. 'Come to think of it, didn't the bread taste just like the souls of children? I shall faint!' she puts a hand to her forehead… 'But why mark the East Wing with blood?' I ask. Cecily mulls it over. 'For revenge. To frighten the workers.' 'Or to raise evil spirits,' Martha offers. 'What if it's the sign of a witch or…or the devil?' Elizabeth whispers. (*The Sweet Far Thing* 175)

Felicity tries to redirect the conversation by mocking its melodramatic quality. The irony is that the witch is much closer than the other girls imagine but Gemma is a far cry from the evil entity they fear. For Cecily and her followers, the witch represents all that is negative and threatening; while apparently lacking the misogyny of Fowlson's curse-like use of witch, they too wield the term as an insult. It is the sign of the transgressive in society and it is significant that these Victorian girls, training to become ideal Victorian ladies—the-angel-in-the-house—locate it in the lower class, female servant. In "mainstream Western history and religion," Sempruch notes,

"witches have been perceived, (re)presented, and depicted consistently as the 'unthinkable,' peculiar outcasts on the margins of culture" (127). I would add literature and popular culture to her set of sources. Servants, invariably from the lower classes, occupy marginal positions in most cultures (whether real or fictional) but this is particularly true of the Victorian period. Brigid, the housekeeper, is a "peculiar" outcast by virtue of being from the lower class, Irish (and therefore Catholic), and old—a trifecta of disempowerment in Victorian England.

15 A key historical text in the persecution of those perceived to be witches was the 15th century *Malleus Maleficarum* by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger. One of the many offensive and destructive 'conclusions' the pair offer is that "since [women] are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves by witchcraft" (quoted in Schimmelpfenning paragraph 4).[2] Magic is a means of compensating for a sense of inadequacy and powerlessness based upon biology (and later, the concept of gender): one is tempted to apply that logic to witch-hunting. Schimmelpfenning points out that "throughout the text the terms 'woman' and 'witch' become synonyms. What begins as a treatise on the witch turns more and more into a polemic pamphlet on the evil nature of women in general" (ibid). Woman and witch are conflated in *Malleus Maleficarium*; a similar reductive strategy is employed by the Spence ladies-in-training: to be a 'lady' in the Victorian period is to transcend (or at least sidestep) the negative implications of class. It is inconceivable to them that the true witch is one of their class; for Cecily and her followers, there is an oddly comforting lack of ambiguity about what and who a witch is (at least until the dangers of the realms invade the real world).

16 Magic is a more complex reality in the realms and there is more ambiguity surrounding the witch. The Gorgon cautions Gemma that "power changes everything till it is difficult to say who are the heroes and who are the villains….And magic itself is neither good nor bad; it is intent that makes it either" (*The Sweet Far Thing* 367). From the perspective of those denied the power of magic under the guise of "protecting" them, the Order have become the enemy. Recognizing the crescent amulet Gemma wears—a symbol of the goddess, and the Order in particular—a centaur, Creostus, is immediately hostile, "rage snarling around his words" and he identifies her as a witch (*Rebel Angels* 186, 187). His distrust threatens to spill over into violence in their next encounter: "Creostus growls in anger. He kicks a table with his hoof, smashing it to pieces. 'Another stalling tactic, Philon. When will you realize you cannot make bargains with

[2] See Purkiss for further discussion of the *Malleus Maleficarium*.

these witches?'…Creostus looks as if he would stomp us into dust. 'We should be looking after ourselves!'" (*The Sweet Far Thing* 167). In both instances, it is only through the intervention of Philon, the former weapons master of the Order, that the violence is, temporarily, defused. Significantly, he approaches Gemma with a greater degree of respect (albeit tinged with suspicion) calling her priestess. The first use identifies her as a priestess, observing "we have not seen one of your kind in many years" (*Rebel Angels* 187). By the final volume, Philon addresses Gemma as Priestess; the title both acknowledges that she is, at this point, the only priestess and signals that she is *the* Priestess destined to restore order to the realms (*The Sweet Far Thing* 164).

17 In order to fulfil her destiny, Gemma must draw upon both her personal and collective origins. She is the daughter of a priestess, a spiritual descendant of a long line of goddesses. Seeking a guide to help her understand the magic within her and the history of the realms, it is natural that Gemma would turn to her mother for instruction. Through a series of visions she cannot control, Gemma stumbles upon the realms and her mother but the first guide she encounters, however, is Miss Moore. The knowledge Miss Moore provides is, as discussed earlier, presented as folklore—superstition, not fact—but it does provide Gemma with some insight. More significantly, Miss Moore acts as a surrogate mother for Gemma who is still grieving for her mother: "Miss Moore…holds me in her sure arms, which remind me so much of my mother's right now, I can barely stand it" (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 190). The sense of security is merely an illusion: Gemma is, unknowingly, being embraced by the being who hunted her mother to death: Sarah Rees-Toome, now Miss Moore/Circe. The allure of the illusion is so compelling that the simple gesture of fixing her hair moves Gemma: "she lifts a limp piece of hair from my still-damp face and secures it behind my ear. It's so tender, so much like my mother that I could cry all over again" (191). The emotional void created by her mother's death renders Gemma susceptible to the influence of surrogate mothers. In fact, it is her (untested) faith in the maternal figure of Miss Moore which allows Circe to return to the realms: desperate to save Pippa who is under attack and trapped in the alternate world, Gemma brings Miss Moore to the realms (a space she can no longer access on her own). Blinded by terror, weakened by grief, Gemma does not see through the illusion Miss Moore projects; Gemma fails to recognize that she has redirected all her suspicions towards another teacher. Indeed, Gemma has forgotten the lesson taught her by the Gorgon: the Order "were the master makers of illusion" (*Rebel Angels* 177); Gemma will learn that they are not the only source of illusion in the realms.

18 The dark forces of the realm also employ illusions in an attempt to master Gemma. The weapon of choice is logical. The desired but absent mother is the most effective tool in their arsenal. In a desperate attempt to rescue Pippa, Gemma confronts the newly released dark spirits of the realms. The response to her defiant shout "If you want me, here I am," is the unexpected appearance of her mother: "she smiles, and everything inside me bends to her. I'm tired and uncertain but she's here now. She'll help me set things right" (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 389). The sight of her mother is comforting; it allows Gemma to shift responsibility to (or at least share it with) an adult. The pull is strong but once she touches her "mother's" hand, the illusion is shattered: "instantly, the thing that hides in my mother's shape emerges, rising high as the stones themselves" (390). It is a thing, a creature, not her mother; Gemma has almost been ensnared by her own not-so-hidden desire. Resistance occurs in the nick-of-time but the longing for her mother continues to leave Gemma vulnerable to manipulation. The shape shifter Neela taunts her by assuming her mother's appearance and voice. It is a cruel joke but the challenging question, "How will you fight when you cannot even see?" denotes a valid point (*The Sweet Far Thing* 170). Gemma must accept that her mother is gone if she wishes to resist the illusion wielded against her.

19 In fact, it is the conscious choice to release her mother that enables Gemma to withstand the first 'maternal' attacker. In the pivotal moment between defeat and resistance, Gemma remembers her mother's lesson: "you have to know yourself, know what you want. That's what Mother told me" (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 392). The knowledge is sufficient to thwart the creature's attempt to control the magic. In order to truly disempower it, Gemma must shatter her own illusions about her mother. It is the act of forgiving her mother for her past crimes, combined with the destruction of the magic transmitting runes which saves Gemma and the realms:

> 'Mother…I forgive you.' The grip loosens. The thing's eyes widen, the hideous mouth opens. Its power shrinks. 'No!' I feel my strength returning. My voice grows, the words take on a life of their own. 'I forgive you, Mother. I forgive you, Mary Dowd.' The creature writhes and screams. I roll from its grasp. It is losing the fight, diminishing. It howls at me in pain, but I don't stop. I repeat it like a mantra as I grab a rock and smash the [runes]….With a great gasp, the thing loses its grip on my mother's spirit…. 'Mother?' I say. I'm not really expecting an answer, and I don't get one. She's truly gone now. I am alone. And somehow, this is as it should be. (393)

This moment marks the first step in the process of accepting the loss of her mother. It would not be possible without also accepting that her mother was a flawed human being like everyone else. In releasing her mother from the burden of perfection, Gemma recognizes the need to accept her own imperfections.

20 The mother/daughter relationship is far from idealized in Bray's trilogy. It is fraught with tension and is frequently volatile. The narrative opens with Gemma at odds with her mother—an added layer to her grief is their angry exchange just before her mother's death—and the pattern continues in the realms as her mother tries to instruct Gemma in the use of magic. Gemma wilfully defies her mother and brings magic back to the real world: "I'm thinking of my mother's warning that I'm not ready to use my full powers yet. Oh, but I am, Mother. I am" (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 315). As is often the case, her mother was right; Gemma breaks the seal between the worlds paving the way for a magical invasion. Of equal significance, however, is the wrongs of her mother; Gemma discovers "my mother is not at all the woman I thought she was. I've never really known her. She is Mary Dowd. A liar and a sorceress. A killer" (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 352). The illusion of tame respectability her mother has created is shattered. She resents the burden the knowledge represents and her mother's request for forgiveness. In the moment of raw emotion, Gemma withholds that liberating acceptance but having faced the monster, she can finally release her mother. Gemma recognizes that

> In some ways, the mother I remember was as much an illusion as the leaves we turned into butterflies on our first trip to the realms. I'm going to have to let her go to accept the mother I'm only just discovering. One who was capable of murder, but who fought the dark to come back to help me. A scared, vain woman, and a powerful member of an ancient Order. (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 393-394)

Gemma must resolve her own ambivalence about her mother, not only to withstand the 'mother-as-lure' approach of the dark forces, but also to come to terms with her own imperfections. Forgiveness releases both Gemma and her mother. The burden of perfection needs to be rejected.

21 The ambiguous mother resonates in Gemma's life in another significant way. She is associated with "Kali, the destroyer" in the opening pages of the first book (2) but does not appreciate the significance until much later. She discusses the Kali statue with the Gypsy Mother Elena. "You have a talisman of Kali," Gemma observes. "The Terrible Mother," responds Mother Elena but Gemma counters with, "the goddess of destruction". Mother Elena, however, has the final word: "the destruction of ignorance". "She is the one to help us walk through the

fire of knowledge, to know our darkness that we should not fear it but should be freed, for there is both chaos and order within us" (*The Sweet Far Thing* 472). Mother Elena offers a more nuanced view of Kali and human nature: the destruction of ignorance frees the way for a more genuine existence. Gemma must embrace all aspects of her personality in order to wield her power wisely. She must emulate Kali, the terrible mother, if she wishes to birth a new world. Gemma does not, of course, give birth. The distinction between motherhood as an institution, and mothering as a practice is relevant to Bray's trilogy. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich distinguishes "between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (13). The patriarchal institution of motherhood is oppressive, even in benign societies. It imposes and enforces strict definitions of what constitutes 'acceptable' mothering. Mothering, however, is a potentially empowering act entailing social responsibility and active engagement with the world. Gemma's mothering involves tapping into her inner "Kali". New beginnings can only come from the destruction of the old order. As Miss Moore points out "without that spark of anger, without destruction, there can be no rebirth"; the reference is to the Morrigan "a threefold goddess, often seen as a beautiful maiden, the great mother, and the bloodthirsty crone" (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 127). This goddess represents the threat and the appeal of the witch: seductive, fertile and violent. [3] Gemma's violence is to the social order; its outlet is a refusal to accept the status quo.

22 Many titles are bestowed on Gemma while in the realms—Priestess, Most High, Lady Hope—which can be construed as ameliorating the concept of the witch. Relabelling feminine (magical) power with these positive terms does, however, arise the question of whether or not Bray rehabilitates the witch or simply sidesteps the issue. The return to the goddesses, to pagan rather than patriarchal origins, might be the key to the problem. Moving through the realms, Gemma and her friends discover

> an impressive array of friezes showing women of all sorts. Some are as young as we are; others are as old as the earth itself. Some are clearly warriors….One sits surrounded by children and fawns; ….Another, dressed in chain mail, wrestles a dragon. Priestesses. Queens. Mothers. Healers. It is as if the whole of womanhood is represented here". (*The Sweet Far Thing* 81)

[3] This issue is discussed from a variety of perspectives in the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* edited by Brian Attebery. Volume 9, # 1, 1998 is devoted to the witch/goddess.

The range of images depict greater possibilities than Victorian society offers its young women. It is a fitting development given that "in a century fascinated with angel women, divine mothers, and other paragons on the 'virgin' side of the good/bad dichotomy", Jacqueline Labbe notes, "readers of Victorian [literature] suddenly found that, instead of God the Father, these texts were substituting the Wise Woman, the Fairy Godmother, as their sage of choice" (96). In Bray's texts, inspiration comes from a multifaceted matriarchal deity; the girls (re)create themselves in the image of the goddess of their choice. By including a range of possibilities, Bray avoids the tendency to conflate goddesses into *the* goddess. Verlyn Flieger concedes that "there is ancient precedent for this kind of amalgamation [in] the intertangled gods and goddesses of India who swap genders, marry and are born out of one another" (4). The key difference, however, is that "it is seldom as the One, but as the many and in their multifarious individuality that these gods are worshipped" (4). Individuality is a central trait of Bray's depiction of the goddesses. The experiences of the realm—good and bad—inspire Gemma and her friends to create their own opportunities, to forge new destinies in anticipation of returning to those realms. The final moments of the trilogy find Gemma sailing into New York:

> there in the city's steam-and-smoke-smudged harbor is the most extraordinary sight of all: a great copper-clad lady with a torch in one hand and a book in the other. It is not a statesman or a god or a war hero who welcomes us to this new world. It is but an ordinary woman lighting the way—a lady offering us the liberty to pursue our dreams if we've courage to begin. (*The Sweet Far Thing* 818)

The implicit, but unspoken title bestowed on Gemma—Lady Liberty—is particularly apt given Emma Lazarus' poem on the bronze plaque on the statue's pedestal. The "mother of exiles" welcoming the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" with her lamp lifted "beside the golden door" is a fitting emblem of the young woman who accessed the realms through a door of light, bringing the winds of freedom to the oppressed (Lazarus).

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