Title of Paper: *Spiritus Mundi at the crossroads: Revealing the female trickster in selected works of mid-Victorian fantasy*

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Section: Articles  
Date of Publication: March, 2014  
Issue: Volume 2, Number 1

Abstract:

The female trickster in selected works of mid-Victorian fantasy functions in the various narratives to reveal a social metacommentary on the female body, voice and agency in this period. This essay explores how these tricksters are caught in traditional romantic binary oppositions of femininity, but also manage to undermine these conventional representations via the liminal trickster energy.

Keywords: Victorian, fantasy, feminism, post-Jungian, post-structuralism, trickster, language, motifs, myth, socio-cultural.

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Whether they were hordes of “trooping” fairies (as Yeats called them) who traveled the air or misled travelers on the ground or took victims “away,” or whether they were solitary and human-size demonic creatures, the figures who most preoccupied the Victorians were those capable of causing discomfort, serious injury, and often death (Silver 1999: 149).

Mercurius, usually depicted as an active, potent, masculine figure, is also fiery, water and feminine (Rowland 2002: 116).

“Our speaking instrument is an unknown secret…that’s known to no one except those in our purfession. It’s a hinstrument like this which I has in my hand, and it’s tuned to music” (Mayhew 1861: 53).¹

The formidable nature spirits appearing in mid-Victorian fantasy require an alternative teleology. The term *spiritus mundi* establishes an etymological connection to pre-Victorian concepts of morally equivocal spirits — particularly those that proliferated medieval literature such as *Sir Orfeo* — where faeries were represented as mercurial, unsettling and disruptive to the dominant social order even while they parodied it.² Paul Radin remarks that “few myths have so wide a distribution as the one, known by the name of *The Trickster*” (1956: xxiii), and this archetypal figure is found in many guises in children’s literature, from the devolved and pitiful Gollum in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937), to the gentle spider in White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952).

I will focus my discussion on a particular incarnation of the trickster archetype — the trickster-saviour — and assert that this formidable zoomorphic riddler and trickster of classical mythology offers the reader a social metacommentary, acting as a *speculum mentis*, mirroring back the nature of humanity: in the aphorism that man is a riddle to himself. This is the foremost function of the late-cycle trickster (Henderson, 1968: 147), and has been formerly perceived as predominantly the domain of male characters.

It is the essential ambiguity of the imposing female faery figures in mid-Victorian fantasy, which offers the possibility of imagining the feminine in a context that could potentially elude the phallocentric symbolism of socio-religious femininity. As Susan Walsh observes, in Victorian England women were largely unable to “control the iconography that prescribe[d] their roles” (1987: 33). Thus, representations in Victorian literature and visual art typically entrap women in what Nina Auerbach describes as a Blakean dichotomy: a marriage of heaven and hell where “to be an angel … is to be masculine and breathtakingly mobile” (1982: 71) and to be fallen is demonic. These mythologised socio-religious conceptions of the feminine, according to Walsh, largely sought to inscribe women’s bodies with symbolism that articulated “a repository of conflicting nineteenth-century feelings about adult female sexuality”

¹ The spelling mistakes in this quote represent the phonetics of the Punchman’s English, as recorded by Mayhew.

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(1987: 32), or more specifically, conflicting male attitudes towards their relationship with the female body. The representation of Walsh’s “elemental queens” and Auerbach’s “ancient femme fatales” are typically associated with a kind of gendered eros; they are nurturing, numinous mothers or vampirish, voracious lovers. However, reading these figures as tricksters affords one the ability to somewhat elude these restrictive oppositions. Indeed, there is no real explanation for why the trickster is always described as male, and while Ricki Stefanie Tannen aligns the female trickster with the post-modern female sleuth, her description is equally applicable to these mid-Victorian fantasy figures. Tannen observes the self-reflexivity that seems to exist between the female writing and the female trickster that she writes about, stating that “she stands, visible, at the crossroads of feminism, humor, depth psychology and postmodernism, ready for us to unpack her bag of multiple meanings” (2007: 3). Despite his conservative attitudes towards gender, Jung acknowledges the potential for a female trickster when he notes that the etymologically linked spiritus mundi appear in alchemical writings as the Holy Spirit (and are feminised), but also represent all aspects of the trinity, and are therefore an amalgam of feminine and masculine, body and spirit.3 This polymorphous characteristic of spiritus mundi evokes Jung’s own definition of the archetype as androgynous in its embodying of oppositions.

**The instability of the caduceus**

The trickster archetype and archetypal images associated with the trickster — such as the caduceus, which signifies the communication aspect of the trickster — are inherently mutable, but the signifiers constellated around this particular archetype are especially unstable. As Susan Rowland observes:

> On the one hand, the concepts of archetypes and archetypal images are grand theory and logocentric. On the other hand, archetypal images are signifiers without fixed, knowable signifieds. They are subject to slippage and denied logocentric fulfilment (2002: 106).

The trickster embodies oppositions — good and evil, dark and light — and so too does the caduceus, embodying both traditional symbols of masculinity (rod/wand) and of the feminine (serpent/wings). The fantasy works that I have selected for this study demonstrate a relationship between the female body of the nature spirit and the caduceus. Typically, a female fantasy figure in possession of a “caduceus” is perceived to represent the phallic woman, and is characterised by grotesque sexual excess and described as embodying the dark feminine.4 Where protagonists associated

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with the dark feminine possess the wand/rod signifier, they elicit fear of castration and become rivals of the hero. Therefore, the hero typically displays considerable enmity towards these female figures, and inevitably humiliates and defeats these evil women, marginalising their power from the text and the reader. Yet, in mid-Victorian fantasy, these signifiers that appear to relegate female tricksters to scorn and obscurity are unstable. In its essentially androgynous signifying position, the caduceus becomes a crucial point of negotiation for feminist readings of these texts.

From a structural perspective, William Makepeace Thackeray’s Fairy Blackstick — from his fireside pantomime *The Rose and the Ring* (1855) — appears to be a typically romantic archetypal figure. However, this precocious fairy, named by the inhabitants of the kingdom “from the ebony wand or crutch which she carried; on which she rode to the moon sometimes” (19) appears to epitomise the traditional Jungian characteristics of the dark feminine. The hero Giglio experiences the threat of emasculation in his relationship with Blackstick, and this is evident particularly at the end of his quest where “he quailed under the brightness of her eyes; [and] felt there was no escape for him from that awful Inquisition” (143). Yet, fairy Blackstick is not depicted as evil, and rather than being alienated from the reader, she is a creative force who according to Stephen Prickett is credited with being “the originator of all the magic in the story” (2005: 66). Thackeray’s daughter Anne, was so moved by Blackstick’s narrative presence that she assumed the guise of this literary trickster — and channelled this force into her work, *The Blackstick Papers*. In her introduction, Anne informs the reader that the fairy Blackstick was originally two characters: Fairy Blackstick (good) and Fairy Hopstick (evil), and thus, Thackeray’s indomitable Fairy Blackstick, once half of a romantic fairy pair embodying a Blakean dichotomy of femininity so popular in Victorian Britain, ultimately became a trickster in her containment of oppositions.

It appears that this assimilation of two diametrically opposed characters may have resulted in a destabilised representation of the caduceus. In addition to the wand functioning as an unmistakable masculine signifier of the phallus, the Blackstick is also able to change “her wand into a very comfortable coach-and-four” (146), in an evident subversion of the masculine signifier. In these transformations, the ultimately androgynous nature of the archetypal caduceus is revealed. Indeed, the narrator also remarks that Blackstick “according to her custom, had flown out of the coach window in some inscrutable manner” (146). By abandoning the signifier altogether, yet still managing to retain her otherworldly power, this suggests that Blackstick is not reliant on possessing a stable phallic signifier in order to assert her power. Thus, this fairy adeptly negotiates trickster power, acting independently, with agency and authority in a female form.

In the figure of Fairy Felicia and Aunt Sarah, Thomas Hood’s satirical narrative *Petsetilla’s Posy* (1870) is driven by the antics of two fairy protagonists who seem to embody the archetypal romantic moral dichotomy that Thackeray successfully eludes in his work. Yet, Hood’s heavily ironic prose turns the dominance of romance in on itself. Prickett observes that “Hood was strongly, even compulsively, aware of unresolved contradictions in his society” (2005: 47), and this tendency toward social subversion is highly suggestive of the potential for a manifestation of the trickster. Aunt Sarah is depicted as abject and is consequently despised. She appears as a figure
encoded with patriarchal discourses of primitivism, fearful excessive female sexuality and irrationality. To the reader, she seems to be offered as an object to be mocked and reviled, yet her mysterious hold over the usurping buffoon King Bungo denies her relegation to obscurity. Indeed, his unlawful Majesty goes to considerable effort to placate her, and this is evident when he invites the entire kingdom to his daughter’s christening, as “it was better to do it than to run any risk of offending some cantankerous sorceress or evil-disposed old maiden fairy” (58). However, the “objectionable old sorceress” (59) still manages to bring misrule to the proceedings by appropriating the good fairy’s — Fairy Felicia — seat in “the place of honour on the Sovereign’s right hand” (59). Aunt Sarah metaphorically replaces Christ himself at the right hand of the father, creating a dramatic inversion of her social position. This act and her wild behaviour as she “stamped and jumped with fury” (61) suggests the role of the trickster in the medieval festum stultorum (fools’ feast), where “in the very midst of divine service masqueraders with grotesque faces … performed their dances” (Jung 1972: 137). Yet, unlike Thackeray’s Blackstick, Aunt Sarah does not carry a wand.

Of all the horrors of Aunt Sarah’s abject appearance, none evokes such consternation for the narrator as the pipes she perpetually places in her mouth. Her possession of the pipe is evidently as threatening as it is reviled. Indeed, the original illustrations to the story depict Aunt Sarah as having a pipe instead of a nose, demonstrating the considerable discomfort that her possession of this pipe evokes in the illustrator. As a consequence, by separating this masculine signifier from her mouth, its potential to be read as a symbol associated with messages or speech is displaced. A female protagonist exerting that type of socially disruptive power is evidently quite grotesque. However, Luce Irigaray’s two-lips metaphor offers another way of reading the female body in its representation as a trickster, where the primary signifier of the archetype is not phallic. Frances Gray identifies correlations between Jungian theory and Irigaray’s feminine/feminine symbolic imaginary, and asserts that:

The two-ness of the lips symbolises the fundamental two-ness of difference and intersubjectivity: it is an oppositional alternative to the singularity of Lacan’s primary signifier, the phallus (2008: 90).

Irigaray’s parler femme — or two lips speaking together — intrinsically designates the metaphor as a sign of speech, but also as a feminine signifier which offers the potential for the “caduceus” to be read independent of masculine signifiers of the phallus. It offers a pluralistic sign economy for the female trickster, which means that she is no longer dependent on the instability of masculine signifiers of the caduceus to facilitate her trickster power. Furthermore, this signifier also appears to avoid the cultural coding on the female body that is associated with the phallic feminine, yet, this in itself proves problematic.

Titania, in Mark Lemon’s Tinykins’ Transformations (1869), is depicted as half-motherly, half-erotic, yet “though very lovely and good-natured at times, she had the proverbial malice of the fairy race” (316). The original pre-Raphaelite style illustrations of Lemon’s Titania position her as a desirable object of ethereal femininity, and like Fairy Blackstick, Titania can exert her trickster power with or
without her wand “on whose top shone a star-fragment” (225). However, it is when she kisses Tinykins on the forehead that her trickster power for disruption and transformation is most evident. The narrator remarks that “when she removed her lips, there was left a small red spot like a rose-leaf upon it” and it is this that enables Tinykins, through the ensuing bodily transformation, to access spaces liminal to the primary action of the story.

The caduceus — while typically considered to be a phallic symbol — is comprised of several parts: the wand, wings, and the entwined serpents. This serpentine imagery is usually aligned with the dark feminine in myth, and is evoked in signifiers such as Medusa’s serpentine hair. In a mid-Victorian context, the wings and serpents of the caduceus may be read as symbolic of socio-religious discourses of femininity, that is, woman as essentially angel or demon. This is where reading the representation of feminine signifiers of the caduceus — in light of Irigaray’s two-lips metaphor — is problematic. While Irigaray’s work facilitates a reading independent of a purely phallic signifier, we still get caught in a negotiation between two ideals of femininity. However, as with my previous discussion, focussing on the instability of representations of the caduceus goes some way to addressing this issue.

George MacDonald’s North Wind — in At the Back of the North Wind (1871) — is also described as half-motherly, and half-erotic, and as with Lemon’s Titania, her connection to trickster energy is represented by typically feminine signifiers. On their first other worldly journey together, North Wind tells the child protagonist Diamond that the troubling noise he hears is: “The noise of my besom. I am the old woman that sweeps the cobwebs from the sky; only I’m busy with the floor now” (37). So, the besom or broom — often associated with witches, and thus, the dark feminine — is displaced as an enchanted signifier. It is not the source of North Wind’s trickster power, indeed she employs “it” for purely utilitarian purposes; that is, to sweep. The trickster power associated with the besom is transferred on to North Wind’s hair. While images such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Lady Lilith” depict flowing tresses as an object of the gaze — in this case, seen through the subject looking at herself in the mirror — North Wind’s hair is connected to flight. However, the caduceus is not the only examinable site of female trickster power in these narratives.

**Trickster’s form and the female body**

The action, or inaction, of the body of the trickster is significant, because as Joseph L. Henderson asserts “the trickster is a figure whose physical appetites dominate his behaviour” (1968: 103). The trickster appears in animal or human form, and regardless of the form, the representation is typically unstable. Jung describes the trickster’s bodily manifestation, thus:

> He is so unconscious of himself that his body is not a unity, and his two hands fight each other. He takes his anus off and entrusts it with a special task. Even his sex is optional despite its phallic qualities: he can turn himself into a woman and bear children. From his penis he makes all kinds of useful plants.
This is a reference to his original nature as a Creator, for the world is made from the body of a god (1972: 143-44).

The body that the androgynous psychic energy of the trickster inhabits is encoded with cultural, historical and socio-religious ideologies that exclude or restrict the feminine. In her formative study of the female body, sexuality and society, Elizabeth Grosz argues that:

Women’s bodies and sexualities have been structured and lived in terms that not only differentiate them from men’s but also attempt, not always or even usually entirely successfully, to position them in a relation of passive dependence and secondariness to men’s (1994: 202).

This applies to the literary manifestation of the trickster, whose androgynous and anarchical form is privileged as male, despite the fact that he may ‘appear in drag’ and give birth. Nevertheless, the trickster is correlated with the phallus, because according to the tenets of psychoanalysis, it is the most anarchic bodily organ. Thus, the problematic cultural coding of women’s bodies with passivity is a significant obstacle in potential for reading the trickster as female. However, I assert that the fluidity of the female body, which is oft obscured by the coding of the female body as abject or erotic, is similarly equipped to convey the anarchic energies of the trickster.

In an historical context, the “common coding of the female body as a body which leaks, which bleeds, which is at the mercy of hormonal and reproductive functions” (Grosz 1994: 204) is not perceived as anarchical in a positive way, rather it is inscribed as a sign of weakness. To an even greater extreme, it designates the female body as abject; a thing to be feared and reviled. The fluidity of the female body is thus marginalised in a social context, and as Grosz observes it is “confined, constrained, solidified, through more or less temporary or permanent means of solidification” (1994: 205). Thus, the active potential of anarchic, or volatile bodies, becomes one of what is accepted into the realm of visual representation. In Christina Rossetti’s Speaking Likenesses (1873), the transformations undergone by the children at Flora’s birthday party are grotesque despite the fact that the narrator declares the transformation to be “inconvenient”. The animalistic and Darwinian representations of gender portray the threat and dominance of masculine sexuality, and the visceral intangibility of the feminine. Rossetti writes:

One boy bristled with prickly quills like a porcupine, and raised or depressed them at pleasure; but he usually kept them pointed outwards. Another instead of being rounded like most people was facetted at very sharp angles. A third caught in everything he came near, for he was hung round with hooks like fishhooks. One girl exuded a sticky fluid and came off on the fingers; another, rather smaller was slimy and slipped through the hands (1992: 335).

Despite the fact that this representation of gender appears to conform to the binaries discussed earlier — regarding the anarchic potential of the body — what is also meaningful is that the fluidity of the female body has entered the visual realm, in “a dark inversion of the pantomime transformation scenes that were supposed to delight
young audiences: they change into hybrid animals and instruments of pain” (Auerbach & Knoepflmacher 1992: 320). This fantastic discursive space invites rebellion in, and Rossetti responds quite angrily.

Yet, the male authors who dominated mid-Victorian fantasy were typically invested in representing the female body in a “knowable” phallocentric dichotomy of either an abject or erotic body. The visibility of the female body in this literature is thereby intrinsically connected to the male gaze. The unity of the female trickster’s body is maintained by the male gaze, which perceives an abject body as static and an erotic body as mutable. Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s works “Sybilla Palmifera” and “Lady Lilith” exemplify this contrast of the female body being hidden from the gaze or exposed and caught in the gaze.

Jung’s exposition of the trickster is also problematic in the sense that it venerates the male body as creator. Conversely, Charles Kingsley’s Mother Carey — from The Water-Babies 1863 — epitomises the static creative force ascribed to the “dark and invisible” female body. This protagonist, whom Naomi Wood has identified as an exemplar of the “icy mothers” of Victorian fantasy, was

... the grandest old lady [Tom] had ever seen — a white marble lady, sitting on a white marble throne. And from the foot of the throne there swum away, out and out into the sea, millions of new-born creatures, of more shapes and colours than man ever dreamed. And they were Mother Carey’s children, whom she makes out of the sea-water all day long (282-283).

In this image, the mutable creative force of the sea-water is conflated with the immutability of the white marble. This paradoxical representation is suggestive of a patriarchal desire for the creative potential of the feminine, while repressing its agency by keeping it hidden and mysterious. For Luce Irigaray, the fluidity — which is an embodiment of femininity — “signifies not only the ‘formlessness’ of feminine jouissance but more particularly the amniotic elements that houses the child in the mother’s body” (Grosz 1994: 104). It is, according to Irigaray, “this darkness or invisibility of the maternal sojourn [that] conditions and makes vision possible” (Grosz 1994: 104), and so she positions the female creative potential as a crucial precursor to the realm of visual difference, rather than a dark absence or hidden and mysterious force. Furthermore, she juxtaposes the “pouring out of colour” experienced upon entry into the visual realm with fluidity, and thus, colour and visual difference are metaphorically aligned with the feminine. Kingsley displaces the fluidity of Mother Carey’s body, and this representation of a static, marble female creator erases female desire and usurps a female role in creation.

The body of the female trickster therefore provides a point of intersection for post-Jungian theory and gender theory. Susan Rowland argues that in so far as

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… the feminine acts as the boundary to be continually negotiated and reconstituted in Jungian psychology, then it corresponds to Butler’s criticism of the way powerful discourses expel the feminine beyond the signifiable as deviant or abject (2002: 143).

This allows for an interrogation of a plural cultural discourse that ascribes the female body with mutability, rather than it being subject to a fixed social representational status. In this sense, Rowland asserts that the Jungian alchemical subtle body is “a body viable for postmodern feminism” (2002: 145). She points out that despite his tendency to lapse into gender essentialism, for Jung, “the body is not an objective source of the truth” (134). So, Jung’s conception of the fluid forces of the psyche and the interrelated transformational process of the “body” also operates “in a web of interdependent connections with gender, body and external reality” (2002: 145), allowing for the female body to be read as plural and fluid.

Thackeray’s descriptions and illustrations of the Fairy Blackstick situate her seemingly immutable body as undesirable. The first and last of the black/white sketch illustrations show her covered in a large formless dark robe with only her face and hands visible. Despite the fact that in both scenes there is considerable antagonism being shown toward her, she is depicted as serene, passive and youthful. Conversely, when Blackstick first meets the hero Giglio, she is described as an old “very ordinary, vulgar looking woman” (98), and he pitied her for her ill health. Blackstick’s role as trickster is quite obviously hampered by her ability to find representation in a romantic discourse. She is not a lover and thus erotic object for the hero, so there is only one other visual space for her to occupy: that of the undesirable hag. Furthermore, in order for Blackstick to get physically close enough to the hero to have him listen to her, her body is depicted as frail and weak. This thwarts the potential for the volatile trickster energy to express itself through Blackstick’s body.

While Blackstick’s body is mostly hidden and enfeebled, Aunt Sarah’s is much like Tom from Kingsley’s The Water-Babies. That is, a marginal place “for doubtful, feared people and substances, the place of physical exuvia that are rejected at the margins of the body” (Cunningham 1985: 125). Her dirtiness is inscribed with discourses of imperial ideology. She is described as:

… a person of repulsive appearance; and if her features were the reverse of attractive, her manners were simply loathsome. Her face was a smeary black, and her lips were the tint of vermillion, her eyes were odd, and her hair was like tow. She wore a dirty white nightcap with a wide flapping border, innocent of starch, had a dirty and ragged shawl pinned across her shoulders, and, worst of all, carried a pipe in her mouth! (60).

This negative cultural coding of the body is not uncommon in Victorian literature. Indeed, Clare Bradford observes that for Kingsley’s Tom, “the grime of the chimney, a signifier of Tom’s lowly position within the domestic economy, is mapped onto the blackness of peoples colonized by British imperialism” (2001: 196). Further, Anne McClintock asserts that “Victorian cleaning rituals were peddled globally as the God-given sign of Britain’s evolutionary superiority, and soap was invested with magical,
fetish powers” (1995: 207). Thus, despite the fact that Victorian Britain did face legitimate concerns regarding sanitation under the weight of industrial pollution and a burgeoning urban population, the narrative representation of the dirty body operates as a site of fear which demonstrates an escalation into an obsessive preoccupation.

As the antithesis of what is desirable to the imperial, white, male gaze, Aunt Sarah’s vermillion lips and dirty white night cap are all indicator of excessive female desire and the phallic feminine which is perceived as dangerous and grotesque. When the Queen refuses to meet Aunt Sarah’s demands, the narrator ironically highlights the primitivism inscribed on Aunt Sarah’s body, declaring that “she nearly turned white with rage. She stamped and jumped with fury. She threw the stump of her pipe into the silver tureen of turtle. She tore her cap-border into ribbons” (61). Aunt Sarah’s actions — like her appearance — are unequivocally satirical and absurd. Yet, they are also deeply unsettling to the king who “sat quaking in his chair without venturing to open his mouth” (61). Aunt Sarah’s ability to express the trickster energy through her bodily representation is hampered by imperialistic discourses.

Female tricksters Titania and North Wind are physically desirable, and exhibit trickster-like signs of mutability in their stages of animal metamorphoses. As Jung remarks, trickster “is a forerunner of the saviour, and, like him, God, man, and animal at once” (1972: 143). Animal tricksters are not unfamiliar protagonists in children’s literature, and Elliot Gose contends that these character types “derive their age-old appeal from the sense of connection they offer with a stratum of existence that may be lower and thus less than human but is also simply other and thus potentially more than human” (1988: ix). In his veneration of the animal-trickster as an instigator of play, Gose effectively minimises and civilises the very animalism/primitivism that he celebrates. In a more evolved form, the trickster is also associated with the figure of the shaman, and his or her ability to shape-shift is a signifier of the Jungian subtle body.

However, the shape-shifting of Titania and North Wind is either determined by, or exists in response to, the will of the male protagonists. Lemon’s Titania does not transform into “animals of power”, rather she transforms according to Tinykin’s wishes. He expresses the desire to be a bird, and “to his great delight, the little maiden had changed also to keep him company” (322). Further, when she changes him into a dappled fawn, Titania transforms into a white doe as “she had resolved to keep by the side of her favourite, believing that, by so doing, she should be able to preserve him from all danger” (348). Both transformations exhibit a maternal, nurturing instinct — rather than the elusiveness of the trickster — and thus, Titania’s bodily transformations conform to and maintain cultural expectations of the female body, most particularly in its role in responding to the needs of others. Ultimately, Tinykin is granted the status and acclaim of a romantic hero through his ability to appropriate Titania’s shape-shifting abilities, and in doing so displaces this embodiment of her trickster power altogether.

MacDonald’s North Wind is also inclined to transform her body in order to accommodate her male protagonist, evoking a similar nurturing and maternal instinct that is present in Lemon’s Titania. Regardless of North Wind’s austere composure, MacDonald depicts a barely tempered wildness in her that conveys some of the intensity of the trickster energy that is virtually absent in Titania. Her bodily
transformations are more than mere sport, and North Wind explains this to Diamond after he sees her change into a wolf and frighten “a nurse that was calling a child bad names” (34). Her explanation bears some resemblance to the more modern concept of projection: “I had to make myself look like a bad thing before she could see me. If I had put on any other shape than a wolf’s she would not have seen me, for that is what is growing to be her own shape inside of her” (34). However, she does not only perform a mirroring role, but shape-shifts into animals according to her own desires. Diamond’s whispered request — that she take him in her arms and carry him home from the country at her back — raises the ire of tiny North Wind, who accuses him of being ungrateful and tersely responds “how dare you make a game of me?” (95). Her fury catalyses a series of swift animal transformations from a spider, to weasel, cat and eventually a Bengal tiger. North Wind’s shape-shifting not only indicate growth in size and physical strength, but also in evolutionary power as she transforms her way — through her own agency — to the top of the food chain. The connection between her spirit nature and her body gains strength across her transformations. Nevertheless, the overtones of Darwinism still situate her body in a phallocentric discourse, where the ultimate goal is represented in body strength being juxtaposed with an increased ability to eat, and thus inspire fear in others. Furthermore, the narrator informs us that “at none of them was Diamond afraid” (96). And while the primary purpose of trickster transformations may not necessarily be to instil fear, trickster energy itself is heavily reliant on the way people react to it, be it through laughter, fear or discomfort. North Wind’s bodily expressions of her role as trickster are thus virtually negated through Diamond’s insouciance. Moreover, the power of her transformations is compromised by her eventually submitting to Diamond’s will and appearing to him “as he liked best to see her, standing beside him, a tall lady” (96). The female trickster’s shape-shifting abilities thus become a paradoxical signifying site, as the male gaze constrains the vital primal energy of the trickster.

The trickster’s unknown tongue and the feminine

Implicit to the trickster’s nature is the embodiment of opposing forces. The ultimate paradox of the trickster is in its role as a communicator of messages from marginal spaces — like Hermes from classical mythology — that is also difficult to understand in conventional language. The language of the trickster is obtrusive, ambiguous and unstable. Jung suggests that the trickster emerges in culture to convey messages about what is socially repressed, and that the disparity existing between the trickster’s language and our understanding is attributable to a disconnection with our own original primitive language, evident in the language of myths. Anthopologist


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Thomas Belmonte is wary of overemphasising these archaic origins of language. Instead, he posits that the “unknown tongue” is a deconstructive linguistic force whereby “if the process of self-constitution in the language of myth is blocked — the equilibrium of the person-in-society is disrupted and the contents of desire are experienced as threatening and alien” (1990: 50). If the body of the female trickster is abject or obscured, then her message in phallocentric language is equally so.

Outward expression of the feminine, through a female body and voice, is problematic in its mirroring of phallocentric images of the feminine. Furthermore, Christine Wilkie-Stibbs argues that “it is through the system of language and representation that women have internalized an image of themselves” (2002: 40). Thus, the trickster’s unknown tongue and the female voice are analogous, in that their incomprehensibility is largely attributable to their alienation in the dominant phallocentric exchange. Wilkie-Stibbs draws on the works of Julia Kristeva, in particular, to describe a maternal body and pre-Oedipal language:

… in terms of non-verbal language and gesture, “intonations, scansions, and jubilant rhythms,” that connect with the primordial, prelapsarian time and is indeed, figuratively and literally, the myth of the Mother Tongue that speaks in meanings that are tactile and corporeal as well as conceptual (2002: 98).

Just as the trickster’s tongue deconstructs significance and meaning, the feminine erupts into phallocentric discourse with all these intangible qualities. The language of the trickster, like the feminine, effectively prises “open a gap between signified and signifiers in a concerted effort to destabilize, one stable (comfortable?) meaning” (2002: 53). Consequently, the act of reading the trickster’s message of social alienation as metacommentary, and interpreting the feminine as metalanguage, is complementary in subverting prevailing ideologies about subjectivity, order and power.

Fairy Blackstick, like all tricksters, exists in the margins. Indeed, she quite literally lives in the liminal space “between the kingdoms of Paflagonia and Crim Tartary” (19). The inhabitants of the kingdoms regard Blackstick as “a mysterious personage”, and it is this intangibility of her identity that inspires them to name her the Fairy Blackstick. Her possession of this masculine signifier is thus identified as the most important indicator of her power, but it also helps the inhabitants identify her in conventional terms. The blackstick gives her a degree of authority that enables her — to a certain extent — to exist outside the phallocratic order, and so she treats everyone with equal indifference. Yet, when she abandons it, she engages a more socially subversive form of power, and from this space of self-marginalisation is labelled abject; an “odious fairy”.

The ensuing chaos inflicted on the inhabitants of the absurdly decadent kingdoms begins and ends with Blackstick’s usurpation of the porter, who — like the trickster-messenger Hermes — is a guardian of thresholds. Casting off her formless robe, Blackstick assumes disguises that enable her to guide events, and indeed, the hero is not just “a Prince of a fairy tale” (134), but of her fairy tale. Giglio attains social power through her gift of a magic sword “which elongated itself at will” (135), but this gift also increases the enmity between them, and she is “seated on the left side of
King Giglio” (140), and of course this is associated with the villain in pantomime. In her begetting of chaos and conferral of misfortune, Blackstick undermines the power of much venerated attributes in Victorian England — education and inherited social status — by demonstrating their vulnerability to the greater, intangible power of fortune. Giglio admits: the “fairy has led me to the height of happiness to dash me down into the depths of despair” (143). It is only when Giglio surrenders to Blackstick’s will, that she restores order and disappears from the narrative altogether.

Contrarily, Hood’s Aunt Sarah is more overtly confronting in her social metacommentary. Aunt Sarah’s usurpation of Fairy Felicia’s seat of honour causes King Bungo to experience “a stream of cold water running down his back” (60). This ambiguous, “most ‘amniotic’ of elements” (Wilkie-Stibbs 2002: 57) is transformed into a symbol of containment and order when it comes into contact with the King. Aunt Sarah’s eruption into the narrative is subtly tempered by the ultimate symbol of phallocratic power: the King. He is not just horrified at her physical appearance, but also her apparent incomprehensibility. Indeed, the narrator remarks that she “launched out into a flow of conversation so rapid and confusing that Bungo lost his head altogether” (60). His failure to acknowledge the authority of her message — to name the child Sarah — elicits her wrath, and effectively sets the course for the narrative. Aunt Sarah declares:

“Harkee here, you wretched dummy of a King — you doll set up in a real King’s place! I’ll punish you for your pride and stuck-up notions! You won’t give your child the simple and unaffected name of [Sarah]! But I’ll be revenged! Your daughter shall marry a beggar — there!” (61).

The ironic connection between naming and social power is constant throughout the narrative, as is particularly evident in the second most powerful man in the kingdom who is named the First Noodle of State in Council, and was selected for the role on the basis that he “talked most nonsense and did least real work” (65). But for King Bungo, it is “the words of that vindictive old Aunt Sarah [that] were constantly ringing in his ears” (75), and this drives Bungo’s erratic actions towards Aunt Sarah’s prophesied end.

Titania’s trickster voice is authenticated by her connection to her Shakespearean literary forebear. Wilkie-Stibbs also associates intertextuality with the feminine:

The promiscuously allusive quality of the narrative which denies the reading subject a straightforwardly linear experience of narrative engagement is another marker of the feminine because as a narrative it invites the type of paradoxical centripetal and centrifugal readerly engagement that is typical of the nonlinear experience of the feminine textuality (2002: 57).

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This intertextual subjectivity is somewhat problematic in Titania’s role as trickster, given that her message is primarily concerned with commenting on female agency, especially in marriage. Despite the emphasis on “romance”, the reference to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is also suggestive of narrative play, which is complementary to trickster energy. Titania and Oberon’s marital discord operates on the periphery of Lemon’s narrative, with the narrator’s fairly vague observation that “Queen Titania and her royal lord Oberon did not lead the happiest of married life, and were frequently at odds with each other” (330). And so a pattern develops, of Titania’s disobedience, Oberon’s fury at her disobedience, Titania’s subsequent punishment and imprisonment, which is inevitably followed by her eluding her captors. This narrative pattern is repeated and expressed in the other heteronormative relationships. Titania’s interventions restore the feminine through supporting the agency of women in marriage, yet it is made contingent on the willingness of men to develop the somewhat idealistic ability to transform and recognise the authority of a woman’s choice, despite the fact that it undermines their privileged position in the patriarchal discourse.

North Wind provides Diamond with access to the feminine through sound and song, rather than by teaching him how to transform. After his arctic sojourn with North Wind, Diamond develops the ability to sing nonsense rhymes, which he suspects emanate from the river “at the back of the North Wind” (266). Prior to this journey, North Wind tells Diamond:

“… I am always hearing, through every noise, through all the noise I am making myself even, the sound of a far off song. I do not exactly know where it is, or what it means; and I don’t hear much of it, only the odour of its music, as it were, flitting across the great billows of the ocean.” (61).

Thus, Diamond’s nonsense rhyming may be associated with his passing through North Wind’s icy body, creating a mimesis of the alien coldness of his mother’s body. The multivalent sensory experience of North Wind’s elusive song suggests Kristeva’s Semiotic, a pre-Oedipal “pre-signifying, polymorphous space (or ‘chora’) of anarchic impulses and energies (pulsations)” (Wilkie-Stibbs 2002: 82). Diamond’s thwarted attempts to reconnect with his mother invites in the trickster, who ruptures the paternal symbolic through the deconstruction and chaos that she begets.

The frequent references to musical instruments and tone, encourages the reader to listen to the trickster’s metacommentary through sounds, feelings and vibrations. This is particularly evident in North Wind’s voice, which the narrator describes thus:

Her voice was like the bass of a deep organ, without the groan in it; like the most delicate of violin tones without the wail in it; like the most glorious of trumpet-ejaculations without the defiance in it; like the sound of falling water without the clatter and clash in it … it was more like his mother’s voice than anything else in the world (54).

North Wind illuminates the material and spiritual poverty wrought on a burgeoning industrialised society, where human relationships and community are sacrificed for
The Victorian survival, and are thus far more vulnerable to the whims of fortune. By connecting with the language of the feminine, the female body that is visibly fluid, and the female voice that is heard, the female protagonist is granted agency that conciliates her emergence from an oppressive liminal silence.

Works Cited


