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Five Thousand for Justice: The Use of English Folklore in the Novels of KJ Charles

Master's thesis

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Abstract

This thesis aims to identify and interpret how the contemporary British author KJ Charles uses and queers English folklore in her M/M neo-Victorian romance novels with paranormal/fantasy elements and to consider the purpose and effect of this method. The analysis is focused mainly on queering in connection to sexuality and gender but, when applicable, includes the question of social inequality and privilege too, as these are often interconnected. The usage of the individual folklore elements in the novels identified by close reading is then compared against their historical, social and cultural background in order to identify recurring relevant themes.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis with the title **Five Thousand for Justice: The Use of English Folklore in the Novels of KJ Charles** I submit for assessment is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my thesis.

Brno, November 26, 2021

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Bc. Monika Markéta Šmídová

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1 Introduction

Folklore is not just old traditions and collections of stories gathering dust. Folklore is something we encounter, create and disseminate throughout our entire lives, from nursery rhymes and fairytales to sayings and proverbs. Folklore influences our worldview, our beliefs and our biases. It is therefore useful not only to create and consume but also to engage critically with folklore, especially with the outdated stories which contain elements of oppression based on social status, ethnicity, gender or sexuality that reflect the then preconceptions and are no longer deemed appropriate. After all, "folklore is continuously being updated and invented, and therefore folklore involves innovation, and consequently individual initiative" (Bronner 18). Contrary to the old definitions of folklore and popular perceptions of the term, "in the modern sense of folkloristics, especially, individuals choose and adapt traditions rather than merely following them" (20).

Folklore is employed extensively in art and literature. It represents important and interesting material for fiction writers of various genres, be it a deep exploration of old myths and legends or a superficial touch upon a certain symbolism. Writers not only "brought the stories out of the dense and dusty collections where they were imprisoned" but they also engage with folklore creatively through retellings, breathing "new life into the creatures of the British supernatural" (Larrington, ch. 6). This way, the outdated stories can be updated and presented to new audiences, who would not have accepted the original versions.

Aside from genres in which folklore elements are expected (fantasy, urban fantasy, horror, ghost stories, fairy tales) folklore appears – and is critically engaged with – to a perhaps surprising degree in romance. Indeed, romance novels can be socially and politically conscious and activist if the author chooses to do so and they are aided in this endeavour by the nature of the genre: "Romance is a highly self-referential genre in which narrators and characters frequently draw attention to the meaning and significance of the kind of story in which they feature" (Ramsdell 251). More than romance in general, queer romance novels are often engaged in questioning the established social and cultural order, including but not limited to the questions of discrimination based on gender and sexuality. Queering folklore draws attention to these issues and provides the queer audience with relatable stories that are either not available in the mainstream folklore collections at all or are accessible only through meticulous scholarly excavations.

This thesis aims to identify and interpret by close reading how the contemporary British author KJ Charles uses and queers English folklore in her M/M neo-Victorian romance novels with paranormal/fantasy elements and to consider the purpose and effect of this method. The analysis is focused mainly on queering in connection to sexuality and gender but, where applicable, includes the question of social inequality and privilege too, as these are often interconnected.

The thesis is divided into two sections. The Theory section talks about (queering) folklore and about the romance genre in more detail, provides definitions and mentions research in this field of study. This section also introduces the author

and the selected novels and describes the criteria for the selection. The definitions and concepts are supplied by *Folklore Rules* (2013) by Lynne S. Mc Neill, *Encyclopedia of Romance Fiction* (2018) edited by Kristin Ramsdell, and *Queeries: Essays on Queer Theory & Fairy Tales* (2019) by Peter Jordi Wood.

The chapters in the Analysis section then attempt to identify and interpret individual folklore elements, introducing first the historical, social and cultural background, against which the usage in the novels is then compared. The elements are sorted into chapters by theme, such as ghosts, magic or liminal places. The last chapter is slightly different and could be labelled as meta-folklore as it deals with folklore updated or created within the novels by the characters themselves in order to strengthen so-called *found family* bonds. Among the most consulted sources in this section are *The Land of the Green Man: A Journey through the Supernatural Landscapes of the British Isles* (2015) by Carolyne Larrington for the folklore tied to the land, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft: Sabbats, Satan & Superstitions in the West* by Frances Timbers, and Owen Davies's *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts* (2007) for folklore related to magic and apparitions respectively. Individual chapters are further supported by a range of publications, articles and essays.

2 Theory

2.1 Queering Folklore

In *Folklore Rules*, Lynne S. McNeill distils the definition of folklore into three words: "informal, traditional culture" (13). She explains it further this way: informal in this definition means "noninstitutionally dictated", i.e. not "protected by copyright or enforced by the government, and thus free to evolve, adapt, and be adjusted to different tellers and audiences" (18). Traditional "simply means passed on, whether that's over many generations or over just a few days, resulting in the same expressive form cropping up in multiple places" (13). Culture is "whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to act in a manner acceptable to its members" (Goodenough qtd. in McNeill 3). So far, the definition seems to be clear and straightforward.

Where it becomes rather more complicated but also interesting is the role of fiction authors in creating, altering and disseminating folklore. Folklore is usually anonymous: even if the author of a piece of folklore is known, the information is usually lost quickly in distribution (McNeill 18). However, as Carolyne Larrington in her account of English folklore *The Land of the Green Man: A Journey through the Supernatural Landscapes of the British Isles* claims:

> It's writers, though, from the late nineteenth century onwards, who have brought the stories out of the dense and dusty collections where they were imprisoned, . . . Fiction authors have breathed new life into the creatures of the British supernatural, unleashing them into the imaginations of young and

> old alike, in fantasy novels, poetry and other kinds of genre fiction. So Neil Gaiman, in Neverwhere, and, more recently, Ben Aaronovitch, in his Rivers of London series, have created versions of London where spirits and demons live in the underground, where the rivers, even the lost rivers of London, have their multicultural gods who must be propitiated, and where the human who looks closely, who opens the hidden door, or who is initiated into magical procedures, becomes drawn into a world of terrible danger and astonishing allure. (ch. 6)

The authors in the abovementioned quote obviously do not become anonymous as quickly and completely as the authors of old folk songs and legends. However, their original ideas get transmitted not only institutionally, i.e. through officially published books and TV shows, but now more than ever also through channels that are out of control of anyone: fanfiction, fanart and memes distributed through internet pages and social media such as Archive of Our Own, Tumblr, Twitter or Facebook. The crucial point here is that not all those who consume these texts and imagery are familiar with the original published source. It is common to read fanfictions or to be a part of a certain fandom without knowing the original work well or even at all. In this way, the originally institutional (officially published) alterations and inventions of existing folklore become non-institutional again and begin to function as new folklore in turn.

It is clear that the group of people who, without reading KJ Charles, *know* magpie tattoos can move if one possesses the right kind of power is rather small

compared to people who have not read Ben Aaronovitch and still *know* they have to be polite to river deities, and still smaller than the group of people who *know* there is another London below, without ever reading Neil Gaiman. But this is, when it comes to folklore, irrelevant because the definition of a *folk group* is “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor” (Dundes 2). The size of the group does not matter.

What does matter is that in this way, the old and sometimes outdated legends can be updated, weeded of harmful stereotypes that are no longer acceptable, and made more appealing to modern readers in order to be transmitted by them both within and outside the respective fandoms. If the role of the folklore of the past is to “offer particular kinds of answers . . . to very large questions through a kind of metaphorical thinking, through structures and patterns which, in their stripped-down clarity, show us what’s really important in an unfamiliar light” and if the legends “tap into our concerns, anxieties, questions about being human and about how we live now, in this land,” then when the society changes, the folklore that does not fulfil this role anymore dies out or, to prevent this, it must be changed in turn to fit the society’s needs (Larrington, Introduction).

This change is needed because “folklore isn’t all butterflies and rainbows – it includes racist, sexist, xenophobic, and vulgar content as often as not” (McNeill 14). This means that the space various social groups have been given in folklore throughout history is not equal. Some groups were silent because the members did not know other members existed or could not form a group in the social, cultural or

legal climate of the period. No group means no transmission and no transmission means no folklore. Some people formed groups but kept the folklore secret. Some might have been silenced subsequently in the process of the folklore collection: "it is possible that scholars changed tale-types to reflect their own belief systems, bias or political agendas" (Wood 25). It might have even been unintentional due to the internalization of these biases. All of this is applicable especially to queer folklore.

In the collections of old folklore, there are not many stories that would positively portray queer characters. As Peter Jordi Wood in his short collection *Queeries: Essays on Queer Theory & Fairy Tale* points out, "traditional stories from folklore, featuring homosexual characters for example, have tended to be ones catalogued by folklorists in the humour section of indexes" (23). Worse, "gay men are portrayed in much of folklore as weak, effeminate, sinful, rapists or predators, publicly shamed, humiliated and often killed. . . . The general stance taken by folklorists of the past was that positive portrayals simply didn't happen because queerness was taboo, and wasn't accepted" (24). It appears that Stith Thompson, an American scholar and one of the two people who created Aarne Thompson Uther Tale Type Index, "monumentally erased much of LGBTQ folklore" while cataloguing tales:

> In the accompanying Motif Index of Folklore he compiled in the 1920s, and revised in the 1950s, he lists 'Homosexuality' and 'Lesbianism' in a section called "Unnatural Perversions" with bestiality and incest. Open about his

views he admits he omitted many stories in the catalogue because they were ‘perverse’ or ‘unnatural’. (Wood qtd. in Wareham)

As late as in 1995, Joseph P. Goodwin, author of *More Man Than You'll Ever Be!: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America* (1989) published an article “If Ignorance Is Bliss, ‘Tis Folly to Be Wise: What We Don’t Know *Can* Hurt Us” where he lists opposition and aversion he encountered when publishing research on the folklore of gay men and points out that although “these days, such studies would hardly raise an eyebrow among folklorists and publishers”, there are still people “who would dictate what we should not study” and “topics like homosexuality are still largely excluded from the type and motif indexes” (155).

The field of queer folklore research has been growing for several decades now. In 1997, *Cassell’s Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Lore* by Randy P. Conner et al. was published. It surveys folkloric and spiritual traditions of cultures all around the world. During the first two decades of the 21st century, queer folklore research has blossomed not only in academia but amongst the non-fiction for the general public as well. One of the relatively new voices, popularizing queer folklore, is LGBTQ+ historian Sacha Coward. He made a video series “Queer as Folklore” (2021) for the Museum of London, exploring “the connection between mythical creatures and the queer community,” wrote an article “Mermaids: a Queer Twist in the Tail” (2018), has done numerous talks on the topic for a general audience and is now writing a book on queer folklore (“Queer”).

One way to change the marginal queer representation in folklore, “to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queereradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged” is the restoration of lost and hidden queer folklore elements through folklorist research, including but not limited to a queer reading of the existing folklore texts that are posed as heteronormative and searching for queer moments, i.e. “moments of narrative disruption which destabilise heteronormativity” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 3; Sullivan 191). Because of the persecution of queer people throughout history, “it would make sense to hide their folklore within ambiguous texts that, on the surface, read as heteronormative but are intentionally encoded with queer meaning; codes that queer recipients of the tales are able to decipher” (Wood 32).

Another way is to alter the existing folklore creatively, the same way “women in the arts absorbed, deconstructed and retold fairy tales in order to reclaim stories which had for many years been presented from a male perspective” (Wood 25). It can be a subtle alteration or it could be a new version of the piece of folklore, such as “gender swaps, lesbian love and gay romances” (23). It could stay close to the folk tale form, like the recent publication of *Queer Folk Tales* (2020) by Kevin Walker, a collection consisting of both folklore retelling and newly created modern folk tales, which, although authored and officially published, stemmed from the author’s oral storytelling performances and are thus conceptually very close to folklore.

Alternatively, it could take the folklore elements to a new genre – be it fantasy, horror or romance.

2.2 Folklore in Romance

When it comes to literature, folklore elements can be and are used in almost every genre. The most obvious are (urban) fantasy, paranormal and horror fiction but surprisingly – if only at the first glance – common occurrence is also in romance, especially in romance novels, both historical and contemporary, written by contemporary authors.

Although the contemporary romance scholarship has been growing stronger in the recent period, analyzing any romance novel academically still requires to overcome "the *aesthetic disdain* that surrounds the genre, specifically the assumption that romance novels are formulaic and essentially interchangeable artifacts, so that whatever is said about one—from either a literary or a political standpoint—will be true for them all" (Ramsdell 362, original italics). However, while there are many formulaic novels that come up with nothing new in the romance genre, this can be said of any genre of fiction, including those perceived as high-brow.

The perception of romance novels as formulaic might stem from the misunderstanding of the modern romance genre definition, which describes not only the content of the genre but also its rules and restrictions. There are two main rules that define the romance genre. The first rule states that the love story, i.e. "individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work," must be the "main focus of the novel." The second rule says that the romance must end in "an Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic Ending: In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and

unconditional love" ("About"). In other words, if there is no Happy Ever After (abbreviated further as HEA) or Happy for Now (abbreviated further as HFN) ending, the book may well be a love story but it cannot be classified as romance.

The usual structure of a romance novel consists of three acts that are further divided into smaller parts, also called *beats*. There are myriads of books and online manuals (called *beat sheets*) on how to outline a romance novel (see for example *Romancing the Beat* by Gwen Hayes). However, these conventions, contrary to the rules in the paragraph above, are not set in stone and can be violated.

All these rules and limitations have to be taken into consideration in analysing any elements in a romance novel to avoid explaining them the wrong way around. In this genre, the storyline has to adhere to and is shaped by these rules, not vice versa. However, it is important to see "this predictability as both a defining feature and a strength of the genre" (Ramsdell 249). When the structure is thus outlined and the ending prescribed, this scaffolding must be filled with inventive, original content to avoid repetitiveness.

The above-mentioned applies to analysing folklore in romance as well. In many romance novels, folklore elements are used superficially just to provide a fresh, original atmosphere or a mystery plot. However, there are a lot of romances that work with folklore in order to deconstruct and subvert harmful stereotypes. It is common especially for historical and/or fantasy/paranormal romance novels, as these subgenres allow authors to dedicate substantial space to explore folklore elements.

Historical romances by contemporary authors are facing the issue of addressing period-typical attitudes, such as racism, misogyny and homophobia. If they choose to gloss over them, it is at the risk of alienating a substantial part of the audience. The novels this thesis is focused on belong to a particular subgenre of romance that usually does not shy away from confronting harmful stereotypes and prejudices: "M/M neo-Victorian romance, that is to say, novels written in the twenty-first century but set in the Long Nineteenth Century, with a central love story between two male characters and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending, which are generally written by female authors and for a mostly female readership"[1] (Duvezin-Caubet 2). The neo-Victorian genre is characterized by "desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalised voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally 'different' versions of the Victorian" (Llewellyn 165).

Queer historical romance and M/M neo-Victorian romance, in particular, has to deal with the popular perception of the Victorian/Edwardian era as a "homophobic hell from which gay people eventually liberated themselves" (Robb 17). This perception is caused by a similar erasure of voices to the one mentioned in chapter 2.1. The majority of information about queer relationships in this period comes from

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[1] This fact is slightly controversial: there has been demand for *own voices* authors (meaning the author is a part of the community they are writing about) and female authors writing M/M romances, as well as their female readers, are considered by some to be appropriating this subgenre. The *own voices* movement did a lot of good; however, "the book community has, at times, transformed [#OwnVoices] into a weapon to criticize authors on the basis of their identity alone, not on the strength of their work" (Lewis). It has also pressurized authors into coming out before they are ready.

the court records, which gives the impression there were not any happy stories. There were of course such stories, as Graham Robb in his work *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* proves. They were just to be found elsewhere: among others as patients' autobiographical accounts in medical publications, which served as a thrilling revelation to "many people who had thought themselves unique" (60). The medical publications provided a platform for queer people to be heard.

What historical queer romance novels by contemporary authors strive to do is to "re-write the past through creating a happy queer 'archive', while also engaging critically with the representation of marginalised gender, sexual, and racial identities," resulting eventually in a possible alteration of the popular perspective of that period (Duvezin-Caubet 1-2). If a person conditioned by this popular perspective reads queer romance, the presence of *so many* happy queer characters might even feel strange but in fact, the genre just gives a voice to previously silenced and oppressed people. As KJ Charles put it in an interview for *Jeff & Will's Big Gay Fiction Podcast*, quoted here from the transcript published on their website:

> If you actually read the history of Britain, it is not a history of white cishet or anything. There's so much being dug out. . . . I do feel, no matter how much fantasy you've got in an historical (sic), the heart of it needs to be true. And, you know, writing queer characters and, black or Indian or Jewish, or whoever characters is true about this country and especially now it's something we flipping will oughtn't forget (sic). . . . It needs asserting because there's a lot of

> people who've seen to have a vested interest in trying to make us forget and that's not okay. ("Episode 323")

Folklore lends itself very well to subverting the normative narrative from the point of view not only of queerness but also of gender inequality, social inequality and any other kind of bigotry and discrimination. The use of a particular folklore element creates a sort of expectation, the same as genre choice does, precisely because the structure and the rules of both are known to the audience beforehand. The author can choose to observe the structure and the rules or to subvert them, creating a tension that questions these expectations. In the following analysis, it will be shown that KJ Charles uses this technique of altering the existing folklore – sometimes subtly, sometimes more overtly – to highlight the issues of (im)morality and (in)justice in regards to not only the queer characters but also other marginalized identities in her novels.

2.3 Selected Works and Methodology

KJ Charles is a contemporary romance author living in London and the majority of her novels are set in London or the English countryside. She writes queer historical romances, both with and without supernatural elements, spanning the period from the 1800s to the 1920s. For the purpose of this thesis, two series of novels were selected: *A Charm of Magpies* series and the *Green Men* universe novels.

All of the selected novels are M/M neo-Victorian romances, except for one novel set in the post-WWI period. All of them are historical and at the same time paranormal romances, i.e. "romance novels in which the future, a fantasy world, or paranormal happenings are an integral part of the plot" ("About"). All of them use English folklore for the world-building of the supernatural part. The universe in all those novels is the same as our own, only with the addition of supernatural elements. The novels are firmly set in a realistic historical background, meaning not only the physical setting but more importantly the attitudes and laws of the period in question. Bigotry, period-typical racism, social inequality and homophobia are not glossed over or erased by magical elements of the story. Instead, they are acknowledged and incorporated into the plot. Sometimes they are used as an obstacle which the main characters have to overcome to reach their HEA/HFN.

A Charm of Magpies series is set in 1880s London with a few countryside excursions. The series contains three main novels, two spin-offs and six short stories. The folklore elements used in the series are magpies, magic/witchcraft and ghosts. Among the themes of the series are social inequality, corruptive effects of power,

privilege, period-typical homophobia, coming-out and acceptance, morality and justice.

The main trilogy – *The Magpie Lord* (2013), *A Case of Possession* (2014), *Flight of Magpies* (2014) – and accompanying short stories "The Smuggler and the Warlord" (2013), "Interlude with Tattoos" (2013), "A Case of Spirits" (2015), "Feast of Stephen" (2014) and "Five in Heaven" (2019) follow a rich nobleman/former smuggler Lucien Vaudrey, Lord Crane, who after returning to England from Shanghai finds himself under a curse targeted at his family that compels him to commit suicide. Stephen Day is a magician/justiciar called in to deal with the curse. Although he has a reason to hate the Vaudrey family, he helps Crane with the aid of Vaudrey bloodline powers tied to magpies and awaken by Stephen's magic and brings the culprits to justice even though the main one escapes. The following two novels map the development of their relationship while dealing with further threats, both supernatural and ordinary, including a blackmail attempt threatening to expose their intimate relationship. The series culminates in a final encounter with the escaped villain.

The short story "A Queer Trade" (2016) and the spin-off novel *Rag and Bone* (2016) overlap the main trilogy in time and follow a waste-man Ned Hall and a magician apprentice/former warlock Crispin Tredarloe. Crispin had accidentally become a warlock but now he is apprenticed to the justiciary, trying to learn how to use his powers correctly. It is difficult because not everyone believes in his reformation. Ned hates magic but when his rag-and-bottle shop is targeted and his

panicked lover returns to his old habits, they work together to save the entire London from a revenant.

The spin-off novel *Jackdaw* (2015) follows a windwalker (a practitioner of magic able to walk on air) Jonah Pastern, who was a minor villain in the main trilogy, and his former lover and former policeman Ben Spencer as they try to mend their relationship broken by Jonah's betrayal and to escape the Justiciary. They find a new home in a small village in Cornwall but Jonah's past catches with them even there.

The *Green Men* universe novels are two loosely connected novels and one short story (there was originally meant to be at least one more novel). The folklore elements are ghosts, Green Man and folklore tied to the land and nature. Thematically, the novels are dealing with privilege, responsibility, trauma, guilt, tradition and the necessity of change.

The novel *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal* (2015) and the short story "Remnant" (2014, co-written with Jordan L. Hawk as a crossover with his *Widdershins* series) are set in the 1890s London. The novel consists of several short stories (cases) of a ghost-hunter Simon Feximal and his chronicler/former journalist Robert Caldwell. Simon's method of ghost-hunting is allowing the ghosts to tell their story by writing messages directly on his skin, which in turn takes its toll on him. The novel is written in the style of Sherlock Holmes stories. As with Doyle's stories, the cases can be read as stand-alone short stories but they are tied together by the romance arch between the two main characters. The narrative is framed by letters from Robert to his editor in 1914.

Spectred Isle (2017) is a novel set in 1924 in London and Cambridgeshire and it belongs to the same universe as *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal*. Its main characters are disgraced archaeologist Saul Lazenby and occultist Randolph Glyde. After his disgrace during WWI, Saul resorts to working for a rich eccentric who believes in every piece of folklore he stumbles upon. Saul does not believe in magic but as he finds himself in increasingly weird situations, he has to admit the existence of the supernatural. Randolph is one of the Green Men, people who protect the land and work with its power. Randolph's family had been guarding England for centuries but he is the only one surviving the war. He has to fulfil the ancient duties while trying to repair the damage the war did to the veil between the worlds. He has nobody to pass a part of his burden onto until Saul gets too tangled up in Randolph's world and recruited for the Green Men as well.

To avoid repetition in in-text references, the following list of abbreviations is used for primary sources:

The Magpie Lord = TML

A Case of Possession = ACP

Flight of Magpies = FoM

Jackdaw = Jd

Rag and Bottle = RaB

The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal = TSCoSF

Spectred Isle = SI

The majority of the short stories were included in one of the main novels and will be cited accordingly. All the primary sources are listed in the bibliography under the heading Charles, KJ.

The method used for the following analysis is close reading supported by the research into the history and cultural significance of individual folklore elements. It is also queer reading (queering), however, the aim is not to render the "text queerer by reading it in a certain way" – it is already established that it is queer – but to show how it is made so. The author of the thesis acknowledges that "there's never one 'true' reading of any text – not even the one the author intended. Rather, there are always many possible readings, and the reader is implicated in the meanings that are (re)produced" (Barker and Scheele 102). The following analysis is one of those readings and does not claim by any means to be definitive, although it is trying to be as informed as possible.

The term queer is understood in this thesis also in its broader sense, i.e. queer as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" and queering as "radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality and the family" (Halperin 62, Smith 280). Charles's use of folklore to challenge heteronormativity is quantitatively the main but not the sole focus of the thesis, as the question of heteronormativity is very often interwoven with and impossible to separate from other issues, especially class and privileges connected to it.

3 Analysis

3.1 Liminal Places

Liminality was first conceptualized by Arnold van Gennep (1909) as a second step in the three-step process of ritual passages (separation, liminality and reintegration) to describe "the symbolic and physical transitional stages in which initiates find themselves when undergoing rites of passage" (Davies 45). Since then, the concept of liminality was significantly extended to include any "betwixt and between" situation or object, and later even more "to include both personal and collective liminality, temporal as well as spatial" (Thomassen, "Liminality" 322). Temporarily, liminal periods are "characterized by a wholesale collapse of order and loss of background structure, agency is pushed to the forefront" (Thomassen, "Uses" 20). Spatially, liminality applies for example to thresholds, body openings, areas or zones like borders, monasteries, prisons or airports, or even whole countries or regions that are in between (15).

In folklore, the concept of liminality, particularly of liminal places, is useful for interpreting:

> . . . the relationship between life, death, the afterlife, and natural and man-made features in the landscape. . . . Natural features such as rivers likewise served as liminal places where the two worlds met, and where people gathered to either reinforce the separation between them or to try to permeate it briefly for religious or magical purposes. Man-made or

> administrative boundaries constructed for pragmatic rather than religious purposes could also assume deeper liminal significance. (Davies 45-46)

Environmental changes that alter the landscape and liminal places with it, for example, parliamentary enclosure or wetlands drainage in the Fens, are also reflected in folklore (46).

Aside from minor isolated instances in her other novels, Charles works with folkloric liminal places and rites of passage mainly in *Spectred Isle*. The novel is set in the period between the two world wars, with the premise that the governmental usage of occultists as weapons during WWI thinned the veil between our world and the supernatural one. Saul Lazenby's entire storyline is about his initiation among Green Men, a group of people protecting England from supernatural threats (see Chapter 3.2), and can be read as one prolonged rite of passage; however, there are several specific instances in the novel where the spatial and temporal liminality coincide. All of them are tied to the folklore of the land and nature.

The first of these instances happens at Camlet Moat, a little island with a well in Trent Park, where Saul is sent by Major Peabody, his eccentric employer and amateur folklorist, who believes that Camlet Moat has something to do with Camelot[2]. Camlet Moat is, in the universe of the novel, a crucial point of protection: "London, like certain other key places, stands for England, and Camlet Moat stands for London" (*SI* 180). Water sources are often interpreted "as liminal places, portals between the

[2] In this belief, he is not alone: "The moated island is probably a medieval structure serving the royal hunting grounds of Enfield Chase, but may date back further. The name is intriguingly close to Camelot and, indeed, the area is recorded as 'the Manor of Camelot' in 1440" ("Where").

worlds of the living and the spirits" (Davies 57). When Saul meets Randolph, an occultist, a Green Man, and Camlet Moat's provisional guardian (called "Walker"), at the well, Randolph commands him to drink water drawn from the well, which is in "impossibly good condition for its age. . . . The centuries had smoothed away all the evidence of a house; a well would have collapsed into itself, or filled up with leaf-mulch that turned to earth" (*SI* 38). This is a liminal moment because the Moat needs to decide whether Saul is a danger to it or not, and according to that, the water either refreshes or mutilates him: "The water is good and pure, Mr. Lazenby. The question is, are you?" (41). When it is clear that the Moat approves, there is another ritual awaiting Saul: a cloutie tree.

Cloutie (clootie) wells were common in Scotland, Ireland and England and are popular even today (Meier). The ritual goes like this: "Where a tree grows by a holy well, one may dip a rag in the water and use it to wash the afflicted part. Tie the rag to the tree and the affliction rots away with the cloth" (*SI* 42). Saul inquires whether it works for everything, even "broken hearts, broken minds", to which Randolph answers: "Yes, they need healing as much as legs and arms, don't they, even if the injuries are less visible. Ah… I think one might simply wash one's face, you know. The water knows its business" (42-43). Randolph then proceeds to wash Saul's face with a handkerchief:

> Saul was a man of science; he would never, even alone, have given in to the urge to make a superstitious gesture. Glyde had dirtied a fine pair of trousers to soak that handkerchief, and done it in such a priestly way that Saul had

> been left with a feeling of something almost like absolution. It was a comfort, even if an illusory one, to imagine his sin and shame rotting away with the cloth, and Glyde had given him that when other men had spat. (47)

The sin and shame stem from Saul's disgrace during the war. When stationed in Mesopotamia, he fell in love with a local man, who was, however, an Ottoman agent, using Saul to gain information about the garrison town, which the Ottomans then attacked. Saul was subsequently court-martialled, flogged and spent two years in gaol. After the war, his career in archaeology is destroyed; he cannot find employment and ends up working for Major Peabody. Saul's main problem is that he has been unable to forgive himself, although he served his sentence, and is convinced that he does not deserve anything good ever again. He does not even socialize in pubs "because it seemed unjust to impose himself under false pretences" (65). This conviction is strengthened by the behaviour of his family and social and professional acquaintances after his return to London: his family disowned him, his friends turned away from him and his former employee withdrew the offer to work on further excavations. The cloutie tree ritual begins Saul's healing process, whether it is actually caused by the water from the well or Randolph's unexpected kindness and compassion.

Trees, in general, are liminal places or maybe even entities due to their "essential ambiguity":

> . . . they are alive and yet seemingly not alive; they have a celestial and a chthonic dimension; they are vulnerable and powerful; they seem to embrace

> nature and structure; even when dead, they may still stand and remain part of the forest for many years. . . . Cyclicity, seasonality and apparent death in winter are all woven into the symbolic currency of trees; they are changeful . . . but enduring elements in the landscape. (Aldhouse-Green qtd. in Hooke 9)

Saul has had a long-standing affinity with trees since his childhood and he uses them to distance himself mentally from bad situations: "He'd got good at this over two years in a military gaol in Mesopotamia. There he'd put himself into the sunny chalk uplands of his boyhood, and remembered-created-learned that imaginary landscape in such detail that he could slip back into it during the worst times" (*SI* 120). When he first arrives at Camlet Moat, he is "filled with the green joy that pulsed from the ground through his feet, just as it rose through roots out into a flourish of foliage and life" (37). He is, in short, more perceptive to trees and greenery than most people and thus possibly predestined to become one of the land's protectors.

Saul's technique of the safe space visualization becomes useful when he finds himself stuck with Randolph in the Fens. The Fens as such are a liminal place: originally dangerous wild marshes, nowadays flatland with straight channels and regular angles; neither land nor water; cultivated by Fenmen but resisting the industrial drainage attempts for a long time and still on the verge of being flooded; "the brown peat-water and rank grass of a landscape that at best tolerated humankind and had been broken because it would not be tamed" (Hargan; *SI* 119). Nevertheless, the protagonists are not caught in the real Fens but on the other side:

"*east of the sun and west of the moon*"[3] (*SI* 105, original italics). Although they keep walking, they are stuck both in place, eternally two miles to Swaffham Prior, and time, twenty-one minutes past eleven.

They are stuck in a liminal place, trapped in liminal time and everything is caused by a liminal entity: Geoffrey de Mandeville. He was the 1st earl of Essex and the hereditary constable of the Tower of London, "the worst of a number of cruel and lawless barons during the reign of King Stephen of England," a turncoat alternating his support between Stephen and Matilda, gaining concessions on both sides. After his arrest for treason, "he gave up his offices and castles in return for his freedom and went off to plunder the fenland around Ely." In the end, he "was mortally wounded by a chance shot while laying siege to Burwell" ("Geoffrey"). After his death, "his corpse was carried by some Templars to the Old Temple in Holborn, where it remained unburied for nearly twenty years" (Round). However, his death and burial is a subject of wildly varying local legends and there are reports of Mandeville's ghost haunting East Barnet, London.

Charles makes use of this ambivalence: in *Spectred Isle*, "De Mandeville was neither buried nor unburied; shot and hanged and drowned but not dead. Held in between life and death, his rotten heart seething with hate, but still fulfilling his vow

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[3] This phrase references a fairytale "East of the Sun and West of the Moon", in Arne-Thompson folktale classification categorized as "Search for the Lost Husband." This tale has an active heroine: "she's not a princess to take this sitting down: upon his loss, she seeks to free him from the spell. . . . Her determination wins her assistance from others; in some retellings, the winds themselves obey her will. And once in the palace of the witch, her weapon isn't her beauty or her virtue, but her wits" (Valentine). In *Spectred Isle*, Saul's bravery and wits significantly contribute to their survival in the Fens.

as Master of London" (*SI* 224). The instability of the barrier between worlds combined with someone else's nefarious doings[4] stirs him up and allows him to rise. The power of storytelling and repetition, using "ritual phrasing" – "letting the repository of belief build up, creating the shape of a tale, bleeding it into other forces, growing like ivy round oak" – plays a significant role as well: "Before the War Beneath, perhaps Abchurch's story was just a folktale. Now it's a calling. He called, something came. . . . Something eight hundred years dead in the fens. . . . Something that wanted to put out the lights" (92, 93, 95).

As much as their situation in the Fens is frightening, the temporary dismantling of structures inherent in liminality allows Saul and Randolph to act more freely. First, they can talk honestly and confide in each other. Saul talks about his disgrace in the war in detail for the first time and Randolph confesses his own guilt of being a part of occult summonings in the war that tore the veil between worlds to shreds, resulting in the loss of his entire family and him singlehandedly carrying their duties. Second, they can kiss and embrace without fear of discovery because societal norms do not apply here: "They were in the open road, visible for miles. They were in an empty land, where no birds sang and the road never ended" (*SI* 106). However, instead of the societal norms, other, much older and more sinister laws that cannot be broken work in this place: the two men cannot do anything more physical together because that would mean "an expense of spirit in a waste of fens", getting tied to this

[4] This storyline has not been concluded yet as the novel was originally planned as the first part of a series, which is currently on hold.

place and moment forever: "I'm not sure how good an idea would be to fuck on this road. I have a feeling that once we start, we might not stop. Which doesn't sound like the worst fate in the world, but…" (108). For the land and nature, passion is passion. It does not care whether it is between a man and a woman, or between same-sex partners – the very relationship that society deems unnatural. This motif will be encountered several more times in the following chapters of the analysis.

Saul's mental calling on nature and Camlet Moat helps them to reach the Burwell castle, the place where de Mandeville received his mortal wound and which would therefore protect them. Here, Saul undergoes another rite of passage, in which the ghost of Theresa Glyde, Randolph's cousin and the previous Walker of Camlet Moat, meets them and gives Saul her duty that Randolph has unsuccessfully tried to carry after her death: "She was kissing him, or breathing into him and Randolph's other sight could see the tendrils of ivy snaking from her ears and eyes and mouth and fingers, snaking into Saul. If Saul wasn't screaming, it was only because he couldn't," promptly losing consciousness after the act (*SI* 137). Saul emerges from the rite of passage in the Fens as a Green Man (see Chapter 3.2) and the Walker of Camlet Moat, a protector of one of London's crucial sites, although he does not realize it yet.

Saul's final rite of passage is undergone at Camlet Moat again. He is the Walker now, growing attuned to the Moat; therefore he knows the sacred well has been compromised: "Camlet Moat was still there, wounded but living under his feet, and Saul breathed into it. *I'm here. I'm with you. We stand*" (*SI* 225, original italics). It transpires that de Mandeville's body was hidden in the well, encased in "lead,

Saturn's metal, the stuff of transfiguration and doorways, death and rebirth and something in between" (224). A part of the weight that held him down in the well is now gone. Saul has to restore the balance with a sacrifice of a lead bullet he has been wearing around his neck since his release from jail: "it's hung between life and death if ever metal has. And don't tell me it's not heavy. I've never felt a heavier thing. That's your sacrifice, Walker" (226). The bullet is heavy with meaning: "It meant death and shame and failure, loss and betrayal, unspeakable, unbearable grief which he'd lived in order to carry" (227). Saul throws it into the well, preventing de Mandeville from rising and symbolically freeing himself from his past.

The most ritualized rite of passage in the novel, however, is undergone by Randolph, an occultist and heir of an ancient duty that has been running in the Glyde family for twenty-three generations. To become a Keeper of Wayland's Words[5], he had to suffer through an excruciatingly painful ritual: "I carry words the human mind is not equipped to contain. I see in the dark. I can command obedience to an extent.

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[5] Wayland's legend is of Germanic origin. He was a smith who was captured by King Nidud and "hamstrung so that he could not escape." He was forced to forge things for the king. In revenge, he killed the king's two sons, seduced or raped his daughter and escaped (Larrington, ch. 1). Charles's recasting Wayland into a god, a word-giver, might be traced to Rudyard Kipling's story collection *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906): "In Kipling's imagination, Weland is a god, and quite a successful one, ...Wayland's strange and dangerous nature corresponds to the ambivalent smith figure in other cultures. . . . he is the master of arcane knowledge, knowing how to transform unpromising and dirty ore into pliable, shining metal . . . . Magically he brings together the four elements, fire, water, air (in the bellows) and the bones of the earth, the clods of ore, in his craft, welding them together to shape wonderful things." (ch. 1).

That sort of thing has a price, which was this. . . . Nine days and nights, suspended by hooks through my shoulders, hanging off a tree" (*SI* 130). This is a tree as a liminal place again, this time connected to divination: "The link between trees and divination is exemplified in literary references to 'the tree of knowledge' . . .; in part, this is further associated with the tree's perceived connection to the underworld, where the spirits of the ancestors remained a source of knowledge and past learning, and to that of the gods in the heavens above" (Hooke 5). Randolph's ritual is akin to Odin's self-sacrifice on the Yggdrasill, the World Tree, "on which the god Óðinn . . . was thought to have hung in voluntary sacrifice in order to acquire hidden knowledge and wisdom: by undergoing ritualistic death he learned the secret of the runes" (3).

However, Randolph's sacrifice is not exactly voluntary: it is imposed on him by his father and other twenty-two generations of Glydes behind him: "It mattered enough for my father to put the hooks in my shoulders, and for me to let him. It was unthinkable not to" (*SI* 131). He is damaged by the ritual, physically and mentally: he suffers from chronic weather-sensitive pain in his shoulders, and the scars, which did not heal well and left a "lumpy mess" on both sides of his shoulders, "were one of the many reasons Randolph liked to fuck fully clothed, standing up, preferably with men he didn't know" (168). Carrying the words is unpleasant, actually speaking them is worse: "They jarred through his body, clanging in his bones, scorching his eyeballs, hung deafeningly in the air for a fraction of a second that lasted an eternity" (28). The awareness of the ritual's necessity also put a strain on the paternal-filial relationship: "he'd wondered if his father's chilly lack of affection had been in part because he'd

known what he'd have to do to his son" (130). He would have been forced into a marriage of convenience with his cousin Theresa to produce an heir (had she not died during the war), counting as luck that Theresa resented the idea of traditional marriage as much as he did: "they'd both be happy with a practical arrangement, pleasure to be taken elsewhere. . . . He'd have grown old with his best friend and considered himself blessed" (55-56). Randolph, the last living Glyde, perceives his inability to carry on with that duty as a failure – a duty which everyone who is close enough to Randolph to be in the know rightly considers monstrous: "I'm sorry that I'm going to fail at everything because I can't – the idea of having a child, of doing that, explaining – I can't" (131).

The series of events that has drawn the two men together also lets them see their own suffering from a different perspective as cruel and imposed, not normal or deserved: "'Free choice? Are you serious? When do you think I last had one of those?' 'You should.' 'Says the man born to be hung off a tree with hooks'" (*SI* 162). Their scars (physical as well as mental) are exposed to scrutiny – "It was a perfect back except for the thin diagonal white stripes of an old, cruel flogging, and Randolph had a sudden and overwhelming urge to throw up his duty" – and accepted: "They're part of you. . . . Not pretty. Nor, I imagine, a terribly pleasant memory to carry around . . . But still you, for good or ill" (166, 169). Both of them emerge from the chain of events with the newly acquired understanding that they do not have to carry their burdens alone.

Randolph's storyline asks whether tradition is unbreakable, whether nature or land truly demands sacrifices and cruelty and whether it is necessary to repeat cruelty only because it was done that way many times before. The same cruel land in Saul's case offers healing where the societal rules almost destroyed him because these artificial norms are not something the land recognizes. Folkloric liminal places serve here as locations for the rites of passage and although these mostly concern Saul, the temporal dissolution and reconfiguration of societal structures and traditions, which is inherent for the liminal stage of the rite of passage, force both men to step back and either adjust their thinking or have it done for them. The importance of the power of storytelling mentioned in this chapter is not limited to liminal places but will echo through the following chapters as well.

3.2 Green Men

The Green Man as a mythical figure is very much a liminal entity as well. Not only is he both humanoid and foliate in appearance, thus comprising the dichotomy of humankind and nature in one form, but the most interesting thing about him is that he apparently does not exist, or, to be more accurate, that he was retroactively created to meet the need of modern times.

The Green Man, a foliate head sprouting leaves and twigs from its mouth and/or eyes, carved into stone and wood in British churches, certainly comes across as an ancient entity, perhaps from pre-Christian times. The stone foliate heads' symbolism is interpreted as representing sins of speech, foreboding, rebirth or "how death rules the natural, as opposed to the spiritual world" (Simpson and Roud, "Foliate head"). When placed in doorways, they are seen as guardians of the entrances to the building (yet another liminal place). However, although these church decorations go as far as the twelfth century, there is no supernatural entity behind them and the name itself originates in the article "The 'Green Man' in Church Architecture" by Lady Raglan, published in 1939:

> British enthusiasm for folklore was at a great pitch, still under the long-reaching influence of James Frazer's compendium of comparativism, "The Golden Bough" (1890). Frazer emphasized continuity with and preservation of a native tradition, and Raglan, thinking very much in those terms, posited that the Green Man was an ancient pagan icon of fertility. (Livingstone)

The name was readily adopted and it can be said that "Lady Raglan's 'Green Man' was a particularly successful example of modern myth-making, a 'case study in the 'invention of tradition'" (Judge qtd. in Centerwall 26). Some scholars make various connections between the Green Man and Wild Men ("creatures covered in long shaggy hair, who lived in the forest and were usually thought to be lacking in human language"), Green Knight and Jack-in-the-Green and some even argue that Lady Raglan's name was correct after all, drawing attention to the Green Man in pub signs and distillery emblems (Larrigton, ch. 6; Simpson and Roud, "Green Man").

More interesting, however, is the fact that the Green Man myth did not lose its popularity. On the contrary: "over the last fifty years, the Green Man has become a specifically countercultural icon. It was adopted by New Agers in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, and recast by the changing status of folkloric imagery into a surprisingly durable alt icon" (Livingstone). It has been adopted also by Wiccans "as one of their god figures" and by Radical Faeries, a group of gay men founded in the US in 1979 (Timbers 178). It is obvious that the connection of the Green Man to the pagan times, although probably artificially made, resonates with humans, especially now, that the environmental crisis is at the forefront of our minds: "The industrialisation not just of our cities but also of our countryside has awakened old mythic figures and created a new one to raise awareness of the threats to the landscapes that nurture and sustain us" (Larrington, ch. 6). Simon J. Bronner in *Folklore: The Basics* claims that "folklore exists because it provides a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of what cannot be articulated in the more usual,

direct way. This process serves to deal with anxieties, emotions, and conflicts by sublimating, redirecting, and disguising them through the symbol and fantasy-laden content of folklore" (110). No wonder, then, that "the idea of an ancient vegetation god, a hybrid of man and tree, a fierce defender against human trespass into the wild, struck a resonant chord in contemporary culture" (Larrington, ch. 6).

Aside from this resonance, it is the absence of the Green Man's story that appeals to writers of fiction: "He doesn't do anything; he has no story, no legend, except those invented for him by modern writers, but his appearance, as a hybrid of man and plant, insists that humans are inextricably part of that natural world which we in the West are so keen to subjugate" (Larrington, ch. 6). This void can be filled with new meanings and connections and used for world-building. And because writers have "more impact on popular opinion than academics do", the use in fiction is bound to get more traction than the academic debate on the absence of the myth behind the Green Man (Timbers 178).

Charles built the entire universe around Green Men, combining various folklore elements tied to London and the English countryside. Apart from the foliate heads, Green Men in *Spectred Isle* is also the name for "people who work with the land and are permitted to borrow a little of its power" (*SI* 179). It is a very diverse group: "Arcanists and academics and ghost-hunters, religious men, highly irreligious women. All of us with an urgent interest in making sure the veil tears no further than it has" (98). It is the ability that matters, not gender or social status. Lineage might have mattered before the war but not anymore: "Sam Caldwell was only brought in

three years ago, after the War, when it was imperative to make up the numbers. He is quite the most urban Green Man one can imagine, the occult equivalent of Coram's Fields, but it seems to work" (180).

The language explaining the concept of the Green Man in the novel is deliberately vague, drawing attention to its inexplicability – it has to be experienced in order to be understood:

> "My understanding of the Green Man is, well, these things." Saul indicated the wall in his turn. "Foliage heads. Early church decorations harking back to pagan times."
>
> "Yes. And also no. . . . There is the Green Man, the stone decoration. There is the Jack in the Green, the country custom of dressing up in foliage. And there is more. There is the face in the woods, the laughter in the trees, the spirit of old England and an older land before the name. The land of Wayland Smith, the maker, the word-giver." (*SI* 179)

The stone foliate heads serve as a way to connect spiritually with the land, as when Randolph consults one of these heads in St. Mary's Burwell church: "Ivy. Randolph could taste it in his own mouth, feel the push of roots and branches, the spring of leaves. The face in the forest, the watcher in the woods. The Green Man. *What have you beheld?* he asked the silent watcher in his mind, and let the impressions flood in" (*SI* 86, original italics). Saul, after he becomes a Green Man, seeks it as well even though he does not yet know why, and when he finds it, the foliate head helps him remember what happened to him in the Fens.

The most important thing about Charles's version of Green Men, however, is what his recruitment to them does to Saul. He is thrown into the occult world unknowingly through a chain of events beginning at Camlet Moat and culminating in the Fens where he is made a Green Man and the Walker of Camlet Moat. He has to rely on Randolph because, although intelligent and brave, he knows nothing about the occult: "After whatever Saul had endured in the war, the years of trying to get back on his feet, it could hardly be pleasant to be rendered helpless yet again" (*SI* 127). Randolph tries to prevent Saul being dragooned into the Green Men but he has to surrender to the fact that "Theresa knew her business, and Camlet Moat needed a Walker. No matter what that did to Saul, already chewed up and spat out by one war, being dragged into another, and both times by a kiss" (137). By getting entangled in the Green Men business, Saul also unwittingly turns the attention of a Department of Special Affairs (called the Shadow Ministry) to himself. After one failed attempt, from which he is saved by Randolph's men, the Ministry manages to take him into custody for interrogation, disregarding his right to a lawyer, using his war record to intimidate him: "You have a record of collaborating with the enemies of this country in a peculiarly disgraceful manner, Mr. Lazenby. . . . You will now co-operate with her protectors, whether you like it or not" (153). Being locked up in the cell causes Saul a PTSD-induced panic attack.

Although he feels helpless and out of his depth, since the moment Saul was made the Walker his connection to nature and to the other Green Men has been growing in him. His panic attack intersects with the desecration of Camlet Moat and

because he is already connected to it, its damage makes him extremely ill: "It felt like he had a lump of corruption in his stomach, something so old and foul it tasted of spiderwebs and grave rot" (*SI* 194). When he tries to use his technique of safe space visualization in the Ministry's detention cell to fight the panic attack and calls on greenery, he calls on the Green Men as well and they respond: "Bright eyes opened wide in the leaves, staring at him. Saul stumbled away with a yelp of shock and found himself on his back on the bench in the cell, disoriented and dizzy" (193). When Randolph rescues him from the cell, "he could feel the push of greenery, the drive upward to the sun. Saul was calling on the Green Men, know it or not" (199). After years of loneliness and having to rely only on himself, he now *does* have someone to call on and to rely on because Green Men stand together. Randolph might have "let loose the ancient strength of the Green Man in the middle of a building, unleashed Barney and Isaacs, and kicked away the last pretences of rapprochement with the Shadow Ministry, all without the slightest compunction" because of his feelings for Saul but Sam, another Green Man, stands by his side during that unwaveringly even though he does not know him, saving questions for later (206). The Green Men do not care about Saul's disgrace at the war, partly because they are strongly anti-war themselves and have to deal with the damage caused by much more high-ranking and therefore more powerful fools. Camlet Moat found him worthy and that is all that matters to them. Saul finds friendship and even a new family (see Chapter 3.6) among them while his own family disowned him.

Last but not least, becoming a Green Man gives Saul a meaningful, although terrifying job. His career in archaeology was terminated by his disgrace. Since then he was unemployed and then worked only for Major Peabody, which was "a year of astounding futility" destroying "any hope of returning to a career in archaeology" (*SI* 8, 7). As a Green Man, Saul has an important task and it becomes obvious that a major part of his self-esteem is tied to being good at his job, which he has not had a chance to be for several years. When the Green Men get to Camlet Moat and find it excavated, Saul automatically takes the blame – as he has been conditioned to do – although he could not have prevented it: "'This is my fault,' Saul said, a great hollow feeling spreading through him. 'She gave me the responsibility, and *this*–' 'Is their fault, whoever *they* are,' Randolph said. 'We don't have time for guilt'" (212, original italics). Saul is ready to sacrifice himself but the Green Men help him to find the right solution and they walk with him, "a green presence beside and behind him" (225). They help him realize that he has not only questions but also the answers: "'And the Moat? That is – well, what happens now?' Sam shrugged. 'I don't know, Walker. You tell me'" (228).

For Saul, the recruitment for the Green Men, although accompanied by rather brutal and unsettling experiences, ultimately means healing and absolution he would have not been able to grant himself, human connection and sense of belonging he has denied himself since his release from jail, and return of self-esteem and agency that have been inhibited by the shame and sense of failure imposed on him.

3.3 Ghosts

Ghosts are very much a part of the English folkloric landscape. England is sometimes said to be the most haunted country, although this is obviously impossible to prove. Owen Davies in his book *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts* remarks: "The continuance of English ghost-belief is a truly remarkable story considering that, as a Protestant country, the population should have rejected ghosts centuries ago along with Catholicism" (2). He explains this perseverance as "a consequence of our religious, social and cultural development over the last 500 years" (1).

The Catholic Church preached that "apparitions were the souls of those trapped in Purgatory, unable to rest until they had expiated their sins" (Clarke 291). Many ghost stories were saved thanks to the clergy using them as morality tales for sermons. Reformation changed that: "To the early Reformers, the experience of ghosts was akin to that of witchcraft. Unlike the Catholic Church, they did not seek ownership of ghost stories . . . , they rejected them outright" (295). English Canon Law of 1604 banned exorcism and consequently, the clergy were "prevented from providing what had been an important service aiding the laity in their regular struggle against the torments of malignant spirits" (Davies 73). This meant that the Reformers lost control over hauntings and "with no rite of exorcism available, people . . . increasingly turned to cunning women and renegade priests to help with a haunting, thus reinforcing the general notion that ghosts were an aspect of witchcraft" (Clarke 292). Later, the revolutions throughout Europe, industrialization and "the gulf between country folk beliefs and city materialism acted as another

powerful modifier" (297). It seemed this would be the end of ghosts in England but in the late Victorian period, the séances and table rapping became popular and the ghosts were also treated as a subject of scientific inquiry. Then the First World War came and "the huge number of fatalities . . . stunned people once again into belief in the supernatural. The phenomenon of table rapping, which had been on the verge of dying out, suddenly became popular again" (299). Current belief differs wildly from person to person; however:

> communal tradition shapes our expectations of how ghosts manifest themselves. Hence even a memorate is likely to include details highlighted because they fit a stereotype (e.g. a drop in temperature, sounds of footsteps, an animal refusing to approach the eerie place), and these become more numerous as the story spreads into the community as rumour. (Simpson and Roud, "Ghosts")

These rumours then have the potential to solidify into legends, local or even more widespread.

When it comes to dealing with ghosts, there are several traditions in folklore. Some "imply that there is nothing the living can do to lay the ghost to rest," others state that ghosts "depart once whatever is troubling them has been dealt with," and "there is a third group of traditions from Oxfordshire, south-west England and English counties bordering on Wales, where ghost-laying is a conflict of wills between an exorcist and a stubborn, malevolent spectre" (Simpson and Roud, "Laying Ghosts").

Ghosts in KJ Charles's novels are mostly of the kind which Peter Underwood, English parapsychologist, categorized in his taxonomy as "traditional or historical ghosts," i.e. "souls of the dead, aware of the living and able to interact with them" (Underwood qtd. in Clarke 18; Clarke 20). They return either to warn or guide the living or "to show their disapprobation if their earthly remains or the sanctity of the dead were disturbed" (Davies 4). Aside from reflecting the history of ghosts, especially the stereotypes used in ghost stories and the upsurge of belief after WWI, Charles also uses the ghosts to give voice to the silenced.

The most ghost-oriented of the analyzed novels is The *Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal*, a nod to both Sherlock Holmes[6] stories and Victorian ghost stories. The novel consists of several short stories framed by letters from Robert Caldwell, the narrator of the story and a journalist by profession, to his editor. Robert, similarly to John Watson, has been writing and publishing stories about his friend Simon Feximal, a ghost-hunter. The set of short stories in *TSCoSF*, however, is different. They are to be passed to the editor after Robert's death, for they record the true life of Robert and Simon together, which Robert had declined to write before "because it is a story too private to be truthfully recounted, and memory too precious to be falsified" (*TSCoSF* 1). The collection began with just one story of their first encounter but the need to tell the story was too strong not to continue: "For two decades, we have been

[6] "There would, after all, be no detective fiction without the ghost fiction that preceded it, something that ardent spiritualist Arthur Conan Doyle knew only too well. Sherlock Holmes is all about the rational explanation of the uncanny; he is awfully like a ghost-hunter" (Clarke 324).

everything to one another, yet to the world I am no more than the famed ghost-hunter's friend and chronicler, witness to his deeds. In writing Simon's stories, I have written myself out of my own life. I wonder, Henry, if you can imagine what that is like" (15). The letters framing the narrative highlight the themes of the burden of having to be silent and of the relief of being able to tell the story. These themes reappear in different variants throughout the narrative and the structure of the novel – short stories sent with accompanying letters to the editor – draws attention to the very act of storytelling.

The short stories are written in the tradition of the late Victorian era, which was the "apogee" of the literary ghost stories. In this period, "the stories were steeped in gothic melodrama, with a pronounced sense of madness and derangement. The narratives usually involved someone being put in a haunted room not generally in use, and then, after a night of terror, identifying the spectre from the family portraits" (Clarke 104).[7] *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal* begins exactly like this, in a haunted room in a long-neglected manor, but the tone is different. Robert is describing the presence of a ghost of his ancestor in his inherited property with absolute calm and, what is more important, tolerance. He does not mind "the screams in the night" or "muffled moans" and only calls the ghost-hunter "when the walls began to bleed" (*TSCoSF* 2). In this tolerant streak of his, Robert goes well together with Simon, a professional ghost-hunter with a peculiar *modus operandi*.

[7] For example, *Carnacki, the Ghost Finder* by William Hope Hodgson follows this pattern. Carnacki is borrowed to be one of the minor characters in *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal*.

For Simon gives the ghosts a space to write messages directly on his skin, serves "as their page" and tells their story (*TSCoSF* 8). It is a result of an occult experiment Mr Karswell[8] carried on Simon and his own daughter. Simon cannot refuse to do this – even though the marks gradually wear his skin down – because the ghosts keep coming to him. He is also very serious about the necessity to conclude their stories and to allow them to rest in peace, passionately defending their right to do so and not for the convenience of the haunted: "It is not a matter of making anything go away, Mr. Caldwell. A wrong was done here, a pain caused, a circle opened that has yet to be closed" (*TSCoSF* 5).

The first short story of the novel is queering a classic haunting case in a very in-your-face fashion. As mentioned above, ghosts usually return because of an unfinished business, be it inheritance in the wrong hands or the conviction of a murderer. In this case, Robert's ancestor is haunting the manor because he was shot dead in the middle of intercourse with a man. What the ghost needs to rest in peace is to climax – which he reveals in obscene messages all over Simon's torso – and he achieves that by forcing Simon and Robert into intercourse right in front of his portrait because "'It is very easy for a spirit to direct the actions of the living as it desires, if...' 'If the living share the same desires?'" (*TSCoSF* 11). The ghost, although

[8] Mr Karswell is a character borrowed from M.R. James: "The conclusion of his tale can be found in a somewhat dramatic account by Professor Montague Rhodes James, published under the title 'Casting the Runes'. Professor James's publishers are clearly as shamelessly sensational as my own" (*TSCoSF* 216)

invisible, participates in the intercourse as well and when he climaxes, his story is concluded and the haunting ends.

An encounter with Rat Queen is queered in a similar fashion. Rat Queen is a legend circulating amongst London toshers, people searching for coins and metal in London sewers. Her true appearance is of a rat and she followed toshers in the sewers: "when she saw one that she fancied she would turn into a sexy-looking woman and accost him. If he gave her a night to remember, she would give him luck in his work" and would bit him on the neck so no rat would harm him, but if he talked about her, he would "meet with some horrible accident" (Westwood and Simpson 457). Simon labels her "a spirit of the city" and explains her existence: "The tosher's life is dark and dangerous. They turn to one another, make their community and buttress it with stories, and you know the power stories hold" (*TSCoSF* 170). He says to Robert: "perhaps, were you a tosher, you would have encountered a Rat King instead" and Robert uses it in innuendo "you will be the Rat King to my tosher" (171). However, as the case progresses, Robert, who is not a ghost-hunter but has certain awareness of supernatural, is having visions supplied by the Rat Queen. It culminates when he and Simon have sex and are possessed or influenced by her. They are in their room and at the Thames riverbank at the same time: they "inhaled the smell of sea salt and river rot on the air" (177). Simon bites Robert's neck as Rat Queen would have: "[He] bit down hard on the flesh there, and I came, spilling into the Thames itself like a sacrifice, sobbing his name" (177). This retelling inserts a gay couple into a strictly heterosexual legend and puts them on the same level because the sacrifice

works, similarly to the already observed situation in the Fens in Chapter 3.1 and to the transfer of power in Chapter 3.4.

All of the ghosts in *TSCoSF* point to some injustice done to them, be it a murder, a stolen gift or being buried alive by mistake. Even in a story featuring a ghost of Dando (a Cornwall variant of a Wild Hunt legend), "a wicked priest . . . who went hunting on Sundays" and was carried off by the Devil for it and who has been since then "seen or heard galloping across the moors on stormy nights", Dando is the lesser evil compared to the ghost-hunter Dr. Berry, who summoned him and whose *modus operandi* is not to listen to the ghosts, but to extinguish because "any ghost is a manifestation of evil," who "must be sent away howling" (Simpson and Roud, "Wild Hunt", "Dando's Dogs"; *TSCoSF* 53). The ghosts are in the right and the villains are those who disrespect them and deny them their voice.

In *Spectred Isle*, a novel set in the same universe a generation later, the ghosts and attitudes towards them are more varied. Not all ghosts are simply the spirits of the deceased as they were in *TSCoSF*: there are various malignant entities trying to get from the world beneath through the veil that the misuse of magic during the Great War shredded to tatters, for example, the spirit of Geoffrey de Mandeville, who is maybe dead and maybe alive (see Chapter 3.1). Several real-world urban legends and myths are used in the novel. Some are acknowledged to be fake but they create a space through repeated telling that allows the entities from the world beneath to fill it up and, in turn, to make the myth real.

One example is the famous Cock Lane ghost. In reality, the Cock Lane ghost is a well documented eighteen-century fraud and "'Cock Lane' was the cynical cry when new knocking ghosts came to the attention of the press" (Davies 83). Charles uses it to demonstrate the strength of storytelling, belief and collective memory, for "Henry Mayhew noted that a ballad of the Cock Lane ghost was still being sold on the streets of London nearly a century after the affair" (234). When it comes to the attention of the Green Men that something wrong is happening there, Randolph sneers: "given the state of this ghost-raddled city, it takes a special gift to spend a day on one of the few manifestations that *doesn't* exist" (*SI* 16, original italics). However, it quickly transpires that "Now it's real. . . . Malice, accusation, a mood of growing discomfort and distrust among neighbours" (16). An entity, "a malignant thing that felt spiteful and ancient" and "filled a ghost-shaped hole in the street's belief" (24, 27).

The second example is the Angels of Mons legend, "in which archers from the 1415 Battle of Agincourt appeared to help the beleaguered British Army in 1914" (Clarke 10). The legend has its origin in a short story "The Bowmen" by Arthur Machen. It was published on 29 September 1914 but quickly began to spread as a real story. Machen himself was appalled but it could not be stopped: "by spring 1915 it was becoming unpatriotic not to believe in the Angels of Mons (219). Charles, in line with the strong anti-war message of the novel, effectively dismisses this "scenario straight out of late-Victorian England, a mix of parish piety and imperial flag-waving" (Clarke 230). She does that by transforming it into the story of the greed of the powers that be:

> Oh, my friend, those weren't angels. That was the first Great Summoning. We started it there, the British. We – arcanists who ought to have known better, under direction of generals who ought to have been shot – we summoned things that should never have been in unimaginable quantities. And we ripped the veil to shreds. (*SI* 95)

Here, the generals do not shy away from capitalizing on the occult, same as in reality they capitalized on technology and sacrificed people.

Another stereotype that gets subverted is of the silent or moaning female ghost. When the two main characters are trapped in the Fens (see the detailed analysis of the Fens as a liminal place in Chapter 3.1), the ghost of Randolph's cousin Theresa can find them and approach them because they are "in a borderland, where it was easier for her to meet" them (*SI* 161). In life, Theresa was a strong woman with agency, a suffragist, uncaring of her reputation, and continues to be so even after her death. Her mission is to set things right and her ghost is certainly not silent. She makes a decision that Randolph has been unable to make due to the heroic self-sacrificing trait imposed on him since his childhood. He has been deaf to arguments from his friends and colleagues and unable even to consider breaking the tradition:

> "All I have to justify investing myself Walker in her place is that I'm a Glyde with twenty-three generations of service behind me; someone else wouldn't even have that."

> "Then someone else needs to start again from scratch," Sam said. "It's no good telling me about hereditary responsibilities when you're all out of heredity." (51)

Theresa's ghost comes both to rebuke him and relieve him: "You are not the Walker. . . . Not with the Words. You can't carry it all. It's a little arrogant to try" (136). She makes Saul the Walker against Randolph's will because it has to be done.

There is one more separate instance of queering in the novels. In the *Green Men* universe, seers are often non-binary. Jo, the adoptive child of Simon and Robert, is one of them: "Jo, like many of the greatest seers, was neither man nor woman in the conventional sense, and should be referred to as 'they'" (*SI* 18). The current debate over personal gender pronouns and the refusal of some people to acknowledge them contrasts with the *TSCoSF* and *SI* characters' easy acceptance and effort to work it out linguistically, even though it is a novelty for them: "As we were to learn, neither 'he' nor 'she' is quite appropriate for that remarkable person; I prefer to do violence to grammar rather than insult to nature, and use a singular 'they'" (*TSCoSF* 222). Some achieve not so great results but not for lack of trying: "'What did they say?' Randolph asked. 'How is they?' added Barney, who did his best" (*SI* 18).

There is a ghost in *A Charm of Magpies* series as well and the interaction with him belongs to the third category mentioned above, "a conflict of wills between an exorcist and a stubborn, malevolent spectre" (Simpson and Roud, "Laying Ghosts"). Stephen, the man who deals with the ghost, is not a ghost-hunter or an exorcist, but a practitioner of magic and his primary goal is to banish the ghost, no matter how

temporarily. The ghost is a spirit of Crane's violent and abusive older brother and Stephen's focus is on protecting Crane, so he does not realize the ghost is trying to communicate that his grave was opened and his head taken until it is too late and they are in lethal danger: "'I think someone has taken his head,' Stephen said. 'I don't believe his ghost just happened to start walking. I think someone took his skull and he wants it back" (*TML* 144).

Whereas *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal* asks what happens when the story is not told and who gets hurt by the silence, *Spectred Isle* shows what happens when the story is told too often, usurping the space in the collective memory and replacing the truth. Finally, the encounter with the ghost and the subsequent events in *The Magpie Lord* demonstrate the results of banishing a ghost without listening to what it has to say. Apart from the theme of storytelling power and silence, there are several more directly queered ghost encounters in *TSCoSF* and *SI*, effectively introducing queer characters to traditionally heteronormative folklore stereotypes.

3.4 Magpies

The reputation of magpies (as well as other corvids – e.g. crows, ravens) in folklore is deeply ambivalent, not only between cultures but also within the English folklore itself. The ambivalence is already obvious in the most popular piece of folklore connected to magpies, the rhyme *One for sorrow, two for joy*. This rhyme "is well known all over the country, although presumably not believed. The divination depends on the number of birds seen; there are numerous variations, although nearly all agree that *one* magpie is bad but *two* are good" (Simpson and Roud, "Magpie", original italics). However, "magpie omens go back to medieval times. Sometimes they are favourable, for example, that the chattering means that guests or strangers are coming . . . ; more often not . . . . This is especially so if the bird is flying around, or perching on, a house where someone is ill" because it would "signify their imminent demise" (Simpson and Roud, "Magpie"; Frisby 200). Subsequently, there are many recipes, as well known as the rhyme itself, on how to avert the evil upon seeing one magpie, e.g. drawing a cross, spitting over one's shoulder, bowing, wishing it a good day, or enquiring about its significant other (Simpson and Roud, "Magpie").

The ambivalence of a magpie as a symbol stems from the belief that "supernatural power is regarded as liable to express itself either benevolently or malevolently, and often, unpredictably. Consequently, a supernatural bird may foretell, or indeed bestow, weal or woe" (Armstrong, ch. 5). Animals, in general, are "often considered to act as meaningful links, able to mediate in intellectual exchange between the worlds of men, gods and animals" (Hooke 11). Birds in particular are

often portrayed as psychopomps, "conductors of souls to the afterworld" (Duncan and Hawkins 24). In the United Kingdom, it was believed that "the souls of dead humans were reincarnated as birds," however, "birds as crows, ravens and magpies were condemned as diabolical by the missionaries who brought Christianity to Britain" because of their black/dark feathers that symbolised darkness, "thus black birds came to be considered familiars of witches" (24). The eating habits of the corvids do not help their reputation: for example "the belief that ravens (and other corvine birds) peck out the eyes of their victims" is supported by corvids' omnivorousness and feeding, among others, on carrions and young birds (Armstrong, ch. 5).

Although the thesis focuses on English folklore, for the analysis of *A Charm of Magpies* series it is significant (given that Crane, the main character, returned to England after twenty years in Shanghai, wearing seven magpie tattoos) that in China, contrary to England, a magpie is a symbol of happiness. There is a legend called "Weaving Maid and the Cowherd", in which the two lovers, who were turned into stars for their forbidden relationship, are allowed "to meet once each year via a bridge made from magpies" that spans over the Heavenly River on the seventh night of the seventh lunar month (Raitisoja). This legend is not hinted at in *A Charm of Magpies* series; however, its knowledge enhances the ambivalence of the magpie as a symbol.

Magpies are firmly woven into the main trilogy of *A Charm of Magpies* series. Crane is a descendant of a powerful magician, the Magpie Lord, whose powers were

tied to magpies. The birds have been following his descendants around and when the dormant power is awaken by combining Crane's blood with Stephen's magical power, they begin to serve to and protect both Crane and Stephen. The transfer of the Magpie Lord's power can be realized through "blood, bone and birdspit" (i.e. i.e. through blood contact, bone magic, or intercourse), which is "a deep-rooted old and strange type of magic that could tap the massive power inherent to Crane's bloodline" (*ACoP* 26). Although the first transfer of power between Crane and Stephen is made through blood in contact with the Magpie Lord's ring, the intercourse transfer works just as well. This goes against the heteronormative view in two ways.

First, it is implied that had Crane and Stephen overcome their moral and other qualms and succumbed to their desire for each other sooner, they could have avoided the confrontation with the villains in which they were almost killed: "'So it came down to blood, bone and birdspit in the end?' 'Indeed.' 'Does that mean, if you'd just come to bed last night–' 'Probably'" (*TML* 167). This contradicts the cautionary folktales about the danger of acting on one's desires (see e. g. Scottish ballad *Tam Lin*). It is a positive affirmation of sexual freedom, the right of a person to choose who to bed and when as long as it is consensual.

Second, the fact that the transfer of power works through sexual intercourse between two men goes against "the denigration of homosexuality on the grounds that it (unlike heterosexuality) is a sterile or non-reproductive, and unnatural relationship . . . anathematic to 'the family' as the cornerstone of heteronormativity, and, by association, to blood (lines) as that which enable(s) the passing on of private

property and racial purity" (Sullivan 52). Not only do the magpies / the Magpie Lord's power perceive Crane and Stephen's intercourse as natural (which is proven by the fact the transfer works), but also the birdspit transfer is presented as less dangerous and (obviously) way more pleasant than the blood and bone alternatives. It is also less questionable even in the eyes of the magical law enforcers: blood and bone magic are the definition of warlockry, forbidden and persecuted, whereas "the justiciary [an authority that polices the use of magic] have no obligation to investigate normal, unskilled crimes, as such" (*ACoP* 29). Furthermore, the result of the birdspit transfer is, ultimately, the passing on of private property, although in this case, the property is immaterial magical power.

The ambivalence of the magpie in folklore is used in the trilogy on several levels. The most obvious is the rhyme with its alternation between good and bad omens. The doubts whether the rhyme had been actually believed or not are also reflected. The rhyme is omnipresent in the series. Each of the main novels begins with two variants of the rhyme, thus ensuring the reader will be conditioned to look for them in the story. The novels play with the rhyme constantly, usually in a humorous tone and/or sexual innuendos, as when Crane shows his tattoos to Stephen: "'the other two are lower down,' said Crane. 'Two for joy'" and "Seven for the secret never to be told. . . . Actually, I just ran out of useful space" (*TML* 23). Later on, when Crane persuades Stephen to have intercourse against the window in his London flat and they see seven magpies outside, Crane says: "Seven for the witch" (i.e. Stephen) to which Stephen replies "Seven for the devil his own self" (i.e. Crane)

(*TML* 181). In other instances, the use of the rhyme foreshadows the imminent threats: "a trio of the birds strutted in front of the three men. 'Three for a funeral,' he muttered. 'This is a mausoleum'" (*TML* 37). Even Crane, who has been regarding the birds as pests, cannot help but reflect: "Ten for a dance? . . . Or ten for a dearth? Was it a warning? The magpies had been right too often for Crane to disregard the possibility. If he faced a dearth of allies, he and Stephen were probably going to die" (*FoM* 144).

The rhyme, however, is also used literally in the dramatic finale of the first book. Seconds away from being tortured and killed, Stephen, wearing the Magpie Lord's ring, realizes he needs Crane's blood to wake up the ring's power, bits Crane's lip and calls on the magpies: "'One for sorrow . . . Two for joy . . . Five thousand for justice,' said Stephen, and the magpies of Piper rose off the trees around them in one huge, terrible, boiling cloud of black and white and glittering blue that blotted out the sun. Then the birds descended" (*TML* 163). They follow Stephen's order and help to destroy the villains but the situation is not that straightforward.

In fact, the trilogy's less obvious use of the ambivalence surrounding the magpies is the literal embodiment of the proverb "Fire is a good servant but a bad master". The first signs of this are noticeable from the very beginning. When Stephen finds out that the item inserted into the Judas jack, a device operating on the principle of sympathetic magic, was a magpie feather, it transpires that the Vaudrey family is obsessed by and infused with magpies: "It's the family badge. There are magpies carved all over the house, magpies in family portraits, that sort of thing. My father's –

my – signet ring. The grounds of Piper are infested with the things. Come to that, *piper* is a country word for magpie. It's very much a family symbol" (*TML* 22, original italics). When Crane and Stephen get down to Piper to investigate, it turns out that the family had been actively collecting magpies in china, silverware and tapestry and Lucien's father had a magpie pet when he was a boy (*TML* 39-41). Then Stephen realizes one of the ancestors of the Vaudrey family was the Magpie Lord, "one of the most powerful magicians this country has ever known" and "that explains the magpie compulsion" because "magpies were a key part of his power in some way that I don't pretend to understand, and the people who carry his bloodline and live in his house have been picking up that resonance for *two hundred years* after his death" (*TML* 43-44, original italics).

Crane's childhood was very unhappy. He was bullied by his cruel brother to the point of breaking his leg in the door, he rebelled against his awful family and in the end, he was sent away to China by his father with the hope he would die there, as much for his rebelling as for his homosexuality. And yet, it is him who collects magpies in the most extreme and intimate way: he has them tattooed all over his body. It is important to remember that getting a tattoo in nineteenth-century Shanghai is a completely different experience than getting a tattoo now. Crane himself describes it as "extremely painful" (*FoM* 197). He is, however, deeply offended when Stephen points this out:

> "You hate your family. You loathe this house. You were five thousand miles away and never coming back. You could have chosen any design you liked. And

> you still felt compelled to etch magpies into approximately a quarter of your skin."
>
> . . . "I chose to have my tattoos," said Crane, with a flare of anger that took Stephen by surprise. "I chose them. I don't know what you're suggesting but I didn't get them done at the command of some long-dead warlock–" (*TML* 44)

Crane is fighting against the predetermination of his actions by his ancestors because it is unacceptable for him. He managed to claw his way back from an absolute hell of poverty and degradation *in spite of* his father's intentions, thanks to only his will and determination (and with the help of his manservant, who was originally supposed to kill Crane). Tampering with his mind is triggering for him, no matter the intentions.

The magpies begin to assert their will right after the powers of the ring are awoken but at that time the birds' will is in harmony with the main characters'. When the birds help to defeat the villains, Stephen explains why they killed one of them in particular: "'The magpies had him.' 'Why?' 'He made the charnel posture [a grotesque statue made from body parts of dead Vaudrey family members to channel the magical power], I think. They didn't like that.' . . . 'The magpies took the remains. They'll have burial under the sky. I think probably the birds know what's best for Vaudreys, in Piper'" (*TML* 167).

The magpies protect Crane and Stephen, have saved their lives and spared them inconveniences several times but with each use of Magpie Lord's magic, the ring, which Stephen is wearing, becomes more powerful, "responsive . . . alert" (*FoM* 120). It damages a man who steals it: just having it in his possession ages him and

when he uses it, a white streak appears in his hair. What is worse, this is done without Stephen's or Crane's knowledge or volition.

The magpies are gradually imposing more and more of their/Magpie Lord's will and presence over the two men, culminating in the final confrontation of the trilogy when Crane puts on the ring for the first time and his and Stephen's mind are joined into one with the Magpie Lord's. His will is so strong that it is almost impossible to take the ring off and, ultimately, it is the strength of friendship between Stephen and Esther, his colleague and one of the two people to whom Stephen has been able to come out, that manages to overcome it:

> The Magpie Lord's blood surged at that – *who are you to give orders, you will not take this from me* – but even as his anger rose, Stephen struck out from within, forcing his own submerged, separate determination over the roiling power. The Magpie Lord's indomitable, arrogant will hit Stephen's own, dead on, but nobody would harm Esther while Stephen lived, and he stood immovable against the wave of command that rolled over him and broke. (*FoM* 158, original italics)

Stephen later reflects that "It made me something that I'm not and you're not" (*FoM* 171). It is decided then to seal the ring in iron and put it into a bank vault to avoid having this happen again. For Stephen, it means yielding a source of immense power but he does not need it anyway (the role of magic in the otherwise socially and physically unequal relationship between Crane and Stephen will be discussed in Chapter 3.5).

This narrative arc is reflected, although a bit more light-heartedly, in the behaviour of Crane's tattoos. As mentioned he had seven magpies tattooed. When the transfer of power through intercourse happens for the first time, the two lovers are startled to find out that the tattoos are moving between them. At first, it is a source of joy and fun as they bicker over one tattoo that stubbornly insists on staying on Stephen's body. But as the ring comes to life and gathers power, the tattoos begin to behave unpredictably, inconveniently moving even outside of the aftermath of the bedroom activities. Ultimately, it is the ink from the tattoos that is transformed into a weapon attacking the villain in the final battle of the trilogy. As a consequence, all the tattoos except one on Crane's back and one on Stephen's shoulder disappear. For Crane, that means a loss of memories but for them as a couple, it opens "future spinning out before both of them without certainty, an endless choice of paths now. . . . A new start. Quite literally a clean slate" (*FoM* 172). They can act for themselves without the influence of the magpies and without questioning whether their acts are truly their own.

The ambivalence of the magpie as a symbol in folklore reflected in the rhyme is used by Charles to point out the issue of free will versus predetermination by heredity and tradition. The magpies invade not only Crane's body in the form of tattoos but also his relationship with Stephen as they are woven into Crane's bloodline and their power transfers through intercourse. The fact that the birdspit transfer of power works between them, on the other hand, goes against the presumption of homosexual intercourse as non-productive and unnatural.

3.5 Magic and Witchcraft

A Dictionary of English Folklore provides the following definition of magic: "Magic assumes there are non-material connections between material objects" (Simpson and Roud, "Magic"). Frazer "usefully divided it into 'sympathetic' or 'imitative' magic, where the action performed or object used resembles the result desired ('like causes like'), and 'contagious' magic, where something once in contact with a person provides a link through which he or she can be helped or harmed" (Frazer qtd. in Simpson and Roud, "Magic"). It can be also divided into black and white magic (from the moral point of view), or high and low magic, where high means ritual (or ceremonial) magic, which "flourished in late medieval and Renaissance times, and was revived by occultists at the close of the 19th century. Its aim was to summon and control angels or demons, by incantations and pentacles" (Simpson and Roud, "Magic"). Low magic was folk practice, most often performed by cunning (wise) men and women, who "were called upon to heal sickness in humans or animals, to detect and punish thieves, look into the future, give information about people far away, cast horoscopes and tell fortunes, and to procure love" and also to diagnose witchcraft (Simpson and Roud, "Cunning Men").

Witchcraft, i.e. "using magic to harm humans, farm animals, or property," on the other hand, was "a social construction not a reality" and "the phenomenon is seen as essentially one of belief-systems, stereotyping, rumour, and social pressures; debate now centres on the interaction of upper-class and popular attitudes, and of prejudice against women" (Timbers 112; Simpson and Roud, "Witchcraft"). In

popular perception, witchcraft in England is tied to the witch hunts and trials of the 16th century. The reason for such an outbreak is best explained from the anthropological point of view:

> . . . witchcraft gave early modern people a way to explain the inexplicable. Witchcraft accusations served a purpose in the community, which could help deal with grief and anger. In the face of repeated outbreaks of plague, constant war, bad weather that affected crops, the subsequent diseases associated with famine and malnutrition, and religious rivalry, the idea of satanic conspiracy made sense. (Timbers xii)

The extraordinarily inventive descriptions of the sabbath – "discordant music, nasty food, backward dancing, and taboo sex" – were based on inversion, well known from the carnival, "a period of excess prior to the abstinence of Lent" (75).

The difference between high and low magic (and witchcraft) is also divided along the combination of class, education, gender and urban-countryside axes: "For the most part, the techniques attributed to witches did not require literacy, and most of the accused, who were female, were not trying to practise any sorcery," whereas "magicians were almost exclusively educated, elite men, including aristocrats, physicians, clerics and lawyers" (Timbers 112). Unsurprisingly, "social status, determined by gender, education, and wealth, had protected magicians from the stake" (166).

These differences are reflected and commented on in *A Charm of Magpies* universe. There is a difference between high and low magic, the latter being mostly

referred to as craft. The two seem to be distributed similarly to the real world. High magic tends to be practised more in the cities, by both men and women (with men in the slight majority) of the upper and middle class, although talented poor kids are sometimes taken into an apprenticeship. It is held in high regard – by the practitioners themselves. It results in them acting according to their own morality and justice, which is, however, in some instances tied to the class and power: the more powerful, the more above law they feel to be. Craft is practised usually by people (women in the majority) of the lower class in the countryside and considered simpler than practice, with or without pejorative meaning. When Stephen fights the Judas jack (a wooden device working on the principle of sympathetic magic), he has trouble figuring it out until he realizes: "I'm making this too complicated. This is craft. Wood, blood and birdspit" (*TML* 14). Craft is not the same thing as witchcraft. Craftsmen/craftswomen (or witches) can be respectable and respected in their communities.

The use of magic is observed and policed by the justiciary, which is in turn responsible to the Council. Inevitably, "nobody likes the justiciary, sticking our noses into other people's business and telling our betters what to do" (98). It is acknowledged that countryside practice is even less controllable than urban practice – "In the cities, there's more danger but that means people understand more. Here, they just do what they like and treat the law like it's for other people" (98). However, it is also shown that countryside practice does not equal witchcraft and that malicious intent might come from elsewhere, as when the idea of making a Judas jack

to target the Vaudrey family was planted by a warlock in the disturbed mind of a craftswoman grieving the death of her daughter: “She had a good reputation all her life, and that wasn’t a warlock’s home” (144). Stephen speculates: “I expect he was the one who got Gammer to make the jack, in fact. Haining refuses Ruth decent burial, Baines is full of sympathy… Easy enough to steer her, half mad with rage and grief” (146). Her motive would be grief, whereas the warlock’s motive is greed for power.

The problem with abuse of power does not concern only warlocks, i.e. magicians on the wrong side of the law. In extreme cases, a justiciar can act as judge, jury and executioner in one. This is a dangerous amount of power in the hands of one person and it can be abused, if only by being too sure of their right to act. This is obvious in the spin-offs, because “nobody is the villain in their own version of the story” (“A Conversation” 00:12:33-36). In the main trilogy, it is easy to agree with Stephen because he is trying his best to be moral and just and he is pitted against horrible villains. In the spin-offs, he is seen from the point of view of other people (or even of those villains) and his decisions are suddenly more obviously black and white. In *Rag and Bone*, the main character Crispin, a young practitioner, who was turned warlock by his master without his consent and now is trying to learn how to do magic lawfully under the watchful eye of the justiciary, wonders “how the justiciary did it. Stephen Day hadn’t looked uncertain, storming through the Council halls, gripping a warlock’s severed head by the hair. How did anyone feel that sure of their actions?” (97).

In *Jackdaw*, Stephen actually acknowledges that he is abusing his power when he and his friends manage to hunt down Jonah, the villain from the main trilogy, in order to take revenge on him for recklessly endangering Crane's life: "I'm not a justiciar any more. I'm acting as a private citizen. . . . If you're planning to challenge my authority, don't. You know what my authority is" (185). At the protests that authority based on being stronger is not just, he replies: "That's practitioners for you. It's why a practitioner who goes bad must be stopped, one way or another" (185). This sentiment is shared by Randolph in *Spectred Isle*: "In our line of work, when people go bad, they go spectacularly bad. Power corrupts and all that" (*SI* 186). And it is even worse when the magical power is combined with the class privilege.

Class differences are observed even amongst practitioners. Being a justiciar was initially meant to be "an appointment of honour" but now it is "a job you give the misfits and the ones who can't pay for training" (*TML* 98). Being a justiciar "is ghastly, thankless, dangerous and badly paid," on the other hand, it is also a place to hide for one reason or another, as Stephen explains when he tries to hire Crispin, a former accidental warlock, and Ned, a waste-man and non-practitioner who can hear magic: "People want to think they know who you are. Well, if you're a justiciar, that *is* who you are. You develop your talents, we use them, it becomes normal, you have a place to fit. Nobody thinks twice about you any more . . . Some of us find it convenient not to be noticed" (*RaB* 155, 153, original italics). After the changes in the Council brought by the exposition of the villains amidst the members, the misfits are hired exactly because they do not fit and are not ready to bow to the authority: "'You see,

the justiciary needs an obstinate, pig-headed misfit,' . . . 'We *need* different. . . . We need uncertain. We need seeing other people's points of view, and wondering if you're right after all'" (154, original italics).

Even before the purge in the Council, magic sometimes outweighed class. In the justiciary, talent is the only thing Stephen has to balance his circumstances, to help him to become a senior justiciar and head of his team, and also – just barely – to have an upper hand over his *betters*: "Stephen's talents outstripped Fairley's to an almost embarrassing degree, but he was a son of a provincial nobody who had died destitute; Fairley was the son of a baronet" (*TML* 33). The entire plot of the series hinges on the fact that those on the upper rungs of the social ladder stand together and the villain was let loose to do as she wished: "it was my word and Esther's, we had no conclusive proof. And they were well born, well connected. . . . Some quite senior people . . . don't believe she's a warlock, even now" (*FoM* 66).

Magic (and related danger, as Crane is attracted to "the dark thrill of fucking a very dangerous man") is also the only thing Stephen initially thinks he has to offer in the relationship with Crane (*TML* 171). He considers himself to have "limited personal attractions," he is skinny, small and poor, while Crane is an embodiment of privilege, which in his case was hard-won, but the origin does not matter – the difference does (178). Merrick, Crane's henchman and best friend, observes:

> . . . you might think you're treating someone as an equal, but you ain't. Because, my lord earl, when you're bigger and older and richer and all that and you're naturally a domineering sod, maybe that person don't feel equal, no matter

> what you might reckon. . . . plus you don't give a shit about anyone knowing you like blokes. The biggest problem he's got and for you it's *nothing.* He's terrified, you couldn't give a monkey's. And you're all, like, 'I'll buy this, I'll dress you, I'll fix it, I'm in charge' . . . that bloke is held by spit and pride, and if you take away his pride– (*ACoP* 69, original italics)

Merrick points out the fact that Stephen has several reasons to be constantly in control of himself and not to show any weakness, to the point that he is perceived by others as "terrifying" and "intimidating":

> He'd spent so much of his life learning not to indulge his emotions – undersized boys did well to keep quiet, and his powers had come on him when he was just thirteen, meaning endless exercises in self-control, and then it hadn't been long before he'd become aware of his attraction to men, and that had been yet another thing to hide. The power that prickled through his hands had made it impossible for him to take lovers who weren't practitioners unless he wore gloves throughout to avoid betraying himself, and that was scarcely sustainable. (*RaB* 5, 35; *FoM* 71).

Stephen has to hide his magic from his lovers and his lovers from the law, thus there is no place he can be fully himself and accepted as such. Meeting Crane is a revelation because not only he is of the same inclination but also he is not repulsed by Stephen's magical hands – on the contrary.

However "implacable, indomitable and, frankly, terrifying in the exercise of his duties" he is, Stephen has "a definite appetite for authoritative treatment in bed"

(*TML* 185). He can lend the control to someone else, safe in the knowledge he can kill with a thought, his magical powers serving as consent and a safeword. As his trust in Crane grows, he allows himself to indulge his submission kink even more and to let go of his powers entirely by having Crane put iron cuffs on him. Iron prevents practitioners from using their powers, in accordance with "a widespread, and ancient, belief that iron is an effective protection against witches, fairies, the Devil, and other sorts of evil or troublesome beings" (Simpson and Roud, "Touching Iron"). For Stephen, however unpleasant the sensation of being cut off from his powers is, "like having a bag drawn tight over one's head – airless, unnatural, cutting off all sensation," it also means setting aside the pressure of responsibility and obligations connected to those powers (*FoM* 116).

Magic in *A Charm of Magpies* series is used to draw attention to power imbalances and privilege based on gender and class, mirroring not only the difference between the concepts of magic and witchcraft but also the real-life social inequality. It also explores the issue of morality and justice in the hands of individuals. Last but not least, it is used to highlight the need to hide a part of oneself from society and the resulting strain.

3.6 Found Family and Folklore

Folklore by definition requires community, someone to pass the lore on. In the folklore studies, this community is called a *folk group* and defined as "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor" – it can be a family, a group of friends, members of a certain profession or a nation, "basically anything that unites people and generates a shared cultural understanding" (McNeill 4, Dundes 2). In turn, communities produce folklore, be it accidentally or by a conscious effort because those shared stories, customs and rituals unite the community.

One specific kind of community often to be found in romance, especially in those romance novels, whose protagonists do not for any reason fit into the society, is a so-called *found family* (or *family of choice*): "the supportive family we adopt outside our biological family" (Stitt 183). To its members, found family usually substitutes missing real family and provides "connection, adoption and kinship" and a safe space to deal with trauma and to be themselves without judgement (373). Their real families could be dysfunctional, missing or could have disowned them for their queerness or other reasons. The protagonists often do not fit into larger communities (school, work, army, society in general) or are rejected from them. Queer community, depending on the time, could be nonexistent, inaccessible or could gate-keep people who do not fit their definition.

Folklore is important for found family. It is "one of the strategies commonly employed to give a sense of tradition, and hence identity to participants in the network" (Bronner 25). Because there are no tales and traditions passed on from one

generation to another in the found family, the members have to invent them in order to create ties that in a real family exist naturally from a shared history. It could be done by sharing stories by individual members that had happened before they joined their found family or it could arise from a repeated recounting of the events they experienced together. In queer found families, the members can also identify with ancestors and contemporaries who share their sexuality, gender or preferences. In the period the analyzed novels are set in, the happy queer history was not readily available and "to an invisible man, any reflection is a consolation", thus:

> Police raids and famous trials . . . could even have an encouraging effect. They proved that like-minded people existed and that not all 'sodomites' lived in fearful isolation. Legal-medical textbooks and newspaper reports were the unwitting media of a virtual community, a society of strangers that was informed of its own existence by its persecutors. Even a horrific case like the Vere Street scandal of 1810 could be a consolation and a rallying-cry. (Robb 227, 34)

It is for this reason that when in *Spectred Isle* Saul is told Simon and Robert – the hero and the author of books Saul loved in his youth – were a pair and their relationship lasted long years, he is beyond thrilled: "It was huge, and he wasn't sure why. He'd loved the stories but that wasn't it. It was the possibility; the knowledge that men like him had found each other for whole lives, not stolen hours" (188). It is also the reason why Robert could not stop just at one story and wrote the entire book about his and Simon's relationship.

For the members of found families in both *SI* and *TSCoSF*, folklore is a reality they live in or they *are* folklore elements themselves. The already existing found families adopt (a) new member(s), who have to be initiated to the occult trade and to go through one or more rites of passage (see Chapter 3.1) and that is quite enough to create the sense of belonging through shared experiences.

In *TSCoSF*, Robert becomes a part of a household shared by Simon and his sister (not by blood) Theodosia Kay. Simon and Theodosia are united by suffering. They both served as subjects to occult experiments by Theodosia's father Karswell. He etched ink into Simon's skin and Theodosia's fingernails, making them his tools for divination. When they grew up, they rebelled, poisoned his tea and took the house in exchange for an antidote. When messages on Simon's body begin to bleed through as the skin wears down and Simon is slowly dying, Robert begs malicious Karswell for help and had a cartouche implanted in his hand in order to be able to act as Simon's lightning conductor, thus he is united in suffering with the rest of his found family.

Towards the end of the novel, Simon and Robert adopt two orphans, Sam and his sibling Jo, a non-binary soothsayer. The found family is torn apart by the war: Jo has been spirited abroad to prevent the government from using their divination skills. Simon and Robert, who were blackmailed into the service by the Shadow Ministry as an act of revenge for hiding Jo, are listed as missing in action with no bodies found, and Theodosia disappears in Naples, although in the note from Robert's editor that closes the novel it is strongly implied – and, given the genre's need for

HEA/HFN, almost certain – that: "it is possible that Miss Kay vanished with a purpose, and a destination. Some little Mediterranean cottage, perhaps, far from the world's notice. A place where a bright-eyed gentleman and his older companion might live in ghostless quiet, and spend their days together watching the sunlight on the sea" (237). This leaves only Sam staying in the house in Fetter Lane.

In *SI*, Saul has to be accepted first by Camlet Moat, the place he is supposed to protect. The found family into which he is then adopted was created by Sam*,* who "opened the house to the rest of their group because, Randolph suspected, he found its emptiness unbearable" (*SI* 49). Sam offered rooms to Barney and Isaacs, two former soldiers and the only people who survived a military occult experiment intended to create "a battalion of abominations" (222). In their case, having a safe space means that they have to be locked up if they suffer from a fit because they are dangerous to their surroundings during those, but the fact that this is accepted as it is makes them feel as normal as possible:

> And there they were, four chaps at home in their shared lodgings, passing a few idle hours in companionable quiet. Saul was disgraced, Barney and Max were apparently monsters, God knew what Sam might be; and it seemed that none of those things mattered. . . . He had no idea what fresh horrors his bizarre new life might hold, but whatever the price would be, he'd pay it. For acceptance and perhaps even friendship; for a place to fill and a job to do . . . (229; 231-232)

Randolph is also a member of the found family, supports the rest of them financially and was offered a room too, however, he "had no intention of leaving his luxurious and solitary rooms in the Albany, but had joined the Fetter Lane household to the extent of carrying a key" (*SI* 49). The found family is united primarily by their shared mission but also by the PTSD caused by the war and hate for the Government:

> If there was one principle that united their little band, it was refusal to do Government work. The thoroughly decent Barney would unquestionably kill before he let bureaucrats get their soft, unaccountable hands on Isaacs again, while Sam, whose family had been destroyed by the War, regarded the British state with all the hatred of which his cheerful nature was capable. (17)

There is a hint of a military rank structure as the members have varying degrees of occult knowledge and Barney and Isaacs are former soldiers. Their growing friendship and trust are an after-effect of working together in dangerous situations. Saul would not have become a member of their found family if he had not become a Green Man and the Walker of Camlet Moat first.

Neither of these found families cares about the sexual orientation of their members. In *TSCoSF*, Theodosia, asexual herself, "might remark it if I laid you over the dining-room table at suppertime. But only to request that we did not spill her soup. She is not concerned with such things. . . . She would like me to be happy, and she finds you amusing" (122). Sam, Simon and Robert's adoptive son, answers Randolph's question if he minded about them being lovers: "It wasn't up to me to mind. Uncle Simon and Uncle Robert belonged together, and it was nobody else's

business” (*SI* 56). When Sam welcomes Saul to Fetter Lane, he tells him: “nobody will give a damn if Randolph’s here for breakfast, or indeed if you’re not. . . . I’d call it the bare minimum. Anyway, we’d all like to see Randolph happy, if only because he doesn’t half spread it around when he’s not” (230). It is because the concept of found family, in general, is based on acceptance and also because after facing occult horrors and beings that other people consider to be mere folk tales, the mundane laws lose their significance.

A Charm of Magpies is the series in which the creation of folklore within the found family is the most prominent because said found family is newly created. In the main trilogy, the found family consists of Lord Crane, his lover and practitioner Stephen Day, Crane’s manservant and henchman Merrick, Merrick’s wife-to-be Jenny Saint (a windwalker who was also Stephen’s student at the justiciary) and later Merrick and Jenny’s newborn daughter Lucy. Although there are two romantically involved pairs, the core of the found family is Crane and Merrick, as they have known each other the longest, have lived in close quarters for decades and have saved each other’s lives countless times. The adventurous stories of their life in Shanghai create a repository to which new stories are added as the found family members experience them together.

In the short story “Feast of Stephen”, the two pairs spend Christmas in the privacy of Crane’s secluded hunting box and Crane, who is aware he is a skilled storyteller, uses the storytelling technique consciously and purposefully to draw Jenny – a poor, illiterate girl, who is intimidated by him and his illicit relationship

with her former boss and tutor – into their circle and to include her in their found family. First, he tries to dress her in fancy clothes but "it seemed she would continue being herself, regardless of trappings. Which meant two things: that Merrick had made a damned good choice, and that Crane would need to try another tack" (*FoM* 187). Therefore, after a bit of a carol-singing, he and Merrick engage her with an adventurous story back from their life in China, when they were attacked by bandits in the mountains.

The two men are well synchronized in taking turns in the storytelling and it is obvious that they have told this story before. Crane casually includes information about his affair with a man, addressing it directly to Jenny: "'I was not very much older than you then, and in the throes of an affair with a mandarin, which is to say a very rich and powerful man,' he spoke without pause or a particular emphasis. Saint fixed her eyes on her brandy" (*FoM* 189). Merrick and Crane intersperse the narration with merciless jibes at each other and Jenny is enthralled enough to forget herself and tells Crane to shut up, "to Crane's satisfaction" (190). At the end of the story, Jenny is intrigued and demands another one but Crane is determined to draw her all in: "Christmastide by the fire. It's a time for storytelling, and I'm sure you can cap that tale, one way or another. . . . Let's hear it, Miss Saint" (194). Jenny rises to the challenge. The success of Crane's tactic is later confirmed by Stephen: "Jenny had a wonderful time once you finally got her talking. I think this is going to work, you know" (194). To which Crane replies: "And then there were four" (194).

The spin-off *Jackdaw* introduces another peculiar found family: on their run from the justiciary, a windwalker Jonah and former policeman Ben find a shelter in a small village in rural Cornwall. They live and work in an inn, which is run by a widow who has a small daughter. They are well accepted in the village, Jonah working as an aleman in the inn and Ben playing rugby in the local team. However, they keep a secret both Jonah's identity as a windwalker and their illicit relationship. The windwalking ability makes Jonah a folklore element in the universe where magic is not generally known to exist. A revelation has the potential to shatter their small found family. However, the revelation takes place in a storm that threatens to drown two villagers on a boat. Jonah saves the man by windwalking in the storm even though he knows he will be seen by the villagers. As a consequence, his ability unites the entire village as a found family. Stories about Jonah never go beyond the tight village community: "Well, the villagers saw Jonah windwalk and they didn't mind. They think he's some kind of lucky charm or spirit or something, and they don't want him to vanish. They're not gossiping" (*Jd* 183).

When Crane, Stephen and Merricks catch up with Jonah and Ben with an intention of revenge for Jonah's doings in the main trilogy, they are met with a savage resistance from the villagers:

> The adults were all armed, with hayforks, gutting knives, boat hooks, a bristling array of heavy, sharp iron . . .
>
> "This is my inn." Dora had a cleaver in her powerful hand. "My inn and my men and you ain't welcome here, nor you ain't taking 'em anywhere."

> "*Our* men," Bill Penrose grunted. "Bloody incomers. You leave our bucca be."
>
> (*Jd* 180-181, original italics)

The villagers, unfamiliar with the concept of windwalking, associate Jonah with a local folklore element they do know. *Bucca* is "the name of a spirit that in Cornwall it was once thought necessary to propitiate. Fishermen left a fish on the sands for bucca, and in the harvest a piece of bread at lunch-time was thrown over the left shoulder, and a few drops of beer spilled on the ground for him to ensure good-luck" (Courtney 186). Jonah is therefore considered a bearer of good luck for the village and although they do not throw bread to propitiate him, they are determined to defend him at the cost of physical violence. Their dedication helps to avert the revenge.

In Charles's novels, folklore is either used as a cause that brings the found family together in the first place and the shared fate or mission of the members is the uniting force, as seen in the example of the *Green Men* universe novels, or it is created anew as a means to set up a repository of shared stories, thus it is specific and unique for the given found family, rarely leaving its bounds, as in *A Charm of Magpies* series. In the case of *Jackdaw*, Jonah's magical ability and its conversion to a folkloric figure is the reason why his new fragile found family and safe space survive.

4 Conclusion

KJ Charles uses a broad range of (not only) English folklore elements for the world building in her paranormal neo-Victorian M/M novels, rooting the world firmly in the deeply familiar, yet different. These folklore elements are queered to draw attention to the issues of heteronormativity and privilege. Through the analysis of the use of these folklore elements, several recurrent themes have been identified. Some of them are a subtle undercurrent, others more explicit and easily identifiable.

The theme most directly tied to the purpose of the neo-Victorian M/M novels, as defined in Chapter 2.2, is giving voice to the silenced and justice to the wronged. It is most strongly embedded in the ghostly narrative of *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal* but appears in other novels as well. Simon's efforts to tell the story of the ghosts regardless of his own suffering are contrasted with the impossibility to publish stories of their life together to the general public at the time and with the blackmail from the government threatening to expose their illicit relationship.

Closely related to this is the theme of the power of storytelling and the creation of new folklore. The way a story is told matters: the more it is told, the deeper it is rooted in the culture and beliefs of a given society. If the lie is repeated more than the truth, it wins its place in people's beliefs. If the story is not told, it is not remembered. Not only the retelling of the old folktales and invention of new folklore gives voice to the silenced but it can serve as foundations and a bonding agent of found families.

Liminality in folklore often shows the dichotomy of nature versus society. As seen in the example of *Spectred Isle*, nature can be cruel and deadly and demand sacrifices but it does not care about societal norms and laws. It can even offer healing to the worthy, if only under its own conditions. Another dichotomy is tradition versus innovation and individual agency. The temporary dismantlement of structures during the liminal phase allows reflecting whether the tradition and old rites are truly unchangeable or whether there is a – previously unthinkable – possibility of change.

Less complicated and more easily identified direct queering is the use of folklore elements in explicit scenes, as seen in the example of the exorcism by intercourse and the Rat Queen possession in *TSCoSF* and of the magpies and magic power in the bedroom in *A Charm of Magpies* series. It loosens the mysterious atmosphere of old myths and introduces queer couples where folklore is oriented predominantly to heterosexual ones.

Last but not least, the light-hearted use of folklore elements in wordplay, sexual innuendos and situational humour that appears throughout all the analysed novels is something that goes against the usually tragic and/or humiliating end of gay men portrayed in folklore. It is as relevant as the more serious and thought-provoking themes.

Several paths of subsequent research should be possible. It would be interesting to compare Charles's use of folklore with other British authors of neo-Victorian M/M romance to ascertain whether it is typical for the genre or whether it is wholly or partially Charles's individual choice. From this could follow a comparison

of neo-Victorian M/M romance with historical M/M romance set in other countries, especially those which were a part of the former British Empire. The colonial penal code Section 377, criminalizing, among others, consensual homosexual acts, may arise here as another factor that might be reflected in the use of folklore. Finally, on the most general level, a comparison of the use of folklore in M/M and M/F romance novels could bring new insights as well by determining whether M/F romance authors use the subversive potential of folklore to challenge patriarchal stereotypes.

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Résumé

This thesis aims to identify and interpret how the contemporary British author KJ Charles uses and queers English folklore in her M/M neo-Victorian romance novels with paranormal/fantasy elements and to consider the purpose and effect of this method.

The aim of the first part of the thesis is to provide definitions of folklore and modern romance as a genre and to survey the state of research in queer(ing) folklore. This part also describes the method of selection of the analyzed novels and of their reading.

The second part is focused on analysis. The folklore elements identified in the texts are interpreted in the light of their cultural, historical and social background. The analysis is focused mainly on queering in connection to sexuality and gender but includes the question of social inequality and privilege too, as these are often interconnected. Through the analysis, six folklore areas were identified and dealt with in the individual chapters of the analytical part: liminal places, Green Man, ghosts, magpies, magic and witchcraft and the role of folklore in the so-called *found family*.

The thesis identified several themes which appear more or less explicitly throughout the analysed texts: giving voice to the silenced and justice to the wronged, the power of storytelling and creation of new folklore, the dichotomy of nature versus society, the use of folklore elements in explicit scenes, and finally wordplay and innuendos.

Several paths of subsequent research should be possible: to compare Charles's use of folklore with other British authors of neo-Victorian M/M romance, to compare neo-Victorian M/M romance with historical M/M romance set in other countries, especially those which were a part of the former British Empire. It would be also possible to compare the use of folklore in M/M and M/F romance novels.

Resumé

Tato diplomová práce analyzuje použití a tzv. queering anglického folkloru v neo-viktoriánských M/M romancích s paranormálními/fantastickými prvky současné britské autorky KJ Charles a zamýšlí se nad účelem a účinkem této metody.

Záměrem první části práce je vymezit definice folkloru a moderní romance jakožto žánru a zmapovat stav bádání v oblasti queer(ing) folkloru. Tato část také popisuje kritéria a metody výběru analyzovaných knih a jejich čtení.

Druhá část práce se věnuje analýze. Folklorní prvky identifikované v textech jsou interpretovány ve světle jejich kulturního, historického a sociálního pozadí. Analýza je zaměřena zejména na queering ve spojitosti se sexualitou a genderem, ale zahrnuje i otázky sociální nerovnosti a zvýhodnění, protože tyto jsou často vzájemně propojeny. Prostřednictvím analýzy bylo vyčleněno šest folklorních oblastí, kterým jsou věnovány jednotlivé kapitoly analytické části: liminální místa, Green Man, duchové, straky, magie a čarodějnictví a role folkloru v tzv. *found family*.

Výsledkem této části práce je identifikace několika témat, která se v analyzovaných textech opakovaně objevují: navrácení hlasu umlčeným a zadostiučinění těm, kterým bylo ublíženo, síla vypravěčství a vytváření nového folkloru, protiklad přírody a společnosti, použití folkloru v explicitních scénách, slovní hříčky a dvojsmyslné narážky.

Další výzkum je možný v několika oblastech. Nabízí se porovnání použití folkloru v díle KJ Charles s dalšími britskými autory neo-viktoriánských M/M romancí, případně porovnání s M/M romancemi zasazenými do jiných zemí, zejména

bývalých britských kolonií. Také by bylo možné porovnat použití folkloru v M/M a M/F romancích.