

Classical Myth and Margaret Mahy's Young Adult
Fiction

By

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the importance of classical myth in the young adult fiction of Margaret Mahy. Mahy's novels are full of references to classical myths, both direct and indirect, in names of characters like Dido, Ovid, Ariadne or Hero; in storylines such as Flora's journey to the Underworld-like Viridian to rescue her cousin Anthea, strongly reminiscent of Demeter's rescue of Persephone from Hades, which take their inspiration from classical myth; in seemingly incidental references like the persistent comparisons of Sorry to Charon, the classical ferryman of the dead, in *The Changeover*. These references point to a deep engagement with the heritage of classical myth. It is an engagement that has not gone unnoticed by scholars of Mahy's work, but it is one that has not enjoyed the dedicated critical attention it deserves. This thesis explores the full importance of classical myth to Mahy's young adult fiction, and shows how an understanding of the classical background of a large selection of Mahy's major novels can both enhance our appreciation of what is already there, as well as open up new avenues for critical engagement with her work.

Introduction

In yet another retread of the old debate about the relevance of the classics to modern literature and modern life, the English poet Philip Larkin claims that writers have “a duty to be original,” and that employing material from “classical and biblical mythology” fills poetry with “dead spots” (quoted in Miles, 3). If such a “duty to be original,” however, amounts not merely to a wholesale rejection of a significant portion of the Western literary tradition, but to an attempt to carry on as though this part of our literary heritage never even existed, then poetry is not enriched through the excision of “dead spots,” but impoverished. It is, of course, certainly true that classical mythology embodies ideas that we find repugnant today, restrictive and offensive ideas about the role of women, say, and that the stories that make up classical mythology come from a culture and society unimaginably distant from our own, not only in time and space but in its values and ideals. But it is also true, for all that, that classical mythology has had a grip on the Western imagination for millennia like no other set of stories has except, of course, the biblical stories which Larkin also wants us to excise from our imaginations. Whatever Philip Larkin may have thought, the classical myths are a part of our common cultural heritage, and as such, it is impossible not to engage with them on one level or another, even if only to find nothing of worth in them and to reject them. If classical mythology embodies ideas that are offensive, then surely it is important to examine why and how they are offensive, and why and how, despite that, they have managed to exercise the hold they have over the Western imagination. It is enough to ensure the continuing relevance of the classics, in short, that they have been relevant for so long. Literature does not emerge from a vacuum. It exists in social, cultural and institutional contexts that define what ‘literature’ is, and what the appropriate subject matter for literary

material might be. It is important always, therefore, to engage with and if necessary contest what has come before.

This thesis examines the employment of classical allusion in the young adult fiction of Margaret Mahy, and in that fiction there is ample evidence to suggest a deep engagement with the heritage of classical mythology. Mahy's novels abound with references to Greek and Roman myth. Many of her characters have names that point to classical antecedents – Ovid and Ariadne from *The Tricksters*, Hero from *The Other Side of Silence*, Dido from *The Catalogue of the Universe*, to name just a few. Many of her novels are peppered with seemingly incidental references to classical motifs – the repeated references to the classical Underworld in Laura's changeover in the novel of the same title, for instance. There are Latinate and Hellenising names, Flora and Anthea, for example, protagonists of *Dangerous Spaces*, whose names are the Latin and Greek words for flower, respectively, and whose journey to the Underworld-like realm of Viridian is redolent of the story of Persephone's kidnapping by Hades and her mother Demeter's intercession on her behalf.

The ways in which Mahy comes to terms with this material are truly diverse. In *The Changeover* (1984), for example, Mahy mediates her classical material through the theories of Joseph Campbell, as explained in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In this particular instance, the classical material is so intertwined with Campbell's theories that it is impossible to attempt an analysis of the function of either in the novel without explaining the other. Campbell's ideas are of recurring but diminishing significance in several of Mahy's later novels. *Dangerous Spaces* (1991), for example, contains recognisably Campbellian motifs, in the ghost Old Lionel, for instance, who bears a striking resemblance to Campbell's idea of Holdfast, or the ogre-father, who remains alive for longer than his allotted natural span. These motifs are not as

pervasive as they are in *The Changeover*, however, and the novel's classical allusions can be fruitfully read on their own terms as well as being a reflection of some of Campbell's ideas. Even *The Other Side of Silence* (1995), with its suggestively named protagonist Hero, can be read with Campbell in mind. But the very fact of Mahy's eclecticism – novels like *The Tricksters*, for instance, which could sustain several different readings based on everything from Freudian psychoanalysis to Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque – means that to restrict a reading of Mahy's employment of classical allusion to a reading of that classical allusion as mediated through Joseph Campbell's archetypes would be to restrict the range and scope of reading which Mahy's work can sustain. Therefore I explain the obvious importance of Campbell's hero archetype in *The Changeover*, where it really is central to a reading of her employment of classical allusion, while I pursue other readings of her other novels.

If the prisms through which Mahy reads the classical myths are manifold, then so are the uses to which she puts them. She is not engaged, that is to say, in some single-minded pursuit to 'rewrite' classical myths according to a certain agenda. Although, for example, in *The Tricksters*, *The Changeover* and *The Other Side of Silence*, one can detect elements of such a re-writing of their antecedent myths from a feminist perspective, and I do identify the importance of such a perspective where it is noticeable, the significance of the classical allusions in these novels extends far wider than any particular agenda can encompass. My argument is, essentially, that an awareness of the depth and breadth of classical allusion present in Mahy's novels enriches our appreciation of much that is already there, as well as opening up new areas for researchers to explore.

I should outline what I mean by 'classical myth' in the context of this study. By 'classical myth' I mean that body of stories which circulated in classical antiquity,

that is, the period of the Greek and Roman civilisations, first as orally transmitted story and then as literature. The time period I take to be the whole of classical civilisation, from the first written literature to appear in the history of the Western world, that is, the Homeric poems of the eighth century BC, down to the very last pagan authors of the incipient Byzantine Empire, writers like Nonnus and Musaeus of the fifth and sixth centuries AD. Many modern academics have attempted definitions of myth; scholars like Northrop Frye have come up with very specialised definitions of the term. For some purposes, of course, it is very important to define concepts such as ‘myth,’ ‘legend,’ or ‘folktale,’ and to describe the differences between them. My interest, however, is not in studying myth as such, but rather to discuss the application of a specific group of myths to one particular set of novels. To that end, I have simply adopted what I take to be the ‘common sense’ interpretation of the term ‘classical myth.’ It is in this regard perhaps instructive to remember that the Greek word *mythos* originally simply meant ‘story,’ and acquired all its other connotations only later.

Perhaps unusually for a New Zealand author, there is a reasonable body of scholarship already extant about Margaret Mahy. A collection of essays, *Marvellous Codes*, was published in 2005. There have been a number of articles published both in journals and as chapters in article collections, and two postgraduate theses. Mahy criticism has been dominated by three major themes.¹ The most important theme among the criticism has been, probably, adolescence. According to Anna Smith, for example, Mahy’s novels for young adults focus on the adolescent disjuncture between

¹ Apart from the articles gathered in *Marvellous Codes*, Gavin (Gavin and Routledge, 2001), Gose (1991), Jackson (Coats, Jackson and McGillis, 2008), Lawrence Pietroni (1996), Lovell-Smith (Coats, Jackson and McGillis, 2008), Marquis (1987), and Raburn (1992), have all produced articles on facets of Mahy’s work. Leibowitz (1997) and Voorendt (2007) have written theses. In addition, Tessa Duder published a literary biography, *Margaret Mahy: a Writer’s Life*, in 2005. Full bibliographic details may be found in my Works Cited list (92).

childhood self and changing body, and the need for a new sense of self to emerge to engage fully with the adult world. For Smith,

(w)hat interests Mahy is the conjunction of dangerous new knowledge offered to adolescents in the form of desire and enhanced perception, and the need to assert one's new self autonomously in the adult world of powers and principalities (48).

Alison Waller focuses on Mahy's engagement with concepts of witchcraft and relates it to her treatment of adolescence. According to Waller, Mahy uses an "eclectic and selective method" when writing about witches, using exclusively positive portrayals of witchcraft, derived especially from Wicca traditions (29), and argues that the transition to adolescence finds a supernatural parallel in the transformation of ordinary girls into witches. In Waller's view Mahy's witches "change from quiet, seemingly unremarkable teenage girls into more confident, more vocal and more sensual selves" (25). She stresses that, for these girls, "being a witch provides a metaphor for adolescence, not adulthood" (25), arguing that what she sees as "(t)he pause and restraint in the protagonists' sexual lives suggests a waiting time that signifies adolescent development" (36).

A common theme in many of these critical interpretations is that of the adolescent discovery of agency, the discovery of the ability to act autonomously, especially in matters of sexuality. This is seen in Smith's "need to assert one's new self autonomously in the adult world" (48) and in Waller's shift from "quiet, seemingly unremarkable teenage girls into more confident, more vocal and more sensual selves" (36).

A second common critical concern is Mahy's engagement with New Zealand culture, with both Ruth P. Feingold (2005) and Diane Hebley (2005) producing

articles on this facet of her work. According to Feingold, *The Tricksters* articulates the anxieties of settler society, its Christmas setting, for example, stressing the contradictions inherent in the introduction of a European festival into an alien environment. These contradictions reveal the instability of a settler (Pakeha) cultural identity stuck between two worlds. Hebley's reading of Mahy's novels identifies the New Zealand landscape as a key motif in her writing. According to Hebley the geological instability of the New Zealand landscape becomes a metaphor for the instabilities of Mahy's characters and the uncertain boundaries between reality and fantasy in her writing. In Hebley's words,

the sea and the shifting linear forms of beaches, the dark mystery of forests in cityscapes, and the faultlines of the country become intensifying lines of demarcation in human relationships and in what has been her constant preoccupation since her first picture book, *A Lion in the Meadow* (1969): the distinction between truth and illusion, between reality and imagination or the magical (188).

A number of articles examine the use of folktale or mythical motifs in Mahy's fiction, usually within the familiar framework of a reading of Mahy's novels as an exploration of the issues of adolescence. Claudia Marquis envisages Mahy's *The Haunting* (1982) as a feminist corrective to sexist folktale archetypes, connecting its reversal of these archetypes with Lacanian theories of adolescence. According to Marquis, Mahy inverts traditional folktale gender stereotypes: the stepmother, Claire, for example, instead of occupying a "place of malevolent power" as fairytale stepmothers traditionally do, "proves...to be the very image of the kind and loving mother" (193-4).

There exists another strand of criticism which can be loosely organised around the theme of Mahy's attitudes to fiction itself. An important article in this regard is Kathryn Walls' "'True-seeming Lyes" in Margaret Mahy's Fiction' in which Walls argues that there is a disjuncture between what Mahy professes is her attitude towards fiction in her critical writings and the actual operation of truth in her novels. Whereas in her criticism Mahy claims, according to Walls, that one can find value, a certain sort of 'truth', in the literal untruths of fiction, in fact in her novels, Walls alleges, Mahy privileges "a more empirical concept of truth" (150). This contradiction remains unresolved; according to Walls, Mahy "take(s) refuge in sheer ambiguity" (154).

Sam Hester analyses the narrative technique of Mahy's novel *The Catalogue of the Universe*, arguing that Mahy creates a strongly personalised narrator whose commentary shapes the reader's response to the action. Borrowing a phrase from the novel itself, Hester also focuses on "the wobble in the symmetry" of Mahy's novel, suggesting that Mahy deliberately plays with readers' expectations of a neatly constructed narrative in order to draw their attention to what she calls "the dichotomy of spontaneity and structure" and the possibility of their coexistence (181).

Lisa Scally interprets *The Changeover* in the context of Margaret Mahy's ideas about authorship. In Scally's argument, authorship (or, as Scally labels it, 'author-ity') in *The Changeover* is connected with power; as Scally has it,

(s)tory, in Mahy's novels, is a metaphor for coming to terms with the world and one's own place in it, and for gaining power and mastery over the world and the self (131).

According to Scally, what Laura gains through her changeover is the ability to "author reality" (133). In Scally's reading this authorial power has both positive and negative

connotations. In being granted “the ability to turn her desires into reality” (136), Laura is tempted by her opportunity to torture the defeated Carmody Braque into exploring her “darker desires” (136), namely her desire for vengeance against the loathsome but helpless Braque.

Saskia Voorendt (2007) opens a completely new line of criticism in her master’s thesis on Mahy’s young adult fiction. Voorendt focuses on what she sees as the psychological disturbances of Mahy’s protagonists, arguing that what other critics interpret as the typical problems of adolescence are in fact serious psychological problems. Voorendt’s valuable addition to the scholarship, however, need not invalidate previous readings of Mahy’s novels as narratives of adolescent development. A reading of Mahy’s protagonists as psychologically disturbed may coexist alongside a reading of them as maturing adolescents. In fact many of the psychological problems identified by Voorendt may be read as exaggerated versions of many of the tropes identified in earlier scholarship as facets of adolescent development. The process of the discovery of the self and the discovery of agency are central both to Voorendt’s readings of Mahy’s protagonists as psychologically disturbed and to the narratives of adolescence described by scholars such as Smith, Waller, and Marquis. In the case of *The Other Side of Silence*, for example, Hero’s obvious psychological disturbance – and the process of overcoming it – clearly echoes the process of the affirmation of identity undergone by less obviously disturbed characters such as Harry of *The Tricksters*.

This brief overview of the scholarship indicates a number of recurring themes. Mahy’s young adult novels have most often been read as narratives of adolescent development, often with a distinctly feminist bent. Her intertextual proclivities are well-attested in the scholarship, which shows a tendency in her fiction toward the

revision of ‘classic’ folktale, fairytale and mythical narratives, often in feminist terms, tracing the maturation of teenage female protagonists. Furthermore, her novels use this focus on text and intertext as a springboard for explorations of the nature of fictional narrative itself, and its problems. What this thesis offers that is new is a *systematic* study, across most of her major novels, of one particular aspect of this intertextual tendency. The criticism suffers at the moment from a lack of such systematic study. The major themes of Mahy’s work have been approached by a number of different scholars, but rarely with a focus broader than one or two novels, and rarely in a format longer than the journal article or book chapter, the theses by Leibowitz and Voorendt being the most important exceptions.

This thesis is organised thematically. I begin, perhaps perversely for a thesis about young adult literature, with two chapters about the theme of death in Mahy’s work. Both *The Changeover* and *Dangerous Spaces* concern journeys to Underworld-like realms, and contain much imagery derived from Greek myths about the Underworld journeys undertaken by mythical figures like Heracles, Odysseus and Orpheus. The centrepiece of the thesis, my chapter on *The Tricksters* and its relation to myths of the Greek god Dionysus, appropriately occupies its middle third. I finish with two chapters that are most centrally about one of Mahy’s most persistent preoccupations, fiction and its possibilities and limitations, especially the possibilities and limitations of children’s fiction. *The Catalogue of the Universe* and *The Other Side of Silence* are both about author-figures, Dido May in *Catalogue* and Annie Rapper, Conrad Credence and Miss Credence in *Silence*. In both cases the myths they allude to – that of Dido and Aeneas in *Catalogue* and Hero and Leander in *Silence* – are employed in such a way as to raise questions of authorship, and truth and untruth in fiction.

This thesis is informed most centrally by the richness and eclecticism of Mahy’s

novels. While the scholarship thus far has focused on one or two themes, most prominently adolescence and the troubled relationship the novels envisage between fiction and truth, I wish to broaden the range of themes with which Mahy criticism has thus far been preoccupied, and to show that an awareness of classical allusion can show us the way to such a broadened appreciation of her work. I do not wish to deny, conversely, that Mahy's fiction is preoccupied with questions of adolescence, and indeed many of my readings will focus either centrally or tangentially on aspects of her characters' maturation and transition from childhood to adolescence or adolescence to adulthood, but this thesis will also show how, by paying attention to the employment of classical allusion in her novels, especially the employment of allusions to the classical Underworld in *Dangerous Spaces* and *The Changeover*, it is possible to discern a preoccupation in Mahy's fiction with the problem of death, and the relationship of children and adolescents to their dawning perception of mortality. My other chapters provide more 'traditional' readings of Mahy's work, but they do so, I hope, in an original and interesting way from an under-utilised perspective that can enrich our understanding of much that has already been discovered.

I.

Other-worlds and Underworlds I: *Dangerous Spaces*

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes offers a strikingly fatalistic and un-Christian view of life and death, telling us that, for every living creature, there is “[a] time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up [that which is planted]” (3.2). Everything has its allotted purpose, and an allotted span of time on earth: “[t]o everything [there is a season], and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (3.1). The book counsels us to accept the inevitability of death, a death that, it is implied, is not a transition to another form of life, but a final extinction. Death is a part of the universe, part of a grander cycle; it is not the place of individual human beings to question the justice or injustice of this cycle, but simply to accept their lot. In this Old Testament book, there is no hint of a glorious Kingdom of God to come, which will vindicate all the sufferings and vicissitudes endured by human beings in this life. This view of death as natural, as inevitable, is an important idea in the fiction of Margaret Mahy, emerging with particular clarity, and subjected to a particularly honest and searching examination, in two of her novels, *Dangerous Spaces* and *The Changeover*. These novels are also replete with allusions to classical myths of the Underworld, myths which resonate particularly strongly with many of the ideas about life and death to be found in those novels. Although *Dangerous Spaces*, published in 1991, is chronologically later than *The Changeover* (1984), the relatively straightforward way in which the themes of life and death are treated in *Dangerous Spaces* makes it a better introduction to Mahy’s ideas on life and death than the more elaborate treatment given them in the earlier novel, and so I will deal with the later novel first.

Many Greek myths tell of the interactions of gods or heroes with the Underworld and its inhabitants, and it is through allusions to such myths that *Dangerous Spaces*

and *The Changeover* conduct their discussions of death. *Dangerous Spaces* makes especial use of the story of the kidnapping of Persephone, daughter of the vegetation goddess Demeter, by the Underworld god Hades for its plot, and of depictions of the Underworld derived from writers like Homer and Virgil for much of its imagery. Told in the *Homeric Hymns* (2), and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story of Persephone tells how, driving a great chariot drawn by black horses, Hades erupts out of a gaping hole in the earth that opens beneath Persephone while she is picking flowers, and takes the unfortunate goddess back to his underworld kingdom to be his wife, while her distraught mother Demeter searches the world for her missing daughter. In her grief Demeter neglects her duties as goddess of the crops, and the seeds die and rot in the barren earth. Faced with the death of humanity from hunger, and consequently the end of the sacrificial rituals from which they draw their sustenance, the rest of the gods persuade Hades to give up his new wife, and mother and daughter are reunited. Unfortunately, however, during her time in the Underworld, Persephone ate the seeds of a pomegranate fruit, unwittingly binding herself to spending half the year with her kidnapper, and dooming the earth to an endless cycle of barrenness and renewal.

Dangerous Spaces tells the story of a young girl, Anthea, whose parents have drowned in a sailing accident, sent to live with her cousin Flora and her family. The novel opens with Anthea's description of a mysterious dream she has had, of crawling through a "crack in the world" (1) to a strange snowy realm beyond. The strange snowy realm turns out to be another world called Viridian, to which Anthea gains access through an old photographic viewer called a stereoscope, which possesses magical properties. Through her dreams, and the images she sees in the stereoscope, Anthea is steadily drawn away from the real, waking world, which comes to seem to her both less real and less inviting than the dream-realm of Viridian, which itself turns

out to possess a literal, physical reality of its own. Anthea's difficult relationship with Flora, who sees Anthea as something of an intruder on her own family life, and her feelings of being unable to fit into Flora's kindly but chaotic family, contribute to her feeling out of place in the real world after the deaths of her parents.

In Viridian Anthea meets a boy who calls himself Griff, who exhorts her to accompany him on a journey to the mysterious island that lies at the heart of Viridian. But Anthea increasingly begins to bond with Flora, who also gains access to Viridian. After Anthea spends an enjoyable day planting trees with Flora, she returns to Viridian to find a verdant forest overgrowing Griff's carefully constructed world, including an enormous Roman-style amphitheatre. After this incident, the cold, lifeless realm of Viridian comes to seem less inviting to Anthea than her budding relationships with her new family. When Griff senses that Anthea is losing interest in Viridian, he becomes increasingly agitated, and tries to trap the now reluctant and scared Anthea in his dream world. With a herd of black wild horses, however, Flora comes riding to Anthea's rescue, and having persuaded "old Lionel," the ghost of Flora's grandfather who turns out to have been the ghostly Griff's brother, to finally leave the old family home behind and join his brother on his journey to Viridian, also exorcises the family home of its own persistent ghosts.

A number of features suggest an identification of *Dangerous Spaces* with the myth of Persephone, and of Viridian with the classical Underworld. The Roman amphitheatre which Anthea comes across early in her adventures in Viridian immediately suggests a classical presence. The vegetal connotations of the names Flora and Anthea, respectively the Latin and Greek words for 'flower', recall the characters' mythical predecessors. The motif of kidnapping, present explicitly in the myth, is present also in the novel, albeit in more muted form, when Griff refuses to let

Anthea leave Viridian behind after she has decided she prefers the world of family life. The herd of black horses that runs free in Viridian, and at the head of which Flora rides to Anthea's rescue, recalls the black horses which pull Hades' chariot in the myth. The 'crack in the world,' finally, which Anthea crawls through in her dream, and through which, it is implied, she first gains access to Viridian, recalls the great rent in the earth through which Hades bursts to kidnap Persephone.

If Flora is the novel's Demeter to Anthea's Persephone, then Griff is its Hades, and Viridian its Underworld, and indeed there are a number of images which suggest an identification of Viridian with the classical Underworld, especially as depicted by epic poets such as Homer and Virgil. There are suggestions of Dante's engagement with the Christian afterlife, to be sure, especially in the figure of Griff, who is, as it were, Virgil to Anthea's Dante, as, indeed, Saskia Voorendt suggests (104). But the parallels that can be drawn with Graeco-Roman visions of the afterlife are more important for my purposes. As well as suggesting a classical identification, the coliseum which becomes overgrown with Anthea's trees is also a convenient symbol of death to contrast with the trees that symbolise life and Anthea's newfound security in Flora's family. The water which Griff and Old Lionel must cross to get to the island, and the boat they row across in, suggest the ancient Styx and recall Charon, the classical ferryman of the dead.

The Underworld is, of course, the ultimate destination of all human beings after death. Hades is the abode of the dead; it is a place that is identified with death, and the mystery that shrouds whatever follows the end of human life. A novel that is heavily invested in myths about, and imagery of, the Underworld cannot avoid handling the theme of death, and in fact there is much imagery in *Dangerous Spaces* which suggests not only the identification of Viridian with death, but that the novel's driving

theme is mortality. When Anthea asks Griff the name of the island in Viridian, for example, he answers evasively, and suggestively, that “[i]t has a lot of names,” and that “[m]ostly people don’t talk about it, but everyone has to go there in the end” (66). Thinking of her dead parents, about whom she had earlier fantasised as still alive and having abandoned her for a tropical island where they spend their days swimming, Anthea asks Griff, before he and Lionel row across the waters of Viridian to its island, that “if you see anyone swimming there, on the island I mean, [to] give them my love” (122).

The significance of these allusions to the Underworld and death becomes clear when we consider that Anthea is suicidally depressed. Traumatized by the death of her parents, feeling out of her place among her new family, Anthea longs for a space of her own, and finds it in Viridian, the novel’s emblem for the other world on the other side of death. To consider how Mahy portrays the Underworld, and by extension death, it is instructive to explore more deeply the novel’s references to the classical Underworld, and also the debt it owes to the ‘other-world’ tradition in children’s literature.

In Book 11 of Homer’s *Odyssey*,² Odysseus makes a journey to the Underworld, to visit, among others, the shade of the great Greek hero Achilles, who suggests famously that he would rather be the poorest peasant labourer on earth than king of all the dead (180). The shades in Homer’s Underworld are not to be understood as souls in the Christian sense of the term. In order to communicate with Odysseus, the shades of the dead must drink the blood of a sacrificial victim, and so Odysseus digs a trench and sacrifices two lambs, the blood of which seeps into the earth (166). Immediately, the shades of Hades begin to flit about Odysseus, desperate to get at the blood of the

² As line numbers are not provided in Fitzgerald’s translation, references are to page numbers.

lambs and drink their fill (166). Without the life-giving blood, the shades exist in an ambiguous state that is not quite (after)life and not quite death, not quite conscious, but not completely devoid of consciousness either. Although to actually communicate they must drink the blood of Odysseus' lambs, enough of their minds remain for them to be able to realise, as Achilles does, what they have lost in leaving the land of the living. The afterlife of Homer's heroes, then, is no Christian heaven. This is no eternity of glory in the presence of the divine. Far from a realm of perfect spiritual being, in which the human soul exists in a state of spiritual perfection removed from the vulgar physicality of the flesh, the Homeric Underworld is a pale shadow of the world of the living, which is where everything that is significant, that is, the deeds of great heroes in war and athletic contest, occurs.

This much less comforting vision of the afterlife is suggested in *Dangerous Spaces*. There are a number of striking passages in which inhabitants of Viridian appear to be more akin to Homeric shades than Christian souls. When Anthea is in Viridian, for example, her real-world memories are "watery ghosts of what they should have been" (28). When Flora sees Anthea, who in a deliberately ambiguous passage is either sleepwalking in the garden or wandering through Viridian, she seems a "pale, living slither" (72). Such descriptions suggest the insubstantiality of the inhabitants of Viridian, similar to that of the shades of the Homeric underworld, but other references make Viridian's debt to the Homeric Hades even clearer. When Flora talks to Leo (that is, Old Lionel's name in Viridian), who has now finally followed her into Viridian, he seems to her to "struggle, concentrating hard in order to have a shape and to talk at all" (76). The emphasis on the difficulty Leo has in speaking is the clearest reference in the novel to the shades of the *Odyssey*, whose greatest difficulty is in communicating with Odysseus.

While at first Viridian seems inviting to Anthea, by the end of the novel it is a deeply terrifying place for her. *Dangerous Spaces* is a novel about suicidal depression, and about being drawn back from suicidal depression. The death of Anthea's parents leaves her feeling isolated, and without a stake in the world of the living. The world she flirts with, the world of death, is the only world in which she feels she fits, the only place she feels has a space for her. But it is a dangerous flirtation, a dangerous space to seek to access, as the title of the novel suggests. Without a space in family life, Anthea feels the only way she can create a space for herself is not only by leaving family life but life itself behind. When she begins to identify with her new family, she begins to feel that she has a stake in life again, and Viridian begins to seem uninviting to her. Anthea comes to fear Griff's breath, knowing that if she feels it on her, it will be "cold...as cold as death" (86).

But it is notable that as much as Viridian comes to seem frightening and uninviting to Anthea, it is a place that Griff longs for, a place in which he feels he belongs. Griff feels no uncertainty about Viridian; he must reach the island at its centre, and lacks only a companion to accompany him there. When Leo refuses to come with, and insists on lingering in the Wakefield family home, Griff takes advantage of Anthea's appearance in his world and wishes her to come with him to the island at the centre of Viridian. Leo's lingering, in fact, is unnatural, and prevents the Wakefields from living their own lives. Leo – that is, Old Lionel, Flora and Anthea's long-dead grandfather, now a ghost haunting the family home – must leave the land of the living for whatever comes next. Whereas for Anthea the journey to Viridian is premature, for Leo-Old Lionel the journey is long overdue; Viridian is where he belongs, with his brother Griff. It is here that the parallel with Dante's *Divine Comedy* becomes instructive. As Voorendt points out, Virgil takes Dante on his journey through heaven

and hell because he is considering suicide, as a warning against premature death (*Purgatorio* 1.58-63). For the old, death is a natural thing; the transition is not to be feared, might indeed even be welcomed. For a young person like Anthea, or Dante, however, death is unnatural, premature, tragic. This is what the allusion to the myth of Demeter and Persephone suggests; the seasonal imagery associated with the myth suggests that for one like Anthea, in the springtime, as it were, of her life, a descent into the wintry realm of Viridian would be premature and unnatural. The names Flora and Anthea suggest spring, the regrowth of vegetation, the greening of the world; the act of planting trees suggests a spring-like return of vegetation to Viridian, which is associated with bare stone amphitheatres, with snow, mountains, and the mysterious, storm-like Battle.

In her Master's thesis, Saskia Voorendt connects *Dangerous Spaces* with the 'other-world' tradition in children's literature (84). This tradition represents the confrontation between children's literature and death. The tradition derives ultimately from Golden Age children's literature, from the novels of George McDonald and other Victorian children's writers, and presents a particular kind of Christian or quasi-Christian vision of the kingdom to come after death, of a paradisiacal afterlife, free of all the problems and vicissitudes of this life. Mahy's purpose is to problematise death; if the other-world tradition could be accused of sugarcoating death, of hiding its reality from children, making it seem, perhaps, even inviting, then Mahy's purpose is to provide a corrective. Death in *Dangerous Spaces* is fundamentally ambiguous. Its true nature cannot be discovered until one crosses over to the island; in literal terms, that is, until one dies, an idea which makes metaphysical and tautological sense, and also does not shield children from the fact of the mystery of death. The classical material is what creates the ambiguity; the Christian material, the allusions to Dante's

Divine Comedy, is useful to suggest that what is on the other side of what Shelley called the painted veil can even be longed for, mystery though it is; longed for, that is, however, for those who are in the proper phase of life to confront death, those who have lived a long and fulfilling life, not one like Anthea, who is far too young, whose suicidal tendencies represent a desire to cut life off before the proper time.

To return to the allusion with which I began this chapter, the story of Demeter and Persephone is a particularly appropriate one for this novel about death. It is an unsettling story, involving the confrontation of the gods themselves with the facts of death, and the triumph with which it concludes is only partial, and ambiguous. Even the gods themselves, it seems, cannot fully escape the facts of mortality. Nature itself, in the endless cycle of the seasons, is ruled by the rhythms of life and death. In Persephone's partial escape from the Underworld, her own vulnerability is stressed, and grief touches even Demeter, one of the twelve Olympians of the classical Greek pantheon. This emphasis on divine vulnerability, where even triumphant resurrection has its catches and caveats, where there is no God the Father to make sure the victory over death is full and final, is without a full parallel in the Christian tradition, and suggests on the one hand the inevitability of death and on the other the value of life. Flora's rescue of Anthea, and Old Lionel's long-delayed departure from the land of the living, signals that both life and death are natural processes, that we each in time must make our own peace with them, and that while death is an inevitability, it is not something we should let get in the way of the fulfilment we find in life.

II.

Other-worlds and Under-worlds II: *The Changeover*

In *The Changeover*, the bizarre landscape of the protagonist Laura Chant's changeover, or initiation into witchcraft, is described mainly in fairytale terms, but might also be read as another vision of the classical Underworld. Sorensen Carlisle, known to Laura as Sorry, her future boyfriend and both the guardian of and Laura's guide through the storybook landscape of her changeover, describes himself, for example, as Charon, ferrying Laura across the Styx from the world of everyday living to the strange landscape she must pass beyond to become a witch, and, the novel implies, acquire the wisdom and maturity she will need to understand her emerging sexuality. As her guide through this Underworld, Sorry also provides her with advice, admonishing her not to look back, recalling Orpheus' breaking of the gods' injunction not to look back on his wife Eurydice as he brings her back from the Underworld. Although not a prominent figure in the changeover scenes themselves, Laura's antagonist, the demon Carmody Braque, is also associated with the Underworld through the peppermint smell he exudes, recalling the story told by the classical authors Strabo and Ovid of the nymph Minthe, nearly seduced by Hades himself before the intervention of Persephone, who changed her into a mint plant (Strabo, 8.3.14; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.729).

The Changeover tells the story of a young girl, Laura Chant, fourteen years old, who both possesses barely understood supernatural powers and is emerging into adolescence, with its attendant mysteries and confusions of budding sexuality. Living with her divorced mother Kate and younger brother Jacko, Laura is still coming to terms with her parents' divorce, and is jealously protective of the integrity of the rest of her family. One day, while taking Jacko home from his babysitter Mrs. Fangboner,

Laura and Jacko walk into a mysterious shop owned by a sinister old man, Carmody Braque, who stamps Jacko's hand and thereby is able to effect something akin to a demonic possession of Jacko's soul. As Jacko sickens, and doctors are baffled by his seeming mystery illness, Laura consults Sorensen Carlisle, known to her as 'Sorry,' a prefect at her school she suspects, in spite of his gender, of being a witch, and who she thinks might be able to help Jacko. Sorry tells Laura that Braque is a *lemure*, an evil spirit that drains the living of their life energies for its own continued existence.³ Meanwhile, Laura is hurt by the budding relationship between her mother Kate and a Canadian man, Chris Holly, whom she perceives to be an intruder on the cosy family life she has enjoyed for the past year. This new relationship is balanced by the budding sexual tension between Laura and Sorry, who after consultation with his mother and grandmother, Miryam and Winter Carlisle, with whom he lives and who are also witches, tells Laura that the only way she can save her brother is by undergoing a 'changeover,' that is, to become a fully-fledged witch, and then confront Braque herself. This changeover involves a journey into a bizarre and dangerous supernatural realm, which the novel suggests has on the one hand an actual physical reality while at the same time being a creation of Laura's imagination. After a successful changeover, followed by a confrontation with Braque in which she destroys the demon and saves her brother's life, Laura is ready to accept Chris, if not quite as a family member then at least as her mother's companion, and also achieves a sort of resolution to her own confusing relationship with Sorry, putting off her own sexual initiation until she is older and feels more confident.

The Underworld of Laura's changeover is very different from the ambiguously sinister Underworld of Viridian in *Dangerous Spaces*. The classical motif most

³ In Roman tradition, the *lemures* were restless spirits of the dead, to be placated by the bizarre offering of black beans thrown over the shoulder.

central to *The Changeover* is the Underworld journey, an important motif also in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Indeed, Campbell's theories, as much as the classical material itself, seems to be exercising a direct influence on the novel. As I hope to demonstrate, a reading of the novel based on either Campbell's work or on classical myths of the Underworld is impossible without an awareness of the other. As for the classical material, the journey of the hero to the Underworld is a common motif in classical mythology. Both Homer's Odysseus and Virgil's Aeneas make the trip and return safely, as does Orpheus, albeit without his wife, whom he had sought to rescue. Hercules, as one of his famous twelve labours, descended to the Underworld to retrieve the giant three-headed hound Cerberus, guardian of the threshold of Hades. Often in these stories, for example in those of Hercules and Orpheus, the motive of the hero to travel to the Underworld is to retrieve a loved one or some token and return with it to the land of the living. This task is accomplished with varying degrees of success. While Hercules successfully returns with Cerberus to king Eurystheus, who had commanded him to bring the monster to him, he is less successful in his quest to rescue Theseus and Pirithous, two earlier heroes who had themselves travelled to the Underworld to win for Pirithous the hand of Hades' wife Persephone in marriage. In punishment for their presumption, Hades had stuck the two adventurers fast to a bench at a banquet he prepared in their honour. While Hercules was able to free Theseus, Pirithous proved stuck too fast to his bench to be removed, even by Hercules, and so remained in the Underworld, never to return to the land of the living. Orpheus' attempt to rescue his wife, meanwhile, went famously wrong.

Stories such as these are the most important classical antecedents for *The Changeover*, in which Laura must travel into a dangerous storybook realm to

transform herself from an ordinary teenage girl into a witch capable of confronting the demon Carmody Braque, and thereby save her brother. As already noted, however, Joseph Campbell's influence on *The Changeover* is inseparable from that of the classical myths from which Mahy draws much of the inspiration for the changeover scenes. As such it is necessary first to explain the significance of Campbell's ideas for *The Changeover*, after which the full importance of the classical allusions can be appreciated.

Campbell argues that all myths follow a single pattern, which he labels the 'monomyth.' At its most basic level, the monomyth consists of three motifs: separation (or departure), initiation, and return. These three motifs refer to the three phases of the hero's adventure. In the first phase, separation, the hero leaves the everyday world behind to embark on an adventure. In the second phase, initiation, the hero enters a dangerous realm of adventure where obstacles must be overcome and supernatural tasks completed in order to win through to the final goal, the achievement of which will grant the hero power or enable him to bestow some manner of boon or benefit on his community. In the third phase, return, the hero comes back to the everyday world, and grants to the community the fruits of the journey. This basic template fits both the classical myths of the hero's journey to the Underworld and the story of Laura's changeover perfectly. In the classical adventures in Hades, as in Campbell's account and in Laura's adventure in *The Changeover*, the journey is from the everyday world to a dangerous world of trial, where after a number of perilous tasks have been completed the hero gains access to some sort of reward and, if successful, returns with it to the world of ordinary life.

Campbell characterises the hero's adventure partly as an expression of a universal human spiritual yearning for the reconciliation of the individual with the prospect of

personal death. The quest of Campbell's hero is for the extinction of personal ego; with the annihilation of the ego, individual perspective disappears, replaced with a consciousness of the grand totality of human life, and more broadly of the eternal, timeless, and universal fact of existence, which is disguised in the contingency of its ever-shifting physical and temporal manifestations. With the vanishing of individual ego, and the new consciousness of participation in a universal and unending cycle of creation and destruction, in which each instance of death and dissolution is balanced by one of creation or birth, the prospect of individual death loses its sting, and the newly-liberated consciousness is able to exist harmoniously with all things, in the knowledge of the participation of every being, itself included, in the sheer fact of existence. The hero's adventure in myth, according to Campbell, is a narrative treatment of this universal spiritual aspiration toward the dissolution of the ego, a breaking into form of Jungian archetypes resting deep in the human psyche (17-18), and a counterpart to the deeply significant visions that Campbell sees rising to the surface in dream.

It is difficult to overstate the scope of Campbell's vision. It offers a new spiritual and metaphysical orientation for humanity, the aim of which is the harmonious co-existence of all human beings and nature in a new order founded on love. But there are microcosmic as well as macrocosmic aspects to Campbell's vision. For a truly harmonious existence, we must not only be reconciled to the world outside, but to our own (selfish, ego-driven) inner impulses. One of the complexities of Campbell's argument, however, is that the two are almost the same thing, since by resolving our own inner conflicts, related mostly to an ego-driven need to control external circumstances, we achieve inner peace and a reconciliation with the outside world through the same process. The hero-adventure which Campbell claims to find in all

the myths of the world is, then, as much a journey inward, to the core of the psyche, as it is outward, reaching toward the meaning of existence and human life. The cycle of death and rebirth he sees as constituting the physical universe is also visible in the inner life of the human psyche, as the human life-cycle moves from one phase in life to another. Through initiation rites, human individuals die to their past and are reborn to their future (15). The attachments of the previous phase of one's life must be set aside to enable a smooth transition to and a happy existence in the next. The same myths that express the spiritual importance of reconciling the individual ego to the universe mediate important transitions in human life such as adolescence and sexual initiation.

Campbell's thesis, then, is of the universe and human life as process, as marked by unending flux; we must, in the microcosm of the psyche, as in the macrocosm of the physical universe in its totality, accommodate ourselves to this flux, and yield gracefully to it, no matter the seeming personal cost. As Campbell has it,

Only birth can conquer death – the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be – if we are to experience long survival – a continuous 'recurrence of birth' (*palingenesia*) to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death (16).

The old is continually dying, and new things must be constantly born to balance the unending process of death and decay. Not only that, but for the old to persist is in itself inappropriate; Campbell insists on the birth "not of the old thing again, but of something new" (16). Not only must the new arise to replace the old that is dying, but for the old to die and the new to come into being is in itself a good thing. The

alternative is the eternal persistence of what already exists, its eternal withering, eternal decay, and the denial of life-force to the new. Death, then, is as necessary a component of the universe as life.

The hero's antagonist is a figure Campbell calls 'Holdfast,' the tyrant who refuses to gracefully yield his position to the new forces continually welling up to replace him, focusing instead on personal aggrandisement. Holdfast is an emblem of stasis, of the refusal to yield gracefully that upsets the cycle of existence. The unnaturally long life that Holdfast lives, by suppressing the forces welling up to replace him, in fact represents death: death made more tragic by the fact that those who die because of his selfishness do so prematurely. Campbell refers to Holdfast as "the monster of the status quo," and says that "[t]ransformation, fluidity, not stubborn ponderosity, is the characteristic of the living God." Holdfast is the hero's greatest enemy, the hero who is "the champion not of things become but of things becoming;" while "the ogre-tyrant [Holdfast] is the champion of the prodigious fact, the hero [is] the champion of creative life" (337). The hero, then, represents new life welling up to replace the old life that has lived out its natural existence.

In *The Changeover*, Carmody Braque is clearly a Holdfast-like figure. A centuries-old demon, Braque depends for his own continued existence on finding victims to suck the life out of. He explicitly thirsts for young life, explaining to Laura during their confrontation that he is "very very choosy" in selecting his victims, preferring an "innocent, sucking baby, withering at its mother's breast" (213). In feeding on young life to continue his own, selfish existence, Carmody Braque upsets the cycle of life and death that defines the universe, denying new life its chance to live out its own allotted span of time. Beyond the requirement that a children's or young adult novel should have youthful protagonists, then, Laura's, and especially Jacko's, youth is an

important element in *The Changeover*, in setting up the contrast between the old, grasping and selfish Carmody Braque and the young and innocent Jacko and Laura, whose journeys in the world, or into adult life in Laura's case, are only just beginning. *The Changeover* is a novel about death; the peppermint smell exuded by Carmody Braque, his characterisation as a Holdfast-like figure, and his identification with the Roman *lemures*, restless spirits of the dead, hints that he is an Underworld creature, a creature of death, and that his unnaturally prolonged life is something demonic, something not natural or proper, representing a ghastlier death for his victims than the natural deaths all human beings eventually must die. *The Changeover*, therefore, like *Dangerous Spaces*, introduces the idea of death to young readers, both that it is an inevitable and indeed natural and normal phenomenon, and a corresponding idea that young death is a most *unnatural*, indeed unfair phenomenon, that while death is an inevitability, our knowledge of it must not impair the living of a happy and fulfilling life.

On a literal level, Laura's changeover is an actual physical event involving a physical journey to another realm, where through a series of dangerous adventures she gains the power to save her younger brother. If we are following Campbell's definition, what Mahy has written is an actual modern-day myth: that is, a literalisation of (what Campbell sees as) a universal human spiritual aspiration toward the extinction of personal ego, expressed through a narrative of a journey to a perilous realm where the hero discovers the secret of universal life and returns with it to the realm of everyday life. This is the metaphysical, outward facet of Campbell's hero adventure. But as in Campbell's argument, so in *The Changeover* is the hero's adventure simultaneously an inward psychical journey in which the hero comes to terms with inner turmoil. It is in this sense of the hero's journey, which we find in

Laura's attempts to come to terms with her parents' divorce, her mother's new relationship with her boyfriend Chris, and with her own emerging sexuality, that striking parallels emerge between Laura herself and Campbell's Holdfast figure.

On the realist plane of the novel, in which Laura must come to terms with both her own sexuality and with her mother's need for companionship, Laura undergoes a change of a sort more mundane than her supernatural transformation into a witch, but just as important. For Laura, the process of growing up means coming to accept change in her family life, and that the members of her family have lives of their own. She cannot demand the affections of her mother entirely for herself, and must accept that both her parents have moved on into new relationships. Her desire that her family remain just the same as it was resembles Carmody Braque's selfish appropriation of other lives to continue his own. Both demand the subordination of others' needs to their own. For Laura, part of the process of growing up is to accept that things change, and to accept the right of others to live their own lives, that part of loving others is recognising their own needs and desires, even when they conflict with hers.

The Changeover's is a non-Christian view of death: there is no eternal life on the other side of death, no eternal bliss. Instead, death is personal extinction, not to be welcomed, to be sure, but not to be fought against, either, as shown terrifyingly in the figure of Carmody Braque. Like *Dangerous Spaces*, *The Changeover* addresses children obliquely on the subject of life and death, with the message that life is for children, for the young and dynamic, but also that death, when it comes, is a natural and normal process, an unavoidable consequence of being human. And again *The Changeover* does not sugarcoat death by presenting it in a Christian framework that suggests the possibility of eternal bliss in a spiritual realm beyond physical extinction. As in *Dangerous Spaces*, the ambiguous classical Underworld, where the afterlife can

scarcely be described as a life at all, is the better metaphor for death to deliver this message. It is peculiarly appropriate also that Laura's journey through the landscape of her changeover should be presented as a journey through the Underworld, from everyday life, across the Styx and back to ordinary life again, but energised and empowered by her journey. Like her classical predecessor Orpheus, Laura looks back despite an admonition not to, but while for Orpheus the violation of this injunction means the loss, this time forever, of his wife Eurydice, Laura manages to avoid the potentially catastrophic consequences of her indiscretion. Why should Laura be admonished not to look back? Why, despite the warning of the Carlisles and the terrible precedent set by Orpheus, should the worst consequences of her violation of this warning not come to pass? And why should the realm of her changeover be presented explicitly as an Underworld, with its own Charon and River Styx to cross?

Campbell suggests that the hero's journey is a symbolic death and rebirth (90). It is *journey* that is the key word here. Like those of her classical predecessors, Laura's journey to the Underworld is a passage through, not a permanent stay. Nonetheless something important to Laura *does* die in her passage through the Underworld: her old self, her old, innocent childhood self, and the insecurities that defined that self, about sexuality, about her parents' divorce, about her mother's relationship with Chris and her own relationship with Sorry, must be shed, must die for her new self to be born. This is, in Campbell's terms, the natural function of death and dissolution in the universe: old things must be cast away so that the new can flourish in its own life. Also like her classical predecessors, Laura travels to the Underworld to save a life taken unjustly and before its time: the young and innocent life of Jacko must be allowed to bloom, while the unnatural, demonic life of Carmody Braque must not be allowed to pervert the natural rhythms of the universe. The classical template, in *The*

Changeover as in *Dangerous Spaces*, then, is paramount, the narratives of heroes such as Hercules and Orpheus, who travelled to the Underworld to retrieve those accidentally or unjustly imprisoned there, providing a model for this novel about the saving of a young life from a terrible and premature death. For Laura to look back represents an attempt to remain attached to her old childhood self, an attachment that hazards a transformation from intrepid hero to grasping Holdfast, the cessation of the dynamic flux of the universe, and death: entrapment in the Underworld before one's proper time, the horrible fate that befell Pirithous in his ill-conceived attempt to kidnap the wife of the King of the Underworld.

The parallel narratives of the novel, of Laura's own personal growth and of Jacko's sickness and near death, really represent Laura's own converging inner psychological crises and her need to overcome them. Laura's transition from innocence to experience is hinted at in the novel's many allusions to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and in the changeover scene itself Laura (whose father's nickname for her is 'baa-lamb') is escorted by the watchful Sorry, who significantly takes the form of a tiger. It is this helpful guardian, representing the new life towards which Laura is journeying, who leads Laura from innocence to experience, guards as Charon the threshold of the Underworld and ultimately coaxes Laura back to her proper path when she risks her near-fatal look back.

Visions of the classical Underworld are key to Mahy's depiction of death in both *Dangerous Spaces* and *The Changeover*. Although it was published seven years after *The Changeover*, *Dangerous Spaces*' is a more straightforward engagement with the classical Underworld than *The Changeover*, its references to myths and images of the Underworld less refracted through the prism of Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* than those of *The Changeover*. As such it expresses the attitudes to

life and death that underpin both novels with a greater clarity. Nevertheless, Campbell's influence, albeit more muted and less central than in *The Changeover*, is still discernible in *Dangerous Spaces*. The later novel has its own Holdfast figure in Old Lionel, for example, the old ghost who, as it were, refuses to give up the ghost and move gracefully into the next world of Viridian, instead haunting and unsettling his family in this world and preventing them from living their own lives in the house that once was his but now is theirs. There is a quite Campbell-like sense, too, of inappropriate disruptions of the cycle of life, both in Old Lionel's haunting persistence in the old Wakefield family home and in the young Anthea's premature flirtation with death. In the end, perhaps, in both novels Campbell's spiritual vision and classical perceptions of death are impossible to fully disentangle from one another, just as a reading of each novel against the other enhances our perception of each of them individually.

The next chapter will examine Mahy's 1986 novel *The Tricksters* from the perspective of myths about the Greek god Dionysus. If *Dangerous Spaces* and *The Changeover* can be read as novels about death informed by classical depictions of the Underworld, then *The Tricksters* takes the myths of Dionysus to examine more traditional themes of the young adult novel such as family dynamics. Although, of course, both *Dangerous Spaces* and *The Changeover* – *The Changeover* especially – can be read as novels of adolescence, the presence of imagery drawn from classical myths of the Underworld hints at the presence of darker themes, and points the way to readings of these novels as confrontations of youth with death. *The Tricksters*, with its intimations of murder and murky family pasts, may on the surface appear a darker novel than either *Dangerous Spaces* or *The Changeover*, but in its exploration of the

adolescent negotiation of family conflict more neatly fits in with the traditional critical view of Mahy's young adult novels as chronicles of adolescent insecurity.

III.

Dionysian Imagery in *The Tricksters*

Although the name Dionysus never actually appears in Mahy's 1986 novel *The Tricksters*, it is nevertheless clear, on a careful reading of it, that the presence of the god can be discerned behind most of the novel's supernatural events, and accounts for much of its deep strangeness. A reading of *The Tricksters* is immeasurably enhanced by bringing to it an awareness of Dionysian themes and motifs, and discovering how Mahy weaves her Dionysian material into the plot and characters of the novel is one of the most pleasurable experiences in reading it. The first clue as to the novel's classical background are the names of two of its chief characters, its protagonist Harry, whose actual name is Ariadne, and her rival, the leader of the titular trio of tricksters, a strange conjuror called Ovid. The Roman poet Ovid touched on the myths of Ariadne many times, in most of his major works; in the *Heroides*, for example, he imagines a letter from Ariadne to her first lover, Theseus. The context of this letter is her abandonment by Theseus on the island of Naxos, and far from being a love-letter, like most of the other imaginary letters collected in the *Heroides*, it is a bitter remonstrance against Theseus' betrayal of her trust. Most people, perhaps, are aware only of the first half of Ariadne's story, that she is the daughter of the Cretan King Minos, and falls in love with the Athenian hero Theseus, whom she helps escape her father's Labyrinth by laying a trail of twine for him to follow. The second half is perhaps less well-known, although not so unfamiliar to the sixteenth century Italian painter Titian, who made it the subject of one of his most famous paintings. After Ariadne's flight from Crete with her new lover Theseus, she is marooned by him on the island of Naxos. After this horrific betrayal, however, the god Dionysus takes pity on her, descends with his train of maenads and satyrs and Sileni, and takes her as his

lover. When she dies, the mourning god takes her bridal crown, and sets it in the sky as a constellation. The first half of Ariadne's story, indeed, is so well-known that two scholars, Elliott Gose (1991) and Claudia Marquis (2005), have already used it as a springboard for their own readings of the novel. It is the association that the myth provokes with the god Dionysus, however, which is as yet unexplored, and, I believe, at least as important to a reading of the novel as its references to the Labyrinth. Before I can move on to my discussion of the place of the Dionysian in *The Tricksters*, however, I must explain some of the ways in which Dionysus has been understood over the past 2,500 years.

In 406 BC the Athenian tragedian Euripides staged his play the *Bacchae*, one of the most famous portrayals of Dionysus in ancient literature. The *Bacchae* concerns the god's return to his birthplace of Thebes after a long sojourn in Asia. He finds that his own family – specifically, his aunts, that is, the sisters of his mother, Semele, and his nephew Pentheus, the king of Thebes and son of Semele's sister Agave – have rejected him, spurned his cult and, in Pentheus' case, actively denied his godhood and attempted to stamp out his worship. Dionysus decides on a terrible revenge. First he drives the sisters of Semele mad, persuading them to join his ecstatic female followers in their revels on the mountain Cithaeron outside Thebes. Then, having been imprisoned after confronting Pentheus in the guise of a follower of his own cult, he breaks out of his chains, causes an earthquake which destroys the royal palace, and, coming face to face with Pentheus again, puts the young king into a trance and persuades him to don women's clothing to watch the revels on the mountainside. The women, chief among them Pentheus' mother Agave, mistake the king for a lion, and tear him limb from limb in a Dionysian rite called *sparagmos*, or the tearing apart dead or alive of a wild animal, one of a number of horrifying Dionysian rituals

probably barely practised at all in real life, as Charles Segal notes (350), but nevertheless a staple of myths about the god.⁴

In the modern imagination Dionysus is probably most commonly known as the god of wine and revelry. The first encounter with the grim and vengeful god of the *Bacchae* perhaps comes as a shock to many contemporary readers. Dionysus, however, has always had two sides to his character. On the one hand he is a god of food, wine and sensual pleasure. On the other hand, many ancient myths present him as a dark and vengeful god who visits a terrible violence on those who defy him. This is a contradiction that does not go unremarked in Euripides' *Bacchae*. In fact the chorus of the play, consisting of Asian bacchantes, spends much of the play's first half extolling the god's generosity and bounty to his followers. The bacchantes need only thump the ground with their *thyrsos*, wooden staffs tipped with pine cones (important implements in the cult of Dionysus), to coax forth a flow of wine, milk and honey from the earth. In many ancient mystery cults, Dionysus was a god who promised release from death, and eternal life, to his followers. One modern scholar, in fact, the German-Hungarian scholar of Greek religion Karl Kerényi, has depicted Dionysus as a god of inextinguishable life, of *zoe*, the life of which only a spark courses through every living being, and as the very embodiment of life on Earth outlasts individual deaths and endures as an everlasting principle of dynamism and vitality (Kerényi, 1976).

Although in the popular imagination Dionysus remains the spirit of jovial sensuality he has been at least since the Renaissance, in the academic imagination of modern times, since Friedrich Nietzsche or perhaps even the Romantics, he has been

⁴ Segal refers specifically to the rite of *omophagia*, in which the flesh of a wild beast was consumed raw. He notes that this rite is attested only once in the ancient sources, and the 'raw flesh' referred to seems to be that of an animal killed in a conventional hunt or sacrifice, not one torn apart in Bacchic frenzy. In fact it may be reasonably doubted whether the rite of *sparagmos* reported in the myths was practised at all in real life.

the embodiment of something very different, as Albert Henrichs shows in his 1984 article 'Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard.' The title of the article hints at the preoccupations Henrichs identifies in the modern scholarly view of Dionysus. This 'modern Dionysus,' as Henrichs labels him, embodies all the darkest characteristics of the ancient god, and none of his positive, life-giving aspects. Kerenyi's view of Dionysus is very much at odds with the dominant twentieth-century academic perspectives of the god.

For Nietzsche, for example, as outlined in his first major book, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, the loss of self undergone by Dionysus' followers in the ecstatic dancing that accompanied his worship was the most important facet of Dionysian experience. In Nietzsche's argument, all art is inspired by one of two impulses, named after the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus. The Apollonian and Dionysian impulses represent two different ways to come to terms with the existential suffering at the heart of the human condition. All human beings suffer pain and undergo death; the proper question, for Nietzsche, is how to face, or cope with, these facts. Art that follows the Apollonian impulse 'redeems' life by depicting its pleasures, asking us to appreciate beautiful form rather than face head-on the fact of our vulnerability and mortality. Nietzsche gives the example of a Christian martyr, whose suffering is redeemed by the beatific vision of the paradise to come (22). Dionysian art, on the other hand, asks us to face head-on the horror of existence, the horror of mortality, but in doing so allows us to perceive behind our individual deaths the universal life-cycle that is eternally at work. By temporarily uniting us in the ecstasy of collective experience, we are temporarily able both to face our mortality and transcend it.

One myth of Dionysus tells how the god was killed, dismembered and eaten by the Titans as a child, then reconstituted from his heart, which had been preserved by the goddess Athena, and brought back to life. This myth enables Nietzsche, as Henrichs shows (221-222), to read Dionysus as an emblem of human existential suffering, the human race split up into myriad mortal individuals and unable to experience our collective immortality except in the briefest of moments in the ecstasy of a Dionysian ritual.

Other modern scholars have focused relentlessly on the violence of the god as depicted in a number of myths about him, the most famous being the story of the *sparagmos* of Pentheus as related in the *Bacchae*. The French anthropologist Rene Girard, for example, made Dionysus a centrepiece of his theories about sacrifice, depicting Dionysian violence as the archetypal instance of the ‘bad’ violence of the blood feud which tears communities apart rather than the ‘good,’ cathartic violence of the sacrifice which purges society of its animosities (Girard, 1977).

Henrichs finishes his article with a call for a new, more “flexible” understanding of Dionysus, one that revives the ancient perception of the god as largely a benevolent deity, but also capable of extreme cruelty to those who defy him (234-5). In this chapter I will show how *The Tricksters* goes about presenting just such a new construction of Dionysus, in which his benevolence and his cruelty are inseparable.

The Tricksters begins with the arrival of the Hamilton family at their beachfront holiday home, Carnival’s Hide, for their Christmas holidays. Shortly after their arrival the protagonist, Ariadne Hamilton, known for most of the book by her nickname Harry, meets three mysterious strangers on the beach, the eponymous Tricksters. It is suggested, although we are never explicitly told, that these Tricksters, who call themselves Ovid, Hadfield and Felix, are in fact characters from a novel Harry has

been secretly writing brought to life. Whatever their true origins, the three men, who say they are brothers descended from the builder and original owner of the house, Edward Carnival, slowly insinuate themselves into the family group, despite Harry's misgivings. While Ovid tries to seduce Harry's sister Christobel, whose relationship with her boyfriend Robert is foundering, Harry herself begins to fall for Felix, in spite of her earlier misgivings about the brothers and a rape attempt by the violent and unpleasant Hadfield. While Christobel goes to a pub with Ovid and Hadfield (who starts a fight), and the rest of the family is away at a party, Harry and Felix spend an evening together in which their attraction for one another becomes clear. Ovid and Hadfield begin to feel threatened by the budding relationship between Harry and Felix, and Ovid warns her to stay away from his brother, telling her that if she does not, he will "destroy your family, and...use you to do it" (224). On Christmas Eve, returning from a secret tryst with Felix, Harry walks in on Christobel reading from her secret novel to the rest of her family. As Ovid, who has obviously found the book and given it to Christobel in an attempt to sow discord in the family, looks on, Harry, who is overcome with shame and furiously angry at Christobel, blurts out the great family secret, that her father Jack fathered an illegitimate child with Christobel's best friend Emma, who is present with the child at the Christmas party at Christobel's own invitation. At Ovid's moment of seeming triumph, however, Felix enigmatically proclaims himself to be the "true Carnival magician," and declares that "mind and instinct" have "become the servants of the heart" (295). The three brothers then vanish on the spot.

In typically Mahian fashion, this bizarre climax goes unexplained, the supernatural nature of the brothers and their disappearance hinted at but not elaborated on. The consequences for the Hamilton family of the traumatic events of the evening, however,

are clear. Harry, who has for her whole life silently resented her older sister for her self-centredness and bullying personality, finally becomes reconciled to her.

Christobel, for her part, gifts Harry with a diary, a peace offering that is not incidentally also a replacement for her since-destroyed secret novel. Christobel also learns to live with the fact of her best friend's affair with her father. The family's new-found emotional honesty, and willingness to forgive, enables them to set aside the devastating events of Christmas, and celebrate New Year's together, transformed by their new understandings of one another.

The thread that ties this story together, and helps explain (or, paradoxically, perhaps further deepens) the mystery of the bizarre and enigmatic Tricksters, is the figure of Teddy Carnival, son of Edward Carnival, who originally built and owned the house. The novel opens with a Hamilton family legend told almost jokingly to Anthony Hesketh, a visitor from England, that Carnival's Hide has been haunted by Teddy's ghost ever since his death nearly a hundred years before. The family believe Teddy died by drowning. In time, however, we begin to learn more sinister details of Teddy's story, and with the appearance of the Tricksters the old family legend of his ghost begins to take on significance. Anthony reveals to Naomi Hamilton, Harry's mother and a collector of local history, that he is himself a Carnival descendant, and tells her more of the Carnival family history. He reveals that, on her deathbed, Teddy's sister Minerva claimed that Teddy, rather than drowning, had been murdered by his father. He also tells Naomi about Teddy and Minerva's difficult upbringing by a father grown cold and distant after his wife's death, who foisted on his children an educational system of his own design that emphasised reason and tried to rid them of emotion and feeling. He also explains many of the cryptic references the Tricksters make, to 'King Trowelly' and 'Lord Rake-Rake,' to the 'Black King,' the 'Boy

Enchanter' and the 'Goddess of Wisdom.' According to Anthony, in their isolation from other children Teddy and Minerva devised a fantasy kingdom and populated it with anthropomorphised garden tools, writing about their fantasy lives in books in which they referred to themselves as, respectively, the 'Boy Enchanter' and the 'Goddess of Wisdom,' and to their father as the 'Black King.' Stumped by their knowledge of obscure family legend, Anthony says of the Tricksters' identity that he "could almost believe they're ghosts" (269). Harry, for her part, having initially half-believed the Tricksters to be characters from her novel brought to life, begins to have similar suspicions, and asks Felix point-blank if he is Teddy Carnival, to which he replies that he is "'the best part'" of him, and also hints enigmatically to her that the characters of her novel provided him and his brothers with a convenient vehicle through which to manifest themselves (277). The implication, which is not stated outright, is that Felix and his brothers are Teddy reincarnated and split into three different personalities.

This is an enigmatic novel, one that works by suggestion and inference, and on a first reading its many different threads can be difficult to disentangle from one another. Enough clues run through the novel, however, to be able to read in it a sustained engagement with Dionysus and Dionysian concepts, and it is to these clues that I now turn. The actual name 'Dionysus,' as I have said, never once occurs in *The Tricksters*. The god's influence must be traced in more subtle but recurring references to Dionysian themes, motifs and narratives. Two narratives in particular, I believe, form a sort of mythical backdrop against which *The Tricksters* can be read. These are the stories, already mentioned, of Dionysus' revenge on Pentheus, as told in Euripides' *Bacchae*, and the story of Dionysus' murder by the Titans and subsequent resurrection.

The Tricksters and the *Bacchae* share a strikingly similar plot. Both tell of the appearance of mysterious strangers in a place with which they have ancestral connections. In both novel and play, conflict develops between the protagonist and the mysterious strangers, and this conflict leads to an attempt, successful in the *Bacchae*, unsuccessful in *The Tricksters*, by the strangers, their true identity by now either established or suspected, to destroy or humiliate the protagonist, using the protagonist's own family to do so.

A close reading of *The Tricksters* reveals tantalising echoes of specific incidents in the *Bacchae*. There is a scene in the novel, for example, in which the Hamilton family is disturbed by an earthquake in the night, and wakes up to find that the wallpaper in the hall of Carnival's Hide has been tampered with, the new wallpaper put up by subsequent owners of the house torn away to expose the original waterlily-patterned wallpaper put up by Edward Carnival (185). The family members are suspicious that the Tricksters have had some hand in damaging the wallpaper. Indeed, even as they protest their innocence in the matter, the Tricksters make their preference for the old wallpaper clear. Even the family members, however, come to express doubt that the Tricksters themselves could have damaged the wallpaper while escaping the notice of the rest of the family. No other explanation is given, but we are left to speculate that the real answer is that the mere presence of the Tricksters in their ancestral home has been enough to somehow provoke the physical changes in the house. The supernatural element in the incident is hinted at, but, as is typical of Mahy, is not explicitly confirmed, and instead must be inferred by the reader. The Tricksters are consistently represented in this way, as possibly supernatural, or at least as ambiguous in their humanity, most notably perhaps in the increasingly, and even disturbingly, inexplicable magic tricks performed by Ovid that give the brothers their nickname and

the novel its title. Ovid and Hadfield's bar-room brawl, earlier on the same night as the incident of the damaged wallpaper, and the hair's-breadth escape from the police that follows it, strikes a similarly inexplicable note, a disbelieving Christobel reporting Hadfield's superhuman strength (174). The escape, and the same night's incident of the damaged wallpaper (especially in view of its association with an earthquake), also suggests the 'palace miracle' of Euripides' *Bacchae*, in which Dionysus, imprisoned by Pentheus, breaks free of his chains, and demonstrates his power by causing an earthquake that brings down part of the royal palace.

These are not the only echoes of the *Bacchae* in *The Tricksters*. Ovid's threat to Harry, for example, to destroy her family and to use her as the instrument of its destruction, and the family conflict that Ovid precipitates when he gives Harry's book to Christobel, recalls Dionysus' vengeance on the royal house of Thebes, in which he manipulates the hapless Pentheus into being the agent of his own and his family's destruction. The literal *sparagmos* of Pentheus in the *Bacchae*, and what might be labelled the figurative *sparagmos* of his family, becomes in *The Tricksters* Ovid's attempted destruction of the Hamilton family. There are many other such echoes of Euripides' play in *The Tricksters*; to explain them all in detail, however, would take up far too much room, and so I move on to a consideration of the story of Dionysus and the Titans and its relation to *The Tricksters*.

The correspondence between the novel and this myth is very strong. Reading the two stories against each other, it becomes clear how much of the *The Tricksters*' plot and imagery is taken from the myth. Teddy's story especially, it becomes clear, is a re-working of the story of the dismembered Dionysus. The hints given that the Tricksters are Teddy's ghost returned to Carnival's Hide, split among three different personalities, point to the Titans' dismemberment of Dionysus' corpse in the myth. A

striking incident at the end of the novel resonates strongly with the myth. As Harry burns her own ill-fated novel in a fire on the beach of Carnival's Hide, she becomes aware of a face watching her in the flames, a face, she notes, that blends the features of Ovid, Hadfield and Felix: the ghost of Teddy Carnival at last reintegrated in one being, we are given to understand (305-6). This closure to Teddy's story throws further light on Felix' mysterious triumph at the Hamilton family Christmas party, where he proclaimed that "reason and instinct" had become "the servants of the heart" (295). It is well to note here that Felix on at least three occasions (87, 166, 282) is explicitly referred to as the "heart" of the tricksters. Felix' triumph, the heart emerging triumphant over reason and instinct, is the reassertion in Teddy Carnival of the power of emotion, long-suppressed in him while alive, and represents the harmonious reintegration of his divided personality, as in the myth the survival of Dionysus' heart enabled the reconstitution of his dismembered body. Finally, the name of Teddy's sister, Minerva, recalls the role played in the myth by the goddess Athena, who in some versions of the story was the preserver of the heart from which the god later returned to life: Minerva, of course, is the Roman name for Athena.

These are not the only Dionysian elements in *The Tricksters*. The novel is in fact liberally sprinkled with subtle references to Dionysian motifs. Recounting the story of Teddy's murder to Naomi, for example, Anthony says his great-aunt Minerva, on her death bed, told him how Teddy became so enraged at his father he would have "'torn him to bits'" had Edward not defended himself with a spade, with fatal consequences for Teddy (267). The reference to the rite of *sparagmos* is clear.

Dionysus is a god peculiarly associated with vegetation, extending not just to the vine and the grape, but ivy, and even pine, in the pine-cone with which the *thyrsoi*, or staffs, of his followers were tipped. This association extends to a strange kind of

control which Dionysus is able, in myth, to exert over vegetation, and the natural world more generally. In the so-called ‘Homeric Hymn to Dionysus,’ for example, the god, seized by pirates, proves his godhood to them by making ivy twist around the mast of their ship, and causing a grapevine to grow around the sail (Homeric Hymn 7, 39-44). He further unsettles the hapless pirates by transforming himself into a lion, an incident which shows also his association with animals, an association that extends further than the proclivity of his mythical followers to tear them apart.

Associations with vegetation and animals, and an ability to exert a strange influence on the natural world, whether by causing earthquakes or making milk, wine and honey flow freely from the earth for the benefit of his followers, are some of the attributes most strongly associated with Dionysus by artists classical and post-classical. Titian’s *Bacchus and Ariadne*, for example, shows the god arriving in a chariot drawn by cheetahs, and accompanied by followers wreathed with serpents, holding staffs wrapped with grapevines and bearing body parts of animals presumably torn apart in Bacchic frenzy. It is not surprising, then, that there are similar motifs in *The Tricksters*, nor that they occur in contexts that are identifiably Dionysian. The waterlily wallpaper is one such motif, signalling a Dionysian presence with its echo of the spontaneously sprouting vegetation of the ‘Homeric Hymn.’ The Christmas tree set up in the lounge of Carnival’s Hide is another, the smell of pine infusing the whole house and providing an object of peculiar fascination for the Tricksters themselves (117). Bringing an awareness of Dionysian imagery to bear on the novel makes much of its symbolism begin to take on a distinctly Dionysian cast. The Canterbury nor’wester, a constant presence in *The Tricksters*, is described in strikingly Dionysian terms, “strong as a lion” in the very first chapter (10). The world of nature is palpable in *The Tricksters*, and powerful: not just the nor’wester but the earthquakes, of which

there is more than one, not just the obviously Dionysian earthquake associated with the damaged wallpaper, but one in the very last chapter, described as a “familiar, even homely twitching of the solid earth, reminding [Harry’s brother Benny] who was powerful” (330), a quasi-anthropomorphised, almost divine power.

A benign divine power, too; the Dionysian of *The Tricksters* is a more subtle, more complicated force than it has been in many other contemporary and recent representations of this most complex of gods. This complexity, the paradox and contradiction inherent in the figure of Dionysus, his association, on the one hand, with the pleasures of wine, with natural abundance, with life fully and sensually lived, and on the other with violence, frenzy and death, has been missing from many recent accounts of the god. In *The Tricksters*, however, the contradictory character of the god re-emerges in ways not seen in many of the most influential modern portrayals of him.

Having established the Dionysian pedigree of *The Tricksters*, it is now time to look more deeply at the novel to establish how it builds on the traditions about the god bequeathed to it by antiquity and later eras. I will argue that *The Tricksters* is built around a clash between two visions of Dionysus, the cruel and violent deity of much of the modern imagination, and the more benevolent god worshipped in antiquity by the Greeks and Romans. I will further argue that the conflict between these two visions of Dionysus, and its resolution, tracks both the latent conflicts between the members of the Hamilton family that erupt in open hostility on Christmas Eve, and the development of Harry’s character.

Given that I have just argued that *The Tricksters* is a Dionysian novel, it might seem sensible to determine, first of all, which of the characters in the novel are Dionysian figures, which characters might best be identified with Dionysus: in short, who might be called the Dionysus of *The Tricksters*. I believe, however, that this is an

oversimplification of the issue. While *The Tricksters* is a Dionysian novel, I do not think there is any single character who can be accurately labelled the novel's Dionysus. Teddy Carnival probably comes closest to such an embodiment of the god. But even Teddy Carnival, as I will show, is in the end more a figure whose personal experience can be described using Dionysian language, rather than a literal embodiment of divinity. As I have already said, the name 'Dionysus' itself never once occurs in the novel, and I believe this is significant, and must be accounted for. I will argue that many characters of the novel undergo experiences which can be understood in Dionysian terms, but that the Dionysian, the divine itself, is finally more an elaborate conceit behind which more rationally-minded readers can discern a concern with psychological development and traumas.

This all has to do with Mahy's handling of the supernatural. I have already indicated that her treatment of the supernatural in *The Tricksters* is somewhat ambiguous. It is so in all of her fantasy novels, of course, but particularly in *The Tricksters*. The presence of the supernatural is always very understated, and always occurs in conjunction with, or even in the background of, some psychological trauma or difficulty that the protagonist is undergoing. Saskia Voorendt refers to Mahy's employment of what she labels 'externalisation,' the doubling in the external world of the internal, psychological difficulties that the protagonist is undergoing. The same dynamic is discernible in *The Tricksters*. Harry lives in the shadow of her older sister, Christobel, and her insecurities are embodied in her tormentor, Ovid, who is precisely the kind of domineering, bullying, self-centred rival Harry perceives Christobel to be. The relationship between Harry and Ovid is adversarial, one of conflict, each attempting to damage or gain power over the other. The dynamic between Ovid and Harry parallels Harry's attitudes to Christobel. They are unhealthy attitudes, and

Harry must transcend them. The Dionysian provides the framework within which this conflict is played out. The supernatural, then, is secularised, domesticated, through its association with psychological trauma. Readers who are unsettled by the shameless presence of the supernatural can rationalise it as something no more than an elaborate metaphor for the protagonist's psychological state. This process happens in all of Mahy's fantasy novels, but it is particularly noticeable in *The Tricksters*.

Thus, then, is the precarious position of the Dionysian within *The Tricksters*. The question now is how does the Dionysian operate within the parameters set for it by the novel's ambiguous attitude to the presence of the supernatural? How are the conflicts of the Hamilton family, and Harry's inner psychological states, presented in Dionysian terms? How does the novel present the kind of Dionysian I have been promising to demonstrate, the blending of the light and dark sides of the god worshipped in classical times by the Greeks and Romans?

It is best, perhaps, to begin with Teddy, and his divided personality, as it is Teddy, as I have already indicated, who is the closest thing the novel has to a truly Dionysian figure. It is Teddy, of course, who, between the elements of his personality embodied in Ovid and Hadfield, performs the role of Dionysus to Harry's Pentheus (if we choose to read the novel alongside Euripides' *Bacchae*); it is Teddy who is killed and his personality split into three different fragments by his tyrannical and Titanic father; and, finally, it is Teddy, in the form of Felix, who falls in love with Harry's Ariadne. Teddy Carnival is, of course, a complicated figure, not one but three, perhaps even four different personalities, if we count the rounded and complete Teddy who finally makes a brief appearance to Harry in the flames of the Christmas bonfire down by the beach at Carnival's Hide. By themselves, none of these Teddies embodies the figure of Dionysus fully; between them, however, they render the characteristics of the god

in the full range of their contradiction and paradox, and through all of them together the full force of the Dionysian is brought to bear on all the characters of the novel, including Teddy himself in his divided personality: Teddy, as much as Harry, must learn how to love.

This Teddy Carnival, who is in some respects the novel's stand-in for Dionysus himself, and in other respects merely a character whose experience is couched in Dionysian language and imagery, is inextricably linked with Harry and her own troubled personality, and the best way to understand Harry, Teddy, and the place of Dionysian imagery in *The Tricksters* is through an examination of the psychology of both characters. This psychology can best be described with the Freudian concepts of repression and the uncanny.

There is a certain word that springs to mind when considering Dionysus, his mythical attributes and the nature of his epiphanies, and the bizarre events that accompany his appearances and manifestations. The image of a maddened maenad in the throes of a Bacchic ecstasy beating the earth with her *thyrsus* so that milk, wine and honey flows forth, the god who causes earthquakes, who frees himself by no known power, by more than human strength from the strong, heavy chains that bind him, who transforms himself into a lion, who causes vines and ivy to twist around the mast of a ship, who whips his followers up into a virulent, infectious madness in which they rampage through woods and fields, tearing to pieces any animal or person unfortunate enough to cross their path – all this is unsettling, strange, hints at the operation of forces unknown and unfamiliar breaking forth from where they have been buried deep. In a word, a very significant word, Dionysus is *uncanny*.

In colloquial usage, the adjective 'uncanny' describes experiences that are unusual, frightening, or unsettling, and often bears supernatural connotations. Dionysus and

Dionysian experience certainly embody all these elements. But it is also fruitful to consider the relation of the Dionysian to the uncanny with a more precise, more clinical unpacking of both terms.

The most influential theorisation of the uncanny is surely Freud's essay of the same name, first published in 1919. Freud argues, borrowing an aphorism which he attributes to the German philosopher Schelling, that uncanny feelings are brought on when something which should remain hidden comes to light (Freud 225). In his psychoanalytical interpretation of the term, then, uncanny feelings are brought on by the return of repressed experience, or more precisely, by incidents which prompt the return to consciousness of experiences long buried deep in the unconscious. Freud distinguishes the psychological phenomenon of uncanny feeling, brought on by real-life incidents which hint at some repressed item of experience, from literary effects brought on by the employment of certain devices in literature. In general, anything that in real life seems to hint at the operation of supernatural forces, an unsettling coincidence, say, can bring on uncanny feeling.

In literature the case is somewhat more complicated, however. As Freud says, readers of literary texts must accept whatever world the writer creates as given. If the writer presents a world where the supernatural is a matter of course, then it is impossible to recognise any uncanny effects in it. The power of the supernatural to summon up uncanny feeling rests in its ability to make us feel uneasy; if a writer creates a world in which magic or the supernatural is a commonplace, an accepted part of the reality of that world, then any manifestation of the supernatural is not experienced as uncanny. The revival of *Snow White*, for example, does not, as Freud notes, excite any feelings of uncanny terror, even though he has just named the resurrection of the dead (or, rather, any incident that seems to hint at the resurrection

of the dead) as a prime example of the kind of event which would induce a peculiarly uncanny mode of fear. A genre like the fairy tale, then, where we can expect witches or malevolent talking wolves or fairy godmothers as a matter of course, can never be experienced as uncanny. When, however, we are faced with a realistic fictional world in which the supernatural nevertheless at some stage intrudes, we experience the same sort of situation we would if we were faced with something supernatural – or, rather, seemingly supernatural – in real life. The uncanny as an aesthetic effect is the result.

In myth, as in fairytale, the presence of the supernatural is simply an accepted fact of the genre. More than that, even: the supernatural, in the form of gods and monsters, in the form of the existence, in fact, of entire worlds (Olympus, say) that operate according to rules that differ from those of everyday reality, is an expected and indeed integral element of myth. Properly speaking, then, the Dionysus of Greek myth can never be uncanny, at least in Freud's interpretation of the term. Dionysus is frightening, unsettling, represents the welling-up of forces hidden deep in the human psyche, of repressed sexualities, say, everything, that is, and more, which we understand by the idiomatic use of the term 'uncanny,' but not quite what Freud means in his precise and clinical interpretation of it. *The Tricksters*, however, is not a myth, but a novel that uses mythical tropes in a world which is recognisably our own. The presence of the supernatural, and especially the ambiguity of the supernatural, in *The Tricksters* therefore creates precisely the kind of situation which Freud says produces the literary effect of the uncanny, and hints to the alert reader that most of the events that are unsettling or frightening for Harry, events usually connected to the Tricksters and their strange powers, in fact signal the long-delayed eruption to the surface of Harry's repressed insecurities and anger.

The myths of Dionysus have long provided a rich vein of ore for psychoanalytic critics to mine. The *Bacchae* especially, with its conflict between a conservative, authoritarian king and a god who represents licence and liberation from ordinary social constraints, is open to interpretation as a story of the return of the repressed. Charles Segal in his article 'Pentheus and Hippolytus on the Couch and on the Grid: Psychoanalytic and Structuralist Readings of Greek Tragedy,' (1978) for example, reads the *Bacchae* partially as the story of Pentheus' repression of his own sexuality. In Segal's reading, Dionysus represents the destructive consequences of Pentheus' denial of his sexuality. The licence that Dionysus brings, the sexually charged nature of the madness he inspires in his followers, the aggressive sexuality of the satyrs, all manifest the worst of Pentheus' paranoid fears of the dangers of untrammelled sexuality. In the end, unable to reconcile the forces of sexuality with his own life, he is destroyed by them. Having struggled all his life to repress desire, he is at last overcome by the curiosity to watch the maenads in their revels. For Pentheus, sexuality is 'something which should remain secret' yet nevertheless 'comes to light.'

Sexuality is a universal facet of human experience. It is impossible to reject it completely, Segal argues; it must somehow be reconciled to the social conditions and norms that human individuals find themselves subject to. In the world of the Greek city-state, in which the *Bacchae* takes place, it must be accommodated by and fitted into the limitations set for it by the institutions of marriage and household. Segal argues that the key to Pentheus' character is his incomplete maturation, his inability to grow into a responsible adult sexuality and out of an Oedipal dependence on the love of his mother (141). His fear of Dionysus is an exaggerated fear of the potential consequences of unrestrained sexual passion, and the contradictions built into his character, between his Oedipal need for an ambiguously sexual motherly love and his

extreme fear of the liberated sexuality represented by Dionysus, literally and figuratively tear him apart.

Segal's reading of the *Bacchae*, indeed, is peculiarly appropriate to my reading of *The Tricksters*. In his psychoanalytic reading, sexuality is both a powerful and potentially dangerous force, but it is not one that can simply be rejected. The individual and society must be reconciled to it, somehow. As a force that is both dangerous and necessary, sexuality can in fact be interpreted as a peculiarly Dionysian force. It is an indispensable element of the human condition; indeed, of course, human life would be impossible without it. But it can be a dangerous force, too, and, for Pentheus, at least, to try to reject it completely is perhaps the most dangerous course of action of all. The bifurcated character of sexuality, then, bears a remarkable resemblance to the two different sides of Dionysus I have been painstakingly trying to demonstrate, the benevolent, life-giving Dionysus and the violent, destructive and dangerous Dionysus. On a psychoanalytic reading, a sexuality that is accommodated, integrated, assimilated into one's life and reconciled to society and with others can be tamed, domesticated, and lived with, and be beneficial, benign, and pleasurable. Failure to come to terms with sexuality in one way or another, however, to try to repress it, to fail to integrate it into one's personality, to fail to understand it properly, can in the end lead to disaster. So both sexuality and Dionysus, in our psychoanalytic reading of them, are potentially dangerous but necessary forces with which an accommodation must be reached.

I do not mean to advance a reading of *The Tricksters*, or more specifically of Harry's psychological development, exclusively as a story of a coming to terms with an adolescent sexuality, although that element is certainly present. My argument is broader than that, and indeed I would say that Harry's relationship to Christobel is

more important to the novel than her relationship with Felix. Harry's problem is her stored-up resentments against her elder sister, her perception of always having been "nothing but a middle one," (25) caught up between the concerns of elder and younger siblings, with her own lost in the tumult. To put it plainly, I believe Teddy can best be read as a manifestation of Harry's own insecurities about her relationship with her sister. Teddy represents, in fact, a Freudian return of the repressed, and the Freudian reading could be extended further, the three Tricksters inviting comparisons with the Freudian id (Hadfield), ego (Felix), and superego (Ovid). Here is not the place to take the Freudian reading as far as it will go, however, but to explore how Freudian ideas work in the novel to create a new fusion of the light and dark sides of Dionysus.

Harry must learn to love her sister Christobel. This she learns in the aftermath of her outburst at the Hamilton family Christmas party, and it is a lesson she learns alongside another lesson in love that she receives from Felix. At the climax of the novel, the family is shattered into its individual components, the faultlines along which strain had been building up between family members throughout the novel finally rupturing into yawning chasms in a spasm of violence. The reintegration of Felix with his brothers parallels the reintegration of the Hamilton family which begins in the aftermath of their devastating Christmas. The ambiguity inherent in the Dionysian is revealed: from violence comes peace, and renewed life. The catalyst for this eruption is the conflict between Harry and Ovid, which at Christmas finally bursts into the open.

Harry's relationship with Ovid is always characterised by conflict, and the chief weapon in that conflict is writing. Writing in *The Tricksters* encapsulates the ambiguity and paradox inherent in Mahy's concept of the Dionysian. The very name

‘Ovid’ signals that the confrontation between Harry and Ovid is a struggle between writers, and indeed the written word, in the form of Harry’s novel, is Ovid’s chief weapon in this conflict. While Ovid tries to use writing to subjugate and dominate, to bend others to his will, for Harry writing is a means of self-definition and self-assertion. For Harry, writing stands for imagination, which in turn stands for the power to make things in the world the way she wants them to be, in her family relationships and in her romantic relationships. Here Lisa Scally’s idea of ‘author-ity’ (132) is useful: writing, identified with the power to make the world the way we want it to be, is a power that can be used for ends both good and evil, can be both an empowering and a potentially morally corrupting force (136). The name ‘Ovid’ for Harry’s antagonist is particularly appropriate. The original Ovid, the Roman poet, treated the story of Ariadne extensively in his own poetry. Mahy’s Ovid, the (would-be) all-powerful author-figure, is the perfect foil for this modern Ariadne, herself a would-be author, but with a different purpose: not domination over others, but self-assertion. Both characters desire power, to be sure, but each pursues a different kind of power, Harry’s desire for power to assert herself and Ovid’s for power over others, at first in alliance with Hadfield over Felix, and when Harry comes to threaten the balance of power among the Tricksters, over Harry herself. Writing is Harry’s means of self-expression; writing, and in fact the very same writing, is also what Ovid uses to try to destroy the Hamilton family, in his final and greatest act of manipulative destructiveness in pursuit of power. Writing, therefore, is the catalyst of the climactic Dionysian moment in *The Tricksters*. Of course, too, the novel ends as it began, with Harry the writer, only this time with the affirmation of her former rival, Christobel. Writing can now be to Harry what she has always wanted it to be for her, a means of fulfilment and self-expression, the status of writer providing her with her own niche in

the family. Again, this Dionysian writing is ambiguous. While Ovid can employ it to destructive ends, as a tool to perpetuate conflict, for Harry it turns out to have a much more positive purpose.

That both Harry and Ovid use writing in pursuit of their goals makes the fact that they are, after all, after the same thing more apparent, and creates some interesting parallels between the two. Harry's desire for self-assertion, for a place in her own family, is not as innocent as it might first appear. With her revelation of her father Jack's affair, Harry intends to hurt Christobel. As she confronts Christobel, "a thousand bitter memories" come pouring "out through the rents" in "her head and her heart;" they are "longing to be set free" (288). These are memories of "birthday parties when Christobel just couldn't help seeming like the true birthday girl," of "days when Christobel had forced her into spending her saved-up money on things Christobel wanted and she didn't" (288-9). Harry's revelation, then, springs out of a desire for revenge on a sister she perceives as a self-centred bully. There is a nasty streak in Harry that parallels Ovid's need for domination. In the end, Harry must learn to let others have their own place in the family as much as Christobel needs to learn to let Harry have hers.

Ovid, then, can be read as an externalisation, an emblem or distillation, of Harry's own least generous impulses. The Dionysian climax of the novel, in which both the Hamilton family and Teddy Carnival himself are torn asunder before being put back together again, represents the eruption in Hamilton family life of paradoxical Dionysian forces, on the one hand the violence that Ovid and Hadfield visit on the Hamiltons, and that Harry visits on Christobel, and on the other the greater understanding of one another, and one another's needs, that the confrontation provokes. Ovid and Felix are two opposites, different poles of the same personality; at

one end, the desire for power, domination and vengeance, to be achieved if necessary by force and in the most destructive way possible, and on the other the capacity for love and harmony. The Dionysian forces that Harry (and the rest of the Hamilton family) had long repressed return in the most devastating way, but in being brought into the open bring in their train the reconciliation that the attempt to sweep them under the carpet, in its failure to address the real roots of the problems, could not.

The peculiar appropriateness of Harry's name – that is, her proper name, Ariadne – now becomes apparent, too. Harry, or Ariadne, must learn to love. If she is to avoid the fate of Pentheus, who tried to repress the Dionysian forces within himself, she must learn to come to terms with the Dionysian forces and conflicts at work in her own life. Harry's relationship with Felix signals the existence of her capacity to love, and also provides an obvious pointer to the story of the original Ariadne's rescue from the island of Naxos by a beneficent Dionysus. There is a tension between the elements of Ariadne and Pentheus in Harry's character. The name Ariadne signals, however, that ultimately Harry will have a very different interaction with Dionysus than Pentheus. While Pentheus tries to fight Dionysus and is killed, Harry learns to accept the Dionysian within her and comes to incorporate the life-giving functions of Dionysian experience which Pentheus is unable to see. Whereas Pentheus becomes the victim of the violent side of Dionysus, and is unable or unwilling to see his positive life-giving aspects, in the end through her relationship with Felix, Harry is able to experience the Dionysian in its positive, life-giving capacity.

Teddy is also a character in his own right, however, and when we read Teddy as a character rather than as merely a manifestation of Harry's own psychological problems we see that Teddy is as much subject to Dionysian forces as Harry is herself. For Teddy as much as Harry the Dionysian is an external force; Teddy is no divine

figure, unlike the Dionysus of the *Bacchae*. The relationships between the Tricksters, representing the conflicts in Teddy's own personality, are dangerously unbalanced, with the head, represented by Ovid, and the instincts, represented by Hadfield, dominant over the heart, or capacity for emotion and empathy, whose representative is Felix. Reason and instinct must be the tools of the heart, proclaims Felix in his moment of triumph (295). Without the heart to guide reason and instinct, the human proclivity to seek domination and power takes over. Felix's victory, then, is the triumph of emotion and empathy over violence, domination and subjugation. It is a victory, then, of one manifestation of the Dionysian, its peaceful, life-giving aspect, over another, its dangerous, frightening and violent aspect. Teddy's own complicated relationship with the Dionysian forces at work in his own family, then, is resolved simultaneously with that of the Hamilton family. Teddy's father Edward's suppression of his son's emotional capacities ends with the son's violent outburst against the father and subsequent murder by the father. Teddy's ghost then remains restless until Harry's novel inadvertently summons him back to life, and in the relationship between Felix and Harry Teddy is finally able to achieve the emotional intimacy he lacked in his lifetime. The two sides of the Dionysian are as visible in Teddy's life story as in Harry's. The dark, unpleasant and dangerous side of the Dionysian is awakened in him by his father's repression of his emotional side; his final reconciliation with it, in Felix's relationship with Harry, allows him to achieve the peace denied him in life.

The conflicted and incomplete nature of Teddy is visible in a striking incident reminiscent of the story of the sculptor Pygmalion in the original Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this scene, Ovid applies makeup to Christobel in an attempt to woo her, but, unlike the Roman Ovid's Pygmalion, instead of bringing a statue to life,

The Tricksters' Ovid shapes the living, breathing Christobel into a statue of exquisite beauty, and is unable to infuse his "work of art" (241) with the life he wishes to see coursing through her. In spite of Ovid's kisses, Harry, observing, wonders "if there really was a live sister left in the core of that beautiful puppet" (241). Able to make roses or a sprinkling of fine dust appear out of thin air, Ovid is nevertheless unable to give his aesthetic creations life. Incomplete without a capacity for emotional connection, Ovid the creator is unable to imbue his creations with the passionate, untamed life that Dionysus represents. Indeed, Ovid himself seems troubled by the lifeless beauty of his art: "[s]omething in him grieved at his own success, and he took Christobel's smiling face between his hands and kissed her as if he would breathe his own life back into her" (241). Aware of the unreality of this aesthetic imitation of life, Ovid comes to bear a striking resemblance to Nietzsche's Apollonian artist, the creator of beautiful form who is nevertheless aware that his work is an act of concealment, hiding its own distance from what is really real.

This story shows the interdependence of the two sides of the Dionysian. Ovid is an incompletely Dionysian figure. He needs to be able to experience love to exercise the true life-giving function of Dionysus. Representing only one facet of Dionysian experience, the facet that visits violence on the world, that seeks to achieve its goals by force, that tries, like the Dionysus of the *Bacchae*, to proclaim its power by the utter annihilation of its enemies, Ovid is unable to experience the other half of Dionysus, the one that the chorus of Bacchantes knows and wishes to spread, the benevolent deity who grants life in all its sensuality and fullness to his followers.

That *The Tricksters* takes place around Christmas is no accident; nor is it an accident that a novel taking place at Christmas should be heavily imbued with a Dionysian spirit. In *The Tricksters* Christmas and the Dionysian, the Christian and the

pagan, are inextricably intertwined. Similarities between Dionysus and Christ have long been noted. Stories are told about both figures in which they are raised from the dead. Both Dionysus and Christ offer eternal life to their followers. Both are associated with wine, and with the performance of miracles. The pine tree Christmas tree of *The Tricksters* may be read as a Christian *thyrsus*, or perhaps the *thyrsus* as a pagan Christmas tree. As well as Dionysian figures, the Tricksters also strongly resemble the three Magi who come to visit the infant Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, and are compared to the Three Wise Men (134). The Tricksters are heralds of new life, of renewed family life. Intending, in the end, to destroy the Hamilton family, they in fact bring about its salvation. In the happy ending for the Hamilton family there is a blending of the Christian and the Dionysian.

Mahy presents a contemporary Dionysian. Not a modern Dionysus, in Henrichs' sense of an implacable god of violence, bent on the destruction of his enemies and the embodiment only of what is most terrifying and horrible in human psychology; Mahy's employment of Dionysian imagery is too ambiguous for that. In *The Tricksters*, the Dionysian emerges in the full glory of its contradiction and paradox. While Ovid and Hadfield – the superego and the id – represent the unpleasant aspects of Dionysus, there is also Felix to balance them. As hard as Ovid and Hadfield try to destroy the Hamilton family, as Dionysus does in the *Bacchae*, their efforts lead only to the revelation of long-buried secrets that, brought into the open, lead to the beginnings of long-delayed reconciliations. And I use the term 'Dionysian,' not Dionysus, for none of the characters in the novel are actually Dionysus; the name never occurs in the novel, and this is crucial. It is more important to read *The Tricksters* in the context of the Dionysian than in the context of the god himself. The characters of *The Tricksters* are under the sway of the Dionysian; none, however, has

it fully under their control. The Dionysian, the divine, is an external force; there are no gods among the characters of *The Tricksters*. While Ovid and Hadfield represent the dark side of Dionysus, they are unable to bring their schemings and power plays to fruition; when they attempt to do so, the benevolent aspects of Dionysian experience conspire, in the shape of Felix, to remove events from their control, leading to consequences they could not foresee. They are incomplete in themselves. What Mahy shows is that the violence of Dionysus is inseparable from his beneficence. The two are unimaginable without each other; each flows from each, and is implicated in each. Spurned, rejected, turned away, Dionysus becomes angry and vengeful. Given in to, he is benevolent, and gives the gift of life. Eric Dodds, one of the twentieth century's most prominent scholars of Greek religion, summarises the bifurcated character of Dionysus and Dionysian experience in a way which is very apposite for *The Tricksters*:

those who repress the demand in themselves (for Dionysian experience) or refuse its satisfaction to others transform it by their act into a power of disintegration and destruction, a blind natural force that sweeps away the innocent with the guilty (xlii).

Such a transformation is visible in *The Tricksters*, albeit in reverse. The emotional conflicts of the Hamilton family, deeply buried, finally erupt into the open; it is this open confrontation with family conflict that finally enables the Hamiltons to embark on the path toward reconciliation. The Dionysian is transformed from a violent force of destruction to an agent of reconciliation and renewal.

Lisa Scally discusses the idea of “author-ity” in Margaret Mahy’s fiction, the idea that writing in Mahy’s novels assumes a doubled character, a force that can be used for ends both good and ill. This bifurcated character emerges in *The Tricksters*, in

which Harry's novel is both an instrument of her self-definition and self-assertion, and a weapon Ovid uses to strike at her family. In the following two chapters I wish to show how the idea of writing, the idea of literature, and especially the idea of children's literature, tends to assume an ambiguous aspect in Mahy's novels. The two novels that these chapters will focus on, 1985's *The Catalogue of the Universe*, and 1995's *The Other Side of Silence*, each in their own way treat the problems and contradictions of fiction, problems which seem to cause Mahy herself much anxiety and insecurity.

IV.

Myth, Fiction and Lying in *The Catalogue of the Universe*

From her first picture book, 'A Lion in the Meadow,' fiction itself, and its potentially problematic status, has been a perennial concern for Margaret Mahy. With her notion of 'author-ity,' Lisa Scally is one who has already discussed the ways in which Mahy has explored the nature of fiction in her own novels. Scally's concern is Mahy's exploration of the power of fictional stories, power that can be used for good or ill depending on the intentions of its wielder. *The Catalogue of the Universe* (1985) is another novel in which the nature of fiction itself forms an important part of the subject matter, with the devastating power of one kind of fictional narrative, the lie, one of its central concerns. For the crucial lie in *The Catalogue of the Universe* Mahy artfully alludes to an actual myth, that of Dido and Aeneas, as the backdrop of the story, inviting us to consider the relations between such concepts as myth, fiction and lying and the uncomfortable connotations for literary fiction of its juxtaposition with its kin. Fiction as myth, myth as lie, and the lie as a fiction or a myth: the tension between truth and falsehood at the heart of the idea of fiction is the subject matter of this novel. How can a story that fails the basic test of factual truth be of use to us in our lives? This is a novel that, through its examination of ideas about myth, fairy tale and fiction explores the potential uses and pitfalls of fictional narrative, and finally calls into question the utility of children's literature by drawing attention to some of its paradoxes.

One commonplace view of Virgil's *Aeneid* is as a piece of Roman imperialist propaganda, justifying and glorifying the Roman imperial project and granting the Roman dominion over the world the legitimacy of divine sanction. But there is another side to the *Aeneid*, as Adam Parry shows in his article 'The Two Voices of

Virgil's *Aeneid*.' The *Aeneid* is a poem about war, about the conquest of Italy by Aeneas and his allies, the mythical ancestors of the Roman people. Running alongside the poem's undeniable imperialist propagandising is a much more melancholy strain. Far from being a straightforward celebration of the glory of Rome's imperial expansion, the *Aeneid* is characterised also by a mournful awareness of the costs of that expansion, especially its personal costs to its hero, Aeneas, whose human wants and desires are overwhelmed by the requirements of his historical mission. The mood of the *Aeneid*, then, far removed from the triumphalism of a propagandising glorification of the Roman state and its wars and conquests, is profoundly tragic. As Parry puts it:

The *Aeneid* enforces the fine paradox that all the wonders of the most powerful institution the world has ever known are not necessarily of greater importance than the emptiness of human suffering (123).

Parry's double-edged view of the *Aeneid*, in which the poem simultaneously affirms and denies its ostensible propagandist purpose, provides a useful template for understanding the dynamics of Margaret Mahy's 1985 novel *The Catalogue of the Universe*, and in fact *The Catalogue of the Universe* relies heavily on Virgil's *Aeneid* for its central narrative. The name 'Dido' for its protagonist Angela's mother invites us to consider the novel as a re-imagining of Virgil's story of the affair between his hero and Dido, the mythical queen of Carthage. In Virgil's narrative the affair ends when the Trojan hero is admonished by the gods to leave his luxurious lifestyle in Carthage behind to fulfil his historical mission to found Rome. Subsequently, the distraught Dido kills herself, throwing herself on her own funeral pyre. In Mahy's novel the main action takes place eighteen years after another affair, between the revealingly named Dido May and a businessman called Roland Chase, has come to a

traumatic end, when Angela, the progeny of the relationship, has nearly reached adulthood, and concerns her reaction to her discovery that the romantic story her mother used to tell her about the circumstances of her birth was a lie. Angela had been raised to believe that her father, whom Dido had told her was married, had abandoned Dido only out of a sense of duty to his first family. The truth, however, is a crushing and un-romantic tale of abandonment and poverty, whose spirit of empty human suffering closely echoes its mythical inspiration in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Roland, in fact, had never had a family in the first place, and far from having left Dido out of a sense of duty abandoned her and fled to Sydney when he discovered her pregnancy. When Angela tracks her father down, he reveals these facts to her dispassionately, and disavows her on the spot. After Roland's departure, Dido and Angela had lived a life of poverty in a tiny, ramshackle house, the difficulty of Angela's impoverished upbringing made more bitter in retrospect by Dido's final lie, that Roland had provided them with financial support. Indeed, we learn the only money Dido ever received was from Roland's mother, intended to pay for an abortion.

Dido's story in *The Catalogue of the Universe* echoes her mythical namesake's abandonment and despair. But instead of throwing herself on her own funeral pyre, this Dido finds that her suffering is redeemed by the love of her daughter Angela. There is an interesting parallel with the *Aeneid* here: almost Dido's last words to Aeneas before he departs are a despairing wish for a child to remember him by, that might alleviate her sense of loneliness and abandonment:

Had I at least before you left conceived
a son in me; if there were but a tiny
Aeneas playing by me in the hall,
whose face, in spite of everything, might yet

remind me of you, then indeed I should
not seem so totally abandoned, beaten (4.440-445).

In *The Catalogue of the Universe*, Angela is that child. There is no funeral pyre in this story; instead, after Angela's rejection by her father, she angrily confronts her mother about the "sickly story" (155) she told her about Roland's loving and noble self-sacrifice. Mother and daughter are reconciled and saved from their mutual spirals of self-destruction after witnessing a fiery car accident in which each thinks the other has been killed.

As Dido remarks to Angela, the name 'Angela' means 'message,' (210) reinforcing Angela's impression that she is the child of loving parents and allaying her insecurities. Angela's "hidden, sad guilt that she existed at all" (107) is relieved in the first half of the novel by her belief that she was conceived in testimony to a loving relationship that ended only because of her noble father's sense of duty to his first family. Angela's disillusionment is therefore especially crushing. *The Catalogue of the Universe* is, like many of Mahy's novels, a story of adolescent self-discovery, and Angela's story is paired with that of her friend (and later boyfriend) Tycho Potter, the victim of his own insecurities. Tycho is quiet and introverted, and self-conscious about his appearance, finding solace for his solitude in intellectual pursuits, especially in *The Catalogue of the Universe*, the book that gives the novel its title. Eventually, he finds acceptance and fulfilment in the arms of Angela. Both Angela and Tycho get their happy ending, earning their happily ever after at the end of what Tycho thinks of as a "fairy tale" (192).

My concern is the novel's exploration of the relationship between myth and truth. In common and academic usage, the term 'myth' has many different and sometimes contradictory connotations. In colloquial usage, the word is often used to describe

stories that are not true, or beliefs that are mistaken. One could refer to, say, the myth of ever-rising house prices and mean by the usage of the word a belief that is not only mistaken, but, in light of its potential consequences when held by large numbers of people, pernicious and even dangerous. The word, then, can connote stories or beliefs that are not simply wrong, but actively dangerous. In this sense the word comes to mean something strikingly close to ‘lie,’ the moral weighting it can be made to bear becoming especially clear if one were to use it in a sentence like ‘the belief in ever-rising house prices was a myth propagated by unscrupulous bankers and mortgage lenders’. In other contexts, however, especially more academic ones, a myth is a story that is held, by the culture that tells it, to possess some sort of deeply seated value or truth. The double-edged connotations of the term ‘myth,’ then, reflect the double-edged attitudes towards fiction expressed in *The Catalogue of the Universe*.

In her article ““True-seeming lyes” in Margaret Mahy’s Fiction,’ Kathryn Walls argues that, in her non-fiction, interviews and essays, Mahy stresses the value of what Walls labels fiction’s “visionary truth” as giving value to fiction (153). In defending fiction, in its literal untruth, from charges of being a bearer of lies, Mahy in her essays privileges this notion of ‘visionary truth’ over the more usual empirical sense of the term truth, that is, of truth as correspondence with reality. However, according to Walls, in her fiction itself, Mahy is much more ambivalent; the ‘visionary truth’ she speaks of in her non-fiction is nowhere apparent. Instead, Walls offers three case studies of Mahy’s novels, one of which is *The Catalogue of the Universe*, centring on crucial lies. In all cases the serious negative consequences of lying are the driving forces of the plot. In warning against the dangers of lying, therefore, Mahy seems to champion an empirical understanding of truth, and this dichotomy, between visionary

and empirical truth, is crucial to *The Catalogue of the Universe* in ways I will outline below.

The novel itself repeatedly draws attention to concepts like fairy tale in ways that are hard to ignore and point to a deeper engagement with issues of truth and falsity in fiction. Angela herself, for example, asks her mother about the story of her birth, which Dido used to tell “just as if it was a fairy story” (15). In this connection the novel’s fixation on issues of wealth and poverty reveals its significance. Angela would like to believe that she is living out a ‘fairy story’ as a kind of suburban Cinderella, who will be raised up from the poverty of her upbringing by a benevolent and wealthy father. With Angela’s crushing rejection by her father the ironic gap that emerges between Dido’s fairy story and the truth of her relationship with Roland Chase is heightened, emphasising the novel’s dichotomy between literal truth and the supposed transcendent or visionary truth of myth.

Similarly, just before Angela asks her mother about the old story of her birth, when she is thinking about her father, she feels that she is “surrounded by the light of revelation and prophecy” (15). This employment of religious language in connection with Dido’s story strongly suggests its identification with something akin to Walls’ notion of visionary truth. Rather than being affirmed, however, Angela’s belief in the truth of her mother’s story proves to be misplaced. The literal *untruth* of Dido’s story will completely overturn the sense of self she gained from that story and force her to re-evaluate her sense of identity. *Visionary* truth is inextricably bound up with *literal* truth, and any story that does not possess the latter has a much less secure claim to the former. In this way *The Catalogue of the Universe* challenges the capacity of myth and fiction to embody truth, labelling, as it were, the spiritual value of myth a fiction and the truth of fiction a myth.

Moreover, both Tycho and Angela themselves are conscious of the absurdities of fairy tale-style happy endings. A recurring motif through the novel is a romance novel that Angela and Tycho have read, called *The Sheik*, based on the famous movie of the 1920s. Although they both laugh at it, Angela, especially, is just as enamoured of a narrative which proves equally ridiculous, the story that Dido tells her about her noble father's self-sacrifice. And even though both Angela and Tycho laugh at the melodramatic romance novel their own story partakes of a similar sort of narrative form. Indeed, they are both conscious that they are living out a narrative as far-fetched and fantastical as any Mills and Boon; Tycho even thinks at one point that he has achieved a happy ending to his "fairy tale" (192). That the novel so convincingly shatters one of the fantastical narratives that drive its characters makes us doubt the authenticity of its own romance novel ending.

The story of *The Catalogue of the Universe* appears to be the happier ending to her story that the mythical Dido envisages in her final plea to Aeneas, her wish for a son to alleviate the hurt of Aeneas' departure apparently fulfilled in *The Catalogue of the Universe* by the birth of Angela. But in reality, Roland's abandonment of Dido in *The Catalogue of the Universe* is just as abrupt and crushing as Aeneas' departure from Carthage. Angela was not, as Dido told her, a child conceived in love as a testimony to a relationship that, though intimate and loving, could never last; rather, she was the accidental outcome of a relationship that, for Roland at least, was just a meaningless fling. The Dido of *The Catalogue of the Universe*, just as in love with Roland as the Dido of the *Aeneid* was with Aeneas, is just as devastated as her mythical counterpart when Roland leaves her. The real story of the novel's Dido is, in fact, the real story of Dido in the *Aeneid*: one of abandonment, betrayal and loneliness.

When the Cherry brothers crash their car, the novel seems to be heading for the same ending as the story of Dido and Aeneas. The fiery car accident, indeed, is the novel's counterpart to Dido's funeral pyre in Virgil's poem. But here the novel takes a different turn. When both Angela and Dido each think the other has been killed in the crash, they find redemption and solace in their love for one another. Angela ends up being her mother's salvation after all. The novel finishes as double-edged as the *Aeneid* is in Adam Parry's reading of it. On the one hand, Angela and Tycho get their happy romance novel ending, and we see that Angela is, after all, the consolation that Dido needs after her abandonment by Roland. But the novel also leaves us feeling that perhaps this ending is too pat, too easy. Having revealed how easily romantic myths of gallant lovers and noble self-sacrifice fall apart when exposed to reality, it asks us to believe in the very sort of fairytale ending it had earlier disavowed. Dido's earlier secret nighttime tears, the poverty Angela and Dido had to endure during Angela's childhood, and the uneasy precedent of the *Aeneid* itself, remain as reminders that the real world is often not as kind and merciful as it is in fairytales and romance novels.

The novel is poised on a knife edge on the issue of truth and falsity in fiction. On the one hand the 'myth' that Dido tells Angela is convincingly shattered. On the other hand, a deeper truth about loss and suffering is revealed in the allusion to the *Aeneid* and the story of the death of Dido. In *The Catalogue of the Universe*, the tension between truth and lying at the heart of the idea of fiction – as well as tensions between different kinds of truths, what species of statement can stake a claim to the label of truth – is laid bare. Of course, the novel itself, and many of the other narratives that occur within it, propagate ideas about happy endings and tidy narrative closure that Angela's shattering meeting with her father undermines. However, through that meeting with her father, the novel exposes the hollowness of those ideas, and the

incapacity of narrative to fully encompass the messy, inchoate and often tragic nature of real life. The novel both affirms and denies the project of fiction itself. Through the nexus of allusions to Virgil's *Aeneid*, which similarly wrestles with the collision between ideals and reality, and the horrible toll that an ideal, ruthlessly and single-mindedly pursued, can have on a human life, the novel reveals both how potentially facile and even dangerous a fictional story can be, and also fiction's capacity to relate deeper, emotional truths that do not need to impart literal, empirical truths to have an effect.

The collision between ideals and reality goes, if anything, even further in *The Catalogue of the Universe* than it does in the *Aeneid*. Aeneas' tragedy derives from his destiny, which is determined by fate and over which the gods themselves have at best only an ambiguous control. Aeneas' suffering is caused in large part by the fate – one might say the story, the story of Rome – that drives him on. In the first book of the *Aeneid*, the hero, exiled from his homeland, his fleet beset by storms, makes clear he would rather have died defending his homeland than have to take up the mission ordained for him by fate (1.133-43). Whereas the theme of the *Aeneid* is destiny, the theme of *The Catalogue of the Universe* is the unravelling of destiny. In the first half of the novel, Angela's greatest certainty is that she was meant; this gives her an identity and solace for her insecurities. It is the loss of meaning that is the main theme of the novel; whereas Aeneas is driven by the certainty of his destiny, and suffers because of it, Angela's sense of self is shaken by the collapse of the only certainty in her life, and must be rebuilt in the hard knowledge that the fairy tale of her upbringing has no basis in fact.

Where the *Aeneid* posits meaning and certainty, *The Catalogue of the Universe* posits contingency and uncertainty. Whereas in the *Aeneid* every event is accorded

narrative significance, in *The Catalogue of the Universe* that significance is undermined. Whereas the Dido of the *Aeneid* pleads for a child in memory of a meaningful relationship, Angela of *The Catalogue of the Universe* is the accidental progeny of a casual fling. Whereas Aeneas is a man whose life is tightly controlled by narrative – that of the Roman state – and whose tragedy derives from his inability to escape it, Angela's life is driven by the desire for narrative certainty, and her disillusionment derives from the collapse of this certainty. Angela's disillusionment in *The Catalogue of the Universe*, in fact, represents not only the collapse of her own personal certainties, but also of the narrative certainties that drive Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Sam Hester writes of *The Catalogue of the Universe* that "Mahy is clearly interested in drawing our attention to the dichotomy of spontaneity and structure" (181). In her article 'The Wobble in the Symmetry: The Narrator's Role in *The Catalogue of the Universe*,' Hester argues that Mahy's use of symbolism, instead of providing a distillation of the novel's concerns, in fact destabilises the reader's search for unity and coherence. Hester points out that many seemingly important moments and symbols in *The Catalogue of the Universe* have no discernible thematic or narrative significance. Unusual names like Jerry Cherry, for example, are never remarked on and have no obvious symbolic or thematic importance. Other motifs, however, such as the description of Dry Creek Road, on which Angela and Dido live, as a "serpent god" that "claimed victims," (12) prove to be terribly significant. A reader, therefore, who might expect, in Hester's words, a "perfectly constructed model world," (178) is constantly kept guessing. This is an important insight into the dynamic of *The Catalogue of the Universe*. Mahy's project in the novel is to draw attention to the messy nature of reality, and to disrupt attempts at totalising or universalising accounts of human experience.

While Hester's dogmatic approach might be questioned – given that the theme of her article is uncertainty, we might well ask how she can assert with such authority that, for instance, there is no deeper significance to, say, the name Jerry Cherry – her broader insight remains valid: *The Catalogue of the Universe* is a novel steeped in uncertainty. A young adult or children's novel is obliged to provide a happy ending; after many adventures and much disillusionment *The Catalogue of the Universe* eventually does so, too, but given that so much of the novel is taken up in knocking down certainties and discrediting fairy tales we might well question the sincerity of that ending. There are two possible ways to read the ending of *The Catalogue of the Universe*, a naïve reading that sees Angela discover meaning and self-worth in the arms of the people (that is, her mother and Tycho) who actually do love her, as opposed to chasing the mirage of a happy and wealthy life in the suburbs playing tennis with a doting businessman father, and a sophisticated reading conscious of the novel's own status as a narrative, and how Angela's disillusionment with Roland, and the disdain with which she and Tycho regard the romance novels they read, undermine the novel's own ostensibly happy ending.

What end all this questioning? A key problem of children's literature is how to present a happy ending when life doesn't always do so; how to balance the necessity of being honest with one's children about the facts of the world with their (parents'?) need for reassurance and hope. The two readings need not conflict with one another, or cancel each other out; rather, they should be seen as coexisting with one another, ministering to the two different needs for honesty about the harsh truths of life and the reassurance that a happy ending is always at least possible. After all, if life is not necessarily a fairy tale with a neatly resolved happy ever after, then neither is it necessarily a story of unmitigated misery and suffering. It is a dichotomy similar to

the one faced by Virgil in composing the *Aeneid* in the first century BC: the Roman poet's need to present a glorious national myth was tempered by his desire to imbue it with an awareness of the costs of war and the pathos of human suffering.

V.

Heroes, Authors and Others in *The Other Side of Silence*

In *The Other Side of Silence* (1995), the young protagonist, Hero Rapper, a twelve year old girl defined by her 'elective mutism,' a psychological disorder in which a person otherwise fully capable of speech voluntarily stops speaking, becomes fascinated with the tangled gardens of a large old mansion near her house. Climbing among the trees that grow in the house's grounds, she steps on a branch that breaks under her weight and falls out of the tree in front of the house's enigmatic inhabitant and owner, known to Hero as Miss Credence or, in a cruel reference to her lazy eye, as Squintum. Miss Credence, daughter of the deceased academic and original owner of the house Conrad Credence, develops an affinity for the silent Hero, and offers her work tidying up the overgrown gardens. Accepting the offer, Hero is unnerved by, and then becomes curious about, the barely audible scream she can sometimes hear emanating from the highest room of the Credence mansion, a mysterious tower always shut to the outside world, its only window painted over. Developing a suspicion that Miss Credence's father Conrad is not dead, as Miss Credence claims, but still alive and imprisoned by his daughter in the tower, Hero deciphers the combination to its door, and ascends a flight of stairs to the chamber at the top. There she finds not Miss Credence's father, but her daughter, Rinda, fathered by one of Conrad's academic colleagues. Rinda is chained to her bed and, having never learned speech, is capable only of unearthly screams and howls.

The eccentric Miss Credence, one of whose unnerving habits is to shoot cats straying into her garden, turns out to be seriously unstable. After stumbling on Hero in the tower, she shuts the young girl in, and Hero can hear her babbling incoherently, justifying her actions to herself, over the house's intercom system. Apparently Rinda,

at birth, appeared to be intellectually disabled in some way, and Miss Credence, deeply ashamed to have born such a daughter into a family of, as she stresses, academics and Mensa members, locked this disappointing child in the tower soon after giving birth. Hero spends a terrifying night in the tower, scared that the armed and dangerously unstable Miss Credence might kill her. In the morning, Hero smashes the tower window using Rinda's chamber pot and, breaking her silence for the first time in three years, calls out across to Sammy, an abandoned young boy whom Hero's sister Ginevra has taken in tow, who with Hero's family is desperately searching for her across the neighbourhood. Her terrible secret about to be exposed, Miss Credence shoots herself, and Hero is reunited with her family. Miss Credence lives on for another three years in a vegetative state, while Hero, speaking again since her escape, writes her story down and begins to form a relationship with Sammy.

This story occurs against the background of a chaotic family life. Hero's mother, Annie Rapper, is a famous academic, author of several bestselling books on child-rearing, constantly away at conferences and using her own children as guinea pigs for her educational theories. Hero's father, Mike, is a househusband who stays at home to look after the children, not only Hero but her sisters Ginevra and Sapphire and grown-up brother Athol. Mike also has to cope with Annie's larger than life personality, and the incessant arguments that erupt between Annie and the equally headstrong Ginevra. Some time before the events of the novel take place, Ginevra left home for a stock car racing circus in Australia, only to return at the start of the novel, arm bandaged and broken after a crash and with Sammy, abandoned by his own father, in tow. The youngest daughter, Sapphire, competes for attention in this soap operatic family by quoting from a dictionary of bizarre and obscure words, while Athol retreats from family life, ostensibly writing a thesis but in reality observing from the margins and

using family arguments as the basis for scripts for the television drama *Pharazyn Towers*.

The Other Side of Silence is replete with intertextual references. Hero is identifiable with a number of fairy tale characters, and her relation to these characters is often explicit. As she contemplates breaking into the secret room in which Miss Credence has imprisoned her daughter Rinda, and in which she will later entrap Hero herself, Hero explicitly compares her curiosity to that of the ill-fated wife of the fairy tale ogre Bluebeard (120). Awaiting rescue from Miss Credence, Hero wishes that, like Rapunzel, she had “a great braid of hair, thick as a rope,” to throw across to her would-be rescuer, Sammy (157), while Rinda “[isn’t] any kind of Rapunzel;” her “thin, brown, straggling hair” could never have been climbed by any prince (142). Miss Credence herself gives Hero the pet name Jorinda, after an obscure Grimm Brothers fairy tale, in which a wicked witch turns a young woman into a nightingale and shuts her in a tower with thousands of other young women she has similarly changed into birds and imprisoned (17).

Hero’s very name gives the novel another intertextual twist. Receiving its first famous literary treatment in the *Heroides* of Ovid, the classical story of Hero concerns a young woman, Hero, a priestess of Aphrodite, who patiently awaits her lover Leander in her chamber at the top of a tower in the city of Sestos. Separated from Hero by the straits of the Hellespont, every night Leander makes the risky swim to his lover, guided by the lamp Hero has set up in her tower, and the couple enjoys a nighttime tryst before Leander departs with the morning, afraid of discovery by Aphrodite, to whom Hero has sworn a vow of chastity. Inevitably, an enraged

Aphrodite discovers their love, and one night soon after a storm blows up, blowing out Hero's lamp, and Leander drowns in the usually placid waters of the Hellespont.⁵

The name 'Hero' thereby gives rise to an irresistible pun. Hero is at once the protagonist of the novel, while elements of her situation – her imprisonment in the tower of Squintum's House by Miss Credence – echo the classical story of Hero and Leander. The intertexts of *The Other Side of Silence* are all stories of young women trapped in towers by ogres or witches or irate goddesses, and this image of the helpless woman, embodied in the figure of Hero waiting in her tower in vain for her lover, is the central image of the novel, around which cluster its most important themes and ideas. As this chapter will show, the themes of *The Other Side of Silence* are embodied most profoundly in the pun on Hero's name, that she must transcend the passive helplessness of her mythical namesake and grow into the literal meaning of her name, becoming not Hero, a literary character whose narrative is written by others, by authors, but *the* hero, and author, of her own story. In exploring the significance of this pun, it is first useful to explore more of the literary meanings of the image of the trapped woman, especially as it has been explored by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

In the account of Harold Bloom, literary history consists of a quasi-Freudian struggle between "strong" poets and their literary fathers, in which strong poets attempt to assert their own individual voices against the pervasive influence of their precursors, in an attempt to possess the feminine 'Muse' in the stead of their

⁵The story of Hero and Leander is first attested in Ovid's poetry, his *Heroides* containing an imagined pair of love letters exchanged by the couple. Ovid assumes familiarity with the story, so it is clear that it was already circulating in one form or another in his time. The first full telling of the story that survives is Musaeus' poem from the very end of antiquity, probably dating to around the year 500 AD. In Musaeus' account, Hero is a virgin priestess of Aphrodite, but her violation of her vow of chastity is not moralised. In the sixteenth century Christopher Marlowe took up the story, and when he left his poem incomplete it was finished by George Chapman. Chapman introduced the moralising element which is today often associated with the story, in which it becomes a cautionary tale of the consequences of forbidden love. Chapman portrays the storm in which Leander drowns as the enraged Aphrodite's punishment of Hero for the violation of her duty to the goddess. It is this version of the story with which I assume familiarity in this chapter.

patriarchal forerunners. Bloom's theory of literary history provides the inspiration for one of the most influential works of feminist criticism, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's monumental *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. In the argument of Gilbert and Gubar, Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' is replaced for female writers by an anxiety of authorship. Whereas for the male writer the chief problem is the assertion of his own individual voice against the voices of all those great writers that have gone before him, for the Victorian woman novelist authorship itself, and the very possibility of a female voice and a female literature, is the great difficulty. In a world where the feminine ideal was passive renunciation, and women's writing an unacceptable foray into the public sphere and the masculine arena of self-expression, women writers had to try to establish a place for themselves in a culture hostile to the very enterprise they sought to undertake. In looking back to their own literary forerunners, instead of a tradition of literary giants nineteenth century female authors found only a debilitating 'infection in the sentence,' deriving from the woman writer's anxiety about the very legitimacy of her own craft.

The inspiration for the title of Gilbert and Gubar's book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, is the figure of Bertha Mason Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, who according to them represents a recurring figure in nineteenth century fiction by women. In the case of *Jane Eyre*, the mad, defiant Bertha has been locked up by her husband Mr. Rochester in the top floor of his mansion, Thornfield, from which she occasionally escapes to visit her rage on her husband. In Gilbert and Gubar's argument, the madwoman in the attic, and her murderous rage against male oppressors, represents the transgressive anger at their condition nineteenth century women authors were unable to express directly. As such the madwoman in the attic

was a double of both the protagonist and the author herself, an expression of the anger that demure heroines and respectable lady novelists could not display themselves (Gilbert and Gubar, 77-8).

It is interesting to note that Margaret Mahy seems to play with this image of the madwoman in many of her own novels. Harry of *The Tricksters*, although, of course, she is not actually mad, nevertheless strikingly renders a number of the characteristics of Gilbert and Gubar's archetypal madwoman. Not only does Harry actually sleep in an attic room in the family holiday home, Carnival's Hide, but she faces an antagonist with a name redolent of masculine literary authority, Ovid, and displays a desire to be taken seriously by her family, not just as a sister and daughter, but as a writer. Furthermore, the violent eruption of her rage out of what I have shown to be its suppression and repression, reflecting Gilbert and Gubar's notion of the madwoman as representing the repressed rage of the female author against a society that denigrates and belittles her efforts, is a response to her sister Christobel's mockery of the novel she has secretly been writing. Finally, the reconciliation between Harry and Christobel is cemented by Christobel's gift of a diary to her sister, representing her acknowledgement of and respect for Harry's desire to be a writer.

While Harry in *The Tricksters* fairly straightforwardly embodies the struggle for self-expression that the motif of the madwoman in the attic symbolises, Hero's story in *The Other Side of Silence* represents a more complicated approach to the motif. The Hero we meet at the beginning of *The Other Side of Silence* could not be further removed from the picture of the madwoman painted by Gilbert and Gubar. In her silence, in the way she lets Miss Credence take her on as a gardener without protest, Hero displays none of the characteristics of the mad, bad and dangerous madwoman, shut in the attic for the safety of her oppressor. Hero's encounter with Rinda Credence,

however, begins to change her. Rinda, in fact, in her utter passivity and helplessness, is a kind of anti-madwoman, a terrible illustration of the consequences of the lack of even a capacity to rebel, even to make an attempt at self-assertion. Rinda performs a monitory function in relation to Hero, showing her the possible end point of the trajectory she has embarked upon. And so Hero becomes a madwoman-like figure. It is her realisation of her entrapment that prompts her to speak again, screaming “Help! Help!” into the intercom of Squintum’s House during the terrifying night she spends trapped there (154). As the madwoman in the attic rebels against the external masculine forces that oppress and imprison her, literally as well as figuratively, so Hero breaks out in open violence against her kidnapper, Miss Credence. The first words she speaks to another person in the novel (other than to Athol, to whom Hero occasionally opened up during her years of silence) she speaks as though she had “never, ever been silent” (157). In the end, of course, Hero becomes herself the writer of a novel, an author, acting out the desire that conflicted the nineteenth century woman writers Gilbert and Gubar wrote about, and which was expressed in the figure of the madwoman.

In acting out this desire, Hero achieves what according to Gilbert and Gubar was impossible for the nineteenth-century woman author, self-expression without self-consciousness or guilt. Hero’s own first-person narration stresses that her silence was her own choice. Hero, trapped in the tower with Rinda, sits with her in mutual silence, but realises that there is “a huge difference in our silences. I had chosen mine. Rinda had never been able to choose” (148). The self-imposed nature of her silence makes it easier for Hero to overcome it. It is easier to break out of “the *idea* of a cage, rather than a real one” (156). For Hero, therefore, being a ‘madwoman’ in Miss Credence’s attic is merely a stage that she passes through on her path to self-actualisation,

expressing the moment of her self-assertion, rather than a debilitating straitjacket that defines her identity as permanently repressed, permanently oppositional. Hero becomes the madwoman, becomes ferociously oppositional (in her attack on Miss Credence), but is able to overcome this stage, to become what Gilbert and Gubar's madwomen never could, a fully-fledged author, in fact, a *self*-author, literally the author of her own life story. Thus Hero overcomes her version of the anxiety of authorship; perhaps it could be labelled an anxiety of self-authorship.

The Other Side of Silence is a novel peculiarly concerned with authorship. It is replete with characters who are also authors: Annie, Miss Credence's academic father Conrad, Hero's brother Athol and, in the end, Hero herself. Even Miss Credence, with her propensity for telling stories (and inserting Hero into them), is a kind of author. Notably, many of these authorial characters, most importantly Annie, Conrad Credence and Miss Credence herself, are parents. Gilbert and Gubar begin their study with an exploration of a metaphor of literary paternity, of the (male) author as the father of his work, and this metaphor's exclusion of women from the possibility of literary creation. In *The Other Side of Silence* this metaphor of literary paternity becomes a metaphor of parental authorship, of parents as the 'authors' of their children's lives, and of the exclusion of the children themselves from the writing of the stories of their own lives.

Turning to these parental authors, we see how they are the major shaping forces in their children's lives, and not always in a positive way. In a very obvious way Miss Credence is the dominating factor in her daughter Rinda's life. Less obviously, although still very significantly, she attempts, through the stories she tells, to turn Hero into the daughter she wishes she had had, as she had earlier attempted to do to Ginevra in painting her picture. Similarly Annie, in her books on child-rearing, writes

idealised narratives of growing up which she attempts to realise in the lives of her children. Even Miss Credence herself, like Hero the daughter of an academic parent, lives out her father's aspirations rather than her own. Significantly, Hero guesses that Miss Credence's "dry, garden voice" is "probably a copy of [her father's]" (147). Also like Hero, then, Miss Credence lacks even a voice of her own with which to speak. For the parental authors of *The Other Side of Silence*, whether or not they have malicious intentions, or understand what they are doing, their children are extensions of their own selves, their own desires and aspirations.

The parents of *The Other Side of Silence* are self-centred figures, and the entire novel is permeated with imagery of edges and centres, often describing relations between parents and children. Annie, for example, says of her parenting that she always puts her children "at the centre of things," but Hero points out in her narration that Annie herself "loved being the centre. She loved the world," and wonders about those like herself and her brother Athol "who like edges best" (58). This labelling of children as inhabitants of the edges of family life is a recurring pattern in *The Other Side of Silence*, and signals the novel's concern with the marginalisation of children by parents in pursuit of their own desires. Sammy, for example, caught between families, of an indeterminate, vaguely foreign ethnicity, is unable to anchor himself to any firm centre, and in one passage he is described as sitting "on the edge of the family," (94) and the narrating Hero includes in parentheses "no rapping, no hip-hop;" (94) that is, the voice that distinguished him, of the culture of his upbringing, is silenced, like Hero's, in a family talking and arguing past him, pushing him to the margins of family life. Of course, the ultimate representation of the marginalised Other in the novel, Miss Credence's daughter Rinda, is described as sitting on the

edge of her bed (141), and Hero describes Miss Credence herself as “not so much a person as a distraction on the edge of her father’s life” (148).

A useful framework within which to explain Mahy’s employment of images of centre and edges may be found in Linda Hutcheon’s ideas on postmodern community. According to Hutcheon, the postmodern replaces the idea of culture as a monolithic entity with the notion of many different cultures, many different centres as opposed to one hegemonic centre of legitimacy, and replaces the notion of *otherness* with that of *difference*: “the concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way...to that of differences...to the assertion not of centralized sameness, but of decentralized community” (12). Mahy’s exploration of relations between parents and children suggests a crowding out of children to the edges of family life; in this novel parents are self-absorbed while children retreat or are forced to the margins of family life. The children of *The Other Side of Silence* crave recognition as centres in their own right, *different*, but not Other. Hero herself points this relativity out: “[a]nd anyhow, Athol says no light comes back from the edge of the universe, so, if you can’t be sure about the edge you can’t be sure about the centre, either. I mean the centre turns out to be everywhere. You are the centre yourself” (58). As Hutcheon has it:

there have been liberating effects of moving from the language of alienation (otherness) to that of decentering (difference), because the center used to function as the pivot between binary opposites which always privileged one half: white/black, male/female, self/other, intellect/body, west/east, objectivity/subjectivity – the list is now well-known (62).

And, in the case of *The Other Side of Silence*, one might ‘parent/child’ to this list.

The Other Side of Silence, with its madwoman and author figures, therefore, can be read not only in terms of a feminist re-reading of the myth of Hero alone in her tower as a hero in her own right capable of significant action, but also in terms of an examination of family dynamics, especially the relationships between parents and children. These two readings of the novel complement each other in suggestive and interesting ways, and it is in the intersection of these two readings of the novel that its relationship to the myth of Hero and the importance of that allusion is revealed most fully.

Every story must have an author; equally, it must have a hero. Thus *The Other Side of Silence* is also concerned with the other half of the literary equation, the hero, a preoccupation signalled most obviously by the name of its protagonist. All of this has been by way of pointing out the importance of concepts of authorship in *The Other Side of Silence*. The name of its hero, Hero, gives rise to an irresistible dichotomy, that of author and hero, and it is this dichotomy, that is, of the two main figures of the literary drama, author and hero, around which the novel revolves. In *The Other Side of Silence*, this dichotomy works on multiple levels. On the first level there is the interaction between Hero and another character in the novel, a figure I label her unkind goddess. In the original myth, there is the conflict between Hero's mythical namesake and the angry Aphrodite, enraged at her priestess' violation of her vow of chastity. In the novel, there is the relationship between Hero and her eventual kidnapper, Miss Credence. On this first level, the conflict is the struggle of Hero (that is, the Hero of *The Other Side of Silence*) to escape from the clutches of Miss Credence, to regain the voice she herself renounced, and to become the literal hero of her own story, and, eventually, its author as well. In this way Hero (the version in *The Other Side of Silence*) achieves what Hero (the mythical one) never could: the

transcendence of her own literary status, literary stereotypes about the passivity of women, and the achievement of the status of author, a status from which women have been excluded for most of literary history, and to which Gilbert and Gubar devoted their attention.

The Hero/hero pun, therefore, is of central thematic significance. Hero's escape from the tower is not only an altered ending for the mythical Hero, who rather than waiting on Leander's arrival and remaining trapped by her vow of chastity (that is, of self-renunciation) takes charge of her own story and indeed rewrites it from her own perspective, but a symbolic enactment of the struggle of Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman for self-assertion. The victorious end to Hero's struggle is an enactment of the victory denied to the madwoman, ultimately a symbol of endless struggle against the forces of oppression, rather than victory over them. As always with Mahy, however, the picture is not quite this simple, or this unproblematic, for *The Other Side of Silence* seems to wrestle with the possibility of children's literature itself, in a comment on some of the inescapable contradictions of the genre. On this second level of the novel's exploration of heroes and authors, there is an acknowledgement of Hero's still inescapably literary status.

The Other Side of Silence might be read as a comment on the contradictions of children's literature itself. The central contradiction is contained within the very label 'children's literature.' Quite what is meant by the term is ambiguous. If it is not a literature *by* children, in what senses is it a literature *of* or *about* children, or a literature *for* children, as the grammar of the phrase suggests? Surely the point of a literature of, about, or for children is that it articulates children's concerns in a way which adult literature presumably does not and justifies the existence of a separate genre. But how authentically can a literature *for* children, *by* adults, articulate those

concerns? Mahy seems anxious in *The Other Side of Silence* to give the voiceless Hero a chance to tell her own story. But perhaps Hero, standing in for all the children in history who rather than speaking out have been spoken for, is in the end inevitably an articulation of Margaret Mahy's own anxieties about her contradictory position as an adult trying to give a voice to (or is that speaking for?) a child who is unable to speak for herself. In attempting to put Hero, as it were, in the centre of things, is Margaret Mahy, the author/parent, merely acting out the same self-centred impulses as all the parent/authors of *The Other Side of Silence*?

We tend to think of 'the hero' as an autonomous subject, in charge of his or her own destiny. A *literary* hero, however, with another shaping consciousness behind his or her every action, that of the author, is a more complicated instance of the type. In this light, the meaning of Hero's name shifts again. If the point of the novel is that Hero ceases to be Hero, the young woman alone in her tower, helpless to prevent the death of her gallant lover in the face of the anger of an unkind goddess, and becomes a hero, *the* hero of her own story, we must remember that, as she is ultimately and inescapably a literary hero, there is always and unavoidably the consciousness of an(other) author behind her actions, behind her story, even the one she has purportedly written herself. Perhaps 'Hero,' with an upper-case 'H,' in becoming the 'hero,' with a lower-case 'h,' merely changes stories, no longer the protagonist of some ancient author's myth, instead the protagonist of a modern novel, the (still literary) hero of a new story, in an exchange of one author for another. Perhaps Mahy, in trying to excise Hero's jailing goddess from her story, herself becomes a new kind of unkind goddess in her stead.

Conclusion

A conclusion offers a space for reflection, and it seems a shame to employ such a space merely to summarise what has already been said. A profitable use of this space, then, should make use of the opportunity to explore some of the broader implications the research undertaken may have shed light on. In this conclusion, therefore, I will not just outline what I believe my own work has demonstrated, but also indicate some possible new avenues for future research to explore.

To begin with a broad generalisation, I would like to suggest that one fundamental theme of Margaret Mahy's young adult novels is life, but that this overarching theme is explored in some very particular ways, in the handling of which the conceptual framework of Greco-Roman myth provides a very useful set of ideas. The word 'life,' of course, has very specific connotations in one of Mahy's most important sources, Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. For Campbell, life is the essential fact of the world – rather than mortality, finitude, what characterises human life is its endless dynamism, vitality and variety. Despite the comings and goings of individuals and generations, this abstracted life continues on in the everlasting birth of new cohorts of the young and the vital. A strikingly similar set of ideas is behind some of the most influential portrayals of the Greek god Dionysus, so important in Mahy's *The Tricksters*. For Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, Dionysian art affords the opportunity to look death in the face, and see through that terrifying mirror to the collective, undying life the human race leads in spite of individual mortality. Harry in *The Tricksters* is able to experience Dionysus in his most positive aspect, as the embodiment of the life we share in others when we accept them for who they are.

I began my thesis with two chapters about death in Mahy's young adult fiction. In two different novels, two different characters have encounters with death. In *The*

Changeover, Laura must save her brother from a horrible death at the hands of the demonic Carmody Braque. In *Dangerous Spaces*, Anthea must come to terms with the deaths of her parents, and thereby overcome her own incipient suicidal tendencies. What Mahy's novels suggest about life and death is that life is for the young, and death, while not to be welcomed, is an inevitability that is not to be feared. Rather, it is a transition to an unknowable future state that, mystery though it is, for those who have come to the end of life's natural course represents a final peace, as shown by the peace of mind finally granted Old Lionel and his family when he joins his brother Griff on the journey across the Styx-like waters of Viridian to, we are led to believe, the abode of the dead on Viridian's mysterious island.

The abode of the dead in *Dangerous Spaces* and *The Changeover* is closely identified with the classical Underworld, especially as depicted in the poetry of Homer and Virgil. The classical Underworld is a place unlike Christian depictions of Heaven and Hell. Notably absent from the Homeric vision of the Underworld is any sense of an afterlife as it would be thought of in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Rather, the Homeric Underworld seems to be a way to conceptualise death as oblivion, a way to visualise what is unrepresentable: the extinction of consciousness at the moment of death. This way of looking at life and death finds a way past Christian traditions about the afterlife, which risks portraying death as attractive.

In fact there is a complex interaction between the Christian and the pagan in Mahy's novels. In the ending of *The Changeover*, for instance, there is something very Christian. After Laura, the 'baa-lamb,' has offered herself as a sacrifice to Carmody Braque to save her younger brother, and after her successful trick of this devil and the confrontation with him which follows and saves her brother's life (and recalls medieval traditions in which Christ's crucifixion and death effectively tricks

the devil into allowing him into his realm so Christ can effect the harrowing of hell and the salvation of those good souls trapped there by Adam's sin), she finds herself free to be "infinitely revenged on someone who had invited her vengeance" (241). On the advice of Sorry, however, who finds himself disturbed at the capacity Laura now reveals for hatred and revenge, Laura decides to end the demon's life rather than drag it out for the purpose of infinite retribution. There is here both a very Christian notion of mercy and a subtle criticism of the Christian eschatology of eternal torture in hell for the souls of the damned. This very subtle ending is emblematic of Mahy's engagement with Christian traditions and the ways in which she uses both Christian and classical pagan traditions to her own ends, playing them off against one another, taking the best parts from each to set against the harsher elements of the other, using such traditions to her own ends.

The interaction between Christian and pagan ideas is a recurring theme in Mahy's fiction that warrants further investigation. In my chapter on *The Tricksters*, for example, I touched on the ways in which classical traditions about Dionysus offer parallels with the life of Christ, and how the novel produces a fused version of the Christian and the Dionysian. There is perhaps more to be found in the employment in *Dangerous Spaces* of traditions about the Christian afterlife derived from Dante's *Divine Comedy* and pagan traditions of Hades derived from the epic poets of classical antiquity. This is a very brief summary, and there is sure to be more to reveal along such lines of inquiry, but it is for future scholars to discover.

Another overarching theme of Mahy's novels is writing itself. In looking at Mahy's novels through the prism of myth, as I have done in this thesis in general and in the last two chapters in particular, I have discovered a number of interesting ways in which the concepts of myth and fiction interact with each other. The idea of myth

and the idea of fiction seem to occupy an important place in Mahy's body of work. Setting each against the other enables interesting reflections on the importance of both myth and fiction, and while I have begun the task of examining the ways in which concepts of myth and fiction interact in Mahy's novels there is surely still much work to be done in teasing out the full implications of this interaction for Mahy's body of work and for the attitudes to fictional narrative which it reveals.

The themes around which I have organised my thesis – death, the Dionysian, and writing – are somewhat idiosyncratic when set against the main body of Mahy criticism. This is deliberate. I have shown that there are ways to read Mahy's novels that escape the concerns of most of the extant Mahy criticism, which tends to read her novels as narratives of adolescent development. This is not to say that such a reading is invalid; indeed, much of my own interpretation suggests that ideas about adolescent development are vital concerns in Mahy's body of work. It is intended, however, to suggest that these are not the only ways to read Mahy's novels; that they can be read as novels on their own terms, that the special category of 'young adult fiction' does not exclude novels such as Mahy's from consideration alongside, for want of a better term, adult fiction. Reading Mahy's novels through the prism of the classical myths they allude to has enabled me, I hope, to show new and interesting angles from which to read her work. The discussion of death that a reading of *Dangerous Spaces* and *The Changeover* from the point of view of the stories of the Underworld they allude to, for example, opens up new avenues from which to consider Anthea's death-wish in *Dangerous Spaces* in particular and the general conception of death as personal extinction that, I believe, underlies both novels, and in the case of *The Changeover* opens the way to a reading of that novel as a confrontation with mortality as much as a story of growing up.

The basic objective of this thesis was to show, across a range of novels, the importance of classical myth to Margaret Mahy's fiction. I believe I have shown that any reading of most of Mahy's novels is vastly enriched by an appreciation of their classical background, a background that is often explicit and one that, while it has often been acknowledged in the scholarship, has not as yet been systematically examined. I hope also that I have shown, beyond that, that a reading of Mahy's novels from a classical perspective can show the way towards new ways of reading her work that depart from the dominant critical concerns in the extant literature.

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