



LIBRARY AS A POLITICAL SPACE IN FANTASY FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Spaces are contextually and geographically politicized on multiple layers of the society. Literary spaces are exposed through texts, orders, linguistic sequences, real world and imaginary sequences. Libraries are enchanted places. Many libraries are designed to look like churches, with high walls, stained-glass windows, carved wooden stalls, and nooks for private reflection. This research paper enhances ideological evidences of the reading process, thereby exploring the outcomes and aftermaths of sustaining in a library space, developing a connection with the fantasy world of fiction which promulgates 'Library' as a political entity.

Keywords: Magic world, Bibliographic building, Aesthetic entryway

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Libraries are enchanted places which surround us with the tightly packed remains of the dead, much like graveyards. They are quiet, like forests, but full of rustling leaves that indicate unseen business. Many libraries are designed to look like churches, with high walls, stained-glass windows, carved wooden stalls, and nooks for private reflection. Libraries, like religious or mystical sites, often have a sense of the numinous. Arcane thoughts become visible like motes of dust in sunlight where silence is allowed to gather. Live bats are intentionally kept in two Portuguese libraries: the baroque Joanina Library at the University of Coimbra and the Maфра Palace Library. These tiny guardians protect the books from insects and are permitted to fly around after sunset, when the book credenzas are covered with leather shields that collect bat droppings. Even in buildings without bats, we have a sense of the magical possibilities that can be unleashed in the library after dark.

Many works of fairy tale and fantasy make reference to libraries. These are the places where hidden secrets are revealed; where magic waits to be released into physical form. They provide keys to doors that may contain marvels or monsters. Lilith George MacDonald's 1895 fantasy for adults, mixes monstrosity and marvel with its library and Edgar Allan Poe-derived supernatural librarian, Mr Raven, and in *The Library: A Catalogue of Wonders*. Stuart Kells has raved about the fantastic 'libraries and scriptoria of Tolkien's Middle-earth.'¹ Other literary libraries, however, are equally unsettlingly magical. Sodomasochistic images in Bluebeard's pornographic library alert his latest bride to his habit of binding and collecting women in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. The Hogwarts Library, presided over by Irma Pince in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, contains tens of thousands of texts enchanted to prevent damage or defacement, some of which scream when you try to remove them. Books in the fantastical world frequently exist in a suggestive, unsettling space between being alive and being dead which are dangerous if not handled with caution.

In E. Nesbit's 'The Town in the Library', from *Nine Unlikely Tales* (1901), two bored children—Rosamund and Fabian—are left home alone on Christmas Eve by their socialist mother in a kind of quarantine, because she fears they may be coming down with measles and she doesn't want her children giving measles to the poor while she is distributing tea and flannel petticoats. The children find their way into the forbidden top drawers of a bureau and begin building a town out of books: "They got Shakespeare in fourteen volumes, and Rollin's 'Ancient History,' and Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall,' and 'The Beauties of Literature' in fifty-six fat little volumes, and they built not only a castle, but a town – and a big town – that presently towered above them on the top of the bureau" (139). It is noticeable here, especially to the female reader, that the abandoned children build their town out of books by men: solid and imposing educational texts of the kind that might make very grand gateways and educational steps.

The settlement in the library is an occupied area and includes an army of fifty blue soldiers that were kept in the prohibited bureau drawers as a Christmas present for the kids. The youngsters once again stole candied fruit from the bureau that was meant to go in their Christmas stockings, but the troops requisition food and demand the candy. In fact, as the children's adventure progresses, it turns into a nightmare with elements of a fever dream similar to those one may have when suffering from the measles. The kids then discover that, despite having constructed a town and entered it, it is actually "their own house with the precise town they had made – or one exactly like it – still on the library floor." Every time they attempt to enter the town within the library or the town with the library, they discover that they have sunk "deeper and deeper into a nest of towns in libraries in houses in towns in libraries in houses in towns in... and so on for always—something like Chinese puzzle-boxes multiplied by millions and millions for ever and ever" (28). This proto-Borgesian library has been transformed into an infinite regress model. It is a maze of knowledge that poses the risk of locking up kids in their houses or, possibly, in their own minds. Fortunately, Rosamund and Fabian eventually leave the town in the library and, as a result of the measles, avoid being punished by their parents for violating the banned bureau.

The biblical concept of forbidden knowledge and the prospect of eternal exile that it can bring about are two themes that Nesbit tackles in this work. The connection between the labyrinth and the library is made by the idea that the brain is also labyrinthine, a repository of ideas that can endlessly replicate and conceal themselves from themselves, until the originating subject is unsure of whether it is the controller or the victim of the thoughts that dominate it. Like the interior of the mind, the mythical library is a place of great power and unbounded, secret, guarded knowledge. It is a kind of intellectual hive that values its own functions, institutions, and hierarchies more than the individual, hence it is also a potentially dangerous place. The relationship between the free-wheeling feminine imagination and the rule-bound, intricate architecture of the Academy, with its instructive essays, epics, and exquisite extracts holds the potential for a clash between the historical and fantastical genres.

Many of the events it details, including the Napoleonic Wars and George III's insanity, are accurately recorded. It takes place between 1806 and 1816. The spoken language, attire, and manners in the book are all superbly believable. A testimonial to the author's extensive and fruitful reading is the book. Here, history serves as both a stylish inspiration and a beautiful backdrop. The book savours its grace and wit. It savours the dynamic conflict between the amazing magical happenings revealed by the narrative and the prevailing cultural restrictions of the time, such as those related to politeness, social class, and linguistic usage.

The book opens with a male club called the York Society of Magicians, which only studies magic theoretically. One of the club's members then asks the club an ordinary question that makes them feel awkward and uncomfortable: Why is there no longer any practical magic practised in England? There is only one practising magician, Mr. Norrell, the solution, which astounds the group. Mr. Norrell is a pedant, historian, and bookworm with an intellectual disposition. He is exact, dry, and cautious, yet it turns out that he has a haughty desire to suppress all other modern magicians. He desires to have the knowledge monopoly. And he forces all but one of the York Society members to sign a document renouncing their own claims to the title of magician if Norrell can persuade them that he is capable of performing magic in real life.

In a sense, Norrell is an Augustan magician, and the magical contests he participates in are scathing wit fights evoking the time of Pope and Swift. But when Mr. Norrell shows the York Society of Magicians how to perform magic, he does it, tellingly, by bringing all the statues and carvings in York Minster to life. These talking statues expose the hidden history that have troubled them for the many decades that they have existed: of women being killed and artefacts being stolen, of resentment and personal wrongs. The snow-covered church suddenly bursts into uproar. As fiction can accomplish as well, magic has created a larger version of history where minor characters are free to change what has already been written and people who were previously only represented have their own voices. In addition to leaving the two magicians there at the end of the book, we find Mr. Norrell in his magnificent library at Hurtfew Abbey. Only magical techniques can be used to navigate Norrell's library, which is a labyrinth. Even the inexperienced magicians Mr. Honeyfoot and Mr. Segundus realise from their first visit to Hurtfew that it is an enchanting place that somehow transcends the regular limits of space and time:

Mr. Segundus was unable to recall the order of the corridors and rooms they had travelled through or accurately estimate how long it had taken for them to arrive at the library. He also had trouble determining the direction; it was as though Mr. Norrell had found a fifth point on the compass, one that was totally different from east, south, west, or north, and that was the way he was leading them. The English wood bookcases that lined the room's walls were shaped like carved Gothic arches and bordered the room's walls. There were carvings of ivy, berries, roots, and twisted leaves, all of which were expertly done. There were also carvings of dried and twisted leaves, as if the artist had intended to depict autumn as the season. However, the wonder of the books was greater than the wonder of the bookcases. The first thing a magic student discovers is that there are books of magic as well as books about magic. Second, he discovers that the worth of the latter is more than rubies, and that a perfectly decent example of the former may be purchased for two or three guineas. At Hurtfew, there were bookcases lining every wall, and there were books on every shelf. The books were all, or almost all, antique texts that dealt with magic.

Clarke transforms the mystical library into a living, breathing organic space. It doesn't fit the definition of architecture; hence it doesn't exist. Its shelves have fruit and foliage carvings. Additionally, its works do more than only outline the historical occurrence of magic. They are magical books, which means they may be used to do magic. They are able to bear children, thus in this way they resemble living creatures more than taxidermy specimens. The books in this library will briefly transform into ravens at the book's conclusion and will emerge from the shelves in a vast, wheeling flock.

Between the eras prior to and following 1600, Clarke makes a differentiation. Magic is only described from this point on. Before it, there are aspiring magicians, some of whom are female (for example, Catherine of Winchester and Loveday Ingham). It is obvious that Clarke is using a "before and after" model of the Renaissance, but this model assumes that the dominating mood of post-1600 culture is one of loss. She claims that people are no longer using magic by the time they begin to write about it.

A large number of the early magicians were illiterate in English. As a result, magic is relegated to the realm of oral tradition, making it an art form that is poorly served by literacy. Naturally, Clarke's account of the disappearance of magic here draws on ancient tales, such as Chaucer and Shakespeare's references to faeries having left England, and it also takes into account our current understanding of witch trials and how they decimated thousands of innocent women throughout Europe during their peak from the fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. However, Clarke's difference between books of magic and books about magic is revisionist in that it stresses the rarity, importance, and value of the book that contains the formulas for new spells (the recipe book; the grimoire) over the analytical work. The power of the library rests in its ability to inspire creativity that can emerge from thoughts held indefinitely within the literature. Books about magic are uterine, not seminal. Arabella Strange, who attempted to raise the funds to purchase the Duke of Roxburghe's collection at auction, is prevented from having access to them by Norrell, who avariciously buys up all the magical books he can find. However, Norrell ultimately is unable to master the magic he makes an effort to classify and govern.

Despite his vain attempts to control by regulating text access and wielding hermeneutic authority over it, the scholar's enchantments fail him. It's evident that Clarke enjoys reading. There are 200 footnotes in her book. Her description of Mr. Norrell attending the sale of the Duke of Roxburghe's magnificent library in 1812 in order to acquire its exceptional magical incunabula depends on her familiarity with the real Roxburghe collection and the resurgence of interest in early manuscripts that resulted from it. However, the key distinction here is that while her feminine history of 'books of magic' plays with popular eighteenth-century ideas of revival and restoration, it is really more of a tale about books as living, open, fictional forms than academic knowledge archives. In *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, Vinculus, a street magician who was born with a prophetic text covering his skin and preserving the words of the arch-magician John Uskglass, is one of the most important characters.

Clarke is purposefully examining the tension between a bibliographic conception of the library as a historical resource, whose main purpose is to collect and preserve texts, and a different conception of the library as a host of living cells, barely under control, whose magical subjects retain the power of organisms to speak, charm, and fly. The body is the library rather than "the body is the library" is what is being discussed in the fanciful text. Vinculus' text is made to vanish and reappear before the reader's eyes as a way for Clarke to celebrate the prospect of radical modification.

Deborah Harkness's *Discovery of Witches* trilogy possesses the same organic, breathing aspect of the magical literature. It's a quest story in this case. Diana Bishop, our heroine, is a Yale University professor and academician who specialises in the history of science, particularly alchemical manuscripts: "My research concentrated on the period when science displaced magic - the age when astrology and witch-hunts yielded to Newton and universal laws."⁹ Diana is a witch by heritage, though. Her parents, who were both scholarly anthropologists who were also witches, were slaughtered in Africa when she was seven years old, so she has opted to ignore and not investigate this aspect of herself. Diana doesn't practise magic, but she does occasionally permit herself to employ her paranormal abilities to fetch down a bulky book at the Bodleian Library that is too high for her to reach without a stepladder.

The story begins and ends in the Bodleian Library and will centre on Diana reclaiming and discovering her birthright as a strong witch and a scholarly historian. The book, *Ashmole*, an antique illustrated alchemical manuscript, appears to be alive at the start of the book; it tugs on its call slip, moans audibly when Diana loosens its metal clasps, and the pages are turning:

Hundreds of words shimmered and moved across its surface, but they were invisible unless the lighting and viewer's viewpoint were precisely right. A magical palimpsest is *Ashmole 782*. There are a few missing pages. A spell has obscured the lettering. Diana decides to put it back in the stacks because she can't understand it. But the magic has now been let loose. It turns out that this is the book that has been sought after for millennia. The trilogy's focus will be on recovering it, finishing it, and comprehending it while avoiding everyone who wants Diana to suffer. Diana will go across time to the fifteenth century. She will realise in the conclusion that the book is a really strange artefact. The genomic secret that vampires, daemons, witches, and humans are not separate species but rather are related and, in some circumstances, can interbreed is contained in this object, which is made of the skins and blood of hundreds of magical beings. This genomic secret has been suppressed by centuries of doctrine. So, in many other ways, it is a *Book of Life*. It's constructed of organic materials. It contains details that will alter the setting of the book. And, like the Bible, it is a prophetic text about a new birth. The original text is made up of the bodies of all those who have lived it and will live it, rather than being a patriarchal, religious, didactic fable. Importantly, Diana absorbs the book at the conclusion of the *Discovery of Witches* trilogy, making it a living, evolving narrative that is written in her body: "I was the *Book of Life*."¹¹ Her prophetic journey involves a book that, like Vinculus in *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, belongs in her own fertile, female corpus, not in the exclusive, sealed historical dominion of the library.

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury, published in 1953, depicts a society where books are forbidden and destroyed. The exiled bookworms 'become' the books they adore by memorising their favourite works in order to preserve them orally. In their dreams as bookworms, Susanna Clarke and Deborah Harkness also produce real

beings who are books (Vinculus and Diana Bishop). The purpose of these characters is to carry the text into the future, much like a mother carries her children. Although the material contains the DNA of the host, its future form and significance are ambiguous and uncertain. Again, these writers assert a view of the book in history that is much less interested in the auteur than in the generative dialogues and fictive futures that the text gives rise to. This feminist emphasis on the essence of power as creativity rather than ownership, and on writing as innately multivalent, is evident in their feminist emphasis on these concepts.

Diana learns throughout her timetraveling adventure into the 1590s that she is a "weaver," a very uncommon type of witch, with the ability to create and control the elements of earth, water, wind, and fire. She learns how to use her gifts from witches of the sixteenth century, gaining the community and practical knowledge of her ancestors while assisting the community of women as a midwife and herbalist. Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, a "paragon of learning" who "has a predisposition for setting things alight," helps her conduct alchemical experiments. By discreetly reintroducing women to the historical narrative of early modern science through her fantasy series, *Discovery of Witches*, Harkness suggests what has been left out of women's cleverness, witchiness, and wickness. When Diana's father, a fellow scholar who lived during the 1970s, meets Shakespeare and exchanges dialogue with him, the communication between the past and present is made plainly two-way.

As a professor of history at the University of Southern California and a historian of science, Deborah Harkness is a scholar in her own right. She writes fantasy from an academic perspective, much like Susanna Clarke. It is difficult to avoid interpreting the central theme of her trilogy—in which Diana Bishop learns to accept her abilities as a witch rather than a don—as a metaphor of Harkness' own transition from critical academic writing to creative fiction. Her trilogy is both intelligent and mocking of academic customs and rivalries. The male love interest, Matthew Clairmont, is a vampire academic in the Oxford science department. At the age of 30, he already has an impossible publishing record—the kind of record that can only be amassed by truly living for 600 years. The works of Harkness implicitly defend fantasy literature as anything other than mindless entertainment that is capable of having a thoughtful conversation with academic writing. Diana is forced to break the Bodleian Library's fire-free policy in the third and final book of the trilogy by letting her familiar, Corra, a female fire-dragon, wild among the books. This strikes me as a clear indication of a strong desire to assert Fantasy's rightful claim to the library.

At this time in history, should women even need to make this argument? possibly not However, there is still a genuine and acute prejudice in academia towards the Fantasy subgenre. I was in attendance at an academic gathering when a senior creative writer bemoaned how some creative writing students had let the faculty down by turning out to be "fantasists." It was implied that they had been granted admission to the programme under false pretences and that their work was inferior to "genuine" fiction-writing in terms of skill requirements and artistic and societal significance. The pun also hinted that fantasy authors were mistaken in their beliefs. Fantasy still struggles with a literary label that considers it, at worst, infantile and, at best, esoteric. Similar to pornography, it may be condemned as being too blatantly commercial and too openly preoccupied with wish fulfilment rather than insight. Some academics also implicitly criticise its technical requirements as being too lax: one can invent anything, and the world is the fantasy writer's dream sequence. While these biases are still prevalent and financially strapped, crowded modern library administrations are increasingly eager to replace physical books with digital data, work by Clarke and Harkness that firmly situates Fantasy within the tactile space of the library is especially important for evoking the power of manuscript and printed texts as physical, living, magical artefacts. Fantasy has evolved into a subdued spokesman for the library—not as a dreary repository and study environment, but rather as a setting for thrilling adventure.

But the digital world has not left much of an impression on the library in the fantasy book. The *Volume of Life* copies itself to Diana easily and quickly in the third and final book of Deborah Harkness' trilogy. The Library, where the heroine works in Genevieve Cogman's *The Invisible Library* (2015), is a repository akin to a supercomputer that holds data from an infinite number of "worlds" and the historical eras in which they function. In order to complete the library's encyclopaedic, pantextual mothership of knowledge, spies are dispatched to these various worlds to collect specific required volumes that contain specific linguistic usage or

other information. The Library's organisational structure is quite similar to that of the Oxford English Dictionary. The relationship between the individual and the library is tense because the library's infinite, multidimensional task over space and time necessitates submission (library staff members are brand on their backs like books), dwarfs their emotional demands, and trumps both. But in *The Invisible Library*, a large portion of the writings required to finish The Library's extensive knowledge collection are fictional works, and their significance amounts to a metatextual affirmation of Fantasy's own authority. The protagonist of this story brings a dragon into the library once more. The book is a creative touchpaper, and while the library's potential suprahuman power may reside in its holdings and bindings (what it contains, collects, and requisitions), this power is fiery in Fantasy.

A dark maze filled with monsters, including the Hairy Scary Librarian who will attempt to kill anyone he sees in the stacks, the Meathead Public Library (which forbids book borrowing) is like so many other libraries in fantasy. Interestingly, though, the book Hiccup finds in the library that allows him to flee is actually his own book. Hiccup had been writing lines for a potential future book titled *A Hero's Guide to Deadly Dragons* in an exercise book before entering the library. Chief Stoick the Vast, his father, had taken it away because he was upset that he had a writer instead of a soldier for a son. Hiccup discovers a book with his name on the front and the exact same title as the one he had been working on in the Meathead Public Library. Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Second, his ancestor, wrote *A Hero's Guide to Deadly Dragons*. Hiccup not only finds a literal way out of the library, escape the wrath of the librarian, but he also finds permission to be an author after learning that his ancestor had improvised a book with a perfect match to the title and interests of his own. The route out of the library ends up becoming a route to self-realization, as in so many works of fantasy.

Fantasy libraries aren't intended for book borrowing. Because it is a magical, living text—one that can change the dead language of information into the living discourse of action—the book one finds within the library's mute and intimidating complexity generally connects to one's inner existence. The protagonist, Nora Seed, has attempted suicide and is on the verge of passing away in Matt Haig's most recent bestseller, *The Midnight Library* (2020). In the *Midnight Library*, she discovers herself surrounded by volumes that represent all the other lives she may have had. She can also refer to the possibilities she passed on and later lamented in her *Book of Regrets*. Chapters of Nora's different potential lives are "read," or entered and lived. If she chooses the one with the most compelling story, she may stay in any of them. She experiments with many versions of herself, including those in which she achieved success as a champion swimmer, a rock star singer, an environmentalist studying glacier melt, and an academic philosopher living in Cambridge with a husband and daughter. Nora is intrigued by all of these potential lives, but despite their outward prosperity and fulfilment, each one also contains losses and emptiness.

The fantasy library has also been given new significance in this digital world. It is nonetheless a labyrinth, much like the brain itself, who's infinitely winding pathways may be both amazing and dangerous. But the library of fantasy also strongly advises against books being screens in the sense of objects that separate and shield us from the unbridled energy and risk of being and creating in today's society when too much time is spent in front of screens. *A Discovery of Witches* requires the hidden truths of the *Book of Life* to be released from Oxford's Bodleian Library into Diana's body in order to disclose their modern valency, unlike the magical books in *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* fly from Hurlfrew Library as birds in the earlier book. To survive, Nora Seed needs to leave the *Midnight Library*. Similar to reading itself, the library functions as a sort of transient physical stasis in all of these books. It won't support you indefinitely. Because of its infinite expanse and obsessional organisational styles, which paradoxically tend toward entropy, it is a place you must abandon. Like reading, however, the seeming stillness of spending time in the fanciful library will bring about a profound metamorphosis that will permanently change the way you see the wonderful world outside.

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