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“Power and all its secrets”: Engendering Magic in Neil Gaiman’s  
*The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

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*Abstract:* Neil Gaiman’s recent adult novel, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013), presents the power of magic as an exclusively female concept. At the same time, however, it can be argued that the text subverts its own feminist potential in its advocacy of motherhood as paradigmatic femininity. Gaiman’s ecofeminist vision connects the nurturing qualities of the motherly Hempstocks with the prospering magical landscape they inhabit. Evoking the image of the triple goddess of Neopaganism and connecting it to the Greek Moirai, Gaiman presents them as direct counterparts to the text’s other magical creature, the villainess Ursula Monkton, who appears as embodiment of Freud’s unruly id.

Both variations of female magic empowerment can be read productively as gendered performances of the *femme fatale* and the *godmother*, used in order to effectively manipulate their human surroundings. Contrasting evil hypersexual femininity, which eventually has to be banished from the scene, with a benevolent nurturing femininity, the text clearly values one over the other. While the domesticity of the Hempstocks’ thus seems to communicate a surprisingly old-fashioned set of gender politics, continuously pointing to the constructedness of gender roles actually makes the text a postmodern meta-commentary on the performance of gender roles.

*Keywords:* Gaiman, feminism, ecofeminism, performance, fantasy

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That Neil Gaiman is a writer with strong feminist sensibilities has been frequently pointed out by scholars interested in his work (cf. Prescott and Drucker “Preface” 2, Cook 18, Dalmaso 37). In 2012, editors Tara Prescott and Aaron Drucker even published an entire and insightful collection *Feminism in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman: Essays on the Comics, Poetry and Prose* to this effect. This article continues Drucker’s and Prescott’s approach and examines the feminist potential of Gaiman’s latest novel, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. Published in 2013, the novel promptly topped bestseller lists and became a critical darling. Gaiman’s latest offering is very specific in what

kind of feminism it promotes and takes up the often discarded notion of ecofeminism and renders it literal within the confines of the novel's fantasy setting. By connecting ecofeminism and magical maternities, Gaiman seems to advocate a benign and powerful maternalism as ideal femininity. However, due to the complex and overt constructedness of gender roles within the novel, the text simultaneously functions as a meta-commentary on the performance of gender.

## Genesis

In numerous interviews, Gaiman has explained that *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* was written to tell his wife Amanda Palmer, to whom it is dedicated, about the author's childhood (see Campbell 244). Gaiman muses that

[i]t is such a weird book ... in that the narrative character is absolutely playing fast and loose with my memories and my identity, and [the narrator is] kind of me except when he's not. ... I really tried very hard to kind of make him as me as I possibly, possibly could. (qtd. in Campbell 245)

Gaiman thus uses autobiographical elements to ground the novel's magical plot. In its frame narrative, *Ocean* trails an unnamed first-person narrator's return to his childhood home for a funeral. Almost unconsciously, he begins to trace his childhood, revisiting the house he lived in as a boy and seeking out a family he used to know, the Hempstocks. Upon meeting them at their eponymous farm at the end of the lane, he begins to remember the childhood he had forgotten, full of trauma, death, miracles, and magic. "I remembered everything," (8) the narrator suddenly exclaims, and the novel dips into an embedded narrative, where the readers encounter the narrator as a child.

The child-narrator befriends the youngest Hempstock, Lettie, and together they embark on an adventure to banish a disruptive ancient creature. Unfortunately, the mission fails, the monstrous creature is released, and returns to the narrator's home in the shape of a pretty, new nanny called Ursula Monkton. In the novel's climax, the three Hempstocks, who are supernatural protectors and gatekeepers, eventually succeed in banishing Monkton, but only at a price.

## Mothers, Magic, and Deities

While most, if not all, of Gaiman's works strives to present strong and complex female characters, Gaiman's newest novel goes even further in that *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* presents the power of magic as an exclusively female concept. There is not a single male magical character in the whole text: all magic is female, and all males are mere observers (and occasionally victims) of it. Gaiman's goddaughter-daughter-grandmother trio lives on their farm at the end of lane without any sons, fathers, or grandfathers present. When the boy-narrator wonders about this, Old Mrs. Hempstock exclaims "I dunno what blessed good a man would be! Nothing a man could do around this farm that I can't do twice as fast and five times as well" (94). Old Mrs. Hempstock thus represents the second wave of feminism in its most radical form; in her world, men are obsolete, and women can do it better anyway. The fact that this is supported by her actions in the novel's climax attests to *Ocean's* radical feminist potential. Lettie takes a more moderate view: "We've had men here, sometimes. They come and they go. Right now, it's just us" (95). Her mother, perhaps in an attempt to make the boy narrator feel more at ease, provides the longest explanation.

They went off to seek their fate and fortune, mostly, the male Hempstocks. There's never any keeping them when the call comes. They get a distant look in their eyes and then we've lost them, good and proper. Next chance they gets they're off to towns and even cities, and nothing but an occasional postcard to even show they were here at all. (ibid)

The different positions the three women take to explain the absence of men on their farm also points to the fact that feminism as such is hardly a unified movement, and that different strands take up different issues and negotiate them in a multitude of ways. But however radical (Old Mrs. Hempstock) or however moderate the approach (Lettie), it is made clear that the absence of men does by no means connote a lack. The farm is complete, functional, and happy without them. While the adventurous nature of the male Hempstocks must appeal to a boy who loves to read adventures tales, it is the combination of safety, powerful autonomy, and nurturing warmth the female Hempstocks exude that really draws him in.

The novel, rather than stopping only at one mode of femininity (i.e. maternal), further differentiates between two models of female-gendered magic: the aforementioned protective, nurturing magic of the homely Hempstocks, and the dark and dangerous allure of Monkton's powers. The Hempstocks are a set of characters that Gaiman has worked with a number of times. He called them "the oldest characters in his head" (Campbell 245), and some of their relatives have already appeared in *The Graveyard Book*, where Liza Hempstock is a mischievous but kind-hearted witch who protects and aids another boy protagonist, and in Gaiman's Victorian fairy tale *Stardust* (1999), where Daisy Hempstock takes in the son of a fairy princess and raises him as her own.<sup>1</sup>

All of Gaiman's Hempstocks characters are benign, in equal terms supportive and protective, offering a kind of tough love approach to the young male heroes whom they take under their wings, but the Hempstocks of *Ocean* are the only ones who are placed in the context of a deity. Alluding to a common belief "in an originary matriarchy, located in the prehistorical ancient world," the Hempstocks play into the idea of "a deity called the Great Goddess or the Great Mother" (Purkiss 33), and are further connected to the concept of the Triple Goddess. The triple goddess can be interpreted in two ways: for one, as "a triad of related goddesses with similar aspects" or as "a single goddess that appears in three forms" (Keen 125). The Hempstocks falls into the first category and play with the trope of what Robert Graves in his seminal *The White Goddess* (1948) has called the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. Young Lettie is the Maiden, Ginnie Hempstock serves as the Mother, and Old Mrs. Hempstock is the Crone. Courtney Landis points out that Gaiman partially subverts the trope by not casting the maiden either as a baby or as a "young woman maturing sexually" (165), but as prepubescent (166), and thus as more aligned with the role of a child. Likewise, the mother too is devoid of any markers of overt sexuality as Mrs. Hempstock usually appears in loose fitting farm clothes. In fact, this rendition of Gaiman's triple goddess is "utterly desexualized" (Landis 175).

The triple goddess is a motif that finds frequent application in both Gaiman's novels and comics, but the desexualized portrayal used in *Ocean* markedly stands out. Tony Keen has traced the recurring motif of the triple goddess in Gaiman's earlier works, finding that it is used to effect particularly in *The Sandman* and in *American Gods*. Whereas *American Gods* features a sudden nocturnal seduction scene between the novel's protagonist Shadow and the maiden, *Ocean*, by virtue of its young protagonist, plays it safe in order to later elevate Monkton's monstrous sexuality. Where the bed at midnight, and in the company of the maiden, is a charged location in *American Gods*, *Ocean* simply puts its protagonist to bed, and in a long, flowing nightgown at that. Gaiman here reinforces the maternal nature of the triple goddess, and saves her sexualisation for his works featuring adult heroes.

Keen finds that – desexualisation or not – "Gaiman's One who is Three are supernatural primal forces" (133), and, like the Fates of Greco-Roman mythology, do not have to take orders from anyone. Instead, they inhabit a position of supreme power and isolation, both of a spatial and temporal nature. This is evidenced by the Hempstocks unchanging nature; since they do not age,

<sup>1</sup> Gaiman commented on the connection between the different Hempstock characters spread across his novels as early as 2011, two years before *Ocean*'s publication: "Also, I'm writing a story about Lettie Hempstock. Who may be distantly related to Daisy Hempstock in *Stardust* and Liza Hempstock in *The Graveyard Book*" (Gaiman "Hobart" n.p.).

they forever inhabit the same role in the maiden-mother-crone triad. As a boy, this barely baffles the narrator. He asks Lettie for her age, to which she replies: “Eleven.” Shrewdly, he prods: “How long have you been eleven for?” Lettie’s answer is a smile (30). As an adult, he has forgotten much of his magical summer with the Hempstocks and mistakes Old Mrs. Hempstock for her daughter, Ginnie, simply assuming that she must have aged. The Hempstocks’ unchanging age is not the first power they demonstrate, but it is a telling one: they are magical beings that offer stability (cf. Miller 115; Long 126; Kim 159; Landis 170).<sup>2</sup> They provide the narrator, both as a boy and as an adult, with a stable home to return to, a place untainted by the changing world around him, sexually unproblematic in their stagnant roles of childhood friend, mother, and grandmother. While precisely this kind of stability is rendered threatening in *Coraline* (2002), where an “old-school, maternal stereotype is depicted ... as evil and must be decommissioned” (Parsons 376), the maternal stereotype in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is not only maintained, but idealised and frozen in time. Change in the Hempstocks is shown as undesirable and their permanent attribution to grandmother and mother roles speaks to the narrator’s desire to prolong childhood and ward off destabilising influences (such as a burgeoning sexuality and the realisation that parents are not necessarily perfect) that come with growing up.

The “old-school, maternal stereotype” is realised in a variety of ways, be it tucking the narrator in at night, or making sure that the boy is well fed. This goes so far that every time the boy narrator sets foot in Hempstocks’ house, he is given food (cf. Landis 169). Be it warm milk fresh from the cow and porridge with homemade blueberry jam on his first visit, pancakes during his second, soup after he fled his own home after Monkton’s intrusion of it, or the cheese and tomato sandwiches Old Mrs. Hempstock prepares for him when he returns as an adult, the Hempstocks are constantly associated with food and loving care. Monica Miller finds that “the material sustenance reinforces the sense of emotional security” (115) the narrator finds on the farm. This emotional security is perhaps best expressed in the narrator’s blissful description of the first glass of milk – a beverage inherently connected to motherhood – he drinks on the farm: it tasted “rich and warm and perfectly happy” (20) and this emotional connection is maintained throughout the novel. The Hempstocks feed him, take him in for a night, mend his clothes, and keep him from harm in a way his own (non-magical) parents fail to do.<sup>3</sup>

## Ecofeminism Revisited

Gaiman's ecofeminist vision connects the nurturing qualities of the motherly Hempstocks with the prospering magical landscape they inhabit. Whereas the idea of an “all-powerful maternal” was still used as a means to generate fear in *Coraline* (Parsons 371), here it is used in conjunction with ecofeminism to create the opposite effect. Ecofeminism denotes an interdisciplinary approach of philosophy, activist work, cultural anthropology that has its roots in Françoise d'Eaubonne’s 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (cf. Gates 7). It argues that

women interact with the environment in a spiritual, nurturing and intuitive manner. As a result of women's close association with the environment, their domination and oppression has occurred in conjunction with the domination and degradation of the environment. Ecofeminist strategies to address women's oppression and environmental degradation are centred on reclaiming and reviving nature and women as powerful forces. (James 8)

<sup>2</sup> So far, scholarship on *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is centred in one recent anthology, *Neil Gaiman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*.

<sup>3</sup> In that way, they evoke the “other mother” from Gaiman’s novella *Coraline* (2002), who too seemed to offer more care and attention than Coraline’s real mother, who, like the protagonist’s mother in *Ocean*, is busy working. But unlike the other mother in *Coraline*, there is nothing evil about the Hempstocks.

Since its inception in the 70s, ecofeminism has been frequently criticised “for its dangerous essentialisms” (Evans 223). Argued to use middle-class, white, Western women as their prime subject and as a stand-in for all women, the approach has largely fallen out of favour (cf. Kunze 31). Peter Kunze argues that in “early ecofeminist thought ... one woman metonymically stands for all women” (34); in *Ocean*, this idea is both doubled down on *and* subverted. The idea is reinforced once more because the Hempstocks, as has been shown, evoke the image of the triple goddess, the one who is three. Where Lettie therefore automatically stands in for her mother and grandmother, one woman stands in for all in their connection to the land. The subversion however is brought on by the differences between the three Hempstocks. These differences are manifested in their different ages, but most importantly in their different powers. Lettie is not as capable as her mother, let alone her grandmother, and her connection to the land and the power she can draw from it is thus a different one.

Ecofeminism further draws the connection between women’s reproductive abilities and the land’s production of food: both thus participate in humanity’s continued existence, thus once more offering stability. As the men leave Hempstock farm and only the (never-aging) maiden-mother-crone trio remains behind, it is them who are deeply connected to the land and Old Mrs. Hempstock’s strong assertion that they do not need men to take care of the world becomes a reality. Ursula Monkton, who leaves her home to haunt and hunt in the ‘real’ world, is shown as disconnected from her true nature; it is disconnect that will later allow the Hempstocks to banish her. Just like the land gives power to the Hempstocks, Monkton loses hers because she has abandoned her home.

The connection between the land and creatures living on it is enforced when the narrator goes exploring with Lettie. He soon learns that the farm is a magical, timeless place, one where yellow and white daisies bloom in every corner, and kittens grow in the ground like mandrakes. The narrator is caught in wonder:

The furry tendril by my feet was perfectly black. I bent, grasped it at the base, firmly, with my left hand, and I pulled. ... I brushed the earth from it and apologized ... It jumped from my hand to my shirt, I stroked it: a kitten, black and sleek, with a pointed, inquisitive face, a white spot over one ear, and eyes of a peculiarly vivid blue-green. (44-45)

The protagonist of Gaiman’s Neo-Victorian fairy tale *Stardust*, Tristran Thorn, son of Daisy Hempstock, is also given a magical kitten during a difficult time of his life (echoing the events of the fairy tale musical *Into the Woods*, he is not allowed to go the market while everyone else does). Not plucked from the ground but born to the farm cat, the kitten nevertheless offers a trace of the Hempstock magic that stands at the heart of *Ocean*. It is “a tiny kitten with a dusty blue sheen to her coat, and eyes that changed color depending on her mood” (*Stardust* 46), but like the cat *Ocean*’s narrator encounters, it is not for him to keep. After a while, it disappears to be back “[w]ith her own kind” (47), as Tristran’s father explains. The Hempstock cats in both novels therefore function as magical means of providing support and affection, but like many magical creatures, cannot be owned indefinitely. They are extensions of the ecofeminist magical set-up of Gaiman’s fictional world, but it is a world that at least in *Ocean*, must be travelled through and cannot be inhabited by anyone but the Hempstocks themselves.

This shows that the ecofeminist set-up is exclusive rather than inclusive; the narrator, a boy, must leave the farm at some point since he is not part of the gendered connection between land, magic, and identity. This, of course, is linked to the fact that except for Peter Pan, all children must grow up, and the boy will become a man sooner or later. At the very end of the novel, it is revealed that like a stray cat, the grown-up narrator has returned and will return to the farm many times, but every time, he is made to leave again. This raises an interesting point with regard to the motherliness of the Hempstocks. They evoke the idea of motherliness, but they do not integrate

strangers into their families. The story is not one of adoption, it is one of a temporary refuge. The idea of returning to one's own kind is made central, and the pity in the narrative comes from the fact that *Ocean's* narrator seems to feel at home at the farm, but as neither a Hempstock nor as a woman is not allowed to fully partake in the ecofeminist vision he so admires.

## Protection, Power, and Age

Even though the Hempstocks do not care to integrate the boy into their lives fully, they nevertheless take care of him and protect him. This is linked to their other occupation: rather than just being farmers, they are also protectors of both the humans around them and the magical creatures living in the magical land that their farm is a gateway to. When the narrator worries about the interference of Ursula Monkton and the danger she constitutes for him and his family, Lettie assures him that "I'll make sure you're safe. I promise. *I'm not scared*" (31).<sup>4</sup>

While Lettie indeed is not scared, she is however also not as capable as she thought she was. The boy is hurt when they go exploring, and in this instance, Lettie's age suddenly becomes a factor again. As the maiden, her magical prowess ranks lower than that of her elders, and Gaiman's choice to render her prepubescent instead of a young woman is backed up by narrative implications. Rather than an all-powerful and omniscient deity, Lettie suddenly becomes a girl who makes a mistake and it falls to her elders to fix it.

Ultimately and perhaps conventionally, it has to be the crone, attributed with the authority of age and the wisdom that comes with it, that returns the world to how it should be. Gaiman thus pits a motherly or even grandmotherly authority against the wiles of sexualised young femininity as represented by the evil nanny (cf. Landis 176), but he also plays into well-established genre tropes. The idea of the wise, old helper (to use a Proppian term) has been extensively used in the fantasy genre, and *The Harry Potter* series, where Albus Dumbledore aids the child-protagonist, and *The Lord of the Rings*, where the wizard Gandalf offers counsel and protection to the childlike Frodo, come to mind as obvious examples. Terry Pratchett's *Tiffany Aching* series also plays with the trope, when testy witch Granny Weatherwax aids the titular heroine. One notable difference though is that Gaiman offers a combination of protagonist and helper that draws on different genders. In the ecofeminist setting, this pairing then has further implications that render the relationship an impermanent one. Of permanence, the novel seems to argue, is only the connection between the Hempstocks and their land.

It is therefore also the crone who once more points out the connection between the land and the Hempstock women who live on it. Lettie, critically wounded in the final battle, is given to her pond, which she calls her ocean. "One day, in its own time," Old Mrs. Hempstock explains, "the ocean will give her back" (164), restored to perfect health, once more the ageless maiden the narrator befriended on the lane. As long as the land is there, the girl will not die. A Hempstock, the crone assures the boy, would never do anything so common (162). Lettie's submersion in the pond is thus the ultimate ecofeminist fusion between women and land, and further plays into the well-established "symbolism of water regarding rejuvenation, (re)birth, and life" (Kunze 35). The ecofeminist vision proposed in the text is thus of a circular nature, and despite the traumatic events that lead the narrator to grow up into a confused and aimless man, there is a fairy tale promise at work. "The Hempstocks' world is story-shaped" (Kim 160), insinuating that an 'and they lived happily ever after' is not ruled out. The Hempstocks, Gaiman communicates, are here to stay, but they will do so within the exclusive confines of the ecofeminist, triple goddess family.

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<sup>4</sup> In that way, they evoke the "other mother" from Gaiman's novella *Coraline* (2002), who too seemed to offer more care and attention than Coraline's real mother, who, like the protagonist's mother in *Ocean*, is busy working. But unlike the other mother in *Coraline*, there is nothing evil about the Hempstocks.

## Performing Magic

Old Mrs. Hempstock, as the leader and matriarch of this family, is nearly omnipotent. Able to threaten disruptive magical beings with removing them from the list of all created things (159), her powers far transcend the time she lives and the novel takes place in. The Hempstocks have the ability to manipulate time as they see fit. Earlier in the novel, this is once again connected to the Hempstocks as homemakers: Old Mrs. Hempstock mends the narrator's torn bathrobe, and with each snip and stitch, she also changes the course of events and alters the memory of the boy's parents. She is quite literally working on 'the fabric of time' in what Miller calls "[s]ome of the most striking magic" (118) in the novel. Magic and housework are thus metaphorically and literally linked, making a case for homeliness as a powerful ideal.

That this homeliness is an act, at least visually, is revealed in the novel's climax. During an epic battle between the Hempstocks and the creatures Lettie has summoned to rid the world of the intruder Ursula Monkton, Old Mrs. Hempstock's old spinster looks are shown to be a disguise she only wears when dealing in the mortal world. In the 'ancient' land, deities assume a different physical shape.<sup>5</sup>

It was Old Mrs. Hempstock, I suppose. But it wasn't. It was Lettie's gran in the same way that... I mean... She shone silver. Her hair was still long, but now she stood as tall and as straight as a teenager. My eyes had become too used to the darkness, and I could not look at her face to see if it was the face I was familiar with: it was too bright. Magnesium-flare bright. Fireworks Night bright. Midday-sun-reflecting-off-a-silver-coin bright. I looked at her as long as I could bear to look, and then I turned my head, screwing my eye tightly shut, unable to see anything but a pulsating after image. (159)

The form of mother-maiden-crone is thus a choice, a costume selected to put the 'real' world at ease. The Hempstocks thus exemplify the point Judith Butler makes about bodies in connection with drag in *Gender Trouble*, namely that "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (137). The Hempstocks have deliberately gendered their appearance into the three generation model of femininity, acting and performing their gender to full effect. Their power is hidden underneath the unassuming shapes of an eleven year old girl, her hands-on mum, and the frail old grandmother. They are too kind to mock, but their costumes point to the constructed nature of gender, and more importantly, the expectations tied to it. Magic is made unthreatening, ordinary, commonplace. It becomes a friend rather than a danger. However, it does not become domesticated, which is evidenced by the boy's inability to fully take in Old Mrs Hempstock's real appearance; he has to look away. Likewise, he will also never permanently remember the events of that night. It can be argued that the magic is too overwhelming, too traumatic, for perfect recall, while the performed genders as weaker images can remain in his mind.

## Sex and Seduction

In very much the same way, villainess Ursula Monkton too has chosen a form to appear in. Where she looks like a "kind of tent, as high as a country church, made of gray and pink canvas that flapped in the gusts of storm wind, ... aged by weather and ripped by time" (41) in the ancient lands, she appears as a "very pretty" (53) woman when she becomes the narrator's nanny. It is this dual appearance that has an uncanny effect on the boy,<sup>6</sup> who recognises the monstrous creature in the beautiful nanny. Monkton's chosen form however also problematizes the feminist potential of Gaiman's novel. As Landis points out, "Ursula adopts a sexualized performance of femininity,

<sup>5</sup> Gaiman also used this concept in *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys*, where he called it "backstage."

<sup>6</sup> For an elaborate discussion of uncanniness in *Ocean*, please see Yaeri Kim's "Not at Home: Examining the Uncanny."

utilizing a pretty appearance and seductive behaviour to gain a position of power within the narrator's home" (164). Monkton easily and deliberately plays into the trope of the femme fatale: always perfectly made up, she is an image of seduction. She soon makes a move on the narrator's father, successfully so. The moment echoes Freud's primal scene (cf. Miller 114).

I was not sure what I was looking at. My father had Ursula Monkton pressed up against the side of the big fireplace in the far wall. He had his back to me. She did too, her hands pressed against the huge, high mantelpiece. He was hugging her from behind. Her midi skirt was hiked around her waist. ... I was scared by what it meant that my father was kissing the neck of Ursula Monkton ... my parents were a unit, inviolate. The future had suddenly become unknowable: anything could happen. (79-80)

The destruction of the boy's nuclear family renders her far more monstrous than her shape, be it the abstract one of the tent fluttering in the breeze, or that of the pretty woman. But it is key here that the second shape facilitates her disruptive influence, leading Kim to argue that her "greatest danger comes from her attractive adult body and the power it has over the narrator's father" (158).

It is thus logical that the shape this creature has chosen is that of an appealing and sexualised "honey-blond" (*Ocean* 53) woman, who fully uses (and thus subverts) Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze to her advantage. Writing about film and drawing on Freud's writing on scopophilia, Mulvey identifies "[w]oman as image, [and] man as bearer of the look" and argues that

[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle. (837)

By providing an image that the male characters will wish to consume, Monkton's true terror is cleverly hidden to all except the boy narrator. He is too young to fall prey to the sexually charged image, but too old to not realise that there is something wrong about the new nanny and her interactions with his father.

Even though Monkton appears harmless during her first appearance in the boy's home, he is terrified because he has already learned from the Hempstocks that just because power is not flaunted, does not mean it is not there. Afraid of Monkton and unable to understand why she is causing him harm, it falls to the Hempstocks to explain Monkton's motives to the child. Ginnie Hempstock, the mother, explains that "I don't hate her. She does what she does, according to her nature. She was asleep, she woke up, she's trying to give everyone what they want" (*Ocean* 110). Antagonism is thus unwarranted, but control must be exerted. Monkton however operates as an uncontrolled Freudian id, and the non-negotiation of its manifold desires stands in stark contrast to the rule-governed existence of family life. Untampered by a super-ego, Monkton just delivers desire, irrespective of the consequences. Sexual desire is released and acted upon, threatening the father's marriage and thus the stable family unit so important to the narrator.

Where the Hempstocks are connected precisely with a stable family life (perhaps, given their unaging nature, even a too stable one) and with warmth and nurture, Monkton occupies the other end of the spectrum. As the nanny, she is supposed to take care of the narrator, but deliberately does not do so. For the narrator, her presence is connected to hunger and loneliness (cf. Landis 171), which – physical shapes aside – aids in constructing Monkton as a monster. Monkton's presence in the narrator's home leads to restricted access to food as well as restricted freedom of movement, for Monkton declares everything outside the actual house and garden as out of bounds. Most importantly, she severely restricts parental attention. Monkton's presence allows the narrator's mother to take on a job in a nearby town, and demands the narrator's father's full attention by



flirting with him and turning him against his son. While Monkton thus gives, to echo Ginnie Hempstock, everyone what they want, there is one notable exception and that is the narrator, whose needs and wishes are denied entirely. Where the Hempstocks carefully explain their magic to him (as far as magic can be explained), Monkton thrives on mystery, and mystery, in her case, means danger. The Hempstocks provide answers, Monkton provides questions. She is thus directly juxtaposed with the benign and nurturing trio, and by doing so, affirmative and powerful motherliness in women is presented as an ideal (cf. Landis 167).

## Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning, Gaiman's feminist literary potential is well attested. He creates strong female characters from all age groups, races, sexualities, and ethnicities. When asked to explain how to write strong female characters, he replied that

Well I write people. ... And also, it's worth pointing out that people, unfortunately, misunderstand the phrase "strong women." The glory of *Buffy* is it was filled with strong women. Only one of those strong women had supernatural strength and an awful lot of sharpened stakes. And people sort of go "Well yes, of course Buffy was a strong woman. She could kick her way through a door." And you go "No, well that's not actually what makes her a strong woman! You're missing the point." (Gaiman, BBC)

Gaiman's latest novel, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, is filled to the brim with these strong women, and not in the sense of door-kicking, but in that mysterious other quality that Gaiman alluded to. Strength in *Ocean* has little to do with physical prowess, and everything to do with determination and magic.

Both the Hempstocks and Ursula Monkton are beings of magic and determination. While the Hempstocks seek to unobtrusively do good, Monkton gives people what they want (essentially money and sex), thus appealing to baser desires. Both are strong characters, complex and well-rounded, but the element of shape shifting and more particularly the forms that the magical beings shift into (maiden-mother-crone on the one hand, femme fatale on the other) partly subverts *Ocean*'s feminist potential in its advocacy of motherhood as paradigmatic femininity (a reading for instance proposed by Landis). The only adult female character not presented as belonging to a family, not assuming a motherly role, but instead perverting it, is the novel's antagonist. Her weapon is the sexuality that both the Hempstocks and the narrator's mother are denied. While the humanised shapes the Hempstocks assume are the ones that offer stability, especially in connection with their un-aging nature and the ecofeminist connection to their land, Monkton's shape shifting confronts the boy narrator with the instability that desire produces: he is faced with a sexuality he cannot understand yet.

Diane Purkiss argued in a discussion of myths of female deities, ordinary ones in particular, that "such figures [as the Great Goddess] were the dark, repressed underside of civilisation" (34) and that civilisation then needed to be ordered by men, leading to new and more patriarchal mythologies. *Ocean* subverts this; the men (even the boy narrator) are expelled, as is the dark female – only the true one in three is allowed to remain, safely connected to the land they inhabit. Power remains a maternal and matrilineal concept, but it is shown as an exclusive one that is bound to a strict, desexualised presentation. Contrasting evil hypersexual femininity, which eventually has to be banished from the scene, with a non-threatening benign nurturing femininity, the text clearly values one over the other. However, I argue that what is valued here is good over evil, and not sexuality over motherliness. While the domesticity of the Hempstocks' thus seems to communicate a surprisingly old-fashioned set of gender politics, continuously pointing to the complex

constructedness of gender roles actually makes the text a postmodern meta-commentary on the performance of gender roles.

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