

THE MYSTERY OF THE NOVEL WITH A BRITISH AND AN AMERICAN ENDING

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This article is an investigation on an unusual feature in a work of fiction. Margaret Drabble's novel *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996) was published in America with a different ending to its British counterpart. This paper explores the consequences this anomalous fact may have for the interpretation of the novel, but it takes this situation as a starting point to consider other aspects related to the presence of magic and the occult in the novel itself, an eerie dimension that was completely missed by critics when the novel was published. The paper will assert that with *The Witch of Exmoor* Margaret Drabble has initiated a new and enticing path in her literary career.

These are the facts: in september 1996 English writer Margaret Drabble published her thirteenth novel, *The Witch of Exmoor*. When the book was launched in the United States a year later, it contained a final chapter which did not appear in the first edition. The book, then, had two different endings, a British and an American one. This article is, in part, a literary investigation of this anomalous fact in a work of fiction, and it tries to answer the questions that this situation could raise (Which is the "correct" reading? How does the general perception of the book change with each ending?). Other questions related to this narrative's leaning towards the world of magic will also be explored. In order to deal with these issues properly, the thematical content of the book is described first in order to see what the final (American) chapter adds.

The Witch of Exmoor is a 276 page novel (first hardback edition)¹ and consists of eight unnumbered, but not untitled, chapters. The book begins with a gathering of the Palmer family: Daniel and his sisters Rosemary and Grace, together with their respective spouses, enjoying a dinner on a summer evening at Daniel's country house in Hampshire. They belong to the comfortable English middle classes and the three of them are respected professionals in their own fields: Daniel is a barrister, Rosemary is an art manager and Grace is a doctor. They are playing an after-dinner game prompted by one of the in-laws, David D'Anger, Grace's

¹ All references in the article are taken from this edition.

husband. The game is called “The Veil of Ignorance”, and they have to imagine a just society regardless of their position in it .

The conversation, however, inevitably drifts to Frieda, the mother of the Palmer offspring and once an influential sociologist who, in her late sixties, has decided to cut her links with the rest of the world. The narration openly acknowledges a parallelism between the behaviour of Frieda and that of the protagonist of Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*. Like Timon, who cursed the city and went to live in a cave, Frieda has moved to a derelict hotel beside the sea, after telling her next of kin that no one would be welcome. The reader is told by an intrusive and omniscient narrator that before moving to her ruined abode Frieda showed signs of being slightly out of her mind. Like Timon, she had also invited her relatives to a last supper, and after playing a tasteless hoax on them she announced her decision to retire to Exmoor, as she was fed up with the stressful and polluted urban way of life.

Back to the weekend at Hampshire, the family have decided that David and Grace, together with their son Benjamin, Frieda’s pet, go to the West Country to visit the old woman to see for themselves how she is, and also to try to obtain any information they can about economic matters that may affect the rest of the family, like Frieda’s intentions regarding her will. From time to time the reader gets a glimpse of Frieda in the damp rooms of Ashcombe, her derelict castle by the sea. She spends her days rambling around the abrupt Exmoor coast, accompanied only by her dog, brooding over crucial episodes of her life and writing her memoirs. She continually summons ghosts from the past: her sister Hilda, who died in tragic circumstances, her missing husband Andrew, and her fastidious mother Gladys.

When autumn comes, the D’Angers go to visit Frieda hoping that young Benjamin, a bright and imaginative boy, will act as protection against his grandmother’s bad temper. The visit passes without trouble but they forget to ask her the questions they were supposed to ask, to the growing suspicions of the rest of the Palmers, who are afraid that David might have planned to keep for himself the old woman’s money. They do not trust this charismatic, good-looking, Guyanese-born outsider who is clearly favoured by Frieda’s attention, and who discusses with her topics on social justice. Rosemary’s husband, Nathan, the other in-law attached to the Palmers, although not so close to Frieda’s affections, is presented as a nice, small, ugly but attractive advertising executive who looks with amusement at the tribulations of this complicated family. Nathan is portrayed as being very much attached to his flat by the Thames, not far from where a girl he admired drowned some time ago.

Meanwhile another character enters into the limelight: Will Paine, a young coloured man, and ex-convict, who had been put up by Daniel and his wife Patsy, has been asked to leave their house in Hampshire and, having nowhere to go, hitchhikes towards Exmoor to seek asylum from the woman he has heard so much about. After listening coldly to Will Paine’s petitions, Frieda finally agrees to have him under her roof for a limited period of time.

The next person who visits the old house is a courier, sent by the family with some documents for Frieda to sign. However, the messenger finds the place deserted, and a search begins for the old woman. The Palmer children travel to Exmoor and they are told by the police that the area is being combed. In the inquiry it is revealed that she was last seen in the company of a young man, taking money out from different cash points in the West Country.

Some weeks later, still with no news about the disappeared grandmother, the content of Frieda's last will is disclosed. She has left all her fortune to her grandson Benjamin, and has named the boy's father as one of the trustees. The news is a source of consternation for the whole family. On the one hand Daniel and Rosemary do not want their nephew to have what they consider their money and, on the other hand, Benjamin's parents consider it is an overwhelming responsibility for a young boy to become an heir overnight. Will Paine, in the meantime, has sent a fax from Jamaica claiming that he has nothing to do with Frieda's absence. He writes that after a few days Frieda got tired of him and told him to go, not without pressing on him a great amount of money she wanted to get rid of.

A spell seems to have been cast on the Palmers after the grandmother's disappearance, as all of them find themselves in deep trouble, particularly Benjamin, who has suffered a profound nervous breakdown. The discovery of Frieda's body, washed up on the shore some days later, increases the level of anxiety in the family. Benjamin tries to drown himself and his parents take him to a child therapist to save him from the darkness he has fallen into.

Nobody in the family wants to go back to the hotel by the sea to recover Frieda's documents and Emily Palmer, Daniel and Patsy's daughter, is sent to Exmoor to collect them. She spends the night at Ashcombe, reading what Frieda had written on her computer, and there she discovers the tragic past of her grandmother, a personal history filled with deceit and betrayal. The following morning, as Emily is preparing to leave the derelict hotel with Frieda's things, a hunting party breaks into the gardens of Ashcombe, and Emily stands between the hunters and the deer they were chasing, becoming a national celebrity as a defender of animal rights. By the end of the novel, the fortunes of Frieda's relatives reach their conclusion with mixed results. Nathan has died, drowned in the river Thames, apparently due to a heart attack after a night's drinking. One of Daniel and Patsy's children has died too in tragic circumstances, Will Paine has moved to Australia to straighten out his life, and Benjamin slowly recovers with the help of the therapist, who has commended him the task of having a conventional child's life. The spell seems to have vanished, and in an epyphanic ending characteristic of Drabble's novels, Emily and Benjamin explore the surroundings of the boy's problematic property in Ashcombe. The narrator manages to convey the hint that the new generations will face the future bravely.

This is the plot of *The Witch of Exmoor* as it can be read in the first (British) edition. What is added in the American edition is a new section called "Envoi" in

which the tone changes completely from the rest of the book. The protagonists are now Frieda, Nathan and the girl he admired so much and who drowned. They are sailing in heaven towards the Isle of the Blessed. They are comfortably installed on the deck of a ship, enjoying the pleasant voyage and telling each other the stories of their deaths. Frieda confirms what was suspected but not definitely established in the narrative. She tells Nathan and Belle, the girl, that as she was strolling along the path by the sea, she couldn't resist the sight of some edible fungi on a dangerous stretch of land below her and she fell to the sea. She is astonished to learn from Nathan that Benjamin suffered from a severe depression; her first idea was to leave her fortune to the boy's father, David. Their favourite topic of discussion had always been social justice and she had wanted to give him the opportunity of putting his ideas into practice (by setting up an igualitarian commune in Guyana), but she had realized that he would never do it, and so she left her money to Benjamin instead. The three of them continue their voyage while Frieda and Nathan tell Belle how the whole story began.

The reason why the final chapter appears in the American edition and not in the British one has been explained by the author herself in a personal letter (date 2 August 2000)². In the first draft the "Envoi" chapter was there, but the author was advised to take it out by people close to her. They thought the ending made the novel too unreal and it was not necessary, as it was evident that the book worked on two levels, a realistic and a theoretical one. Margaret Drabble agreed to take it out, but as reviewers interpreted the text too literally and missed the symbolic elements, she put the original ending back for American publication. The second edition is therefore closer to the writer's manuscript than the edition that was published in the first place. In other words, American readers were given a narrative with more thematical and structural elements, a richer and more complete novel, than British readers. Although the paperback Penguin edition (published in 1997) still does not contain the "Envoi" chapter, there should not be any disputes over the "correctness" of the two versions of the novel. Books are the intellectual property of authors and it is their right to establish the exact contents of their work. The American edition should, in my opinion, be considered the official version of *The Witch...* because it offers the full text, as originally conceived by the author.

The inclusion of the "Envoi" chapter is also important for a full understanding of the novel, as the narrative is insufficiently developed if this final part is not taken into consideration. In other words, it provides closure, not just an ending to the novel. From my point of view the American chapter explains situations and events that were left inconclusive, like Frieda's death. The reader last "sees" Frieda alive at the end of chapter five, when she lets Will Paine in to stay for the night. In the following chapter

² Thanks are here given to Margaret Drabble for her kind help in answering the questions strictly concerning the publication of *The Witch of Exmoor*. The rest of the issues discussed in the article are entirely my own responsibility. Thanks are also given to Margarita Giménez Bon for her assistance.

the messenger arrives at the house to find it deserted. The search begins and not until the first line of chapter seven are we told that Frieda's body "was recovered three weeks later" (196). It might be argued that there were some hints that pointed in this direction: Will Paine had written in his fax that Frieda had liked to go along "a dangerous walk", and once her corpse is discovered the official inquest determines that she died "by misadventure" (202), but even then his son Daniel suspects that Frieda might have committed suicide jumping off a cliff (202). The exact cause of her death is open to interpretation until the "Envoi" chapter is read.

Something similar happens to Nathan's end. He steps off his taxi by the Thames after a night's heavy eating and drinking, and next the readers are told that "Nathan is fished out quite promptly the next morning..." (262). He had had a heart attack, the narrator explains, but the same voice wonders why he had been "standing at the bottom of a cobbled slipway with his feet in the Thames when he toppled over" (263). In the "Envoi" addition the spirit of Nathan tells Frieda and Belle that he had simply felt an instinctive urge to walk down into the water, drunk as he was, and then he had had the heart attack.

Frieda's apparently whimsical decision to leave all her money to David to create the Just Society, and her change of mind in favour of her grandson Benjamin is also explained in the new pages. The American chapter, therefore, makes things clear and helps to tie up all the loose ends that remained in the novel. Besides, the addition of the "Envoi" fragment makes explicit the second dimension that had been concealed in the novel, the one that Drabble complained that readers and reviewers had missed when the British edition was published. With the surreal ending of the three dead people on the boat to heaven, the frame of the narrative changes completely, making the reader consider the whole book under a different perspective, as it instils an eerie atmosphere to the different parts of the novel. In some way it produces a similar effect to that of the final chapter of D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981), when after all the suffering and anguish of the previous chapters, including her own murder, Lisa Erdman finally arrives in Palestine and she is happily reunited in the camp with all her dead relatives. In *The Witch...* the frame of the narrative changes with the American ending, as the omniscient narrative voice that guided the readers through the Palmers' story with a firm grasp of the situation, following the style of solid realism (with frequent metafictional asides as the only variations), now enters a symbolic realm that makes it move on uncertain ground. It is not that *The Witch...* is converted into a fantasy novel by virtue of the final chapter, but it certainly contributes to adscribe it into what David Lodge (1992: 208) calls "crossover fiction", the kind of narrative that combines traditional realism with any of the alternative forms of contemporary fiction such as fabulation, the non-fiction novel or metafiction. In this sense *The Witch...* would be committed to the mixing of literary styles that predominates in the production of present-day novelists.

As has been said, apart from the opening to fantasy, the narrative also abounds in metafictional asides, in which the characteristic intrusive narrator of Drabble's

latest novels bursts confidently into the plot anticipating what will happen next (“We are nearing the end ... There will be one or two more deaths, but not many”, 251) or comments on the actual procedures of writing the novel (“We need a new character”, 77). As regards the non-fictional trend in contemporary writing, the reader is frequently informed by the narrator of cultural, social and economic data in the style of a newspaper article or an encyclopaedic entry which may help the reader to complete his or her picture of what is happening in the story at a particular moment. When Benjamin’s parents tell him that they will visit the caves of Wookey Hole on their way to Exmoor, for instance, the narrator informs that “[T]he world’s largest cave chamber is in the Gûnong Mulu National Park in Sarawak, the largest underwater cave is in Mexico, and the largest cave system in Britain is the Ease Gill system in Yorkshire” (88). Likewise, in the course of the narration we get to know in full detail who is the owner of British Sugar plc (39), what is the national average level of radon in British homes (202) or that “there are fewer than 350 child psychotherapists in the whole of the United Kingdom” (230), among other facts. The novel thus becomes an accurate report on the state of the nation, which fits into Drabble’s social concerns. However, it is the fantastic element introduced in the last chapter which gives a twist to the narrative, because it affects the whole structure of the fictional world that Drabble has created and it makes the reader consider the plot under a different prism.

Despite the addition of the “Envoi” chapter, however, the reviews of *The Witch...* were not favourable in America, just like they had not been good in Britain with the incomplete version. By reading the criticism that was published when the novel came out, it seems that the question of the two levels on which the novel was based was simply not an issue when any of the two versions were considered in the media. Critics paid attention to what they considered significant flaws of the book, regardless the symbolic or realistic level in which it was written.

Anne Duchêne wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement* that it was difficult to disentangle Drabble’s thoughts from those of the protagonist, Frieda Haxby, considering the abundant interventions of the narrative voice. Her main objection to the book was that it was irregular and she defined it as “a very well meant, messy book, unsteady in tone and in its concerns” (1996: 26). The reviewer complained that the author had not reached the naked truth that she had intended to unveil and, curiously enough, it was the writer of this British review who hinted at the allegorical nature of the story, but without exploring this line further: “Still, *The Witch of Exmoor* is, very cautiously, even clumsily, a muddled fairy-tale with a regenerative purpose” (Ibid.).

Almost a year later the editor of the Outlook section of *The Washington Post* published a review of the American edition of the novel, and she stated bluntly her opinion on *The Witch...* at the beginning of the article: Drabble’s book was “a tart and knowing peep show of Britain’s privileged middle classes”. The reviewer’s main objection to the novel was that the game of the “Veil of Ignorance” and the

social criticism that it ensued was a mere distraction, it was not developed to its full extent: “With its allusive style, caustic wit and sharp insights, it is a very clever book. But, just like the conundrum from which it draws its inspiration, it sometimes feels more like an intellectual exercise” (1997: X 09). The writer of the article, Frances Stead Sellers, also complained of a lack of dramatic tension: “We never really understand the old lady’s motives” she wrote, and furthermore she thought that the authorial intrusions were “irritatingly imperious”.

At around the same time James Wood, in *The New York Times*, made the harshest criticism on Drabble’s novel so far. In his opinion, the main failure of the book lay in the portrayal of its characters. They were predictable caricatures, clichés of real people that did not transmit the illusion of being alive: “Drabble deals with her subjects as if they were nuisances, or mere variables in the experiment of the novel” (Wood, 1997). The Palmers, for example, were for the critic no more but “serfs to Drabble’s blowing whims”. The author of the novel took, in his view, special delight in showing the protagonists’ defects with the result of not leaving them any space for growth beyond their dark side. As for Drabble’s politics, James Wood considered that although the author spoke angrily against the evils of contemporary Britain, it was a kind of fury that did not point to any solution, it was a restlessness that led to nowhere: “There are no choices in Drabble’s world, and thus no real politics”. Just like the writer of *The Washington Post* article, James Wood voiced a now regular complaint about the author’s “suffocating intrusions”.³ The review in *The New York Times* ended with the conclusion that *The Witch...* represented “a genuine confusion about how to write fiction at the end of the century”.

These different opinions stem from what now seems to be a commonly held idea about Margaret Drabble having supposedly lost part of her narrative power, on one hand, and of not being the sharp critic of society that her followers remember from such books as *The Ice Age* (1977) or *The Radiant Way* (1987), on the other. This trend of opinion could be summarized by the final statement on Drabble’s entry in *The Cambridge Guide to Women’s Writing in English*: “if her [Drabble’s] later work has not always fulfilled early promise, it is perhaps because of high seriousness rather than its lack” (Kaveney 1999: 202). According to this view, Drabble would be able to create full conventional portrayals of society and politics of a solid appearance but without an incisive criticism to sustain it. Without having the intention to polemic on this current of thought, nevertheless I would like to venture a different explanation of the novelist’s recent approach to fiction. My contention is that Drabble has initiated a new route that, hailing from conventional realism, intends to explore the uncertain areas of the occult, including myths, legends, riddles and esoterism. What has been interpreted as a weakening of the

³ Margaret Drabble first interrupted the flow of discourse to address the readers in *The Realms of Gold* (1975), becoming since then a common feature in her novels, and her critics have generally reacted against this kind of narrative intrusions (see Korn, 1975; or Manheimer, 1978, among others).

skill of a novelist with solid realist credentials, I would describe as a timid but unequivocal departure from a well-trodden path, an exploration of new alternatives for the novel. I would like to prove my hypothesis with the discussion of the missing chapter of *The Witch...*, but it has to be said that Drabble's latest novel so far, *The Seven Sisters* (2002), confirms in my opinion the new direction of her narrative, with plenty of references to ancient myths of a dark nature (in this case following Virgil's *Aeneid*: a visit to the Avernus, the invocation of the sibyl at Cumae, etc.) and parallelisms with *The Witch...* such as the (false) drowning of the protagonist, a solitary woman like Frieda Haxby.⁴

The references to the occult were completely missed in the reviews of *The Witch...*, however obvious they may seem, and their explicit presence in the "Envoi" chapter may work as an indication that the novel should be read from this point of view. An "esoteric" approach is being demanded from the readers, and the American ending acts as a confirmation for those who have paid heed to the clues that are scattered along the novel. For those who have not, the final chapter might represent the author's warning that there were some elements in the narrative that should be interpreted under this new and tenuous light. Under the clash of worldly impulses that push forward the action in the novel (covetousness in the case of Daniel or selfishness in the case of Patsy, his wife, to mention just two examples) there are dark forces at play which act upon the characters' lives in a subtle but determinant way.

There is a full range of signals that stress the leaning towards the underworld in the narrative. The first hints of the existence of a hidden design come early in the initial chapter, when the youngest ones in the house gather to play a kind of role-playing game while their parents sit round the dinner table. It is called "the Power Game" (13) and Benjamin ("the dark boy" [13] who "glows with darkness" [14]) is the master and organizer, thus presenting the boy as flirting from the beginning with hidden forces that will later act against him: he has chosen as his fortress during the game the *Isle aux Morts*, and *Beltenebros* as the captain of his army. Benjamin is shown muttering an incantation at the beginning of the game, while his two younger cousins listen mesmerized by his words.

It was grandmother Frieda who put a spell on him when he was born: "Benjamin," she said to him appraisingly, 'you are the youngest child of Israel, Benjamin. You are the child of War, you are the warrior babe. You are *Beltenebros*, the Beautiful Obscure'" (51). It is no surprise, then, that Benjamin shows a great interest in the subterranean world, in caves and tunnels: "The unknown called to him, the depths invited him" (95), and that in his dreams his grandmother acts as a guide and initiator, like Charon carrying the souls across the Styx into the land of the dead: "He dreamt that his grandmother Frieda was standing with him at the

⁴ After *The Witch of Exmoor* and before *The Seven Sisters*, Margaret Drabble has published a novel based on her mother, *The Peppered Moth* (2001), in which she tries to come to terms with aspects of her own past.

prow of a boat on an underground river. The river flowed rapidly through a dark tunnel. Frieda was holding high a banner that swirled in the wind” (88). When Benjamin falls ill, the narrator states that “He should not have meddled with those powers (...) He has invoked bad spirit, black spirit” (208).

The realm that Benjamin will struggle to get out of is described in the book as the permanent abode of Frieda Haxby, and to evoke this gloomy place Drabble turns to different sources taken from myths and legends. The surroundings of her house by the sea, for instance, are described like the phantasmagoric landscape of fairy tales where an evil spirit might suddenly jump out at an incautious traveller:

Frieda walked on through the ancient woodland. It spoke to her of decay, her own decay (...) Some [trees] leant from the steep slope at perilous angles, and others were uprooted, reaching their inverted crowns into the air like great matted discs of red ogre hair, of monstrous curling fibre. Twisted faces peered at her from severed, scarred and stunted limbs (...) Stumps rose through the leafmould like old teeth. (65-66)

Frieda is also a sovereign of an underground world like the one of Hades, king of the dead. In a literal sense, visitors have to go through a steep descent that is almost vertical to get to her domain. Besides, the downwards path is filled with perils, beasts and threatening noises (134). Like Hades, Frieda rules over deceased persons, the family ghosts of her father, mother and sister that she guards in the dark memory of her computer. Other references in the novel reinforce this connection of the protagonist with the king of the underworld: “In European folklore (...)” writes Robert Graves, “the souls of the damned were hunted to the Northern Hell by a yelling pack of hounds...” (1996: 122), and in a disturbing part of the narrative mentioned above dozens of furious hounds “...in full cry, howling and yelping and lathering...” (253) are shown chasing a hind down the mountain towards Frieda’s house. But Hades is not the only king of darkness that can be traced in the narrative. Like a Miltonic Satan, the protagonist lives in a constantly dimmed environment, near rock pools by the sea which resemble sulphurous pitches (112). Occasional rays of light filter through the crevices of a clouded sky, “from which might descend an angel, a grace, a dove” (83).

But above everything else, Frieda is a witch, and an emblematic example of her kind considering her ample range of powers. She is shown capable of predicting the death of a friend and her dreams “are omens sent from the other world” (143). Like the three witches in *Macbeth*, Frieda can make a spell in the form of a riddle (108, 211), and like a conventional witch, she is not visitor-friendly, keeps a shabby appearance and surrounds herself with objects related to her craft like skulls or objects pierced by needles (64). The author names mythical ancestors for Frieda, like the Witch of Endor in the Book of Samuel in the Bible, and following her example she will invoke the dead (66), although one does not have to go far in her vicinity to find a model of perfect witchcraft, and in this sense Frieda may be the

heiress of the most famous sorceress from the West of England, Morgan Le Fay, the fairy sister of King Arthur.⁵

There are reasons to think that Margaret Drabble had Morgan Le Fay in mind when she was envisaging the portrait of the witch of Exmoor. For one thing, Morgan is known to be a “fascinatingly ambiguous figure” (Lacy 1986: 395), sometimes a benevolent witch, sometimes a cruel enchantress. Despite her incantations and her bad temper, it must be remembered, Frieda is extremely generous with Will Paine and provides him with money for his escape from England. Further revelations on this mythical figure may reinforce this connection: scholars have identified Morgan Le Fay with various manifestations of an aquatic lady in the Arthurian legends. John Rhys claims that the name Morgan, correctly spelt Morgen, “means the offspring of the sea” (1891: 348-9), and it is related to a lady lake, Muirgen, in Irish mythology. Frieda, of course, dies drowned in the sea, like the other woman in the ghost ship at the end of the book, Belle, who had died by water. In *The Witch...* Nathan, who is always shown hypnotized by the river Thames, dies in the same way.

If these points in common were not enough to establish the ascendancy of Morgan Le Fay on Frieda Haxby, it is precisely in the final American chapter (hence its importance as a key factor in the development of the story) where it is specified that Frieda and her companions are sailing an afterlife voyage to the Isle of the Blessed. As Margaret Drabble herself reminds us in her *Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1996: 31, 395), Morgan Le Fay was, among other titles, queen of Avalon, one of the Celtic Isles of the Blessed. Thus Frieda would be returning after her death to her eternal kingdom which is in turn related to the dark subworld mentioned in different parts of the narrative.⁶

Confirming the “archetypal power” of the Arthurian figures in modern fiction (Thompson 1985: 4), Morgan Le Fay may be considered as the most distinguished link of Frieda Haxby with the occult world, and the final chapter of the American edition plays a fundamental role in the closing of the story. By stepping out of conventional time into an atemporal realm in the American addition, Drabble is providing clues to understanding the novel, but at the same time she is establishing herself as an author (and implicitly us as readers) in a position from which to see the whole picture⁷, away from a mortal perspective, and in this way contributing to the unreal tone of the novel.

⁵ In a physical sense, Frieda and Morgan Le Fay would be connected by the geographical location. The story of Frieda takes place on the coast of Exmoor, just opposite the peninsula of Gower, across the Bristol Channel, where according to Cornish tradition Morgan Le Fay was queen. In those legends Gower, “accessible by land on the Welsh side, derived its mythical importance as a part of the other world” (Rhys 1891: 346-347).

⁶ Avalon, writes E. K. Chambers (1927: 219), is a Celtic name that refers to the other world.

⁷ “We project ourselves (...)” writes Frank Kermode about the need to humanize common death, “past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle” (1967: 8).

By taking elements from Morgan Le Fay and other mythical sources, Drabble has in my opinion created a richly suggestive figure in the portrait of Frieda Haxby. The magical dimension, that was not noticed by the critics when the book was published, may add a renewed and strange perspective from which to consider other traditional aspects in Drabble's novels, like the sharp criticism of modern living, and it may inaugurate a new trend in her career as a novelist. As by an irony of fate, even the mysterious case of the double ending of the book that has been discussed at the beginning of this paper, simply provides a further element of restlessness that turns out to be uncannily appropriate within the general content of the narrative.

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