

The Maids, Mother and “The Other One” of the Discworld: Exploring the magical aspect of Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg, Magrat Garlick, and Agnes Nitt.

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Abstract

Fantasy novelist Terry Pratchett’s Discworld is inhabited by a very diverse group of characters ranging from Death and his horse Binky, Cut-Me-Own-Throat-Dibbler, purveyor of the ‘pork pie’, the Wizard faculty of the Unseen University and a ‘coven’ of three witches. ‘Because three was the right number for witches...providing they are the right sort of type’, according to Nanny Ogg.¹ Magic features prominently on the Discworld; so much so that there are a host of long term side effects the inhabitants of the Discworld have come to expect from being in proximity to this powerful force. Phenomena that to others might seem strange or unusual are typical, even expected on the Discworld. The use of magic, for good or ill, is often a prominent theme in Pratchett’s Discworld novels. This paper focuses on the Pratchett’s portrayal of magic as used by resident witches Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg, Magrat Garlick and eventually Agnes Nitt who replaces Magrat when she assumes the title of queen. This will include the role each witch assumes as the Maiden, Mother and Crone, as well as the unique relationship each witch has forged with magic. The witches’ use of ‘Borrowing’ as well as ‘headology’; magic not entirely dissimilar to psychology and psychiatry, will similarly be explored. Discussion of the witches’ ongoing ‘disagreements’ with the wizards, about what magic is, and how it should be employed will be examined to emphasize the diverse perceptions of magic. Finally, the consequences of magic use are discussed.

Key Words: magic, Discworld, witches, maid, mother, crone, headology, .

1. Magic on the Discworld

The Discworld is a flat, swirling, brightly coloured collection of land and sea travelling through space on the backs of four elephants. Don’t worry, the elephants are safe, they are travelling on the back of an astronomical turtle known as the Great A’tuin. As might be expected, this world is a little unusual. Simpson tells us that, on the Discworld, magic is a force as common and seemingly essential as gravity.² According to Pratchett, “Magic glues the Discworld together – magic generated by the turning of the world itself, magic wound like silk out of the underlying structure of existence to suture the wounds of reality.”³ However, he also points out that there was a time that ‘raw magic’ controlled the world, and this was a terrible

thing, that would cause the whole framework of reality to tremble.⁴ (p94). This was before people such as wizards and witches began to ‘control’ magic. It is now harnessed by, presumably, responsible men and women, and the problem of raw magic is largely a thing of the past...

Not entirely dissimilar to radiation, ‘background magic’ leaves behind residuals that have some fairly interesting, albeit unusual, effects on the land and people of the Disc. The extraordinary and unusual are mundane and expected. For example, roosters sometimes lay eggs. Not to be outdone, some chickens may lay the same egg three times. Rains of shrimp are not uncommon, trees are upwardly mobile, and a cow giving birth to a 7 headed snake is considered typical.⁵ Magic plays a pivotal role in Discworld affairs; it is a tool of great power, wisdom and strength. The greatest wisdom, however, is knowing when not to use it, those not heeding the warnings risk being consumed and corrupted by it. According to Death “THERE ARE PLACES EVEN MAGIC MAY NOT GO.”⁶ Such is the lesson that the Ramtops witches, who figure prominently in many of Discworld’s sagas, demonstrate time and again.

We are about to examine the use of magic from the perspective of the Discworld’s most notable witches, Esmeralda ‘Granny’ Weatherwax, Gytha, ‘Nanny’ Ogg, Magrat Garlick, and Agnes ‘Perdita X. Dream’ Nitt. Perdita, (or Agnes), is more or less known by this name only during a brief singing career in Ankh Morpork and when she joins an upstart group of eager young ladies wanting to play at being witches, and who apparently require more interesting sounding names than those they were given at birth. In fact, she dare not actually use the surname Dream for fear of reprisal. Magrat, (or Queen Magrat, after her royal nuptials) has not been witching long enough to develop a nickname, though ‘wet hen would readily come to (Granny’s) mind due to her soppy nature and earnest belief in things like “getting in touch with one’s self” and “folk music.”⁷

One quickly realizes that there is no clear cut definition of magic on the Discworld. It means many different things to many different people. Even from the most notable magic users, witches and wizards, or the older or younger exponents, we see strikingly different responses. The elder might assert that magic is “candles, circles, stars, bananas, chants, runes, and the importance of having at least four good meals per day” whereas a young wizard would talk about “fluxes in the morphic nature of the universe, essentially impermanent quality of even the most apparently rigid time-space framework, the implausibility of reality, and so on”.⁸ This does of course give the impression that they are merely prattling on about something they do not fully comprehend. Witches have similar explanations, “older witches

hardly put words to it at all, but may suspect in their hearts that the universe doesn't know what the hell is going on and consists of a zillion billion trillion possibilities, and could become any one of them if a trained mind rigid with quantum certainty was inserted in the crack and twisted."⁹ Neophyte witches, on the other hand, talk about magic constantly and believe that its fundamental essence is "crystals, mystic forces, and dancing about without yer drawers on."¹⁰ And most troubling element of pinpointing precisely what magic is, is that, as Pratchett says, "everyone may be right."¹¹ It would seem that what one believes in, including believing in self, influences the outcome that may be achieved with magical workings; this is an invaluable lesson. One reason the elder witches don't tolerate the use of silly amulets, or similar is that if you believe the power is in them rather than within you, and you don't have them to hand when the going gets rough, you won't be able to make do. And what good as a witch are you then?

As it is impossible to define precisely what magic is, and it is wise to avoid getting on the wrong side of a wizard/witch in selecting a particular position that may lack a certain 'rightness' to it, we will leave it to the prudence of the reader to make a sound judgment on the basis of what follows. If your morphic field suddenly resonates with that of a duck however, you must realize you have run foul (ha ha) of some magical influence and the writers are not responsible in any way. Also, as both wizards and witches are not inherently evil, you can expect these changes to be temporary and that you will, eventually, have the luxury of reconsidering your position on such matters after returning to your original form.

2. The Witches of the Ramtops and Witchcraft

The Ramtops are in the crossfire of so much magical energy that many of the Discworld's witches and wizards are born and bred in this location simply by being in proximity to so much residual power. Being a witch, however, requires a great deal more than simply being born in a region known for magical side effects on residents. It is a vocation that requires great resilience, intelligence, intestinal fortitude (for the scumble, mostly) and a lack of fear, because as Pratchett warns (p 198) "being a witch meant going into places you didn't want to go."¹² Another attribute the witches have (p. 153) is "the true witch's ability to be confidently expert on the basis of no experience whatsoever."¹³ And often the witches will share this expertise - whether you asked for it or not. According to Granny Weatherwax, being a witch also means bowing to no one, regardless of their position; that would include kings and other "royalty".¹⁴ Suffice to say, being a witch requires a great deal of self confidence, nosiness, and being adept at subtle yet effective bullying, when necessary.

Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg, Magrat Garlick, and, after Magrat becomes queen, Agnes Nitt are often called upon to right wrongs, such as

insuring that the rightful heir, or at least someone the kingdom will accept, is made king, ensuring ‘equal rites’ for a young girl who’s only fault was being born the eighth ‘son’ of an eighth son and now has wizarding abilities despite being female, fighting vampyres (sic), and changing the course of a story so that rather than inflicting a ‘happy ending’ on a princess, she has the free will to choose her own path. This is in addition to the more mundane tasks, such as chiropractic, midwifery and preparing an outstanding gumbo that one could also use for scrying purposes.¹⁵

As explained above, witchcraft is not just the use of magic, it’s also knowing when not to use magic. In fact, one of the hardest lessons the young witches must come to terms with and often grumble about the most is the hard work, and lack of ‘real magic’ that gets used on a day to day basis. Both Garlick and Nitt make similar lamentations about how Nanny and Granny frequently rely upon the beliefs and gullibility of the local people rather than actually use magic to resolve problems. This is often met with disapproval from the younger witches who think they know how magic works best. For example, Magrat is, by all accounts a bit ‘soft’, for a witch. She believes in a variety of ‘new age’ concepts from the healing power of crystals and obtaining inner peace and acquiring self-defense skills via learning martial arts. She also believed, at one time, that magic was intended to make people’s ‘lives better’ (p. 80) and that Granny and Nanny did not appreciate this.¹⁶ Nor did they appreciate the medicinal value of herbs. They relied more on the headology; tell someone something will work, and more often than not it did. This doesn’t sit well with Magrat who complains to Nanny Ogg about Granny Weatherwax lack of willingness to use real magic, to which Nanny kindly explains that “you can’t help people with real magic. Not properly...By doing real things you help people.”¹⁷ This is a lesson echoed time and again by the witches, for two very important reasons: there are limits on what magic can be used for, and any magical undertaking has consequences. So if you intend to use magic, you best be damned sure there is no other alternative, and that you are willing to accept any of the consequences for having done so.

There is a very serious side to witching, of course. Witches straddle the space between light and shadow, black and white, life and death. Pratchett explains there are certain times and certain circumstances when a witch must make the decisions when others are not able or willing.¹⁸ For those life and death decisions others can’t make, won’t make, or would find it too painful to make, they take on the burden. Distasteful and unpleasant as they may be, they often fall to the witch who, because of her unique perspective, will take on the burden. There are numerous examples where

Granny Weatherwax, in particular is required to make decisions about whether or not a mother or child dies, or a murderer is exposed and tried for his crimes (Pratchett, 1998).¹⁹ Pratchett explains,

“ You might be right, you might be wrong, but you had to choose, knowing that rightness and wrongness might never be clear or even that you were deciding between two sorts of wrong...And always, ALWAYS, you did it by yourself. Never any tears, never any apology, never any regrets... You saved all that up in a way that could be used when needed”²⁰

That is what it means to have the power and the responsibility of being a witch. And while it was a terrible burden, Granny wouldn't have it any other way. Even with agonising decisions and the burden she has had to carry, it made her the best at what she did. And this was not a matter of pride, though it is frequently acknowledged that she could be prideful, but more because someone had to be THAT good. Regarding Granny Weatherwax, Pratchett explains, “she'd given up so much, but she learned a lot.”²¹ And, as Granny laments, “real witchcraft, the true stuff, out of the blood and the bone and out of the head...it don't allow for mercy.”²² The witch's role is varied; rewarding, thankless, terrifying, mundane, and trying. Often all at the same time. For all of these reasons witches are given a healthy level of respect, awe and, in the case of Granny Weatherwax, regarded with a measure of true fear. It therefore seems sensible for us to examine who, or what, these women are.

3. The Witch's Coven: Maid, Mother and 'The Other One'

Simpson credits the notion of the Maid, Mother and Crone to “Cambridge scholar, Jane Ellen Harrison, who decided that all the many goddesses in ancient religions could be tidily sorted out into three aspects of one great Earth Goddess: the Maiden, the Mother and a third she did not name.”²³ Simpson goes on to explain that because of Harrison's interest in the first two aspects, the third was never fully realised until Aleister Crowley dubbed her the crone and attributed very nasty aspects to her in his 1921 novel “Moonchild”.²⁴ Simpson further tells us that the poet Graves gave further morphic resonance to the triple aspect in his book “The White Goddess” (1948) similarly charging the crone with the less pleasant aspects of existence such as pain and destruction, as well as promises of reward and renewal. It is largely Graves' image of the Maid, Mother and Crone that many subscribe to in this modern age.²⁵ However, this has no bearing on the Discworld, where belief in the necessity of the three has existed for centuries and will endure, though the reasons aren't always clear. Of course, there are now four, rather than three, if one includes Magrat who is primarily queen,

and secondly a witch, though Granny would be quick to point out that “witches is better than queens.”²⁶

Simpson points out that the presence of three witches is an allusion to the work of Shakespeare, who gives a strong portrayal of three witches in *Macbeth*.²⁷ However, she indicates that this tradition of three wise or powerful women, often inextricably tied to the fate of others, (just like the Discworld unofficial coven) have existed in various cultures for centuries.²⁸ The Norns of the Norse countries, the Fates of the ancient Romans and Greeks, and many others, all had three female entities who weave the fates of others, for good or ill. As for the Maid, Mother and Crone, Simpson explains that this is more of a romantic convention rather than something steeped in tradition, at least on Earth, which does not necessarily share the same view as the Discworld inhabitants on this matter.²⁹

According to Nanny Ogg three witches are ideal because as a unit, they can get up to considerable trouble which is infinitely more fun than getting on one another’s nerves, which became a problem one when there is only two of them.³⁰ Aside from it being a tradition/superstition seemingly older than time, three witches could better shoulder the responsibilities of witching better than two. In more contemplative times, Nanny considered the fact that while she was most definitely ‘Mother’ material due to her expansive and impressive brood, Granny encompassed all three aspects, Maid (as far as she knew), Crone and, Mother... (rhymes with trucker), especially for anyone so unfortunate to try and cross her.³¹ Before Magrat became queen and gave birth to Esmeralda Margaret Note Spelling of Lancre, she was the Maiden, a role eventually claimed by Agnes and her inner thin Goth persona, Perdita.

Each witch excels at magic in their own way. While Granny is expert at ‘Borrowing’, ‘headology’ and anything related to getting into the minds of others, Magrat is adept with herbs and healing. Agnes/Perdita is a bit too novice to determine what precisely she’s best at, though she’s got great hair, and an uncanny voice that enables her to harmonise with herself. She’s of two minds about everything thanks to the presence of Perdita, so she gets twice as much thinking and observing done as others, which incidentally comes in handy when you’re surrounded by mind controlling vampyres. Nanny Ogg has an uncanny ability to like and be liked by others. She had the ability to become friends with virtually anyone, gain their confidence and their trust and make it seem as though she’d been there all along; plus she is the maker of scumble and knows the many aphrodisiac purposes of food, including the legendary Carrot and Oyster pie.

Granny Weatherwax is considered the most powerful of the witches. And this means a great many things, including that she has to be a 'good' witch, be the best at everything she does, be the most clever, and be absolutely convinced of these things at all times. Believing she is that capable is the lynchpin of any witch's abilities. Pratchett explains that when someone truly needs help, she is the one they come to. "When Death was standing by the cradle or the axe slipped in the woods and blood was soaking into the moss... When all hope was gone, you called for Granny Weatherwax."³² As a consequence, for good or ill, Granny is the unofficial leader of the witches. Unofficial because, while wizards enjoy nothing more than overly complicated hierarchical systems of ranking, witches detest such things. In fact, no witch would ever concede that someone were more skilled or adept than she, however, when needs must, they will gather to work together, or gossip, whichever is the most helpful.³³

Pratchett also explains that the typical witches' sabbat is not often depicted accurately by most artists or writers. He feels they perhaps spend "too much time in small rooms with the curtains drawn, instead of getting out in the health fresh air."³⁴ (p. 18) There is no naked dancing, as that's patently absurd especially with the number of environmental hazards, including inclement weather and hedgehogs. Your typical witch is more likely to be an elderly, slightly anti-social sugar junky who's only interaction with 'mystical ointments' (p. 19) involves liniments intended to ward off infection that smell so reprehensible as to afford the individual a wide berth in social situations. While unofficial, it is generally accepted that witches credo is, "Don't do what you will, do what I say."³⁵ (p. 19). This generally accepted by anyone smart enough to realize that anything a witch has to say is worth listening to and any advice she offers, is worth adhering to. Or else. As Pratchett (p. 19) points out succinctly, "when people were in serious trouble, they went to a witch. Sometimes, of course, to say, "Please stop doing it."³⁶

4. Borrowing and Headology

Another form of magic frequently used by witches, Granny Weatherwax in particular, is known as 'Borrowing'. This is where the witch, rather than transform into an animal, (it is a commonly held belief that witches possess such an ability) enters the mind of a particular animal. The purposes behind the borrowing vary. When Granny was younger, she did it often simply because she could, but as she got older, and understood magic better, it was used for a purpose. It was done with respect and the understanding that there was always a price, and you paid it because it was the right thing to do.

Pratchett indicates that if wizards were to do it, they'd do it like 'thieves', not so much out of malice, but because it wouldn't occur to them that there was a more gentle way to do it and that this way made it possible to share the

thoughts of the animal rather than assume control, which was useless if you intended to ‘borrow’ an animal because it had a skill you did not possess.³⁷

Taking over the mind of another is problematic for another more important reason, as a novice witch/wizard finds out when she attempts to overtake an eagle. The minds become entangled, and as the eagle knows what it is meant to be, and you’re simply it’s guest, you can become lost. Pratchett explains (p 74) “that the mind shapes the body...Borrowing is one thing...however, truly taking on another form has a built-in penalty.”³⁸

Granny points out that it takes a lifetime to learn how to fly, for example, and by overtaking an animal, rather than gently entering its mind, the animal’s skills would be of no use, as you’ve assumed complete control, rather than striking the balance that is often alluded to regarding magic.³⁹ So not only would you lose your mind, but it’s unlikely you’d be very successful in any endeavour you attempted as the animal you’d overtaken, at least not for very long.

Part of the price of ‘Borrowing’ was that the borrower needed to become re-accustomed to their original form. While Granny was good at borrowing, it had an effect that was often unpleasant. For example, when taking on the mind of a bat, she’d have the urge to hang upside down or after ‘borrowing’ an owl, to eat mice. A more common problem for the Borrower was the assumption by the uninitiated that you were dead. As this could often lead to ‘embarrassment’, Borrowers often left a sign about their person indicating that they most certainly were not dead which saves time on unnecessary funerary arrangements and lowers the probability of incurring the wrath of a very angry witch. Another side effect of borrowing that could be particularly problematic, was that, occasionally, a witch wouldn’t make it back. Nanny Ogg, who found Granny’s skill at borrowing a bit ‘unnerving’, still leaves out provisions for Granny Postulate, who Borrowed a bluetit and never returned.⁴⁰

Pratchett explains the price paid for borrowing, “There was a price. No-one asked you to pay it, but the very absence of demand was a moral obligation... You paid. You cared; not because it was kind or good but because it was right”.⁴¹ This extends to virtually everything a magic practitioner does, good or bad. There is a price, and it must be paid. Balance must be maintained. Because of this, Pratchett (p. 206) explains, “You couldn’t set out to be a good witch or a bad witch...All you could try to be was a witch, as hard as you could.”⁴²

Headology is universally used by witches as its use is infinitely more practical than attempting real feats of magic. In brief, it requires you have an understanding of how people think, and are willing to exploit that,

including gullibility and superstition. That is not to say it is used with malice, just that the witches know that, more often than not, people can help themselves better, if given a good ‘push’, be it mental or literal, in the right direction. Granny Weatherwax is an adept at headology. She knows that she can give someone a bottle of sugar water, that she’s assured them she’s done all sorts of incantations and widdershins about it, and that it will work because the person believes it will and desires to be well. That is the power of headology. Knowing the mind of others well enough to gently navigate their will towards a particular goal. The person wants to get better, and will, if they believe in Granny’s abilities, and have the will to overcome whatever it is that’s troubling them.

According to Pratchett, there are similarities between headology and psychiatry, however, Pratchett points that the witches would have no use for it “as some arts are too black even for a witch”.⁴³ Pratchett explains that the fundamental difference between psychiatry and headology is that a psychiatrist would assume a fear of being chased by monsters is due to an overactive imagination and attempt to eradicate the erroneous belief. Granny, of course, knows better, and would provide her client with a chair and a heavy stick to dispatch said monster.⁴⁴

5. Witchcraft versus Wizardry

As magic is a complex phenomenon that requires consideration from the perspective of both the wizard and witch, it might be useful to take a closer at precisely how witchcraft and wizardry work. One aspect that practitioners of magic are resolute about is that there are certain types of magic that are intended for men and others for women. This worked, more or less, until the birth of an eighth son of an eighth son, who turns out to be a daughter, is born. But we digress. It is generally expected that males become wizards and females become witches. And there are some fairly basic reasons for this. According to Granny Weatherwax female wizards would be inappropriate because of the nature of the type of magic wizards do. Things such as “books and stars and jommetry” would be inappropriate for a female who would never ‘grasp’ the concepts. Magic for women comes “from the ground.” and men would no sooner be capable of that, than women of magic from the ‘sky’.⁴⁵ The reason for this has to do with ‘headology’ or “how your mind works” according Weatherwax, who goes on to say “Men’s minds are different from ours...Their magic’s all numbers and angles and edges and what the stars are doing...It’s all power.”⁴⁶ Because the wizards and witches draw upon different sources for their magic, they can achieve very different results.

We get a deeper perspective on this when Granny and a deceased wizard, who has been reincarnated into an apple tree, have a philosophical argument about the nature of witchcraft. It would appear that wizards, for the

most part, do not grasp witchcraft particularly well, probably because of their emphasis on naked females dancing in the moonlight.⁴⁷ (Pratchett, 1987) Wizards, according to Granny “talked too much and pinned spells into books like butterflies... wizardry was not the way to use magic, it’s nothing but lights and fire and meddling with power...” Granny also felt that the worst transgression was that wizards regarded their magic as the only sort worth practicing.⁴⁸ According to a wizard called Treatle, “Witchcraft is Nature’s way of allowing women access to the magical fluxes...it is not high magic”. He goes on to explain, however, that women are ‘unsettling’, and ‘a little too excitable’, suggesting that their talents do not lie in that direction due to lack of clarity of thought and a tendency for their brains to overheat.”⁴⁹

To sum up, witches and wizards use magic in different ways, to achieve different aims, allegedly, and it’s possible to overdo it. And each believes the other isn’t capable of handling the power that magic conveys to the other. Probably the most profound difference in how wizards and witches perceive the use of magic is in regard to its potential. Treatle states that the high magic of wizardry can “give us everything we want.”⁵⁰ This is a view in stark contrast to the commonly held belief of witches that magic is not meant to provide what people want, but rather what they need, and only when there is no other more mundane alternative than to use magic. Magic is not a toy, it is not a balm or cure-all, it should not be used unless absolutely necessary. This is meddling with power; simply because you can do so leads to all manner of problems, and consequences that must not be taken lightly.

6. Price for Magical usage and Cackling

To use magic, you have to accept that you are taking it from other places and that there will be a price. As Rincewind the wizard says “Magic uses people...It affects you as much as you affect it. You can’t mess around with magical things without it affecting you.”⁵¹ This is a sentiment shared by both witches and wizards, but it seems that, generally speaking, witches take this a bit more seriously. Granny Weatherwax understands all too well the use of power, and the price therein. But she also asks, “if you were worried about the price, then why were you in the shop?”⁵² And that is what makes witches different from other users of magic. They not only understand the consequences of their choices, they are willing to make the choices and accept the consequences, because sometimes there is no other choice; someone has to. This is also why witches are so reluctant to use magic unless absolutely necessary, and understand the importance of not misusing or abusing magic. If one assumes the responsibility for its use, one must also

assume the consequences therein including the temptations associated with wielding such power, such as cackling. Cackling is a side effect of a witch spending too much time alone, taking on too much responsibility, handling other people's problems and relying heavily on one's power. All witches keep this at the back of the mind. It wasn't just a loss of control, or one's sanity. It is the time when a witch begins tottering more and more over the edge, losing her balance, or "going to the dark" and then a gingerbread cottage and slamming oven doors can feature prominently in the unhinged witch's future.⁵³ It's likely this seems like a heavy price for anyone who generally tends towards being helpful, however, as Granny's caveat about shopping bear repetition here "if you were worried about the price, then why were you in the shop?".⁵⁴

Magic is potent on the Discworld, but it comes with a tremendous price. Particularly for those who are extremely adept at using it. A practitioner must not only believe in magic, but believe in his or her self for it to be successful. They must accept that magic requires balance, skill, cunning, and knowledge that many others cannot bear to live with, and that they must know when not to use magic, and if unsure, it is best not to meddle at all. A basic hint? More often than not, it should not be used. Magic is not a panacea, it should not be used to make someone happy, especially when the person in question hasn't been consulted. It is there for when there is no other choice, for when actions necessitate, and the user is willing to accept the consequences without thanks or expectation of reward.

Notes