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## The Witch Woman: A Recurring Motif in Recent Fantasy Writing for Young Readers

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### The Witch Woman: A Recurring Motif in Recent Fantasy Writing for Young Readers

#### Abstract

Thematic analysis of the figure of the witch woman (incorporating both good and evil versions) in recent examples of epic fantasy for children and young adults.

#### Additional Keywords

Children's literature; Fantasy literature; Henry, Maeve. The Witch King; Lawrence, Louise. The Earth Witch.; Price, Susan. The Ghost Drum; Smith, Stephanie A. Snow-eyes; Wise women; Witches

# The Witch Woman

## A RECURRING MOTIF IN RECENT FANTASY WRITING FOR YOUNG READERS

JOHN WARREN STEWIG

**O**ne of the most interesting, recurring figures in recent fantasy for young readers is the witch woman. What Susan Steinfurst calls a theme analysis will reveal this further. Not as precise and quantitative as a content analysis, a theme analysis identifies an idea of current importance in literature, and presents commentary about this. Such an analysis seemed wise, as according to Dowd and Taylor, this "genre has not attracted its share of critical research ..." (175).

To narrow the focus here, this paper examines what Sheila Egoff calls "epic fantasy ... filled with seriousness, momentous events, and protagonists on the verge of adulthood" (208).

There are, in such fantasies, complexly developed, recurring characters. One of these is the witch woman, either at the plot's center, or at least an important operative to get the plot going. In *The Witch King* by Maeve Henry, for example, Granny Fishbone the wise/witch woman, knows long forgotten history. She sends the main character, Robert, off on the quest which involves him throughout the remainder of the book. Only a functional character, serving an initiatory purpose, she disappears from the story once this is accomplished.

In contrast to such implementing characters, however, is the witch woman who is the main character. Examining three of these in recent books reveals similarities and differences among the women. Reading these in the context of commentary about the witch woman as a recurring character helps deepen our understanding of them.

These witch women are users of magic, and as such they come from roots in their simpler folk tale antecedents. Charlotte Huck comments that "Folktales are replete with characters ... that possess particular magical powers ... (and) (m)odern authors ... have been quick to utilize this motif" (360).

Other experts suggest an origin even earlier than folk tales for the witch woman character. Rich writes "All these writers envisioned a prehistoric civilization centered around the female both as mother and head of family, and as deity ..." (72). Jamal suggests that this figure originated in the "older feminine tradition of sacrality" traceable to Paleolithic times (5). Briggs (1971), commenting on more recent times, asserts that "Tales of ... shape-shifting are to be found everywhere" (610). She comments further, on the "widespread and genuine belief in witchcraft" (1974, 139), which includes stories of shape-shifters who can raise spirits and transport themselves and others.

In writing of contemporary shamans, Jamal (4) points out that these women can shift their shapes in a literal sense (as they outwardly transform physical shape) or in a metaphorical sense (as they alter their consciousness and that of those around them). Each of the three main characters in these books does one or the other. In *The Earth Witch*, Bronwen makes very gradual changes in her physical self, as she grows younger and older. In this she represents the tradition described by Gilbert and Gubar who point out that a witch woman can often "transform herself into a modest and docile beauty" (79). In *The Ghost Drum*, Chingis makes more radical changes, more quickly. Finally, in *Snow-Eyes*, the transformation isn't physical, but rather metaphoric, as the woman comes to understand herself and her own gift, through her experiences. These women thus share "qualities with others throughout time and from diverse cultures" (Jamal, 4).

In reading the three books, we find women very unlike those from different societies and times, described by Rich (70) as dominated by men's power over them. In all three books, the women are the most powerful figures.

### The Ghost Drum

In *The Ghost Drum*, author Susan Price writes of a 250 year old shaman, who teaches the young woman apprentice, Chingis, her skills. The old woman has a "face crisscrossed with wrinkles like fine old leather that has been crumpled in the hand. A thin beard of long white hairs grew from the old woman's chin, though her pink scalp could be seen through the white hair on her head" (4). Child of a slave, she was begged from her mother the night she was born, by a shaman who gave her the gift of 300 years of life. Despite her powers, she remains conscious of her roots, living simply in the chicken-footed house drawn from Russian folklore. "The witch could have lived in far higher style had she wished, ... but she saw no reason to insult the memory of her parents by putting on unnecessary airs" (30).

When the shaman selects her apprentice, she demonstrates her magic by shaping a counterfeit baby from snow, which will not melt until the woman has shown it to others, claiming her baby was born dead. (6). The natural mother agrees, the "Woman of Power" takes the baby and vanishes into the stormy winter night. The baby substitute is an interesting parallel to the ice baby in Maurice Sendak's *Outside Over There*, and a descendent of the many changeling stories described by Briggs (1967).

After selecting her apprentice the witch's instruction can begin, as Chingis is taught simply "to be a mere herb doctor." The witch teaches her about those "plants whose spirits heal and whose spirits kill, and to know that they are often the same plants" (32). In less than a year Chingis learns all this rudimentary lore, and other witches "spoke approvingly of her and said they wished their own apprentices were as quick" (35).

The shaman has the ability to leave her body and travel to other worlds; she tells Chingis this is what she experienced when Chingis thought she was dreaming. "There are a hundred thousand worlds (the spirit) . . . can wander in . . . including the ghost world" (34). When Chingis hears the young Czarevich Safa's cry for help, she responds: "Stepping from her body, her spirit grasped the thread of the cry and flew on it, like a kite on a line, to the Imperial Palace . . ." (64). Later, still outside her body, she "stepped into the Czarevich's dream" (69). Newall points out that this type of shape-changer, called a hamhlepva, lies in a trance while her soul travels, and comes from early Nordic antecedents (171).

After learning herb lore, Chingis learns three more involved kinds of magics. The first is word magic. "Words can alter sight and hearing, taste, touch and smell. Used with a higher skill they can make our senses clearer and protect us from the simpler magics" (37). The second is writing magic. The witch tells Chingis that every day people "open books and listen to the talk of the dead. They learn from the dead, and learn to love them, as if they were still alive. That is strong magic" (38). The third magic is that of music, critical because when the shaman twins the two strongest magics together (words and music), "all within hearing must do as the shaman wills" (40). At first, the shaman uses her music to make the baby grow. She sings for a year, and at the end of that time, Chingis is a young woman of 20. Later, Chingis herself will learn to use music to heal, to bring death, and to shift shapes.

Chingis has other abilities, as well. She can change her own shape. When she finally confronts the male shaman Kuzma, she changes into a "small, spiked seed-head," and then later into a "big leech," as she holds onto her fleeing enemy (146). In addition, she can change others' shapes, i.e., "she had made trees walk in their bark" (61).

Invisibility is one of Chingis's most useful abilities. She can become invisible in two ways. One, she can make a spell in the shaman's alphabet, which she puts on the door so no one will see her house, even though it crouches in the palace courtyard, amidst many guards (66). Two, she can sing a song which allows her to pass through a crowd of people who do not see her. "She was not seen because, as she went, she sang, and her song told all who heard it that she was not there" (66).

Summoning of spirits is a recurring ability of witch women. Chingis can call the spirits of wolf, bear, deer, birds, and other creatures, while drumming and singing (99).

Despite these abilities which other shamans possess, Chingis is unconventional. She took an apprentice when she herself was still young. In addition, the apprentice was a male, Safa, an unheard of choice among witches (94). Finally, she chose an apprentice who was not new-born. This unusual choice makes Kuzma, her male enemy, furious. Though her shaman tells her that Safa is unteachable, it turns out Chingis is right in her selection: at the end he accompanies her to the spirit world where he will learn what she teaches.

Because she is young and inexperienced, Chingis can be tricked by Kuzma's skill. When she approaches Kuzma without being properly cautious, she discovers that his soldiers wear bells and blow trumpets, so they cannot hear her, and are thus immune to her magic. "A shaman's power is all words and music. If she cannot be heard, her power is niggling" (123).

There are minor and more significant limits to Chingis's skill. When she asks the drum for information about Safa she is in the tradition of Icelandic Lapp shamans as far back as the 1300s (Newall, 31). The drum doesn't respond to her this time, which is a minor inconvenience.

But there are other, more major limits. Unlike witch/wise women in some other books, Chingis cannot save herself. In the end she is truly dead. She walks through the ghost-world and greets her mother. Despite her death, she, her mother, Marien the nurse, and Farida the slave-Czaritsa, are together able to re-inhabit Chingis's body, so they can go into the real world to remedy the situation (134). This is indeed unusual, since in their human lives, neither Marien nor Farida had any particular magical powers. Having died and traveled to the ghost world, however, they are able to help Chingis in raising not only her own dead body, but also Kuzma's. Thus, the four women working together are able to overcome Kuzma's solitary evil. They become, in Jamal's words, "channels through which the energy can flow" (70).

Author Price gives a truly memorable picture of a strong woman, making astute use of arcane knowledge, able to do many things, but not able—in the end—to save her physical self in the human world. She is able, nonetheless, to return to the spirit world, where she will continue teaching her apprentice.

### The Earth Witch

Bronwen, *The Earth Witch*, is, like Chingis, able to take many forms. In the book by Louise Lawrence, we have a fantasy set in modern times, and Owen, the young orphan boy who becomes involved with Bronwen and eventually has to be saved from her, is clearly a modern youngster. In the remote Welsh area of Mynydd Blaena, female images abound. Uncle Ifor remarks on the withering cold of a blackthorn winter, "Always she is the same . . . black and cruel and not letting go until the flowering is over." Later, in the suddenly green spring, the images are also female: "She is coming now . . . in the drying wind and the dark

buds swelling . . . and the fat thrusting fists of daffodils" (14). Uncle Ifor, "living close to the earth and knowing all its signs," comments that spring, "rich and abundant with lambs and violets, grew young and strong, lusty with wheat and cow parsley," will extract a price for this bounty. "We will be paying . . . Death for the life. That is her way, see? What she is giving she is also taking away . . ." Ifor sees a hard winter. "Harder than we ever knew. She will be cruel in her killing and unrelenting. This summer will not be for free . . ." (106-107). As the summer comes to its fullness, the villagers marvel: "They could remember only one year to equal it . . . and that was the year Megan Davis came and Gareth Llewellyn died" (147).

Owen is surprised to find someone living in Blaena cottage, until lately inhabited by the shunned Megan Davis who died unmourned. Is this who Owen saw on the hilltop one day, when neither his friends, Kate or Jonathan, could see her? Owen feels this female presence in a variety of ways: while walking along the ridgeway with Kate and Jonathan, he can feel Myrnydd Blaena, "taking many forms. She is the willow and the mountain hare . . . the soul of the earth, the heart of stone . . . It does not do to take her lightly" (21). He tells all this, detailing the shape changing which is one of Bronwen's most pervasive abilities: she is Rhiannon when of the underworld, Blodeuwedd when of the owls, Angharad when of the lake, and finally, she is Cerddwen, the shape changer. The many names are all for the one woman, and the woman "is the world" (Jamal, 122).

Owen knows the truth of the old legends, despite Jonathan's disbelief. Little does he know, however, that he will soon meet Bronwen in person. The appearances continue. Contentedly playing scrabble one evening, Owen goes out to investigate a sound, discovering that

Someone was standing by the corner of the barn, a woman under moonlight. He could see the pale oval of her face and the black drifts of her hair. Her white gown fluttered. With her gaze she was owning the moors and the meadows . . . In the wind was her breathing, and deep she was seeing into the heart of things . . . (42).

At other times, the appearance is noted more briefly: "Twice he had seen her out of frost and moonlight . . . and he could not forget her" (49).

Bronwen, the shape changer, can assume animal form. The day he keeps his promise to show up and clean out her gutters, the woman is nowhere in sight,

but only the crow perched on the rain barrel and watched him. "Working for her, are you?" Owen asked it . . . "Waiting to report back?" Its claws shifted restlessly. "Better tell her I'll do it then." But the crow did not leave him. He talked to it through the rasp of the wirebrush . . . through the sound of the hammer . . . Still the crow kept him company . . . the sun slid downward into midafternoon . . . It was as if he could not stop . . . He watched the shadows lengthen. He saw the crow leave the garden like a scrap of darkness jettisoned from hell. (53-54)

Only after the crow departs does Bronwen in her human form appear. Sometime later, when Uncle Ifor goes hunting crows,

. . . the cry came from behind him, a screech of rage or pain. Owen swung around. Bronwen staggered by the rain barrel and fell . . . She clutched her arm. Blood soaked black through the green sleeve of her cardigan, came away scarlet on her hand . . . But that was impossible—she had been nowhere near the sights of Ifor's rifle . . . But at his feet a feather lay, black from a crow's wing. (82-83)

In assuming the shape of a crow, Bronwen is in the tradition of pagan Celtic goddesses, who often took this shape (Newall, 140).

Beyond simply changing shapes, Bronwen is also able to grow younger gradually. At first Owen is unaware of this, though when she returns to the cottage, "Owen was seeing her close up . . . She was not as old as he had thought. She was not as harsh either" (56). She drinks water, drawn from the depths of the earth, described as wild, invigorating, "the water of life." Some time later, Owen notices that "The scarf was gone from her head and her hair was falling loose from its pins . . . making her look younger. She was not as bad as he had thought" (67). Still later both Owen and Kate notice that "Bronwen was changed. She was not middle-aged and ugly anymore . . . She seemed to embody the spring within herself . . . She was the essence of flowers . . . eternally young" (132). This is the kind of transformation noted by Briggs, who says some witch women "can change their appearance . . . but this is probably not a real shape-shift, only the effect of glamour, a kind of hypnotism which affects the senses of the beholder . . ." (360).

As harvest approaches, however, Owen notices changes. "There were tiny lines like crow's feet at the corner of her eyes and her pale flawless skin had lost its youthful bloom . . . amid the darkness of the hair Owen saw a single strand of grey" (152). When she returns after being gone for some time, he notices that she was "not straight and proud, but bent and shrunken and her movements were slow and fumbling" (178).

She is evidently able to reincarnate: when Owen asks her if she knew dead Megan Davis, she replied "I am her . . . I am her blood. The white roots woke me and I rose from the grave of her bones and her dust. I know all that she knew" (69).

Like Chingis, Bronwen knows herb magic as when she offers Owen an ointment, having seen the sunburn and scratches on his body, the result of working on her house. She says it is made from chamomile but it heals with a potency unfamiliar to him. When she suffered an unexplainable accident, she says, "I will make the fomentation . . . leaves of the woundwort and the dried yarrow flower" (83).

Though she lives among people, she is perceived as someone with supernatural powers, as Kate says, "She's a witch" (31). This woman is thus in the tradition of strong, independent women who are "the object of men's fear and hatred" (Rich, 70-1). The children are skeptical, but the

speed with which Bronwen goes off to her cottage once they've offered to help carry her firewood suggests unnatural movement. After several days when Owen has gone off early and stayed into the night working at Bronwen's cottage, Bronwen Glad worries "She is leading him astray with her heathenish ways. It's not decent. . . . Inside that cottage . . . the two of them alone" (77). Uncle Ifor, more charitable than Aunt Glad, remembers with trepidation that it was when Gareth Llewellyn was roaming the woods with Megan Davis that he was killed by a rife.

There is recurring color symbolism. Bronwen, from the earth, is continually linked with the color green. The author writes of Bronwen's "green, discerning gaze" (65). When Owen went to work at Bronwen's cottage, there was a crow perched on the rain barrel, whose "feathers shone green as bottles in the sun." Aunt Glad remembers that Megan had cat-green eyes (75). When Bronwen is shot, she is wearing a green sweater. Her eyes are described as "green as poison" (87) and "spring green" (126). When she appears at the May Day celebration, she wears a white gown lined in green (132). As the summer passes however and autumn approaches, Owen notices that "the brightness was gone from Bronwen's eyes, their greenness dulled like tired grass" (150).

The conflict presented is between men's demands of the earth, and the earth mother force represented by Bronwen. Owen is increasingly drawn toward her, and consequently isolated from his family, and from Kate and Jonathan. "The world seemed emptied out of everyone except Bronwen" (98). A man must die that she can become young again, and the conflict is expressed when she tells him, "Them or me it is, and it is your choice. Go, if that's what you want. I am not stopping you" (100). But he is powerless to go when confronted with this choice. The alienation continues as he lives with his aunt and uncle, and goes to school. "A shell of himself acted out a part but his real life was with Bronwen. He belonged to the earth, to the green growing things, and the garden on Mynydd Blaena" (123).

Midway through the book, we begin to notice her need. The greenness of her eyes began to dull in August (150), and Owen notices crow's feet at the corner of her eyes (152). In the critical final scene, when she reappears after an absence and traps him in the cottage she explains: "Always I claim the blood of a young man when the oak leaves fall. It is the old ways, see? All through the year men are taking life from the land. It is not much that I am taking one life back" (181).

Toward the end, we see that the conflict will be between Bronwen and Kate, fighting for Owen, whom she loves. Uncle Ifor, who tried to help Owen earlier is helpless at the final conflict. Attacked by Bronwen's dog when they force open her cottage door, "Kate kicked it. Her boot drove hard and fast into its ribs, its legs, its head." When Jonathan asks why she was so vicious, she responds, "He does not bite that has no teeth," and goes on: "I have kicked the teeth

out of dogs and men" (196). What does this mean? He doesn't understand, but there may well be more to Kate than he or readers have suspected. When Kate finally dispatches Bronwen's black sow in a flurry of chaos and killing, with the images of black birds thrashing around, Jonathan knows "She was not Kate, not human" (200). Only when the spirit is vanquished does she return to the mild Kate he knows.

### Snow-Eyes

In *Snow-Eyes*, by Stephanie A. Smith, we meet an entire group of women living in community, servitors of the Lake Mother, Trost, who must have new servitors as the current ones age and die. Despite these and other outward details, the book in fact is an example of what Penelope Farmer, herself a respected fantasy writer, calls an "Inverted fantasy (which) deals with interior kinds of subjects, psychological problems that concern the individual . . . protagonist" (57, 61). One of those problems, achieving maturity by "finding oneself," is a major theme of fantasy books according to Dowd and Taylor (181).

The young heroine, Snow-Eyes, is chosen, much against her will. Daughter of a servitor named Beya Rete, she is unhappy, fights against her chosen status, and eventually comes to terms with it. As Jamal points out, a recurring link among shamans is being called, in the words of one, "I was not seeking it" (58). Not until more than three years into her stay at the Lake Mother's villa, does Snow-Eyes learn new servitors are always daughters of other servitors. Each mother brings her own daughter, conceived with a human father and left to grow up among other humans, to the island home, to become a new part of the group (123).

Before readers encounter the Lake Mother however, they hear about the human female ruler of the area, the Drake Villae, to whom all Kildeans must pay a tithe for their land (13). While on a trip to the village to pay the tithe, Snow-Eyes is questioned about her mother by a little boy. The boy's questioning brings to the surface Snow-Eye's deeply felt loss. In this, she is in the company of

most women in literature (who have) mothers who are either dead or absent . . . But whether the mother is dead, absent . . . the fictional protagonist feels a void in her life and yearns for a positive, heroic, and nurturing tie with a maternal model (111).

When Snow-Eyes returns home, she asks her father, aging Paudan, if the Lake Mother is her own mother. She receives a very thorough explanation of the Lake Mother, the sister of death, who

softens her sibling's nature. She brings rain when the sun is too harsh and melts the ice in winter. She gives flowers their fragrance . . . She listens to the trouble we . . . have—and also to our wishes (16).

We further learn that when it is time for the Kildeans to go to Death's abode, the Lake Mother comforts and guides them.

Snow-Eyes learns from her mother when she is just ten years old that she has "the gift" (29). Readers discover

there is much to be revealed about why Beya does not stay with her daughter. She has a commitment, to something as yet unspecified, which we will learn about later.

Snow-Eyes is different from her half-sister, Edarra, in many ways. For example, Edarra, child of two human parents, is afraid of physical darkness. But when together at the seaside, ritually celebrating the onset of Snow-Eye's womanhood, they talk about darkness. Edarra needs a fire to hold off the physical darkness. But Snow-Eyes, child of a human father and a servitor mother, instead tells that she is afraid, "Of the dark that comes when I'm lonely, of the dark that comes when I feel that everyone else has gone away and I am the only one left in the whole wide world" (43). She feels here, as Jamal says so many shaman women do, some element which "sets them apart from other children" (6).

The servitors have many gifts; among these is the ability to make themselves invisible. Beya Rete returns when Paudan is ill and indeed dying, but only Snow-Eyes can see her. Though Edarra is in the sick room, ministering to her father, she does not see Beya (59). Later, when Edarra regrets having in effect sold her sister, Beya makes Snow-Eyes invisible. "She does not see us. She cannot hear you anymore" (72).

The women's magical abilities are limited. Beya makes Snow-Eyes blind by touching her eyes with Trost's tears (71). When Snow-Eyes implores her to restore the sight, Beya replies, "But I cannot give it back" (73). The blindness is finite in duration, for as Beya says, "It is a time of waiting and of patience. Trost's tears will make your insight grow stronger and wider" (73).

Another magical ability is the gift of transformation. When they need to cross to the Lake Mother's island villa, Beya transforms Snow-Eyes into a fish (77-78). However, later when they are hurrying so Lammar, another servitor, will not be angry about their delay, Snow-Eyes asks Beya why she doesn't simply turn them into birds, who could travel more swiftly. "No, no, I'm not strong enough to do a dream-change twice" (85).

Trost's servitors are able to send thought to one another. Explaining her late return, Beya admits she has ignored her summons, as Lammar asserts, "you did not answer my dream-calls to you." Beya responds that Lammar is "forever bothering me with nothings . . ." (88). Not until much later are these two revealed as mother and daughter. Beya is here resisting her mother, as she will in turn be resisted by her daughter.

The women age differently than do humans. When Snow-Eyes asks why her father is so much older than Beya, her mother says: "Time passes differently for me — for we who are servitors" (83). Near the end of the story when, despairing of her mother's treatment of her, Snow-Eyes returns to her human home, she doesn't recognize her brother Edan as the "old man," or her half-sister Edarra, "thin and bent into a rounded nugget of a woman" (168). Snow-Eyes ponders: "How many seasons had really passed? she wondered. How much of Edan and Edarra's

lives?" To her recollection, she had been at the Lake Mother's home only five seasons. "How could her brother and sister have become the elderly couple she saw before her now?" (169). Trost's tears give the servitors "seasons and seasons of youth . . . if we did not have the gift of youth, we would age too quickly to do the Lake Mother's bidding" (181).

Though they have abilities, these are given to serving the Lake Mother. "When I made my first vow to Trost, I pledged her I would do her bidding. Her work came before all else" (82). This struggle between her vows to the Lake Mother and her own human desires for her husband lead to Beya's estrangement from her daughter, Snow-Eyes.

Sometimes the women work magic individually, though at other times cooperation is needed. For example, Beya goes on an unexplained errand with the other servitors, as soon as she and Snow-Eyes arrive at the villa. Later she explains:

... it is raining. Lammar told you we had work to do. I am truly sorry about the drought . . . and as you see there must be four of us here, to call in the rains. It is hard to make the rain fall. Three cannot do it (95).

When they do this, the four servitors are in the company of shamans from Icelandic sagas and Jewish folklore who, according to Newall (109), often raised storms.

Life settles into a routine which only gradually becomes comfortable after Snow-Eyes learns she can adjust to blindness. Much of the women's daily work is mundane: weaving, baking, dipping candles. Snow-Eyes isn't happy because at her human home, she had enjoyed weaving; here she is allowed only to spin. Weaving itself is reserved for the servitors (103).

Part of the routine is daily instruction Snow-Eyes has with her mother, Beya. Much of this consists of old tales about Trost; characteristic of the lessons is that Beya talks and Snow-Eyes listens: she is not encouraged to ask questions and responses are seldom given. The community routines are explained. As each servitor grows old, gives up her tasks and travels to Death's abode, one of the wandering servitors is called back to the island. Snow-Eyes chafes under the slow tempo of her learning; she asks Beya when she will begin teaching her such abilities as the "power to see our dreams and to become them" (101). Beya replies that will occur "When you are ready." And being ready means vowing one's life to Trost. When that occurs, as Beya tells, "You will begin to see" (101).

When Snow-Eyes finally understands what she must do, it is only through the unpleasantness of discovering her mother has lied to her (125). She is in this way kin to two of Robert Westall's protagonists, Beth in *The Wind Eye*, and Anne of *The Watch House*, each the victim of adult selfishness. Snow-Eyes

... knew why she would choose dreams. Not because she was selfish . . . but because dreaming was her gift. She had been born with the beginnings of that special gift of insight. It would be wrong to deny it . . . But

it would be wrong also to deny that she wanted to go home. . . . She could never vow her life honestly to Trost without first asking her heart's desire. (129)

The women are subject to human shortcomings. Beya has lied to her daughter, not telling her she had a choice of accepting the tears and resulting blindness. She lied to the other servitors, telling them she was returning often to her human home to teach Snow-Eyes the knowledge she needed to take her place in the line of servitors. Beya was avoiding the pledge made at the second vowing, that of bringing the daughter who will follow in her footsteps. Lammur explains, "Seeing you grow up reminded her that she was aging. As you became strong, she would grow old" (139). Snow-Eyes is in the company of all those women who, having seen their own mother as a destructive force, "still feel, at moments, wildly unmothered" (Rich, 225).

The women are not immortal. At the second vowing, Beya evokes Paudan's image and he calls her to join him in death. Snow-Eyes holds Beya with them in life, though Verlie, her voice deep and forceful, says,

Beya, if Trost ever held the power to cheat Death, it is a power lost. And better so. Did she not, even she, join her brother, at long last? Trost knew that life is precious, but it is only one state of being. Death is another (157).

Despite this limitation, the book is in the fellowship of others which reconfigure old tales as authors "project a woman-centered society in which men can no longer interfere with the lives of women" (Zipes, 23).

### Conclusion

In these books, and others (see Related Reading), we find a richly varied portrayal of the wise/witch woman. Sometimes these women work alone as in *The Earth Witch*. Sometimes they work with a single apprentice, as in *The Ghost Drum*. At other times they live in community, as in *Snow-Eyes*. Sometimes their work is primarily beneficent, as in *Snow-Eyes*. Sometimes it is primarily evil, as in *The Earth Witch*. And at other times it is a mixture, depending on what evokes the magic, as in *The Ghost Drum*. Often these women possess simple herb lore; all three books feature main characters with these abilities. Sometimes the abilities are more complex. They may be complex physical abilities. For example, Chingis in *The Ghost Drum* can inhabit and bring to a semblance of life a dead body. Sometimes the complex abilities are mental. Brownen in *The Earth Witch* is able to make Owen forget his friends and family, desiring only to be with her. An interesting feature of these powerful women is that their abilities are always limited in some way. In *The Ghost Drum*, Chingis cannot write the spells of the drum. Brownen in *The Earth Witch* cannot prevent herself from growing old. And in *Snow-Eyes* the servitors cannot call the rains unless they act together. In these fantasies and others published recently, we find an impressive array of abilities, making the witch/wise woman one of the most interesting characters in genre.

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### Related Reading

- Babbitt, Lucy Cullyford. *The Owl Amulet*. New York: Harper, 1985.
- Paragrind, the female warrior, banished from the mixed colony, finds her strength with the group of cave-dwelling women, who nurture her gifts. The entire task of the book is the effort to reunite the male and female elements.
- Furlong, Monica. *Wise Child*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.
- The contrasting draw of two different kinds of magic: Juniper's healing and sorcery gifts, compared with the black magic of Wise Child's own mother, Maeve. Old Juniper feels Wise Child has the ability to become a doran, one of the group of women, speaking their own secret language, who feeling part of "the pattern," live in "the rhythm."
- Halam, Ann. *The Daymaker*. New York: Orchard Books, 1987.
- This deals with the difference between men's magic, i.e., "trickery," and women's magic which young Zanne will learn while being trained by the Tecovs, a group of women who prepare new covenants. Zanne's powers are both physical (i.e., she can become invisible) and mental (i.e., she can look into someone's mind).
- Katz, Welwyn Wilton. *The Third Magic*. New York: McElderry Books, 1988.
- Conflict between the Sisters of the Circle and the Linesmen, this is a complex book in which shifting time makes for difficult though rewarding reading. Morgan, at varying times called the Morrigan or Rigan, must work with the boy Arddu, using her Mind-Melding abilities.