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Abstract

The Old Kingdom's River of Death is a hell impinging on life: The Dead take hideous Boschian forms, and helped by necromancers wielding "Free Magic" they often emerge from Death. Necromancers, Free Magic, and the Dead are battled by Abhorsens wielding "Charter magic," Free Magic that has been transformed by symbols. Immersion in the Charter gives a joyous experience of connection to all life. Symbolization must unite with Free Magic to create this experience; symbolization alone is inadequate, as we see in the example of mundanely rational people who dwell in a neighboring land. But the source of joyous access to the Charter is also the source of access to Death, demonstrating *jouissance* that can provide great pleasure or great horror.

Integrating symbolic with nonverbal experience is fundamental to humanness, becoming crucial when language develops around year three. The theme of dead mothers indicates how this development can leave gaps that horror creeps through. Some mothers of Abhorsens and necromancers are literally dead; other mothers are emotionally dead. Desire for joyous connection turns hellish under the sway of the dead mother.

Additional Keywords

Language; Symbolism; Jouissance; Garth Nix; Abhorsen series; dead mothers in literature

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HELL ON EARTH IN GARTH NIX'S OLD KINGDOM: DARK JOUISSANCE AND THE DEAD MOTHER

JOHN ROSEGRANT

GARTH NIX'S OLD KINGDOM SERIES VIVIDLY DEPICTS a Hell on earth that is rooted in two inter-related psychological agonies: Hell emerges from a lack of attunement between language and primal nonverbal experience, and this lack of attunement occurs under the emotional sway of the dead mother—dead in actuality, or relationally dead. The Old Kingdom shows us that language attuned with primal nonverbal experience leads to depth and richness that language alone cannot reach.

The Old Kingdom series consists of six novels and two novellas. With limited exceptions, the action takes place either in the Old Kingdom itself or in the adjacent regions of its southern neighbor, Ancelstierre. The Old Kingdom is a fantasy realm where society and technology resemble that of medieval Europe but are augmented by and imbued with a complex magic system. Central to Old Kingdom magic is the desire of the Dead to return to life and kill people to extend their own lives. Necromancers wielding Free Magic summon and control the Dead for purposes of power and domination. A person called the Abhorsen provides the bulwark against these dangers, wielding Charter Magic to defeat necromancers and send the Dead back into Death. At any given time there is only one Abhorsen, assisted by an Abhorsen-in-Waiting. Aid is provided to the Abhorsens by a sisterhood of seers called the Clayr.

The novels and novellas are the interrelated *bildungsromans* of several characters. Each protagonist begins with the self-concept that they are an ordinary person, and gradually discovers great powers that they embrace, resist, or both: either that they are themselves Abhorsens or that their abilities enable them to provide crucial aid to the Abhorsens.

Magic is almost completely lacking in Ancelstierre, whose society and technology resemble that of late nineteenth or early twentieth century England. The exception is the area bordering the Old Kingdom, where weak magic evades the wall, or is blown over by the wind; magic is clearly defined as natural to the Old Kingdom and not Ancelstierre. The interactions between Ancelstierre and the Old Kingdom thus provide a geographical metaphor for the psychological development of the protagonists from mundane to magical. (Ivan has previously

highlighted the contrast and interaction between these locales of mundanity and magic.)

The Hell of the Old Kingdom is the River of Death. Although Nix does not explicitly identify this river as a hell, and does not depict it as sharing all the features of hell in any specific traditions such as Christianity, it can be recognized as a hell because of several familiar signifiers: Most simply, it is a locale entered after death—although since everyone goes there, not only the damned, it resembles Classical Hades or the Old Testament Sheol more than the Christian Hell, and it resembles Purgatory in that it is a temporary dwelling from which spirits eventually depart with a feeling of relief or bliss. Like Dante's *Inferno* with nine sectors, the River of Death has nine districts and nine gates. The longer the Dead linger in the River, the more distorted they become, eventually resembling Boschian monsters: "Some were squat, as if compressed to fit some awful container; some were stretched long. They had too many teeth, and shifted jaws, and talons or teeth in place of fingernails" (*Goldenhand* 5). (Probably because the novels are aimed at the Young Adult market, the dead do not manifest the sexual perversity of the *Inferno* or Boschian imagination.) A final signifier of hellishness is seen in the title of the central heroic characters whose job it is to send escaping Dead back to the River and to defeat Free Magic creatures: the first two syllables of "Abhorsen" spell "abhor," to recoil from horror.

The River of Death is closely enough linked to the living world that dead spirits and living people can move back and forth under necromantic control. Existence becomes hell on earth when the Dead emerge, intent on devouring the living in order to extend their own life. It is also Hell on earth when people are threatened by Free Magic creatures, which fit with familiar fantasy images of demons as distorted or deformed humanoid monsters that may be associated with fire.¹ For example, one named Aziminil is described as

vaguely feminine in shape. But [...] the slender legs ended not in feet, but narrowed to become sharp, bony blades the color of yellowed teeth; its arms had two elbows a handsbreadth apart; and its spadelike hands had

¹ See for example Tolkien's iconic Balrog: "he gathered his demons about him [...] their hearts were of fire, but they were cloaked in darkness, and terror went before them; they had whips of flame" (*Silmarillion* 47): "it was [...] of man-shape maybe, yet greater [...]. It came to the edge of the fire [...]. The flames roared up to greet it, and wreathed about it; and a black smoke swirled in the air. Its streaming mane kindled, and blazed behind it. In its right hand was a blade like a stabbing tongue of fire" (*Lord of the Rings* II.5.329) See also the video game *World of Warcraft's* Burning Legion of demons that stalk the Hellfire Peninsula ("Burning Legion"), or the demons and devils of "*Dungeons and Dragons*," many of which have associations with fire (Perkins).

too many fingers each ending in a curved-back claw. Its hair was not hair, but a mass of brilliant tendrils of white light [...], and its face, if it had one, was an absence of light in the middle, a dark, oval void, without features of any kind.

Below its shining head, its skin was entirely the color of old, dried blood. (*Clariel* 136)

Necromancers, and some of the dead themselves, similarly resemble demons in that their eyes and mouths are often filled with red fire or white smoke. All these beings are metaphorically hellish too, as they transmit nightmarish feelings of terror and despair.

The struggle between the Abhorsens and the forces of hell is the central dynamic of the series. It is the different magical resources used by on the one hand the Abhorsens and their allies, and on the other hand the representatives of hell, that manifest the attunement, or lack of attunement, between language and primal nonverbal experience. Free Magic is essentially nonverbal. Free Magic creatures, as is apparent from their name, are powered by Free Magic, and necromancers wield Free Magic to control such creatures as well as the Dead and can also use Free Magic against living people. Free magic carries the potential of unbounded, individual narcissistic power. As *Clariel* (a central character who is potentially good but falls into the temptation of Free Magic power) established dominance over Aziminil, she

felt a sudden surge of power. It was Aziminil's power that she felt, power that she knew she could draw upon, shape and direct as she willed.

Power that would be far greater still if she [...] took Aziminil into her body, there to dwell and be ever ready to serve her mistress. (*Clariel* 322)

And Free Magic and the Dead are characterized by repellant oral and gastrointestinal sensations. Free Magic is frequently signified by an "acid, hot-metal stench," as when Nicholas Sayre (a regular human who has been placed under necromantic control) becomes aware of an army of the Dead working on a Free Magic entity: "They seemed to generate an acid, hot-metal smell that cut through even the fetid, rotting odor of the Night Crew. The smell made him sick" (*Abhorsen* 86). The nonverbal nature of Free Magic and the Dead is also apparent in that necromancers use sound to control the Dead, but the sound of gesturally controlled bells rather than language. The significance of the nonverbal sound is emphasized by the crucial and differentiated role of the bells, seven hand-held bells of different sizes and tones that have varying effects depending on the way they are swung. (Olver has previously highlighted the importance of sound in the Old Kingdom.)

In fact, what Free Magic is free from is linguistic symbolism, order, and sociality. The Abhorsens combat it with linguistic Charter Magic, which is also wielded by good lesser magicians known as Charter Mages. The Charter is manifested through symbols called charter marks, which mages combine in sequences to create magical effects.² Although not usually spoken (for only one spell, to create flying knives, are the words printed in the novels: “Anet! Calew! Ferhan!” —e.g. *Goldenhand* 203), the Charter is essentially linguistic in that it consists of letter-like symbols that are arranged serially to create meaning. To those who are part of the Charter, it is a language that makes sense out of Free Magic.

The Charter serves not only for combatting Free Magic and the Dead, but also for healing wounds to people and the land and for building and creating. As opposed to the rampant narcissism and individualism of Free Magic, the Charter is experienced as communal togetherness and merging. Charter Mages bear Charter Marks on their foreheads, and when they meet they simultaneously touch each other’s marks in order to establish that they are true, rather than necromantic deception. When the Charter Marks are true and powerful, connection with the Charter is a blissful experience. For example:

Sabriel [a central character and powerful Abhorsen] felt the familiar swirl of energy, and the feeling of falling into some endless galaxy of stars. But the stars here were Charter symbols, linked in some great dance that had no beginning or end, but contained and described the world in its movement. Sabriel knew only a small fraction of the symbols, but she knew what they danced, and she felt the purity of the Charter wash over her. (*Sabriel* 27-28)

Sometimes the experience is described more sensorially, but rather than the repellent oral sensations of Free Magic, these are joyous whole-body immersions. For example, when Ferin (a highly skilled survival expert from a pastoral society, but not a Charter Mage) first experiences the Charter: “‘It is like swimming in the high lake,’ she said, grinning, her teeth white in the darkness. ‘The shock at first, the sudden cold, then it comes all around and you know what it is to be alive and you go under and it is so smooth and clear and it seems to be forever and it is not cold, but warm . . .’” (*Goldenhand* 294).

The Charter was created in ancient days out of Free Magic to shape and control Free Magic. “In the Beginning, all magic was Free Magic—unconstrained, raw, unchanneled. Then the Charter was created, which took most of the Free Magic and made it ordered, subject to structure, constrained by symbols” (*Lirael* 386). To those who do not accept it, “‘The Charter is a prison,’

² Single charter marks can be utilized but only to create simple effects.

said [Aziminil]. [...] 'A maze to pen you in, to make you go certain ways. You do not need marks and spells, Clariel. There is a power within you. Direct it, by your will alone'" (*Clariel* 135). The function of Charter Magic to control Free Magic is depicted especially directly in the enigmatic character Mogget, who plays a crucial role throughout the series. Mogget, who sometimes takes the form of a small humanoid dwarf and sometimes of a cat, is a resentful servant of the Abhorsens who repeatedly solicits naïve characters to remove his collar. As Sabriel first encounters him,

[S]he saw the collar around its neck and the tiny bell that hung there. The collar was only red leather, but the Charter-spell on it was the strongest, most enduring, binding that Sabriel had ever seen or felt—and the bell was a miniature Saraneth. [Saraneth is the Binder that subjects being to its wielder's will.] The cat was no cat, but a Free Magic creature of ancient power. (*Sabriel* 53–54.)

Whatever Mogget was that collar was the only thing that kept it as a servant of Abhorsen . . . or anybody else. The Charter marks on the collar were quite explicit about that. As far as Sabriel could tell, the binding spell was over a thousand years old. It was quite possible that Mogget was a Free Magic spirit as old as the Wall, or even older. (78)

The few times that Mogget is briefly released from his collar he becomes an enormously powerful, chaotic, and malignant Free Magic creature—until his final release, a critical moment that I save to discuss at the end.

Charter Magic is intimately related with Free Magic: the Charter was created from Free Magic, as noted above, and the most exceptional and powerful benign magic is derived from integrating Charter Magic with Free Magic. Charter Stones are centers of Charter power that augment the strength and comfort of Charter Mages, but part of their power comes from the Free Magic they contain. Abhorsens wield bells that are much like necromantic bells, but their Free Magic is combined with Charter Magic, so they serve to bind the dead rather than release them. "Abhorsens [...] are a sort of uncommon necromancer (*Terciel*, 261); in the bells, Free Magic and the Charter are in equilibrium (*Terciel* 157).

The mighty generative potential of integrating Free and Charter Magic is seen perhaps most clearly in the character of the Disreputable Dog. As a lonely child, Lirael (a central character who will grow into an Abhorsen with special powers) attempts to create a "sending" (a kind of magical simulacrum with a limited range of activity) of a dog to be her companion. Sendings are creations of Charter magic, and Lirael begins the spell by summoning Charter marks. But soon the Charter marks flow out of her control, and

Strange, unknown marks were pouring out of her into the sending. Powerful marks that rocked her body as they left [...]. Desperately, Lirael tried to open her eyes [...]. Still the marks came, and then Lirael's nostrils caught the terrible, unmistakable reek of Free Magic [...]. More and more marks flew through Lirael, through her tears and her silent screaming. [...] [T]he tremendous flow of marks suddenly stopped. [...] Where the Free Magic and Charter marks had fought in their sparking, swirling brilliance, there was now a globe of utter darkness [...]. [I]t was no longer dark but as star-filled as a clear night sky. [...] [T]he globe disappeared, leaving behind a dog. Not a cute cuddly Charter sending of a puppy, but a [...] mongrel that seemed to be entirely real [...]. The only hint of its magical origin was a thick collar around its neck that swam with even more Charter marks that Lirael had never seen before. (*Lirael* 98–100)

The Disreputable Dog, thus created by melding Free and Charter Magic, becomes a loving companion and guide for Lirael as well as a powerful magic-wielder.

South of the Old Kingdom is the realm of Ancelstierre, a mundane rational world loosely modeled on late nineteenth or early twentieth century England. No magic, Free or Charter, is native to Ancelstierre, although as stated above magic from the Old Kingdom spreads into the border region, and talented persons there are able to learn a little about how to use and control it. But despite otherwise lacking magic, Ancelstierre is intimately connected to the Old Kingdom by the Wall that divides them. The Wall is itself a mighty creation of Charter Magic, designed to prevent the intrusion of magic into the mundane world. But because the wall is not completely impermeable, the area of Ancelstierre immediately to its south is a military zone where regular weapons as well as charter magic are employed to combat invasions of the Dead or Free Magic creatures, and where the aid of the Abhorsen is welcome. Farther south, people disbelieve in magic in the same way as science-oriented people in our own world and consider reports from near the wall to reflect hallucination or hysteria. Thus, citizens of Ancelstierre ordinarily experience neither the horrors of hell nor the bliss of the Charter. But necromancers, the Dead, and Free Magic invade Ancelstierre several times, and can only be defeated by the Abhorsen and Charter magic allies from the Old Kingdom, so we see that hell can be inflicted upon Ancelstierans, but although they can be protected by the Charter, they cannot experience it themselves.

All these interconnections between the mundane and different types of magic can be understood as representing the states of mind and feeling experienced during the attunement, or lack of attunement, between language and primal nonverbal experience. Free Magic, with its unstructured power and association with the oral body, is a manifestation of primal nonverbal experience

unlinked from language. Mundane Ancelstierre life, too far south for magic, is a manifestation of language unlinked from primal nonverbal experience. Charter Magic manifests the integration of the primal nonverbal with language and creates the possibility of deep joy and creativity that is otherwise unavailable. But the infliction of Free Magic or the Dead upon the mundane, unmediated by the Charter, creates the horrors of Hell.

Psychoanalysts have long recognized that the degree to which one integrates or does not integrate language with primal nonverbal experience has profound effects on one's feelings, sense of self, and relationship to others. The mutual effects of these two registers of mind are central to Lacanian and post-Lacanian understanding of subjectivity. When a child acquires language, they enter the Symbolic³ order with its access to culture and communication with other people, but this step creates a permanent incision in experience and an unfillable lack, the sense that something has been irrevocably lost (Evans 159, 201–2). That something Lacan names the Real, and it comprises the primal nonverbal relationship with the mother and with the body. By definition, the Real cannot be captured in language—one can talk about it, but then one is operating in the Symbolic order rather than unboundedly experiencing the Real (Evans 159–160).

But the Real does at times impinge upon the Symbolic order, and when this happens it creates the experience of *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is akin to pleasure but is excessively intense, beyond what may be sought as the satisfaction of desire, and therefore it is desymbolizing and potentially overwhelming (Evans 91–2). Examples of overpowering *jouissance* include psychosis, mystical experience, and ecstatic sexuality (Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 76–77; Kristeva, *Powers* 9, 63). Kristeva elaborates on the abject *jouissance* experienced when the Real in forms such as corpses, putrefaction, and disgusting excretions and secretions erupts into the Symbolic order.

Up to a point (that I will get to a little later), these ideas map very well onto the Old Kingdom and clarify its psychological meaning. Free Magic creatures and the Dead are manifestations of the Real. When they attack in the Old Kingdom or invade south of the Wall, their stench and horror are manifestations of abject *jouissance*—as just noted, Kristeva recognized corpses as prototypical of this experience. Most Ancelstierre citizens operate in the Symbolic order without awareness of the existence of the Real. Ordinary citizens

³ Lacan's Symbolic Order refers only to language. It should not be construed as referring to all symbolism. For example, the notes played by Abhorsens and necromancers on bells and flutes are symbols, as are visual images. The distinction that Lacan is drawing and that is the focus of my paper is between verbal and nonverbal symbolism.

of the Old Kingdom operate in the Symbolic order, but with awareness of the Real and the risks and potential gains that it carries.

The Old Kingdom also captures the link between *jouissance* and psychosis. In part this is metaphorical; as noted above, most of Ancelstierre considers reports of the Dead to result from hallucination or delusion. But the experience of one of the central characters depicts quite directly psychotic *jouissance* resulting when the Real erupts into the Symbolic order. When first met, Nicholas Sayre of Ancelstierre is a naïve, likeable high school student who totally disbelieves in magic despite his friendship with Prince Sameth of the Old Kingdom. He tolerantly considers all of Sameth's ideas about magic to be superstition that is certain to have some scientific explanation. Then, to make him a pawn in a complex evil plot, Nicholas is penetrated by a shard of a mighty Free Magic creature named Orannis. Nicholas subsequently believes he is overseeing an exciting excavation project to uncover hemispheres of special metal that will provide an unlimited source of power (actually Orannis seeking to be reborn to destroy the world), and that the putrid "Night Crew" laborers are people with some strange disease, when they are actually corpses controlled by a necromancer. He pays little attention to the way his clothes fall apart, the way he sickens and grows thinner, and his fainting spells when the being that possesses him speaks. Temporarily rescued by Lirael, and under her benign influence, he says "I'm in trouble, aren't I? [...] It's been like a dream [...] Most of the time I don't really know whether I'm awake or not. I can't remember things from one minute to the next. I can't think of anything except the hemi[spheres]" (*Abhorsen* 150). His later successful rescue and rehabilitation commence with an encounter with Lirael in the form of an owl, and her comrade the Disreputable Dog with wings, an encounter that he assumes is a hallucination. Thus, in this eruption of the Real into the Symbolic, Nicholas believes that reality is a hallucination while accepting delusions about the Night Crew and the hemispheres as real.

In certain of its aspects, the Charter itself fits in the Symbolic order. As noted above, it is essentially linguistic since it is composed of signs that must be arranged serially to have effect. In fact, the Charter is sometimes described in ways that closely accord with Lacan's descriptions of the Symbolic order. Lacan states that the Symbolic order is expressed in chains of signifiers that slip and rearrange themselves outside of conscious intent and meaning; the signifiers make mind, rather than mind choosing signifiers (Evans 187–8; see for instance Lacan, "Purloined"). This sounds much like the endless flow of charter symbols that Abhorsens and charter mages experience when they access the charter, and the way that messages from the charter rewrite themselves unpredictably. For example, swords that are charter-imbued to give them power against Free Magic and the Dead may have messages written on them that change from time to time

and are hard to read. Two Charter tomes, *The Book of the Dead* that teaches Abhorsens about the River of Death, and *The Book of Remembrance and Forgetting* that teaches Lirael how to see into the past, are different each time that they are read; even after being read from beginning to end they will contain different information upon subsequent reading.

But here we reach the point I alluded to above where Lacanian ideas no longer fit with the Old Kingdom. For Lacan, it was axiomatic not only that psychological wholeness and integration (such as experience of the Charter) are impossible, but that efforts to achieve these are illusory defensive maneuvers designed to escape awareness of our essential fragmentation and lack, what he named the Imaginary order (Lacan, *Mirror*). But taken on its own terms, the Old Kingdom includes a paean to the possibility of wholeness and integration. When *The Book of the Dead* and *The Book of Remembrance and Forgetting* present different information to the reader, it is not done randomly but because the books sense what the reader needs to understand and is capable of understanding. The Charter itself is powered by Free Magic and was created to shape and control Free Magic, and thus represents an ongoing integration of the Symbolic and the Real rather than a perilous eruption of the Real into the Symbolic. And this integration of the Symbolic and the Real facilitates a joyous and tolerable *jouissance*; above, I quoted Sabriel's and Ferin's experience of this. When Elinor (another central character, Sabriel's mother) first experiences the Charter, it has the excess quality of *jouissance* but at the same time provides contentment and communion:

All her senses were overwhelmed. The world disappeared, all sight and sound cut off. She saw only Charter marks, millions and millions of brilliant glowing marks all around her, stretching into infinity, and she heard sounds that did not exist, and she felt an astonishing mixture of excitement, fear, and a sense of contentment all at once, and she knew, she knew to the very marrow of her bones, that she was part of this vast, limitless Charter, and so was everything and everyone else [...]. (*Terciel* 64)

When the experience of the Charter is compared to the mundanity of Ancelestierre, which has language but no magic, and to the misery and insanity that result when Ancelestierre encounters Free Magic but has no capacity to cope with it, we can recognize that the psychological meaning of immersion in the Charter is that the greatest joy and wholeness result when the Real is neither absent from language nor rejected by language, but instead is met, explored, and integrated with language.

Other psychoanalysts have explored the importance of integrating language with primal nonverbal experience. Kristeva (*Revolution*) understood

such integration as fundamental to creativity and vital thought and communication. For Freud, integration of the verbal with the nonverbal was crucial to the effect of psychotherapy. The forgotten nonverbal relationship with the mother and the body that Lacan called the Real was for Freud part of the unconscious. A fundamental difference between the unconscious and the conscious, according to Freud, is the relationship of these systems to language: unconscious ideas contain only “thing-presentations” without language; conscious ideas are thing-presentations combined with “word-presentations” (Freud, “Unconscious”). The pain of conflictual and traumatic unconscious ideas can only be ameliorated by linking them to language and thus making them conscious. But it is not enough simply to have a verbal understanding of unconscious ideas—that would be like Ancelstierre—the linking of words to the unconscious thing-presentation must include experiencing the feeling connected to the unconscious idea in order to create meaningful integration.

A friend reported to Freud that he regularly experienced something that we can recognize as akin to immersion in the Charter, a sense of always being connected to, and a part of, the universe as a whole (Freud, “Civilization”). Freud conceived of this as the “oceanic feeling” at the center of mystical experience and understood it to be a residue of the primal connection to the mother accepted and maintained by the adult verbal mind. Loewald (“Ego”) elaborated on this idea and suggested that the fullest human experience is possible for people who can function at both a differentiated rational level and at a boundaryless level linked to the primal mother, and who can comfortably move between these types of experience. But he also pointed out that being able to do so means being in a state of equilibrium that is difficult to maintain. Tipping too far toward rational differentiation risks isolation and lovelessness; tipping too far toward boundarylessness risks a terrifying loss of self and being swallowed up—think of the gaping jaws of the Dead.

And this leads us to a fundamental question about the psychology of the Old Kingdom: Why is Hell on Earth rampant there? In the absence of Charter Magic, necromancers, demons, and the Dead roam freely, and even the Charter Magic that can tame and drive away the denizens of Hell is built out of the dangerous unbounded Free Magic that fuels Hell. We have seen from Lacan, Freud, and others that connection to the primal mother produces intense emotion that can be malignant or benign—dark or bright *jouissance*. What does the Old Kingdom show us about the conditions that produce dark *jouissance*?

The answer is not explicit in the text; the hellish nature of the Old Kingdom is unquestioned background upon which the stories unfold. But the prominent theme of the Dead Mother provides an implicit psychological explanation both of the terrifying emotional quality of the Old Kingdom’s hell on earth, and of the Old Kingdom’s interplay between the Symbolic (Charter

Magic) and the Real (Free Magic). As discussed above, a toddler's entry into the Symbolic Order of language creates an incision from the pre-existing relationship with the primal preverbal mother. If the relationship with the mother has been traumatic, the painful impact of this incision will be intensified. Nix does not describe sequential psychological development like a case history, but he creates a recurring theme of dead mothers in the life histories both of the archenemies in the series (the primary movers of Hell), and the Abhorsens who confront them but are themselves a special kind of necromancer,

In addition to actually physically dying, some of their mothers were emotionally dead and/or hostile to their children before their physical death. The actual physical death of one's mother of course is often traumatic, but mothers who are physically present but emotionally dead or hostile due to their own severe depression or other inability to relate to their children can be even more emotionally damaging. The death when her child is young of a loving mother will cause tremendous grief, but this may be built upon a sense of basic goodness and connection from the earlier relationship. But the child of a mother who is unable to love or relate to them may develop feelings of emotional deadness, depression, and worthlessness; Green has even designated this the "dead mother syndrome." Grossmark provides vivid clinical examples.

Elinor from *Terciel and Elinor* is not an Abhorsen but is descended from the Clayr, magical cousins of the Abhorsens, and thus is able to help her partner the Abhorsen-in-Waiting Terciel in his battle against the Dead. Elinor's mother is an intense exemplar of the Dead Mother. When the book begins Elinor is nineteen years old, and her mother is on her literal death bed but has always been an emotionally dead mother.

Her mother had never liked Elinor touching her, had always shrugged off any attempt at a hug or a kiss. Mrs. Watkins said this was because Amelia had been forcibly taken from her own mother at birth, and raised by two of her dead father's strict and judgmental aunts in Corvere, so she'd never learned how to love *anyone*, or be a parent herself. This explanation, while it made perfect sense, didn't make it any easier for Elinor. (*Terciel* 19)

Her mother soon dies in actuality and is possessed by a Dead spirit, becoming a hideous creature and metaphor for the Dead Mother:

It was a human form of the right height, in her mother's heliotrope nightgown, with her mother's dyed-auburn hair, but the hair hung lank on a face where the flesh had caved in upon the skull, and where her mother's eyes should be there were sockets of flame, and black smoke coiled up where there should be eyebrows. (*Terciel* 46)

Elinor is the mother of Sabriel, the eponymous Abhorsen of *Sabriel* and the rest of the Old Kingdom series. But Elinor dies in childbirth with her, and the grief and terror of this loss is emphasized by the fact that Sabriel is stillborn, only becoming a living person because her Abhorsen father, Terciel, retrieves her from Death, and furthermore from the arms of the Greater Dead spirit Kerrigor: Terciel enters the River of Death, where

He could hear the child crying, which was good. If she had gone beyond the first gateway he could not bring her back without more stringent preparations [...]. He paused to listen, and hearing the crying diminish, hastened forward. [...] The baby had not yet passed through, but only because something had caught her and picked her up. Standing there, looming up out of the black waters, was a shadow darker than the gate. [...] [T]here were pale marsh-lights burning where you would expect to see eyes, and the fetid stench of carrion rolled off it. (*Sabriel* 3-4)

Sabriel's life-spirit burns Kerrigor so that he drops her, and Terciel carries her back out of the River of Death.

In dire need, after nineteen-year-old Sabriel's father has disappeared, she enters Death to summon help, and it emerges from deeper in death:

Sabriel saw her guide, first as a tall, pale light drifting over the swirling water towards her, and then [...] as a blurred, glowing, human shape, its arms outstretched in welcome.

'Sabriel.'

The words were fuzzy and seemed to come from much farther away than where the shining figure stood, but Sabriel smiled as she felt the warmth in the greeting. Abhorsen had never explained who or what this luminous person was, but Sabriel thought she knew. She'd summoned this advisor only once before—when she'd first menstruated.

[...]. 'Hello, Mother,' said Sabriel. (*Sabriel* 57-58)

Her mother's spirit then provides crucial knowledge for Sabriel's safety. Sabriel's dead mother is loving, able to provide help with the intimate female experience of menstruation and with the current danger situation, but because she is dead she is fuzzy, distant, and rarely available.

Lirael, the eponymous Abhorsen-in-waiting of *Lirael* and the rest of the Old Kingdom series, has a mother who to her mind is both emotionally and physically dead:

Deep within a dream, [fourteen-year-old] Lirael felt someone stroking her forehead. A gentle, soft touch, a cool hand upon her own fevered skin. [...] Then the dream shifted [...]. The touch was no longer soft and loving,

but rough and rasping. No longer cool, but hot, burning her [...]. Lirael [...] wanted to regain the feel of that hand on her brow. That touch was the only thing she remembered of her mother. [...] Lirael's mother was long gone [...]. She had left when Lirael was five, without a word, without an explanation. [...] Just the news of her death, a garbled message from the distant North that had arrived three days before Lirael's tenth birthday. (*Lirael* 11-12)

The pain of this abandonment is captured in the feeling of the soft touch turning harsh and is one factor leading Lirael to suicidal thoughts.

Lirael learns as a young adult that it was visions her mother (a Clayr) had about what her daughter would face in the future that led to her abandonment, but even when she learns how important she always was in her mother's thought she experiences disappointment in the lack of tangible love. Ferin, a fugitive from the tribal North where Lirael's mother had gone to live, brings the message that Lirael must use her unique powers to enter the past, at the time of her tenth birthday, and listen to her mother from that time. Lirael responds to Ferin "'That's all? My mother who abandoned me thinks I have 'more to do' and wants me to go and listen to her in the past, using the Dark Mirror?" asked Lirael, unable to hide the anger and hurt on her face. Arielle hadn't even bothered to say anything personal, or send her love" (*Goldenhand* 259). A "dark mirror" indeed, responding to Lirael's longing gaze only with a dark task.

It is at best bittersweet when Lirael follows the instructions and encounters her mother in the past. After delivering critical information about how to oppose the world-destructive threat of the Greater Dead necromancer Chlorr, her mother closes with "Go now, with my love. I always loved you. Always. You probably don't believe it. Perhaps you shouldn't. Love should always be shown, not merely said. I was too slow to learn this" (*Goldenhand* 273).

So we see that Elinor, Sabriel, and Lirael all grew up under the sway of the Dead Mother. Perhaps that odd term "Abhorsen" could have alerted us to this. Wikipedia reports that Garth Nix based this word on a name that differs in only one letter, "Abhorson" from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, and Nix has confirmed this attribution ("Interview"). Abhorson in the play is an executioner who takes pride in his job, and his name can be simply parsed into the two English words "abhor son." The quality of a deadly and emotionally dead parent is built into the name.

What of the archenemies in the series, the commanders of Hell? Kerrigor, mentioned above seizing infant Sabriel in *Death*, is the major adversary in both *Terciel and Elinor* and *Sabriel*. He is a Greater Dead spirit of immense power who summons necromancers and legions of the Dead to destroy the living world and augment his power. In *Sabriel* we learn that he was

originally the human Prince Rogir of the Old Kingdom who fell into evil and as a necromancer determined to destroy the Great Charter Stones beneath the Palace, thus greatly weakening the Charter to help Free Magic and the Dead prevail. A charter stone can only be destroyed with the blood of a murdered Charter Mage. To this end Rogir's minions slay his two sisters, and Rogir himself murders his mother, "stepping up behind the Queen, a saw-edged dagger striking so swiftly across her throat" (*Sabriel* 192). His mother's death at his hands is too late in his life to have affected him developmentally, but nevertheless is associatively linked to the dead mother syndrome. And although the book does not tell us what led him to this evil, leaving *Sabriel* wondering "What had put Rogir's feet on the long road that led to the abomination known as Kerrigor?" (*Sabriel* 258), we can speculate that something must have gone very wrong emotionally between them for Rogir to murder his mother. Perhaps we see a hint of contributory coldness in the Queen's reaction when her son, in order to lure her to the scene where he will kill her, reports that something is wrong with the Charter Stones: "[S]omething the Queen must look into. He was her son, but she did not take great account of his wisdom, or believe him when he spoke of trouble with the Stones. She was a Charter Mage and felt nothing wrong. Besides, she was winning at Cranaque, so she told him to wait till morning" (*Sabriel* 191).

The center of evil in *Lirael* and *Abhorsen* is Orannis the Destroyer, mightiest of the Nine Bright Shiners, Free Magic beings present at the creation of the Old Kingdom. Orannis exists to annihilate entire worlds, and seven of the other nine united in ancient times to bind Orannis and place him beneath the earth. *Lirael* and *Abhorsen* recount his revivification and second defeat and binding.

As an eternal spirit, Orannis does not have a psychological development story. Nevertheless, the character has subtle resonances with the dead mother syndrome for readers who are acquainted with the mythology around Uranus (Hesiod). (Whether Nix is acquainted with this mythology is unknown to me, but does not alter the potential resonances for readers.) The name "Orannis" is reminiscent of the Greek primordial deity Uranus, alternatively spelled Ouranos. Uranus was the personification of the sky, and we see Orannis's connection to the sky in that his defeat requires him to be deeply buried underground, and his renewal requires him resurfacing and being struck repeatedly by lightning. Uranus, like Orannis, is eventually defeated by other deities. The connection with the dead mother syndrome lies in Uranus's incestuous relationship with his mother, Gaia. As the first male, Uranus was brought forth with no father of his own, and with his mother incestuously fathered the Titans. Gaia does not die, and outlives Uranus in importance, but their incest symbolically kills the primal mother in Gaia;

mother-son incest destroys the emotional relationship with the primal mother. The primal mother is (optimally) the mother of nurturance, protection, and merger, and incest with her is an emotionally violent forcing of the relationship away from these qualities; one psychological function of the incest taboo is to protect the relationship with the primal mother. "Incestuous object relations are evil, according to received morality, in that they interfere with or destroy that sacred family bond [...] the original oneness, most obvious in the mother-infant dual unity, which shines through or is sensed as remaining the innermost core in later family relations" (Loewald, "Waning" 765).

I have saved for last the character Clariel/Chlorr. We first meet her in *Lirael* as Chlorr, an extremely powerful Greater Dead necromancer who serves Orannis. She is finally defeated in *Goldenhand*, chronologically the last novel in the series. In the prequel *Clariel* we learn of her human past. *Clariel* is subtitled "The Lost Abhorsen," because she was of Abhorsen blood. As someone who is both Abhorsen and Greater Dead, she is central to showing the dead mother syndrome that is built into all of them.

Clariel suffers under the emotionally dead mother syndrome. Metaphorically this is apparent in her bitter separation from Mother Nature: the book begins as her family moves from their rural home to the capital city, and throughout the book Clariel longs for and strives to return to the woodlands. But more directly, her actual mother is at best oblivious to her, interested only in her own craft, and at worst actively hostile. For example, when Clariel asked to stay behind in their rural home, "Typically, Clariel's mother, Jaciel, had simply ignored her daughter's request, refusing to even discuss the matter. Jaciel's mind was rarely focused on her family. A goldsmith of rare talent, all her attention was typically on whatever beautiful object she was currently making" (*Clariel* 7). At another moment, when Clariel sees her mother outside the workshop, "The lack of an apron was a bad sign, thought Clariel, because if Jaciel was not working, then she might take an interest in her daughter" (20). Again thinking of trying to persuade her mother to let her go back to the forest, "she determined that she would talk to her mother that night, even going into the workshop if that proved necessary, though this would be akin to entering the lair of a monster" (72). Later, in the midst of political intrigue, Clariel's mother and father are both murdered, but Jaciel saves Clariel's life, ironically connecting with and valuing her daughter emotionally at the moment that she becomes actually dead.

The names "Clariel/Chlorr" are phonetically similar to each other as well as to "Clayr," the name of the sisterhood of seers: The first syllable of Clariel sounds very much like Chlorr and is identical in pronunciation with Clayr, a syllable that itself is a homonym of the name Clair that means "clear" or "light." Although this linkage is not made explicit in the text, the relationship between

these terms implicitly illustrates the dead mother syndrome.⁴ The Clayr are a distillation of a kind of ideal femininity. Often among them the greatest power is combined with great beauty: “the twins Sanar and Ryelle—the flawless embodiment of the perfect Clayr. Their Sight was so strong they were nearly always in the Nine Day Watch [those actively searching the future]. [...] They were both tall and extremely beautiful, their long blond hair shining even more brightly than their silver circlets in the sun” (*Lirael* 39). The Clayr are unashamed about sexuality, and when they wish will take lovers whether for pleasure or to become pregnant; their children are almost always girls. Thus, the linguistic sequence Clayr—Clariel—Chlorr manifests the transition from vibrant powerful femininity to the dead mother and the emotional death that results.

The presence of a loving father can ameliorate the negative impact of the dead mother, and we see this manifested by the contrast between Sabriel’s life and that of the other characters with dead mothers: Although for much of the book Sabriel’s father is absent and she seeks him until he finally dies heroically aiding her quest, their relationship has always been loving; in parallel with this, her mother although dead in childbirth is the least malignant of the characters’ mothers. The fathers of all the other main characters are themselves dead, absent, or weak, and are of much less emotional importance than the mothers. Both Terciel’s parents drowned when he was two years old and he has no memory of them; Tizanael, the Abhorsen whom he assists, becomes a kind of dour mother figure for him who dies herself in the climactic battle, leaving Terciel as the actual Abhorsen. Elinor’s father died when she was eight years old, and although she has fond memories of him he looms much less large in her emotional life than her mother. Lirael does not know who her father was until late in her story (in fact he was Terciel), but her feelings of abandonment and rage are much more strongly focused on her mother. Clariel’s father is a weakling under her mother’s thumb. Kerrigor’s father is not mentioned, and Orannis has no father. So we see that only Sabriel’s father was a strong loving presence and correspondingly Sabriel’s mother was the least malignant, and we see that for all these characters weak or absent fathers were unable to help them with their more intense relationships with their dead mothers.

I close with a plot twist that neatly emphasizes the theme of the dead mother by showing the opposite effect of good mothering. The final defeat of Orannis can only be accomplished with the help of Mogget uncollared, and Mogget thus choosing good rather than evil completes a redemption arc associated with symbols of good mothering rather than dead mothering. Mogget in fact is Yrael, the eighth Bright Shiner, who was collared and made a

⁴ Nix (“Interview”) has described the great care he takes in creating names, so it would not be surprising if he were aware of these relationships.

servant of the Abhorsens because he refused to help in the original binding of Orannis. The first step toward Mogget's redemption is his capture by a female spirit even more powerful than he, who tells him she is giving him another chance and then releases him. The second step is Mogget remembering and relating to Lirael a message from her mother including the words "'Tell her also that I love her, and will always love her, and that leaving her will be the death of my heart.' Lirael listened intently, but it was not Mogget's voice she heard. It was her mother's" (*Abhorsen* 181). Instead of the anger and disappointment she felt when Ferin previously delivered a message from her mother (pp. 20-21), this message gives Lirael strength for a journey into the River of Death. The third step is Sam feeding Mogget sardines; Mogget suspects that this is a mean trick but eats the fish and realizes the offer was kind. When Orannis asks Yrael/Mogget why he has turned against him, Yrael/Mogget replies, "Life [...]. Fish and fowl, warm sun and shady trees, the field mice in the wheat, under the cool light of the moon" (*Abhorsen* 352). Three moments associated with maternal care—a powerful woman granting mercy, a memory of a mother's love, and a kind gift of food—have led a malicious Free Magic creature to aid the Charter; dark *jouissance* associated with the dead mother has been transformed by maternal love into enjoyment of life.

In conclusion, the Old Kingdom series embodies fundamental aspects of psychological development that have been explored by Lacan, Freud, and others. The acquisition of language, the entry into the Symbolic order, makes an incision in human experience so that it becomes difficult to access primal nonverbal maternal and body experience. When with our symbolic minds we do contact primal nonverbal experience, it comes with the great emotional intensity of *jouissance*. If we try to pretend that such a realm of experience does not exist our lives are relatively impoverished, and we are vulnerable to feeling terrified and overwhelmed if we encounter it. Finding the right words to understand and integrate primal nonverbal experience enhances the possibility of a rich, full life. But this is especially difficult for people who have grown up with mothers who are emotionally absent or actually dead. Life becomes hell on earth under the sway of the Dead Mother.

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