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The Interplay of the Domestic and the Uncanny in Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*

Abstract. This article examines the effects resulting from the interplay of the domestic and the uncanny in Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, a novel that boldly blends the conventions of the novel of manners and Gothic fiction. Analysing the selected key elements of the story, it is argued that while the uncanny is domesticated for a considerable part of the narrative, in the Gothic layer of the novel the mechanism of the uncanny is used to bring to light repressed voices. In the process, the long-established sources of inspiration for fantasy literature are rejected, and the nineteenth-century tradition of women's writing, in both its realistic and Gothic threads, is used to reinvigorate the thematic and structural repertoire of the genre.

Key words: uncanny, domestic, Gothic fiction, fantasy literature, Susanna Clarke.

A reader of Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004) is confronted with an extensive three-volume novel that evades straightforward generic classifications and plays with a number of literary conventions. This novel not only reveals traces of such (sub)genres of fantasy as alternative history, historical fantasy, and fantasy of manners, but can also be read as an exquisite pastiche of nineteenth-century literary traditions, especially the novel of manners, characterised by its emphasis on the domestic sphere, and Gothic fiction, from which the supernatural elements of the novel are derived. Interestingly, these two dominant traditions are not juxtaposed against each other but carefully interwoven, which draws critical attention to the interplay of the domestic and the uncanny in the novel, and invites one to examine the effects and meanings resulting from such a unique approach to writing fantasy fiction.

First, it should be observed that Clarke's 'signature play' with the realistic and the supernatural, familiar and unfamiliar, evokes connotations with the concept of the uncanny as developed in "The Uncanny" (1919) by Sigmund Freud, who grounds his conceptualization of the term in the lexical ambiguity of the German words *heimlich* (familiar) and *unheimlich* (uncanny). Obviously,

as he observes, *unheimlich* is the negation of *heimlich* in the sense of ‘homely’ or ‘native’, which initially might lead us to conclude that “what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar” (Freud 1955: 220). A closer semantic analysis reveals, however, a different shade of *heimlich*, which also signifies something ‘hidden’, ‘furtive’ or, to use Freud’s nomenclature, “concealed and kept out of sight” (225). Freud (1995: 226) further argues that the meaning of the term “develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite”, which eventually makes *unheimlich* “a sub-species” of *heimlich*. In its most basic sense, therefore, the effect of the uncanny is related to the occurrence of the feeling of fright, discomfort or strangeness arising without warning when something known and familiar suddenly becomes strange and unfamiliar. As Freud (1995: 241) writes, “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression,” or in other words, “something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.” While the notion originally occupied only a minor position in the Freudian canon, it has been reworked by various theorists, including Derrida, Todorov and Cixous, to become a late-twentieth century theoretical concept (Masschelein 2011: 3-7, 15-16) that “transgresses the disciplinary boundaries of literary studies, psychoanalysis, and aesthetics and fundamentally partakes of all three domains” (Masschelein 2011: 125).

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell, quite atypically set in a specific historic period around the time of the Napoleonic wars, opens with reversing the mechanism of the uncanny by presenting the unfamiliar as familiar. The supposedly supernatural element of magic is initially established as a legitimate aspect of nineteenth-century England’s reality, delineated with truly Austenesque attention to social custom and proper manners. Magic is a purely theoretical discipline, equated with antiquarian research and scholarly knowledge – a domain of a group of “gentleman-magicians”, who formed a society and met to “read each other long, dull papers upon the history of English magic” (Clarke 2015: 3) and who “did not want to see magic done . . . only wished to read about it in books” (Clarke 2015: 21). From the appearance of two practicing magicians, Mr Norrell and Jonathan Strange, the reader is expecting a change, which indeed comes but does not go as deeply as anticipated. The former, in fact, does perform magic, which he treats as a necessary nuisance, but is still depicted as a reclusive, socially awkward scholar obsessed with acquiring knowledge, regulating its accessibility, and striving to make it “a respectable profession – no less than Law and a great deal more so than medicine” (Clarke 2015: 44); the latter is a man with a natural flair for magic and much better social skills, who favours improvised experimentation and postulates magic should be made available to everyone, including women and the lower classes. As a result of blurring the distinction between magic and knowledge, Mr Norrell and Jonathan Strange epitomise different attitudes to scholarship, i.e. meticulous research versus intuitive creativity (Schaenoes 2012: 244), different worldviews inherent to the Enlightenment and Romanticism (Thomson 2011: 322), or even different authorial approaches to writing fiction.

Despite these differences, leading to a temporary separation of the two magicians, staged here as an exemplary pamphlet war, they are united by Norrell’s “lively ambition to bring back magic to

England” (Clarke 2015: 41). Seeking public recognition, social position, and renown, both of them delve into something they vaguely comprehend, and fail to foresee the disastrous consequences of their actions. Furthermore, both belong to the privileged class of white, middle-class, wealthy men, focused on their gentlemanly occupation, which happens to be magic. Thus, in Clarke’s narrative the magic in the hands of Mr Norrell and Jonathan Strange does not seriously challenge the existing social order but becomes incorporated in its power structures. Both magicians, even if somewhat eccentric, find themselves comfortable within the system, while their magic is not meant to change the *status quo* but to produce practical solutions and conform to the rules by which the society operates, which is well exemplified by Strange’s service for the army in the Napoleonic wars, and once again shows Clarke’s strategy to render the uncanny as familiar and domesticated.

Jonathan Strange is not expected to blast fire or wipe out the enemy with powerful spells – the actual killing is left to ordinary, lower class, and preferably foreign *guerilla* soldiers. His involvement befits his social standing, whereas being a magician is just a subcategory of being a well-respected gentleman:

“Can a magician kill a man by magic?” Lord Wellington asked Strange. Strange frowned. He seemed to dislike the question. “I suppose a magician might,” he admitted, “but a gentleman never could.” (Clarke 2015: 223)

Overall, Strange’s exploits as a military magician contribute to Wellington’s success, and include the practical tasks of creating new roads for soldiers, changing the landscape, and moving the position of forests, rivers, and towns to confuse the enemy. Yet, his most spectacular achievement, with the biggest potential for uncanny effect, is raising seventeen dead Neapolitan soldiers to interrogate them. Necromancy, clearly an act of forbidden black magic, expected to curdle the blood of the readers, fails to achieve this effect due to unforeseen problems with communication – the zombies turn out to speak “one of the dialects of Hell” learnt, as Lord Wellington approvingly observes, very quickly for “[t]hey have only been dead for three days” (Clarke 2015: 357). The problem is soon fixed and the enlivened corpses begin to speak their “native, *earthly* language – a thick Neapolitan dialect of Italian, which to most people was quite as impenetrable and almost as horrible as the language they had been speaking before” (Clarke 2015: 357). They prove useful in providing the desired information. In fact “[b]eing dead, the Neapolitans were infinitely more anxious to please their questioners than any living informer could have been” (Clarke 2015: 357); yet Strange, ignorant of how to send them back, is haunted by the living dead until Wellington, who “greatly regretted such cruelty to men who had already suffered a great deal” (Clarke 2015: 358), gives the order to throw them on a bonfire.

The passages recounting these adventures show Strange’s magic in terms of Mendlesohn’s intrusion into reality¹ – resurrecting the dead is far from ordinary after all – which is, however, quickly

1 Concerned not so much with the definition of fantasy literature as with its construction and language, Farah Mendlesohn, in her influential *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), distinguishes between four main categories, or modes, determined by the way in which the fantastic element enters the world of the narrative, i.e. the portal-quest fantasy, immersive fantasy, intrusion fantasy, and liminal fantasy. Each of them establishes its own set of practices, narrative

accommodated as familiar. The zombies, a vivid example of the uncanny as creatures that are both well-known and alien, simultaneously alive and dead, and thus creating a cognitive dissonance, usually serve to reveal one of the most universally repressed fears – the fear of our mortality. Yet, in the discussed passages, dread is virtually absent as it is submerged by practical concerns, and the process of reversing the mechanism of the uncanny produces a comic relief rather than fear. The otherness of the living-dead lies not so much in their ontological dualism as in their inability to speak a comprehensible language; the problem is resolved swiftly, with a conventional note of regret only, once they have ceased to be valuable. It is also relevant that the familiar is rendered as Englishness while the unfamiliar is denoted as foreign – a dialect of Italian is as alien as a dialect of hell; the landscapes on the Continent are nonchalantly transformed just as the maps of Europe can be created anew after the wars, as long as the process does not affect merry old England itself.

In this context Mr Norrell's mission to restore English magic fits into the bigger project of establishing British supremacy over other nations. The war waged against Napoleon "had made Great Britain the Greatest Nation in the World", and the magic "had been of vital importance in achieving this" (Clarke 2015: 362), one more tool employed as a means of establishing an empire in which Englishmen would see themselves half a century later "as the creators of a worldwide system in which they as it were gigantically replicated themselves, carrying with them their language, their culture, their institutions, their industry" (Kumar 2006: 189). These attempts to domesticate magic as an inherently English, not a universal, phenomenon, with the Englishness additionally restricted to upper-middle class gentlemen, dominate a considerable part of the narrative, which despite containing the elements of fantasy does not question the existing social order, akin in fact to that of the mimetic novel.

If the analysis stopped here, we could prematurely conclude that *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* fails as literature of subversion, which is posited by Rosemary Jackson (1981) to be a constituent element of fantasy, perceived as "a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" (3) and opens "for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law [and] dominant values systems" (4). Yet, within the second layer of the novel, whose mode is derived from the Gothic literary tradition and clearly indicated to the reader by several mentions of Beckford, Lewis, Radcliffe and Byron, the fantastic escapes absolute domestication, and the parallel world of the Faerie intrudes into peaceful drawing-rooms, taking its toll. Even Strange, freed from Norrell's authority, undergoes a certain evolution and engages in exploring the old-forgotten roads connecting England with Faerie, the mysterious and gloomy land in-

strategies, and stylistic devices, which are meant to establish a particular "reader's relationship to the framework", a certain reading strategy that, Mendlesohn (2008: xviii) claims, might be anticipated by the authors as "part of their own poetics". In "intrusion fantasy", which is of greatest interest here, the fictional world of the narrative is "ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality," Mendlesohn writes, "and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled" (115). The thrill of the reader then is in the waiting for "the *approach* rather than the arrival of the fantastic" (118); the arrival itself might be in some cases experienced as disappointing or inadequate as "it marks the end of the adventure rather than the beginning" (118). For a more detailed discussion of *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* as intrusion fantasy, see pp. 165-170.

between the known and unknown reality, as a result of which magic appearing “so familiar” and “so *English*” suddenly becomes “inhuman, unearthly, *otherlandish*” (Clarke 2015: 428).

Perceiving the Gothic in *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* mainly in terms of the decorum, Thomson (2011:320) writes that “[w]hat sets her novel apart from the old, hoary tradition is how rarely its crosscurrents appear as tensions or paradoxes or even troublesome matters” and briefly notes the process of the domestication of the uncanny discussed in more detail above. Yet, he does not fully explore Clarke’s Gothic streak, also characteristic of the broader category of “intrusion fantasy”, demonstrated by her constant oscillation between latency, defined by Mendlesohn (2008: 16) as “the withholding, not of information, but of visuals or events,” and escalation, which relies on intrusions beginning “small and often quite distant” and then increasing “in magnitude, in scope, or in the number of victims.” This type of storytelling, from Gothic fiction to horror movie, relies heavily on “a sense of encroaching intimacy” (Mendlesohn 2008: 116), achieved by building tension, at the heart of which lies the feeling that there is always something lurking in the darkness, beyond the surface of the world, and escaping rational explanations.

The true “bringer of chaos” (Mendlesohn 2008: xxi) into the otherwise ordered and organized reality in Clarke’s novel is a mysterious “gentleman with thistle-down hair” (Clarke 2015: 84), a mischievous elf lurking in the darkness, summoned by Mr Norrell to assist him in bringing back to life Mrs Wintertowne, whose premature death prevents her from marrying Sir Walter Pole, an MP. The whole ordeal is presented in terms of a business transaction rather than romantic impulses; it is settled that the lady is to spend half of her life with Sir Walter and the other one with the elf. The profits are carefully calculated, and Mrs Wintertowne’s life is a currency in the exchange that benefits and satisfies all three gentlemen (the elf gets a half of her life; Sir Pole is able to marry her and secure his finances with her dowry; Mr Norrell gets political support for the enterprise of restoring magic) but brings little in return to the lady herself. However, an attempt to domesticate this magic resurrection in the same manner as in the case of the dead Neapolitans, i.e. by presenting its mundane and practical aspects, fails this time. Mr Norrell has been outwitted by the Gentleman and, consequently, lady Pole is destined to spend her days with her husband in London and the nights dancing at eerie balls in Lost-hope – a dreary, otherworldly, ominous mansion belonging to the elf and described in the vein of Gothic fiction. Unable to communicate the truth due to a muffling spell, so that every time she tries to tell anyone about her fate it sounds nonsense, she eventually becomes an embarrassment to her husband, who literally removes her from society by sending her to a secluded house in the countryside. Arabella, Jonathan Strange’s wife, becomes another prisoner of the darkling in the parallel Gothic reality while her husband is too preoccupied with magic to notice the fact. Similarly to Norrell, Strange is outwitted by the gentleman with thistle-down hair and tricked into believing that his wife has died (what “died” was actually a tree magically transformed into her shape by the elf and sent as an impostor). Strange’s inability to tell the difference between his wife and the tree comically undermines his failure, both as husband and magician, to go beneath the surface, to perceive his wife as a real woman not a silhouette, and to recognize the magic intervention.

With limited agency over their own lives, and their activity being restricted to the domestic sphere, both Lady Pole and Arabella typify innocent angels in the house²; yet the house fails to be a safe harbour in Clarke's novel. Lost-hope, the premises of the gentleman with thistle-down hair in the Faerie, virtually encroaches Lady Pole's apartments (both in London and in the countryside) to become their integral part. The existence of a supernatural house within an ordinary house, rather than next to it, not only blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality, but also challenges the assumed security of the domestic space. The danger, the narrative implies, lies within this space, not outside; and this realization triggers the mechanism of the uncanny: "the feeling of the uncanny is uncanny precisely to the extent that the sensation comes about in places where one should feel most secure, or with which one is most familiar" (Wolfreys 2004: 240). Interestingly, whereas Sir Walter Pole, Jonathan Strange and Mr Norell, as representatives of the establishment, are oblivious of the existence of the Gothic mansion within a familiar London estate, to Lady Pole both places are equally real. Her entrapment in Lost-hope symbolically represents the entrapment of women in the role of domestic angels; her inability to express her dread due to the muffling spell corresponds to the lack of a female voice in historical records.

The magic, performed in Clarke's novel by men, makes the effects of male dominance tangible, and relegates women into the Gothic layer of the narrative, a literary space that according to Ellis (1989: x) creates "in a segment of culture directed toward women, a resistance to an ideology that imprisons them even as it posits a sphere of safety for them." This observation seems to be particularly valid for the Female Gothic, the term coined by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1976) and referring to Gothic fiction written by women, which can be seen as "a coded expression of women's fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body" (Smith, Wallace 2004: 1), as well as the articulation of "the terror and rage that women experience within patriarchal social arrangements, especially marriage" (Williams 1995: 136). The echoes of this rage are actually expressed in the novel by Lady Pole herself when she is finally rescued by two amateur magicians and accuses both Mr Norrell ("I have been enchanted! ... Bargained away for the sake of a wicked man's career! ... We must write to the editors of the newspapers!") (Clarke 2015: 788) and Jonathan Strange ("I consider him by far the worse of the two. By his negligence and cold, masculine magic he has betrayed the best of women, the most excellent of wives!... Oh, how these men protect one another!") (Clarke 2015: 788) of sacrificing and neglecting women for the sake of their personal and political ambitions.

The transformation of Lady Pole from an angel in the house into a raging monster, whose fury stems from the enforced silence, resonates with Gilbert and Gubar's (2000: 77) construction of "a madwoman in the attic," a figure that "emerges over and over again from the mirrors women

2 Although the very phrase "angel in the house" comes from the 1854 popular poem of the same title by Coventry Patmore and is associated with the Victorian ideal of womanhood, Gilbert and Gubar (2000) have convincingly argued that the foundations of the model considerably predate the actual poem. As they write, "[t]he ideal woman that male authors dream of generating is always an angel" (20) and the angelic qualities inherent in this ideal are always the same as in Patmore's verse, including passivity, submissiveness, meekness, grace, self-sacrifice and purity.

writers hold up both to their own natures and to their own visions of nature.” Their influential discussion of the 19th century literature written by women demonstrates that the “mad double” is central to both gothic and anti-gothic novels as it allows their authors to “dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and reject them” (Gilbert, Gubar 2000: 78). The second heroine of the novel, Arabella Strange, does not rebel against the patriarchal structures as vehemently as Lady Pole, yet in the end of the novel, after she has found her way back from the Faerie, she refuses to join her husband, entrapped in the Other-world, choosing to live on her own rather than share his fate. While Thomson (2011: 324) observes that a feminist reading of the novel is actually complicated by the fact that it is a love story, in which Strange declares “I have changed England to save my wife” (Clarke 2015: 805), it should be emphasized that his role in saving her is less prominent than he actually believes. Moreover, if *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* is a love story to a certain extent, it is one that concludes not with the reunion of lovers, but with their separation, with Arabella choosing her independence over marriage.

Even if the uncanny appears domesticated to a large extent throughout the novel, in the Gothic layer of Clarke’s narrative the mechanism of the uncanny operates in the manner defined by Freud to bring to light not only the repressed voice of women, but also that of people of colour and the lower-class poor, which is discussed in more detail by Elizabeth Hoiem (2008). The conclusion of the novel, in which the gentleman with thistle-down hair is finally defeated not by the two officially practicing magicians but “by the allied efforts of women, blacks, and the very poor white magicians put out of business by the professionalization of magic” (Hoiem 2008), also transforms England by opening it up to the Faerie. Although Mr Norrell and Jonathan Strange unknowingly played their part in the very process and came up with the necessary spell, their role in the revival of English magic proves accidental, and the magic that “returns” to England is not the gentlemanly profession desired by Mr Norrell but a more unpredictable force derived from the Raven-King, a mythical medieval magician-king of both England and Faerie. His story is told mainly through the footnotes, which can be seen as another unfamiliar (for fantasy fiction), or uncanny, structural intrusion that disrupts the flow of the narrative. These continual textual interruptions, sometimes used to add a trivial remark of little significance, are predominantly employed to build a whole system of magic, which is practically absent from the main narrative. As Mendlesohn (2008: 167) observes, “it is through the footnotes that the world of the fantastic slips through to disrupt the meaning or common understanding of the tale told in the main text.” In a novel so preoccupied with knowledge, they also draw attention to the issue of the validity, or invalidity, of textual and historical sources by frequently citing fictional texts, such as Francis Sutton-Grove’s (1682-1765) *De Generibus Artium Magicarum Anglorum*, 1741, and *Prescriptions and Descriptions*, 1749” (Clarke 2015: 64), as well as referencing equally fictive folk tales as real.

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell at its surface level tells the story of two male magicians, as different as the heroines of *Sense and Sensibility*, who are trying to restore English magic, yet in doing so the novel consciously refers to the tradition of women’s writing, both stylistically and themati-

cally. The combination of two familiar traditions, Austenesque domestic realism and supernatural elements derived from the Gothic, additionally supplemented with a pastiche of historic documents, results in a surprisingly fresh and unfamiliar prose. While this quite unusual blend rarely produces the effect of real fear or fright, which is marked as a hallmark of the uncanny effect by Freud, it does create a certain hesitation in the reader, and makes the novel, to borrow Thomson's (2011: 321) words, "a *strange* read," during which silenced and repressed voices come to the surface. Drawing on the mechanism of producing the moment of the uncanny through estranging ordinariness, Clarke appropriates these old-established literary traditions to defamiliarize the form of a fantasy novel, which typically relies on other sources for inspiration. Yet, the process affects more than the form of the narrative, and allows one more voice to be heard – that of an author tired with the male-hero-oriented setting of fantasy. This default setting stems from the history of the genre, whose major forefathers, including Robert E. Howard, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, were white men of Anglo-Saxon origin, drawing inspiration from European mythology, religion, medieval history and heroic or chivalric literature. Rejecting these sources of inspiration, Susanna Clarke, no longer a mad woman in the attic, is free to draw on the tradition of women's writing and forge her own lore and history to 'replace' what she finds unsatisfactory for the purpose of her enterprise. Boldly blurring the borders between real and imagined, familiar and unfamiliar, history and fantasy, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* expands the boundaries of the genre and proves fantasy conventions to be open to creative and insightful reinterpretations.

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