A Little Witch: Abjection and Identity in *Practical Magic*

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at Alice Hoffman's novel *Practical Magic* (Putnam Adult, 1995) and the eponymous film (Village Roadshow Pictures, 1998) in light of Terry Eagleton's theory of the pharmakos (*Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2002) and Judith Butler's theory of the Abject (*Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge, 1993).

In *Practical Magic* the protagonists, Gillian and Sally Owens, are part of a family of women who live on the outskirts of their Massachusetts town in a house that is two-hundred odd years old and are blamed for everything wrong that happens in the town. The Owens are a matrilineal, matriarchal clan, made so due to a curse that causes the premature deaths of men with whom Owens women fall in love, and an apparent inability to produce male offspring. While this might have caused them to be treated as outsiders regardless, the Owens women are witches—a fact made more explicit in the film than the novel, which is steeped in the magic-realist treatment also seen in Hoffman's *The River King* (2000)—and this reinforces their status as outcasts. Both Gillian and Sally militate against this and briefly escape—one by physically distancing herself from the town and the other by socially distancing herself through marriage—but eventually have to return to their childhood home and practices.

While *Practical Magic* obviously uses the literary trope of the witch living on the physical and social outskirts of the community

and can therefore be read through the lens of the theory of the pharmakos or scapegoat, the hereditary nature of both the practices and the isolation of the Owens women also lends itself to the use of Butler, since their Abjection and Otherisation appears constitutive of the community.

The Village Roadshow Pictures' romantic comedy *Practical Magic* (1998)[1] begins

> For more than 200 years we Owens women have been blamed for everything that's ever gone wrong in this town.

Alice Hoffman's 1995 novel of the same name, from which it has been adapted, begins similarly, and goes on to add,

> [I]f a damp spring arrived, if cows in the pasture gave milk that was runny with blood, if a colt died of colic or a baby was born with a red birthmark stamped onto his cheek, everyone believed that fate must have been twisted, at least a little, by those women over on Magnolia Street. It didn't matter what the problem was—lightning, or locusts, or a death by drowning. It didn't matter if the situation could be explained by logic, or science, or plain bad luck. As soon as there was a hint of trouble or the slightest misfortune, people began pointing their fingers and placing blame.[2]

segueing thence into a description of the Owens house and its residents. Both texts hold true to these beginnings: the film telescoping and abridging the longer and deeper narrative of the novel, but retaining the same skeleton, albeit more scarcely-fleshed, and dwelling upon the same themes of belonging and

identity-formation. This paper uses Judith Butler's theory of abjection and Terry Eagleton's theory of pharmakos to read Hoffman's *Practical Magic* and its cinematic adaption and explore these themes as they relate to feminine presence and community in the texts.

In brief the commonly-held plot of both texts may be stated as follows: in the late eighteenth century, Maria Owens, suspected by the neighbourhood and known by her descendants to have been a witch, built a house that said descendants continue to occupy when the story begins. The Owenses are a matrilineal family: the women who marry out retain their names and pass them onto their daughters, who inherit with it witch-grey eyes, a headstrong tendency for trouble, and certain talents which run the gamut from bewitching men with their beauty to brewing potions and selling spells. Consequently, the Owens women are sought out by potential, often desperate, clients and shunned by their neighbours; that the former and latter groups are usually constituted by the same individuals, at different times of day or month, only serves to further the Owenses' particular status and isolation. The Owens women at the time the story begins are Frances and Bridget—called Jet Owens, sisters of some indeterminate age, and their nieces and wards, Sally and Gillian Owens; they are in due time joined by Sally's daughters Antonia and Kylie, and by mentions of other Owens women, not least Maria. Of these, the narrative most faithfully follows Sally Owens—though the novel uses a number of narratorial voices—and her determination to live a normal life. In the film this takes the form of a brief marriage, after which she returns home to her aunts; in the novel, which stretches on for nearly a decade longer, Sally Owens spends her marital life under the aunts' roof but leaves while her children are still young to start anew in a town where nobody knows her and cannot therefore deride or ostracise her daughters as she and her sister—and presumably

their various relatives and ancestresses—were ostracised. Gillian escapes earlier, to a nomadic existence from which she arrives, thirty-six and weary, on Sally's doorstep—in the film obviously one shared with the aunts—with the rapidly cooling corpse of her late boyfriend Jimmy. The sisters bury him, with or without resurrection attempts depending on the text, and are then haunted by his increasingly violent and disruptive spectre. Their first attempt to rid themselves and the house of his presence prove futile, though the spirit lies deceptively dormant for a time. Matters are complicated further by the appearance of Gary Hallet, a special investigator for the attorney general's office, on the hunt for the late unlamented Jimmy (who is in the novel James Hawkins and local to Tucson, but in the film inexplicably and xenophobically East European with the ironic surname Angeloff). Hallet and Sally find themselves drawn to each other and he is in time instrumental in fudging evidence to ensure that the Owens women are not embroiled in legal trouble over Jimmy's death. The supernatural trouble caused by the latter's unquiet spirit requires the aunts' eventual intervention and a return to the full identity of Owens woman—witchcraft and headstrong nature and all—that both Sally and Gillian have been attempting to escape in different ways for their entire adult lives. The ending of both texts imply that this reclamation has brought them not simply inner peace but easier relations within the family and with the larger community.

While they will not be greatly relevant to the paper, it is worth noting some of the differences between the novel and the film, besides those of time and place already noted. Sally's daughters are older in the novel at sixteen and thirteen, and their lives and friendships and personalities are given due space and importance in the text; as the later events are brought forward in the film, occurring within months of Sally's widowhood, her daughters are depicted as children, a little dampened by their father's death,

but excited to be living in the Owens house, and not particularly explored. Sally Owens obtains the sort of respectability in the novel that eludes her in the film, working in the local school and at the head of the snow chain. Gillian starts working in a diner while living with her sister, starts dating her nieces' science teacher and eventually moves in with him to the surprised approval of her family, whereas in the briefer span of the film she is still in the early days of recovering from life with Jimmy and his death. Both film and novel end with the Owenses reunited in the house on Magnolia Street and the lines

> Always throw spilled salt over your left shoulder. Keep rosemary by your garden gate . . . Plant lavender, for luck. Fall in love whenever you can.

either spoken by Sally Owens or attributed to her. As with the beginning, there are differences also in the resolution of the novel and the film. The film, in keeping with its emphasis on the spectacular aspect of witchcraft, ends on Halloween with the Owenses in costume performing tricks for the neighbours. The novel, however, ends with the Owens sisters visiting their aunts for Thanksgiving: a quieter resolution, but momentous not only because of Gary Hallet's reappearance and signalled future relationship with Sally, but insofar as Gillian has not visited the house since she ran away half her lifetime ago—having a dread of returning home that seems to border on a compulsion(?)—while Sally and her daughters, as a rule, only visit in August. However, neither of them is home to stay, as they are in the film. Rather, the novel believes in quieter compromises: the aunts send Sally's daughter a portrait of their ancestress Maria Owens, visit Sally for the first time in order to help subdue Jimmy's ghost, and bring with them blue stones used by Maria Owens in the house on Magnolia Street to create a little circle of luck

in Sally's house in Long Island. There are no triumphant returns or reabsorptions into society, in part because we see little or nothing of the Owenses childhood neighbours and tormentors after Sally moves out with her daughters, but in part also because in the novel both sisters, if Sally earlier and more prominently than Gillian, have made good their escape, sunk securely enough into mainstream conventionality—white picket-fence and all—to be able to venture back into their familial normalcy without losing their sense of self.

Julia Kristeva, in 'Approaching Abjection',[3] describes abjection as a braid of affects and thoughts that does not have a proper object. The abject, that which gives rise to such a reaction on part of the speaking subject, Kristeva's "I", is not an object that may be named or imagined, and in fact shares with the latter only the attribute of being opposed to the subject. The nature of this opposition is not shared. The opposition of the subject and object creates in the former a desire for meaning and makes them "infinitely homologous"; the abject, contrarily, is radically excluded, and through opposition draws the subject towards a collapse of meaning. The abject lies outside, driven out by the superego, and continues to engage the subject from this place of banishment, outside the game and outside its rules. It evokes from the subject a convulsion, verbal, physical, or social.

Kristeva conceptualises abjection as a safeguard, keeping the subject from an annihilatory recognition of a significant meaninglessness, an almost—"I" that haunts the subject as loathsome, radically separate. The act of expulsion creates the subject as separate from others, including this Other, this doppelganger, but at the same moment it expels the subject, or an aspect of the subject. Kristeva speaks of this in terms of food-loathing, where, for instance, revulsion towards milk-cream causes a nauseated reaction, an expulsion that—since the repulsive object has not been assimilated—can only be an

expulsion of the self on part of the subject.

I expel *myself,* I spit *myself out,* I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself.*[4]

While ill-health, injury, filth, and food-loathing may cause abjection, the same is not triggered by a lack—even of cleanliness or health or life—but by that which disrupts order and identity, that which is no respecter of systems or rules, but transgresses borders. The abject both beseeches the subject to a moment of recognition, and through that recognition pulverises that "I", since the recognition of the abject dwells in the fact that the abject so radically excluded is part of the subject, even constitutive of it. The abjection of the self most clearly makes visible the way in which abjection itself is a recognition of want, upon which any and all things are founded, be it a being, meaning, language, or desire.

This want is not, for Kristeva, reducible to the wanted object, but must be conceptualised as preliminary to both being and object, and therefore signifiable only as abjection and especially as abjection of the self. This abjected self—the one through whom the abject exists—is loathed, and feared, beyond any sense: as Kristeva says, "the phobic has no other object than the abject". Yet this fear is also deferred, such that discourse relating to it can only become comprehensible when it confronts that radically excluded Other, both intimate and unapproachable, the repelling and repellent abject. These abject/ed lives, are not predicated upon desire, which is always for objects, but rather dictated by exclusion.

While Kristeva in 'Approaching the Abject' is primarily concerned with the abject as it relates to the individual, symbolically and psychologically, Butler draws the concept into the sociological realm. In 'Phantasmic Identification' Butler uses the lens of abjection to analyse the question of sexuality and the law, such that sexuality is not simply repressed but generated

and directed by legal prohibitions. While this is a fascinating subject in relation to the Owens women and their sexuality, which appears always to function with and due to a frisson of danger—whether caused by the nature of the men with whom they are involved, the nature of the Owens women involving themselves, or the curse that in the film at least explicitly signals the doom of the relationship by signalling the doom of any man that loves an Owens woman—it is worthwhile noting that the shift from Kristeva to Butler produces a shift from psychological, symbolic depths to performativity and social norms.

While the then—and currently—ongoing argument about sex/gender/sexuality may be summarised as a debate about constructivism, which suggests that it is free in essence, versus essentialism, which suggests that it is in some way fixed or predetermined, Butler instead proposes a more nuanced and necessarily complex view that not only admits the existence of constraints in the performance of norms, but views said constraints as the condition of performativity. Thus, for Butler performativity is only comprehensible within a process of iterability, a repetition of norms that is necessarily regularised and constrained. Further, this repetition is not performed by a subject, rather it is the repetition that enables the creation of the subject. The performance—whether of sex/gender/sexuality, which is Butler's focus, or of any social norm—cannot be understood as a singular, unique, event, but must be seen as a ritualised production, reiterated, recited, under the constraining force of prohibition and taboo, with the threats of ostracism, punishment, and in extreme cases death, compelling said production but not entirely determining the same.

It should also be noted in this regard that the norms thus reiterated do not spring from, or draw their authority from, any source that may be held as truly prior to their various embodying or citations, i.e. the norms whose reiterations are constitutive of

the subject are themselves constituted through said reiteration. While the recitation, the re-citation, of norms is held to be a performance of some deferred or deflected origin or originary instance, this assumption is deceptive, since there is no such pre-existing authoritative moment. Rather, this origin is later theorised—often mythicised—to endow the recitation of social norms with authority.

It therefore follows that, when the oft-reiterated norm constitutive of a subject involves the abjection of a group such that said norm cannot be reiterated without said abjection, then the latter is in turn constitutive of the subject. Thus, if—as is the case for normative heterosexuality which forms the subject of Butler's analysis—the repudiation and radical exclusion of homosexuality is necessary for the reiteration of gender norms in heterosexist society and the constitution of the heterosexual subject, then inarguably the abjection of the homosexual is constitutive of the heterosexual subject, since the latter is only made possible through the reiterated relegation of the queer body and self—one cannot say queer subject—outside the realm of the law. However, this queer self is not entirely repudiated, not simply since it on occasion, at least, contests the symbolic, even recast in heterosexual relationality as culturally unthinkable and unviable, but because the very act of abjection, of the assumption of heterosexuality through the abjection of homosexuality, creates a link between the two. One cannot make abject that with which one cannot identify: it is the self which is abjected; abjection—here of homosexuality—can only occur through an identification with that abjection that is then disavowed, an identification that institutes and sustains the abjection that is constitutive of the subject.

As is obvious, Butler's conception of the reiterability of social norms is widely applicable outside the field of gender studies. It can be productively used as a lens for the study of vestementary

or culinary norms, of exclusion along lines of race and caste and ethnicity as easily as along lines of sex/gender/sexuality. In this paper, it is used to study constitutive exclusion and abjection along lines of witchcraft in the novel and film *Practical Magic*.

While witchcraft might seem a far more arbitrary line to draw to divide people than questions of sexuality or race, it is a line that has been drawn in both literature and history to appalling effect. The earlier-accepted numbers of accused witches—thought to be in the millions[5]—have been cast into doubt by later research that discounts rhetoric and the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* in favour of examining the meticulously maintained court records of witch trials. However, the new, lower figures still give out somewhere upwards of 50,000 women not only formally charged but sentenced by courts in Western Europe and the Americas between 1400 and 1800, with Anna Göldi being the last person executed for witchcraft in Europe, in Glarus in 1782. Witch-hunts of course continued in other parts of the world, and notably continues in India till date, with the Assam State Assembly passing the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Bill on 08.05.2015 in a bid to stop witch-hunting; as of April 2017 it is still awaiting approval by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs.

In the Western imaginary, however, the trials of witches—shorthanded, especially in Wiccan practice, as the Burning Times, though suspected witches were often executed through means such as drowning and decapitation—is a thing decidedly of the past, associated with the Inquisition and upheavals of early Protestantism and Reformation While witchcraft is associated in North America especially with the Salem Trials, in England it pairs most significantly with the reign of King James I, who imported European notions of witchcraft into England: English laws about witchcraft charged the malificience of the alleged act, whereas the European laws charged the witches themselves as

malificient creatures, allowing for little or no distinction between the wise-woman herbalist and the politically-motivated sorceress. Yet, one cannot charge James I with an indiscriminate criminalisation of witches, considering he oversaw the North Berwick witch trials and acquitted several of the accused though they were accused of conspiring and attempting to commit regicide. The regal theory of witchcraft, as laid out in the *Daemonologie*, combines English and Continental concepts subtly and arrestingly to create a picture of the witch that far exceeds the caricatures available in the *Malleus Maleficarum*: it is unsurprising that the latter was soon abandoned and the authors discredited, while King James' text has merit aside from the status of its author. Across the pond, fear of witchcraft dominated the predominantly Puritan colonies of New England, and any accusation could blossom into long-drawn trials that could devastate and decimate communities and nascent townships: the most famous of these are of course the aforementioned Salem trials, but they are first among equals, as similar accusations and trials characterised life in the early colonies. Western Anglophone literature about witchcraft typically uses the seventeenth century or earlier as chronotopal location or point of departure. The manner in which these texts treat witchcraft—as a true phenomenon, or instead as a political ploy on part of the accusers—usually depends upon the genre of said texts; as does the way in which fictional witches are treated. Without adhering to stereotypes one may say that feminist and fantasy literature tends to be unsurprisingly sympathetic towards witches or those accused of witchcraft, in case of texts like the (in)famous *Mists of Avalon*[6] at the cost of more traditionally feminine characters, who are depicted as complicit in the patriarchal, overwhelmingly Christian, society which can only be constituted through the radical exclusion of—among others—witches, who are in such texts often shown as women engaged in pagan worship and

endowed with traditional knowledge of herblore or medicinal arts: wise women, wrongly accused of criminality.

Fiction that does not locate witches in the historical or mythical past but instead in an alternate universe or in the modern world—whether in some sort of pocket-dimension or hidden in the open—usually still maintains this separation, whether wrought by professional distance, as in Pratchett's *Discworld*, or by sustained and determined ignorance, as in Rowling's Harry Potter series, which begins

> Mr and Mrs Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.[7]

neatly illustrating the separation of "normal" people and the strange and mysterious, which in that world devolves into a hidden world of magic rubbing invisible shoulders with the oblivious mundane. Even in worlds where magic is known and—relatively speaking—accepted, as in the aforementioned *Discworld* series, there is a divide between witches and the villagers they live among, and the latter are too often too ready to turn on the former and believe those who depict them as beings of whom to be afraid and wary. The magical is separated from normalcy, the presumed speaking-subject of not only the world inhabited by the author and readers, i.e. the world outside the fictional text, but also of the world inhabited by the characters themselves, in a manner constitutive of said fictional work and its in-world speaking-subjects.

A distinction must be made here between the speaking-subject of the fictional world, who represents the normal therein, and the speaking-subject of the fictional narrative, who is in texts

about witches, as for instance in the text at hand, *Practical Magic*, an abject in said fictional world, radically excluded within it even as their perspective determines what the reader sees and knows. *Practical Magic* follows Sally Owens, and the narration is aligned to her and her interests, even shared out among the other characters or dipping into third-person omniscient. People inimical to Sally or the Owenses are not granted narratorial privilege, granting us a view of this fictional scrap of Massachusetts and Long Island as seen through the eyes of the Owens women and the men who love them, at times almost literally, as when colour fades out of the world for Sally Owens during the first year of her bereavement. The texts, in other words, afford us a view of abjection from within, as experienced and narrated by the abject. Indeed, considering the only non-Owens narratorial voices belong to people in some non-authoritative manner involved with them, *Practical Magic* appears to transform the witches from in-story abjects to speaking subjects who disavow normalcy and through that disavowal constitute the "normal" as abject in relation to their own new position as subjects constituted through said disavowal. In this regard it may be equated with texts that depict white Western Europeans and Americans as disadvantaged,[8] a prevalent matriarchal system,[9] or heterosexuality as the minority position: in the world of the Owens women, being a witch or at least acknowledging witchcraft is normal. However, unlike such texts, *Practical Magic* is set in a universe next-door to our own, familiar but replete with a magic leaning heavily on nature, as with many of Hoffman's texts. In such a world, the Owenses and their associates, or witches at large, do not wield social or signifying power such that they can disavow or abject the non-magical world, anymore than homosexual abjection of heterosexuality is effective in the same manner as heterosexual abjection of homosexuality.

Further, the contents of the texts reveal the cognizance both

in the world and narration of the story of the Owenses position as located outside and radically excluded from the community they inhabit. In the 1998 film, their ancestress Maria is exiled following a botched execution on the charge of witchcraft and builds the house her descendants continue to occupy two hundred odd years later, a house located on an isolated promontory of the island, edged by sea-cliffs. Neither the failed attempt at hanging nor such explicit isolation is present in the novel, but Maria Owens arrives shrouded in mystery and an air of distance and retains this air even as she builds a house and raises a daughter in the community, becoming mythicised well before her death and simultaneously avoided and sought for: a dangerous figure at will transgressing social norms of marital fidelity and celibate singlehood as well as those of travel and manner. Her neighbours hide from her in life, cowering behind charms to secure luck and unravel spells, and after her death conjure her spirit as a travelling talisman, bringing luck if her spectral gown brushes skin.

This abjection is reiterated over the next two centuries, visible in her descendants. The radical exclusion of the Owenses is constitutive of the community to which they belong, touching all their interactions with the other inhabitants of their unnamed Massachusetts small town (not Salem, Massachusetts, in all likelihood, but occupying the same narratival space). Sally and Gillian Owens are tormented as children, Gillian, thin-skinned, more than Sally, as she is more greatly adored once the sisters start high-school; said torment is in the film reiterated with Sally's children, as though to torment the already excluded Owenses, to abject them anew, is constitutive of childhood, as being bewitched by them is constitutive of adolescence. (It can be noted here that such infatuations only turn kind once the Owenses are transplanted to the hitherto-unfamiliar space of Long Island, where the community does not require this constitutive radical

exclusion; Sally's first marriage may be considered a partial exception, but ends in death like the other named romantic relationships in which the Owens women engage.) Bridget and Frances Owens, the aunts, are in no way tormented or even offered insult, but their very presence can sway town hall meetings, and they stop a very young Gillian from being mercilessly bullied by standing next to the tormenting children. The novel does not offer us a view of Sally and Gillian as adults resident in their hometown, making it difficult to determine whether the reiterated pattern for the Owenses transitions from tormented children through enchanting adolescents and young women to formidable adults: certainly Sally in the film, barely months out of her bereavement, has started her own shop which has no dearth of customers, and various Owens cousins are recounted as being successful in their own fields; further, the aunts are depicted as having been very beautiful, as all the Owens women are, and having had many and devoted admirers, especially Aunt Jet.

But to be an Owens woman in this presumed third stage of the oft-reiterated pattern is to make the shift not simply into someone formidable, but also someone feared, where the fear springs still from the revulsion—the abjection—that leads to the torment of children and the attraction towards post-pubescent girls. The aunts owe their status in the town not simply to their personal presence but to the fact that they sell spells and potions to the townspeople, primarily if not solely the women, who come to them seeking recourse in times of desperation, whether emotional or otherwise, and are willing to exchange cherished heirlooms for the same: mention is made of a drawer full of antique curios collected from clients, and Aunt Frances speculates on the odds of a potential client being willing to pay for a spell with a similar item. This witchcraft is the aunts' only visible source of income—the big old house on Magnolia Street

does not appear to be accompanied by sufficient income to guarantee a life of leisure, or indeed retirement, since the aunts are still engaged in bespelling others at the conclusion of the novel and presumably the film—and neatly fits into the literary trope of the witch who lives outside the community and is sought out by women in trouble, which trouble is often sexual. (When the aunts advise Gillian that "a baby was easier to prevent than to raise", this sage advice comes to the reader wrapped not in modern prophylactics but in traditional abortifacients like ergot, if only because ergot poisoning is commonly believed to be the source of the hallucinations that led to the accusations made in the Salem Witch Trials).

Whether the aunts would retain their clientele if they were socially acquainted with the same must remain a matter of speculation, since in the novel at least there is no change in that direction. In the film the efforts of the Owens women is not enough to rid them of the spectral, malicious, presence of Jimmy, and the wider community of women, who—apart from Sally's employees at her herbal products shop—have at best been indifferent towards them, are called in to help make up sufficient numbers for the necessary ritual of exorcism. They answer for various reasons ranging from Wiccan enthusiasm through a desire to see inside the Owens house to sympathy for a woman with an abusive and persistent ex, but both subsequent cinematography and dialogue imply that they find themselves identifying with the Owens women.

WOMAN A: Once, I was across town, my daughter had a nightmare. I swear, I could hear her crying.
AUNT JET: There's a little witch in all of us.

Nobody directly answers her, and the action moves onto the exorcism without any rebuttal being presented. Later scenes

imply that the partial identification with the town's resident witches transforms the community once it is brought into the open. Without entering into the implications of assuming that all women are (capable of becoming) witches, at least in part, as it relates to troubling aspects of second-wave feminism or white feminism, it may be noted that this identification with the abject, an identification that is then disavowed, is constitutive of both the abject and speaking subject, and a suspension of said disavowal affects and alters both, as visible in the last scene of the film Practical Magic, where it has altered not only the Owenses' place within the community, but consequently the community itself.

The constitutive abject need not be in any respect otherworldly, any more than the speaking subject constituted through the reiteration of said abjection. The abject in the texts under discussion happen to be so, but the same cannot be said of the abjection of homosexuality, for instance, nor of abjection along racial or religious lines. Yet the very act of abjection has its symbolic as well as social power, and "the abject is edged with the sublime".[10] A brief note about the pharmakos might serve to further illustrate the nature of the abject in *Practical Magic*.

Terry Eagleton conceptualises the pharmakos as the tragic hero,[11] who is chosen on grounds of their misfortune or ill-favour and—symbolically loaded with the misfortunes of the community or city-state—is banished from the same as an act of ritual purification. The pharmakos or scape-goat, thus expelled from the city-state has to wander the wilderness which is the embodiment of the liminal spaces between fortifications of civilization. In other words, the abjection and ritual expulsion of the pharmakos is constitutive of the community of the city-state and of the speaking subjects contained therein.

However, this abjection and the abject figure of the pharmakos is a powerful one that challenges the speaking subject constituted

through his/her expulsion. The pharmakos is deprived of politically-qualified life through the act of expulsion, but said expulsion also renders their bare life inviolable: the pharmakos, once sacrificed, cannot then be killed. However, the symbolic role of the pharmakos can only be assumed voluntarily: as a sacrifice, the pharmakos must submit themselves to expulsion and the load of misfortune thenceforth attributed to them. Such assumption of the divinely-consecrated bare life also brings with it gifts the pharmakos may then bestow upon a community of their choosing.

In light of this, it is interesting that the personal and bespelled misfortunes of Sally and Gillian Owens only disappear when they fully accept the roles of witches and Owens women from which they have been attempting to escape for much of their lives, as though the scant and symbolic advantages of their abject status is contingent upon acceptance of the same.

NOTES

1 *Practical Magic*, DVD, directed by Griffin Dunne, Los Angeles: Village Roadshow Pictures, 1998
2 Alice Hoffman, *Practical Magic*, (New York: Putnam's, 1995), 1
3 Julia Kristeva, "Approaching the Abject", *Powers of Horror*, Trans Leon S Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)
4 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 3
5 Seen particularly in Wiccan and second-wave feminist texts, as for instance in Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), which repeatedly mentions millions of women victims.
6 Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983)
7 J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 1
8 Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Years of Rice and Salt*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002)

9 YFilms. "Man's World – Full Episode 01". Filmed [September 2015]. YouTube video. 16:32. Posted [September 2015.] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NgvxN9RJSg
10 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 11
11 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003)