

*Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*

*A Crooked Timber Seminar*

*Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell: A Crooked Timber Seminar.*

Page 2. *Introduction.*

Pages 3-4. *The Magical-Industrial Revolution* by John Quiggin.

Pages 5-9. *The Claims of History* by Maria Farrell.

Pages 10-14. *Who Is The Narrator of **Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell**, and Where Are The Lady Magicians?* by Belle Waring.

Pages 15-32. *Two Thoughts (About Magic Christians and Two Cities)* by John Holbo.

Pages 33-37. *Return of the King* by Henry Farrell.

Pages 37- 48. *Women and men; servants and masters; England and the English* by Susanna Clarke.

## Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell Seminar - *Introduction*

Susanna Clarke's novel, *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* has been extraordinarily successful, and for good reason. It's received both the Hugo and World Fantasy Awards, but has also won a vast readership among people who don't usually care for fantasy. On the one hand, Neil Gaiman describes it as “unquestionably the finest English novel of the fantastic written in the last seventy years” (with the emphasis on the adjective ‘English;’ see more below), on the other, Charles Palliser, author of the wonderful historical novel, *The Quincunx*, describes it as “absolutely compelling” and “an astonishing achievement.” We've been fans at *Crooked Timber* since the book came out - not least because it has funny, voluminous and digressive footnotes, which seem near-perfectly calculated to appeal to a certain kind of academic.

In addition to writing JS&MN, Susanna has written three short stories set in the same (or a closely related?) setting, which were originally published in Patrick Nielsen Hayden's *Starlight 1*, *Starlight 2* and *Starlight 3* collections, as well as a short short available on the book's website. We're delighted that Susanna has been kind enough to participate in a *Crooked Timber* seminar.

John Quiggin argues that the book returns to science fiction's roots in the examination of the consequences of the Industrial Revolution. Maria Farrell argues that the book is a collision between the imagined Regency England of Jane Austen and romance novels on the one hand, and the real Regency England on the other. Belle Waring asks who the narrator of the book is, and where the female magicians are (she speculates that the two questions may have converging answers). John Holbo examines magic, irony, and Clarke's depiction of servants. Henry Farrell argues that the hidden story of JS&MN is a critique of English society. Susanna Clarke responds to all the above.

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## *The Magical-Industrial Revolution*

John Quiggin

In a sense, science fiction is all about the Industrial Revolution. The genre begins with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus*, first published in 1818. Among the layers of meaning that can be read into this work the most obvious, pointed to by the subtitle, is an allegory of the Industrial Revolution, unleashing forces beyond the control of its creators. In one form or another, this has remained the central theme of the genre.

Counterposed to the Promethean theme of science fiction is the frankly reactionary medievalism of Tolkien and most of his successors ('It is not unlikely that they [orcs] invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosions have always delighted them').

Alternate history, long the topic of five-finger exercises in which, say, Paul Revere's horse goes lame, has provided a new approach to the problem. The great discovery of recent years, after a period when the whole genre of speculative fiction seemed in danger of exhaustion, has been the fictional potential of the 18th and 19th centuries, the time when modernity, the transformation of life by science and technology, was still new and startling.

Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* gives the alternate history wheel a new spin, by imagining a starting point at which alternate and real histories have converged. Clarke's Georgian England is just like the real thing, but has a history in which magician-kings ruled the North until some time in the 14th century.

For reasons that are never entirely clear, magic has faded away until its study has become the domain of gentlemanly antiquarians, 'theoretical magicians' who never actually cast a spell. Their comfortable clubs are suddenly disrupted by the emergence of a 'practical magician' the enigmatic Gilbert Norrell. He is joined by a student and potential rival Jonathan Strange.

Strange is much the more attractive of the pair, but appearances may deceive. Without anything much in the way of moral qualms, he joins Wellington in wreaking magical havoc on the armies of Napoleon, often finding it difficult to put the world

back together afterwards.

The re-emergence of magic in this fictional world (where industry is scarcely mentioned) parallels the emergence of technology in the Industrial Revolution. Norrell is the image of a modern researcher looking for grant funding, emphasises cautious and practical applications of magical technology in agriculture, coastal defence and so on. And he has all the vices of associated with the type, hoarding information, jealous of his intellectual property and so on. Meanwhile Strange is alive to, and welcomes, the revolutionary possibilities of magic.

But it is Norrell, and not Strange, who opens the door to chaos when he makes the classic mistake of accepting an attractive-seeming bargain from the faery king of lost hope, to spare a young woman from death in return for ‘half her life’.  
attractive-seeming bargain from the faery king of Lost Hope, to spare the beautiful young wife Sir Walter Pole, from death in return for ‘half her life’. Rather than taking the second half of three-score years and ten, the king calls her away every night to dance in his endless dismal balls.

Lost Hope is the link to the third main character in the book, the ‘nameless slave’ Stephen Black, a negro servant in the Pole Household. The faery takes a fancy to Stephen Black, and determines that Stephen should become King of England, a goal he pursues with amoral carelessness for the sufferings he inflicts along the way. In the end, however, it is his own kingdom of Lost Hope that Black comes to rule.

The book ends in a cloud of dimly-perceived possibilities, with Norrell and Strange vanished from England, and magic transforming the North, very much like the real situation as Britain emerged from the Napoleonic wars. A sequel (or a trilogy) seems called for, and will be awaited eagerly.

## *The Claims of History*

Maria Farrell

As the last to write her piece on JSAMN, I have the benefit of reading my fellow Timberites' pieces and developing on some of their themes. Henry points out that JSAMN, which seems to begin as a comedy of manners ultimately becomes something altogether more serious. I agree. I think JSAMN is about the forgetting and remembering of a history that unleashes the downtrodden of the past, freeing them, in E.P. Thompson's famous phrase "from the enormous condescension of posterity." John Holbo notes that Susanna Clarke's Austen-like voice emerges almost unbidden to channel perfectly her own magical reality. I suspect that Clarke's choice of Regency England as the time and place for a novel about the tension between political and folk memory is no accident.

Regency England in 1806, when JSAMN begins, was an age riven through by profound contradictions. Much like any other 'age', then. But the moment Clarke has chosen to begin her novel of hidden histories is significant because it marks almost precisely the moment we, today, identify as the beginning of modernity, or the emergence of a world we can imagine inhabiting. 1800 is the veil behind which everything before disappears into the truly unknowable. Before 1800 there is impenetrable religious dogma and the war of all against all. After it, there's Jane Austen and the specialization of labour. It is the moment of the birth of the modern novel, economics, nationalism, industrialization, childhood and the rule of law.

Strange and Norrell's England enjoyed an economy expanding through trade (the occasional Corn Law or Napoleonic War notwithstanding), though brutally contracting the economic options available to sharecroppers, weavers and artisans. It harnessed technology and labour, creating the working class and paving the way for an accumulation of capital that allowed a larger swathe of the higher orders to enjoy the luxuries of increasing refinement and idleness. This England was described by Continental contemporaries as a lover of liberty and freedom of expression, which was in large part true, as long as you weren't a servant (including 'freed' slaves), a woman or a Catholic. (Emancipation of Catholics wasn't legally complete till the 1830s, and you might say women are still struggling for theirs). The widely held doctrine of laissez-faire - and an institutionally weak church and state - made it easier for the rich to exercise arbitrary power. But this period also saw the early development of the principles of social justice - with Mary Wollstonecraft's

Vindication of the Rights of Women, the imminent creation of New Lanark by Robert Owen, the foundation of many of London's greatest hospitals and charitable institutions, and the rise of a self-serving philanthropy that nicely foreshadows today's rhetoric of corporate social responsibility. England was awash with Luddites, Methodists and coffee shop republicans. Then, as now, cajoling and coercion were required in equal measure to keep the poor in their place.

Curiously, JSAMN is set just after the moment English magic really did die, mourned only by religious conservatives. John Wesley remarked in 1782 that "the giving up of witchcraft is in effect the giving up of the Bible". The last witch hunts had begun to fade from living memory by the time Mr. Norrell turned up his nose at the idea of a woman practicing magic. But it wasn't just the supplanting of magic/religion by Reason that makes the England of JSAMN or Jane Austen seem as familiar as a Sunday evening costume drama. England – indeed, Britain – was shrinking; traveling times from one point to another were halved in a period of about 15 years. No one was all that far from London, or from the wild and mysterious north either. As John Brewer shows, standardized weights and measures came into wide use in order to promote the ability of the state to extract tax revenues. Time keeping solved the problem of longitude, and finished the idea that time might run slower in some parts of the kingdom. 1800 marked the beginning of the measurable and knowable world, and the last moment it was still possible to believe in English magic.

But although it's set at the pivotal moment separating the world we know from our magical past, JSAMN – at least in its first three quarters – presents a rather ahistorical picture of political calm. Its world is one of clearly defined and largely uncontested class and gender roles and a political establishment that has banished the previous 150 years of sectarian bloodshed from memory and polite conversation. The titular characters are entirely certain and confident of their elevated places in society, and don't need to struggle either for material comfort or the regard of others. Strange and Norrell's lives seem far removed from Roy Porter's characterization of Regency England as a rough and tumble, devil take the hindmost world where "the margins were fine between thriving and faltering, being reputable and being reprobate". Later in the novel, Drawlight's precarious living and downfall expose the serene self-confidence of his benefactors as the exception, not the rule. But Strange & Norrell, and the political and military elite they become part of, share the historical amnesia and blindness to misfortune that is perhaps common to any establishment newly built on a shaky foundation.

Yoked to politics and war, magic is used to tinker genteelly at the edges of the established order by shoring up coastal towns or flood plains and wittily harrying Napoleon's troops. Magicians might kill with magic, but a gentlemen never could. Magic – perhaps precisely because it is a symbol of the unknowable and unstoppable anger seething just below the smooth surface of Regency England, and boiling over in Revolutionary France – is kept at arm's length in a manner that almost defies belief. Think about it. Equipped with the tactical equivalent of the atom bomb, would Wellington really keep Strange off to the side of the action, drumming up rain clouds and putting out fires? Wouldn't he in fact put magic at the centre of his strategy and work everything else around it? Or would Lord Liverpool truly be satisfied with just two magicians, and fill their days with public engineering works? Liverpool was a politician known for his ability to keep the various Tory factions together (a near-impossible task to this day), achieving power and remaining in it by harnessing rather than competing with the brilliance of his colleagues (Pitt and Peel to name two). Wouldn't he have found something a little more serious and transformative – and self-preserving - for the magicians to do?

Why is magic so *unrevolutionary* during most of the novel, and why is the reader prepared to swallow this? It's because we've been conditioned to read Regency England in a certain way, not only by Jane Austen, but by Georgette Heyer and a veritable host of other, much less talented writers of romances. Clarke finesses the impossibility of keeping magic under the sway and at the service of an unsuspecting establishment by playing to our expectations of Regency manners. Magic is unrespectable, we are told, the property of fairground performers. *Of course* political leaders trivialize magic by using it to fix the plumbing. While Clarke gives occasional refracted glimpses of a colourful, smelly and vaguely riotous London, she cleverly plays on our expectations that the main drama will play itself out in the drawing room of a great house. If magic is tempered and respectable enough to be admitted here, it can't be all that dangerous. Further, readers' familiarity and affection for Jane Austen's impeccably self-contained universe lead us to imbue the Regency world with a feeling of historic permanence that it simply didn't have. The refined manners and ladylike accomplishments so essential to a Regency husband-hunter would have been entirely a novelty to Lizzie Bennett's grandmother. Magic in JSAMN is apparently civilized by this English society, in that classically English style of droll comedy where the most extraordinary events are treated as business as usual. As the book goes on to show, however, this assimilation doesn't work. It relies on a kind of wishful thinking that makes about as much sense as believing Monty Python's Holy Grail tells the real story of the Crusades.



The suspension of disbelief necessary to make this work holds, just, until shortly before the battle of Waterloo. Up to then, there is little to suggest that the major political and military figures suffer anything more than the want of imagination when they assume magic is nothing more than a useful new tool that makes it easier to do the kinds of things that they want to do anyway, and not – as history tells them – a gap through which the enemy of everything they cherish will enter. There are glimpses of what is to come. Sir Walter Pole and Gen. Colquhoun Grant are disturbed by the other-worldly and unEnglish aspects of magic in the final third of the book. And Lascelles hints at how the public may come to have a distaste for the dark side of magic when he threatens to expose Strange’s use of ‘black magic’ in the Peninsular War. But they’re not really able to imagine past the world that they inhabit, a world that we’re familiar with too from our reading of fiction set in this period. They’re limited by the genre of story that they inhabit. Then, in the final part of the book, things change. There’s an unraveling of the comfortable assumptions on which the world of Messrs. Strange and Norrell is built.

In these final sections of the book, the tone darkens, there’s more action, and characters like Stephen Black and Childermass come into their own. Childermass is a liminal character; he moves deftly around the country and up and down the ladder of classes, conversing as easily with kitchen maids as with cabinet ministers. He is also the first to realize that Strange and Norrell have only been dabbling with a raw and mysterious power that threatens to destroy the certainties and comforts of the England they know. We get the sense that Childermass will adapt to the new order in a way that neither Strange nor Norrell will or can. He’s not the kind of character that you find in the foreground of Regency romance novels; he’s far more canny, complicated and self-aware (he has no choice but to be). Perhaps his closest equivalent is Becky Sharp, but he’s more directly opposed to his time than she is to hers. While Sharp wants simply to do as well as she can in a world that wants to keep her down, Childermass is looking forward (and backwards) to a different order, in which the Raven King returns. He doesn’t really fit very well into either Strange or Norrell’s story, and won’t permanently ally himself to either. Instead he wants – and deserves – a story of his own.

What is this power of which Childermass is the herald, and that threatens Strange and Norrell’s England so profoundly? One way of reading the novel is that magic is the return of actual history, with its struggles, complexities and brutalities to the artificial ‘histories’ of our collective imagination. It’s a sort of irruption of reality into the constructed universe of politesse that we imagine Regency England to have been.

Or, to put it another way, the novel is a sort of collision between two kinds of story. On the one hand, we have Austen's brilliant, sometimes bitter, but fundamentally *constrained* stories of an England in which women especially are bound by their class and station to play certain roles. Belle expresses beautifully something I'd felt too; a somewhat hurt surprise that the female characters are so much more acted upon than acting, but also a desire to give Clarke the benefit of the doubt. Mrs. Strange and Lady Pole are such perfect models of ideal Regency womanhood that they're almost parodic; even Fanny Price has more brass balls than the cheerfully supportive Arabella. In this story, our Austenian ideas of what marriage and class meant mesh vaguely together with the vague notions of love and high society in Regency England that we have imbibed from Georgette Heyer and her less talented imitators.

On the other hand, we have the stories of E.P. Thompson, Douglas Hay and other social historians, who write about the people who didn't really feature in Jane Austen's novels (the social historians got some stick too from feminist historians for not writing more about women, but at least made a start). As John Holbo writes, we see the rich inner lives of servants in Clarke's book; we also see dispossessed French refugees, Jews, workers, yeoman farmers and peasants poking out from beneath the fringes of the social tapestry. And towards the end of the book, Clarke forces us to remember that it was their England too. The real England of that period was the England of Ned Ludd, the London Corresponding Society, and what was to become the nucleus of the Chartist movement. It was the story (and E.P. Thompson tells a great story) of the Making of the English Working Class. It's this story which is the important one towards the end of the novel; we get the sense that the Regency England of our conventional literary imaginations is being displaced by something stranger and more complicated.

Of course, this could be a complete misreading of JSAMN. It may be wishful thinking on my part to read a darkly revolutionary subtext into Clarke's incongruously reactionary England. And, though I tried hard, I still can't actually imagine Becky Sharp crossing paths with Jonathan Strange on his bemused walk through Brussels on the eve of the battle of Waterloo. So, for these reasons, I hope Susanna Clarke's follow-up or responses on CT tell us more of what we don't already (think we) know.

*Who Is The Narrator of Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, and Where Are The Lady Magicians?*

Belle Waring

One of the most striking features of Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* are the copious footnotes, which veer between dry citation of imaginary magical histories and truly otherlandish narratives, like a series of charming miniatures. We encounter the first on the very first page: a bare reference to Jonathan Strange's *The History and Practice of English Magic*, which is not to be published for another ten years (and since, when published, it is instantly withdrawn from the public eye by Mr. Norrell's spiteful magic, perhaps not read for longer than ten years). This footnote makes Strange's the first of the two magicians' names the reader will encounter in the text proper, even before that of Mr. Norrell, a recapitulation of the order you see on the title page. This is so even though the tale which follows is concerned exclusively with Mr. Norrell for the next 125 pages or so, but is altogether right in view of the relative power and importance of the two magicians.

At times the footnotes come to dominate the page with a crabbed blackness all down the lower 7/8, leaving the main text to meander above in a thin stream only a few lines wide; the reader must then decide whether she will actually finish any of the sentences in the main text, or will turn aside to learn, say, the fascinating story of the Master of Nottingham's daughter, and how her wickedness was eventually repaid (pp. 240-243), and risk forgetting what the main text is on about. This required split in attention is familiar to anyone who has read a scholarly book, and it strikes me that, in some ways, we must consider *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* a scholarly book. Not to deny that it is a novel; I only mean to say that the experience of reading it is very like the experience of reading a scholarly book. (The footnotes are also an excellent device for presenting information likely known to the characters but unknown to the reader, avoiding the tedious "why don't I deliver a long monologue about our own history and culture to you, fellow character for whom the information is otiose" info-dumps which mar much fantasy and (much more) science fiction.)

But then if *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* is a kind of scholarly book, who is the scholar? From the outside, we may ask, who is narrating this novel? From within its confines, the question is more properly, who has written this imaginative history of the recent revival of English magic? A magical historian, obviously. An English

person. Someone not so much younger than Lady Pole, I imagine; consider the following:

In case there are any readers who do not remember the magicians' booths of our childhood, it ought to be stated that in shape the booth [that is, Vinculus'] rather resembled a Punch and Judy theatre or a shopkeeper's stall at a fair and that it was built of wood and canvas. A yellow curtain, ornamented to half its height with a thick crust of dirt, served both as a door and as a sign to advertise the services that were offered within. (p 179)

So, this person was a child, or little more than one, in the days before magic returned to England, and specifically before the time when Mr. Norrell hounded all the street magicians out of business. In the present time of the book's narration, of course, there must be a great many practicing magicians about, and thus no room for the card-palming hucksters of days gone by.

I submit that this person also knows, or has at least seen, Sir Walter Pole: "*To my mind* [emph. mine] he [Pole] was not so very plain. True, his features were all extremely bad... Yet, taken together, all these ugly parts made a rather pleasing whole. If you had seen that face in repose (proud and not a little melancholy), you must have imagined that it must always look so, that no face in existence could be so ill-adapted to express feeling. But you could not have been more wrong." (p. 65) This strikes me as a more personal description than that of Childermass, or Mr. Norrell, or the others. It is sympathetic and specifically rests on various mobile aspects of his face which could never be gleaned from an engraving. Now, you may well object that a great many things happen in the course of Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell of which no historian of magic or contemporary of Strange and Norrell's could have known anything: what Stephen thought about things the gentleman with the thistle-down hair said, or what they saw in Africa, or how Mr. Norrell looked as he stood outside the library at Hurlfrew and heard Strange inside, and so on. Obviously true. Still, where there are footnotes, there is someone sitting in front of a great pile of books, unable to find the page he wants—even if only by implication. So, I would explain this partial omniscience as a tribute to the imagination of our magical historian narrator.

Is this person a practicing magician? Almost certainly, since it would appear he must be a poor magical scholar indeed in this future England who cannot do real magic. After all, if 13-year-old Quaker girls can do magic from spells they see written out in pebbles (p. 692), then someone as learned as our narrator surely can too. There is some evidence to the effect as well. Consider these quotes, taken from the macabre

episode of the seventeen dead Neapolitans. This sentence, “Unfortunately, Strange was entirely unable to discover the spell for sending the dead Neapolitans back to their bitter sleep,” (p. 333) bears the following footnote: “To end the “lives” of the corpses you cut out their eyes, tongues, and hearts.” No reference to Thomas Lanchester, or other magical authorities; this reads, rather, like a straightforward piece of advice won from experience. One magician talking to another, in fact: “you cut out their eyes...”. It is easy to imagine the magician reader making a note of it, “that’s surely what I will do if the need arises.”

And speaking of Thomas Lanchester’s *Treatise concerning the Language of Birds*, first referred to by an agitated Mr. Norrell after his encounter with Vinculus, and later used to great effect at the novel’s climax—where did our narrator get a copy? The library at Hurtfew, like that in Hanover-Square, is being whisked about the realms of the world in a pillar of perpetual darkness at the novel’s close, hardly a recipe for easy access. We know that Mr. Norrell has gone to great lengths to amass every book of magic in England. Can it be that our narrator has only an incredibly detailed list of these works and their contents? No. Discussing the decline of English magic at their parting, Mr. Norrell asks Strange an irritating question:

“You are familiar, I dare say, with Watershippe’s *A Faire Wood Withering*?”  
“No, I do not know it,” said Strange. He gave Mr. Norrell a sharp look that seemed to say he had not read it for the usual reason. “But I cannot help wishing, sir, that you had said some of this before.” (pp 419-420)

The footnote to the mention of Watershippe’s book leaves no doubt that the narrator has read it:

*A Faire Wood Withering* (1444) by Peter Watershippe. This is a remarkably detailed description by a contemporary magician of how English magic declined after John Uskglass left England. In 1434 (the year of Uskglass’s departure) Watershippe was twenty-five, a young man just beginning to practice magic in Norwich. *A Faire Wood Withering* contains precise accounts of spells which were perfectly practicable as long as Uskglass and his fairy subjects remained in England, but which no longer had any effect after their departure. Indeed, it is remarkable how much of our knowledge of Aureate English magic comes from Watershippe. *A Faire Wood Withering* seems an angry book until one compares it with two of Watershippe’s later books: *A Defense of my Deeds Written while Wrongly Imprisoned by my Enemies in Newark Castle* (1459/60) and

*Crimes of the False King* (written 1461?, published 1697, Penzance) (footnote 4, chap. 39)

So, either more copies of all these works have surfaced, or the narrator has been to Hurlfew, or Strange has convinced Norrell to send copies to England, or...?

Having set myself this puzzle, I began to think it would be more satisfying if the narrator were in fact someone we have already met during the course of the book. Sadly, I cannot think of any compelling candidates. John Segundus is the most likely, in his way. He is a scholar of magic and seems destined always to be more an admirer than a practitioner, his successful use of Pale's Restoration and Rectification to rejoin Lady Pole's finger and break her enchantment notwithstanding. (p. 728) But he wrote a life of Jonathan Strange, referred to several times in footnotes, and hardly seems the sort to refer to himself in this way. In any case he lacks the imaginative presumption. Messrs. Strange and Norrell clearly have better things to do; Stephen Black is greatly occupied Elsewhere; Miss Greysteel would probably scruple to describe herself so flatteringly. Lady Pole certainly wishes to make her wrongs known, but is anyone less likely to turn magician? More importantly, she would paint a blacker Mr. Norrell, and a much blacker Mr. Strange, than our narrator. Arabella Strange? Again, she does not strike me as the sort to turn magical scholar. Childermass is impossible. No, it must be some future magician scholar.

Here I must confess to a bit of pointless speculation. I think that perhaps our narrator may be one of those present at the second meeting of the Learned Society of York Magicians, which forms the bookend for the narration. The "magicians" disbanded by Norrell re-group, in the company of many new practicing magicians. Deprived of all the books in Mr. Norrell's peripatetic libraries, they must begin anew, learning English magic in the old way, from the book the Raven King has newly inscribed on Vinculus' skin. Much discord clearly awaits them, just as Strange foretold in his comment quoted on the first page: "[magicians] must pound and rack their brains to make the least learning go in, but quarrelling always comes naturally to them." (Indeed, the comment is much more apt now than at the time of his writing, when there were only two magicians, admittedly quarrelling ones.) The new Society is much more heterogenous, including even "a young, striking-looking female person in a red velvet gown." This does not sit well with the older members, who seem to be Norrellites in this respect at least; they do not think unsuitable people should learn magic, and "female persons" are of necessity unsuitable.

I am pleased to imagine that this female person in the red velvet dress outgrows her youthful radical Strangeism, becomes a great magician, and late in life pens this only moderately Strangeite work we now read. In truth, there is less than no reason to think so, only a sort of longing brought on by a look at the spine of the novel.

This brings me to touch only briefly on my second question, where are the female magicians? Now, this reaction is in some ways entirely unfair, but I feel a small twinge of disappointment when I read an amazing book like this, written by a female author, in which (male) heroes come to know themselves, restore order, and recapture their lost women from the villain's bondage. Not to say that this isn't normally how things go—quite the contrary. But it is so thoroughly how things go, particularly in the realm of “fantasy”, that I cannot help feeling a bit chagrined. (Similarly, why isn't goddamn Harry Potter *Hermione* Potter? Why not?)

I am aware that this feeling in myself may be too tainted by Mary Sue fantasies to constitute a valid aesthetic reaction. And I can think of excellent reasons why this book is not about Josephine Strange and Mr. Norrell, the best of which is that some other Mr. Norrell would be required to make the thing work. (But then, it's not as though this Mr. Norrell bubbled up out of the ground in his present, unalterable form.) Also, the meticulously maintained historical tone of the novel, which may be even more genius than the fantastic imaginative elements, militates against having a romance-novel heroine who overturns every social convention without much trying. For even if magic has changed many things in Clarke's world, it has clearly not made the least alteration to English manners.

And yet, is a black man, a freed slave, not the hero of a novel convincingly set in the social milieu of the Napoleonic wars? Would it be any more unlikely, any stranger, to have a woman who uses magic? A woman who does something other than be beautiful, or amiable and devoted to Jonathan Strange, or beautiful and amiable and devoted to Jonathan Strange? A woman who does not just suffer convincingly under the watery light cast by a Venetian mirror?

I feel a bit shy criticizing Ms. Clarke about this, since literary criticism is not reverse-engineered fanfic, and *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* is a wonderful novel. However, if it should turn out that I am right about the female person in the red velvet dress, I myself would be even more amiably disposed to this fine book.

*Two Thoughts (About Magic Christians and Two Cities)*

John Holbo

Here are, more or less, two thoughts on Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*.

§1 The Magic Christians

The setting is England at the turn of the 19th Century. Once upon a time, there was real magic - no more. Hence such comedy as the York Society Of Magicians:

They were gentleman-magicians, which is to say they had never harmed any one by magic - nor ever done any one the slightest good. In fact, to own the truth, not one of these magicians had ever cast the smallest spell, nor by magic caused one leaf to tremble on a tree, made one mote of dust to alter its course or changed a single hair upon any one's head. But, with this one minor reservation, they enjoyed a reputation as some of the wisest and most magical gentlemen in Yorkshire.

John Segundus appears, who “wished to know, he said, why modern magicians were unable to work the magic they wrote about. In short, he wished to know why there was no more magic done in England.”; The society is discomfited.

The President of the York society (whose name was Dr. Foxcastle) turned to John Segundus and explained that the question was a wrong one. “It presupposes that magicians have some sort of duty to do magic - which is clearly nonsense. You would not, I imagine, suggest that it is the task of botanists to devise more flowers? Or that astronomers should labour to rearrange the stars? Magicians, Mr. Segundus, study magic which was done long ago. Why should anyone expect more?”

Magic is socially disagreeable, “the bosom companion of unshaven faces, gypsies, house-breakers ; the frequenter of dingy rooms with dirty yellow curtains. A gentleman might study the history of magic (nothing could be nobler) but he could not do any.” A debate breaks out. A few members are roused from historicist slumbers to Secundus' defense. One such - Honeyfoot - soon explains to Segundus



about the Learned Society of Magicians of Manchester, a failed clutch of magical positivist hedge wizards.

It was a society of quite recent foundation ... and its members were clergymen of the poorer sort, respectable ex-tradesmen, apothecaries, lawyers, retired mill owners who had got up a little Latin and so forth, such people as might be termed half-gentlemen. I believe Dr. Foxcastle was glad when they disbanded - he does not think that people of that sort have any business becoming magicians. And yet, you know, there were several clever men among them. They began, as you did, with the aim of bringing back practical magic to the world. They were practical men and wished to apply the principles of reason and science to magic as they had done to the manufacturing arts. They called it 'Rational Thaumaturgy'. when it did not work they became discouraged. Well, they cannot be blamed for that. But they let their disillusionment lead them into all sorts of difficulties. They began to think that there was not now nor ever had been magic in the world. They said that the Aureate magicians were all deceivers or were themselves deceived. And that the Raven King was an invention of the northern English to keep themselves from the tyranny of the South (being north-country men themselves they had some sympathy with that.) Oh, their arguments were very ingenious - I forget how they explained fairies.

If only Max Weber had written "Magic as Vocation" [*Zauber als Beruf*], on the process through which the activity of enchantment has gradually become disenchanting.

A fond fallacy of fantasy - Tolkien being the classic case - is the illogical *felt* implication that somehow, were there elves and dwarves and magic rings and wizards and dragons, politics and morality would be so much *simpler*. Fairies would make feudalism *fairer*. As Isaiah Berlin writes in "Two Concepts of Magic," "those who put their faith in some immense, world-transforming thaumaturgy, like the final triumph of white magic or victory over the Dark One, must believe that all political and moral problems can thereby be turned into magical ones." Jane Austen would have known that without Sir Isaiah's help.

And so Norrell, on arrival in London, is helpless to make contact with the powers that be, despite the power inside him, until something magical happens: "Like the hero of a fairy-tale Mr. Norrell had discovered that the power to do what he wished had been his own all along. Even a magician must have relations, and so it happened that there was a distant connexion of Mr. Norrell (on his mother's side)

who had once made himself highly disagreeable to Mr. Norrell by writing him a letter ...” Mr. Markworthy makes the necessary introduction to Sir Walter Pole.

There is a tipping point in the novel when magic begins truly to reassert itself as a fundamental force, ceasing to be merely this thing that floats lightly over the surface of the more consequential sphere of *manners*. But let's stick with the Austenian opening, before the drawing room atmospherics are somewhat diffused upon exposure to much wider realms.

You *could* just say Clarke writes 'magical realism'. But that raises at least one question: is the category of 'magical realism' any use? Here (at <http://www.public.asu.edu/~aarios/resourcebank/definitions> ) someone has compiled a convenient set of definitions and glosses; which, however, omits Gene Wolfe's suggestion that 'magical realism is fantasy written in Spanish.'

I'll quote the first definition, which apparently really is the first (from 1925):

Magical Realism - We recognize the world, although now - not only because we have emerged from a dream - we look on it with new eyes. We are offered a new style that is thoroughly of this world, that celebrates the mundane. This new world of objects is still alien to the current idea of Realism. It employs various techniques that endow all things with a deeper meaning and reveal mysteries that always threaten the secure tranquility of simple and ingenuous things. This [art offers a] calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces, [this] means that the ground in which the most diverse ideas in the world can take root has been reconquered - albeit in new ways. For the new art it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world. Does this sound like Clarke to you? I'm undecided.

Perhaps we can take the 'written in Spanish' bull by the horns. Consider the following pair of comments. First, from a *Salon* interview with Clarke:

**Susanna, your book is striking for its use of a kind of voice that is like the signature of the Enlightenment. It's the voice of reason that you have very common-sensically describing all these dreamlike things. It's really a voice that belongs to the birth of the novel. It's the root voice of novels.**

S.C: That's true, but I can't say it's in any way deliberate. It's funny, because I don't think of myself as a novelist. I think of myself as a writer. I tell stories. I kind of stumbled on that by trying to combine Jane Austen and magic.

Second, from Gabriel García Márquez (quoted at [http://www.themodernword.com/gabo/gabo\\_mr.html](http://www.themodernword.com/gabo/gabo_mr.html)):

The tone that I eventually used in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was based on the way my grandmother used to tell stories. She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with complete naturalness ... What was most important was the expression she had on her face. She did not change her expression at all when telling her stories and everyone was surprised. In previous attempts to write, I tried to tell the story without believing in it. I discovered that what I had to do was believe in them myself and write them with the same expression with which my grandmother told them: with a brick face.

It is tempting to say that the common denominator here is not so much realism as understatement. This fits with a bit from the wikipedia entry on 'magical realism'. It is suggested that E.T.A. Hoffman qualifies on account of the 'down-to-earth tone of confessional journalism'; in which his supernatural tales are narrated.

I am reminded of the classic Mark Twain essay, "How To Cast A Spell." No, wait, that's not the title:

The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it; but the teller of the comic story tells you beforehand that it is one of the funniest things he has ever heard, then tells it with eager delight, and is the first person to laugh when he gets through. And sometimes, if he has had good success, he is so glad and happy that he will repeat the " " of it and glance around from face to face, collecting applause, and then repeat it again. It is a pathetic thing to see.

I think you can see how a similar contrast might be drawn between 'magical realism' and some over the top gothic production or epic swords & sorcery trilogy which can hardly keep itself from shouting out, while grabbing you by both shoulders - 'Wouldn't it be cool to meet an elf!' Anyway, the point is: there are ever so many ways to manage a sort of stable irony of understatement in which nothing about the

teller's tone seems to telegraph sufficient awareness of astonishing content. In the case of Clarke, there is a sort of additional, subtle calibration, in that the renaissance of English practical magic is astonishing to these Christian gentlemen; yet - being magic Christians from the start, merely lapsed ones - they are not astonished in the *way* we are. Twain might have appreciated it: one way to tell a humorous story is to tell it *like* a comic story, but make sure to collect applause and glance eagerly from face to face at ever so slightly the wrong moment.

It is tricky to say why this sort of stable irony is so satisfying. I certainly find it to be so. It isn't because it is 'realistic', I think. Because it often isn't. Discuss.

And now, another point entirely.

§2 If those eyes of yours were bed-witches and I was an English four-poster, they shouldn't lose a splinter of me

Clarke's novel reminds me of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Let me sort of wind my way around this point in what I hope will prove an interesting fashion.

There are two significant loyal servant characters in *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*. The first is Norrell's agent, the enigmatic and rather autonomous Childermass. The other is Stephen Black, the loyal, mild and competent negro manservant of Lord Pole, whom our sinister fairy villain - the gentleman with the thistledown hair - would raise up from his humble station, restoring his lost true name and placing him on the throne of England.

If you were inclined to read *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* as a parable of politically conservative wisdom, you might read our thistledown-haired gentleman as a parodic *reductio ad absurdum* of Jacobinism run to its mad extreme. Ingenious proposals for ideal realms; heartless and insincere, fundamentally self-centered proposals to right wrongs. The proverbially delusive beauty of faeries, who seem so much more perfect than humans. A basically inhuman mind, the faery mind. More on Jacobinism in a moment.

There are also anxieties ... about the immigrant problem.

After the birds the next thing to haunt Mr. Norrell's imagination were the wide, cold puddles that were thickly strewn across every field. As the carriage passed along the road each puddle became a silver mirror for the blank, winter sky. To

a magician there is very little difference between a mirror and a door. England seemed to be wearing thin before his eyes. He felt as if he might pass through any of those mirror-doors and find himself in one of the other worlds which once bordered upon England. Worse still, he was beginning to think that other people might do it. The Sussex landscape began to look uncomfortably like the England described in the old ballad:

This land is all too shallow  
It is painted on the sky  
And trembles like the wind-shook rain  
When the Raven King passed by

For the first time in his life Mr. Norrell began to feel that perhaps there was too much magic in England.

Another very central and memorable story element is Mrs. Strange's escape from captivity in Faerie, out through a mirror - into the arms of good, solid, reliable English folk.

With a frantic look she surveyed the unknown room, the unknown faces, the unfamiliar look of everything. "Is this Faerie?" she asked.

"No, madam," answered Flora.

"Is it England?"

"No, madam." Tears began to course down Flora's face. She put her hand on her breast to steady herself. "This is Padua. In Italy. My name is Flora Greysteel. It is a name quite unknown to you, but I have waited for you here at your husband's desire. I promised him I would meet you here."

"Is Jonathan here?"

"No, madam."

"You are Arabella Strange," said Dr. Greysteel in amazement.

"Yes," she said.

“Oh, my dear!” exclaimed Aunt Greysteel, one hand flying to cover her mouth and the other to her heart. “Oh, my dear!” Then both hands fluttered around Arabella's face and shoulders. “Oh, my dear!” she exclaimed for the third time. She burst into tears and embraced Arabella.

Fantastic names - Lancelot Greysteel, father of Flora - combine with tears and fluttering hands of femininity very effectively. All very sentimental, but delightfully staged. (Also, the scene in which their loyal servant, Frank, responds to an insidious offer by properly kicking the “venomous cowardly backguard” Drawlight provides us with another portrait of the virtues of loyal servants.)

Let me, however, share with you a contrary judgment on the Greysteels. John Clute writes:

Around about here, Clarke almost drops the ball. After the apparent death of his wife, Strange has gone to Venice, where on page 568—very late to introduce significant characters—he meets an entire family named Greysteel, who turn out in fact to have absolutely no function in the story that could not have been conveyed otherwise, through other eyes and hands, in a paragraph or two. But Clarke can't leave them alone, even though her huge prologue of a novel is begging to have to end. I think, once again, it is the trap of the style: It is so much fun to write the Greysteels, to explore their Englishry in Clarke's unstoppably impeccable Austenese, that nobody cared to tell her to scissor them out completely, nobody seems to have cared that she almost loses her novel right here, because of her virtues. Virtue is not enough. ... But finally the Greysteels do traipse offstage, in the end, when there is no way to retain them any longer. The story bales itself of them. They sink into the lagoon. Bye-bye.

I could hardly disagree more. Now the Dickens connection. I am thinking of the roles of the heroic servants in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Jerry Cruncher but, above all, Miss Pross. My point is going to be that Clarke has renovated certain Dickensian tropes that, to put it kindly, simply cannot, without renovation, be ... recalled to life.

But let me first remind you of something you have perhaps forgotten about Dickens' novel. *Two Cities* is eerie, with its theme of resurrection. Lost true names. Live burial. 'Resurrection-men'. The mad revolutionaries. Desperate escape to England from a hostile alien land that borders it. Even a kind of heroic changeling self-sacrifice. (Far, far better thing I do.) I'll quote a few bits I like. Very atmospheric they are.

All through the cold and restless interval, until dawn, they once more whispered in the ears of Mr. Jarvis Lorry - sitting opposite the buried man who had been dug out, and wondering what subtle powers were for ever lost to him, and what were capable of restoration - the old inquiry:

'I hope you care to be recalled to life?'

And the old answer:

'I can't say.'

As creepy a call and response as any in a ghost story. And, as our heroes are fleeing a nightmare land:

The wind is rushing after us, and the clouds are flying after us, and the moon is plunging after us, and the whole wild night is in pursuit of us; but, so far we are pursued by nothing else.

The revolutionaries are - to push a point - like child-snatching fairies, malignantly obedient to their own inscrutable imperatives as they wreck human lives:

'See you,' said madame, 'I care nothing for this Doctor, I. He may wear his head or lose it, for any interest I have in him; it is all one to me. But, the Evrémonde people are to be exterminated, and the wife and child must follow the husband and father.'

'She has a fine head for it,' croaked Jacques Three. 'I have seen blue eyes and golden hair there, and they looked charming when Samson held them up.' Ogre that he was, he spoke like an epicure.

Madame Defarge cast down her eyes, and reflected a little. 'The child also,' observed Jacques Three, with a meditative enjoyment of his words, 'has golden hair and blue eyes. And we seldom have a child there. It is a pretty sight!'

Of course, Defarge has her reasons. But, having concocted them, Dickens goes out of his way to dismiss them as non-explanatory. She's just plain inhuman: "they were her natural enemies and her prey, and as such had no right to live. To appeal to her, was made hopeless by her having no sense of pity, even for herself. If she had

been laid low in the streets, in any of the many encounters in which she had been engaged, she would not have pitied herself.”

On to the servant question. I couldn't possibly *not* quote Orwell from “Charles Dickens”:

But what is curious, in a nineteenth-century radical, is that when he wants to draw a sympathetic picture of a servant, he creates what is recognizably a feudal type. Sam Weller, Mark Tapley, Clara Peggotty are all of them feudal figures. They belong to the *genre* of the ‘old family retainer’; they identify themselves with their master's family and are at once doggishly faithful and completely familiar. No doubt Mark Tapley and Sam Weller are derived to some extent from Smollett, and hence from Cervantes; but it is interesting that Dickens should have been attracted by such a type. Sam Weller's attitude is definitely medieval. He gets himself arrested in order to follow Mr. Pickwick into the Fleet, and afterwards refuses to get married because he feels that Mr. Pickwick still needs his services. There is a characteristic scene between them:

‘Vages or no vages, board or no board, lodgin' or no lodgin', Sam Veller, as you took from the old inn in the Borough, sticks by you, come what may...’

‘My good fellow’, said Mr. Pickwick, when Mr. Weller had sat down again, rather abashed at his own enthusiasm, ‘you are bound to consider the young woman also.’

‘I do consider the young 'ooman, sir’, said Sam. ‘I have considered the young 'ooman. I've spoke to her. I've told her how I'm sitivated; she's ready to wait till I'm ready, and I believe she will. If she don't, she's not the young 'ooman I take her for, and I give up with readiness.’

It is easy to imagine what the young woman would have said to this in real life. But notice the feudal atmosphere. Sam Weller is ready as a matter of course to sacrifice years of his life to his master, and he can also sit down in his master's presence. A modern manservant would never think of doing either. Dickens's views on the servant question do not get much beyond wishing that master and servant would love one another. Sloppy in *Our Mutual Friend*, though a wretched failure as a character, represents the same kind of loyalty as Sam



Weller. Such loyalty, of course, is natural, human, and likeable; but so was feudalism.

The Sam problem is, of course, the Sam and Frodo problem - hence, a perennial one for fantasy fiction and its feudal fixations. (Homosociality is not homosexuality. Still.) Let me just remind you about the servant-master pairs in *Two Cities*. Jarvis Lorry/Jerry Cruncher, Lucie Manette/Miss Pross.

In the first case, there are marvellous visual contrasts worthy of Mervyn Peake. The ancient banker in his dome of glass; his dogsbody wearing a crown of spikes. Cruncher's wreath of black hair: "It was so like smith's work, so much more like the top of a strongly spiked wall than a head of hair, that the best of players at leap-frog might have declined him, as the most dangerous man in the world to go over."

And Lorry: "He wore an odd little sleek crisp flaxen wig, setting very close to his head: which wig, it is to be presumed, was made of hair, but which looked far more as though it were spun from filaments of silk or glass."

There is the requisite loyalty relation. Here Lorry is explaining how Cruncher is the best choice for a bodyguard as he ventures back into France for the sake of recovering Tellson's precious paperwork: "Nobody will suspect Jerry of being anything but an English bull-dog, or of having any design in his head but to fly at anybody who touches his master." (Yes, Jerry is a part-time resurrection-man, unbeknownst to Lorry. But even a loyal dog may dig up the occasional item on his own time.)

Lorry and Cruncher are an endearing couple. But the really tremendous scene comes when Pross shows her mettle against Defarge. Dickens cannot resist making ridiculous fun of his twin Horatios at the bridge, standing with self-sacrificing nobility - because they are, after all, just *servants*, covering the retreats of the upper class characters.

'My opinion, miss,' returned Mr. Cruncher, 'is as, you're right. Likewise wot I'll stand by you, right or wrong.'

'I am so distracted with fear and hope for our precious creatures,' said Miss Pross, wildly crying, 'that I am incapable of forming any plan. Are YOU capable of forming any plan, my dear good Mr. Cruncher?'

‘Respectin’ a future spear o’ life, miss,’ returned Mr. Cruncher, ‘I hope so. Respectin’ any ‘present use o’ this here blessed old head o’ mine, I think not. Would you do me the favour, miss, to take notice o’ two promises and vows wot it is my wishes fur to record in this here crisis?’

‘Oh, for gracious sake!’ cried Miss Pross, still wildly crying, ‘record them at once, and get them out of the way, like an excellent man.’

‘First,’ said Mr. Cruncher, who was all in a tremble, and who spoke with an ashy and solemn visage, ‘them poor things well out o’ this, never no more will I do it, never no more!’

‘I am quite sure, Mr. Cruncher,’ returned Miss Pross, ‘that you never will do it again, whatever it is, and I beg you not to think it necessary to mention more particularly what it is.’

‘No, miss,’ returned Jerry, ‘it shall not be named to you. Second: them poor things well out o’ this, and never no more will I interfere with Mrs. Cruncher’s flopping, never no more!’

‘Whatever housekeeping arrangement that may be,’ said Miss Pross, striving to dry her eyes and compose herself, ‘I have no doubt it is best that Mrs. Cruncher should have it entirely under her own superintendence. - O my poor darlings!’

And finally evil fairy Defarge appears and Pross gives fierce battle. Here I’m just going to do an odd thing and cut and paste most of III, chapter 14, ‘The Knitting Done’. If this appalling lack of focus on Clarke offends, please just scroll, scroll. My reason for quoting the whole thing is that the sheer weirdness of the dialogue - by Dickensian standards, by any standards - has to be appreciated in its entirety. Both characters speak to themselves in bizarre soliloquys. The conceit is that neither can understand the other because of the language barrier. But such strangely unnatural combat loquacity is not equalled again until Stan Lee starts writing tin-horn dialogue to accompany Kirby productions.

Afraid, in her extreme perturbation, of the loneliness of the deserted rooms, and of half-imagined faces peeping from behind every open door in them, Miss Pross got a basin of cold water and began laving her eyes, which were swollen and red. Haunted by her feverish apprehensions, she could not bear to have her sight obscured for a minute at a time by the dripping water, but constantly

paused and looked round to see that there was no one watching her. In one of those pauses she recoiled and cried out, for she saw a figure standing in the room.

The basin fell to the ground broken, and the water flowed to the feet of Madame Defarge. By strange stern ways, and through much staining blood, those feet had come to meet that water.

Madame Defarge looked coldly at her, and said, 'The wife of Evrémonde; where is she?'

It flashed upon Miss Pross's mind that the doors were all standing open, and would suggest the flight. Her first act was to shut them. There were four in the room, and she shut them all. She then placed herself before the door of the chamber which Lucie had occupied.

Madame Defarge's dark eyes followed her through this rapid movement, and rested on her when it was finished. Miss Pross had nothing beautiful about her; years had not tamed the wildness, or softened the grimness, of her appearance; but, she too was a determined woman in her different way, and she measured Madame Defarge with her eyes, every inch.

'You might, from your appearance, be the wife of Lucifer,' said Miss Pross, in her breathing. 'Nevertheless, you shall not get the better of me. I am an Englishwoman.'

Madame Defarge looked at her scornfully, but still with something of Miss Pross's own perception that they two were at bay. She saw a tight, hard, wiry woman before her, as Mr. Lorry had seen in the same figure a woman with a strong hand, in the years gone by. She knew full well that Miss Pross was the family's devoted friend; Miss Pross knew full well that Madame Defarge was the family's malevolent enemy.

'On my way yonder,' said Madame Defarge, with a slight movement of her hand towards the fatal spot, 'where they reserve my chair and my knitting for me, I am come, to make my compliments to her in passing. I wish to see her.'

'I know that your intentions are evil,' said Miss Pross, 'and you may depend upon it, I'll hold my own against them.'

Each spoke in her own language; neither understood the other's words; both were very watchful, and intent to deduce from look and manner, what the unintelligible words meant.

'It will do her no good to keep herself concealed from me at this moment,' said Madame Defarge. 'Good patriots will know what that means. Let me see her. Go tell her that I wish to see her. Do you hear?'

'If those eyes of yours were bed-witches,' returned Miss Pross, 'and I was an English four-poster, they shouldn't loose a splinter of me. No, you wicked foreign woman; I am your match.'

Madame Defarge was not likely to follow these idiomatic remarks in detail; but, she so far understood them as to perceive that she was set at naught.

'Woman imbecile and pig-like!' said Madame Defarge, frowning. 'I take no answer from you. I demand to see her. Either tell her that I demand to see her, or stand out of the way of the door and let me go to her!' This, with an angry explanatory wave of her right arm.

'I little thought,' said miss Pross, 'that I should ever want to understand your nonsensical language; but I would give all I have, except the clothes I wear, to know whether you suspect the truth, or any part of it.'

Neither of them for a single moment released the other's eyes. Madame Defarge had not moved from the spot where she stood when Miss Pross first became aware of her; but she now advanced one step.

'I am a Briton,' said Miss Pross, 'I am desperate. I don't care an English Two-pence for myself. I know that the longer I keep you here, the greater hope there is for my Ladybird. I'll not leave a handful of that dark hair upon your head, if you lay a finger on me!'

Thus Miss Pross, with a shake of her head and a flash of her eyes between every rapid sentence, and every rapid sentence a whole breath. Thus Miss Pross, who had never struck a blow in her life.

But, her courage was of that emotional nature that it brought the irrepressible tears into her eyes. This was a courage that Madame Defarge so little comprehended as to mistake for weakness. 'Ha, ha!' she laughed, 'you poor wretch! What are you worth! I address myself to that Doctor.' Then she raised her voice and called out, 'Citizen Doctor! Wife of Evrémonte! Child of Evrémonte! Any person but this miserable fool, answer the Citizeness Defarge!'

Perhaps the following silence, perhaps some latent disclosure in the expression of Miss Pross's face, perhaps a sudden misgiving apart from either suggestion, whispered to Madame Defarge that they were gone. Three of the doors she opened swiftly, and looked in.

'Those rooms are all in disorder, there has been hurried packing, there are odds and ends upon the ground. There is no one in that room behind you! Let me look.'

'Never!' said Miss Pross, who understood the request as perfectly as Madame Defarge understood the answer.

'If they are not in that room, they are gone, and can be pursued and brought back,' said Madame Defarge to herself.

'As long as you don't know whether they are in that room or not, you are uncertain what to do,' said Miss Pross to herself; 'and you shall not know that, if I can prevent your knowing it; and know that, or not know that, you shall not leave here while I can hold you.'

'I have been in the streets from the first, nothing has stopped me, I will tear you to pieces, but I will have you from that door,' said Madame Defarge.

'We are alone at the top of a high house in a solitary courtyard, we are not likely to be heard, and I pray for bodily strength to keep you here, while every minute you are here is worth a hundred thousand guineas to my darling,' said Miss Pross.

Madame Defarge made at the door. Miss Pross, on the instinct of the moment, seized her round tile waist in both her arms, and held her tight. It was in vain for Madame Defarge to struggle and to strike; Miss Pross, with the vigorous

tenacity of love, always so much stronger than hate, clasped her tight, and even lifted her from the floor in the struggle that they had. The two hands of Madame Defarge buffeted and tore her face; but, Miss Pross, with her head down, held her round the waist, and clung to her with more than the hold of a drowning woman.

Soon, Madame Defarge's hands ceased to strike, and felt at her encircled waist. 'It is under my arm,' said Miss Pross, in smothered tones, 'you shall not draw it. I am stronger than you, I bless Heaven for it. I'll hold you till one or other of us faints or dies!'

Madame Defarge's hands were at her bosom. Miss Pross looked up, saw what it was, struck at it, struck out a flash and a crash, and stood alone - blinded with smoke.

All this was in a second. As the smoke cleared, leaving an awful stillness, it passed out on the air, like the soul of the furious woman whose body lay lifeless on the ground.

In the first fright and horror of her situation, Miss Pross passed the body as far from it as she could, and ran down the stairs to call for fruitless help. Happily, she bethought herself of the consequences of what she did, in time to check herself and go back. It was dreadful to go in at the door again; but, she did go in, and even went near it, to get the bonnet and other things that she must wear. These she put on, out on the staircase, first shutting and locking the door and taking away the key. She then sat down on the stairs a few moments to breathe and to cry, and then got up and hurried away.

By good fortune she had a veil on her bonnet, or she could hardly have gone along the streets without being stopped. By good fortune, too, she was naturally so peculiar in appearance as not to show disfigurement like any other woman. She needed both advantages, for the marks of griping fingers were deep in her face, and her hair was torn, and her dress (hastily composed with unsteady hands) was clutched and dragged a hundred ways

In crossing the bridge, she dropped the door key in the river. Arriving at the cathedral some few minutes before her escort, and waiting there, she thought, what if the key were already taken in a net, what if it were identified, what if the door were opened and the remains discovered, what if she were stopped at the

gate, sent to prison, and charged with murder! In the midst of these fluttering thoughts, the escort appeared, took her in, and took her away.

'Is there any noise in the streets?' she asked him.

'The usual noises,' Mr. Cruncher replied; and looked surprised by the question and by her aspect.

'I don't hear you,' said Miss Pross. 'What do you say?'

It was in vain for Mr. Cruncher to repeat what he said; Miss Pross could not hear him. 'So I'll nod my head,' thought Mr. Cruncher, amazed, 'at all events she'll see that.' And she did.

'Is there any noise in the streets now?' asked Miss Pross again, presently.

Again Mr. Cruncher nodded his head.

'I don't hear it.'

'Gone deaf in a hour?' said Mr. Cruncher, ruminating, with his mind much disturbed; 'wot's come to her?'

'I feel,' said Miss Pross, 'as if there had been a flash and a crash, and that crash was the last thing I should ever hear in this life.'

'Blest if she ain't in a queer condition!' said Mr. Cruncher, more and more disturbed. 'Wot can she have been a takin', to keep her courage up? Hark! There's the roll of them dreadful carts! You can hear that, miss?'

'I can hear,' said Miss Pross, seeing that he spoke to her, 'nothing. O, my good man, there was first a great crash, and then a great stillness, and that stillness seems to be fixed and unchangeable, never to be broken any more as long as my life lasts.'

'If she don't hear the roll of those dreadful carts, now very nigh their journey's end,' said Mr. Cruncher, glancing over his shoulder, 'it's my opinion that indeed she never will hear anything else in this world.'

And indeed she never did.

After all that, back to *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*.

The comparative point I am getting at is that in both cases the climax of the action involves a servant - a humble character - called upon to stand against the terrible malignant force, be it fairy gentleman or Madam Defarge. There is also the precise parallel of servants called upon to sacrificially cover the escape of upper class women. The pathos of these scenes is a function of these humble figures suddenly invested with unanticipated strength - specifically, strength derived from the land itself; Pross as (four-poster) English heart of oak. I won't tell you what happens to Stephen, except that the spell works. The final battle scars the humble defender. Anyway, that's how you rig these things. If you like this sort of thing. Which I certainly do. (Cf. Granny Weatherwax, another Pross descendant, in the climactic scene of Pratchett's *Lords and Ladies*.)

That said, you just can't go and write a damn ridiculous fight scene like Dickens did. Not today. Honestly, you'd die of mortification. You certainly can't treat servants with such comic disrespect as Dickens does. One possible solution is to refuse the whole Sam-Frodo dynamic as intolerable. It would be quite funny to write sort of a cross between *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Remains of the Day*, in which the Sam character is dutifully following his Frodo, only to have it emerge that - far from being on some heroic quest - the master is up to something wrong and idiotic, and now the servant has wasted his life in service to moral error. Not only does he not get the girl, who has sensibly refused to wait. Maybe he finds that he has also turned into a Nazgul or something for his pains.

The alternative is to retain something of the original while investing characters like Childermass and Stephen with more dignity and fullness than Cruncher and Pross have. I think Clarke pulls it off. I should add that I can perfectly well see that treating your servant characters with dignity isn't exactly the toughest trick in the literary book. For one thing, you can have them both safely out of servant harness by the end of the book. I guess I'm just sort of amused to think of Stephen Black as a literary descendent of Miss Pross, which is otherwise highly counter-intuitive.

You might object that Stephen is much more of a central character than Pross, but actually - if you think about it - he doesn't really do anything much until the end. He has an excuse, of course, being under the gentleman's spell.



One last point about Stephen. The symbolism of him wearily going about his duties in Lord Pole's household, while the gentleman is lavishing gifts on him while charming everyone else into not noticing, is quite brilliant. Stephen ends up with all the finest treasure of Europe in his humble bedroom, while remaining the servant he has always been. The idea of the servant with his rich life no one else can see - ordinarily an inner life, as in *Remains of the Day* - but here a sort of outer life. A cruel sort of rich inner/outer life. As Dickens famously opens chapter 3 of *Two Cities*:

Wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, if some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it! Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is referable to this.

## *Return of the King*

Henry Farrell

John Crowley's novel, *Aegypt* retells the old story of the King of the Cats. A traveler hears one cat say to another, "tell Dildrum that Doldrum is dead." When he returns home and tells his wife, their family cat jumps from its place beside the fire crying, "Then I'm to be king of the cats!" and shoots up the chimney, never to be seen again. In the words of Crowley's character, Pierce Moffatt:

That story had made him shiver and wonder, and ponder for days; not the story that had been told, but the secret story that had not been told: the story about the cats, the secret story that had been going on all along and that no one knew but they.

There's absolutely nothing to suggest that Susanna Clarke was thinking of this passage when writing *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* (henceforth JSAMN). She's surely familiar with Crowley – one of Childermass's prophetic cards seems to have been abstracted from Great Aunt Cloud's deck in *Little, Big* - but JSAMN is decidedly its own book with its own themes and quiddities. Yet the passage from Crowley is helpful in identifying what kind of story JSAMN is. It's a story of the King of the Cats. The point of the tale isn't what it seems to be. The very title of the book is misleading: Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell aren't nearly as important as they think they are. There's a hidden story there, which is whispered through the gaps between the actions of the main protagonists. As the vagabond prophet Vinculus tells Childermass, the magicians aren't so much actors as acted through, less the spellcasters than the spell itself; Vinculus himself, as his name suggests, is one of the chains that binds the two magicians to their allotted task. The magicians fail in their task, as they're supposed to – the future of Clarke's England belongs to other people than they.

So if the story isn't really about Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, what *is* it about? As Neil Gaiman says in his blurb for the novel, it's an *English* novel of the fantastic, and the main argument of the book, as I read it, is an argument about what it means to be English. Like Hope Mirlees' *Lud-in-the-Mist*, the novel is structured around a tension between the land of Faerie and the complacent verities of English society. But Clarke goes deeper in her argument, which depicts Faerie not as a separate realm so much as the unacknowledged root of what it is to be English. The

history of magic, and by extension the history of England has been deliberately forgotten – “all that was not easily comprehensible to modern ladies and gentlemen – John Uskglass’s three-hundred-year reign, the strange uneasy history of our dealings with fairies – might conveniently be done away with.” The return of magic might upset the settled notions of English society; as a member of the York Society of Learned Magicians notes at the beginning of the book, practical magic is no fit business for gentlemen. When it does return, it returns through the agency of Mr. Norrell, who has consciously chosen to become a desiccated conservative for fear of where wild magic might lead to, and Jonathan Strange, who for all his Byronic sympathies is a product of England’s upper classes and their unconscious prejudices. Magic becomes a means to construct roads for the convenience of Wellington’s armies, and to protect Britain’s shorelines against coastal erosion. It’s put to work protecting eighteenth century English society, with all its hierarchies and conventions.

But forgetting the roots of magic is dangerous. Strange says in his essay on ‘The Extraordinary Revival of English Magic’ for the *Edinburgh Review*.

English Magic is the strange house we magicians inhabit. It is built upon foundations that JOHN USKGLASS made and we ignore those foundations at our peril. They should be studied and their nature understood so that we can learn what they will support and what they will not. Otherwise cracks will appear, letting in winds from God-knows-where. The corridors will lead us to places we never intended to go.

Yet Strange is only half-right. An understanding of the origins of English magic isn’t sufficient to shore up the weak points in the structure that is England. Far from it. If the foundations of English magic, of Englishness were uncovered, the social order of England, with all its orderings and hierarchies, its distinctions between upper class and lower class, men and women, whites and blacks, Gentiles and Jews, Londoners and provincials will be revealed as the contingent things as they are, would be in danger of being blown away. English magic isn’t as comfortable as it seems. As Sir Walter Pole and Colonel Grant realize when Jonathan Strange recounts his travels in the eerie land behind the mirror. “Magic, which had seemed so familiar just hours before, so English had suddenly become inhuman, unearthly, *otherlandish*.”

Mirrors and magic go together in JSAMN, for magic is a sort of mirror of Englishness. The Raven King, who is at the heart of English magic, has John Uskglass, or in its original version, d’Uskglass, as one of his names. And indeed, English magic is a kind of dusky glass, a mirror in which we can see darkly what

Englishness consists of. Thus, the land of Faerie is a looking-glass version of everything that the English have forgotten or that they prefer not to notice about their country. Battlegrounds still strewn with skeletons in armour; gloomy castles; ceremonies that are “celebrations of dust and nothingness.” It’s a reminder of the brutal origins of English society, the feudal distinctions that still obtain, and the violence or threat of violence that supports these distinctions. The “gentleman with thistledown hair,” a prince of Faerie, is a model of aristocratic contempt for the desires of others (although perhaps he’s more precisely an autocrat than an aristocrat). As he tells the servant Stephen Black, the guests at his nightly balls are his vassals and subjects; there isn’t one whom he would scruple to kill if they dared criticize him. Yet is he so much worse in his callousness than Jonathan Strange’s father, who decides on a cruel whim to expose Jeremy Johns, an ill servant, to the winter air that he might die? Or than the vicious and self-satisfied Lascelles, who ruins women for sport, needlessly murders a man, and cruelly slices open the face of the servant Childermass for having the affrontery to (correctly) accuse him of thievery? Or the foppish parasite Drawlight who subsists in a twilight world between the upper and criminal classes, and supports himself through drawing others into ruinous debt?

If the *brugh* of the gentleman with thistledown hair is “an ancient prison built of cold enchantments as of stone and earth,” so too is English society. Stephen Black indeed finds that his nightly imprisonment in the brugh are sometimes a welcome refuge from the humiliations of his daily life as a black servant in London. Black, Johns, Childermass and the vast majority of Englishmen are subject to laws and social obligations that expose them to the whims of their social betters – they too labour under a set of dark enchantments. Even Jonathan Strange, who’s more attentive to the unfairness of these norms than most, is a product of his class and station. He ignores the warnings of his country neighbour, Mr. Hyde, in part because he can’t believe that a farmer might have anything important to say to him, and furthermore shows considerable indignation when accosted by provincial businessmen over a billiards table in London. Strange takes the lower-middle class Jewish magician, Tom Levy, under his wing, but still describes him as an “odd little man.” If his condescension to his social inferiors is less marked or obnoxious than that of his peers, it is nonetheless quite real.

Yet even if the norms of English society are oppressive, they are fragile. They’re strong because they’re accepted as verities. To examine them closely is to expose how arbitrary they are; what seems to be rooted in the natural order of things is contingent and can be changed.

This land is all too shallow.  
It is painted on the sky.  
And trembles like the windhook rain.  
When the Raven King passed by.

Hence the disparities of tone in the book, which John Clute (mistakenly in my belief) cites as a defect. Much of the book is a social comedy of sorts, a set of wry observations on the absurdities of English manners, and on what seems to be a petty dispute between two obsessive magicians. But bits and pieces of another, deeper story keep on poking through, as Childermass (perhaps the most interesting and complicated character in the novel) realizes when he is shot.

In his weakened state, Childermass had been thinking aloud. He had meant to say that if what he had seen was true, then everything that Strange and Norrell had ever done was child's-play, and magic was a much stranger and more terrifying thing than any of them had thought of. Strange and Norrell had been merely throwing paper darts about a parlour, while real magic soared and swooped and twisted on great wings in a limitless sky far, far above them.

The disjuncture of tone between the comedy of manners, and the darker matter of the final parts of the book, where the stage machineries behind the *dramatis personae* become partly visible, is, I believe, entirely intended. It's supposed to suggest to the reader that the main characters' comfortable assumptions about what it is to be English, what it is to be a gentleman, have been built on rotten ice. As the novel draws towards its closing pages, the bones of a stranger, starker England begin to emerge.

After the birds the next thing to haunt Mr Norrell's imagination were the wide, cold puddles that were thickly strewn across every field. As the carriage passed along the road each puddle became a silver mirror for the blank, winter sky. To a magician there is very little difference between a mirror and a door. England seemed to be wearing thin before his eyes. He felt as if he might pass through any of those mirror-doors and find himself in one of the other worlds which once bordered upon England. Worse still, he was beginning to think that other people might do it. ... For the first time in his life Mr Norrell began to feel that perhaps there was too much magic in England.

Not only that, but the traditional hierarchies that make up Englishness have become a trap. Lascelles, outraged by Childermass' insubordination, and by the

“democracy” of servants who presume to consult with him about how to handle an emergency, chooses to enter Faerie in order to demonstrate his superiority to Childermass, accepting a challenge that Childermass had refused. But in so doing, he becomes trapped by his own perverted sense of *noblesse oblige* into a peculiarly unpleasant fate.

Not all are trapped in this way; as Norrell perceives to his dismay, the return of English magic is as much as anything else a democratization of possibility. As the novel draws towards its conclusion, the North is beginning to rise, a development that receives only cursory attention in the novel, but that is of enormous importance. John Uskglass, the Raven King, is becoming a sort of Ned Ludd or Captain Swing – an inspiration to the dispossessed weavers and those who have lost out in Strange and Norrell’s England. The York society of magicians is reconstituted – but its membership isn’t confined only to gentlemen (or even quasi-gentlemen like John Segundus). The mirrors of England are opening up, but it isn’t Strange or Norrell who will choose among the possible worlds.

Thus, in the end, JSAMN isn’t a story about two English magicians so much as it is a novel about what it means to be English. The real battle of the book isn’t between two magicians (everyone expects them to fight a magical duel after Strange returns to England; they discover instead that they have rather more in common than they were previously prepared to acknowledge). It’s between different versions of Englishness. Beneath the comedy of their meeting, their falling out, and their final reunion is a secret story; the story of the return of the Raven King. But he isn’t so much a king in the everyday sense (although he once was) as a whirlwind of possibilities, an empty white sky with rooks wheeling in it, beneath which the cityscapes of London fade away to reveal brown, flat, endless fields strewn with puddles, each a gate that anyone might open and pass through to a different world. Or, in another sense, it’s the story of how there’s another idea of what England might be than a class-ridden society secure in its own prejudices. An idea of England that appears to be on the verge not of being realized, but at the least revealed at the end of the novel. I look forward to seeing what Susanna Clarke does next with this material (I hope she gives us some hints in her reply). It’s going to be interesting.

*Women and men; servants and masters; England and the English*  
Susanna Clarke

I'm going to begin as China Miéville did with a kind of disclaimer. In fact I'm going to pick up on something China said at the beginning of his piece. He says:

One of the usual arguments authors level is the foolishness that 'I know better than you because I wrote it'. To make my position absolutely clear: authorial intention be damned. I do not necessarily know best.

I'm going to go a bit further than this. For me it's not so much that authors don't always know best. It's more, "Sorry guys, I'm not actually the author." The author couldn't come. The author has left the building. She left when the book was finished. I'm just the person who remains now she is gone. I may be able to help you because I seem to have a pile of her memories over here -- also lots of her notes and stuff. But, while some of the memories are crystal sharp, others are fuzzy and quite a lot are missing. Ditto the notes and stuff. As for what she *intended* by writing this or that, in many cases she wouldn't have been able to answer anyway. She never gave it any thought. I'll do my best to reconstruct what I can. In fact I shall pretend I'm her, by saying "I" and "me". The point is that if at any point you feel that I am contradicting her (the author), then believe her and not me. She's the cleverer of the two of us.

*Who is the narrator?*

I didn't consider this question until very late on in the writing process. I came to no conclusion. Then, when the book was published, people started asking me about it and I had to come up with some sort of an answer. By that time several people made guesses as to who he/she was. Some guessed Segundus -- which I think is very clever -- not least because I was by then toying with the idea of Segundus writing or editing something -- which may happen or it may not.

I was fairly sure that the narrator was a woman. The first sentence of Chapter 9 seems to me to imply that.

"It has been remarked (by a lady infinitely cleverer than the present author) how kindly disposed the world in general feels to young people who either die

or marry...”

It also seems to me that the narrator takes a specifically female view of the male characters. Her irony is a particularly female kind of irony. It’s not just the things the male characters do and their opinions that she finds amusing; she thinks they’re funny simply because they are men.

As Belle points out the events she’s writing about happened relatively recently. So I came to the conclusion that the narrator was a woman writing in the late 1820s or possibly the 1830s.

But I’ve revised that opinion. I think I knew all along who the narrator was. She isn’t anybody. She is a perfectly ordinary, nineteenth-century, all-seeing, all-knowing narrator.

So why do readers think that there must be a specific personality? Why did I? Firstly because the narrator occasionally intrudes with comments, and secondly because of the footnotes.

But omniscient, nineteenth-century narrators did intrude. Both Austen and Dickens had a penchant for suddenly appearing in the narrative and addressing the audience directly. At the beginning of *Northanger Abbey*, there is this from Austen:

“...for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding -- joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard?”

And from Chapter 2 of *Bleak House*, discussing the “world of fashion” (by which Dickens means something along the lines of high society):

It is not a large world. Relatively even to this world of ours, which has its limits too (as your Highness shall find when you have made the tour of it, and are come to the brink of the void beyond)...

With this curious parenthesis (quite out of keeping with the rest of the chapter),



Dickens' narrator not only seems to sprout a personality himself, but also to thrust one upon the reader. Why have we suddenly become a Highness?

Of course Belle Waring is perfectly right to suggest that footnotes suggest a scholar. To which I can only respond who says God isn't a scholar and doesn't write footnotes? It seems to me, He writes quite a lot of them.

*Where did the female magicians go?*

There is one peculiarly straightforward answer to this question: they are in the short story "The Ladies of Grace Adieu" (anthologised in *Starlight 1* ed. Patrick Nielsen Hayden, pub. Tor, 1996; collected in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror Tenth Annual Collection* ed. Datlow and Windling). This was the first fragment of John Uskglass's world to be completed and published, and concerns three female magicians that Jonathan Strange stumbled across one summer. For a long time it was my hope that these three ladies should eventually find a place in *JS&MN*, but as the novel grew, I decided there was no place for them.

I realise this opens up more questions than it answers. So let's suppose that *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* had been *Johanna Strange and Mr Norrell*, what would have happened? The hypothetical female magician could have been a Mary Wollstonecraft who tussled against the conventions of the time, or possibly a Joanna Southcott who could terrify Mr Norrell by going into trances. Or perhaps -- which is more interesting to me -- she would have resisted being set up as a celebrity. She could have been a quiet, rather moral and conventional young woman who profoundly disliked being made a model for social revolutionaries and who would have been drawn very reluctantly into the limelight by her love and talent for magic.

Whichever way this alternate *JS&MN* played out, some of the narrative would have been skewed away to a story about male-female politics in the Regency. Some of our attention would have diverted from the discussion about English magic and towards a discussion about whether women can be magicians. I can see a problem here -- and that is that you and I already know the answer. But be that as it may, the Johanna Strange version certainly seems possible. Intriguing even. I would like to read it. And I can easily see that some readers would have been better pleased with it than with *JS&MN*.

So why didn't I write it?

The first answer is simply that the story did not present itself to me in this form. That sounds weak, but the writer-part of me knows how vital this point is. It touches upon some of the ways in which criticising and analysing fiction on the one hand, and, on the other hand, writing it, are at cross-purposes. The needs of the two don't always align. I'll begin by quoting Belle:

And I can think of excellent reasons why this book is not about Josephine Strange and Mr. Norrell, the best of which is that some *other* Mr. Norrell would be required to make the thing work. But then it's not as though *this* Mr. Norrell bubbled up out of the ground in his present, unalterable form.

Well, actually...

If anyone were interested I could in fact point to the piece of ground Mr Norrell came up out of. I could give you a grid reference. A corner of a muddy field between the villages of Blackhall Rocks and High Hesleden in County Durham. I used to wander the footpaths round there in the summer and autumn of 1992 thinking up ideas for the book I wanted to write. At that particular moment I was trying to conjure up an English magician who had a library, and then there he was. I saw him very clearly -- small, nervous, librarian-like, friendless, book-obsessed.

But of course he wasn't unalterable. I could have changed him. Just as I could have changed Jonathan Strange into a woman. Except that Strange was a character who had been hanging round my imagination for years; I had wanted to write about him for a long time. Unfortunately that's not true for Johanna Strange.

I don't imagine the story first and find the characters to fit it. Rather I rely on the characters to help me puzzle out the story. If the characters are completely changeable and unfixed, then where is my thread to find the story? I place a lot of faith in the idea that characters (or story elements) present themselves to me in a particular form for a reason. Strange and Norrell meant something to me. They were bubbling with possibilities (odd, to think of Mr Norrell as bubbly). There were things I could find out about them. Writing often seems more like a process of unearthing detail, of archaeology rather than making stuff up.

My second answer to why there are no female magicians is that I deliberately kept women to domestic sphere in the interests of authenticity. Maria Farrell is absolutely right when she says that in creating *JS&MN* I was drawing on a world that

we think we know from Austen -- and, I would add, Dickens. I needed to keep the surface of this world as smooth and unruffled as possible. As John Quiggin rightly divines, it was important that real and alternate history appeared to have converged. This meant that I needed to write the women and the servants, as far as possible, as they would have been written in a nineteenth-century novel. Otherwise the deliberate contrast between “the fields we know” and Faerie becomes much weaker. The fields we know are already somewhat distorted. Suppose the *JS&MN* world had become one in which the following were true:

- 1) the concerns of the late-twentieth/early twenty-first centuries (social justice and women’s equality) are being voiced/commented upon
- 2) there is magic

At this point the whole thing becomes more obviously an alternate history. It’s too different from any history we’re acquainted with. I’m not denying for a moment that *JS&MN* is an alternate history, but I wanted the reader to be able to put that out of her mind while she read. Too many of our contemporary concerns would have made that more difficult.

I’ve laboured this question quite a bit because Belle Waring and Maria Farrell’s feeling of dissatisfaction is entirely reasonable. I feel it myself. I hoped that the women characters would take up more physical space on the page. (I don’t agree that that they’re not important -- Arabella and Emma Pole influence the action, but they are hidden elements, part of the back-to-front story that Henry Farrell points to.) But would I change it? No. It was meant to be a story about English magic and I still think this is best way to tell that story.

I’m glad Belle likes the lady in the red velvet dress (Miss Redruth) who appears at the end. I don’t believe anyone has yet recognised her and her siblings. They have a model.

*The hour has come but not the man*

That Henry Farrell should invoke the tale of The King of the Cats is fascinating. I was aware that in *JS&MN* I was writing a back-to-front story, a story with holes in it through which we can catch glimpses of another, secret story being played out. I even keep a similar story in my head as a sort of touchstone of the kind of stories I like to tell. *The hour has come but not the man* is a Scottish folktale about a kelpie, a sort of water-spirit, who is observed rising up from a false ford in a river and shrieking, “The hour is come but not the man.” This, though very alarming, means nothing to anybody, until a distraught rider is observed haring along the road towards the river. He

attempts to drown himself in the river, but is prevented by kindly bystanders who lock him in a church. Whereupon he drowns himself in the font and the water-spirit is satisfied.

Perhaps *JS&MN* isn't seen from the wrong side to quite the same extent as the above, but there are whole elements of which our two magicians remain unaware throughout the book -- and beyond. Stephen's travails on behalf of the two women, for example. And Strange and Norrell never really comprehend how far they are tools of John Uskglass. (They grasp a bit of Uskglass's intentions but not in the way that Vinculus and Childermass do.)

I suppose a more modern way of writing back-to-front stories is to make them mysteries. Thus *Great Expectations* looks as if it is a picaresque tale of the rise of a young blacksmith, but the plot has a hidden element, glimpsed from time to time; once that hidden element is revealed, everything we thought we knew about the main story is completely changed. Great stuff, if you can manage it.

On another, small, incidental point of Henry's, the cards in *Little, Big* were of course a delight to me. And I'd be interested to know which of the *Little, Big* cards he thought was identical with one of Childermass's. Childermass's cards are, in fact, a perfectly ordinary pack of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Marseilles tarot cards.

*A few observations on the English during the Regency period*

I am delighted by John Holbo's discussion of loyal servants. I'm particularly grateful to him for pointing me to George Orwell's comments about the feudal character of Dickens' servants. (And for making me want to read *Tale of Two Cities* again.) Of course the loyalty of Dickens' loyal servants is overdrawn. For me it's part of Dickens' weird ability to give characters one overriding characteristic -- as if they were virtues and vices in an allegorical masque -- while at the same time he imbues them with more life than the most "realistic" character study. No one else can do it.

I must say that it pleases me no end that in Henry Farrell's essay Stephen Black and Childermass feature as examples of servants for whom servitude is a dark enchantment, while for John Holbo they are loyal servants. I will say that in my opinion neither Childermass nor Stephen actually found his work as a servant to be humiliating *per se*. (The gentleman with the thistle-down hair constantly tells Stephen that he is humiliated and cruelly treated by Sir Walter -- but Stephen keeps politely denying it.) Both are powerful people within their master's houses. Being a servant in the Regency period was not necessarily degrading. There were huge differences of

status among servants. Which is not to say that a vast number did not suffer all the pains of powerlessness and sexual harassment. There are passages in the letters of Byron's male friends concerning the sexual exploitation of maids which make your blood run cold.

The way the servants are drawn in *JS&MN* is in part a conscious reaction to the tendency in films and television to endow all nineteenth-century servants with a mixture of twentieth-century cockiness and resentment at their inferior status. This seems to me a gross failure of imagination. Some servants (of course not all) would have been proud of what they did. They would have supported their employers in the same way a IBM manager nowadays might support IBM, or a football supporter supports his team. The welfare, status and success of "your" family ensured your own welfare, status and success.

Maria Farrell argues that the portrayal of Regency society in *JS&MN* is ahistoric in its placidity. It certainly wasn't intended to be. Clearly we're following rather different threads through Regency history and, yes, there was a more-or-less conscious decision on my part to keep to the drawing-room for much of the book. If Strange and Norrell had presented themselves to me as magicians from much lower down the social scale, obviously the whole feel of the book would have been very different.

There is however one point which I want to make. It's about historical analysis *versus* the lived experience of a historical period.

"...readers' familiarity and affection for Jane Austen's impeccably self-contained universe lead us to imbue the Regency world with a feeling of historic permanence that it simply didn't have. The refined manners and ladylike accomplishments so essential to a Regency husband-hunter would have been entirely a novelty to Lizzie Bennett's grandmother."

Absolutely. We know that Regency society was a transitory period. But knowing that doesn't really tell us what it was like to experience life in those years -- which, as writers and readers of novels, is what we're aiming for. The historian can correctly label trends, manners and economic realities as fleeting (she knows when they begin and end). But that's not to say they are perceived as such by people who live through them. Jane Austen's heroines (and their real-life equivalents) probably all had grandmothers whose manners would have embarrassed them by their cheerful earthiness. But so what? That wouldn't have made those young women feel that their codes of behaviour were artificial or ephemeral -- any more than a young woman

working in Manhattan in 2005 feels that her New Yorkish world, its manners and mores, are somehow contingent or flimsy because her grandmother in Brooklyn still speaks Russian or thinks in a Russian way.

### *Revolutionary magicians*

Another question from Maria Farrell:

Equipped with the tactical equivalent of the atom bomb, would Wellington really keep Strange off to the side of the action, drumming up rain clouds and putting out fires?...Why is magic so *unrevolutionary* during most of the novel, and why is the reader prepared to swallow this?

This points to something about the nature of magic in John Uskglass's world, (and tells us something of why, in *JS&MN*, magic resists becoming a neat metaphor for something else). One thing that magic isn't, is the atom bomb. Once the atom bomb has been invented, it is the property of governments -- its use is (more or less) controlled by politicians, generals, possibly terrorists. But magic is in the hands of the magician or fairy -- it grants considerable power to the person doing it. Understandably this makes governments nervous.

If Strange and Norrell had not been such perfect examples of their class, both so unquestioning about their duty to uphold the status quo, then it seems to me unlikely that the revival of English magic could have been achieved. The Government and the Army would not have given them anything to do. All the Government's energies would have been directed to getting rid of them. Only a man as boring as Norrell could have brought magic back.

### *England and the English*

Several Crooked Timberites wonder about a revolutionary subtext in *JS&MN*. Henry says:

If the foundations of English magic, of Englishness were uncovered, the social order of England, with all its orderings and hierarchies, its distinctions between upper class and lower class, men and women, whites and blacks, Gentiles and Jews, Londoners and provincials will be revealed as the contingent things as they are, would be in danger of being blown away.

Throughout *JS&MN* are scattered little pieces of irony at the expense of the arrogant, complacent English upper classes. At the end of the book Strange opens the gates between England and Faerie and in doing so prompts a democratisation of English magic. The assembly of magicians which convenes in York includes tradesmen and a woman, Miss Redruth (plus there are Miss Redruth's two sisters, also magicians, who are too involved in their studies to turn up). And at the same time, both Stephen and Childermass cease to be servants. Clearly there is something of a revolutionary nature going on, but how far is it a social or political one?

Ironic remarks notwithstanding, there is a limit to how far *JS&MN* was meant to criticise the social and political setup of the time. For one thing I went to considerable pains to see that world as the characters would have seen it, from the inside as it were. I doubt I succeeded very well -- it's a rather tall order, but still worth attempting. The upper-class characters are meant to have some of the virtues of that class as well as its many faults. Strange, Wellington and Sir Walter all consider themselves to be gentlemen first and foremost; and their concept of what it means to be a gentleman involves much more than a set of rights; there is a corresponding set of obligations (to one's own class, to one's social inferiors and to one's country).

I'm not going to deny for a second that England in the Regency period was class-ridden or that women had few legal rights. Nevertheless I'm wary of how far I project twentieth-/twenty-first-century concerns on to nineteenth-century characters. It seems to me that if we see women, servants, the lower classes largely in terms of how liberated or oppressed they were, we miss catching a glimpse of them as they actually were. They just become another mirror reflecting our own concerns back at us. (I should point out that I'm talking here specifically about white women and servants. It's not possible to take any view of slavery other than the one we have today. The position of people of African descent during the early nineteenth century was at best impossible, at worst a living nightmare.)

There is of course one political theme in *JS&MN* which was much more in my thoughts than the class struggle or the struggle between men and women. Few readers remark on it, unless they come from the north of England. It is the division between the north and south of England. John Uskglass's capital of Newcastle in the far north of England rights the balance between the wild, neglected north and the more mundane, but richer south.

Englishness is, in any case, a set of contradictions. It always has been and I tried to mirror that in *JS&MN*. Strange, the perfect English magician, is half Scottish

and was born a mile or two from Wales. Wellington, the perfect English general, was born in Ireland. (Not that he was the least bit grateful to the land of his birth. “Just because a man is born in a stable, that does not make him a horse.”) Even John Uskglass, the Raven King, who in many ways stands for a lost Englishness and England, claimed to be Norman (Chapter 45, *JS&MN*), which made his ancestry ultimately Viking by way of France.

So if the revolution of *JS&MN* is not social or political, what is it? It is, unsurprisingly, magical. English magic now belongs to Englishmen and women and no longer to any particular class or gender. Henry Farrell finds that *JS&MN* is about what it means to be English. I just want to give that statement a little nudge and say it’s about what England means -- the hills and the trees, the rain and the stones. By the end of the book I wanted to give the landscape a voice, rather than the underdogs of society. This is a poetical, romantic idea -- not one that lends itself to a great deal of analysis. I’ll try to explain it a little by talking about two ideas I have of what fantasy can do. (Obviously fantasy can do a million things -- these are just two.)

Firstly fantasy can be about giving power, strength, importance to the small and weak. Thus the smallest, weakest person -- Frodo Baggins to take an example entirely at random -- goes off to fulfil the Most Important Task. And turns out to be the only person who could have done it. Ditto Stephen Black.

Secondly Fantasy (and SF) can be the opposite of this. Instead of Giving Importance to People, it can Humble People. It can be about turning our view, however briefly, away from ourselves; it can be about glimpsing that human beings are not always, forever, and irrevocably, the centre of the universe. If you are C.S. Lewis, writing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, you turn our view away from ourselves to God. (The children become kings and queens -- which looks a bit like giving power to the weak, but as they are self-confident, middle-class English children, they never seem that weak or small.) If you are Alan Garner, writing *Thursbitch*, you turn our view away from ourselves to an actual, historical valley in northern England which stands for all the places in northern England resonating with their own, not-human placeness. I’m with Alan Garner: the landscape of England (particularly Northern England) is the bit of magic we can actually see and touch for ourselves.

I rather like this use of fantasy, partly because is that it’s something we do so much better than the literary fiction people. Literary fiction sticks resolutely to the human. But the world seems to me so much bigger than that.



This was fascinating to think about and to write (it was also very hard work). I'm only sorry to have such insufficient answers to offer in return for such very good questions.