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A WORLD OF THEIR OWN: WOMEN AND FOLKLORE IN INTER-WAR BRITAIN

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Abstract:

*The period between the First and Second World Wars was an unsettling time for women in Great Britain. After the First World War, the media, governmental acts, and everyday society urged women to return to the home. This was an especially difficult concept for women to accept after they had played a very public role during the war actively contributing to the war effort. My thesis explores three novels of interwar England that feature female characters seeking purpose in places outside of the traditional role of housewife. *Ashe of Rings* by Mary Butts, *Harriet Hume* by Rebecca West, and *Lolly Willows or the Loving Huntsman* by Sylvia Townsend Warner feature females who employ untraditional methods in their quest for both stability and power in post World War I England. The women of these novels do not comply with the then popular notion that women belong in the role of wife and mother tucked back neatly into the domestic sphere. Rather, they relate to the mystical realm of nature to empower them. In *Ashe of Rings*, a woman returns to her homeland to reestablish herself as the rightful heir to the power of the Badbury Rings, a megalithic site in southern England. *Harriet Hume* is the story of a woman who discovers she has a special psychic power to read a masculine mind. A single woman, tired of being shuffled from home to home within her family, finally flees to the countryside and becomes a witch in *Lolly Willows or the Loving Huntsman*. In carefully examining these texts as other literary criticism on the topic, I have found that these women do indeed find solace in the mysticism of nature and the power of myth. They discover a powerful connection in a country whose certainties have been demolished by the First World War. They do not find this connection in the much-encouraged role of housewife or mother, and they must search outside the boundaries of "traditional" society to find this stability. These characters possess the power to inhabit a world of their own where their strength is intertwined with the mysteries of nature and the might of the myth. Therefore, this study has implications for the potential of women to find empowerment outside the traditional patriarchy.*

Introduction:

This other self knew that life need not be bitter, nor worthless, nor bounded by a narrow casement, but could be limitless, infinite... Daphne du Maurier, from *Frenchman's Creek*

During February 1919, as troops returned home to England after World War I, an advertisement for Oatine Face Cream featured attractive women applying the product to their faces. Underneath the picture was the legend, 'Back Again to Home and Duty.' The advertisement went on to say, "Now that the war is won, many women and girls are leaving work, their war job finished. They are naturally desirous of regaining their good complexions and soft white hands freely sacrificed to the National need. Oatine is invaluable for this purpose" (qtd. in Beddoe 13). The "war jobs" that women had performed were crucial to the stability of England during the Great War. Their contributions ranged from that of Mrs. Rosanna Foster, who took over her husband's chimney-sweep business to women munitions workers who hand-filled artillery shells in factories throughout the country (Condell and Liddiard 10, 111). Whether they were filling the jobs that soldiers left behind or creating aerial bombs, these women assumed very public roles in the workforce of England. But as men returned from the trenches, there was tremendous pressure for women to return to domesticity. Deirdre Beddoe says that "the single most arresting feature of the inter-war years was the strength of the notion that women's place is in the home" (3). The media, the governmental acts, and often the public urged women to return home where they could regain their "good complexions and soft white hands." There was a push for women to "bear and raise children in a generation tragically depleted by the war" (Beddoe 4). Thus, while the idealized image of the housewife was praised by British society at the time, images of other culturally defined "genres" of women were shrouded with negative connotations. During the war, many women felt a sort of liberation as they came out into the workplace. Their prewar roles as passive, private maternal figures gave way to the more empowering positions of active, public members of the British workforce. "It was now permissible for women to be physically

courageous, enduring, responsible, conscientious, cheerful, and outgoing" (Condell and Liddiard 157). However, much of Britain longed for the familiarity of the world before the destruction of the war, and "properly" putting the gender roles back into their previous state was a way of restoring this. Men were to reenter the workforce, and women were to return to the domestic sphere where they would find their satisfaction from being wives and mothers. But the wartime need for women in the workforce had already shown women that they could play an important role in society outside of the home. Even before the war, women had worked for the vote and begun to examine their roles in society and question the validity of traditional notions of gender. Although women did receive limited voting rights in 1918, expectations for a society that allowed a more public woman were dashed as the general social notion became that they should return to the home.

The opposition between societal expectations for women and the longing for a sense of purpose outside of the traditional role of housewife and mother created tension for English women. Literature was, of course, a method of voicing such anxieties and concerns. According to Alison Light, "The search for her own room, for a place which could be both domestic and public, private and professional, suggests how much the act of writing has itself had special meaning for women given their situation both in the house and in history" (5). Indeed, literature reflected the women's need to achieve a balance between traditional definitions of femininity and their own desire for connection to the world. World War I sparked a wave of such female writing on the topic of gender roles and cultural standards. According to Dorothy Goldman, "if war acts as a stimulus to make women openly reconsider their roles and to write about that reconsideration, it also makes them reconsider what they have been told about their inherent natures, and to write about that too" (42). Thus, the question of women's role in the war effort sparked questions about essential feminine nature. Goldman goes on to say that "one of the threats to women's ability and freedom to undertake war duties came from their families, and here, too, women began to question the familial identity that encompassed them" (43). Many works by female authors question this familial and societal identity by presenting heroines who accept their own version of femininity, one that relates less to the patriarchal public or private spheres than to the mystical realm of nature.

Ashe of Rings by Mary Butts, *Harriet Hume* by Rebecca West, and *Lolly Willowses or the Loving Huntsman* by Sylvia Townsend Warner feature female figures who employ untraditional methods in their quest for both stability and power in post-World War I England. The women of these fantasy novels find solace in the mysticism of nature and the power of myth. One woman is priestess of an ancestral monolithic site, one finds that she has a strange ability regarding insight into her former lover, and one escapes from her family into the wilderness to become a witch. These heroines possess the power to inhabit

a world of their own where their strength is intertwined with nature. The study of these novels has implications for the potential of women to find empowerment outside the realm of traditional patriarchy.

Mary Butts, author of *Ashe of Rings*, was born December 13, 1890, in the Salterns of England to Mary Briggs and Frederick Butts. Salterns, the name of the house at Parkstone, was a tremendous influence on Mary. She described it as a *temenos*, or a sacred enclosure, and called it "Perfectness" in the autobiography of her childhood, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns* (14). She described her isolated childhood as being "saturated with the arts. With the visual arts as with nature, a foundation of classic and to some extent of modern literature" (31). While Mary had an unstable relationship with her mother, her father was a respected source of knowledge. While she described her father as "old soldier and something of a scholar, the inheritor and the treasurer of Blake, the admirer of Whistler and of Wilde," she spoke of her mother as having a "vigorous, romantic, emotional nature, truly religious, but uncoordinated by the least touch of subtlety or intellectual love" (31). Butts's brother, Anthony, was born in April 1901, and her father died in 1905. Even after her father's death, Mary's interest in the classical world continued to flourish. Of her intimate relationship with Greek tradition, she said "to remember Greek life is not to adventure into a delicious ideal but to go home to something so familiar it can bore me" (Blondel 22). Although she felt a deep connection to these ancient traditions, she still practiced a disregard for contemporary conventions and rules all her life through her rejection of popular religion, her numerous relationships (one of which resulted in the birth of her daughter, Camilla, in November 1920), and her experimentation with drugs. During her life, Mary Butts wrote five novels, three short story collections, around thirty poems, an account of her childhood, and many essays and reviews (Wagstaff xii).

A journal entry by Mary Butts written on September 18, 1917, says, "Notes for *Ashe*. Take for the central theme the hatred of age for youth, of the old for the new, of yesterday's 'rose' for today's, expressed in a cruelty, part intuitive, part consciousness" (Wagstaff xvii). *Ashe of Rings* does present a series of battles, between war and peace, destruction and construction, and good and evil. But the novel also serves as a slightly altered reflection of Mary Butts's childhood: "Friends and family are barely disguised in all her work, and speed of her impressions is translated at once to her paper" (xviii). Indeed, *Ashe of Rings* contains a woman raised in a mystical countryside who is taught by a wise father and criticized by her mother. But the novel also parallels Butts's relationship with the mysterious. Once as she explored the ancient countryside with her brother she "experienced an epiphany of supernatural patterning, 'the makings of a correspondence, a translation which should be for ever valid, between the seen and the unseen'" (Wagstaff xix). Set during World War I, *Ashe of Rings* explores what can be understood by some and rejected by others.

In 1912, a young woman named Cicely Fairfield renamed herself Rebecca West. The reason for this formal change was practical: "She had begun writing in earnest for the radical suffragist journal the *Freewoman* and dropped her original name to spare her sister Lettie professional embarrassment over this association" (Scott, *Gender* 560). Rebecca West was born to Charles Fairfield and Isabella Mackenzie in 1873. Her father deserted her family in 1901, but West inherited from her mother "a love of music that would serve her literary metaphors, and the character type of a brave, though stern, female provider" (561). She was a feminist and socialist journalist and book reviewer, wrote studies and lectures on men such as Henry James and Shakespeare, and produced a vast array of short stories and novels. Her personal life was tainted by a "heterosexual crisis, bequeathed in part by the sexual liberation of the new woman. She endured unwed maternity, lifelong identification as the mistress of the sexual libertarian H.G. Wells, and persecution as a bad mother by her only child, Anthony West" (Scott, *Refiguring* xl). *Harriet Hume* figures into West's gender studies as a "lighter 'fantasy' novel that sets the male ambition to rise in political endeavors against feminine art" (Scott, *Gender* 564). The novel explores a woman who has a supernatural relationship with her garden and her music. The heroine of *Harriet Hume* is fully feminine while remaining a single woman in the patriarchal society of London.

Sylvia Townsend Warner, born to George Townsend Warner and Nora Hudleston in 1893, also explored the theme of feminine options in an inter-war society of domestic pressure. Sylvia was an "abnormally intelligent child, even at an early age, 'eager, observant and self-possessed'" (Harman 7). But her mother was disappointed in her because "Sylvia was not a son, she was not going to be a beautiful daughter, she was rather off-puttingly clever and rapidly becoming the apple of her father's eye" (13). Much like the heroine of *Lolly Willowes*, Warner adored her father and had no interest in marriage whatsoever. Warner was "unmarriageably intellectual" and chose to live her life defying societal standards (23). After her father's death in 1916, Sylvia's unmarried status continued to bother Nora. But Sylvia Townsend Warner's great romance came later in life with her dedicated relationship to woman poet Valentine Ackland with whom she published the work *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, dedicated to Robert Frost.

During her life, Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote seven novels, 10 volumes of short stories, nine books of poetry, a biography of T.H. White, a translation of Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, and many essays and reviews (Marcus, Intro 531).

Lolly Willowes, written in 1926, is a novel whose main character has a special relationship with her father, a distaste for marriage, and a special connection to the natural world around her. These attributes reflect Warner's own life, and the reader has little doubt after careful comparisons that she pulled from her own experience to write the fantasy novel. Warner's special

connection to the peace of nature is exemplified by one of her letters:

The day before yesterday, I appeased a life-long ambition: I held a young fox in my arms... I held him in my arms & snuffed his wild geranium smell, and suddenly he thrust his long nose under my chin, and burrowed against my shoulder, and subsided into bliss. His paws are very soft, soft as raspberries. Everything about him is elegant— an Adonis of an animal (qtd. in Marcus, Intro 531-32).

It is clear that Warner had a simple appreciation for the natural such as animals and plants. Warner never had children, but this passage suggests the maternal aspect of her nature. Similarly, *Lolly Willowes* depicts a woman that has a private relationship of wonder and respect for nature. It explores the theme of women "struggling for privacy, not power" (Harman 64).

Sixty new women's magazines were launched between 1920 and 1945. In October 1932, *Woman's Own* was introduced to the public and prefaced with the following:

How do you Do?

We introduce ourselves and our new weekly for the modern young wife who loves her home.

Woman's Own will be a paper with a purpose— a paper thoroughly alive to the altered conditions of the present day. The home paper that makes any girl worth her salt want to be the best housewife ever— and then some (Beddoe 14-15).

But many women were discovering that they did not need an instruction manual on how to be the perfect housewife. Instead, they needed a place to find their own power. This place might be in the English countryside or a small garden in a big city as it was in the fantasy novels of Mary Butts, Rebecca West, or Sylvia Townsend Warner. These stories recommended that women return to their own form of the wilderness, to the essential feminine, to find the ancient traditions within themselves, those of goddess, artist, or witch. But the place could be anywhere, as Mary Butts says, that was "enchanted— technically— concretely— if there is such a thing— by reputation, by experience, by tradition" (Blondel 114). Women needed the opportunity to protect, create, or examine themselves in their own way. The fantasy novels of this time provided an example of this power and showed that this place was available, if only within the pages of a book.

Chapter One:

The notion is that life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis.— William Empson, note to *Bacchus* (*The Gathering Storm*, 1940)

On Badbury Rings... We went up the hill to them. I

walked first saying it is I who have given them life. Then inside the first fosse is steep, and I leaned on Cecil's shoulder and said I need you to enter the Rings... There was the quiet. I lay stretched out on the ground, and understood that the Ring's signature is written in its quiet. Its quiet is made audible by the sound in the grove. — Mary Butts, on her 12 March 1922 visit to the Rings with friends.

John Gould's essay, "On Making Sense of Greek Religion," attempts to explain a complex concept that has particular significance in understanding Mary Butts's novel, *Ashe of Rings*, and the novel's relationship to myth. Gould points out that to more accurately understand the religious experience of the ancient Greeks, readers must dismiss what they understand to be the traditional concept of religion. For instance, Gould states that "Greek religion is not 'revealed; as Christianity is; there is no sacred text claiming the status of the 'word of God'" (7). Greek religion did not feature a belief in "divine omnipotence," nor did it demand an "organized body persisting through time comprising those with dogmatic authority." Thus, there are few sacred requirements. Gould explains that, "the central Greek term, *theous nomizein*, means not 'believe in the gods,' but 'acknowledge them,' that is, pray to them, sacrifice to them, build them temples, make them the object of cult and ritual' (7). The gods of ancient Greece did not require the belief of humanity. Instead, they needed only to be the center of ritual functions.

If they did nothing else, these ritual functions gave the people of ancient Greece a connection to a higher being. Gould goes on to say in his essay that the Greeks perhaps pursued their religion to handle chaotic events in the world around them (5). It is not outrageous to believe that they encountered the same basic experiences as other groups of people. They sought out a method to handle the uncertainty they encountered, and their mystic rituals of worship and offering provided this. Author of the "War-fairy-tale," *Ashe of Rings*, Mary Butts studied the ancient Greeks and the way they maintained balance in their society (Butts 232). Indeed, Butts felt a "profound familiarity" with classical mythology; she states in a book review, "we feel that their delights and desires and difficulties were in the same terms as ours: they were examining, shaping, using and being used by life in a way we understand" (Blondel xi). In her introduction to *Ashe of Rings*, Nathalie Blondel discloses that Butts "acted out Greek fables and historical events with her father in the garden of Salterns, her home in Parkstone on the Dorset coast" (ix). The heroine of *Ashe of Rings* also acts out Greek myths as a child, yet this is not the only instance where Greek myth appears in the novel. *Ashe of Rings* is centered around the concept of human beings inheriting a connection to powerful, ancient forces. Although these forces are not entirely explained, they are able to be harnessed through ritual and humanity's reverence for their mysterious powers. Butts parallels the rituals and myths of the ancient Greeks to the British family of Ashe and their respect for the ancient powers of nature. The novel is the story of the Ashe

woman who becomes heir to this power and by implication, helps keep the world regulated. *Ashe of Rings* features the strong feminine presence of Vanna Ashe, who learns that her strength as a guardian of the Rings involves reinforcing traditions that are worth preserving.

The novel is constructed around the Badbury Rings, a megalithic structure consisting of concentric rings found in south Dorset, England. Rings is referred to in the novel not only as the actual stone structure but also as the property on which are the Badbury Rings. Throughout the novel, there is a constant feeling that there is something powerful yet mysterious attached to these Rings. The forces of this structure bring empowerment to whomever can grasp them and the surrounding aura. Vanna Ashe attempts to explain them to an unbeliever: "Think of Rings as a ship, full rigged, full of treasure, every sail set, plunging over the back of the world. The seas hiss and slide, and she cuts them; and crosses the horizon where the moon comes out of the sea" (Butts 95). If the Rings are a grand ship, then the Ashes are the crew and the hissing seas are the chaotic world. However, maintaining the Rings is also crucial for maintaining the order of the world itself. Therefore, there is an important connection between the stability of the Rings and the existence of the world. In this aspect, the fate of the seas depends on how the ship is sailed by the crew. The Ashe family has an essential role as protector of the Rings because they also assume the role of guardians of the cosmos.

It is clear that the Ashe family has always been consciously attached to their obligation at the Rings. "Its triple circle was the sole device on their shield, represented from the hatchment of their dead to the coral and bells each baby chewed and shook" (Butts 6). Anthony Ashe, father of Vanna, is constantly referring back to the history of the Ashe family at the Rings. The many Ashe ancestors form a strong network of accessible power that reminds the living family of this enabling link. The family had a serious duty to the world through their connection to the Rings. They must be protected by the proper person, but they offer something to that person as well. They can be seen as a living capsule of protection for the Ashe family. They are not only on the family shield, they are the shield itself, offering options for coping in an inherently chaotic universe. At the beginning of the novel as the Rings and the Ashe home are being described, there is a description of their near proximity to the ocean: "The waves rang within earshot of the lodge. In storms they covered it with spray. There Rings ended and the world began" (Butts 5). The world cannot fully penetrate the Rings. This passage suggests that the Rings are not necessarily of this earth. The Rings are a universe of their own where unaccountable forces guard against the storms of our world.

It is important to remember that Mary Butts wrote *Ashe of Rings* as a "War fairy-tale." Good and evil are more easily defined in this context. Death, destruction, and violence are evil. World War I included all of these things, and Judy Marston, the

villiance of the story, embodies the war. On the other hand, vitality, generation, and stability are good. Vanna Ashe, the heroine, represents these benevolent forces. Butts comments on the fairy-tale status of her novel in an afterword: "as a story, it is entirely an invention; yet one finds that one had good reason for everything that one puts in" (232).

Clearly, there is a reason for every literary technique of the novel. The story can be seen as an allegory, a tale that translates the tensions of the world into symbols. Therefore, the novel is more than a fairy-tale, it is a depiction of the strain in inter-war Britain where the aftermath of the war threatens to unravel the threads of tradition. The Rings are a traditional, stable force of good. The guardian of the Rings protects what is right while destructive forces threaten this system. Guardians are not powerful for their own sake; rather, there is a suggestion that their power can help the world. The Ashe family must not use this power for their own purpose. Instead, they must understand the Rings' beneficial role and use their might accordingly.

In her introduction to the novel, Blondel offers the idea that, "*Ashe of Rings* is an allegorical contest between those who understand this prehistoric landscape (and who thus see themselves as the Eumolpidae, inheritors of the Eleusian Mysteries) and those antagonistic to it" (x). The aristocratic Eumolpidae served as "custodians of religious tradition and customary law" (Easterling 7). Perhaps the family of Ashe does not completely understand the mysteries of the rings; rather, they are able to fully recognize their power much as the central term of Greek religion discussed earlier, *theos nomizein*, demands that humans "acknowledge" the gods. Blondel even suggests that Butts thought herself to be part of this descent: "She was increasingly convinced that *Ashe of Rings* had been 'all prophecy' and... she traced the lineage of 'A priestly house. Alkmaionids — Eumolpidae — Blake — I Camilla — ?'" (99). N.J. Richardson gives an explanation of the Mysteries that proves helpful in understanding the Ashes' relationship with the Rings:

In the classical period initiation into the Mysteries (as they were called) at Eleusis was open to anyone who could speak Greek, provided that he was not polluted by bloodshed, and participation was later extended to the Graeco-Roman world in general. Consequently secrecy, although always very solemnly stressed (with the penalty of death if it was broken), was to some extent a nominal matter, and the real point of it seems to have been not so much to limit the range of those who could hope to benefit from initiation, but rather to stress the awe-inspiring character of the deities who were being honoured and of the benefits which they could confer. (58).

The function of the Rings becomes more apparent when they are likened to the Eleusian Mysteries. The Mysteries, a sacred ritual honoring deities, offered a means for the ancient Greeks to empower themselves and control chaos through close relation to "awe-inspiring" beings. Similarly, the Ashes are intimately connected to the "awe-inspiring" power of the Rings.

Again, it is important to acknowledge that the power that these beings provide is not to be misused. The forces should not be used only to empower the guardians; instead, this power should be used to protect what is right in the world.

Throughout the novel, the Rings are shown to be an active force. For example, they are referred to as living creatures. Humans talk to them (7), they sleep (53), and they show their teeth (54). The constant personification of the Rings signals that they are alive and very much in control. In one instance, the Rings actually hide Vanna from danger. As her attacker moves in closer, her naked body blends in with the stone and the blood of a dead dog turns into a "white poison" and moves the stone (Butts 189). This is a result of Vanna's prayers to "Florian and Ursula, my father and my mother in *Ashe*" and her realization that her bare white body could match the paleness of the stone. She has combined herself with the Rings and her faith in this union has saved her. Still, it is the combination of her confidence in the Rings, her ancestors, and her practicality that pull her through the situation. As with the Greek deities, it is not as important to believe in the Rings as it is to acknowledge them. The Ashes have faithfully done this, and they have remained the steadfast guardians of their beneficial power.

Vanna is the heroine of *Ashe of Rings*, and the novel traces her life from conception to adulthood in three sections. *Ashe of Rings* begins in 1892 as the aged Anthony Ashe seeks a young woman to marry in the nearby village of Gulltown. His intentions for the girl quickly become obvious. She will bear his child, the heir to the power of the Rings. As he ponders a particular village woman as a potential bride, he says, "She'd fill the gilt cradle, and the oak cradle" (Butts 9). Anthony Ashe eventually marries the "ripe virgin," Muriel Butler, whom he renames Melitta. The meaning of this new name is significant, according to Roselyn Reso Foy: "*Melitta* comes from the Greek, suggesting bees and the sweetness of honey, and the implication is that Melitta is chosen because of her fertile childbearing abilities and not for any other reason" (38). From the start of their marriage, Melitta is uncomfortable in the house of Rings. She cannot understand her role in the Ashe family. Furthermore, when she finally becomes pregnant and has a baby girl, she fails to connect with the child. She feels as though "the baby [does] not like her" (28).

This daughter is Vanna Elizabeth Ashe, heir to the power of the Rings. Vanna's early childhood is filled with the myths and legends, both Greek and local, that her father passes on to her. From playing "Phoenix persuading Achilles" in the garden to explaining the function of the Lares, household spirits of Roman religion, Anthony Ashe is careful to reveal the power of myth to his young daughter (30-1). Meanwhile, Melitta, confused and unsure of her position within the realm of the Rings, begins an affair with Morice Amberton, a neighbor. The affair is terribly insulting to Anthony Ashe, not only in and of itself, but because it is consummated on the Rings. After Anthony discovers them there, he attempts to clean the tainted area by using "clean leaves

to cover the place where they had lain." The affair does not surprise him, but the fact they disgraced the area is deeply disturbing. However, he realizes that "this, too, had its place in the cycles" (39). Anthony understands that this violation of the Rings has a purpose in the overall string of events that will lead to Vanna's eventual reign as heiress to their power. Anthony Ashe dies shortly after the incident. Melitta discovers her second pregnancy and marries Morice Amberton. Melitta's second child is a boy, Valentine Evelyn Ashe. The children spend their time between Amberton and Rings. Section I ends as Vanna has been sent away at school, the rest of the family dwells at the Amberton house, and the Rings rest in silence. The Sections II and III, set in 1917, explore the life of an older Vanna and the effects of the war. Foy states that, "the stage is set for the adult... Vanna's struggles to search for answers and to begin her attempt to heal and pity those who need her magical solace" (39). The Rings are the source of the "magical solace" that Vanna can provide for those who have been effected by the war-torn and evil-filled environment. In this section it becomes clear that Vanna is the guardian of the Rings and the priestess who is able to draw from their power. The energy she receives from them has the potential to heal those who have been affected by the war. In this way, she has a certain responsibility to use her inherited role for the survival of the world.

One of the main forces antagonistic to the power of the Rings is Judy Marston. Although Judy first appears as Vanna's friend, it soon becomes apparent that she is Vanna's antithesis. Although she is a strong feminine presence, she spends her powers on trying to undo what is stable and secure. She unsuccessfully tries to control the power of the Rings for her own ruinous purposes. Section II begins as Vanna must share a flat with Judy due to a limited income. The section introduces Serge, a Russian *ÈmigrÈ* who has avoided military service in the war. Judy seduces Serge and fights to control and undo him. Vanna tries to save Serge when Judy leaves him for Peter Amberton, the shell-shocked nephew of Lord Maurice Amberton. Although Judy desperately tries to introduce Serge to the power of the Rings, he cannot comprehend their significance. The novel suggests that this is due to the impact that the war's destruction has on Serge. During a conversation with Clavel, the groundskeeper at Rings, Serge admits that he has not found access to the Rings:

"Miss Vanna had the Rings to help her. They're no good to me."

"Perhaps you haven't got what Mr. Anthony Ashe called the words of power, Mr. Serge."

"Magic is no good unless you believe in it, Clavel."

"Quiet, sir. The only good in it is to take out of you what is already there."

Inside out is the rule." (Butts 220).

Serge is a young man who has a history of fleeing from military service. He continues this practice during the First World War. As an artist, he might be viewed as a creator, one who produces things or ideas. He cannot be a part of the war because war is inherently destructive. The role of a soldier would contradict his beliefs as an artist. However, no matter how much he tries to accept the healing nature of Vanna Ashe and the Rings, he has already been claimed by Judy and her destructive powers. Throughout the novel, Serge is in limbo between the "magical solace" that Vanna has to offer through the Rings and the ruinous magic of Judy.

Judy, as Vanna explains in the novel, represents the war and its shattering properties. "Consider the war. Have you known anyone who loves the war as Judy loves it? Stoop then and wash. She dips her tall, white body in the blood and rolls it in her mouth, and squeezes it out of her hair" (Butts 149).

If *Ashe of Rings* is a "War-Fairy-Tale," then Judy is the wicked witch of the story. She is the enemy of the forces of good, and will stop at nothing to undo Vanna and the power of the Rings. Furthermore, if the Rings are a ship, then Judy is struggling to gain control of the vessel and tap into its powers. Vanna must protect the power of the Rings as the Eumolpidae guarded the Eleusinian Mysteries. But although the female heir to the Rings successfully maintains the positive forces, she cannot claim the soul of Serge from Judy. Judy is the strong power of evil in Foy's mind: "She is the antithesis of Vanna's *white magic* (change for good); she is a throwback to ancient aggression and sorcery that Vanna must struggle to combat" (Foy 41). If Judy can be seen as an embodiment of the war, Vanna is a return to what was stable before the war. Her character offers a method of regaining what World War I stole from the hearts of the British.

One of the effects that the war had on the British was a feeling of displacement. Vanna handles her displacement in the city by a return to her country home, and this reflects a long tradition of seeing rural life as the heart of Britain, what Martin J. Weiner terms "idealization of the countryside" (47). According to historian R. C. K. Esnor:

The human wealth of a populous countryside in which all classes lived, and could live, at peace, for centuries—that is our arch-achievement as a nation, the source and condition of our other greatneses, the base on whose fragments, 'majestic though in ruin,' we can still sound, if not our loudest, at least our most legitimate fame (qtd. in Weiner 61).

The Rings, set near the ocean in the British countryside, represent for Vanna a near-Eden. It is there where she can find her strength as a goddess who protects a mystical tradition. Although Judy, the evil goddess of ruin and decay, can tap into their power, Vanna is able to reestablish the Rings as a symbol of peace and order. Butts provides a scenario in which, while World War I threatens to destroy all that was traditionally

British, the strength of the British myth of stable rural life finally triumphs.

Triumph comes from Vanna's position as the "embodiment of an ancient priestess" who is "also closely connected to the animism of the land" (Foy 42). Vanna firmly acknowledges that the Rings indeed have a soul that supports the human life that praises it. Even as a child she begs her tutor to tell her stories of the Ashe family and "say it again. Make a magic of it. I think I know what it is. It's in the tower on the lawn" (Butts 47). She understands the rituals of the Rings as she offers to help Serge: "Serge—I will do for you what we do sometimes. I will cut a turf-strip off the Rings, and we will stick our knives in it and you shall be seized of this country." Serge is aggravated at these "local enthusiasms" (Butts 145). But Vanna remains steadfast in her inherited commitment to the Rings. As discussed earlier, they save her from the danger of Judy and Peter Amberton as she actually becomes one with the stone. At the end of the novel, Vanna prays to the land for a calm stability: "Rings. Rings. Upon the bells of your horses. *Pray for the peace*" (231). She goes on to her room where there is "a red fire; the air in suspense, like the veil over a cradle." Just as when she was cocooned as the sacred baby heir to the Rings, she falls fast asleep in this magical realm of protection. The fire in her room dies, and the "sea wind pour[s] over her" (Butts 232). The ship of the Rings rocks her to sleep as the wind from the ocean peacefully blows. She is established as the present priestess of the Rings. Vanna Elizabeth Ashe has defeated the evil forces of Judy Marston, although she failed to save the soul of Serge. However, even her powers are not strong enough to convince those who do not acknowledge the Rings. Vanna's failure to rescue Serge from Judy's grasp symbolizes the continuing dangers of modern life. Even though Vanna has regained control of the Rings, there are some who cannot be brought back to the stability that they represent.

Ashe of Rings is an allegory, as Nathalie Blondel explains: "Forces are portrayed through the 'masks' (in the Greek sense of the word) of the other characters" (146). Indeed, each character is fighting for something. Anthony and Vanna Ashe fight to defend the honor of the Rings. Melitta Ashe struggles to comprehend this phenomenon. Judy Marston battles to destroy the guardians of the Rings while Serge struggles to save his own soul from the devastation of Judy. Either a character has inherited an intimate understanding of the Rings or he or she has not. On the allegorical level, the story is about a country of people who are trying to defend the only thing they have left that is stable, their traditions and myths. The effects of war and modernity threaten to end even this, and some will be lost as they try to maintain peace. However, in Mary Butts's fairy tale, the peace and order found in nature prevails through the feminine spirit of Vanna Elizabeth Ashe. The solution for the war-torn country lies in the strong feminine presence whose understanding of the mystical in life can reestablish what the degeneration of the war has stolen.

Chapter Two;

I have a garden of my own,
But so with roses overgrown
And lilies, that you would it guess
To be a little wilderness;
And all the springtime of the year...
—Harriet Hume, from *Harriet Hume*

While *Ashe of Rings* involves a heroine who finds the stability and power of nature in the English countryside, *Harriet Hume* features a female musician who has located her own "wilderness" within the city of London. The heroine of Rebecca West's novel inhabits a spiritual sphere where she can fully realize her supernatural capacities. One of her powers is that of mind-reading, and there is only one particular mind she can read, that of her former lover, Arnold Condorex. The novel traces Harriet Hume's encounters with this man. While Harriet establishes stability and discovers her spirituality through her music and garden, Arnold quests for monetary and political success. Much to his dismay, Harriet can see all his dishonest schemes involved in his rise to power. The novel ends in a confusing fantasy sequence as Arnold shoots and kills himself. His spirit travels across the city to Harriet's home where he encounters ghost policemen and the spirit of the deceased Harriet Hume.

Harriet Hume is very much a fantasy novel complete with the mystical phenomenon of mind-reading, the fantasy episode at the end of the novel, and many curious tales of the supernatural told by Harriet. However, woven into this fantasy are comments on the role of women in inter-war Britain. *Harriet Hume* explores the purpose of women in a society that is adjusting to a shift in gender roles. Published in 1928, the novel is described by Victoria Glendinning as a "fable for adults, a vehicle chiefly for entertainment but also for the conveying of social and psychological observations" (1). As the tale of a single woman's supernatural relationship with her masculine opposite, it comments on gender and addresses inter-war social unease in Britain. In this way, the novel transcends its position as a "vehicle chiefly for entertainment."

Indeed, *Harriet Hume* is a novel centrally concerned with gender roles. Harriet Hume is a single woman who has found her niche through her piano playing and life in her private garden. Harriet is the embodiment of a curious category of woman who fits neither the newly re-encouraged role of housewife, nor the stereotyped notion of a 1920s "flapper." She is single, but her role in life is self-affirmed and she is fulfilled. She is not a maternal figure, but the reader soon realizes that West means her to represent the essence of femininity. In a society that idealized motherhood in the wake of the war as the most meaningful part of a woman's existence, Harriet's place in society is not a traditional one.

Like Vanna in *Ashe of Rings*, Harriet evinces a bond with nature. Her home is accessible only through the back door entrance, and visitors must walk through the garden to enter her home. In this way, a visit to Harriet is a call on nature. Her special connection to her garden can be examined in the following passage:

...led the way down the steps into her garden, which was bloomy with deep shadows. At the first flower bed she stooped to dismiss a weed from service, brushed the mould from her fingers with some distaste and grumbled because the duties of a gardener could not be performed with a feather duster (West 37).

Note the way Harriet bends to "dismiss a weed from service." The wording presents the weeds as the subjects of Harriet the Queen. These plants obey and respect her. However, they do not fear her. Nature is celebrated, not controlled, by Harriet as at the end of the novel when she happily sings and she thinks of the arrival of spring (279). Later in the passage, Harriet complains that she is not able to dust as she does inside her house. The garden is an extension of the inside of the house, and Harriet grumbles because she cannot clean it as she does the inside. The precious natural world deserves as much respect as does her inside quarters, for it is her home, her living environment. Arnold also observes that Harriet seems to actually dwell in her garden just as much as she does her indoor home. He says she lives "like a gypsy, half in her garden." He goes on to ponder that Harriet leaves her gloves strewn about, but that perhaps they are not gloves at all. "There was a race of gazelles with a snake-like habit of casting their skins at certain seasons of the year" (53). Harriet is portrayed as fluttering about her garden, sometimes shedding her skin here and there. What is clear is that she has the same complex relationship with nature that an animal would be it a bird, cat, snake, or gazelle.

Indeed, throughout the novel, Arnold Condorex views Harriet as connected to particular animals. When Arnold and Harriet are lovers, he sees her as a little creature who might take flight into the air at any moment with her shoulders that "might have been wings folded in on themselves and packed away for reasons of prudence" and her little feet compared to those of "a bird-woman built by a magician expert in fine jewelers' work and ornithology" (11). The image of Harriet as a flighty entity who almost floats instead of walks comments on her sense of connection. She is not bound by the rationality of the earth, or limited by a domestic setting. Instead, she is a willowy character who might fly away when she pleases and float around if she so chooses. "If she indeed desired to look an ordinary woman, walking on earth and of much the same specific gravity she had better not have cut her skirts so full, for their swaying buoyancy seemed to be supporting her" (11). Harriet is not an "ordinary woman" but one with aerial possibilities.

It is essential to realize, however, that these are Arnold's observations of Harriet. What does West show about their

relationship in Arnold's observation of her? These characterizations from his perspective are, in a way, disparaging. As Arnold reveals to the reader glimpses into Harriet's character, he never truly recognizes their ramifications for himself. Arnold reduces Harriet to animalistic terms without ever realizing the positive qualities they imply. While the reader is able to connect Harriet to the amazing qualities of nature through these comparisons, Arnold simply dismisses Harriet by them. Instead of seeing Harriet as empowered through her similarities to animals, Arnold reduces her to something he can control.

Late in the novel, Arnold compares Harriet to a feline: "She rubbed against him in the way of a pleased cat." As she adjusts her position on the sofa during a conversation with Arnold, she "nimblely" curls herself up on the cushions and keeps an intent and "steadfast" gaze on him (201). Here it seems that Harriet has been granted the skills of a cat, and her movements have become sly and stealthy. She is not described as having the same ethereal quality as she did when compared to a bird. Rather, Harriet is shown as an animal that is very much grounded and has a skillful relationship with the earth. Cats always keep their balance and cleverly maneuver over obstacles. However, it is important to note that now Harriet is not seen by Arnold as an innocent, fluttering bird but as the creature that preys on birds as he becomes more paranoid that her insights into him will result in his evil schemes being revealed, "...you are an animal, and cannot be saved. For you dip your lips to your glass as a cat dips its muzzle to a saucer, and not raise your glass to your lips, as houseled ladies do" (West 201). Here is an interesting set of contradictory images. One is that of a primal animal with no civilized urges such as raising a glass to drink. Arnold denies that Harriet can be "saved," and thus implies that Harriet is somehow a doomed predator. The other image is that of the "houseled lady" who raises her glass to her lips. This woman is what Arnold implies that Harriet should strive to be, if at all possible. If Harriet occupied this role, she would be "trapped" into a household where she would not have the power of insight that frightens Arnold.

In this scenario, Arnold would feel safe from being discovered. The "houseled lady" perhaps is married, and, if not, longs to be. As a passive, polite woman, she gladly accepts her role within traditional society. Arnold's relationship with Harriet has at this point began to sour. He is no longer impressed with her strange relationship to her surroundings. He cannot see her as an innocent, beautiful creature anymore; instead, she is a predator, and specifically, dangerous to him. From this fate he does not believe that she can be redeemed. As far as Harriet is a creature with a close, complex relationship with nature, Harriet cannot be saved. Furthermore, Arnold's opinion of felines is explored later in the story when he approaches a neighborhood cat: "...what a vulgar animal you are in your craving for publicity, and, in considerateness, how inferior to man!" (236). In this context, he sees Harriet as wholly inconsiderate, rejecting the place in which society has told her to stay. Instead she is her own animal, but in

Arnold's opinion a vulgar one. It is ironic that Arnold should condescendingly remark that the cat is an animal "craving for publicity" since his own greed for public recognition fuels his evil schemes.

Perhaps Arnold's distaste at Harriet's relationship with nature is also an instructive realization that it is her source of power—a power that is not dependent on him. Jane Marcus argues that the British fantasy novel depicts nature for the woman as "a wilderness of one's own, away from family control of domestic space and male control of public space. Central to the concept of female wilderness is the rejection of heterosexuality. In the dream of freedom, one's womb is one's own only in the wilderness" (Wilderness 136). It is in this wilderness that women can develop away from the outside pressures of society. Here they may return to the ancient goddess tradition. Among nature, they are earth mothers, sorceresses, and huntresses. These antique powers are again realized and "the actors return to the prelapsarian world of preclassical feminine power" (136).

How does Harriet's preoccupation with music figure into her world of "preclassical feminine power?" Harriet is able to tame the abilities of natural concordance. Music is an ancient art, and Harriet finds comfort and expression through it. Before he begins to resent Harriet, Arnold observes her relationship with her piano: "Rather it was as if some inhabiting spirit of the instrument had resolved no longer to tolerate the age-old conditions by which human virtuosity steals all the credit of its tunefulness, and was essaying to make its music by itself, and found its new art difficult" (West 34). Harriet brings life to the piano. It is as if she feels its need for self-expression and she kindly lends it that ability. The instrument feels Harriet's capacity for accommodation and decides finally to make music by itself. Again, Harriet has a special relationship with spirits, here those of music and harmony. The passage shows that Harriet understands what it feels like to have been caged and contained. It is as if Harriet encourages a situation where the piano can free itself as her music has freed her. In essence, the two have freed each other.

Harriet seems to follow in the tradition of the blind soothsayer, suffering "from a disorder of sight" (16). Her vision "fluctuate[s] with her strength" so that glasses cannot correct the problem (16). When she reads her newspapers she must lean very close to them on the floor in order to see them (17). She cannot predict the future with her mind-reading abilities, but she is a person whose weak physical sight is greatly compensated for by her capacity for psychological sight. Harriet finds that she can read Arnold Condorex's mind. She relates her gift to him in disbelief: "I was in your mind. And because I was in your mind I knew what your body was doing. You were pulling back the curtains—" (27). This is the supernatural gift of Rebecca West's fantasy heroine, and this is what gives Harriet her strength, not simply her power over Arnold. When she can see inside Arnold's mind, she can understand him. The connection between Harriet and Arnold is an intricate one, as they embody West's view of the

essential masculine and feminine. While Arnold has the capacity to read Harriet's mind as well, he does not realize it until the very end of the novel. He lives in denial of this power, while Harriet embraces her gift.

In Western cultural tradition, masculinity accounts for the intellectual, reasonable part of the balance, while femininity accounts for intuition. Thus, while Arnold actively resists his queer ability to read Harriet's mind, she passively comprehends the gift. In this way, Harriet is able to truly understand the motives of Arnold as she sees his hidden agendas. She is observant, while Arnold resists understanding the situation. Their relationship, which should be an understanding balance of power, is instead a struggle. Arnold feels threatened by Harriet's faculty, and takes drastic measures to end her life. He is not comfortable with Harriet having a glimpse into his thoughts and the power this vision entails.

This power struggle can be applied to the general situation in inter-war England. During the war, women had a glimpse into the lives of men. They were able to enter the workplace and were empowered by this contribution to the war effort. Finally, they knew how it felt to be public, active members of society. But after the war, they were encouraged to go back home. Men were perhaps threatened by the women's experience in the workplace. Therefore, society shoved women back into the private, household orbit. The men refused to yield their "power," and women were instead forced to adjust to the changes in their lives. The dislocation resulted in angst that the literary fantasy heroine embodies. Rebecca West's vision of this power struggle has been seen by some critics as ultimately unhelpful for women: "West's dualistic vision assumes that male jealousy of women's power can never be overcome and that she is doomed eternally to know and to forgive" (Marcus, Wilderness 157). Thus, if the fate of women is to follow the model presented by *Harriet Hume*, then they will remain locked in her universe of essentialist femininity, where women are the passive creators who must accept and accommodate. This is not the only possible view of the ending, however. Harriet and Arnold stand together as the story closes and Arnold comments that this is his "proper place" (288). Arnold has realized the potential of their relationship. Before, Arnold viewed the relationship as a battle for power. He struggled to control Harriet by reducing her to something he could disparage. The fact that Harriet possessed so much insight into his character threatened him. However, by standing side by side, they reflect a final scene of harmony. Arnold finally understands that their relationship need not be a power struggle; instead, it can be a balance. Women are not locked into a particular role; instead, both men and women are able to share energies to create a powerful equilibrium. In this hopeful reading of the novel's ending, Arnold understands his role in the equilibrium.

The stories that Harriet tells Arnold throughout the novel shed light on the message of its ending. These stories are related to the relationship of Harriet and Arnold as well as the exchange

between men and women. Harriet's story of the Ladies Frances, Georgina, and Arabella Dudley combines elements of nature, mysticism, sisterly bonds, and a power struggle. The myth of the three sisters begins when they are infants and are lost and found on the lawn asleep "linked by a thick cable of flowers" (West 40). Beginning in this innocent, infantile stage as the children find their solace in mother earth and each other, Harriet demonstrates the magical comfort found in nature as well as femininity. As the tale progresses, the sisters are forced to separate in order to marry, and their beauty falters: "They were still handsome; but they were not, as they had often seemed when they trod the sward parks in their floral panoply, immortal goddesses" (43). The expected domestic role for women has interfered with their connection to nature, sisterhood, and themselves. As these women grow further from their life source, natural femininity, they lose their strength and spirituality. No longer connected by their flower rope, their inner sense of connection is severed as well. Finally, when the women reunite and secure themselves together with flowers, they are "in greater beauty than they had been for many years" (45). They are transformed back into their goddess form and proceed to escape from the confines of being household objects as wives. They are no longer the possession of their husbands, but they possess themselves through their relationship with nature and each other. They proceed to parade down the streets of London to the garden where "the earth about them trembled, to a degree it swallowed them" (47). In this mystical stage, they are ultimately taken back into their mother earth and become trees, permanent reminders of this bond. They have successfully retreated from a dominating patriarchal society to an eternally safe escape into the mystical womb of nature.

Jane Marcus calls the fairy tale a "modern version of the myth of sisterhood" and a "classical invocation of the female spirits in triumph over patriarchal rape and marriage" (Wilderness 143). Indeed, the story creates a space where the feminine presence can escape restrictive social bonds. It is a fable with the moral preaching the importance of life as a goddess. In this life, a woman can find her identity in an ancient realm of wilderness and feminine bonds. Yet it is beneficial to examine the parallels between the tale of the three sisters and the plot of *Harriet Hume* itself. Harriet attempts to free herself from the shackles of inter-war Britain's masculine notion of the domestic woman. As the three women permanently return to the earth, Harriet remains in her natural sphere even in her death. Arnold is drawn to her garden home where the two are able to stand peacefully together at the end of the story. The Ladies Frances, Georgina, and Arabella Dudley are the heroines of a fairy tale where they are able to escape to the comforting arms of mother earth. Similarly, Harriet finds a permanent refuge in the same garden as these trees. Although Arnold comes to the garden with evil intentions, his perception of Harriet changes. At the end, he finally understands that their relationship should not be a struggle, but a delicate balance. Harriet is able to remain in her home where Arnold joins her. The ending suggests that there are solutions to

the contemporary power struggle to be found in nature, a comfort to be found in a return to the organic world. While the sisters find a refuge free of masculine presence, Harriet's refuge accommodates both the female and male being. Harriet forgives Arnold, and as a spirit, carries on as the cheerful hostess to Arnold and the policemen. It is the female spirit that accommodates the male spirit, and Marcus harshly criticizes West's closing, "Her ending suggests that both women and men are at fault in the battle of the sexes and that women will always surrender" (Marcus, Wilderness 146). But this is assuming that the struggle for power must be won.

Thus, the ending of *Harriet Hume* may not be such a negative one after all. Harriet does forgive her transgressor. But does she surrender to him? Are forgiveness and accommodation of another being so retrogressive? After all, the garden in which Harriet finds endless comfort and power can be seen as accommodating. In the same way, Harriet can accommodate Arnold. Harriet is not interested in winning a battle. Although Arnold has blatantly caused Harriet's physical end, it is Harriet who must finally explain to Arnold the phenomenon in the garden, for it is she who holds the knowledge. She comforts Arnold when he sees the "sweetness dripping from the stars," hears the noise of grass growing, "rain hissing upwards," and the "kissing" noise of the buds in the garden opening (West 279). Arnold is finally forced to experience fully Harriet's world. Here, she has the power and is the expert and Arnold must ask the questions. In this reading, the fantasy heroine has not triumphed over the masculine forces of her world, but instead has revealed her own power within her own setting. Furthermore, the ending presents what West perhaps thought to be a solution to uneven gender roles. After all, it is not only Harriet who has surrendered in the ending; Arnold accepts Harriet's offer to stand by her side, suggesting they finally stand on equal ground. As he finally accepts Harriet's natural world, the two are able to exchange equally and are finally balanced. Rebecca West was perhaps not suggesting that the perfect scenario was one where one group won the battle of the sexes. Instead, she suggests that an ideal universe contains man and woman in perfect proportion where they can understand each other and share power fairly.

Although mind-reading and a supernatural connection with nature were not fully realistic options for the displaced women of this period, readers of novels like *Harriet Hume* would nevertheless have found comfort in its parables of female power. In any case, Harriet offers a fully feminine character mighty in her own right. She never submits to domestic "bliss," but finds her own way through music, magic, and her garden. She is a likable character who in the end does not fold in the face of male domination. Arnold can take her life, but her spirit remains in the garden where he must now learn and understand. The trees of Ladies Frances, Georgina and Arabella become "full and well-fleshed, and a cable of foliage to which the moonlight gave an appearance of flowers" (West 280). These arboreal spirits seem to nod their head in approval as they remind Harriet of her bond

with their flower cable. Opting out of the competitiveness of male power structures, Harriet is now eternally secure in her garden. Harriet's "little garden of her own" has indeed become her ancient wilderness to which she may now introduce to the masculine presence of Arnold Condorex.

Chapter Three:

That's why we become witches: to show scorn of pretending life's a safe business, to satisfy our passion for adventure. — Laura Willowes, from *Lolly Willowes*

Mary Butts's novel *Ashe of Rings* depicts a woman who is encouraged from birth to connect freely with nature. In *Harriet Hume* by Rebecca West, the heroine experiences the joys of nature through her garden at will. More importantly, both seem to have the mystical connection to power without struggle. However, Sylvia Townsend Warner's novel, *Lolly Willowes* or the *Loving Huntsman*, features a feminine character who is unable at first to freely find her place within nature, and she must tear away from the constraints of her family to finally experience a mystical connection with the English countryside. Laura Willowes is the heroine of the story, a woman who remains unmarried and is, for much of the novel, controlled by her family. In her introduction to the recent reissue of the novel, Alison Lurie discusses the relevance of *Lolly Willowes* to the unmarried British women of the inter-war period. She explains that during this period there was an excess of single women due to the fact that many young men ventured into the various colonies of the British empire. The horrendous mortality rate of the First World War also lessened these women's chances of finding a husband (vii-viii). It is important to remember that in a society so concerned with having women in the home as housewife and mother, this was a considerable problem. Women who did not marry and have children were looked at as being unfortunate creatures. Warner presents Laura Willowes as being pitied by her family as a hopeless, single spinster and passed around to be used as "Aunt Lolly" to the children.

Lolly Willowes is not the tale of a woman who remains trapped in the confines of society. Lurie says that the novel "was, in fact, a subtle demand for women's right to privacy and independence from their families, for power over their own lives— even if they had to make a pact with Satan to get it" (vii). Laura does indeed make a literal pact with the devil in the final step to gain complete freedom from her family. In this way, *Lolly Willowes* makes a statement concerning women's role in society at this time. Warner implies that women needed a place to be empowered, whether it be a quiet place in the country or by interaction with the devil. On the other hand, the novel could be demonstrating society's view of women if they do stake their claim on a place of their own. Even though Laura never demonstrates any pure evil, she is still a witch. As Lurie comments, "The implication, of course, is that a woman who refuses the "Aunt Lolly" role is, in the view of conventional society, a kind of witch, even if she does no evil" (xiii). Whatever the case, *Lolly*

Willowes is the tale of a woman who finds the power of nature and makes herself mystical in her own right.

Sylvia Townsend Warner presents the story of Laura Willowes in three sections. In the first section, the reader is introduced to Laura's background. Laura, born in 1874, is the youngest of the Willowes children. Her two older brothers, Henry and James, both use their baby sister as a prop for their games as children: "They performed the brotherly office of teaching her to throw and to catch; and when they played at Knights or Red Indians, Laura was dutifully cast for some passive female part" (16). Laura's mother grows ill after her daughter's birth and dies when Laura is still a young girl. These circumstances contribute to the strong bond that develops between Laura and her father, Everard Willowes. Laura grows to womanhood while living very contentedly with her father at their country home, Lady Place. At his death, Laura's brother James and his family take over the estate. The second section of the novel concerns Laura's move from Lady Place to London where she lives with her other brother Henry and his family. There, she is shoved into identities created for her by her family: "One was Aunt Lolly, a middle-aging lady, lightfooted upon stairs, and indispensable for Christmas Eve and birthday preparation" (Warner 57). Laura has been pulled from her life in the country, and she physically shows the negative symptoms of this displacement. Jane Marcus says, "This ten-year limbo is rendered with chilling eloquence. London is colder than the country. The water is hard. Laura's hands roughen, and her face hardens. Patriarchal time is shown as oppressive, like Woolf's depiction of Big Ben in *Mrs. Dalloway*" (Wilderness 150). Despite this repression, Laura eventually experiences a sort of spiritual awakening and plans to move to a small village named Great Mop. The final part of the novel covers the rediscovery of Laura's identity.

During her childhood, Laura is able to develop a sense of connection with the country. However, even at Lady Place, she is sometimes prevented from experiencing nature on her own terms. A scene depicts the contentment that Laura found in nature while also demonstrating the restraints that her brothers placed on her. Once as Henry and James played their outdoor games, they tie Laura to a tree as a captive princess, and "her brothers were so much carried away by a series of single combats for her favor that they forgot to come and rescue her before they swore friendship and went off to the Holy Land." Laura's father eventually finds her "sitting contentedly in hayband fetters, and singing herself a story about a snake that had no mackintosh" (17). Laura is perfectly amused by this situation despite the fact that she has been bound by fetters placed on her by her family. She is not separated from nature or, really, changed by her brother's persecution. However, this situation foreshadows Laura's future as the "captive" of her brothers and their families. Although at this point, Laura is satisfied to be a passive participant in their games, she eventually finds that she must connect with nature in her own way instead of being tied to it by her brothers.

Furthermore, Laura's parents have carefully told their boys to make sure their young daughter does not fall into the pond when they play outside. Bruce Knoll points out that "the proscription against falling into the pond can also be read as a proscription against immersing herself in nature. Already as a young girl, Laura is steered away from that force which is most important to her feminine character." Knoll goes on to discuss that these games with her brothers teach Laura the role that she was expected to assume as she grew older, that of a passive female shuffled around according to the inclinations of her brothers (2). However, she is happy on her own and no one stops her from pursuing her own inclinations. Despite the fact that she does go along with her brothers' game, Laura does not seem changed by it. Even when she is bound to the tree, Laura seems to have a connection to the forest that transcends the role of passive female. She may seem to be submissive to her family, but it seems as though Laura has already discovered that there is a curious empowerment to be found in nature.

For some time, Laura remains in this passive role within her family, although she is able to shrug off the then-encouraged role of wife and mother. Her family does attempt to find her a husband. When Laura is still at Lady Place, family members such as her Aunt Emmy try to convince her that it is time for courtship. But these attempts are unsuccessful, and Laura's father believes that "his relief at seeing Laura's budding suitors nipped in their bud was due to the conviction that not one of them was good enough for her" (28). Everard never feels the need to find a husband for Laura, and he seems to understand her need for freedom at Lady Place. Furthermore, Laura feels no need for a suitor, for she prefers the company of her father over any young man (27). As the mistress of Lady Place due to her mother's death, Laura is content to read books from the library and pursue her interests in "botany and brewery" (31). At Lady Place, Laura often roams the countryside looking for herbs, and this interest reveals her early connection to nature (and, potentially, to witchcraft) that is not then allowed to flourish. Already, Laura is discovering a way to make brews and herbal potions with "magical" abilities to affect people's state of being out of natural ingredients. Laura has begun to develop a special relationship with nature where she has the knowledge and power to mystically manipulate natural components into something beneficial.

After Everard's death, Laura is sent to London where her family continues to try to find her a suitor. Henry and Caroline attempt to make a match between Laura and Mr. Arbuthnot, a stiff lawyer who works with Henry. Although his conversation somewhat appeals to her, Laura feels that "nothing would have induced her to marry him." However, she finally rids herself of this suitor by commenting to him that he resembles a werewolf, and Henry and Caroline end all of their attempts. Laura does not necessarily make this comment in order to bother Mr. Arbuthnot, although it greatly bothers Henry and Caroline. She actually amuses herself with thoughts of the man devouring lambs as a werewolf, and it seems as though Laura believes that her potential

suitor may be a werewolf because "lots of people are without knowing" (53). Laura's statement may have appalled everyone else, but Laura actually felt as though Mr. Arbuthnot could be that dark, mysterious creature. This foreshadowing demonstrates Laura's interest in mysterious creatures and her realization that an "ordinary" person might actually be one.

Despite her important role as mistress of Lady Place before her father's death, Laura simply has no interest in marriage. Caroline finds Laura's situation unfortunate and feels "a kind of pity for the unused virgin." She represents traditional society, convinced that the only satisfying role for a woman was in the domestic setting. Caroline feels both sorry for Laura and "emotionally plumper" herself due to her own wifehood and maternity (55). For her, a woman who does not realize an opportunity to be a successful wife and mother, such as Laura, is to be pitied. However, Laura herself begins to yearn for freedom away from the city, and a mystical escape from the oppression of the patriarchal society of London.

Laura is able to avoid becoming a wife or a mother, but she is forced to play the somewhat maternal role of "Aunt Lolly" to her nieces and nephews. Laura's identity is further displaced when Henry's eldest daughter, Fanny, is unable to pronounce Laura's name as a child and calls her Lolly. Even Laura's name has been taken away from her in her brother's household and "Laura was put away" (57). Her identity has been shelved. Although her relationship with the children is not a close one, they nonetheless look to their aunt as a guardian, if only in the utilitarian sense. She is appreciated by her family only for her practical contributions, and she is unfulfilled. During summer holidays near the sea, Laura "would have liked to go by herself for long walks inland and find strange herbs, but she was too useful to be allowed to stray" (61). This again alludes to her need to connect to nature (and, potentially, magic) through her botanical interests. Laura may be "useful" to the family, but she is otherwise unhappy. She wants to make her own way through nature, but her familial role of "Aunt Lolly" prevents her from having the opportunity. This instance parallels her brothers' childhood games that placed Laura in the passive female role; she is tied to her identity as "Aunt Lolly" and unable to explore the wilderness for herself.

The world of London, to Laura, seems coldly structured. Things in Henry's household are methodical. "Even Laura, introduced as a sort of extra wheel, soon found herself part of the mechanism, and, interworking with the other wheels, went round as busily as they" (44). Life there is as strictly organized as Caroline's clothing drawer "where nightgowns and chemises lay folded exactly upon each other in a purity that disdained even lavender" (48). But Laura craves a release from this structured existence. As the years pass by and the children grow, Laura begins to daydream that she is "in the country, at dusk, and alone, and strangely at peace" (73). Her longings for solitude in nature and freedom from the mechanical lifestyle at her brother's home

are fully awakened when she enters a little florist and greengrocer shop by chance on a walk back home. She finds the shop extremely comforting in its disarray. "The aspect of the shop pleased her greatly. It was small and homely. Fruit and flowers and vegetables were crowded together in countrified disorder" (79). The shop also has "the apples and pears, the eggs, the disordered nuts overflowing from their compartments." The little shop is bursting with greenery, and Laura gets lost in its state of natural disorder. She finds a sort of peace there, as "she forgot that she was in London, she forgot the whole of her London life. She seemed to be standing alone in a darkening orchard..." (80). This incident leads to Laura's discovery of her future residence, Great Mop. After buying chrysanthemums and discovering their origins in the Chilterns, she buys a guidebook and decides to move there.

Back at her home, Laura reads the guidebook "curled askew on the bed" (83). Again, Sylvia Townsend Warner refers to disarrangement. This reflects Laura's longings to be where things do not function as a machine, and everything does not have its own tidy place in the home, including herself. The wilderness offers the perfection of disarray, where leaves fall where they please to the forest floor. She announces to her family that she will move there, but they believe the plan to be in jest. Finally, Henry realizes that she is serious, and pleases with her to stay, telling her that her plan is "absurd." Her nephew Titus is the only family member who is impressed by her plans. Laura reveals that "it's only my own way, Henry" (94). Although Henry has lost much of her money in bad investments, she is still able to tear away from London. Despite her lack of funds, she is able to rent a room in Great Mop. Besides, Laura feels as though "it is best as one grows older to strip oneself of possessions, to shed oneself downward like a tree, and be almost wholly earth before one dies" (98). In this unstructured life, there is a feeling of belonging where Laura is able to find her own place in relation to the earth.

Jane Marcus says that "Great Mop's name is obviously a play on a witch's broomstick, the phallic object of domestic service which links the repeated acts of bringing order and cleanliness with the power to fly" (Wilderness 152). Furthering this idea, the broomstick could be seen as actually transcending domestic order as it enables one to fly wildly about the wind, and it also rejects its original purpose in the home and becomes a magical tool. Laura, too, rejects her place in London as "Aunt Lolly" when she moves to Great Mop and becomes a witch. In leaving the familial sphere, she places herself in a world where she finally has the chance to find her own role. Much like the broomstick, a woman's place was then thought to be in the home, but both broomstick and Laura find that they are able to exceed their original purpose and find a mystical place in the world.

Laura's magic began with her earlier experiments with herbs. Her magic develops in Great Mop as she shapes the townspeople in dough and bakes them, making grotesque figures:

"Laura felt slightly ashamed of her freak. It was unkind to play these tricks with her neighbor's bodies" (130). She slowly finds her way around Great Mop and realizes the secret of both herself and the town. The "mystery" of Great Mop is the witchcraft that takes place there, but Laura begins to find her own magic before she recognizes this secret. As an apprentice to a local man who raises birds, she feels a special connection to nature as a henwife. Laura makes the transformation "from Foolish Virgin to Wise Virgin, as potent as the henwife in fairy tales who 'hatched the future in her apron...' Henwifery transforms her, rids her of her anger against her family for keeping her from the world of women's natural magic" (Marcus, Wilderness 154). She has finally found a world of comfort in Great Mop, and discovers her own role. If her role of henwife does transform her, then it is into a woman who is able to understand her miserable past and her mystical future.

However, her little universe is threatened when her grown nephew, Titus, decides to join Laura in Great Mop, a town that he finds to be charming. Bruce Knoll comments that "the threat [of Titus] is more dangerous because of its subtlety, since to Laura he does not appear as a remnant of the masculine culture that she has fled" (9). However, Titus becomes much more than a "subtle" threat to Laura in Great Mop. Before, Laura had felt a sense of fond connection to Titus, but when he moves to the village, she becomes aggravated by his infringement on her privacy: "Even when she felt pretty sure that she had escaped she could not profit by her solitude, for Titus's voice still jangled on her nerves" (143). Laura realizes his smothering masculine presence as she sees his pipe and tobacco pouch on the mantelpiece, "they lay there like the orb and scepter of an usurping monarch" (Warner 145). Titus represents to Laura the repressive society that she has come to Great Mop to escape, and she becomes desperate to regain her private sense of identity in the town. Titus has come to Great Mop to write a book, and enjoys the area with "a possessive and masculine love" and "loved the countryside as though it were a body" (147). If Titus loves Great Mop as though it were a woman, then Laura feels a woman to woman connection with the area. The countryside seems like a feminine presence that welcomes her to come and get acquainted. Laura's love for Great Mop is a growing one that she develops through her trust for it. She has struggled to come there, unlike Titus, and now struggles to learn to love it.

Laura grows angrier as Titus further "root[s] downward in the soil" of the village (147). The novel almost suggests that there is a battle between Laura and Titus for Great Mop. But Laura is disturbed because a masculine figure has again obstructed her freedom. Not only has he invaded her love for the countryside, he also expects Laura to be "Aunt Lolly" to him again. She deeply resents him for his destruction of her newfound character and his reduction of her back to her familial role: "In vain she had tried to escape, transient and delusive had been her ecstasies of relief. She had thrown away twenty years of her life like a handful of old rags, but the wind had blown them back again, and dressed

her in her old uniform" (150). While Laura understands that her nephew has "a kind heart" and he means her "nothing but good," she nevertheless is bitter towards him because he does not understand that she simply wants to be left alone. It is not his actual character but what he represents that she begins to hate. Laura imagines that Titus has opened the door for the rest of her relatives to reduce her cruelly back to the role of "Aunt Lolly." In terror, Laura pictures her family coming to her to welcome her back as they "seize on her soul" (151). In desperation, Laura cries out for help from her nightmare. Although the woods are silent to her plea, she nonetheless feels as though she has made a pledge to something. Later, the arrival of a kitten at her cottage affirms that Satan—or something—has heard her pleas for help, and she makes a compact with the Devil "sealed with the round red seal of her blood" (155). With Satan's help, she magically casts Titus out of the village and is again free to make her own discoveries in the wilderness.

What are the traditional implications of witchcraft, and how does this concern Laura and her own relationship with the devil? *The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* includes in the definition of a witch as "one having supernatural powers in the natural world, especially to work evil, and usually by association with evil spirits or the Devil" with "knowledge of drugs to produce love, fertility, death, etc...." (1179). This definition implies negative connotations for witchcraft, and that its sole purpose may be magically to perform evil acts. However, Laura discovers her own form of witchcraft as she establishes a relationship with the Devil. The freedom she finds in her communications with Satan transcends traditionally evil connections. Satan is not an evil entity in *Lolly Willowes*; instead, he is a caring gatherer of desperate spirits that have been forgotten by the God of a cold society. Marcus explains, "the novel does not only dignifies spinsterhood. It mocks the patriarchal God whom Virginia Woolf called 'Milton's bogey,' and allies Milton's Satan with women and the old natural magic of the religion of outcasts in the forest" (Wilderness 155). But perhaps the Satan in *Lolly Willowes* does not so much "mock" God as play the "Loving Huntsman" for people who cannot find the connection they need in a rigid, demanding society. Laura seems to discover her own version of Satan, who offers her protection.

Indeed, there are two versions of witchery in *Great Mop*. The scene of the "Witches' Sabbath" in the novel exemplifies these two types. Mrs. Leak, whom Laura rents a room from in *Great Mop*, invites Laura to go on a walk with her. In reality, the walk is a trip to the Witches' Sabbath, the great secret of the village. "Mrs. Leak was a witch too; a matronly witch like Agnes Sampson, she would be Laura's chaperone" (170). As Laura comes to the outdoor ceremony, she hopes that the celebration will be a "different and more exhilarating affair" than the social activities that she had been uncomfortable with in London. But a domineering old man from the village sternly stares at the two women before he allows them to go through the gate to the ceremony showing that the stiff patriarchy is present even at this

Witches' Sabbath (171). Nevertheless, the ceremony is fascinating with candles in the ditch, paper garlands in the trees, and spinning dancers (172). However, Laura becomes disheartened: "Even as a witch, it seemed, she was doomed to social failure, and her first Sabbath was not going to open livelier vista than were opened by her first ball." Laura identifies this relationship with the Devil, no matter how lively, with the oppressive social scene of her life before *Great Mop*. She cannot become excited at this occasion because it represents to her meaningless social interaction, as reflecting the monotony of dancing with the same partners and making pointless conversation at balls in London (174).

The Sabbath becomes even more discouraging as Laura meets a young man who she later discovers had sold his soul to the devil in order to be the most important person at the party on a weekly basis. He seems to be representing himself as Satan, and Laura becomes infuriated by the whole ordeal when he smiles lifelessly to her and licks her cheek with his serpent-like tongue (182). She is disgusted, and leaves the Sabbath. At this point, Laura is upset that the Prince of Darkness is such a vulgar and intrusive character. He is a disgusting masculine presence who treats her with disrespect by licking her face and smiling eerily. Certainly, this could not be the Satan with whom she made a contract. She wanders into the night, and settles into the woods where she finally watches the sun rise. Here a very gentle man with a walking stick stumbles across Laura, the true Satan. The man, who is dressed as a gamekeeper, knows Laura before she knows him. The two carry on a peaceful conversation in the morning light, and he tells her to ask him if she ever needs any help before he wanders back off into the woods (186). This is the figure who truly protects Laura. Laura's Satan does not need to hide in the darkness of night, nor does he come to Laura as part of a demonic soiree. Instead, he is a gentle man who finds her alone in the sunlight, and offers his help to her with kindness. She finally discovers that "this was the real Satan. And as for the other, whom her spirit had so impetuously disowned, she had done well to disown him, for he was nothing but an impostor, a charlatan, a dummy" (188). Laura has found her real protector, a kind man who has gathered her from the lifeless souls of society.

Satan is not presented as evil in *Lolly Willowes*. Instead, he is very much the "Loving Huntsman" of the title. Laura's witchcraft is not negative; instead, its purpose is to establish her own protected place in the woods. In another discussion that Laura has with the Devil, she comes to realize that witchcraft is an alternative to settling for dullness in domestic society. She sees potential witches all over England, "child-rearing, house-keeping, hanging washed dishcloths on currant bushes; and for diversion each other's silly conversation, and listening to men talking together in the way that men talk and women listen" (212). However, witchcraft has offered Laura a way out of all of this. In her witchery, Laura magically connects with the wilderness, and gather her herbs and make potions as she had

always longed to do freely. The Devil is the leader of a group of restless souls who have come to him so that they might find their place within the wilderness. He has lovingly gathered them, yet allows them to do as they choose. Laura is not required to follow a schedule of witchcraft, nor must she attend the Sabbath. Satan is not like the orderly Christ who Carolyn said folded his graveclothes in the tomb (48). Instead, the Devil lets his followers know that he is there whenever they might come to him. He does not require their structured praise or their rigid observances. He simply enables them to become empowered through their own magical connection to nature.

Lolly Willowes is a satirical attack on the traditional notions of God and Satan. It explores what society views as good and evil, and why individuals choose to see things in this way. In the novel, Laura discovers that the Devil is the enemy of souls not because, as society says, he is the "embodiment of all evil," but because "his memory was too long, too retentive; there was no appeasing its witness, no hoodwinking it with the present" (221). Satan remembers everything, particularly those like Laura who are shoved aside and forgotten. Satan is not presented as the Prince of Darkness; instead, he is the opposite of the patriarchal God of a patriarchal society. Laura's world before Great Mop was one where the powerful felt they could dominate whomever they chose. Laura's family bound her to domestic suffocation where she was never granted the opportunity to make her own choices. But Laura does find a world of her own; and a leader who lends her his power to make her own strength. Through the Devil's magic, Laura finds her own mystical place in the wilderness where she can sleep undisturbed under his "satisfied but profoundly indifferent ownership" (222).

Were Laura's only choices, however, "Aunt Lolly" or witch? Or is Sylvia Townsend Warner simply showing what the society of that time believed the options to be? If women were not wives or mothers, then they were shrouded with negative connotations. The identity of witch might seem to be an evil one, but Sylvia Townsend Warner presents witchcraft as an alternative for women to settling down into dullness in their lives. Although the devil is represented as a man in the novel, he is not presented as a macho presence; instead he is liberating. Yet it is curious that he must be portrayed as a dominant male figure. Whatever the case, "the devil is the emancipator of women" in the novel (Marcus, *Wilderness* 156). Unlike the patriarchy, and her family, he is not controlling; rather, he provides the tools for Laura's freedom. Laura sums up her feelings on her escape from domestic imprisonment at the end of the novel in one of her conversations with the devil: "One doesn't become a witch to run round being harmful, or to run round being helpful either, a district visitor on a broomstick. It's to escape all that—to have a life of one's own, not an existence doled out to you by others" (215). *Lolly Willowes* demonstrates the length to which women were willing to go to escape the patriarchal confines of the inter-war period.

Conclusion:

A writer's country is a territory within his own brain; and we run the risk of disillusionment if we try to turn such phantom cities into tangible brick and mortar. — Virginia Woolf, from "Literary Geography"

In 1918, photographer Horace W. Nicholls captured a woman farm worker feeding poultry near Langstock, in Hampshire. Surrounded by hens and geese, the smiling woman stands in the center of the picture with her hand in a basket of feed. The background is filled with trees and overhanging growth, and a small cottage is tucked into the shrubbery. The photograph "manages to create the fairy-tale world which illustrators... so memorably evoked out of such elements as the cottage secretly hidden by overhanging hedgerows" (Condell 147). Indeed, there is an element of magic in the picture. It seems as though anything could happen in the mystical world of this photograph. The woman is engulfed in the countryside, surrounded by her hens and the forest. The picture is reminiscent of Laura's short time as a henwife at Great Mop in *Lolly Willowes*. While working with the birds, she related to the henwife in the fairy tales and "she understood now why kings and queens resorted to the henwife in their difficulties. The henwife held their destinies in the crook of her arm, and hatched the future in her apron." Laura ponders further that the henwife "practiced her art under cover of henwifery" (133). The women of these fairy tales were magical, and Laura's short time as a henwife makes her feel "wise and potent" (133). But the smiling woman in the picture could be any of the heroines of *Ashe of Rings*, *Harriet Hume*, or *Lolly Willowes*. All of these women find their strength amid nature where the restrictions of inter-war society are not present. They have a complex relationship with the natural that is related to their mystical connection to power. They find this within nature, as Laura Willowes did as she became comfortable with the birds and felt empowered by connection to fairy-tale magic. The characters of these fantasy novels all find a unique alternative to the roles traditionally offered to them during the inter-war period. Many women were encouraged to return to the home to find their strength as mothers and wives, and many resisted this pressure and fought to remain in the workplace among men. However, Vanna Ashe, *Harriet Hume*, and Laura Willowes find their own roles of empowerment amid the magic of nature.

While each of these women find similar connections to the magic of nature, there are differences to be examined in these fantasy novels such as treatment of men, degrees of familial relationships, and the presence of World War I. In discussing the various treatment of men in these novels, it is important here to establish what is meant by gender roles. Bonnie Kime Scott says that "gender is a category constructed through cultural and social systems. Unlike sex, it is not a biological fact determined at conception." Therefore, gender roles are what traits a society matches up with particular sexes; thus "in history, across cultures, and in the lifetime development of the individual, there are

variations in what it means to be masculine, or feminine" (Scott, *Gender* 2). Societal definitions of gender roles had undergone change, and they vary according to several factors such as locale, time, or situation. During the inter-war period, gender roles were changing, much to the dismay of many: "By 1918, the restrictive Victorian image of womanhood— physically frail, sheltered, leisured, private— had been undermined by the wartime experience of both sexes" (Condell 157). Women had stepped into masculine roles during the war, proving themselves to be outgoing, public, active, physically brave, and responsible. Their own expectations were altered, even as the war ended and society demanded that they resume their passive role in the home. In the novels discussed, gender roles are modified and traditionally feminine characteristics are praised as powerful and wise.

In *Ashe of Rings*, Butts presents Serge as a man in constant struggle with himself and the world around him. He struggles to understand the power of the Rings, but is ultimately unable to do so. He suffers as he concludes that he cannot determine what is real. He flees from the actual battles of war, yet is always being drawn to Judy, the personification of war itself. Serge lives his life in a tragic disillusion. While he may feel as though he has escaped the power of war, in reality he is unable to leave it behind. Even as Vanna tries to introduce the protective powers of the Rings to him, he still sees it as an "abominable gallery in the dark" because there is a "blaze over [his] eyes" (225). Because the pain and suffering of the war is the one thing that Serge has felt and therefore concludes are real, he cannot accept the good that Vanna offers him. As with the war-torn society of England, Serge has felt the pain of loss and destruction for so long that he cannot trust what is authentic. Serge thinks to himself as he sees Vanna, "Women to run the world. Men to lie about in quiet and think. Not necessarily of anything" (93). Serge is a passive presence who is tossed about by two strong feminine forces.

He is a deep thinker whose soul is constantly torn between good and evil, but he never actually takes any significant action in the novel. In fact, his only actions are withdrawals from situations, his flights from war and from the Rings. Serge is submissive to both Judy and Vanna. His great decision in *Ashe of Rings* seems to be which force he will eventually obey. This is an interesting reversal of traditional gender roles. Serge plays the passive, feminine role, while the women of the novel are the active, masculine powers.

By contrast, Arnold Condorex in *Harriet Hume* is a domineering man who struggles to contain Harriet. During one of their conversations, Harriet "hears" him thinking that "a man must rise in the world! Dear God, did she not understand?" (56). Indeed, this is Arnold's primary goal, to move up the social ranks to a position of domination. However, the novel celebrates passive, understanding feminine traits, and Arnold Condorex, the threatening male presence, even comes to honor them. During the final fantasy episode, Arnold must abandon his

previous motives. "True, I was an excellent administrator, but all the same I feel guilty beside you and your life spent in contemplation of the eternal beauties" (267). Arnold acknowledges that there is also power to be found in the passive understanding of ancient powers. Arnold eventually learns that there is power in the passive, feminine forces of life. He finally sees that there is knowledge to be gained in observation of nature, and he looks to Harriet to teach him these things.

Bruce Knoll has written of gender roles in relation to *Lolly Willowes* saying that, "London society is centered on the masculine ideal, which is portrayed as an aggressive, destructive force. Such an arrangement allows only a passive role for the female characters of the novel" (1). He says that the novel is the story of Laura's flight from the domination of the city to the freedom of the country where she can find an active role without "resorting to the traditional male responses of control, domination, and aggressiveness" (13). Obviously, Laura does make the transformation from passivity to power, but there is also the question of the force that helps her to make this change. The Devil is portrayed (as usual) as a man in the novel. What implications does this have? Is Laura again submitting to a masculine force as she makes a contract with him? Since the Devil is presented as an alternative to traditional patriarchal powers, it is hardly believable to think that Laura is subservient to him. Satan in *Lolly Willowes* does not have the masculine traits of desire for domination and control that the other men of the novel demonstrate. The novel is a satire on the traditional, patriarchal God, and the Devil is a caring, accommodating persona. Laura does not submit herself to the Devil, rather she willingly makes a pact with him. While the men of her family tried to manipulate Laura, Satan allows Laura to make her own decisions and follow her own path. Laura and Satan converse on the same level, and he offers her help if she needs it. Sylvia Townsend Warner offers a solution to the oppressive powers of Laura's society.

The novels also present family as one of these "oppressive powers." There are three degrees of family interaction from Vanna's place in the family chain of protectors of the Rings to Harriet's seemingly complete lack of family association. These degrees parallel the heroine's rejection of patriarchy. While Vanna is taught to be powerful by her father, Laura's father is a more passive man and her brothers later oppress her and Harriet's father is only a bearded portrait, a past she has put behind her. Vanna Ashe's familial identity can be seen as the center of the novel. She is born heir to the power of the Rings, and there is the implication that she, too, must have a child who will inherit the same role. Anthony Ashe raises his daughter to understand the mystical. Vanna is protected, empowered, and comforted by her family role at Rings. Even at the end of the novel, she sleeps in peace at Rings as the "sea wind pour[s] in over her" (232). The clash between her and her mother, Melita, is resolved, and she has a special bond with her brother, Valentine. Her father was a source of wisdom and magic when she was a child, and the

struggle in the story is for her rightful succession. Vanna rejects not familial connection or patriarchal oppression; but, symbolically, war, a destructive force that is typically associated with the masculine.

While Vanna is empowered by her familial connections and never rejects interaction with others, Laura Willowes finds her power after disassociating herself from her family and living alone in the wilderness. Laura is raised in a family whose primary concern for her well-being is her marriage to a respectable man. Her mother is a frail woman and her father, although loving, is content to allow Laura to be the mistress at Lady Place. Vanna Ashe never has to struggle to overcome a passive existence in the home, but Laura becomes empowered as she eventually overcomes the "dullness" of a domestic realm (212). Vanna is empowered as the heir to a powerful force, but Laura's strength comes as she discovers her own connection to a natural force, that of Satan's magic. Although her father never attempts to domineer over Laura, her brothers are the (almost comic) controllers. From Henry and James tying her to a tree to Henry foolishly squandering her inheritance, they are satiric characters who have power but never use it productively or wisely. At the end of the novel, Laura seems to reject human interaction completely, choosing to make her own path alone, with the exception of the occasional discussion with the ever-caring Devil.

Harriet Hume's family is briefly mentioned as Arnold examines some of her old photographs. Arnold sees the image of Harriet's father as a "bearded creature pretentiously austere, overblown with patriarchy, as avid for opportunities to raise a hand to heaven to bless or curse his children as a prima donna for arias" (19). When Harriet explains her father to Arnold, she comments that he "breaks the silence of our hills with a tiresomeness that has something their own air of enduring forever" (30). It becomes obvious that she has left her father's smothering dominance in her past in order to construct her own world outside of this patriarchy. Her tale of the Ladies Frances, Georgina and Arabella Dudley further demonstrates Harriet's views on familial constraint. When the sisters marry and separate, they lose their beauty, and presumably their happiness. Only after reuniting and praying to Mother Earth are they swallowed by the ground and immortalized into a celebration of natural beauty as trees. Their flight from male domination suggests that patriarchy is ruinous for the women. They marry as is expected of them, but there is no self-fulfillment in this role for the sisters. The women finally find peace in the earth, a haven of nature within the city of London. The underlying message regarding marriage here is not that marriage itself is a destructive union. Instead, Harriet Hume sees the problem as marriage for the wrong reasons, such as self-satisfied tradition or monetary gain. Arnold Condorex abuses marriage by marrying a woman for profitable advancements. But marriage for these reasons is enforced by the expectations of the London patriarchy. Indeed, Jane Marcus argues that London is the "capital of Patriarchy"

and "was, and is, unmistakably male." She mentions a witticism from Natalie Barney that said that "nothing in London was made for women, not even the men" (Wilderness 139). But, like Laura Willowes, the sisters Dudley escape this patriarchy in nature. To Harriet as well, nature is a cocoon of feminine comfort. She does not reject the patriarchy of London by fleeing the city, but creates her own space in the city where she is in control.

The war is a source of great stress and displacement among the women (and men) in these novels. For example, in *Lolly Willowes*, Laura's niece Fancy loses her new husband and decides to go to France to drive motor lorries. However, the war had no such excitements for Laura. Four times a week she went to a depot and did up parcels" (63). At the end of World War I, Laura goes up to her room and faints (65). Laura reflects that "there was no difference between her and Henry and Caroline in their resumption of peace. But they, she thought, had done with the war, whereas she had only shelved it, and that by an accident of consciousness" (66). The war is not mentioned again in the novel, but its presence does serve a part in Laura's life. Laura has put the trauma of the war in the back of her mind, and its destruction stays with her. Although she helps in the war effort, she never becomes excited or even feels it gives her a sense of purpose. She rejects the "cheap symbolism" of the recruiting posters in her work room, and therefore rejects the propaganda view of the war as an opportunity for the country to pull together. Instead, she feels that "blood was being shed for her" (64). While her family finds great pride in their country at war, Laura rejects these patriotic emotions. As she later rejects her family hierarchy and the organization of the Witches' Sabbath, she also dismisses the propaganda of camaraderie connected to the war.

Though its phrasing is often 18th-century and Arnold's initial maneuverings are reminiscent of the Victorian era of empire-building, most of *Harriet Hume* takes place after the Great War. Arnold is caught up in postwar politics in his rise to power. Harriet wonders if politicians are not "all occupied in finding a form of government which shall allow that invisible thing, the will of the people, to express its sense of the need for its own preservation... and which shall not be deflected from this by the personal interests of any group" (142). Arnold reflects later that "it is strange that this fundamental stuff of politics has never interested me. 'Tis the negotiation that has ever charmed me, and the struggle for eminence" (143). This exchange reflects their differing attitudes towards war, as well as Arnold's, where skillful negotiation is like a war. While Harriet is concerned with a government that provides freedom for the people to do as they choose, Arnold is concerned with control over others. Judy Marston personifies this control and destructiveness of the war in *Ashe of Rings*. The novel is directly affected by the war, and Vanna fights her own battle at the Rings. Serge is a victim of war in general. He has fled war in his own country, and flees the war in England. But the destructiveness of war as displayed in Judy emotionally tears him apart and numbs his senses. Even as Vanna has fought for his soul in a symbolic battle, he has still

been overcome by war. At the end of the novel, although Vanna has protected the Rings for the presence, she still can only "Pray for the peace" (231).

War affects the characters in different degrees; however, Vanna, Harriet, and Laura all must confront the destruction the war has wrought. Its consequences shape the world of these characters, and it ties the novels together. During this period, England was at a time where its social norms were being questioned and traditions are being shattered. The country struggled to return to a familiar, prewar state. But things had changed for women, and although they were being pulled back into private life, they had already found opportunities to have a very public voice. The characters of the novels discussed are unique to this period because they find their voice in their own realm. Vanna Ashe fights her battle at the Rings, Harriet Hume expresses herself through her music and her garden, and Laura Willows escapes to Great Mop. As they reject traditional paths to power, neither settles for a domestic "power" nor chooses to battle men on their own turf. Jane Marcus argues that "the feminist fantasy novel of the twenties is a response to realism's failure to make permanent female space in the citadels of male power" (Wilderness 141). The authors of these novels have all created this space in nature for their characters.

Many public figures of the inter-war period used essentialist arguments to try to force women back into the home. Verbal abuse, unequal pay, acts of government, media images, and domesticated female education were all factors that worked to encourage women to return to the familial setting after the First World War (Beddoe 4). They made use of the argument that women belonged back in their "natural" setting, the home, where they were nurturing individuals fulfilled by doing their inherent duty as wives and mothers. Since women are physically able to give birth, then it follows they must have the natural inclination for a life in the home as nourishing protectors of their offspring. Inter-war Britain used this argument in an attempt to eliminate women from the workplace with the belief that society should return to its previous patriarchal structure with women back home to restock the dwindled population. But the novels of Mary Butts, Rebecca West, and Sylvia Townsend Warner, all feminists, demonstrated an essentialist view of women as well. Bonnie Kime Scott says that Rebecca West believed that "while women as wives and mothers have remained in contact with primitive instincts, men have been put into conflict with their primitive selves" (Scott, *Refiguring* 168). The women in these novels experience many necessary steps in their private wilderness: they learn to think for themselves, they grow wiser, they practice their own crafts. Their "gardens" represent a world of wild understanding away from the confines of a restrictive society. The authors of these works make the connection between women and nature as if to say that the "natural" place for a woman to be is in a setting where she can be empowered through freely learning what her contribution to the world will be. Vanna,

Harriet, and Laura all find scope for their primal instincts in nature.

These women writers used essentialist notions of the feminine to demonstrate that women's essential nature was best served by not having to follow a strictly determined path. For instance, Vanna Ashe is nurturing as she saves Serge from starvation and attempts to protect him from the evil powers of Judy Marston. As he lays ill in his apartment, Vanna forces her way in and tells him, "I will light your fire. You are not to fight me. Then I will go and come back with everything you want" (89). She feeds him, washes him, and cleans his dirty home. "She bent over the long broom like an oarsman, and the dust-pan followed the rubbish like a hunter's knife... the dust was afraid of her" (90). Just as Harriet Hume dismiss[es] a weed from service in her flower bed, Vanna has full command of the dust in the room. Ironically, as she completes domestic tasks, she is described in aggressive, masculine terms. Rowing and hunting are traditionally men's duties, yet Butts applies them to female service. Vanna nurtures Serge, but does it powerfully.

As Vanna nurses Serge back to health, she also tries to show him what is right in the world. "Her care for him quieted her sensuality. She worked to restore his beauty, as to bring out the grain in wood. She held up a glass while he brushed his hair like dark feathers" (94). If Vanna is attracted to Serge, it is calmed by her sense of duty to help him. She struggles to save what has been dulled by war and Judy. Vanna Ashe's feminine nurturing goes far beyond the domestic: she is a priestess who combines knowledge of her ancient past with the present power of the Rings to transcend the limitations of what society defines as fully feminine. Foy says that "Butts's goddess heroine attempts to use her ancient, secret knowledge in a society usually controlled by male hegemony and moves in a sphere all her own" (32). Vanna, in her mystical womanhood, proves strong enough to be protector of the Rings and thereby nurture the cosmos as well.

Harriet Hume's femininity is also powerful, and it is enough to threaten the patriarchal world of Arnold Condorex. Harriet is a creator of both musical art and life in her flower beds. As a mother gives birth and then strives to properly rear her child, Harriet is concerned with the development of her music and garden. She carefully keeps her garden as Arnold observes it to be "less an exhibition of flowers than a green sanctuary" (74). Her garden is a sanctuary to Harriet, a place where she feels safe and protected. But it is also her private home where she performs domestic duties. At the end of the novel, Harriet displays nurturing feminine attributes as she plays the good hostess to the ghost policemen: "...the French windows swung very wide, and a silly tinkling voice cried, 'Gentlemen! Gentlemen!' and the two less than dove-sized hands held out a tray with two glasses on it in the beam of light" (284). Harriet does embody essential feminine traits, but, like Vanna, she is also a mystical woman with a supernatural defense against the aggressive masculine forces of London. Harriet's powers over Arnold threaten him,

and he often reduces Harriet Hume to purely physical terms, perhaps to regain control over her. Jane Marcus says that "Arnold is afraid of the garden and its lush fertility as he fears Harriet's sexuality and calls her slut, jade, wench, trollop..." (Wilderness 143). He oscillates between dismissing her sexuality with vulgar terms to crudely enjoying her beauty, as when he thinks, as he sees Harriet's cloak slip from her shoulders, that "he was therefore able to enjoy that sense of being at an advantage which he always derived from admiring a woman's beauty in detail" (183). Arnold imagines himself to be more powerful when he can either categorize Harriet in degrading terms or deem himself worthy of "appreciating" her beauty. His masculine gaze helps him to regain the power he has lost as Harriet enters his thoughts. Both Harriet's straightforward sexuality and her supernatural power scare him, although he comes to understand them on a deeper level at the end of the novel.

Both Mary Butts and Rebecca West use their heroines to redefine what inter-war society defined as properly feminine. In the same manner, Sylvia Townsend Warner finds the essence of the feminine in a role with traditionally negative connotations: "There is no more exquisitely powerful evocation of the joys of spinsterhood in print," boasts Jane Marcus. *Lolly Willowes* celebrates the joys of women's solitude, the satisfaction to be found in introspection away from the stressful influence of human interaction. Although Laura Willowes rejects men, she never dismisses her own womanhood. Rather, she despises the domestic role that society has forced women to accept. "It sounds very petty to complain about, but I tell you, that sort of thing settles down on one like a fine dust, and by and by the dust is age, settling down" (Wilderness 212). Her flight into the wilderness is her resistance to this "settling down." Whereas spinsterhood was seen as unfortunate and pathetic, *Lolly Willowes* redefines it as a rejection of the mundane. Although she feels worthwhile as she raises the hens, she feels used and worthless as Aunt Lolly. But her role as henwife and then witch is her own path, one that her family has not chosen for her. Laura does not give in to the pressure of any community, whether it be London, the Witches' Sabbath, or the Great Mop village. Her rejection of society is a celebration of herself just as she is, without the embellishment of others.

Perhaps what is essential to understand regarding these novels is that they reflect women's need for their own space in inter-war Britain, a place where they might meditate on what was positive in their lives away from the harsh realities of social pressure, lost loved ones, and a confusing political situation. These fantasy novels offer this space to their characters: an ancient rock formation by the sea, a small patch of nature within a harsh city, or a dark wilderness. The stories allow female readers to imagine what might be possible if they could find a place where they could fully explore their ancient femininity as a priestess, a resourceful artist, or a witch. The magic and myth of these tales offer a hope in fantasy that could also be applied on a realistic level. Although the supernatural traits could not have

helped the real women of this period to find their own stable place in society, readers of novels such as these would nevertheless have found comfort in examples of female power.

Ashe of Rings, *Harriet Hume*, and *Lolly Willowes* all explore the possibility of women not limited by societal expectations. While it is difficult in any society for an individual to find a private world where she can become a goddess, these novels explore what happens when fantasy and circumstance allow it to happen. Perhaps this concept is discouraging if the only way that woman can find a "permanent female space" is in a fairy-tale. But these novels offer more than a magical solution. They examine and question societal standards of their time while demonstrating that women can be both powerful and essentially feminine and that such an ideal is not a fantasy at all.

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Natalie Holub

Faculty Comments:

Ms. Holub's faculty mentor, Debra Rae Cohen, makes the following comments about her work:

Ms. Holub's thesis project derives from her deep interest in both British culture and women's issues; it involves an investigation into sources of empowerment for women writers during the period between the World Wars, usually considered a time of feminist retrenchment. Examining works by three understudied women writers of the inter-war period, Ms. Holub contends that their works represent by way of mythology and folkways an alternative pathway to female power. She focuses on novels by Mary Butts, Rebecca West, and Sylvia Townsend Warner, all of which feature heroines who find nature and mysticism, rather than the patriarchal public sphere, appropriate loci for effecting change.

Ms. Holub's work has important implications for illuminating a complex period often too easily and reductively categorized as one of Modernist experimentalism and conservative domesticity. While post-Great War anxieties did result in a resurgence of the ideologies of home and hearth, this research makes clear that such constraints were far from monolithic. Ms. Holub's ambition and intelligence, and her potential for truly excellent scholarship, give her project enormous potential.

Two of Ms. Holub's thesis committee members, Mavourneen Dwyer and Susan M. Marren, also remarked on the quality of her work. Professor Dwyer said:

I first had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Holub when she took part in our UA London Study Abroad Trip in the summer of 2001. The course consists of a four-week study tour of London theatre and environs and is sponsored by the UA Department of Drama and the English department. It was easy to tell during our time in England that Ms. Holub was being deeply affected by everything she saw and experienced. Consequently, I was not surprised when she later chose a topic for her thesis, that would require a good deal of research into the social history of England. I have read the thesis and I find that it gives evidence of the same enthusiasm and thoughtful attention to detail that characterized her reviews, reports and essays during the London course last summer. Ms. Holub is obviously intrigued by her subject matter, and her thesis is thorough, fresh and perceptive in its insight.

And Professor Marren said:

I have known Ms. Holub for about a year. I first encountered her when she was an outstanding student in my senior research seminar on turn-of-the-twentieth-century American literature in the fall semester of 2001. In that course I was lucky enough to have several of the best students I have encountered in 12 years of teaching, and I found Ms. Holub to be one of the most thoughtful and intelligent among them. She makes perceptive observations in class discussion; she also listens carefully and responds to other students' and my own questions and comments thoughtfully. These qualities make her a very stimulating student.

Ms. Holub has often impressed me as unusually sophisticated in her thinking and surprisingly self-possessed for an undergraduate. In one instance, she gave an oral report on Charles Chesnutt's novel *The Marrow of Tradition*. As the assignment required, she chose several critical articles and succinctly summarized and evaluated them for the class. She managed to do so in a way that made Chesnutt come to life for the class, and led us to an excellent discussion. For that same course she wrote an essay comparing the fates — the progressions to eventual suicide — of the heroines in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Ms. Holub's minute attention to detail and her speculations as to what those details might mean were fascinating; it became clear that she has the makings of a careful, imaginative and serious critic. In short, Ms. Holub writes clearly and gracefully, whether for an impromptu assignment or an original essay, and she is a first-rate researcher.