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THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE – FANTASY THEATRE IN TRANSMEDIA DIALOGUE(S)

Abstract
This article explores the theatrical actualisation of Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. i.e., the creation and convincing realisation of its storyworld on stage within the emerging matrix of exchange between fantasy theatre and global popular culture. The paper focuses on the creation and recreation of multiple fantasy, fairy-tale, and mythological intertexts employed to bring Gaiman's 'fairy tale for adults' to life on stage. Emphasising the transformation from traditional to modern forms based on contemporary theatre narratology, the paper explores both the active dialogue with the tradition through the play's complex web of intertextuality and the establishment of this particular iteration of *Ocean* as the version of the storyworld, whose actualisation enters a transmedia landscape, conversing both with fantasy theatre productions and other media iterations of the narrative.

Key words: fantasy theatre, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, transmedia storytelling, storyworlding, transgeneric theatre adaptation, theatre actualisation

1. Introduction – Oceanic Waves in Fantasy Theatre

Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013), adapted by Joel Horwood, arrived at the Dorfman Theatre in 2019 before being transferred to London's West End. It was hailed as an "enthralling" entry into the National

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Theatre (Armitstead 2021). Horwood, who had previously worked on *I Caught Crabs in Walberswick*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and Radiohead's play *OK Computer*, was already well-versed in liminal narratives, unusual stagings, and contemporary texts. Some of this prowess found its way into *Ocean*, with its unusual stagings, somewhat surrealist aesthetics, and compelling dramatization. The play's nuanced takes on alienation, otherworldly spaces, and harrowing emotional evocations allow it to thrive, aided by the combination of implicit and explicit intertextuality, shadow play, and the realisation of magic at the edges of consciousness.

Horwood's adaptation of Gaiman's novel is one of the newest additions to what I refer to as fantasy theatre, i.e., the subgenre of speculative theatre that employs common iconography of fantasy, including magic, the fight between good and evil, heroic quests, and protagonists' learning journeys. Fantasy theatre, as it is perceived here, refers to the common iconography of Western fantasy, largely influenced by J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and George MacDonald, whose narratives often feature a world separated from "conventional reality" (Tolkien 2008: 59) or the primary world, heroic quests, witches and wizards, as well as a tendency towards positive resolutions (Fowkes 2010: 12).

The Ocean at the End of the Lane follows the story of the unnamed narrator (the Boy), who visits his neighbours' farm at the end of the lane after his father's funeral, where he recalls an adventure shared with his childhood friend, Lettie Hempstock. The play positions itself within the matrix of adaptation, actualisation, and transgeneric dialogue, actively combining drama with poetry and prose, blurring multiple genre boundaries as it brings its fantasy world to life. As a result, it relies on its audience's familiarity with a multitude of archetypal stories and genres such as fairy tales, myths, fantasy, science fiction, detective stories, and adventure narratives, while highlighting a novel way of staging contemporary fantasy.

What distinguishes *Ocean* from its contemporaries, including *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016), *The Book of Dust* (2021), or *My Neighbour Totoro* (2022), is its turn towards somewhat more abstract realisations of the magical world. Where those plays strive for detail, with plentiful props and special effects ranging from sleight-of-hand to the use of lighting to obscure or highlight certain parts of the stage, *Ocean* leaves its magic in the liminal space of hints and the inexpressible, especially in how it treats trauma and post-traumatic experiences. As a result, the audience is invited to infer meanings from whispered phrases, half-visible beings, or mere

shadows passing over the stage and auditorium. In doing so, the play relies on multiple genres, archetypes, and cross-media borrowings to actualise the world of its protagonists.

2. Once Upon a Time – *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* as a Fantasy Fairy-Tale

The Ocean at the End of the Lane was nicknamed "a fairy tale for adults" by Neil Gaiman himself (2013: 222) and it does indeed position itself somewhere between several genres employing modes of the fantastic.[1] It combines elements of intrusive and liminal fantasy while rooting itself in the immersive world of the narrator's memories, shrouded in the supernatural experiences he had, and the otherworldly knowledge he learned from books. Intrusive fantasy involves malevolent forces intruding upon the primary world. In *Ocean*, this is primarily represented by Ursula Monkton, the protagonist's self-imposed nanny, who is a monster in disguise, and the Hunger Birds, whose task is to maintain balance in the universe by devouring elements that do not belong to it. Intrusive fantasy is often associated with evil beings such as vampires or werewolves, who threaten to disturb human lives (Mendlesohn 2008: 84). This connection hints at the underlying elements of horror within the narrative, reflecting generic hybridity.

On the other hand, the play also includes elements of liminal fantasy which occur "at the edge of perception" in the sphere of the possible or seen through the eyes of a child (Mendlesohn 2008: 114). In *Ocean*, the narrator's recollections serve as such a world, disconnected from the rest of his life experiences and only accessible via the clandestine mediation of the Hempstocks. Already defying classical taxonomies, *Ocean* also borrows elements from multiple narrative, theatrical, and cinematographic

[1] Owing to the notable reliance of the play on the novel in terms of its content – to the point where it may well be called remediation rather than adaptation, I cite both the novel and the play text throughout the article. Passages from the novel are used to provide further background information that had inspired or otherwise influenced the text and will be cited as (Gaiman 2013), whereas I cite the playtext as (Horwood 2021). Furthermore, I am citing the unpublished version of the script which was sent to me upon request by Mr. Horwood himself as I started my research before the publication of the official script; the version is true to the live version from 2022.

traditions, the most prominent of which is in the structure of the play as a 'fantasy fairy-tale' about an 'everyman' facing supernatural odds.

The story follows the unnamed protagonist, who, having just buried his father, lets his feet carry him to a farmhouse at the end of the lane where his childhood home used to be, where he meets a wizened, yet surprisingly astute woman who informs him his heart is growing back. As they talk, he slowly remembers and re-lives a summer when he turned twelve and met Lettie Hempstock, the woman's granddaughter, with whom he saved the world from a supernatural threat. The Boy met Lettie when his family discovered the body of a local opal miner who had committed suicide in their car. Lettie informed him that the miner's death was likely caused by something supernatural. They then ventured into 'the Edges,' a world beyond the Hempstock farm, which acts as both a portal into the world of unknown beings and a defence against these creatures. There they encountered a mysterious creature preying on and instigating people's greed, seducing them into madness. Lettie's attempt to banish the creature which calls itself the Skarthach of the Keep failed, and the monster lodged itself into the boy's palm, securing its passage into the human world.

Once free, the monster took the form of Ursula Monkton, who slowly gained control over the Boy's family, attempting to drive him out, as he recognised her as the creature from the Edges. In another failed attempt to get rid of her, Lettie summoned the Hunger Birds, voracious pterodactyl-like birds who 'eat' the fabric of reality, erasing everything from existence. The Boy, infected when the monster used his hand as a vehicle to enter the world, became the target of the Hunger Birds, and sacrificed himself in order to prevent their plan to devour the entire planet. Lettie, with her magical powers, reversed time, saving the Boy at her own expense. While she was given back to the Ocean to heal, the Hemstocks sent the Boy home where he, aided by their magic and his own inability to come to terms with the horrors he had seen, forgets everything. Upon remembering this, the Boy, now an adult man, is informed by Old Mrs. Hempstock, Lettie's grandmother, that he visited the farm on multiple occasions, always travelling back and forth down the same memory lane as he regrows his heart, which, despite Lettie's efforts, was eaten by the Hunger Birds.

The Ocean at the End of the Lane operates on a peculiar spectrum of adaptation, remediation, and appropriation of various genres, echoing a broader cultural turn towards transgeneric storytelling. On the one hand, the stage version follows the narrative of the novel down to the smallest

of details, including the order in which the Boy and Lettie see different creatures on their first venture into the Edges. In the wake of prominent adaptation scholars like Linda Hutcheon, Deborah Cartmell, and Katja Krebs arguing that adaptations need not be loyal to their adapted texts (Hutcheon 2016: 9; Cartmell 2012: 8; Krebs 2014: 44), the choice to make *Ocean* as close to the novel already indicates a strong preference of today's audiences to see their favourite texts translated into other media, rather than adapted with multiple changes. The resulting play can, therefore, be called remediation in the basic understanding of "the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another" (Bolter & Grusin 2000: 59), with the play reproducing the narrative and enhancing it by providing a tangible, emotionally charged, and magic-infused world. In the age of major cultural turmoil, including post-pandemic recovery, real-estate crisis, wars, and the economic downturn, this return to the familiarity of beloved texts hints at a type of cultural cocooning, which very much aligns with G. K. Chesterton's maxim that "fairy tales give [us the] first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey" (Chesterton 1909: 102).[2] While the external influences of the cultural crisis do not seem as easy to defeat, the security of the victory of good over evil, and the pursuance of the theatrical production of the adapted text, serve as a way of contending with life's insecurities, if, even, for a short while.

On the other hand, although relying heavily on Gaiman's novel for the main narrative, the play borrows from multiple mythologies, folklore, and fairy tales, whose impulses are used to evoke certain imagery that contributes to the worldbuilding on stage. The resulting effect is what I term 'actualisation' i.e., a fully-fledged realisation of a fantasy storyworld that creates the sense of a comprehensive world extending beyond the narrative space, in this case, the stage. Storyworlds, as Ryan understands them, are fictional totalities of any narrative universe that surround a specific narrative (Ryan 2015: 12). In terms of *Ocean*, the Boy's experiences constitute the narrative, whereas the surrounding world combined with that narrative makes up for the storyworld which extends beyond its staging. As a result, actualisation, too, is not a simple staging of a play confined to the playhouse in the given moment but is meant to promote both the sense

[2] Chesterton's original quote is often misattributed to Gaiman himself, owing to his paraphrase used as the epigraph of his novel *Coraline*, "Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten" (Gaiman 2002: 1).

of immersion and evoke the notion of the storywolrd extending beyond the play space and time.

In this particular case, the storyworld expands across multiple channels. On the one hand, some of Gaiman's other novels boast a variety of Hempstock women, magical and unique as the three from *Ocean*.[3] Coincidentally, Ginnie Hempstock, Lettie's mother remarks that there "are Hempstock women out there in [the Boy's] world, … each of them a wonder in her own way" (Gaiman 2013: 220), indicating the farther outreach of Gaiman's so-called "pan-pantheon" which connects all his works (Sims 2013: 94), i.e., the storyworld. On the other hand, Gaiman's social media presence, targeted advertising, and even fan engagement all provide the sense of ubiquity of the world.[4] Consequently, actualisation in fantasy theatre is the joint effort of narrative and non-narrative aspects of a production, including lighting, sound, scenic design, and special effects, to bring its chosen storyworld to life with the "inner consistency of reality" that marks fantasy worlds (Tolkien 2008: 67). As such, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* participates in a transmedia dialogue not only with its novel and theatrical tradition, but the wider fantasy and speculative-fiction discourse, as well as the oral tradition from multiple countries and nations, becoming a fantasy fairy-tale actualisation of an English village in which a series of supernatural events took place in the Boy's childhood.

The play employs a series of archetypal fairy-tale devices in the way it brings the narrator's world to life. Some of these include treating the supernatural as an extraordinary, rather than everyday occurrence, the framing of the protagonist as a fairy tale 'everyman,' and the way the Hempstock women, who are just as magical, accept their presence as ubiquitous and timeless. The play revolves around the memory of the Boy, placed ostensibly at a specific place and time, i.e., when he had just turned twelve, somewhere in Sussex (Horwood 2021: 3). The pastoral English setting echoes the 'once upon a time, there lived…' without ever expounding on when that time was and where exactly the protagonist lived.[5] The Boy

[3] There are references to various Hempstock women in Gaiman's *Stardust*, and *The Graveyard Book*.

[4] Another strategy included painting an optical illusion inspired 3D mural in front of the National Theatre in London in 2022, which created the sense that one could enter the world, and staging multiple photoshoots with the cast and fans.

[5] With only some hints at clothing items which are no longer fashionable, the setting is left deliberately vague to promote the universalising aspects of the narrative.

himself also only ever remembers the events (all over again, as it turns out), at the farm, leaving his life experiences in the sphere of L. P. Hartley's famous quote, "the past is a foreign country" (1953: 9). In that sense, *Ocean* becomes a memory play framed as a fantasy fairy-tale.[6] The distinct lack of the Boy's name also universalises the viewing experience and emphasises the subversive lack of 'chosenness' that follows typical fantasy protagonists. His name is never spoken out loud and the Hempstocks only ever refer to him as Boy. Moreover, the Boy first appears directly from the audience pit, expanding theatrical space to indicate that he is a typical fairytale protagonist who belongs to the perceived primary world, and that the audience, too, is conceptualised as a part of the unravelling storyworld in an immersive experience.

The fairy-tale end of the fantasy spectrum is particularly highlighted through the scenic design of the play evocative of a magical forest where nothing is at it seems. The stage is extended and protrudes into the audience in the shape of an inverse semicircle, the opposite of the typical apron. The edges of the inverse apron are ragged and sharp, with splinters poking out of them, giving the impression of wood being forcefully torn or even bitten off at its ends, hinting at the voracious appetite of the Hunger Birds which appear towards the end of the play. The edges are a result of woodgraining, the process in which pieces of wood are painted with specifically built hard brushes that produce the effect of real wood. A particularly peculiar element of the set is the arrangement of the four sets of wings, which are protruding from the sides, with the gap between the downstage pair being the widest and receding diagonally towards upstage, where the wings meet and form an archway. The diagonal arch of the wings creates a dynamic effect of space seemingly extending infinitely towards the backdrop. On the broad scale, this turns the performative space into the microcosm of the universe of the *Ocean*, demarcating it as only a small part of the incommensurate reality of the world of the Hempstocks – the world in which the Boy is merely a passing figure.

On the level of the play, however, the scenic design points to the fairy-tale forest, filled with dangers and rich with symbolism:

> The forest is about concealment and appearances are not to be trusted. Things are not necessarily what they seem and can be

[6] Memory plays are such plays whose protagonists speak from memory, i.e., the self-aware narrator who experienced an event or events tells them to a presupposed listener, i.e., the audience (Brunkhorst 1980: 227).

> dangerously deceptive. Snow White's murderous stepmother is truly the 'fairest of them all'. The wolf can disguise himself as a sweet old granny. The forest hides things; it does not open them out but closes them off. Trees hide the sunshine; and life goes on under the trees, in thickets and tanglewood. Forests are full of secrets and silences. It is not strange that the fairy stories that come out of the forest are stories about hidden identities, both good and bad. (Maitland 2013: 128)

Such juxtaposition of visual imagery underlies the deceptiveness of appearances in *Ocean*. The Boy, unassuming and unnamed, is the fairy-tale protagonist whose actions save the world, the Hempstocks are quietly powerful, whereas Ursula is disguised as a benevolent nanny. It is precisely Ursula Monkton that appears from the centre of the backdrop twice, both times illuminated with red backlights to indicate that she is, indeed, the danger to the Boy and his world. The first time, she is in her monstrous form with eight skeletal legs ending in sharp claws, and leathery skin draped across her back. While the monster coming out of the deep dark forest immediately attacks leaving no room for questioning its intentions, its human form, Ursula Monkton, is deceptively appealing, bewitching the Boy's family and threatening his life. Her malicious intent is revealed similarly to her monster form – she appears floating in the middle of the proscenium, the wiry branches of the wings enshrining her while the ominous red lights emanate from behind her, emphasising her bloodthirstiness.

In that sense, Ursula becomes the wicked witch, or arguably the big bad wolf of this fantasy fairy tale, whose demise is directly caused by the protagonist's bravery and some magical aid from the Hempstocks, who combine both the fairy-tale godmother trope with a series of mythical intertexts.[7] This, in turn, marks the departure from the theatrical tradition prominent between 1970s and 1990s in which fairy tale structures were used as subversive narratives to delegitimise certain power structures. Where, for instance, Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* (1994) employed its fairy-tale structure to challenge hegemonic structures by causing alienation by having its fairies speak garbled gibberish, *Ocean* takes the fairy-tale tropes as the narrative point of departure for the audience, who,

[7] At one point, Ursula's monstrous form addresses Lettie with "Let me in or I'll scratch you to bits" (Horwood 2021: 22), evoking the big bad wolf from "Three Little Pigs," strengthening the fairy-tale connection.

in recognising them, can engage with the play on a different level. Images of evil stepmothers and fairy godmothers are common enough to serve as a point of relatability giving leeway to the more liminal elements of the play, such as the Edges, mythological appropriations and subversions, and the actualisation of a different storyworld.

3. Multiple Mythologies of the Duckpond at the End of the Lane

The Ocean at the End of the Lane uses its many borrowings to transform the fairy-tale 'everyman' protagonist into a mythical force. The mythological in *Ocean* is highlighted through monsters, cosmic forces, and benevolent aides. This complex interplay is mitigated through the appropriation of the child's voice, concerned about his friendships and family relationships, in a way that universalises the ambiguities of childhood known to "anyone who has ever been seven." (Gaiman 2013: 244). However, it is not just ancient mythologies that contribute to the Boy's journey – it is the intertextual network of stories which he had grown up with.

Among the implicit and explicit intertextuality, the Hempstock women are shown to be the most connected to ancient mythologies. At first glance, they are a clear reference to the triple goddess Hecate, who bears the face of a young girl in the morning, an adult woman during the day, and the old lady in the evening. In the play, the goddess is, however, separated into three entities who bear the appearance of female humans and whose powers cross into the mythical. Old Mrs. Hempstock seems to remember the day when the stars were made, the birth of the universe, the Norman Conquest, claiming that their farm is in *The Domesday Book*, pointing at their agelessness and connection to the land.[8] The triple goddess is subverted both by being placed in English history and given greater scope of power, as her three embodiments have a chance to explore the world from three perspectives at the same time, showcasing different powers and behavioural patterns. Lettie, the youngest of the trio, is the only one who

[8] *The Domesday Book* was a document commissioned by William the Conqueror in 1086, which listed all people living in his newly acquired territories, as well as how much land they owned and how much tax they should be paying. The document is more commonly known by its Middle-English spelling, *The Doomsday Book*, which also indicates the displeasure at having to pay taxes to the new king. The use of the original spelling in the Hempstocks' story points to their historical presence in England.

is patently dependent on the Ocean in her magical strivings, going back to it for aid and being submerged in it after nearly being killed by the Hunger Birds. Though of lesser power than her elders, Lettie is also a venue for the child's perspective laden with idealism and the developmental clash with the failure of the world to be ideal. Teenagers at Lettie's perceived age, suspended around twelve, learn the limitations of the world, often clashing with authorities.[9] Lettie does not tolerate Ursula's presence in her world, which leads her to set up boundaries from which the former cannot escape, and tries to coerce her into leaving, reaching out to Hunger Birds for help. She also does not possess the power to control the snowballing disaster she instigated, leading to the Boy's death. Still, Lettie, immortal and almost infinitely powerful in her own way, refuses to accept his death as a possibility and sacrifices herself, rearranging the past in a way that allows him to live. Lettie represents the invulnerability of the child's mind, which creates rules and is relentless in upholding them, defying even death. She, of course, has the advantage of being in possession of godly powers and can create such rules, but her attitude sets her apart from Ginnie and Old Mrs. Hempstock.

Ginnie Hempstock takes a different approach to things, displaying the maturity of adulthood and the care often associated with motherhood. She is the most prominent maternal figure in the narrative and the first one to provide comfort and security to the Boy, especially after the Hunger Birds' attack. Unlike Lettie, Ginnie is more level-headed and thoughtful, and her role is primarily that of a mother, providing the Narrator with a sense of 'idealised maternity' and offering him the home he no longer has (Czarnowsky 2009: 20). Ginnie observes and knows the world from a motherly point of view and is usually the one who prepares and offers food to the Boy or converses with his father. Her mollifying demeanour seamlessly persuades them that the boy has only been to their farm to play or to see Lettie off to Australia. In the play, Ginnie often assumes the position of an exasperated mother and scolds Lettie for her rashness, enhancing the mother-daughter relationship. Her exasperation balances the characters of Lettie and Old Mrs. Hempstock, while underscoring the impact of Lettie's perceived demise at the end of the play. She is also the

[9] Lettie's age is never explicitly stated. She declares herself to be twelve after a longer thinking break. It is, however, made clear that this age only shows her outward appearance, whereas she had been in the Boy's world at least since the Norman invasion in 1066.

one to chide her daughter for her failure to contain Ursula's monstruous form:

> GINNIE Lettie Hempstock! Bringing them things to this farm!?
>
> *GINNIE tucks ALEX into a warm coat (without his say so). The drone of the HUNGER BIRDS returns.*
>
> LETTIE He'll be safe here 'til Gran wakes up.
>
> GINNIE She could sleep a day or a decade- Did she tell you no one knows how to wake her up?
>
> LETTIE Mum, I'm trying to make it right–
>
> GINNIE That's what you said when you made things worse. (Horwood 2021: 66)

Finally, Old Mrs. Hempstock, as old as the universe itself and the most formidable of the three, is the old woman's face of Hecate – the wise and ruthless empress who not only knows the whole of creation but can control it. Lettie often recounts stories of Old Mrs. Hempstock dealing with 'fleas' and 'varmints,' intuitively turning to her for help when in doubt. Old Mrs. Hempstock is usually seen bustling around the farm, milking the cows, and producing cheese, reminiscent of old traditions which highlight her age and intimate her power. For instance, she routinely selects the kind of moon that will hang above the Hempstock farm, preferring the full moon because "she likes it to shine on this side of the house. She says it reminds her of when she was little, but I think it's because otherwise she trips up the stairs," demonstrating both her age and her godly potential (Horwood 2021: 49).

In addition to its intertextual dialogue with mythology and folklore, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is actualised within the matrix of influential texts and tropes, some of which are referred to more explicitly than others. The continued absence of the mother echoes the common fairy-tale archetype, whereas the Boy's love for reading is displayed through specific literary examples upon which he models his behaviour. He loves detective stories and takes on the role of the child detective with Lettie when they first venture into the Edges of the Hempstock farm and then around the neighbourhood to set the trap for Ursula. Even more so, he escapes from his house through the window, since "in books, people climbed up and down drainpipes to get in and out of houses, so [he] climbed up and down drainpipes too" (Gaiman 2013: 101). The escape is laced with explicit

intertexts, as the Boy recites quotes from *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when he leaves the world that had become too real in its dangers and consciously enters a reality where mythology is more than an entertaining story. Ursula, who claims to be able to read the Boy's mind because she had entered the world through him (Horwood 2021: 30), is diverted through his, almost prayer-like, incantation:

> ALEX [To himself] She took a step further in, always expecting to feel the woodwork. "This must be a simply enormous wardrobe!" and Lucy goes in. And through the coats…
>
> *ALEX sees the window and opens it, rain drifts in.*
>
> ALEX …all the way to the back.
>
> *Steeling himself, ALEX shuts the book.*
>
> ALEX She took a step further in… always expecting to feel the woodwork.
>
> *ALEX picks up the boxing glove and drops it out of the window, watching it fall.* (Horwood 2021: 37, italics in original)

The Boy resorts to his favourite series as he descends through the window and away from the house, picking the moment when Lucy enters Narnia for the first time. He, too, crosses the threshold between what he perceives as reality and myth, as he is soon followed by Ursula in her floating, frightening form, and comes to learn about snipping, stitching, the Ocean, and the Hunger Birds.

The line between the mother and Ursula is drawn in the lifesaving return to stories, as it was his mother who introduced him to literature (Horwood 2021: 32). His mother's protection extends beyond the grave, and through literature, she keeps the Boy safe from Ursula as he escapes imminent danger. In this way, the adaptation underscores the importance of motherhood as a safe haven for children, highlighting the maternal ideal that permeates the play, especially in contrast to Ursula's malevolent influence.[10] For the Boy, mythology is not just about tales of gods and their (mis)adventures, but also the legends of the fantasy genre itself,

[10] Another reference to *The Chronicles of Narnia* may be found, again, in the food Ursula serves and through which she brings the Boy's family under her control. The effect is reminiscent of the Turkish delight Edmund is given by the White Witch, which causes him to betray his family and continually seek the Witch. The Boy cheekily references this when Ursula asks him what he is reading: "A witch from another world gives a kid some Turkish Delight and takes him prisoner" (Horwood 2021: 29).

such as the Pevensie siblings from C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. As he escapes through the window, the myth is further enhanced by deliberately disorienting the viewers, by removing the Boy from the here-and-now of Sussex through the perspectival shift that literally turns his world upside down. As he lets go of the window frame, he is carried by the stagehands backwards towards the backdrop, defying gravity as he falls horizontally into the world of the supernatural. By *narrating* his life via his favourite tales, the Boy not only understands the world in relation to what he knows from stories, but also fashions his memories into a coalescence of myth, fairy tale and reality in which he *performs* the protagonist. Narrating himself into the hero of the story unfolding around him may have made him break free from the Hempstocks' protective grip and run towards the Hunger Birds, convinced that his sacrifice would save his world.

Unlike Ursula, the Hunger Birds, though frightening, are not inherently malevolent. They maintain the world's balance, though their methods are indifferent to the collateral damage they cause. Still, they too indicate similar borrowings from myth and fiction, most notably Norse mythology, as they are reminiscent of the ravens, who, in Gaiman's *Graveyard Book,* are harbingers of death (Green 2013: 56). With their shadowy, predatory flapping, they bring death to both the Boy and his world, reinforcing the superstition that ravens bring bad luck. Ravens, in Norse mythology, are mostly related to Odin, who is accompanied by his two pets who are on the lookout when he cannot be. Their names, translating to thought and memory, are all the more meaningful in its story of forgetting and on the nature of knowledge and reality.[11] Onstage, the alienation from familiar mythology is achieved by using puppets instead of actors to portray the Hunger Birds, contributing a visual narrative thread to the novel. At first, they appear like shadowy figures appearing and disappearing in the dark, but as the threat of their presence grows, so do the birds, gaining more detail with every resurgence. Starting off as human-like figures with simple beaks, they soon reveal massive wings, sharp claws, and demonic shrieks. This is further emphasised when several of them spring up in the audience pit and balconies, making lurching motions at viewers to signal

[11] The Hunger Birds with their voracious appetite are also reminiscent of the eagle sent by Zeus to peck away at Prometheus's liver, evoking further mythological horror in addition to Odin's ravens and acolytes of death. This is highlighted through their skeletal beaks and bleak eyes attached to their shoulders as well as wings made out of ripped cloth, netted string and snakeskin rubber.

their danger to the extradiegetic world, reinforcing the actualisation of the storyworld beyond the stage. At the intersection of old mythologies and popular culture, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* also builds a new myth embodied in fleas, varmints, and Hunger Birds. Gaiman, known for working within the mythopoeic paradigm, capitalises on the familiar to introduce new myths, wrapping them in a sense of familiarity that promotes immersion in a storyworld blending drama, prose, and poetry with fantasy, folklore, and myth, resulting in an innovative actualisation beyond adaptation.

4. Theatre in a Transgeneric Dialogue

Gaiman's multi-generic framework is evident in how the play is adapted, particularly through the use of a transgeneric theatrical prism. Schwanecke defines transgeneric theatre as plays that combine traditional drama with prose and poetry (2022: 11), emphasising the narrative aspect. Building on Fludernik's 'natural narratology' (1996: 207) and Babbage's assertion that storytelling is central to theatre (2018: 83), Schwanecke argues that theatre has also taken a more narrative turn (2022: 17). This sometimes manifests in the form of increased narrativisation achieved through generative narrators (Richardson 1988: 197). Richardson defines generative narrators as characters or diegetic insertions "whose diegetic discourse engenders the ensuing mimetic actions" (Richardson 1988: 197). Richardson challenges the notion that performance is the main criterion for distinguishing drama from other narrative texts, arguing that it is an unmediated part of the dramatic text (Muny 2008: 34). However, Richardson's analysis shows that events in drama are often mediated through "monologues, asides, soliloquies, [extending to] the vocalization of private thoughts," where inner emotions or processes are externalised on stage (Richardson 1988: 204). Although generative narration has been a part of theatre for a long time, its use in fantasy is particularly pronounced as a framing device as it serves not only as a way of introducing the story as a framed narrative, but also as a way of storyworlding.

Fantasy in theatre is usually adapted from novels, which are inherently marked by their narrativity and its affordances in terms of detailed worldbuilding of imaginary worlds. In contrast, theatre is audio-visual as much as it is linguistic, but it also relies on more dynamic shifts tied to

'real time'. As such, it does not have the benefit of explaining its worlds, which is why it employs generative narration to set the scene and explain the basic parameters of the storyworld before the main narrative unravels. In the case of *Ocean*, the play begins with a 'pro-prologue' followed by a prologue and Act I. There is no prologue in the classical sense of a narrator introducing the storyworld and its background, due to the implied similarity between the diegetic world and the conventional reality. Instead, the play's narrativity is accentuated by Old Mrs. Hempstock's arrival, which triggers the Boy's recollection of his previous visits to the farm. The pro-prologue is a single scene, showing "[The Boy] middle-aged, dressed for a funeral, stood among mourners, burying a coffin" – burying his father (Horwood 2021: 1). The scene, metaphorically and literally, dissolves as the cast sways and flounces off the stage, leaving the Boy to stand motionless only to find himself at the edge of the duckpond, being approached by Old Mrs. Hempstock. The transgeneric mixing of the play also emphasises the 'everyman on a quest' structure in the way it is staged. As the pro-prologue and prologue conclude, the Boy ascends the stage from the audience pit, highlighting his connection with the viewers and the potential for anyone to achieve grand deeds, aided by both courage and supernatural allies.

The transgeneric nature of the play goes beyond the three main genres, borrowing from different narrative schemes, as well as different media. The first encounter with Ursula is one of the play's most striking scenes, both in its appearance and in how it blurs multiple genre and media boundaries while actualising the monster. The creature, operated as a giant puppet resembling a horrific crossbreed of scorpion, stag beetle, bats, and leeches, is not only terrifying but also serves as an amalgamation of multiple genres, demonstrating the evolving direction of fantasy theatre in a changing media landscape. Firstly, the creature has six legs, each of which is operated by a stagehand, an elongated neck with a sharp skull-like head with frightful jaws. The stag beetle horns are attached to its back, accompanied by extremities that look like bat-winged legs. Its range of motion is extremely versatile, and the stagehands perform a swift, threatening dance, moving it around the whole stage in a mad chase of Lettie and the Boy, underscored by loud, bass-heavy monophony played on the cello and supported by thunderous drumbeats. Herein the play borrows several methods of musical theatre. The stagehands operating the monster perform a modern ballet as they follow Lettie and the Boy, moving faster and more erratically to the drumbeat. The choreographed exchange

demonstrates the display of power between Lettie and the monster, as they lurch, retreat, and occasionally taunt one another. Unlike the nursery rhyme Lettie chants when she faces the flea in the novel, the composition "The Binding Song" is reminiscent of ancient percussive rhythms indicative of Lettie's agelessness and power from the Old Country and the dawn of time. Far less stylised than typical musical theatre, however, the dance of hunter and prey here is more primordial indicating both Lettie and the monster's true age. It is also more ambiguous, as although the flea attempts to position itself as the hunter, it is Lettie who endeavours to hunt it down when it escapes into the Boy's world, and her family, who ultimately defeats her, employing similar rhyming and rhythmical humming and chanting. Towards the end of the composition, Lettie begins stomping her feet in a sign she had grown tired of the game and is 'putting her foot down' causing the monster to retreat.

In its appropriation of musical theatre techniques, *Ocean* relies on the assumption that the audience, surrounded both by music and various narratives (Anderson & Iversen 2018: 569), is at least subconsciously familiar with the way in which music tells stories. The percussions convey threatening suspenseful situation in which the Boy and Lettie find themselves, and the boding looming closer as the beat grows louder and faster. Even Lettie's chanting, though incomprehensible as it portrays an ancient language, is rhythmically organised in meaningful units that convey her sense of superiority over the monster, which she considers a 'varmint' rather than an actual threat (Horwood 2021: 48). Similarly, when the monster speaks, it does so in a pre-recorded, demonic voice compiled by adding several layers of speech in differing pitches. Such modification of the voice borrows heavily from horror film devices, where multiplied voices usually belong to demons or other malevolent beings. Thus, the play engages with multiple theatrical genres to encode its messages, relying on the audience's familiarity with various genres and storytelling conventions as it weaves old and new mythology on stage.

5. Conclusion

In its transgeneric dialogue, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* emphasises the constant interplay of textuality and intertextuality, as well as 'intertheatricality' as it overtly and covertly combines a series of texts

in order to actualise its storyworld on stage. The actualisation of the conventional reality and the supernatural the protagonist encounters relies on the audiences' implicit familiarity with various archetypes, threads of mythology, and narrative elements of popular fantasy texts. The embedding of the story in such a rich textual tapestry, *Ocean* joins a growing trend of cross-genre, multimodal and multimedia productions, which indicates a shifting trend in engagement with theatrical storytelling. On the one hand, the techniques used to actualise the storyworld heighten immersion and create the sense of the fantasy world extending beyond the play area. When the protagonist, who ascends the stage from the audience pit, marks himself as the everyman from the crowd rather than a mythical figure chosen by fate, the outcome of his story is shared by and with the audience. Consequently, the looming threat of the Hunger Birds, exacerbated by the vultures descending into the audience, is brought closer with an implication that the conventional reality is just as much at stake as the Boy's own world somewhere in Sussex. On the other hand, the play's active use of various intertexts – implicit and explicit – contributes to its worldbuilding in a way that achieves the comprehensive logical unity, whose status is not occluded by the presence of the supernatural. On the contrary, the supernatural, consistently following the internal logic of the world, is brought to life, often in moments of narrative tension, capitalising on the emotional responses of the audience to make itself more tangible and convincing, contributing to the overall effect of actualisation. This reliance on the familiar and the widespread intertextuality of the narrative, as well as the blurring of multiple genres taps into a broader cultural shift brought about by our constant immersion in multiple media and growing familiarity with how they work as well as their storytelling conventions.

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