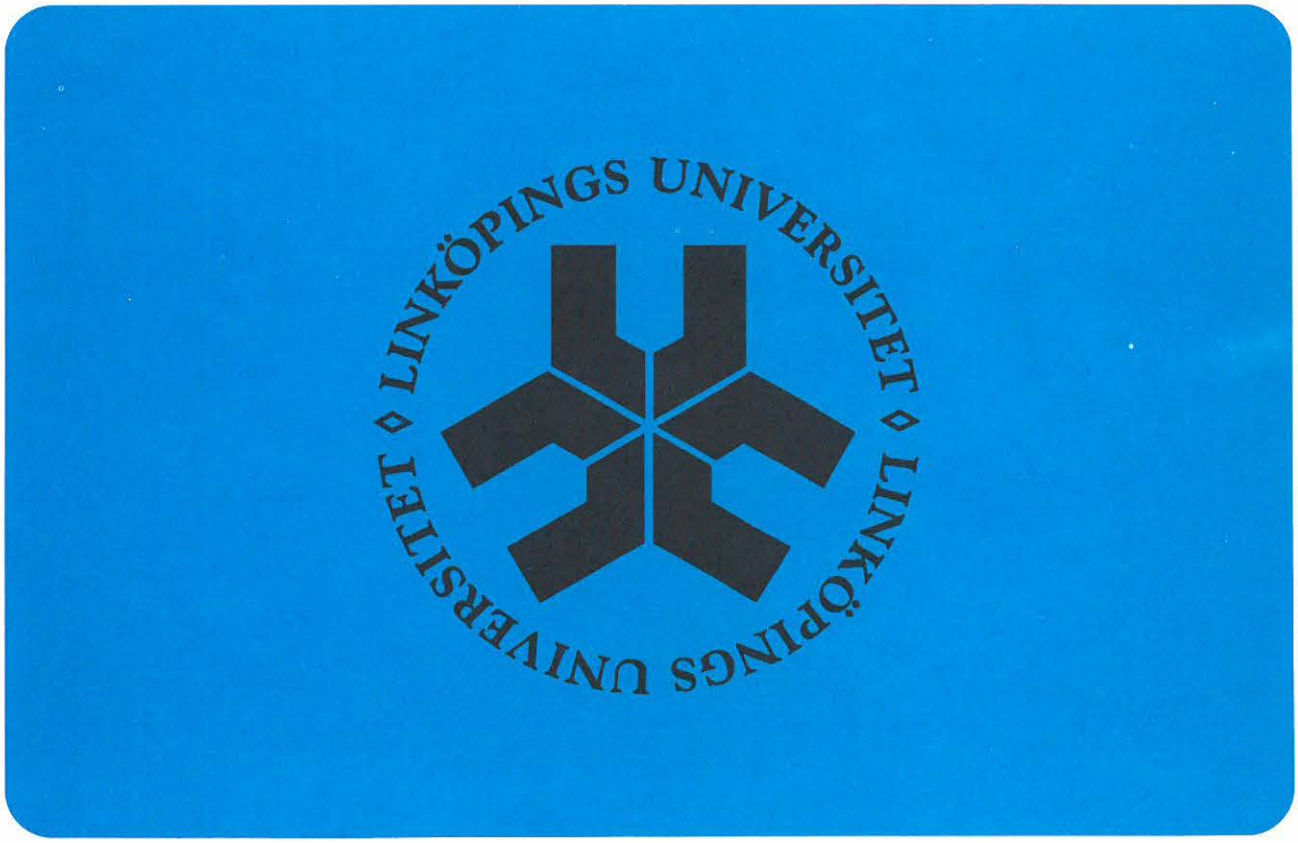
Institutionen för Språk och Litteratur

Dining with

Margaret Drabble's

The Witch of Exmoor



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The Witch of Exmoor

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Introduction

Starters

British author and critic Margaret Drabble has always made use of what she has. When an early pregnancy thwarted her option of a brilliant career as an actress, she simply set herself to writing a novel instead, a decision she would never regret. "A pencil and a piece of paper... and all human life was there"(Rose, 1980:1). Her novels include *A Summer Bird Cage, The Waterfall, The Needle's Eye* and *The Realms of Gold.* She is also the editor of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature.* Since the initial maternal theme, Drabble's scope as a writer has widened to expand through experimentation of character and subject matter beyond traditional realism. However, while attracting increasing attention from both readers and critics with each published novel, Drabble's status as a social novelist has rather outshadowed her talent for modulating "between interior and exterior perspectives" as Mary Hurley Moran observes in her introduction to Drabble.

Studying criticism on Margaret Drabble is rather like going through her own process of evolution. From the outset seen as a woman writer dealing with feminist issues, she has gradually attained a position as a serious philosophical writer. She says that like Hume, she is interested in the mixture of predictability and unpredictability in life. Life becomes wider with age, she has stated, and this is also true of her books. Shining increasingly through her literary works are issues of value, morals and fate, eternal questions of life itself, withstanding the currents of varying criticism such as feminist, social and realist. Margaret Drabble has always something more to say, offering her readers the choice to reflect. And not everything is on the surface. Nora F. Stovel sees the true artistic excellence of Drabble in "the transfiguration of the everyday ... this quality of writing about an everyday incident and making it profoundly emblematic" (Schmidt, 3). The fact is that Drabble is a symbolist as well as a realist, and all her novels are distinguished by evocative imagery as well as true-to-life detail.

Though her symbolist side is less recognized, Drabble is ever sharpening this artistic technique. Her latest novel, *The Witch of Exmoor*, transforms such an everyday incident as the meal into a highly suggestive metaphor for something else. The repetitive use of a scene yields a more complex result, as observed by Cynthia A. Davis, who comments in her essay that "this technique illustrates the relativity of perception"(Rose, 1985:144). No single interpretation is final, an aspect enhanced by the symbolic qualities of the meal. Davis continues: "Dependence on this kind of juxtaposition ... means that the narrative is unified ... by the relation of echoing themes and attitudes"(144). Although Davis' essay refers to themes in another of Drabble's books, *The Realms of Gold,* the same method of juxtaposing scenes is used in *The Witch of Exmoor.*

Symbols and metaphors inhabit a large space in the literary world. Their significance lies in the "opening out" of a theme into the reality of the reader, through association and cultural consensus. A metaphor such as the meal, would for instance imply so much more, as the sharing of food is one of the oldest social structures common to all societies. Culturally and historically, to offer or accept a meal is to acknowledge the intention of friendship, in fact the continuation of

existence. Apart from this basic aspect, the symbol of the meal is deeply rooted in western civilisation through Christianity, with its heavy emphasis on The Last Supper. However, in the world of literature, there are other, now classic, meals, rich with implications and insights into the lives and relationships of those sharing the table, a natural gathering point in a play or book, just as in real life. Virginia Woolf has a beautiful study of a meal in her novel *To the Lighthouse* and William Shakespeare uses the meal as a climax in his play *Timon of Athens.* How these two intertextual meals are worked into *The Witch of Exmoor* by Margaret Drabble will be explored in this essay, along with other symbols and implications present in the novel.

In 1992 Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* was published by Oxford University Press with an introduction by Margaret Drabble. Four years later, in 1996, she had completed *The Witch of Exmoor.* "Structural and stylistic affinities between Margaret Drabble and Virginia Woolf should alert us to, rather than divert us from, their profounder kinship", writes Ellen Cronan Rose in *Critical Essays on Margaret Drabble* (11). It seems quite natural that Drabble's intertextual meal should involve Woolf: "Judith Ruderman finds dinner parties in a number of Drabble's novels and notes that, as in Woolf's novels, they serve as emblems of order and community in a world of ugly chaos", writes Rose (10). A former member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Drabble is fond of alluding to the works of William Shakespeare. Thus, the metaphorical meal in the second chapter of *The Witch of Exmoor* is entitled "Timon's Feast" after its inspirational source, *Timon of Athens.* Whether or not the metaphorical meals serve as emblems of order in Drabble's ultimate novel to date is indeed a question of interest.

This essay aims to demonstrate that Margaret Drabble, inspired by her literary knowledge of Shakespeare and Woolf, has constructed her novel *The Witch of Exmoor* on the two famous literary meals in *Timon of Athens* and *To the Lighthouse.* Parallels will be illuminated in the light of intertextuality, along with the symbolic significance of the meal, where this image is linked to Drabble's conception of social and individual order/disorder, but also used as an opening out to a higher realm.

The first chapter will deal with the dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse,* and its relevance for the intertextual meal in *The Witch of Exmoor.* Structural influences from Woolf will also be discussed. In the second chapter the feast in *Timon of Athens* will be treated in the same way. Finally the third chapter will delve a little deeper into the meaning of Drabble's symbolism, focusing on a passage entitled *Envoi* in one version of *The Witch of Exmoor.* Questions to be asked are: What does the author wish to illustrate with her symbols? In which sense does the use of intertextual meals enhance the symbol/metaphor? Is the message meant to be clear to the reader? If not, what is to be won by obscurity?

A lot has been written about Drabble's novels, as they span over several fields of interest. The three critical works particularly relied on for this study are *The Novels of Margaret Drabble: Equivocal Figures,* by Ellen Cronan Rose, Mary Hurley Moran's *Margaret Drabble: Existing Within Structures,* and *Margaret Drabble: Golden Realms,* edited by Dorey Schmidt. As these books were published in the early '80s, none of them deal with *The Witch of Exmoor.* In fact, as it is her latest novel, there was no critical work to be found at all on the *Witch.*

However, from these books and from several articles, themes and tendencies could be traced relevant to the understanding of various functions of the novels of Margaret Drabble. In the light of former critical works on Drabble, her latest novel appears to add to a chain of constant development and refinement in the author's technique. As the dinner theme is anchored in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as well as *Timon of Athens* by William Shakespeare, criticism on these works has also been used in order to find further likenesses and points of interest.

Chapter 1

À la Woolf

In *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf there is a now classic dinner scene, a picture of harmony, held together by that perfect mother figure, Mrs Ramsay. Echoes of this amazing and symbolic meal can be found in two of Drabble's meals in *The Witch of Exmoor* along with other allusions and implications, hinted at to give added weight to her intertextual meal or contorted to bring out an extreme opposite. Suzanne Raitt observes that the function of the *Lighthouse* meal is: "to hold off the dark formlessness and the floods that threaten outside the windows"(85). This stands for a type of order in a chaotic universe. Drabble changes that order around to produce a chaotic effect with her intertextual meals.

Ruth Z. Temple writes of the *Lighthouse* dinner: "Itself a symbol, the dinner is symbolized by three works of art: the perfectly successful *boeuf en daube,* the bowl of fruit exquisitely arranged by Rose, and the poem recited, whose words and rhythm provide a kind of music to support and universalize the mood visually created"(Sprague, 95). How are these three "works of art" used by Drabble in her novel, and how may an intertextual reading enhance dining with the Witch of Exmoor? Will other influences from the Lighthouse shine through to illuminate the Witch in a different light?

In the second chapter of *The Witch of Exmoor* Drabble depicts a meal heavy with the reverse qualities of the Lighthouse dinner. Instead of the motherly Mrs Ramsay, the hostess is the unmotherly Frieda Haxby, the "witch" herself. The aim of this dinner is not harmony, but discord, and its effect is strengthened by the use of intertextuality, demonstrated in a direct comparison. The subject here is the first "work of art" mentioned by Temple above, the meal itself:

In *To the Lighthouse* Mrs Ramsay says: "Sit there, please...And meanwhile she waited, passively, for ... something to happen. But this is not a thing, she thought, ladling out soup, that one says"(113). In this sentence Woolf conveys the words, the action (or lack of action) as well as the motivation of Mrs Ramsay. Drabble lets her protagonist Frieda Haxby play the same role in a different way: "She greets her family without rising...There's some water in the jug. And that is that...They serve themselves and sip its thin fluoride kidney-filtered brew...They settle themselves, nervously, uncertainly, and wait for something to happen"(35). Her words do not seem to imply an invitation, and the linguistic key, *waiting for something to happen,* involves not the mother waiting for the family to set the action, but the family waiting for the mother; a kind of power-play. Drabble´s description of emotion deals with the family, not the mother, whose distance is thereby kept.

Great care is taken in revealing the food itself, the heightened moment of the masterpiece, the impact on the senses, so mouth-watering in the *Lighthouse*: "...an exquisite scent of olives and oil and juice rose from the great brown dish as Marthe, with a little flourish, took the cover off ... the dish, with its shiny walls and its confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats, and its bay leaves and its wine ...(135). And what of the result? "It is a triumph ... It was rich; it was

tender. It was perfectly cooked .... It is a French recipe of my grandmother's, said Mrs Ramsay, speaking with a ring of great pleasure in her voice"(136).

The counterpart of Mrs Ramsay's dish is uncovered in the *Witch*, "...where the faint wafting of unpleasant cooking smells slightly intensified .... Ceremoniously, slowly, with dignity, she raised the lid ... On seven large white gold-rimmed plates reposed what looked like small, shrivelled beefburgers ... Nothing more, nothing less"(42). The situation is the same, the action is the same, and yet other words convey so different a meaning. In *The Witch of Exmoor* the guests are left guessing at Frieda's intentions: "To laugh, to cry, to eat? .... "What you have before you are Butler's Bumperburgers ... made of gristle, fat, chicken scraps, and water from cow's heads, says Frieda Haxby"(42). Instead of quietly anticipating the mood of her guests, gently drawing each one into her own circle of love and light as is the nature of Mrs Ramsay, Drabble lets her witch hold hers in anguish, gleefully observing their uncomfortable attempts at phatic communion. Frieda appears to be just as proud of her bumperburgers as Mrs Ramsay of her *boeuf en daube*, both dishes creating exactly the impact wished for – harmony or otherwise.

In the *Lighthouse* dinner everything revolves around human relations, implied lightly in conversation, gaining depth from within the train of thoughts and associations predominately in the mind of Mrs Ramsay. Great care has been taken to create a visualised scene where a bowl of fruit carries the most symbolic significance. Raitt gives a detailed account of how the fruit represents "festival and irresponsibility", in accordance with Bacchanalian orgies, coupled with implications of fertility, not only by the contrasting shapes themselves, lying against each other, but also the linguistic method of placing sexual implications in the description(85). Raitt mentions Jack Stewart's findings on the choice of the colour purple as the "chromatic signifier of integration" in the novel, since the combination of red and blue in purple stands for the masculine and feminine(84). The colour yellow is seen as the colour of intoxication. As already mentioned, this bowl of fruit is Temple's second "work of art". By alluding to this poetical work of art Drabble sets the tone for the initial meal in *The Witch of Exmoor*. So exquisitely perfected by Virginia Woolf, Drabble has but to give the slightest indication of the depicted bowl of fruit to set the *Lighthouse* spell on the *Witch*. Thus, on the very first page she simply states that "the meal is drawing to a close. The bowl of fruit has been plundered." The significance of this sentence may be seen in its allusion to the Lighthouse:

> in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape ... until ... a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing. (*To the Lighthouse,* 146-7)

"The bowl of fruit has been plundered." The definite article used suggests the allusion made, a metonym for the intertextual meal. Drabble's novel has already entered *passé composé,* there is no festivity, and disharmony is shown as the starting point in *The Witch of Exmoor*.

The mother figure in this first meal is Patsy, but the effort she makes does not appear to give back what it takes. Patsy plays the mother role out of necessity while Mrs Ramsay knows no other, and therefore she *is* the mother.

She believes in herself and the moments she has helped create - moments of harmony, belonging to eternity, their value indisputable. Commenting on the dinner-scene in her introduction to *To the Lighthouse,* Drabble writes: "The world is for a moment struck into stability ... but only for a moment. It will not stay fixed. It returns to flux ... Nothing remains for ever after. The vision passes..."(xxvii-xxviii). And so, "a flattening liquid disc of Brie circulates slowly on a heavy round grey veined marble slab. The salad wilts a little in its various oils. There are crumbs and stains on the dark pink loose-woven cloth..."(*The Witch of Exmoor,* 1). The vision has passed. There is nothing in *The Witch of Exmoor* that resembles Mrs Ramsays creation of harmony, described by E M Forster as "the dinner which exhales affection and poetry and loveliness..." (Sprague, 20).

In *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf has woven in a few lines of a poem, recited at the dinner and intercepted by the thought-flow of Mrs Ramsay, who without fully understanding the meaning observes that: "like music, the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice, outside her self, saying .... what had been in her mind the whole evening while she said different things." The sound of those words are to her like flowers "floating on water"(149). In this highly poetical framework, the recited poem constitutes Temple's third "work of art", the "music to support the mood". Composed by Charles Isaac Elton, the few lines in the *Lighthouse* focus on nature in full bloom in a garden full of flowers, but there is also the aspect of life's perpetual cycle in "...all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be..."(149). To Mrs Ramsay, these lines are a mystery she allows to pass, but Margaret Drabble does not. Subtly, she picks up this third "work of art" for her own use in the *Witch,* substituting these enigmatic lines of poetry with a game of the imagination called "The Veil of Ignorance", a not-so-innocent after-dinner pastime. Construct another life to live and all the lives to be, and "would anyone dare to press the button and make it happen"(6)? Exchange the context, and what will happen to the self, to personal identity? So she transfers an intertextual theme and develops it further to create a moral dilemma. By introducing this game to the reader, she invites a discourse on introspection: To design "the kind of society which you would be willing to accept if you didn't in advance know your own place in it"(4). The catch is that the veil of ignorance prevails: "You can't expect to be yourself, nor can you expect society to be anything you recognize"(4). And the message from the author continues: "...from this position you have to examine the first principles of justice, and decide what they are"(4).

Here Drabble is pushing the limits of empathy. Empathy is also the issue in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,* albeit on a much smaller scale. Both are needed since we are all part of humanity, though still each a single individual. As a contemporary author, Drabble realises the greater influence and therefore responsibility each individual has on a global level. In Woolf's time, one could be more exclusively concerned with the inner qualities of life, but to a social realist such as Drabble it is clear that we as individuals must take the consequences of our actions on a larger scale if this earth is to be saved from catastrophes on a grand scale due to carelessness concerning the environment or unacceptable conditions in unjust societies. Modern readers have choices and knowledge not available in Woolf's age. Drabble includes aspects in her novels such as the use of

chemicals and pesticides in what is to be consumed and the negative impact of our technical society with its traffic, building developments, pollution and stress. If we are to find a life-style of inner quality, the global aspect cannot be overlooked.

Apart from handling the "three works of art", Drabble explores the function of Woolf's main character, Mrs Ramsay. The accepted view is that she is the perfect mother, described by Anne Hoffman as "Demeter, goddess of the bounty of nature, the marriage bond, motherhood..."(182). Mary Lou Emery does not wholly agree, writing in *Robbed of Meaning* that Mrs Ramsay "may hold court with her Boeuf en Daube, but at a great cost to herself and others"(219). Emery writes that sexologist Havelock Ellis describes women's sexual 'nature' as "inherently...masochistic, and ultimately fulfilled in motherhood" (223). But even if Woolf's Mrs Ramsay appears to find motherhood fulfilling, Drabble brings forth another side of her being. The Woolfish influences in the *Witch* pick up this unrealized aspect of Mrs Ramsay, a type of woman not compatible with Drabble's modern society.

Regarding the "civilised" repressions that made "normal" women masochistic yet found "free women" to be abnormally "mannish," and non-maternal..."(Emery, 232) as a dyad of interest, it may be said that these two features are opposite sides of the same symbol. In Mrs Ramsey, the second aspect is unrecognised, a *nothingness*, as when she is no longer living. She belongs only to the first category, and when she does not, it is because she is dead. However, in *To the Lighthouse* the dead heroine "in effect masterminds the action" of Part Three, as observed by Claire Sprague (9). This absence of motherhood, or other side, can be seen as the witch in *The Witch of Exmoor*. Just as the witch in a child's nightmare symbolises a terrifying aspect of the mother, Frieda Haxby is portrayed as a distinctly "other" type of mother, "burdened with children, husband, sister, mother, and a viper's knot of hatreds", with her "perverse and arbitrary obsession" with the seventeenth-century monarch Christina, also an 'abnormal' type of woman: "Frieda had followed Christina, from cauled and hairy birth through arrogant girlhood, through sexual ambiguity and intellectual experiment..."(67). In short, a mother "against the natural order"(11).

Margaret Drabble appears to be using her protagonist as a symbolic motivator for her story. The same critical conclusion has been found of Woolf's Mrs Ramsay. Raitt has written of *To the Lighthouse* that it is a novel about memory and desire. "Mrs Ramsay is the novel's desired object (its aim is to represent and make sense of her both present and absent), but exactly by being its object she is also its subject, setting it in motion and dictating the shape it will take"(75-76). Raitt quotes Annette Kuhn: "It is often woman – as structure, character, or both – who constitutes the motivator of the narrative, the "trouble" that sets the plot in motion"(76).

The witch of Exmoor is certainly the "trouble that sets the plot in motion", at least for her offspring. Seated at the first meal in Drabble's novel, "the Palmers are relentless ... They could lasso conversations about [anything], and bring them home to graze about their mother"(9), an obsession which reoccurs again and again throughout the narrative. As her children contrive for her the epithet 'The Witch of Exmoor', she constitutes not only the motivator, but also the title of the whole book. Present or absent, dead or alive, it is she, like

Woolf's Mrs Ramsay, who *is* the basic narrative structure, the woman as subject, setting in motion and dictating the shape the action will take.

With this structural function in mind, it is interesting that Jean Guiguet in his discussion of Mrs Ramsey finds "an entirely different order of reality, in which we have no longer somebody or something; ... what we have is a nexus of relations, a manifold participation in all that lies around, absorbing it all into his own substance, which is constantly altered by this contact" (Sprague, 44-5). In other words, Mrs Ramsey is more a symbol than she is herself, a symbol retained by Drabble in *The Witch of Exmoor*, where various qualities within are broken down into yet further symbolic implications.

Another variant of a meal in *The Witch of Exmoor* draws attention to the *Lighthouse*, but this allusion is, so to speak, backstage. It is a theatrical showpiece with all the props required for a dazzling performance. This includes the outer aspects, but disposes of those inner qualities of harmony so intrinsic in *To the Lighthouse*. A special feast is prepared, but again, without the motherly attention of a Mrs Ramsay. Frieda's eldest daughter has arrived with her family to visit the house by the sea for the first time. In the setting of this meal Frieda takes the leading role in a symbolic play:

> She too, a hundred years late, was about to take tea. They saw a table, spread with a white cloth, with a china tea-set, with a fluted silver pot and a silver jug and a silver sugar-bowl... Thick cream was heaped in a cut-glass bowl... And Frieda Haxby... in a floor-length gown of radiant midnight blue embroidered with silver. Sequins sparkled on her bodice, and ran in little streamlets down her full soft draped skirt... (101).

Drabble has truly indulged herself in preparing this scene, using classic objects as symbols for the perfect afternoon tea, and dressing up Frieda, the symbolic witch/mother to perfection in royal attire. But none of it, as shown, is anchored in reality. When Frieda glides out with a rustle of silk, her guests look around in wonder, and notice: "This was a stage set, and you could see into the wings. Only the table and its precious loading spoke of order. The floor was an old, faded, bleached parquet, unpolished for decades, with blocks missing or rising from the plane; the papered walls were stained with damp. The light fittings were askew, and the curtains hung in uneven bunches, tied back by string..."(102).

With this reality beyond the stage setting, an allusion is made to the central section entitled "Time passes" of *To the Lighthouse*, where, likewise, chaos prevails. The "evocation of the life of an empty and uninhabited house over many years", is known according to G S Fraser as "one of the most original and haunting things in English fiction"(761), allowing the ground-work to be already laid out for the house of the witch in Drabble. Virginia Woolf seems to be describing the same house with: "... hangings that flapped, wood that creaked, the bare legs of tables, saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, cracked .... the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork ... the flap of hanging wallpaper ..." (*To the Lighthouse*, 172,175). The decaying house is symbolic in both cases for the absent mother-figure. Apart from identifying Frieda as an "absent mother" as she does not comply with her given role as such, she also dies in the novel, and like Mrs Ramsay, continues to influence the story after her death.

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is known as one of the finest modern examples of poetic prose, striving for an understanding beyond the text. A reading between the lines, using imagination rather than reason, gives a deeper understanding of the author's intention. Schiller wrote in 1788 about "the constraint imposed by ... reason upon ... imagination": "You critics are ashamed or frightened of the momentary and transient extravagances which are found in creative minds, and whose longer or shorter duration distinguishes the thinking artist from the dreamer", (quotation found in *The Witch of Exmoor*, 119). As Virginia Woolf perfected her poetic touch to reach beyond the material world, Drabble makes explicit use of symbolism to reach into other states of being.

One way of enhancing the supernatural element is by using gothic imagery, which strengthens the aspect of witchery. The Victorian castle perched on the edge of the sea, complete with battlements, archways and flag-stones is typically gothic and so are the steep cliffs, tangled woods, dark clouds and a waning moon. Another is clear text, indicating directly what is going on. "*Miss Frieda Haxby* ... He smelled sorcery, he smelled witchcraft .... The skull ... stared at him from its deep eye-sockets, grinned at him with its four remaining teeth, warned him from its blaring absent nostrils ... "(160). This is a stroke more sinister than "this horrid skull" in *To the Lighthouse* (154), but still an intertextual symbol, animated in the process of transferral from one novel to another. The skull at Exmoor presents a question: "Had it ever lived, and how had it died, and why was it here?"(160).

The skull, and the rhetorical questioning attached to it, has to do with the presence of death, and so the enigma of life itself, which is better shown as symbols than in words since a symbol is more open to individual interpretation. The theme of life and death is present in Drabble as in Woolf, and well written, in sometimes unexpected symbols:

> Blood and sea-salt mingle. She hacks, and curses. She has broken a mussel shell, and its living body is exposed. She pulls it away from its rock and a lump of its flesh seems to leap from its crushed dwelling place and attach itself like a leech to her bare and bleeding hand. Horrified, she tries to brush off the clinging fragment, but it sticks. It is fierce and hopeful. It will not die. Its flesh seeks a home on her flesh. She scrapes it off with the knife, and it falls vanquished on to the pale purple rock. The mussels in the bucket breathe and sigh. (84).

Since Drabble, like Woolf, uses images instead of words to convey feeling, the images themselves require delicate handling. Quite obviously there is a fight for survival, a defiant force of life in the face of death. There is also a feeling of defeat. The mussels, those small individuals are vanquished and killed. The killer is hurt and horrified. Her blood and sea-salt mingle, indicating that the sea is the mother of all life.

The sea as an element of imagery is very strong in both novels, although treated differently by Drabble and Woolf. In *To the Lighthouse* the sea bears a resemblance to a comforting mother: "They came there regularly every evening drawn by some need. It was as if the water floated off and set sailing thoughts which had grown stagnant on dry land, and gave to their bodies even some sort of physical relief"(29), whereas in *The Witch of Exmoor*, a daughter

feels only alienation as she: "... crossed to the window and stared out across the darkened garden towards the sea, the indecipherable scrabble of the interminable sighing of the water. She stood transfixed, like a dead person, like a statue frozen. She could hear her own blood"(168).

Now and then Drabble returns to the meal as metaphor. Other, small and lonelier meals than the ones described, are taken in the "dilapidated thirty-room Victorian castle by the sea"(11). Frieda's daughter Rosemary describes what she was offered on her first visit there: "...a slice of corned beef. And a piece of soggy Ryvita. It tasted a thousand years old"(11). Much later, Frieda is found to have abandoned the scene of life. The remains of a meal form a metaphor for the anticipated bodily remains: "An abandoned meal, laid on the large table .... The end of a loaf, dusted with blue mould. A hard and shining cheese rind, a brown and withered apple paring. A bowl of winkle shells"(159). The discarded shell of life.

Yet Frieda was once a part of life, of lust. Again the meal is used as a metaphor:

> But there on their plates had reposed a small dome of red raw flesh, surrounded by a necromantic circle of strange little chemical pyramids of peppers and spices - green, red, black, yellow, crystal white. A golden raw egg yolk in a halved eggshell had topped each frightening bloody pap...(138).

Then follows what must, and the consequences thereof: "Frieda had got up and taken herself to the bathroom and vomited up the lot. The meat, the beer, the man"(138-9). All is said in this brief sequence. A symbolic meal becomes a metaphor for her feeling for what had possessed her.

But now, all that is long gone. She is alone: "The days are long. The light glimmers on the water. The moon is on the wane. And so is she. She has had her supper of tuna and brine"(24). These are metaphors with deeper implications. The passing of time, nature, and scanty meals of a questionable quality, are all associated with the Witch of Exmoor.

Where Woolf handles her symbols with a pure artistic touch, creating poetry of her memories, Drabble uses the same symbols to create a story, a modern kind of meta fairytale whose function is to bring forth the message of the author. That message itself is in fact very similar in both Woolf and Drabble. Stella McNichol finds that the final message of *To the Lighthouse* is one of "belief in the value of life and human endeavour" (62). As Virginia Woolf believed in "on the one hand a threatening, unpredictable Fate, and on the other the individual human being, creating his own existence"(McNichol, 56), Margaret Drabble believes that "people have very little free will; all human activities are planned"(Moran, 15). She is a fatalist to such an extreme that she believes that "one should not fight one's fate ... We are all part of a long inheritance, a human community in which we must play our proper part"(15). Mrs Ramsay plays her proper part, but hardly anyone does in *The Witch of Exmoor*, where the characters appear to do their best to break up that long inheritance of a human community.

Both authors believe that the individual has the power to overcome and create meaning out of chaos. In *To the Lighthouse* the sense of chaos appears to be something belonging to the outside, greater world, gently expelled by Mrs

Ramsay and her influence, which shines through the darkness even after her death, living on in those who knew her. In *The Witch of Exmoor* that light is disrupted. Frieda Haxby does not comply with her maternal role of continuity and the characters are thrown into chaos, each for him- or herself. Yet even by using a mirror-image, the answer remains the same: it is up to the individual to apply method and meaning, to create and endeavour in spite of it all.

In "How Not To Be Afraid of Virginia Woolf", Drabble writes: "There is hardly a writer who has not been affected by her. Her fluid sentence structure, her poetic prose, her perceptions of the slightest connections .... all these things have gone into the novel and remained there"(72). Considering the impact of Woolf on Drabble, it is not surprising that so many "perceptions of the slightest connections" have gone into *The Witch of Exmoor* from *To the Lighthouse*. Drabble writes in *The Witch of Exmoor*: "The unmanned lighthouse had winked and turned"(157). Symbolic significance may thus be stretched from one novel to another and Margaret Drabble is certainly not afraid of Virginia Woolf.

Chapter 2

Au Shakespeare

Instead of viewing Frieda's nauseous meal of bumperburgers under the influence of the *Lighthouse,* this chapter will explore another way to approach the same scene, based on a reading of what H J Oliver calls "Timon's famous mock-banquet" (introduction to *Timon of Athens* xlvii), composed by William Shakespeare, creating a totally different intertextual meal.

In the Shakespearean play *Timon of Athens,* the meal is conceived by the main character, Timon, as a revengeful demonstration of feeling for those 'friends' who turned their backs on him when he was no longer rich. On receiving the invitations, these lords and gentlemen hasten to resume their friendship with Timon, who they believe now to be in a position to entertain again. In Act III, scene vi they pay lip-service to Timon: "The swallow follows not summer more willing than we your lordship", to which Timon mutters aside: "Nor more willingly leaves winter; such summer birds are men"(III.6.28-31). The footnote explains that this retort refers to the proverb "Swallows, like false friends, fly away upon the approach of winter." To the guests he says: "Gentlemen, our dinner will not recompense this long stay" (meaning wait), and says of the offered apologies of conduct: "Let it not cumber your better remembrance. – Come, bring in all together". He urges them all to take a seat anywhere: "your diet shall be in all places alike." The lords are pleased to note that there are "all cover'd dishes", normally meaning good food (footnote), and exclaim to one another: "Royal cheer, I warrant you." "Doubt not that, if money and the season can yield it"(III.6.31-50). So, expectations are raised to the limit. Timon commences thanking the gods, ending with the words: "*For these my present friends, as they are to me nothing, so in nothing bless them, and to nothing are they welcome.* Uncover, dogs, and lap." (The italics used in the play seem to indicate that those words are uttered *sottovoce.*) The dishes are uncovered and seen to be full of warm water. Timon curses them and throws it in their faces (III.6.69-89).

Although sparsely written, the impact of this scene in a play would not be lost on Margaret Drabble, once a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Her intertextual meal in *The Witch of Exmoor* is found in the second chapter, headed 'Timon's Feast', a textual indicator of the inspirational source. In this chapter Frieda's family remembers Frieda's dinner invitation as marking a new stage in family relations. Following the death of her mother, Frieda has shown signs of what her family considers to be "alarming manifestations of madness", launching into projects and premonitions beyond their conventional comprehension(27). On the pretext of worrying about her mental and bodily health, they furtively calculate the costs of her eccentric extravagances. The family speculates: "Was she intent on squandering her money? What, they wondered, of their rightful inheritance"(28)? Like the good lords in *Timon of Athens,* they jealously guard what they consider their share of her riches.

Undoubtedly, Drabble is thoroughly enjoying herself with her intertextual, metaphorical meal. She builds up the same uneasy anticipation: "What is she playing at? Is it a game? ... Surely there will be dinner?"(39); and uses the same 'cover'd dishes': "Well, not silver, perhaps, on closer glance..."(41),

achieving the same theatrical suspense: "Ceremoniously, slowly, with dignity, she raised the lid from her plate. In unison, they imitated her action. Round the table, seven metal covers were lifted. They stared, amazed"(42).

The metal covers seem to spring directly from Timon's Feast in its original setting. The incredulous look of shock on the faces of the guests adds to the intertextuality. Here, however, Drabble takes the opportunity to launch a massive attack on modern foodstuffs and eating habits. The inedible bumperburgers may be likened to the stones supplied by Timon along with the warm water, in some readings, and Drabble does add "water from cow's heads" to reinforce the picture (42). Through her imitation of Timon's Feast, Frieda has put her finger on the streak of hypocrisy present in her chosen guests, made all the more uncomfortable through their realisation in retrospect that it was indeed Timon's Feast she was implying, giving them the roles of false friends.

Drabble adds more to her modern gathering by arranging a pre-dinner discussion of food with no food in sight, making everybody nervous, then the surprise of the formal table, immediately contrasted with the disgusting contents of the meal, and thereafter a return to normality. Luckily for Frieda's guests, a backup dish of macaroni cheese has been prepared, but the demonstration has been made, and over the apple crumble she states: "It's our last supper ... in this house. I've got rid of it. I'm off"(43). And so she is, like some would-be Timon, to exclusion, to the sea, to her death...

Although staging this intertextual meal on the basis of Timon's feast, where the actual scene is meant to have a comic effect, Drabble adds a separate dish of her own: "On the eighth plate ... was a small round display of bright green peas. Nothing more, nothing less"(42). This composition too, is highly symbolic. Green is the colour of growth, peas are seeds, symbolizing the same. The recipient of this chosen plate is the creator of the game "The Veil of Ignorance", touched on before in dining with the Witch. The object of the game is to imagine another type of total social structure in the world, and then press a button to find yourself in it. The catch is not being able to decide beforehand your own individual placement.

The plate of green peas is placed in front of David D'Anger for the simple reason that he is a vegetarian. Frieda's point is to show what this society does with what is meant to pass as food for its people. The "super-naturally green peas" were frozen "long, long before the concept of sell-by date had been dreamt up", and are meant to be as unappetising as the bumperburgers on the other seven plates (43). However, there is a difference, as peas symbolise growth, and burgers consist of dead meat. David is the only one present who truly "believes that the other world is possible", and he puts that belief to use(47). Not only has he political ambition, he also has hope. In retrospect, David is to realise the sincerity of the hidden message. Frieda has also made her first will in favour of David D'Anger, the outsider in the family.

Social realism is ever thematic with Margaret Drabble, and here differences are distilled into the family structure. In this scene she launches a clear attack on morality and lifestyle; and although focusing on the "witch" herself, that focus is often applied through the eyes of her family members, giving as much insight into their inner lives and interrelations. Her three children are all seen as victims of social prestige, locked into convention. They do not seem too

happy with their lives although they would never admit it, much less dare to change their inhibited ways. Their spouses are given roles according to this social theme.

Daniel, the only son, is appropriately a successful barrister. He is also quite incapable of imagining a world in which he would not possess a superior and commanding intellect. His wife Patsy is of the same Palmer type. She is given the most "motherly" role, cooking and baking, giving lunches and acting the perfect hostess. She even takes an outcast from society under her wing, although she sends him on his way when the pressure becomes too great. For she too, has a career, and her motherly context is found to be hollow. Will, the outcast has seen it all and he knows. Her son Simon watches violent videos, cuts classes and takes drugs while Patsy the mother notices nothing until it is far too late. "Simon is a mad boy, a lost cause"(79). Being a mother is not a matter of following certain conventions, but a question of *seeing* the child and of mentally being there for him or her. This is Drabble's message, all the more important in a modern society where violence and drugs are readily available for the young and easily misled. (Simon has a sister, Emily, who makes her own place in the world through a healthy inquisitiveness and self-confidence so not all depends on environment, as Drabble puts forth in other ways.)

Frieda's youngest daughter, Rosemary, is trapped in her artificial shallow world, fighting the panic of mounting blood pressure and fear of failure. Her husband Nathan is more of an outsider. With a supposedly Jewish background, he is the only one who could leave his life tomorrow. A sensuous man, he can savour the good things in life as they are offered him. His profession has not to do with content but with form. Drabble puts her finger on the essence of our modern materialistic world in her description of perfumes, or rather, their apparitions as they glow:

> gold and blue and amber and crystal in caskets and chalices, in ziggurats and phalluses, in pearls and cubes and apples of clear and cut and bevelled and frosted glass. Their names are the names of Temptation, Obsession, Possession, Frivolity. This is the apotheosis of presentation, the triumph of form over content. (227)

On this world of emptiness Nathan has set his energies to work. He is into advertising, and successful since he can see through it all. His function is to act as a contrast to the conventional, proper family and as such he is highly amused by the witch and her impact on the family structure. This couple also have children, young and ordinary.

Gogo, the other daughter, arid and self-righteous, is a consultant neurologist and her politician husband David D'Anger the most interesting outsider of them all. Exotic and beautiful, he symbolises the new blood of England, reminiscent of exploitation of the old colonies, opening up the discussion of politics symbolised by a short history on the topic of sugar and imperialism at "Timon's Feast". By being "handsome, clever and black, he is political plausibility personified"(48). Drabble's social indicator points unquestionably towards hypocrisy on the larger scale of politics. But David stands also for a higher personal idealism as discussed earlier in this chapter. By giving this exquisite foreigner a vocation along with purity of heart Drabble implies that a new road must be taken. David's social placement depends on the

times, he is still a puppet and will probably never reach his idealistic goals. But David and Gogo have a son, one with a special place in the heart of the "Witch". It is this grandchild Benjamin, who goes through a catharsis in the novel and perhaps acts as a realisation of the prevailing hopeful dreams, not as structure, but as an individual. After all, he is just a boy, but one with the new blood in him.

This aspect of human relations is also relevant to Drabble's message. Hope and aspiration are all very well, but they must be handled on an individual level, otherwise that small individual will end up being burned out by the sheer immensity of the task. There is an excellent depiction of this problem within the novel, in the form of a nightmare dreamed by David D'Anger: he is tiny and deluded, "far away and far below, pulling and pulling at a vast heavy carpet of cloth .... The cloth is as large and as heavy as the globe, and on it stand all the peoples of the globe, weighting it down." He knows that he has no hope of moving this mass, but, "if by some superhuman miracle, he were to drag it even a centimetre, he knows he would have done well". So he cannot let go. And he cannot hang on (207-8).

David D'Anger is not the answer, at least not by simply inhabiting the position he has as a politician coupled with his idealistic ambitions. But by being an individual striving to meet his own idealistic image of what he would like to be and like to believe possible, there is still a meaning. To add dimension to his background, the "outsider" at the other end of the social scale, Will Paine, is also of Caribbean descent. Even here Drabble takes pains to contrast his type with the English, who are "clumsy and gross and at the same time runtish". Will Paine is a "beautiful hybrid, grafted on to old stock"(78). Making use of tradition, life must go on with values and ideals revised. Will is really the only one who gains in prosperity and lifestyle in the novel, his road to freedom paved by the witch Frieda, who sets him up with a heap of money and sends him on his way to Jamaica. This line of action goes back to the mother-figure. Patsy did nothing to improve Will's situation, but Frieda could, and did, as though he were her son. Hope can be found in the most unexpected methods and circumstances.

To her own children, Frieda the witch is not compliant. She does not seem to care for them or their way of life, and they definitely do not approve of her standpoint. Without access to the inheritance of her money, their lifestyle is threatened, just as for the lords that swarmed around Timon of Athens. Within the family structure, Drabble has spun a tale on the theme of morality, relationships and individuality present also in *Timon*. Morality and riches do not go well together, a fact as true in ancient Athens as in Shakespeare's day. As our existing material world is based on the structure of economic winnings at the cost of morality and justice, it must constantly be scrutinized by such authors as Margaret Drabble. Life without inner values can only disrupt the harmony of humanity. With this anti-harmony persisting, there are still more structural likenesses to Shakespeare's play in *The Witch of Exmoor*.

When Shakespeare's Timon of Athens is abandoned by his false friends, he sinks into despair, and withdraws to the wilderness in a cave by the sea. There he rages against humanity and dies in abject misery, an apparent suicide. He is the victim of his own excesses of both goodness and hatred, as H.J. Oliver points out in his introduction to the play. Oliver writes further of Timon that he "lived in solitude and hated mankind because he had been deceived by his friends

and had suffered under their ingratitude"(xxxii), and Drabble of Frieda: "Better here alone than make common cause with such dubious friends. There are no common causes left. Each for herself alone"(71).

In *Shakespeare A to Z,* Charles Boyce finishes his commentary on *Timon of Athens* by stating that Timon represents a human truth: "that we are susceptible to vain and prideful extremes of behaviour" (642). The main character, Frieda, in *The Witch of Exmoor* demonstrates some extremes in her behaviour, at least in the eyes of her kin, who could be likened to Timon's so-called friends in that they too, expect money out of Frieda, and speculate over her last will. Frieda also has her share of raging against humanity, although her withdrawal to the wilderness is not an act of misery, and there is no apparent suicide. Critics on *Timon of Athens* disagree on the purely suicidal aspect, though this detail is of no consequence to the play. Regarding Frieda, the question of suicide is left open in the British version while in the American edition her death is explained as accidental.

As to an excess of both goodness and hatred, certainly Frieda Haxby-Palmer harbours "a viper's knot of hatreds", seemingly lodged into her being by unresolved bitter relationships with her parents, sister and husband, all passed away or out of reach. And though she has formerly devoted time and energy to "the good cause", she has gradually become more of an eccentric introvert. As Timon of Athens withdraws in bitterness to the sea, so does Frieda Haxby. Both are disappointed in humanity. All in all, the main ingredients from Shakespeare's play are included in *The Witch of Exmoor:* hatred, greed, revenge, isolation and death by the sea. But knowing Drabble, it may not end there...

Chapter 3

Le Grand Dessert

Having examined the literary influences of Woolf and Shakespeare respectively, using the metaphorical meal as a starting point, there is now something exclusively Drabble for dessert. In dealing with *The Witch of Exmoor*, however, a certain oddity may be discovered, pertinent to dining with the Witch. In the original manuscript, a final passage, entitled "Envoi", exists where three of the four deceased characters in the novel are seen in a type of afterworld, or paradise. However, this extravagance was not present in the proof copy, implying that Drabble decided that the British and European market could do without it. Thus, the Penguin edition of 1996 has a rather more ordinary ending, than that which was offered the American market, where "Envoi" was allowed to remain.

Either life is as it seems, or there is some underlying meaning. Margaret Drabble appears to be focusing away from social realism in the *Witch,* or at least obscuring it behind a veil of symbolism, allowing deeper psychological insight into what lies beyond. "As an artist and as a critic, she is conscious that the crasser the actual, the more crucial the ideal", writes Stovel in her article on Drabble (14). For Drabble, the artist, the sense of the idealistic has gradually become more prominent with each completed novel. *The Witch of Exmoor* contains elements of the fairy tale, fairies omitted. There is a witch, a castle, a touch of magic and evil powers, but the "happily ever after" is absent from the British version, which simply ends in limbo. The future of the old mansion is undecided, and while Frieda's grandchildren Emily and Benjamin are waiting for the land agent to arrive, they set off instead along the beach, answering the "call of the sea"(275). Even if all is what it appears to be, the "call" of something else can still be felt; in this case symbolised by the metaphorical sea. And, simultaneously, in the American version, Frieda and her companions are sailing upon the water, a "myriad of little rainbows sparkling in their wake, the rise and fall and swell of the sea soothing them like babes unborn"(276-7). The metaphorical sea as the mother of creation. For what reason is this highly symbolic ending withheld from the British version?

Without the five surrealistic pages compiling the *envoi*, or message from the afterworld, the reader is left stranded with his or her own concluding thoughts. Although the call of the sea is an opening out in itself, Drabble seems to end this version on an uncertain note regarding what really happens. The reader is invited to follow on to the next point and the next along the beach, with Emily and Benjie. But without the inserted *envoi* the ultimate sentence in both versions is given a different slant, when Emily cries 'Jump', and Benjamin jumps. Perhaps it is just the frivolity of children, jumping as the tide comes in. Or is there another interpretation hidden in this ending in mid-air? Without the *envoi* there are still questions to be asked regarding the death of the witch. Was it caused by a fall from the cliff? Was it intentional or not? Could it even have happened at the same place where Emily and Benjamin are standing when she urges him to jump? They have been making their way up to the point called 'Hindspring', where a slip or a fall would be very easy, as has been speculated upon after Frieda's sudden death...

The question of what happens next is felt far more acutely when the reader is left guessing at the fate of the witch, and at the enigma presented by Benjie - that child of mystical powers who has just asked his cousin Emily, if she believes that Frieda has put a curse on the house. No small amount of mystery has been built up by Drabble in the novel, insinuations not dealt with in the outcome. Have all these clues about Benjie with the magic eye, playing the game of the Breath of Life, Benjie who could will the rocks to tumble and the seas to rise, any deeper meaning? At one point Benjamin believed himself guilty of bringing about the death of his grandmother through his powers. Or are these details simply what they might be; symptoms of delusion in a young boy, now cured from his dark thoughts by Lily, the black child psychotherapist. Lily, with the same name as she who brought everything to its conclusion in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Lily, who puts chaos into order.

Making their way along the coastline, Benjamin confides to Emily what Frieda once told him:

Crows are green, and rooks are blue,
Crows are three and rooks are two,
I may live for ever, and so may you.

Is this a key to what may lie beyond? A speculation of the mind, as to what may follow? Did Drabble decide that ending with speculation was more in line with the British train of thought? Emily Palmer cries 'Jump', and Benjamin D'Anger jumps. End of story. Has the use of their surnames any significance here? Palmer and what the Palmers stand for, commands, and the outsider, D'Anger, obeys. Or simply; she commands, and he obeys. Emily as the "last of her race" (244). Does the witch of Exmoor live on in Emily?

Like Virginia Woolf, Drabble has a preference for concluding her novels with continuance rather than ending. In Lorna Irvine's article this "feminine" ending is described as "women's situation outside of time and epoch ... their habitation of 'eternity,' within a flowing, open narrative that conventionally seems endless" as opposed to the "apparent masculine obsession with endings, with its concomitant denial of the complexity of the immediate present" (Rose, 1985:73). In fact, both endings to *The Witch of Exmoor* are feminine (endless) in different ways. The passage which was taken out of the original manuscript (entitled 'Envoi') with its endless sailing on the golden sea "towards the Isles of the Unimagined"(281) sets itself apart from time, while back at the Witch's mansion the land agent (when he arrives), "may find himself waiting for some time"(276). Thus, the British version is caught up in the wheels of time.

Whatever the reason, something made Drabble change her mind regarding the outcome in the U.S. Harcourt edition of *The Witch of Exmoor*. If one ending reflects continued disorder and uncertainty, the other surely reflects order and plan. Here, Drabble takes the leap into the next world, that sea of gold which fathoms all our longings, our craving for the sweet fruits of earthly toil: life's *Grand Dessert*.

Writing the manuscript for the *Witch*, Margaret Drabble conjured up a real paradise for the chosen of her characters. But since this paradise is yet another constructive pattern formed by the author for her characters, she must speculate on which type of paradise is appropriate. Interestingly enough,

Drabble's method in these five singular pages is again to use the meal as metaphor. The symbol of the meal is hereby transferred into the next dimension.

In her introduction to Margaret Drabble, Moran finds a positive viewpoint in all Drabble's fatalism: "human beings have their imaginations, which enable them to endure existence by imbuing it with richness and significance"(17). Likewise Drabble, the author, imbues this one ending of her novel with richness and significance, implying that there is more to life than the here and now, poetic license put to use rather than a theological explanation, since there are still questions to be answered such as why these three characters have been chosen? A unifying factor seems to be that they all died by water, and without fear. Frieda, Nathan and Belle (a dead friend much missed by Nathan) lived their lives to the full, and made the most of them. They all died in harmony with themselves, as opposed to the fourth, absent victim in the story, Simon, one of Frieda's grandsons who made a mess of his life and so does not reappear. Whatever the cause and meaning, "there seems to be food, and there is no reason, reflects Nathan, why there should not be conversation"(281).

Here, at long last, the meal is a symbol of perfect harmony. As it is the only unearthly meal in the novel, the implication is that total harmony is an impossible state on earth. Moran observes that "Margaret Drabble's novels portray a bleak, often menacing universe, governed by a harsh supernatural force that allows human beings very little free will"(18), but acknowledges that "in spite of the darkness that surrounds human existence, individuals experience occasional moments of profound peace and joy ... a source of spiritual nourishment..."(32).

Viewing the meal consumed in the "paradise" of *The Witch of Exmoor*, as a metaphor for spiritual nourishment, it is interesting to note that what is consumed is exactly the wish of each of the present characters. For Frieda, taking a sip of her gin and tonic is utterly content. She is "in heaven". Nathan seems to be drinking a more than acceptable Gewürztraminer, a wine which "he might have found a little sweet in his previous incarnation, but here it seems just the ticket" (276). And Belle is enjoying a glass of the "purest Pearmain". The food itself is a dish of "unpretentious salmon mayonnaise". The setting is "heavenly", and of course there are large sky-blue napkins (279).

The symbolic passage of 'Envoi' functions more or less as a key to understanding the variants of endlessness described in this chapter. Caught in time, life seems like an endless string of coincidences. Outside of time, endlessness appears to continue, though now with a sense of fulfilled freedom of choice. What was formally seen as coincidence is now recognized as plan. Drabble herself explains her philosophy in Barbara Milton's interview:

> What I'm perpetually trying to work out is the relationship between coincidence and plan. And in fact, I have this deep conviction that if you were to get high up enough over the world, you would see things that look like coincidence are, in fact, part of a pattern. This sounds very mystical and ridiculous, but I don't think it is...It may be that psychologically we're so afraid of the unpredictable, of the idea of chaos and disorder, that we wish to see order. (62)

Life as a series of coincidences invokes chaos, whereas a higher plan stands for harmony. Drabble, when using the metaphor of the meal to convey disorder,

works away from the general idea of the symbolic meal as metaphor for harmony. This is one reason why the meal as such functions so well in demonstrating the opposite; we expect and wish the meal to symbolize harmony, not because of another literary meal, but because it is in our nature to see it so. Meals are shared in friendship, not amongst enemies. By acknowledging that desire, and finally creating the meal in perfect harmony, Drabble has dared challenge the readers of "Envoi" to believe in the ability to imagine a better world than this, and show that she does herself.

Thus, in dining with the Witch a truly symbolic meal is consumed. Even the participating characters themselves are symbolic, placed within a recognisable context. Drabble has stated that her characters, "although fictitious, are emblematic in some way: or true beyond truth, beyond the material representation" (Rose, 1985:30). For those who wish for *Le Grand Dessert,* "Envoi" fills its given place as the final meal in *The Witch of Exmoor.*

Conclusion

Avec

Having enjoyed the meal as metaphor in *The Witch of Exmoor*, there should now be room for some contemplation. As demonstrated, the main courses involved hark back to such classic works as *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, and *Timon of Athens* by William Shakespeare. In each case, the meal as metaphor for human harmony conjures up former literary meals, thus strengthening its symbolic aspect.

Under the influence of Woolf's imagination, Drabble has reworked aspects of *To the Lighthouse* into her novel *The Witch of Exmoor* beginning with the meal mentioned in the first chapter of this essay. The *Lighthouse* dinner of union, where Mrs Ramsay is the creator of harmony, with its implications of interpersonal relationships, is alluded to through the symbolic bowl of fruit, the setting of the triumphant main dish and the poem to set the mood. All is there, and yet it is not. With Drabble's handling, harmony is not the outcome. The theme under the surface of Woolf's novel is picked up and replaced at another angle, almost a century ahead in time. The symbolic signifiers are equally present, their impact enhanced through their relationship with the *Lighthouse*: the Witch as absent or anti-mother-figure, complying with Mrs Ramsay as departed; the dilapidated house by the sea resembling that symbolic empty house where time passes in the *Lighthouse*; the sense of passing time in the endings of the *Witch*; all comply to create a complexity which is as much a tribute to Drabble as to Woolf.

To make use of a novel like *To the Lighthouse,* with its symbolic meal and signifiers, its deep and poetic middle section, its method of working subconsciously in the minds of both writer and reader is a challenge to be met on very special grounds. Margaret Drabble not only accepts the challenge but takes it further in the field of social realism, where the message is updated to fit our own time. And still the philosophical questioning may continue to touch on everyday life in interaction with others, death, the metaphorical sea.... Similarities in aim and method may also be noted in Drabble and Woolf, although the strong poetic element in *To the Lighthouse* does not enter Drabble's prose. Instead, she chooses to emphasize the mystical through myth and gothic imagery.

Not satisfied with one intertextual meal, Drabble has succeeded in simultaneously including Timon's feast. As Timon's mock banquet fulfils the opposite function of Mrs Ramsay's harmonious meal, it is indeed a work of art to have the same intertextual meal contain ingredients from them both. Giving her creative, associative mind the free run of literary meals, Drabble, in merging these two opposites, has enriched her own symbolic meal to reach further than otherwise would have been possible regarding implied social relations. The play *Timon of Athens* is all about individualisation in a social structure, self-knowledge and existentialism. It also brings in an aspect relevant to our own world which is not illuminated in *To the Lighthouse*, namely that of the shallowness of the materialistic world. In this way, the metaphorical meal strengthens Drabble's aim in her novel: to show that each must accept the

responsibility of his or her own life, in any given social structure. The framework of the *Witch*, as shown in the second chapter of this essay, follows that of *Timon,* again creating something potentially plausible in our time and age.

As the third chapter attempts to clarify, the final meal consumed in the American ending carries equally symbolic significance, this time of the vision of Drabble, the philosopher. Drabble believes that we were put on this earth to endeavour in the face of the impossible (as Timon did not) but she has also stated that to be able to do so there must be a connection with the spiritual centre. The emotional life is more satisfying than the conscious intellectual life (as for Mrs Ramsay). Thus, the role of vision is of the greatest importance to humanity. Without imagination, associations and symbols beyond words, the higher pattern of meaning cannot be reached, and life is just a fatal coincidence. Drabble's fatalistic streak is benignly confident in its belief in a better world to come.

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