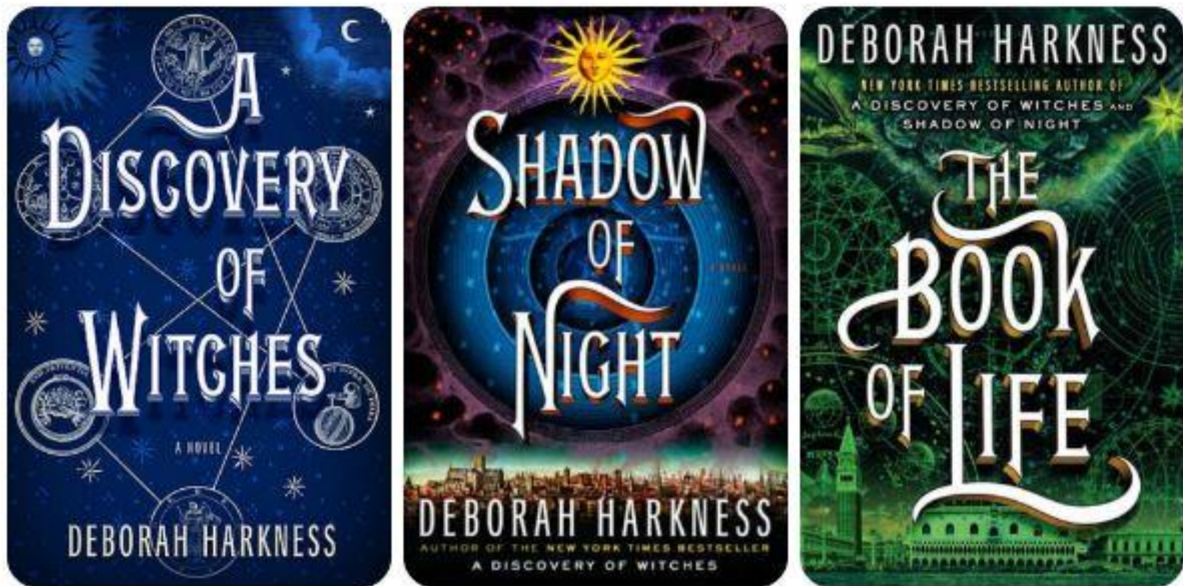
“Neither Fish nor Fowl:” An Exploration of Historical Fiction on the Basis of Deborah Harkness’ *All Souls* Trilogy



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Introduction

"Neither Fish nor Fowl" is an expression that summarizes the nineteenth-century critics' attitude towards the genre of historical fiction. The placement of a fictional plot inside a historical framework rendered the genre difficult to pin down, as it was not quite historical, yet not entirely fictional either. Subsequently, historical fiction became the object of stern criticism from both historians and literary critics. These nineteenth-century critics opposed a combination of an, in their eyes, objective field such as history with a subjective field such as literary fiction. However, a rise in popularity of historical fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first century has coincided with an altered attitude towards history and, accordingly, a changed stance on historical fiction. Considering that in the postmodern era history is regarded as being intertwined with fiction and no longer seen as an objective study, the critique on historical fiction has become less severe. Nevertheless, the debate surrounding the genre is still very much alive, as there remain modern critics who uphold their critique on the genre, predominantly centered on their belief that it is problematic to combine historical "truths" with a fictional narrative. In light of this debate, this thesis will argue that the critique of historians and literary critics on the genre of historical fiction is misplaced, since it has been established in the postmodern era that history is a subjective field that is quite closely related to characteristics of fictional works. Furthermore, through an analysis of Deborah Harkness' historical fantasy *All Souls* trilogy, this thesis will argue that fiction, in particular fantasy fiction, is entwined with history and that therefore the elements of history and fiction are not as disconnected as some critics still seem to uphold.

Harkness, who is a scholar of early modern history of science, was able to incorporate her interest in history, science and magic into her novels in which fantastical beings, such as vampires and witches, are the protagonists. In an interview with Harkness, she stated that she came up with this idea for a trilogy by envisioning the types of careers to which these

fantastical creatures would be drawn. As she puts it, what really got her started was "thinking about these very mundane, practical concerns and blending the fantastic with the real in the same way that I try to blend the present with the past" (qtd in Dunbar). Evidently, her interest in the past heavily contributed to the inspiration for her novels, which is why it is not surprising that the historical elements play a crucial role in her series. The *All Souls* trilogy is a fitting series to engage with the debate around historical fiction due to Harkness' role as a historian and an author of fiction, as well as the novels' mix of history and fantasy.

Deborah Harkness' best-selling historical fantasy series consists of three novels: *A Discovery of Witches* (2011), *Shadow of Night* (2012) and *The Book of Life* (2014). In her trilogy, set in the modern age as well as in the early modern period, Harkness depicts a world in which vampires and witches secretly live among humans. The novels revolve around the budding relationship between Diana Bishop, a witch, and Matthew Clairmont, a vampire. In Harkness' world, close relations between different creatures are prohibited, which is one of the reasons why, at the end of the first novel, Diana and Matthew are forced to time travel to the late sixteenth century. They do so in order to escape the Congregation, a council whose task it is to ensure that different creatures do not get too closely acquainted or romantically involved. Additionally, in *Shadow of Night*, in pursuance of missing pages from the mysterious alchemical manuscript, Ashmole MS 782, which is rumored to contain hidden information on the origin of the creatures, Diana and Matthew travel through late sixteenth-century Europe. Hence, a considerable amount of the *All Souls* trilogy takes place in the past, which is why the novels are categorized as historical fiction.

The first chapter of this thesis will assiduously define the genre of historical fiction and will examine both sides of the debate concerning the controversial genre. The second chapter will focus on the archetypical depiction of vampires and witches in literature, as well as their historical background. Furthermore, in this chapter, the characters of Diana and

Matthew will be placed within the literary tradition of these stock characters in order to show how the placement of these characters in historical fiction is thought provoking, adding to the debate relating to the genre of historical fiction. The third chapter of this thesis will consider the genre of historical fantasy, which is a combination between historical fiction and fantasy literature. This final chapter will discuss the position of magic in history to some extent and will analyze how magic and history are combined in the *All Souls* trilogy in order to support the argument that history and fantasy are intertwined, instead of oppositional, subjects. Ultimately, a close-reading of Harkness' novels will support the notion that history is not solely factual or unchangeable and that considering fabricated stories and belief systems plays a significant part in studying history as well.

Chapter 1: The Debate around Historical Fiction

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the genre of historical fiction was predominantly "frowned on, and disapproved of, both by academic critics and by reviewers" (Byatt 9). As Professor of Literary Theory Ann Rigney puts it, both literary and historical scholars regarded historical fiction as "somewhat of an embarrassment. Neither fish nor fowl, neither 'pure history' nor 'pure fiction' (whatever those might be)" (362). Nineteenth-century author and poet Sir Walter Scott, author of the first prominent historical novel *Waverly* (1814), is nowadays often considered to be "the first and arguably the greatest historical novelist" (Shaw 10). Yet, Harry Shaw notes that in the 1980s Scott's work was often either neglected or met with severe critique (10). The history of the reception of Scott's work is indicative of a rise in popularity of the historical novel that has become apparent in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. Due to this increase in popularity, Booker Prize Winner and author of historical fiction A.S Byatt labeled the twenty-first century as "the renaissance of the historical novel" (9). Consequently, the scholarly interest in the genre has increased as well (Brown), but this does not necessarily mean that historical novels are well received. Attention to the genre has sparked a debate surrounding the legitimacy of historical novels amongst literary authors, historians and other scholars alike. The first chapter of this thesis will carefully define the genre of historical fiction and offer an overview of the debate on the genre. As such, it will examine the opinions of critics from both sides of the discussion. Subsequently, this chapter will situate Deborah Harkness' *All Souls* trilogy inside this debate. By examining the different facets of the debate, it will become possible to see how Harkness chose her subject matter in such a way to actively engage with this debate, which instigates the reader to carefully contemplate the concept of storytelling, whether fictional or historical.

Historical fiction is not a genre that is easily defined (Johnson 1). A novel is generally categorized as "historical" if at least a part of the narrative takes place in the past, as a

historical novel can be defined as "a novel in which the action takes place during a specific historical period well before the time of writing (often one or two generations before, sometimes several centuries), and in which some attempt is made to depict accurately the customs and mentality of the period" (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*). However, following this definition, it remains unclear whether a novel that features events in the recent past, for example in the last thirty years, should be classified as a historical novel as well (Johnson 1). Lynda Adamson states that "if the setting is in a time earlier than that with which the reader is familiar, it is historical fiction" (xi). Hence, she believes that for modern readers Jane Austen is considered historical fiction, despite the fact that Austen wrote her novels in the same time as the actions in the novels occur (xi). According to Adamson, the most important thing is that Austen's novels give readers "insight into the early 19th century," which is why she classifies them as historical novels (xi). However, this would entail that every novel could be categorized as historical if written in a time before the present. Furthermore, it would mean that a novel can be seen as historical for a child or someone with no knowledge on a certain time period, yet the same novel would not be considered historical for an adult or, for instance, a historian. Instead, this thesis will take on Sarah Johnson's definition, as she provides a more fitting definition of the genre, namely as "fictional works (mainly novels) set before the middle of the last century, and ones in which the author is writing from research" (1). Accordingly, the novels take place before the author's life and are therefore not based on his or her own "personal experience" (1), which means that even though an author put much research in his or her work, they were not physically present in the period of time they write about.

In her book *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* (2001), Joyce Saricks discusses the most eminent characteristics of historical fiction, noting that "through its serious respect for historical accuracy and detail, Historical Fiction enhances the reader's

knowledge of past events, lives, and customs" (81). Hence, Saricks believes that historical fiction is able to "bring history to life in novel form" (81). Moreover, the historical details often play such a central part in the story that the historical frame can almost be regarded as a character of its own (83).

Saricks divides the most distinguishable characteristics of historical fiction into four parts. Firstly, she writes that "there is a wealth of accurate historical detail relating to setting (geography, customs, beliefs, culture, society, habits) as well as to characters and events" (82). Secondly, the characters in a historical novel "may be real or fictional, but they are portrayed in such a way that they fit the times. Their lives and actions are shaped by the historical times and details, not vice versa" (82). Regardless of whether a character is based on a historical figure or not, it is vital that they "fit within the novel and the times" (83). Consequently, "historical figures need to act in ways that are consistent with known facts, and fictional characters must act in a believable fashion for the times and places" (84). Thus, if an author places a character in a certain period of time but fails to portray this character in a way that fits with what is known about this time, then the author will lose his or her credibility. A bit of an obvious, yet illustrating example would be if a character from the sixteenth century refers to his Facebook profile. Even when a reader does not have much knowledge on the time in which the actions of the novel take place, it is often picked up on when a character behaves in a too modern manner. According to Saricks, it is crucial for readers of historical novels that the characters "*feel* real" (84).Thirdly, Saricks points out that "story lines may focus on a particular historical event or time period or they may follow the life of a character (real or fictional). Novels may raise difficult social or moral issues through the plot" (82), which can refer both to the issues that were apparent in the time the novel takes place as social and moral issues in the twenty-first century. The fourth and last part of her definition comments on the sheer volume of historical novels, as they are "usually big

books, with stories that unfold at a leisure pace" (82). For example, Harkness' novels comprise over 500 pages each.

An important aspect of the appeal of historical novels is that the reader is invited to delve into history along with the characters, as a way to better understand the past. As Saricks puts it, readers may use historical fiction to "understand history from the inside, from the perspectives of individuals caught up in events from the past" (82). In order to achieve this understanding of the past, Saricks also addresses the importance of the authors' and their editors' knowledge of the past, as readers "trust the novelists-and their editors- to have integrity to keep to the facts as they are generally known" (83). Therefore, according to Saricks, it is crucial that the author of a historical novel does his or her research and makes a great effort to provide historical details that are generally considered to be accurate and that editors have an extensive knowledge about these details as well. Thus, it seems like it is expected of the authors of historical fiction to do the same work as historians. Although there may not be one "true" or correct way to write about history, there is a possibility that authors and publishers lose their authority when they misrepresent generally-accepted historical details.

Saricks divides historical novels into two separate types: those that emphasize "a particular time or event" and those that mainly follow the lives of the characters within the historical framework (84). The former puts the focus on the historical surroundings and events, while the "characters themselves are not important except in the way they reveal the kind of life people actually led" (84). Contrastingly, the latter type of novel places "greater importance on the characters and less on plot" (85). Thus, the priority lies with the characters, and their lives are more crucial to the story than the historical occurrences and surroundings (85). Saricks acknowledges that this distinction is not always clear to make, resulting in a third type in which an author "may combine characters and settings with particular events to

create a viable story" (85), meaning that there is an equal amount attention paid to the historical surroundings as to the lives and actions of the protagonists. The distinction between these types of historical novels is important in relation to the critique on the genre, since most critique is focused on historical novels in which the historical surrounding and the fictional characters both play a prominent role in the plot; it is exactly this combination that troubles certain critics.

As this thesis will illustrate, Harkness' trilogy fits most appropriately within this third 'troubling' type, since the historical framework is crucial in advancing the plot, but there is a large emphasis on the protagonists as well. In her portrayal of sixteenth-century Europe, Harkness pays much attention to the historical details and to the behavior and customs of the historical characters, which are both eminent aspects of historical fiction. Additionally, as is formerly discussed, the historical framework is often a crucial plot device in historical novels, which is the case in Harkness' trilogy as well. For example, Diana and Matthew, Harkness' protagonists, travel through the sixteenth century in order to achieve their goal of discovering Ashmole 782. As such, the *All Souls* trilogy fits best with the third type of historical novel, as described by Saricks, which plays equal attention to the historical surroundings as the personal lives and actions of the protagonists. In Harkness' case, the two are often intertwined: the lives of the protagonists are central, but they are also heavily influenced by their journey to the sixteenth century. Therefore, although time travel is often not considered to be a part of historical fiction because critics deem it to be too unrealistic and romanticized (Saricks 90), this thesis does regard the *All Souls* trilogy in which time travel occurs as historical fiction.

The ongoing debate on historical fiction amongst historians and literary scholars stems back to the nineteenth century. This debate mainly focuses on the authenticity of historical fiction and on whether or not historical fiction can be considered an educational

genre. In the nineteenth century, early critics such as Jose Maria Heredia and Alessandro Manzoni pinpointed that the general problem with historical fiction lied within the genre's fact versus fiction dichotomy. They believed that history and fiction simply could not be combined, because in their thinking history was based on objective facts and true events, whereas fiction was subjective and fabricated. Heredia even went so far as stating that historical fiction degraded history "to the level of fiction" which, according to him, consisted of mere lies (qtd in Carroll).

A possible explanation for the ongoing dispute surrounding historical fiction could also be traced back to the tradition of didactic literature. This genre, which was popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, can be defined as "instructive, designed to impart information, advice, or some doctrine of morality or philosophy" (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*). An example of didactic texts are early modern conduct manuals, which are books that "made their claims to educate and inspire from the outset, and were constructed both textually and physically, to achieve those goals" (Glaisyer and Pennell 3). The earliest novels, too, were often didactic in nature: Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), for instance. Jan Fergus argues that Austen "intends to instruct and to refine the emotions along with the perceptions and the moral sense" (3). Moreover, J.M.S. Tompkin notes that in her novels, Austen either "teaches directly, by way of oral doctrine and general information" or that she "educates the emotions and […] acquaints the reader vicariously with the world" (qtd. in Fergus 3-4). From the debate around historical fiction, it appears as if critics regard historical fiction as a form of didactic literature, since they seem to prescribe that historical fiction has to inform and educate readers as well.

Additionally, assessments of historical novels often focus on a realistic portrayal of the past. This assessment relates to literary realism, another popular movement in the nineteenth century. Realism in literature can be defined as follows:

> a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life. The term refers […] both to a literary method based on detailed accuracy of description and to a more general attitude that rejects idealization, escapism, and other extravagant qualities of romance. (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*)

Thus, historical fiction is at times examined as realistic literature in which the expectation is that a 'true' reflection of life is presented and that the historical framework has to be presented in accordance with what is accepted about a certain period of time.

However, nineteenth-century critics unavoidably based their arguments on a presently outdated view of history, namely that it offers a factual and therefore objective account of the past. Critics in the twenty-first century counter their arguments based on the postmodern approach to history. For instance, Hayden White points out that the distinction between historical writing, in which the author "finds" his stories, and fiction, in which the author "invents" his stories, is flawed. He argues that this distinction "obscures the extent to which 'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations" (White *Metahistory* 6-7). This argument also works the other way around, since the methods of a literary author resemble those of the historian as well: there seems to be an overlap between the types of work of the two professions. Namely, authors of historical fiction have to do research on the period of time they are writing about, which entails that they not merely "find" their stories. Similarly, Rigney notes that the increased influence of historical fiction within the field of literary studies is partly due to a larger trend, namely a "broad-based reconsideration of the nature of 'history' that is currently taking place among theorists of history" (363). The postmodern conception of history entails that it is "among other things, a literary practice in that is uses verbal art and discursive procedures to make sense of the past" (363). Ultimately, there is a consensus among most modern historians that "there is no 'proper' way of doing history; that neither the subject of history nor its form is predestined" (364), which means that there is "no single methodological way of bringing the past to us as history" (Jenkins, Morgan and

Munslow 1). Therefore, it is all the more surprising that modern critics uphold historical novels to the genres of realism and didactic literature.

Another modern historian who argues along the same lines as White and Rigney is Richard Slotkin. According to him, history consists largely of what the author makes of it. He argues that it “is not a thing, an object of study, but a story we choose to tell about things” (222). In other words, although there are certainly events that occurred in a particular manner or on a particular date, “to be construed as ‘history’ such facts must be selected and arranged on some sort of plan, made to resolve some sort of question which can only be asked subjectively and from a position of hindsight” (222). He concludes by noting that all history writing is based on an imagination of the past and that the presentation of the past created by a novelist should therefore not necessarily be considered as less valid than that of a scholarly historian (222). Ultimately, taking into account that history is in fact not objective but always written from the subjective perspective of the author, the main argument against mixing history and fiction is, at least partly, undermined.

Thus, considering that most, if not possibly all, scholarly disciplines agree that history is subjective, it becomes quite odd that some critics from the postmodern era remain in disagreement with the genre of historical fiction. Historian Richard Current, for instance, distinguishes between two types of historical novels, the first being novels in which the author creates fictional characters and places them within a historical setting and the second being fictional history, which is when an author presents real historical characters and events but “actually reshapes them- and thus rewrites the past” (77). This rewriting of the past is the main reason for his stern criticism on the genre. Although he admits that there are errors to be found in “factual history” as well, Current believes that authors of historical fiction are much more easily inclined to fictionalize events yet still present them as “factual” historical accounts (79-80). If readers are unable to distinguish between ‘real’ history and the

fictionalized elements in a historical novel, then this uncertainty could result in misinformation and confusion. John Guy, another historian, also commented on this problem. Guy urges people to enjoy historical fiction for what it is: fiction (M. Brown). According to Guy, the "blur between fact and fiction is troubling" particularly because readers and prospective students at times fail to distinguish the fictional from the factional elements (qtd in M. Brown).

Historian David Starkey also provides a harshly critical assessment of historical fiction. However, it is noteworthy that both Starkey and Guy write their history books for the popular market and not necessarily for an academic audience, which means that they are tapping into the same market as the authors of historical fiction, and are therefore not necessarily unbiased. Starkey notes that "we should really stop taking historical novelists seriously as historians. The idea that they have authority is ludicrous. They are very good at imagining character: that's why the novels sell. They have no authority when it comes to the handling of historical sources" (qtd in Takors 195). When asked to respond to such statements from Starkey, Harkness dismisses his criticism by noting that some "academics should really stop standing in the ivory tower and throwing rocks outside," in particular at authors of historical fiction ("Fact & the Unexplained" 36:34). Additionally, Thomas Mallon, who is an author of historical fiction himself, points out that even well-researched historical fiction can never rise "to a higher truth than perceptively written history" (Mallon). Furthermore, he states that "the literal truth, of things judicial as well as historical, is preferable to any subjective one" (Mallon). Ultimately, Mallon concludes that "nouns always trump adjectives, and in the phrase 'historical fiction,' it is important to remember which of the two words is which" (Mallon).

Historian Mark McKenna also voices his concern regarding historical fiction. He argues that because of historical fiction, "the boundaries between history and fiction have

blurred" which has led to historians losing "much of their earlier cultural authority" (97). In other words, he believes that writers of historical fiction are taking over the authority and role of traditional historians. McKenna regards this as a negative process, as he argues that authors of historical fiction have too much freedom to disregard historical sources when writing their novels (100). He particularly criticizes Kate Grenville's historical novel *The Secret River* (2005). His main critique concerns her own comments on her work, as she has said in an interview that her novel is historically truthful and as close as one can get to understanding the particular historical situation described in the novel, which depicts the story of Solomon Wiseman, "a character based loosely on one of [my] ancestors […] and his encounters with Aboriginal people when taking up land on the banks of the Hawkesbury River in the early nineteenth century" (102). Yet, McKenna points out that there is no way of knowing that Grenville's portrayal of history is actually truthful, due to a lack of evidence (105). In accordance with McKenna, author and historian Inga Clendinnen also fears that novelists will take over the role of historians. Although both of these critics are not necessarily opposed to historical fiction, they mainly emphasize that there remains a difference between how truthful history and fiction is and they both believe that authors of historical novels should always make clear to their readers that their work is fictional.

Considering that critics such as McKenna and Clendinnen do not take umbrage to the historical novel as such but rather to what authors claim in interviews, it is vital to consider what Harkness has said in interviews. Firstly, Harkness' definition of history aligns with the postmodern view of history, as she explains that she tends "not to see history as the production of facts" ("Facts & the Unexplained" 46:44) and that the "truth" historians are after is "highly contingent and it's not the same in all times and places and it's an interpretation […] not a sort of philosophical pure truth" (48:08). Ultimately, Harkness believes that "history, myth, fiction is really very much in a similar sort of world. These are

not as far distant as we might sometimes want to make them" (48:21). Thus, instead of claiming that her works of historical fiction are factual and truthful, Harkness emphasizes the notion that history is not about facts. As she puts it, history is "all about interpretation, it's all about figuring out motivation. It's all about figuring out characters, it's about figuring out what causes someone to do what they do" (12:21). Hence, her definition of what a historian does is strikingly similar to a description of what an author of fiction does. The idea that history is not factual is touched upon when Diana, one of Harkness' characters, travels to sixteenth-century England. Although this is the era of Diana's specialization, she is still unaware of how exactly she should dress, talk and act: "reading books about the sixteenth century wasn't the same as experiencing it, as my brief interaction with Francoise and my crash course in the clothing of the period proved" (*Shadow* 9). Thus, even a historian cannot know every detail about the past.

Taking into account that Harkness is a historian as well as an author of historical fiction, it is quite appropriate to consider her take on the debate surrounding the genre. As a historian herself, Harkness dismisses the critique, in particular from other historians, with which the genre is met. She engages in this debate by stating that "writers of historical fiction and historians have an awful lot more in common than anyone is actually really willing to think about, because really, I hate to tell you this, but historians really are writing fiction most of the time" (15:08). Thus, in accordance with what several critics such as White and Rigney have pointed out, Harkness argues that history and fiction are much more alike than some critical historians seem to suggest. However, it is important to keep in mind that Harkness made these remarks at a historical fiction convention. As she puts it, it is "a great relief to me to now find myself at the historical novel society conference and not at the American historical association, where I have to sort of say different things" (15:11). Evidently, she is aware of the debate and although she seems to have a clear opinion on the matter and knows

that she is being recorded, she would still not dare to remark such things directly to a crowd full of historians. Due to Harkness' profession as a historian and author of fiction and the *All Souls* trilogy's combination of historical elements and fantasy fiction, this trilogy fits well within the debate surrounding historical fiction, which is why this thesis has chosen these particular novels to engage with the current debate on the genre.

In addition to the aforementioned critiques on the mixture of history and fiction, there are concerns regarding social and cultural elements in historical novels as well. If a historical novel takes place in a time in which there was no equality between genders, sexual orientations, different races and different social status, the modern author is placed in a challenging position (J. Brown). The characters need to fit with the time's ideas on such matters, but it is questionable whether these old-fashioned views should be focused on because it could lead to the depiction of characters that would nowadays be considered as quite offensive. Another difficulty lies with how relatable and sympathetic the characters can be portrayed if their views on social issues are so different than those that are nowadays expected from someone. Author of historical fiction Hilary Mantel commented on this notion, as she argues that "women writers must stop rewriting history to make their female characters falsely 'empowered'" (qtd in Furness). Mantel notes that contemporary authors often cannot resist bestowing their female characters with more strength and independence, yet this does not provide an accurate representation and problematically leads to authors rewriting the past "so victims are the winners" (qtd in Furness). Ultimately, Mantel states that "a good novelist will have her characters operate within the ethical framework of their day- even if it shocks her readers" (qtd in Furness). Additionally, Shaw comments on the issue of social exclusion, as he argues that the problem with historical fiction is that the author has to decide which time, people and events to include in his or her work. Therefore, a large part of history is automatically excluded (30-31). However, White justly responds to Shaw by arguing that this

is the case for ‘regular’ history as well. Historians have to make a similar choice as novelists on what they include in their works and what they leave out (*Metahistory* 150-151).

Evidently, there are still modern critics who focus their concern on a clash between the expectations of a historical text and a fictional one, even though this goes against the postmodern definition of history. As this chapter has discussed in some detail, authors of historical fiction are expected to abide by an abundance of guidelines. It seems it is embedded in the critics’ arguments that authors of historical fiction have the obligation to teach their readers about the past. This would suggest that even though it is accepted that history in its form does not differ so extensively from fiction, there is still a problem when the two genres are actually combined in one literary work. Therefore, there is a remaining sense that historical fiction should be as accurate as possible and that a novel belonging to the genre has to be educational.

On the other side of the debate, there are historians who believe that historical fiction is a fitting way to engage readers with history while still being entertaining. Robert Rosenstone is an example of such a historian. He points out that “people are hungry for the past […] they want to touch, feel and experience the worlds of their forebears” (17). However, according to him, “that hunger is not being well fed by professional historians” (17). Rosenstone argues that, in contrast to historical fiction, a traditional way of telling the past does not appeal to large enough audiences (17). Due to the rising popularity of the historical novel, authors of historical fiction are often able to reach a broader audience than ‘regular’ history books. Additionally, White points out that the difference between history and historical fiction is that by utilizing literary devices, such as characterization and narrativization, historical fiction is better equipped to present history in a realistic manner (“Introduction,” 148). However, it has been established that history is a narrative as well, which White seems to discard with this statement. According to White, historical accounts

are too focused on what is "true," and consequently fail to create an account that also feels close to reality ("Introduction," 149).

Literary critic Georg Lukács offers a different perspective on the historical novel. Namely, he argues that the historical details and the retelling of historical events are not the main points; instead, the "poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events" is the most crucial part of the genre. Lukács' main argument consists of the idea that readers of historical fiction should "re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality" (42). In other words, the historical novel focuses on the motives of the characters in history and readers can learn much about the past from the personal drives and intentions of the individual historical characters. Again, there is a focus on the notion that one has to learn something from a historical novel.

Because Harkness' series depicts fantasy elements within a historical framework, it might seem logical, in light of the debate, that her trilogy is met with a certain amount of critique. For instance, since Harkness depicts both completely fictional characters and characters that are based on historical individuals in her novels, critic such as Current would be likely to reprimand her for trying to incorrectly rewrite the past. Furthermore, the combination of 'real' history and the presence of fantastical creatures such as witches and vampires could be a reason for critics of historical fiction to dismiss the series as not educational. On the other hand, those in favor of the genre could argue that the trilogy is an excellent example of the type of novel that is simultaneously entertaining and educational.

Hence, it is not surprising that critics are divided in their assessment of the trilogy. Some critics praise the historical framework that Harkness presents in her novels, arguing that as "a scholar of Elizabethan history, Harkness is an entertaining guide" through early modern Europe (Hand). Additionally, in a review of *The Book of Life*, Paula Woods also applauds the historical aspects of the trilogy. As she puts it, "Harkness' ambitious melding of

scientific and historical detail is inventive and brings up surprising depth to such real-life societal scourges as racial purity and miscegenation" (Woods). Yet, Woods also notes that there are some minor mistakes to be discovered regarding the historical details, as for instance "the date of an infamous attempt to steal the British crown jewels is off by a few hundred years" (Woods). Although Woods notes that devoted fans would probably scarcely perceive such mistakes, as they would be "absorbed by Diana's and Matthew's battle to win freedom for their unconventional family and Harkness' skillful mingling of fictional and historical figures" (Woods), it seems perceptible from the debate around the genre that historians would have difficulty precisely with such errors. Furthermore, while Elizabeth Hand notes that in *Shadow of Night*, the detailed description of Elizabethan Europe even "makes up for a lack of narrative thrust" (Hand), Jenny Turner is less positive of this framework. As she notes, the historical framework is "total pudding" which results in her assessment of *Discovery* as being "a very silly novel" (Turner). Ultimately, she concludes that despite some appealing ideas in Harkness' first novel, it remains little more than the work of "a history professor dropping scholarly research for toshy fantasy" (Turner), thereby reinforcing the opinion of some critical historians on the genre.

This chapter has shown that scholarly interest in the genre of historical fiction has expanded greatly in recent years since its increasingly popularity in the twenty-first century. Although the old-fashioned belief that objective history and subjective fiction cannot work together is undermined by the postmodern view of history, there is still an active debate surrounding this genre. A possible explanation for this debate could be traced back to the literary traditions of realism and didacticism; these were genres that were popular around the same time as the emergence of the historical novel in Europe. It seems as if some modern critics unwittingly hold historical fiction to the standards of these other, older genres and conventions, since they base their criticism on certain expectation one would expect for

realistic and didactic literature. Deborah Harkness' trilogy, which combines elements of history and fantasy fiction, is an appropriate example of a novel that engages readers with a historical framework in combination with an exciting fictional plot. This combination places the *All Souls* trilogy inside the debate at hand and activates the reader to cautiously consider the notion of both fictional and historical storytelling. The next chapters of this thesis will examine how the fantastical elements in Harkness' novels are imbedded in history and that the reader is therefore encouraged to carefully contemplate both forms of storytelling.

Chapter 2: The Literary and Historical Representation of Witches and Vampires

In order to analyze the fantastical elements in Harkness' trilogy and their place in combination with historical fiction, it is vital to first discover more about the creatures that play a prominent role in her novels: vampires and witches. The two protagonists in the *All Souls* trilogy, Diane Bishop and Matthew Clairmont, are both fantastical creatures. Diane is a thirty-three-year-old witch and Matthew is a fifteen-hundred-year-old vampire. These creatures have a long tradition of literary representation. Both of these stock characters have gone through a tremendous change in their fictional portrayal. This chapter will provide a short historical overview of these characters in literature and will analyze how Harkness places her own version of witches and vampires within their literary and historical traditions. Although it could be argued that fantastical creatures are difficult to incorporate in historical fiction, taking into account the debate presented in the previous chapter of this thesis, this chapter will argue that these creatures also have several historical elements to them and that it is therefore not incongruous to place them in a historical novel. In fact, by doing so, Harkness further plays with the suggestion that history and fiction are entwined and that stories, fictional or historical, are subject to change.

In order to understand Matthew Clairmont, the male fantastical protagonist, one first needs to consider the history of the literary vampire. Vampires share an extensive history in folklore and literature. In Harkness' novels, Matthew's friends refer to him as a *Manjasang*, "the old Occitan word for vampire- *blood eater*," as the word 'vampire' was not yet in use in the sixteenth century (Shadow 17). Indeed, although the word 'vampire' was not introduced until the eighteenth century (*Oxford English Dictionary* n.1), mentions of creatures with vampire characteristics in literature even go back as far as classical tales, written by authors such as Ovid and Apuleius, yet in such classical texts not "sufficiently numerous or consistent to be considered a coherent and developed body of vampire literature" (Carlson

26). A more vast body of vampire literature emerged in the eighteenth and, in particular, the nineteenth century as “a result of Romanticism and of the interest in folklore” (Carlson 26).

The way the vampire was presented in folkloric tales differs quite drastically from later representations. In folklore, vampires were generally terrifying corpses that left their grave at night to drink the blood of sleeping men and women. Their existence was often used as a way to explain “otherwise incomprehensible deaths of infants” (Melton and Hornick 39). Furthermore, according to legend, one would become a vampire “after experiencing an unnatural death (that is, a death that occurred from a violent accident, a wasting disease, or away from one’s village)” (Melton and Hornick 39). The appearance of these creatures was described in quite a horrific manner. An example of such a vampiric creature from folklore appears in the late sixteenth-century tale *The Shoemaker of Silesia* (1591). In this tale, a man slit his own throat, after which he dies and turns into a creature that haunts his village, similar to a vampire. The undead creature is described as being “undamaged by decay, but blown up like a drum” with peeled away skin on his feet (qtd in Barber 12). Accordingly, in most folkloric tales the vampire would look like a corpse with a “bloated and extended” body, which caused the skin to be “tight like a drum” (Melton 22). Moreover, the vampire “would have extended fingernails that had grown since its burial. It would be dressed in burial clothes. It would stink of death” (22). Hence, the “semi-decayed nature” (22) of the folkloric vampire made the vampire appear as a horrible living corpse, with no attractive qualities whatsoever.

In the late nineteenth century, the character of Dracula, a vicious fiend who preys on innocent women, drinks their blood and consequently transforms them into devilish vampires as well, became the archetypal vampire. Indeed, Bram Stoker’s gothic novel *Dracula* (1897) is arguably the most well-known vampire novel of all time (Carlson 29): though it is not the first novel featuring a vampire, as it is preceded by earlier texts such as Johann Wolfgang von

Goethe's "Die Braut von Korinth" (1797) and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), it remains the most famous one (Carlson 26-29). As Milly Williamson notes, Dracula "has dominated critical interpretations of the vampire, eclipsing earlier incarnations of the vampire and their many progeny" (5). The horror of Dracula becomes evident from the following passage, in which Van Helsing expresses his fear of becoming a vampire: "but to fail here, is not mere life or death. It is that we become as him; that we henceforward become foul things of the night like him-without heart or conscience, preying on the bodies and the souls of those we love best" (Stoker 221). Thus, Dracula is portrayed as an evil character with no redeeming qualities. This representation was common in both the folkloric tales and nineteenth-century novels, as vampires were depicted as "entirely negative characters" (Melton and Hornick 40). In his appearance, Dracula differs from the folkloric vampire, as Dracula does not quite resemble a rotting corpse, and instead looks like "a tall old man, clean-shaven save for a long white moustache, and clad in black from head to foot" (18). Still, it remains evident from his outward appearance that Dracula is an immoral character, since he has an "evil face" with "red eyes, […] red lips" and with an "awful pallor" (234).

However, the archetypal vampire featured in folkloric tales and late nineteenth-century novels does not survive in modern interpretations. The vampire has gone through a tremendous change in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from being portrayed as "grotty living corpses" to "witty, sexy super-achievers" and even to creatures "to whose condition we may aspire" (Spooner 84). As Conrad Aquilina puts it, "the vampire has certainly come far and has climbed his way up the social ladder" (35). Modern vampires are generally handsome and elegant and are "often invited into the bedroom" (35). Moreover, Catherine Spooner notes that "these vampires have supernatural abilities and tortured souls but avoid drinking human blood" (83). Thus, vampires have moved from monstrous beings to charming love interests. Two fitting examples for such vampires are Edward from Stephenie

Meyer's immensely popular *Twilight* saga (2005-2008) and Angel from Joss Whedon's TV-series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003; hereafter *BtVS*). Both these vampires are presented as desirable romantic partners for the female protagonists and both of them try to do good and refrain from drinking human blood. Whereas vampires in *BtVS* do burst into flames when they come in direct sunlight, Meyer opted to let her vampires sparkle in sunlight instead. Spooner comments on this change by writing that this sparkling vampire is representative of a "de-fanged" vampire: no longer a bloodthirsty killer but a sparkly romantic partner (146).

It has been suggested that these modern representations of the vampire originate from John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819). Spooner points out that the vampire in Polidori's novel, Lord Ruthven, is "transparently based on his employer and mentor, Lord Byron" (85). Furthermore, Spooner notes that this character, based on the Romantic poet Lord Gordon Byron, "provides a modal that informs the development of the vampire myth in the succeeding two centuries: witty, aristocratic, intelligent, tormented and wildly sexually attractive to both sexes" (85). Moreover, this type of character became known as the Byronic hero and developed into "one of the most prominent literary types of Romanticism" (Brîndaş 26). Aquilina argues that even though the vampire as "introspective tragic hero" would appear much later in literature, Polidori was responsible for "detaching the vampire from its folkloric roots and rendering him solely Byronic" (35).

The Byronic hero is portrayed as a character with some distinctively fine yet also appalling personality traits. This "idealized but flawed" Romantic anti-hero is often a "well educated, intelligent and sophisticated young man, sometimes a nobleman by birth" who "fights against social injustice" (Brîndaş 26). Yet, his main characteristics also contain that of a "gloomy, unsatisfied social outcast" who is "defiant, melancholic [and] sometimes haunted by a secret guilt" (Brîndaş 26). Furthermore, due to his lack of social skills, he is often

depicted as an outsider with an arrogant, ill-tempered, brooding and overbearing personality (Stein 3). Hence, the Byronic hero is simultaneously a charming and unappealing character. A famous example of such a character is of course Heathcliff, the male protagonist in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), who is presented as both "attractive and horrifying" (Stein 4).

Spooner provides a possible explanation for this drastic change in the depiction of the vampire. She argues that the "sparkly vampire is just one element of a wider shift in mood in Gothic fictions; one that is linked to the changing fortunes of Goth subculture and its representation in the mainstream media" (147). Moreover, Spooner notes that the fictional vampire is no longer "so comfortable in the position of outsider" as in previous works, because the Gothic subculture has also become less comfortable in this position. Thus, Spooner concludes that "making peace with the mainstream is a strategy that is becoming increasingly visible in some sections of alternative culture, and this uneasy desire for assimilation is acted out in vampire narratives" (148).

Jules Zanger, in contrast, comments on the religious aspect of vampire literature as a possible explanation for the evolution of the character's literary persona. He notes that "for Stoker and Stoker's readers" the character of Dracula represented "the Anti-Christ" (18). The modern vampire, however, "possesses very little of that metaphysical anti-Christian dimension, and his or her evil acts are expressions of individual personality and condition, not of any cosmic conflict between God and Satan" (18). Consequently, the vampire as an utterly wicked character becomes less significant, which permits "the existence of 'good' vampires as well as bad ones" (18-19).

Moreover, a significant element to the danger of Dracula in Stoker's novel consists of his ability to transform chaste young women into sexual, bloodsucking demons. In Stoker's text, the female protagonists are expected to remain at home as the men protect them from the

vampire, in order for the women to uphold their pure and gentle nature. This idea transforms Dracula into "a sexual threat" as he "causes them [women] to abandon passivity and to become sexually aggressive and demanding" (Senf 60). The fear of "sexually aggressive" women was prevalent in the era Stoker wrote *Dracula*, yet nowadays it can be argued that this threat is less eminent. Furthermore, female characters are often expected to fight alongside men instead of helplessly depending on men and waiting to be victimized, considering for instance the eponymous heroine Buffy Summers from *BtVS*. The change in norms of gender and sexuality could also explain the change in the vampire's character.

The way vampires are described in Harkness' novels fit within the formerly discussed tradition of the modern vampire as Byronic hero. The first way in which this characterization becomes evident is in the way Harkness describes the vampire's appearances: "anyone who has read paperback bestsellers or even watched television shows knows that vampires are breathtaking, but nothing prepares you to actually see one" (*Discovery* 21-22). Evidently, it is commonly accepted in the *All Souls* world that vampires are breathtakingly beautiful:

> Their bone structures are so well honed that they seem chiseled by an expert sculptor. Then they move, or speak, and your mind can't begin to absorb what you're seeing. Every movement is graceful; every word is musical. And their eyes are arresting, which is precisely how they catch their prey. One long look, a few quiet words, a touch: once you're caught in a vampire's snare you don't stand a chance. (*Discovery* 22)

Thus, the vampires in Harkness' trilogy diverge quite drastically from earlier interpretations. Although there is an element of danger here, due to a phrase such as "catch their prey," it is still presented in a sexual and seductive manner. Moreover, Diana is the focalizer of this passage and she was brought up to believe that she should stay away from vampires, which might be a better explanation for her reserved attitude than the actual danger of vampires.

Additionally, Harkness pays special attention to her description of Matthew's appearance. The first time Diana lays eyes on him, she describes him as follows:

> This one was tall- well over six feet […]. And he definitely was not slight. Broad shoulders narrowed into slender hips, which flowed into lean, muscular legs. His hands were strikingly long and agile, a mark of physiological delicacy that made your eyes drift back to them to figure out how they could belong to such a large man. As my eyes swept over him, his own eyes were fixed on me. […] His face was indeed striking- all distinct planes and surfaces, with high-angled cheekbones meeting brows that shielded and shadowed his eyes. Above his chin was one of the few places where there was room for softness- his wide mouth, which, like his long hands, didn't seem to make sense. (*Discovery* 22-23)

Evidently, Matthew's striking appearance is discussed quite elaborately, which suggests that this is an important part of Diana's attraction to him. From this passage, one can conclude that Matthew also bears no resemblance to early representations of the vampire, neither to the rotting corpses of folklore nor to Dracula. Matthew's attractiveness, typical for the representation of the modern vampire, is repeatedly commented upon by both men and women throughout the novels.

In addition to Matthew's appearance, his intellect and noble birth also categorizes him as a Byronic hero. Diane immediately recognizes his intellect: "but the most unnerving thing about him was not his physical perfection. It was his feral combination of strength, agility, and keen intelligence that was palpable across the room" (*Discovery* 22). Furthermore, Matthew works as a professor of biochemistry and he is a fellow of the prestigious All Souls College in Oxford. He is also quite knowledgeable about history, as he has been alive for fifteen-hundred years. Since vampires are able to live for such an extensive period of time, they are almost living history books. Due to Diana's profession, she is particularly intrigued by Matthew's experiences. As she explains, "I'm a historian. If somebody tells me he remembers when chocolate was introduced into France or a comet passing overhead in 1811, it's difficult not to be curious about the other events he might have lived through" (*Discovery* 183). Consequently, it is not merely Matthew's outward appearance that attracts Diana to him, but also his intellect, historical knowledge and the fact that he is a respectable member

of society, which again differs entirely from earlier vampires. For the reader, Matthew's character as a fifteen-hundred-year-old vampire provides a window into sixteenth-century Europe as well. For example, his involvement with the Knights of Lazarus, a chivalric order of crusaders, or his role as a spy for Queen Elizabeth can encourage readers to discover more about such aspects of history. As such, a vampire is an ideal narrative device for an author of historical fiction.

Matthew's personality traits also comply with the characterization of the modern vampire as a sympathetic character. In contrast to a vampire such as Dracula, Matthew attempts to refrain from drinking human blood and instead live off the blood of animals. Despite his blood rage, which is in Harkness' world a genetic illness that can cause him to lose control and become violent, he does everything in his power to not harm humans or other creatures. Matthew struggles tremendously with his illness, as it can cause him to transform into a raging monster at any moment. His blood rage is triggered by strong feelings, such as his possessiveness over Diana. On the other hand, the love he feels for her is also what reduces his rage (*Book of Life* 144). Ultimately, it becomes evident that blood rage can occur in any vampire who has a certain amount of daemonic DNA in their genetics and that a loving and nurturing upbringing greatly reduces the risks of outbursts of rage caused by the disease. As described earlier, the Byronic hero was often haunted by a dark past. In Matthew's case, his dark past consists of him murdering his girlfriend in a violent fit stimulated by his blood rage. His past continues to haunt him, and his guilt makes it difficult for him to trust himself and open up to others. Additionally, Matthew tries to be a well-functioning part of society, whereas the older vampires were often isolated from every part of civilization. For modern vampires, it is common that they are "presented to us as multiple, communal, and familial, living with and relating to other vampires" (Zanger 18). This portrayal is accurate for Matthew, since he has a close relationship with other vampires, such

as his nephew Gallowglass and his mother Ysabeau de Clermont.

In accordance with the romantic anti-hero, Matthew has some distinctively negative character traits as well. For instance, Diana's friend Chris Roberts notes that Matthew's reputation consists of him being an arrogant "intellectual snob" who is disrespectful to women and who dislikes students (*Discovery* 61). However, this behavior could be explained by the fact that Matthew dreads that he would lose control around students, in particular due to his blood rage. Additionally, Matthew becomes quite controlling over Diana in their relationship, as he himself admits: "it's just that vampire relationships are… complicated. We can be protective- possessive, even. You might not like it" (*Discovery* 168). As a result of Matthew's overbearing nature, he often disallows Diana to go out on her own because he fears that something could happen to her. Another moment in which his possessiveness becomes apparent occurs when Matthew refers to Diana as his wife for the first time: "the word 'wife' echoed in the room for a few moments. 'Did I miss something?' I finally asked. 'When were we married?' Matthew's eyes lifted. 'The moment I came home and said I loved you […] as far as vampires are concerned, we're wed' (*Discovery* 438). In a vampire marriage, Matthew acknowledges that it is "expected that the female will obey the male" (*Discovery* 439), leaving him in charge to make important decisions, such as deciding that they are now married. Lastly, there is an extensive amount of attention paid to Diana and Matthew's inseparable relationship, which can at times come across as a bit emotionally exaggerated. For instance, when the two have to spend some time apart, Matthew compares his pain to "having [his] heart ripped out. […] Every single minute of every single day" (*Book of Life* 355). Williamson comments on the emotional behavior of modern vampires, as she notes that "the sympathetic vampire has been considered to be rebellious, domesticated, intimate – and indeed it is all of these things at one time or another – but most of all the sympathetic vampire is *melodramatic*" (40). Thus, through the analysis of these multiple

characteristics, it has become evident that Matthew fits within the modern representation of the vampire.

The next important fantastical character that needs to be discussed is the witch. Similar to the vampire, the witch also has a prominent place in literary history, as they are often featured in literature, film and television. In many medieval romances, the witch was presented as a powerful enchantress who had the ability to "rape powerful men" and whose magic "could overpower even knights who were normally self-possessed, and then use them as love slaves or toys" (Purkiss 124). Diane Purkiss notes that the fear of witches stems back to classical literature and that "early modern drama draws extensively on its Greek and Roman precursors" (123). It is likely that the first connotation most people have with witches derives from Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, in which the witches are described as "secret, black, and midnight hags" (4.1.47). Another famous example of dreadful witches can be found in nineteenth-century fairy tales such as the Brother Grimm's Hansel and Gretel (1812) and Snow White (1812). In such tales, the witch was presented as a malevolent, unattractive, elderly woman and ultimately someone who should be feared. Additionally, "witches are *human.* Unlike monsters, they belong to society – a disguised enemy within. They are 'other', and yet they are also 'us'" (Gaskill 1). Hence, a large element of what makes witches frightening is their ability to disguise themselves among regular people, making it difficult to identify them.

Quite similar to the progression of the vampire, the witch has also gone through a change in literature. Nowadays, witches and wizards are often portrayed as good, young characters, instead of wicked hags. Although a distinction between white and black magic has always existed, the stereotypical portrayal of witches has become less prominent. This portrayal is mentioned by Diana as well: "black hats, bats, brooms. It was the unholy trinity of witchcraft lore, which burst into spectacular, ridiculous life every year on Halloween"

(*Discovery* 176). Thus, in the *All Souls* trilogy it is evident that witches are no longer portrayed in such a way. If one for instance considers popular modern examples such as Harry Potter in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, or Willow Rosenberg in *BtVS*, it becomes apparent that they are portrayed as smart, likable characters that generally use their powers to do good. This interpretation of the witch is also apparent in Harkness' novels, as Diana is a young, intelligent woman who does not use her magic for malevolent purposes.

In an analysis of witches, it is crucial to consider more than solely their literary representation. In the early modern period, a large-scale witch hunt occurred in Europe and in America, resulting in many women being persecuted and burned or drowned because they could not prove their innocence. Brian P. Levack notes that, "by the end of the sixteenth century many educated Europeans believed that witches, in addition to practicing harmful magic, engaged in a variety of diabolical activities" (30). In order for a large scale "systematic prosecution and execution" to succeed, it was necessary that the ruling elite believed that large groups of witches rejected their Christian faith, which is why the witches' relationship with the devil was emphasized (31-32). A witch would sell her soul to the devil, who in turn would leave "a secret mark on those who made a compact with him" (Purkiss 133). In the seventeenth century and eighteenth century, "an almost hysterical fear of witchcraft swept through most of Europe" (Wilson 15). Colonist settlers brought this fear with them from England to the New World (15), which eventually resulted in a large witch hunt led by Puritans in Salem, Massachusetts.

Evidently, despite the fact that it is now commonly believed in western cultures that witches are fantastical beings, they still play an important role in 'real' history. Therefore, incorporating witches in a historical framework works well, as it invites readers to discover more about the history of witches. More importantly, it demonstrates that history does not have to be about facts, yet can also be about how people fabricate stories and create belief

systems. The stories people invented about witches were evidently convincing enough to be regarded as facts. Furthermore, it establishes how 'factual' history is subject to change. Although witches were considered to be real in the early modern period, they are now almost exclusively seen as fantastical creatures, which is quite a significant change. Harkness also commented on this changeability of history: "it's interesting, the period that I study people believed that the natural and the supernatural were absolutely inextricably twined together" ("Book Lust" 25:30). Subsequently, she notes that the aim with her novel "was to almost try to imagine the world that we live in through sixteenth-century eyes, through that believe that they [supernatural creatures] really are your next-door neighbors, and how would that translate into the twenty-first century?" (26:10) Furthermore, Harkness states that "our lore about witches and ghosts comes from the sixteenth century, so it's really almost an attempt to update the worldview that I study in the past and put it into the present in a way that would satisfy the logical needs of an adult" (26:25). Thus, incorporating fantastical creatures in a modern novel undermines the idea that history is solely factual and it creates an apparent link to the time in which people regarded these creatures as realistic instead of fictional.

Ultimately, this chapter has shown that both the vampire and the witch have a long and versatile literary history. Literary vampires have transformed from rotting corpses to the more suave, yet malevolent archetypal vampire Dracula and eventually into mostly sympathetic, handsome and intelligent characters. It has been argued that the modern vampire most readers are familiar with today is based on the character of the Byronic hero, as they share a large amount of characteristics. Matthew Clairmont's portrayal complies with this modern depiction of the vampire, as he is an attractive, intelligent vampire who can at times act quite possessively and who is haunted by a dark past. The fantastical character of the witch has also gone through a change in literature, as early works often depict witches as ugly, old women whereas nowadays witches can be of all ages with varied appearances, as is

apparent in the *All Souls* trilogy as well. Furthermore, witchcraft plays an important role in history, as witches were for a long time believed to be real, which becomes apparent in the witch hunt in early modern Europe and America. The history of witches in particular establishes how story-telling can have a great influence on history and it emphasizes the changeable nature of 'factual' history.

Chapter 3: Historical Fantasy

The *All Souls* trilogy combines characteristics of historical fiction with those of fantasy literature. In addition to the fantastical characters examined in the previous chapter, the novels contain fantastical elements such as ghosts, time travel and magic. In light of the debate examined in the first chapter of this thesis, combining the two genres may lay Harkness open to criticism, as has been discussed in chapter one, since it has become apparent that historical fiction is at times criticized for its lack of historical realism. Thus, adding fantastical elements, which per definition seem to clash with realism, might be seen as a daring attempt. However, as chapter one has discussed, historical fiction should not be held up to the standard of realism, since the historical elements do not entail that an author should write an entirely realistic novel. Consequently, it should not be problematic to add magic or other fictional elements. Therefore, this chapter will argue that even though it might seem challenging to combine historical fiction and fantasy fiction in one novel, due to their oppositional definitions, the two genres are actually more alike than one would suspect and combining them in one work of fiction is in fact quite appropriate.

The origin of fantasy literature is quite difficult to pin down, as fantasy elements have existed in literature for centuries. Maria Nikolajeva points out that the works of certain classical authors, such as Homer and Ovid, exhibit aspects of fantasy (138-139). Additionally, fantasy is undoubtedly related to myth, folktales and fairy tales as well. However, Nikolajeva argues that the tradition of fantasy literature "owes its origins mostly to Romanticism with its interest in folk tradition, its rejection of the previous, rational-age view of the world" (139). John Clute agrees with this statement, as he notes that "though fantasy certainly existed for many centuries before," the nineteenth century constituted the genre because before the Romantic period authors did not seem to distinguish "between what we would call fantastical and what we would call realistic" (338), and these fantasy stories

therefore did not deliberately “confront or contradict the ‘real,’” as modern fantasy does (338).

The fantasy genre can be defined as a body of work consisting of novels that are “not primarily devoted to realistic representations of the known world. The category includes several literary genres […] describing imagined worlds in which magical powers and other impossibilities are accepted” (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*). Accordingly, it is agreed upon by the major fantasy literature theorists, such as Rosemary Jackson and Colin Manlove, that the main concern of a fantasy novel “is about the construction of the impossible” (James, Mendlesohn 1). Near the end of the twentieth century, scholarly interest in the field of fantasy literature has grown tremendously, which, according to literary scholar Brian Attebery, “indicates a growing academic interest in a body of literature that deliberately violates the generic conventions of realism, conventions that not too long ago were generally used as defining criteria for great or serious fiction” (*Strategies* vii). These definitions suggest that the genre of fantasy is put in stark contrast with the genre of realism. However, Rosemary Jackson points out that “fantasy recombines and inverts the real, but does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world” (Jackson, 20). If one takes into consideration that fantasy is always in coexistence with the ‘real’ world, there should be fewer difficulties in the intertwining of fantasy and history as well.

Since historical fiction is expected to portray an ‘accurate’ representation of the past, meaning a representation that is aligned with what is commonly accepted about the past, it is not surprising that critics such as Jana French comments on the genre of historical fantasy by acknowledging that “fantasy and historical realism are antithetical forms for mediating the historical world” (3). Yet, Veronica Shanoes argues against the idea that the two forms are truly oppositional. She notes that this opposition merely appears accurate: “historical fantasy

is a hybrid of two seemingly opposed modes, fantasy, with its explicit rejection of consensus reality, and historical fiction, a genre grounded in realism and historically accurate events" (236). According to Shanoes, writers of historical fiction and writers of fantasy go through a similar writing process: both "must engage in world-building, in constructing and familiarizing their readers with a world foreign to their own," which is why Shanoes believes that the two forms are not as antithetical as they might seem (236). Megan McArdle argues along the same lines as Shanoes, as the former provides a similar argument for the fitting combination of fantasy and historical fiction, namely that "they share a focus on creating a detailed background for their stories whereby the look and feel of the world are as important as many other elements in the book" (8). Moreover, McArdle argues that the readers of both fantasy and historical fiction "want to be transported to another world" (29), in particular a world in which the author pays attention to the details: "the clothes, the transport, the smell of the streets" (29). Lastly, McArdle argues that combining historical elements with magic and fantastical beings is not problematic for authors of historical fiction, as long as they remain "true to the period details that historical fiction readers love" (35). Ultimately, authors who write their stories in a historical setting are creating a fictional, imagined world which is quite comparable to what authors of fantasy fiction do as well.

K.L. Maund also comments on the similarities between writing fantasy and history. In *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), Maund argues that "fantasy as a genre is almost inextricably bound up with history and ideas of history" (468). This close blond between the two genres for instance comes to light in the fact that fantasy novels are quite often "set against a quasi-historical (very often quasi-medieval) background" (468), considering for instance two immensely popular fantasy series such as George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* or J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* that are both set against a quasi-medieval background. Accordingly, Maund notes that there is merely a thin line between

historical fiction and fantasy. Moreover, Maund states that "the influence of historical writing upon fantasy is dynamic" since an abundance of modern fantasy authors are also historians, as is for instance the case for Harkness. Additionally, both literary archetypes and historical figures continue to offer substance and inspiration for authors of fiction, as such many works of historical fantasy are based on historical figures (468).For example, in the creation of Diana, Harkness was inspired by the historical figure of Bridget Bishop, the first woman to be executed in the Salem witch trials (Fradin and Fradin 33): in the novel, Bishop is Diana's ancestor.

The fact that in the past people, even scholars, believed in magic supports the notion that fantasy and history are not always easily separated. Similar to how the history of the witch blurs the line between fantasy and history, as described in the second chapter of this thesis, the fact that scholars in the past often believed in magic has this same effect. A prime example of such a scholar is John Dee, who was a "philosopher, mathematician, technologist, antiquarian, teacher and friend of powerful people" (P. French 1). However, Dee was also "a magician deeply immersed in the most extreme forms of occultism" (P. French 1). Dee, along with other philosopher-magicians such as Henry Cornelius Agrippa and Robert Fludd, "lived in a world that was half magical, half scientific" (P. French 1). Consequently, characters such as Dee establish how history, science and magic are closely connected, since magic played such a crucial role in the lives of many people, not solely in the sixteenth century but throughout history. As Shanoes puts it, "the learning and scholarship to which Dee had devoted [his live] is *no longer* accurate, but once it was" (245). This is in alignment with the previously discussed idea that history is not always factual or concerning the truth, as what we consider the truth today varies greatly from what was considered the truth in, for instance, the sixteenth century.

Moreover, a lot of historical research is put into studying magic. Therefore, magic is

not solely a fantasy element with a lack of a historical background. Because magic was a large part of scholarly as well as everyday life in the early modern period, it is necessary to have an understanding of the history of magic in order to better comprehend this period of time. As Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark note, "witchcraft and magic belong also to the historiography of the early modern era as to that of no other. It is extraordinary how, in the last thirty years, these subjects have come to occupy a commanding place in the scholarship devoted to this period of European history" (vii). If one considers the scientific revolution for instance, which is a subject one would possibly not be inclined to link to magic, it nevertheless becomes evident that magic played an important role in this historical development. John Henry argues that "without the tradition of European magic, science and scientific medicine could hardly have developed as successfully as they have" (23). Henry explains that "the natural-magic tradition had a profound influence on the origins of modern science" (23) because the leading thinkers of the scientific revolution "embraced an empirical approach" similar to that of the natural-magic custom (23). Thus, Henry argues that magic had a perceptible influence on the scientific revolution, which supports the notion that researching magic plays a crucial part in understanding early modern history.

This combination in the study of history and magic is not all that surprising, considering the important function of magic in early modern life. According to Allison Coudert, "magic encompassed a wide range of activities such as astrology, alchemy, medicine, divination, necromancy, and conjuring" (35). Moreover, "magical remedies, rituals, and formulas can be found in necromancer's manuals, medical textbooks, scientific texts, the lives of saints, and courtly romances" (36) and magical healing was used to cure diseases such as "madness, possession, and nightmares," or diseases with unfamiliar causes, which were attributed to evil beings such as "sorcerers, witches, demons [and] elves" (37). Thus, magic was not solely present in for instance courtly romances, but also in medical

textbooks and scientific texts, which would not be the case in contemporary society. The altered role of magic in society exhibits once more how history, and what is considered factual, is unfixed.

Historical fantasy novels can offer a fascinating take on this combination between magic and scholarly research. Shanoes notes that this combination calls "into question the distinction between history and fantasy that underlies the legitimacy of historical discourse" (244). In order to do so, historical fantasy novels often involve the figure of a scholar. Scholarly characters in fantasy novels are a way "to address some of the questions brought up by the very existence of the subgenre" (244). Examples of such questions are "what gets to be counted as history, and how can we be sure that it is not fantasy after all?" (244). In the character of a scholar, two discourses are represented in one person: research and history on the one hand, and, seeing that they are presented in a fantastical text, fiction and fantasy on the other. Ultimately, "the scholar allows the writer to destabilize assumptions about what counts as history, the meaning of academic knowledge, and how to negotiate such ground when it is constantly moving beneath our feet" (Shanoes 244). Interestingly, Shanoes notes that the connection between fantasy and research is most apparent when the scholars in the novel are also magicians and "magic is equated with research and scholarly knowledge" (242).

An example of such a character would be Diana, who is both an academic and a witch and is therefore a prime example of how magic is combined with research throughout Harkness' series. For instance, Diana ultimately admits that magic is inherent to her academic research. When Matthew asks why Diana decided to study the history of science, she initially responds by saying that she wanted to find out "how humans came up with a view of the world that had so little magic in it" (*Discovery* 90). Moreover, she notes that "experimental scientist slowly chipped away at the belief that the world was an inexplicably powerful,

magical place" (*Discovery* 90). However, Diana continues by commenting, "ultimately they failed, though. The magic never really went away. It waited, quietly, for people to return to it when they found the science wanting" (*Discovery* 90). Matthew replies by stating that this is why she must have decided on alchemy as a field of interest, since alchemy as a subject is not "devoid of magic" (*Discovery* 90). Diana finally admits Matthew has a valid point: "then it's science with magic. Or magic with science, if you prefer" (*Discovery* 91). Thus, Diana's choice of academic expertise is heavily influenced by magic and the choice to study alchemy specifically combines her research with magical elements.

Another example of an element that combines academic research and magic in the series is Ashmole 782, or The Book of Life, itself. On the one hand, Diana discovers this book in her work environment, namely in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and she aims to use it for her academic research. Although it is an alchemical manuscript, which inextricably links it to magic, Diana initially believes she would merely use the book for her research and not for magical purposes. As she tries to convey to Sarah, Diana's aunt and fellow witch, "there was no witchcraft involved, Sarah. I needed to look at the book for my research, and I laid my palm flat on it, that's all" (*Discovery* 140). Therefore, a large part of the manuscript is linked to Diana's career as an academic and a historian. On the other hand, it turns out that the manuscript is a magical palimpsest which contains the hidden origins of the different creatures. Diana was only able to call up the manuscript because of her magic, and her magical powers ultimately enable her to absorb the book into her body, which allows her to discover the secrets it entails. It ultimately becomes known that the secrets hidden in the book enable Diana and Matthew to remain in a relationship because it turns out the creatures are all part of the same species. The manuscript even literally brings the different creatures together, as it is made from the combined DNA of the creatures. Thus, similar to Diana as a character, the book contains elements of both the academic world as the magical one, combining them

in one highly important object.

Diana's initial attitude towards magic can be interpreted as a manifestation of the formerly discussed possible clash between fantasy and historical realism. In the opening chapter of *Discovery,* Diana is portrayed as a reluctant witch who turned "her back on anything to do with magic" (9). In order to do this, Diana chose a career in academics, as she believed it stood as far from magic as possible. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Diana's research "focused on the period when science supplanted magic- the age when astrology and witch-hunts yielded to Newton and universal laws" (11). As she herself admits, "the search for a rational order in nature, rather than a supernatural one, mirrored my own efforts to stay away from what was hidden" (11). Sarah discards Diana's efforts to avoid magic by researching seventeenth-century science. As she tells Diana "we used to call that alchemy […] there's a lot of magic in it" (12), which complies with what Matthew tells Diana as well.

Harkness commented on Diana's preference for history of science as an ostensible opposite for magic as well. As Harkness notes, "she's made what she thinks is a really careful, logical decision to be a historian, which she sees as being very rational and she is interested in the history of science which she sees as sort of the triumph of rationality over magic" ("Office Hours" 1:05). But then, as Harkness explains, Matthew comes along and he aims to ensure Diana that magic and science are actually intertwined, or as she puts it, "science and magic are really part of the same kind of tangled knot" (3:35). This idea causes a dilemma for Diana, especially because Matthew, as a vampire, makes this statement with "the authority of history behind him" (4:11). Hence, it initially confuses Diana that someone who has lived through the part of history she studies acknowledges that science and magic are entwined subjects.

Despite Diana's attempts to stay away from magic, it turns out that she used magic in her research all along, which becomes evident from the following passage:

> Whenever I was stuck with my research, I imagined a white table, gleaming and empty, and the evidence as a jigsaw puzzle that needed to be pieced together. It took the pressure off and felt like a game. […] The pieces of my puzzle started to move of their own volition, swirling in patterns that were too fast to follow. I slapped my imaginary hands on the table, and the pieces stopped their dance. My palms tingled with recognition. This didn't seem like a game anymore. It seemed like magic. And if it was, then I'd been using it in my schoolwork, in my college courses, and now in my scholarship. But there was no room in my life for magic, and my mind closed resolutely against the possibility that I'd been violating my own rules without knowing it. (*Discovery* 143-144)

Thus, although she opted to fully ignore the magical side of her by delving into academic research, the two elements were in fact always intertwined and simultaneously at work.

Moreover, throughout the novels Diana has to learn more about her magical abilities, which is an important factor in her decision to travel to sixteenth-century Europe and therefore combines with her increasing knowledge of history: "for the first time in my life, I was absolutely delighted to be a witch. As a historian I studied the past. Because I was a witch, I could actually visit it. We had come to 1590 to school me in the lost arts of magic, yet there was so much more that I could learn here" (*Shadow* 4). Finally, she is able to come to terms with her magical powers and can combine them with her work as a scholar: "it was the end of my first full week back in the archives- a trial run to see how my magic responded to repeated contact with so many ancient texts and brilliant, though dead, intellects. […] I'd had a few tricky moments when it seemed it might be impossible for me to return to the work I loved, but each additional day made that goal more achievable" (*Book of Life* 629). This progression can be interpreted as a comment on the combination of history and fantasy, as Diana's successful attempt to combine scholarly research and magic could entail that the genres of historical fiction and fantasy also work well as a hybrid genre.

Lastly, Harkness uses the historical framework in combination with the fantastical elements to show how people can learn from past mistakes, because Harkness is interested in

"the ways that history can tell us things that are important about who we are today and in the future" ("Harkness Interview" 3:01). The idea that the different creatures should live separately and that different creatures should not have children with each other is compared to racism, as Chris points out that creature segregation is not the correct answer, just like racial segregation was not (*Book of Life* 204). Furthermore, the horrors that occurred in World War II are touched upon as well, as Matthew's father Philippe is tortured during the war and Matthew is tortured in the same former concentration camp. Ultimately, Diana discovers that the different creatures all share the same DNA, undermining the notion that they should live separately and in disagreement with each other. The comparison between real historical events and the old-fashioned bigoted way the fantastical creatures have to interact with each other condemns racism and conveys the message that one can learn from the past. Both fantasy and historical fiction are fitting genres to convey such as message, as fantasy is often used to condemn evil and oftentimes "reflect[s] social dynamics" ("Fantasy" Attebery 297) and historical fiction can be a way to emphasize certain problematic aspects of the past.

Harkness comments on the way history can express a message without condemning the past, which she calls "historical empathy" ("Harkness Interview" 3:52). This notion entails that one can learn from the mistakes that occur in history without judging the people who made these mistakes, and instead trying to understand how these mistakes came about and then correct them. Maund points out that a historical framework is often used by authors to "reflect their own contemporary political and social concerns" (469), which is what Harkness seems to do in her novels as well. Thus, the combination of historical events with the way the fantastical creatures eventually overcome their prejudices about one another emphasizes the message that accepting one another excels judging one another.

In conclusion, a blend of historical fiction and fantasy literature is more fitting than

their definitions initially seem to suggest, since historical fiction is judged for its accurate representation of the past, whereas fantasy literature is anticipated to be separated from reality. However, the two genres actually do have plenty of elements in common. Firstly, authors of both genres are expected to pay an extensive amount of attention to world-building, either the imagined world based on the past or an entirely fantastical place. Secondly, the combination between (historical) research and magic, which is embodied in the character of Diana and in manuscript Ashmole 782, accentuates the message that is apparent in the novels, namely that one can learn from the past that one should not discriminate, in the case of this trilogy based on what type of creature someone is, and that different creatures should be able to live alongside each other, fall in love and have children. Lastly, magic and history are actually intertwined, considering that scholars such as John Dee believed in magic in the early modern period and magic played an important role in everyday life. Therefore, it is crucial to have a historical understanding of magic in order to comprehend life in the early modern period. This idea supports the formerly discussed notion that history is subject to change and that not all elements of history can be explained in a factual manner.

Conclusion

This thesis has provided a close reading of Deborah Harkness' historical-fantasy series, which consists of three novels: *A Discovery of Witches, Shadow of Night* and *The Book of Life*. Subsequently, this thesis has placed Harkness' *All Souls* trilogy inside the debate around historical fiction.

The first chapter has presented an in-depth definition of historical fiction, a genre that has seen a rise in popularity in recent years. Nineteenth-century critics were predominantly critical towards the genre, as they believed a combination objective, factual history and subjective fiction to be incongruous. Although the grounds on which these early critics based their criticism of the genre has been undermined due to the postmodern view of history, which argues against the objective nature of history, there remains a debate between modern scholars on whether or not it is appropriate to combine history and fiction in a single work. If one takes into account the elements for which historical fiction is criticized, it seems as if the genre is falsely held to a standard of other popular nineteenth-century genres, such as realism and didacticism. For example, historical fiction is criticized for fictionalizing historical events while presenting them as historically accurate. However, considering that authors such as Harkness make clear that their work, despite the historical elements, remains a work of fiction, the genre should not be criticized for a lack of realism. Ultimately, it has become apparent that historical writing also occurs from a subjective point of view and that literary devices such as narrativization also play an important role in historical writing, which subverts the dichotomy between writing about history and fictional writing.

The second chapter of this thesis has analyzed the literary representation of two fantastical stock characters: vampires and witches. The way vampires are depicted in literature has gone through a distinct change: from rotting corpses in folkloric tales to Bram Stoker's suave count Dracula, who became the archetypical vampire in nineteenth-century

portrayals and to this day remains one of the most famous vampires. Until the twentieth century, vampires were portrayed as frightening, evil beings. However, modern representations often consist of vampires being attractive and intelligent, possible romantic partners. Harkness' male protagonist Matthew Clairmont fits within this characterization of the modern vampire, as he is described as strikingly handsome and intellectually gifted. The extensive historical representation of the vampire shows how fantastical creatures are not merely made up in an instant, but instead have a long history to their literary portrayals during which time they undergo tremendous change.

The stereotypical way witches were presented as wicked, ugly hags, for instance in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and nineteenth-century fairy tales, has developed as well. Nowadays, witches in popular fiction often appear as regular people, such as in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series or Diana Bishop in the *All Souls* trilogy. For witches, it is crucial to consider their appearance in 'real' history as well as their fictional representation. Namely, in the early modern period, a large witch hunt took place in Europe and America. Several women were accused of witchcraft and executed because they were unable to prove their innocence. The fact that people in the past believed witches were real supports the notion that history is not merely about facts. Moreover, it establishes the importance of story-telling and the creation of belief systems in history. Seeing that in the twenty-first century most people would agree that witches are fictional, it also emphasizes the changeable nature of what is historically considered the truth or a fact.

This thesis' third and final chapter focused on the combination of historical fiction and fantasy. Due to the fact that historical fiction is often expected to focus on accurate historical details and consequently often criticized for a lack of historical realism, the genre of historical fantasy could be a target of critics' disapproval. However, this chapter has shown that fantasy and history are actually intertwined and that the two genres can suitably be mixed

together. For instance, authors of fantasy and historical fiction go through a similar writing process, as both attentively participate in world-building, regardless of whether it is based on history or not.

Additionally, a large amount of scholarly research is put into studying magic as well, since magic was a considerable part of everyday and scholarly life in the early modern period. Therefore, understanding the early modern period entails one also has to study and comprehend the role magic had in this era. The combination of scholarly research and magic comes together in the person of Diana, who is both a witch and a scholar and is eventually able to successfully combine both sides to her character. Her success in doing so can be seen as a comment on the appropriate mixture of fantasy and history. Ultimately, the fact that fantastical elements such as witches and magic have an extensive role in history establishes the concept that history is an unfixed field in which fictional stories and beliefs have a large influence, which defends the combination of history, fiction and fantasy. It is fascinating to observe whether the genre of historical fiction will ever be entirely free of the severe critique it is faced with and if historians will ever come down from their "ivory tower and stop throwing rocks" at this thriving genre.

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