

Research Article

The (Re)imagined Shades of Alice Gray: The Counter-Memory of a Woman-as-Witch in Stacey Halls' *The Familiars* (2019)

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Abstract

Historical fiction is a way of dealing with painful pasts and traumatic events as counter-memories. Long-forgotten events are (re)created in a safe space in historical fiction. Set in seventeenth-century Lancashire, in her modern historical fiction *The Familiars* (2019), Stacey Halls narrates Alice Gray's painful past as a woman-as-witch into existence. Halls achieves it by (re)imagining Alice Gray's plight within the historical context of the Pendle Hill witch-hunt in 1612 Lancashire. Not only does Halls give Alice her historical voice back, but she sets the historical record straight by counter-memorialising Alice Gray as a woman-as-witch, i.e., a seventeenth-century woman othered and presumed to practise witchcraft, in this instance, merely for being an impoverished unmarried woman and a midwife. In this way, Halls's narrative invites us to empathise with Alice's plight, to understand the injustices she faced, and to appreciate her resilience. Besides, (re)creating Alice's witchcraft story, Halls fleshes out her heart-wrenching emotional turmoil. Moving away from the cold historical recorded facts, Halls interweaves Alice's troubled personal past as an abused young woman and a grieving and loving stepmother with the unfortunate contemporary events of the Pendle Hill witch hunt. As a result, we are offered a more than plausible (re)imagined rationale for Alice's witch hunt predicament and acquittal, which cannot be found or is even hinted at in the historical records. Thus, Halls culturally endows Alice's seventeenth-century marginalised historical counterpart with a contemporary gender-empowered mnemonic (re)imagined counter-memory. Moreover, Halls's active remembering of Alice Gray politically (re)contextualises and (re)frames this woman-as-witch of the Pendle Hill witch hunt of 1612 previously wanting. Also, the (re)imagined counter-memory of Alice Gray challenges the dominant historical narrative and underscores historical fiction's power in reshaping our understanding of the past. Ultimately, Halls endears and humanises this woman-as-witch of Pendle Hill and provides us with the many shades of Alice Gray.

Keywords

Counter-Memory, Mnemonic (Re)imagination, Historical Fiction, The Woman-as-Witch, The Pendle Hill Witch-Hunt of 1612, Seventeenth-Century English Witchcraft

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1. Introduction

The mnemonic (re)imagination of painful pasts is not confined to or only accessible by those who have directly experienced them. As Keightley, Miller, and Tougow argue, painful memories can be inherited and processed at the individual and cultural levels, becoming more manageable if in the form of cultural memories. [1, 2]

Another way of dealing with painful pasts and traumatic events is their (re)creation as counter-memories by opposing the official narratives, critically questioning the hegemonic cultural paradigms, and possibly offering redemption and healing. [3] Fiction, for example, is a bountiful medium of counter-memory in multiple mnemonic and mimetic contexts. [4] Writing fiction may foster the understanding of painful pasts and traumatic events in a more accessible memorialised narrative form. Ultimately, through fiction, counter-memory is detected, (re)created and maintained. [5, 6] Even more so, we find, when it comes to historical fiction.

Historical fiction shortens the distance between “pre-narrative experience” and the “narrative memory which creates meaning retrospectively.” [7] Its aesthetic and experiential qualities often create a more accessible, memorable, and relatable counter-memory. [8] In historical fiction, long-forgotten – or not – painful pasts are (re)presented and (re)created in a physically yet, at times, emotionally challenging, safe space. [9] Indeed, in historical fiction, far wider-reaching reimagined versions of the past emerge and provoke a sense of revolutionary and restorative potential, regardless of the accuracy of its historical context or its intended audience’s prior knowledge. [10]

2. *The Familiars* (2019) by Stacey Halls

In this modern historical fiction, set in seventeenth-century Lancashire, UK, we learn about Fleetwood Shuttleworth’s story exclusively from her perceptions. We witness what she does; we empathically share her feelings and always ride along with her treacherous and tumultuous train of thought. Though only seventeen, she has been the gentry mistress of Gawthorpe Hall for the last four years. Previously, at the age of four, she had been married, but the marriage was annulled amidst veiled allegations of her molestation by her elderly first husband. As a result, she remains estranged from her mother and harbours deep-seated resentment towards her and her childhood home.

Fleetwood is also pregnant for the fourth time after her previous three pregnancies have all ended in miscarriages. Fleetwood is genuinely and deeply in love with her husband, Richard Shuttleworth, so much so that she abides and forgives him for having a mistress who is also carrying his child. Fleetwood’s hopes and expectations of providing her husband with a much-wanted heir are yet again shattered when she finds a hidden letter written to her husband by their physician indicating that this pregnancy if carried out to term, would put

her life seriously at risk. Taken aback by the fact that Richard has said nothing of this to her, Fleetwood, a bright, bold and not easily intimidated young woman ahead of her time, becomes overwhelmingly settled on doing all she can to avoid miscarriage and delivering her baby safely even if it means going against her husband’s expressed wishes or challenging her husband’s powerful friends in high places.

Serendipitously, Fleetwood meets a local young woman in the Pendle Hill forest: Alice Gray. Being close in age, they soon become friendly. Moreover, as Alice is a midwife, Fleetwood retains her services and will not be persuaded against her friend or to employ any more experienced village midwife. Nevertheless, this is the year of 1612 in Pendle Hill. As a relentless, evergrowing atmosphere of suspicion and fear of witchcraft sweeps Lancashire, Alice is soon caught up in the witch-hunt. Fleetwood is at risk of losing her friend and trusted midwife to the noose, her baby and her own life. She thus sets off on a daring rescue mission, collecting exculpatory evidence from the most unwilling witnesses to acquit Alice Gray.

Historical sources may not corroborate Fleetwood and Alice’s stories or provide insight into their hopes and fears, their dreams and what kept them awake at night, as (re)imagined by Halls. However, like most of the characters in this historical fiction, their existence is documented in the Lancashire historical annals.

Halls’ depiction of their lives at Gawthorpe Hall and in the adjacent area is evocative with period detail, from the meals on the table to the lawless, sullen taverns in the neighbouring villages of, for example, Preston, Bromley and Colne, around the foot of Pendle Hill and its forest. There are also instances of long-held forms of sympathetic and apotropaic magic, suggesting that Halls did her research into seventeenth-century English witchcraft well.

Several other noteworthy twentieth-century, well-researched works of historical fiction about the Pendle Hill witch hunt of 1612 have been published. For example, Robert Neill’s *Mist Over Pendle* (1951), Livi Michael’s *Malikin Child* (2012), Jeanette Winterson’s *The Daylight Gate* (2012), and Christine Middleton’s *The Witch and Her Soul* (2012).

These novels rely heavily on archival elements about the 1612 witchcraft accusations, the accused witches, the court proceedings, and the executions. (Re)imagined, they leap off the page, seize the reader and force him to undertake an uncomfortable emotional journey back into a long-gone, troubled and painful past from the believed shelter of the present. However, in Halls’s mnemonic (re)imagination, *The Familiars*, the ensuing counter-memory of Alice Gray exceptionally ensnares our senses. As follows, who was then Alice Gray in the context of the Pendle Hill witch-hunt of 1612?

3. The Happenings of the Pendle Hill Witch-Hunt in 1692

In 1612, in the Pendle Forest of Lancashire, Northern England, a village rivalry thrived between two families who seemingly practised several popular magic types such as apotropaic, sympathetic, manipulative or image magic. An elderly matriarch led both families. On the one side, Elizabeth Southern, better known to neighbours and patients alike as 'Old Demdike', was the head of the Device family. The Devices included her daughter, Elizabeth Device, and her grandchildren, Alice, James, and young Jennet. On the other side, Anne Whittle, broken down and almost blind, is called 'Old Chattox' and her daughter Anne Redfearne. The Devices blamed Old Chattox for having murdered Old Demdike's husband using *maleficium* eleven years earlier.

The already tense village dynamics between these two families and their neighbours were further stressed by the refusal to dispense charitable donations when asked. Despite this, the locals and nearby villagers came to these cunning women, asking for their help with all sorts of dire day-to-day difficulties. They scraped a living at the foot of Pendle Hill, in the margins of Pendle Forest and decent society. They were reciprocally implicated in crimes such as run-of-the-mill thefts, extortion, and bribery to local officials.

On March 21, 1612, Alison Device encountered John Law, a travelling peddler. She allegedly cursed him because he would not part with some pins for her. Upon the appearance of a big black dog, John Law immediately fell under a strange illness, which by modern standards can easily be identified by any layperson as a stroke. Law's family, who were not from the Pendle Hill area, appealed to the local justice of the peace, Roger Nowell. After a fleeting investigation, Nowell arrested Alison Device, her mother, Elizabeth Device, her grandmother Old Demdike, Old Chattox and her daughter Anne Redfearne. They were all imprisoned in the Well Tower (also known as 'The Witches' Tower') on the eastern side of Lancaster Castle. [11]

On Good Friday of 1612, shortly after Elizabeth Southern, alias Old Demdike, had been arrested, their village friends and relatives met at Old Demdike's home, then known as 'Malkin Tower.' Allegedly, they met there to plot to free them from prison by blowing up Lancaster Castle. Indeed, according to statements taken from Old Demdike's grandchildren by magistrate Roger Nowell of Read Hall, they admitted to the conspiratorial nature of this gathering. Presumably, the resolve was to use gunpowder to blow up Lancaster Castle, kill the warders and release the prisoners. [12]

As the authorities rounded up all the newly identified suspects and the interrogations escalated into torture, they started pointing fingers at each other. Furthermore, Old Demdike admitted to having met, many years before, in the forest, a familiar – an animal-shaped demon, in this case, a black cat or brown dog - that took the shape of a boy named Tibbe. He later placed the Witch's Mark on her, a skin tag under her left

arm from which he would occasionally suck her blood. Only after their third encounter did she initiate her practice of *malificium* at his bidding. She further admitted having passed on her *maleficia* teachings to her daughter Elizabeth, older grandchildren James and Alison, and some of her neighbours. Indeed, Old Chattox claimed that Old Demdike had brought the Devil to her as an alluring young man who gave her imps, Fancie and Tibbe. [13]

Several murder charges were laid against these women, from killing cows to killing a prominent local tenant holder, Robert Nutter. The motives included retribution against unsolicited sexual advances, threats of unwarranted evictions, refusal of a much-needed meal, not honouring the parting of a promised shirt, all sorts of complaints, and even revenge for having been nagged, laughed, and muttered at. All such untimely deaths were caused by *malificium*, resorting to their familiars, burning effigies, or smashing clay poppets. [13]

On August 19 1612, Sir Edward Bromley and Sir James Altham, experienced judges in witchcraft cases, presided over a short but incisive trial at Lancaster Castle. During it, they heard and accepted all the fanciful evidence and hearsay presented against the accused witches and young Jennet Device's testimony against her own family. [13]

A total of ten of the accused witches, many of the Device (Demdike) and Redfearne (Chattox) families, women and men alike, were sentenced to death by short drop hanging. Officials hanged them the very next day to the proceedings, on August 20, 1612. [13]

By the time of the trial, young Jennet's grandmother, Old Demdike, had already died in Lancaster Castle prison. Anne Redfearne was found innocent of the murder of Robert Nutter (or Nuttle) but convicted for the murder of his father twenty years earlier. Margaret Pearson was sentenced to standing four days in the stocks in four neighbouring towns with a sign on her forehead describing her "crimes" in detail, followed by one year in prison. Five accused were acquitted, including the prosecution's principal witness, young Jennet Device, and Alice Gray. [13]

For centuries, anyone who called a woman 'Chattox' or a 'Demdike' was taken to court and fined, since long after their deaths, they were still remembered by the Lancashire folk as the most feared and fearsome of the Pendle witches. [14]

A pamphlet titled *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster*, published in 1613 was Thomas Potts's first-hand account of the August 1612 Lancaster Assizes proceedings and one of the chief sources about the Pendle Hill witch hunt. Besides Thomas Potts' written account, only the following contemporary works have brief or indirect mentions of the case of the Pendle witch trials: *The Journal of Nicholas Assheton* (Vol 14); *The Farington Papers* (Vol 39); *Stewards' House and Farm Accounts of the Shuttleworths of Smithills and Gawthorpe* (Vol 35, 41, 43, 46); *Materials for the History of Lancashire* (Vol 61) and in J. Roby's *Traditions of Lancashire* (Vol I).

Unlike the other accused witches of Pendle, Alice Gray is

only briefly mentioned in Potts' *The Wonderfull Discoverie*. In an article in the *Magazine of The Historical Writer's Association*, Halls outlines her reason for choosing Alice Gray as a central character in *The Familiars*. What drew Halls' attention to Alice Gray was that she lacked "a back story" since "neither her defence nor confession were recorded." Halls adds that Alice's "absence of presence" intrigued her. Indeed, while the details about the other Pendle witches and their familiar spirits, eating habits and quarrels with neighbours abound, "Alice has no voice." [15] In *The Familiars*, Halls attempts to remediate this state of affairs.

4. Mnemonically (Re)Imagining Alice Gray's Voice

In Potts' *The Wonderfull Discoverie*, the charges against Alice Gray are somewhat vague. There is no record of her examination. In his testimonies against his mother, Elizabeth Device, and Katherine Hewyt alias Mould-heeles, James Device briefly mentions Alice Gray. In them, he states, among other things, that both Alice and her friend Elizabeth were indeed part of the group of witches in attendance at the Good Friday feast in Malkin Tower and that they had admitted having "killed *Foulds* wifes child, called *Anne Foulds*, of Colne." [16] In *The Familiars*, however, Halls (re)imagines a staggeringly different sequence of events.

After finding out that Roger Nowell lists Alice as one of the Pendle Hill witches, Fleetwood seeks out Alice and persistently asks her, "How do you know them, Alice? How? ... What were you doing at their house on Good Friday? ... [Y]ou must tell me what you were doing with the Devices at Malkin Tower." [17] Alice denies having meaningful ties with the Chatox or the Demdike family but admits being there, oblivious to the actual peril of her statement.

Along with Fleetwood, we first learn how Alice Gray inadvertently crossed paths with the Devices. Alice recounts: "One morning I was walking to work and I came across a man lying on the ground. It was a quiet road and there was no one else around. He was a pedlar. All his things were cast in a trail behind him, pins and needles and scraps of cloth, as though he'd staggered about dropping them. I thought he was dead, but he was alive, muttering and mumbling. One side of his face was collapsed, and his eye wouldn't open. I'd seen it before with my mother." [18] She carries on: "I took him to the inn and the landlord helped me put him upstairs in a chamber and called a physick. The man kept muttering on about a black dog and a girl he'd met on the road, but his speech was slurred and we didn't know what he meant. Then later that night a girl arrived. [...] She was in such a state, sobbing and begging for forgiveness. I did not know what she meant until she spoke of cursing a pedlar that same day." [19]

After meeting Alizon Device in such implicating circumstances, Alice becomes the target of her grandmother's, Old Demdike, vitriol. Alice explains, "Alizon must have told her

that I'd found John and was looking after him. That's when she started threatening me. She told me she'd put a curse on me if I didn't lie for Alizon. She wanted me to say I'd never seen her, that the old man was making it all up, that his mind was weak and he couldn't tell up from down." [20] However, when interrogated by John Law's son – "Have you seen these here women before? Did this girl curse my father?" – Alice truthfully replied that she had indeed seen them. [21]

Next, Alice adds how she became even more precariously entangled with the Device family. After Alizon and Old Demdike are incarcerated at Lancashire Castle, Elizabeth Device approaches Alice at her place of employment and confronts her. Alice continues to tell Fleetwood: "She asked me to go to her house that Friday, said she was having some neighbours around to talk about what they could do to help those that'd been arrested. She said I had to help, that I was ... She said I was the reason her daughter and mother were in gaol. [...] She was desperate ... angry. I could tell she just wanted to do something. And I wanted to help. Like a fool I went. I had to do something to stop them turning up at work and getting me in trouble. And even after that, after I went to Malkin Tower, she was waiting for me near your house in the forest. I cannot escape them." [22]

Alice ends the account of her unfortunate encounter with the Device family by reassuring Fleetwood that nothing untoward had happened at Malkin Tower. As she puts it, "We ate a meal and they talked about how they could help Alizon and Demdike. It was just a meeting of people who knew the family, neighbours and the like. Apart from me and one other person [...] My mother's friend Katherine. Mould-heels." [23]

However, the worst soon comes to pass. Roger Nowell catches up with Alice at Fleetwood's house. He then proclaims: "'Alice Gray, you are under arrest for the murder by witchcraft of Ann Foulds, daughter of John Foulds of Colne, and will be a prisoner of His Majesty until your time of reckoning.'" [24] Alice is taken to Lancaster Castle, where she is incarcerated with Elizabeth Hewitt "Mould-heels: her mother's partner in midwifery," Old Chatox, Old Demdike, Elizabeth Device, and all the other women-as-witches. [25]

John Foulds was a young widower and a "[h]andsome chap until the drink takes hold of him [...]." [26] Alice and him "were courting" when his young daughter Ann died. [26] Distraught by the little girl's demise, Alice and John have an acrimonious breakup. He goes as far as to threaten Alice with veiled witchcraft accusations as he states: "I could tell them things... People have been asking." [27]

When Fleetwood visits Alice in jail, we are finally made aware of the tragic occurrences that have landed Alice in her current quandary.

Alice begins: "I loved him," she said in a very faint voice. "And I loved Ann. I loved them both. Me and John were ... together. He used to come to the Queen's Arms, that's how I met him, a couple of years ago. He had a daughter; his wife had died. He was funny, and kind. At first I thought we would

get married. Ann wasn't two years old when we met. I used to look after her when he went to work. She was like a little angel, with fat cheeks and yellow hair that wouldn't lie flat no matter how much you combed it." [28]

Alice continues: 'John said he wouldn't get married again, not after losing his wife. It was too painful, he said. So I stayed, and it was like we were married. I lived with him, and my dad as good as disowned me. He called me a whore. He said I'd never be a wife, that I was good for nothing but lying down for John after he'd been drinking. But I was happy, with John and with Ann. We were a little family.' She swallowed. 'Then he started staying out longer, and later. Me and Ann were on our own a lot of the time. Most of the time. John was either at work or at the alehouse, while I was pretending to be his little wife at home. I was lying to myself.' [29]

She carries on: " 'Even when folk started telling me he had other women, I didn't want to believe them. And life went on, and he got meaner, and cheaper, and me and Ann were living off my wage because he spent all his. And she started having these ... I don't know what you call them. She would go stiff and her eyes would roll in her head, and her tongue was too big for her mouth. I thought she was doing it because her dad wasn't around. He didn't believe me when I told him. He thought I was making it up to get him to come home. I tried all the plants I could think of, all the herbs. I went to Katherine for help, but even she couldn't do anything. She was fine most of the time, it was just when this happened she was ... It was like an evil spirit was choking her.' [30]

And finally, Alice mournfully concludes: "One day, I had to go to work and leave Ann at home on her own. John was nowhere to be found. He was supposed to come back. I was close to losing my job.' Tears began leaking again from her eyes. Her face was carved with sorrow. 'I still loved him. I always loved him, even when he wouldn't come home. If we hadn't had Ann, though, things might have been different. I might have left. Anyway, I went to work and asked Katherine to keep an eye on her. The next thing, she came running in saying, "Alice, Alice, come quick, you have to come now." And we ran to John's and she ...' Alice buried her face in her knees. 'I shouldn't have left her.'" [31] After learning about her tale of wows, Fleetwood goes out of her way to secure Alice's exoneration, which she succeeds.

In Thomas Pott's *Wonderfull Discoverie*, we can read that Alice Gray of Colne is one of the "Prisoners found not guiltie." [30] Likewise, in Halls' *The Familiars*, Fleetwood tells us that her first-born son "Richard Lawrence Shuttleworth was born just before dawn on the twentieth day of August, 1612, the same day that ten witches were hanged on the hill overlooking Lancaster. Alice Gray was not one of them." [32] Rescued from the short drop, Alice Grey safely delivered Fleetwood's baby and then, without saying goodbye, disappeared much like her historical counterpart did from the Lancashire records after the witch hunt ended.

5. Conclusion

In Stacey Halls' historical fiction, *The Familiars*, Alice Gray's plight is well established within the historical context of the Pendle Hill witch-hunt in 1612 in Lancashire. Halls achieves it by (re)imagining Alice Gray's background context. Not only does Halls give Alice her historical voice back, but she sets the historical record straight by counter-memorialising Alice Gray as a woman-as-witch, *i.e.*, a seventeenth-century woman othered and presumed to practise witchcraft, in this instance, merely for being an impoverished unmarried woman and a midwife.

Besides (re)creating Alice's witchcraft story, Halls fleshes out her heart-wrenching emotional turmoil. Moving away from the cold historical recorded facts, Halls interweaves Alice's troubled personal past as an abused young woman and a grieving and loving stepmother with the ill-fated contemporary events of the Pendle Hill witch hunt. As a result, we are offered a more than plausible (re)imagined rationale for Alice's witch hunt predicament and acquittal, which cannot be found or is even hinted at in the historical records.

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Author Contributions

Inês Tadeu Freitas Gonçalves is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Inês Tadeu Freitas Gonçalves received her PhD in Cultural Studies from the University of Minho, Portugal. She has been a lecturer at the University of Madeira, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, since 2000, where she teaches Anglo-American Cultures and

Civilisations, Contemporary Great Britain and English Language courses. With several publications, her research interests include Historical fiction and mnemonic (re)creations of the (trans)cultural memory of women with inversionary behaviour, such as the woman-as-witch and the evil woman.

Research Field

Inês Tadeu Freitas Gonçalves: Cultural Studies, Women Studies, Memory studies.