Advanced International Journal for Research (AIJFR)
E-ISSN: 3048-7641 ● Website: www.aijfr.com ● Email: editor@aijfr.com

Her Sin is Sight: Madness, Witchcraft, and the Fantastical in Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale*

Jyotirmoy Joshi

Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages
University of Lucknow, India

Abstract

Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2017) stages a profound interrogation of how patriarchal cultures define, diagnose, and punish women who perceive differently. Set in fourteenth-century northern Rus', the novel follows Vasilisa Petrovna (Vasya), a girl who can see and communicate with household and forest spirits, and her stepmother Anna, whose religious visions are pathologised by an aggressively Christianising society. Drawing on Michel Foucault's genealogy of madness as a socially constructed category of exclusion, Elaine Showalter's feminist history of the "female malady," C. G. Jung's theory of shadow projection, and PhebeAnn Wolframe's work on counter-psychiatric epistemologies, this study argues that Arden employs the fantastic mode not merely to represent individual mental disturbance but to expose madness as a contested label at the intersection of gender, power, and the more-than-human world. The novel demonstrates that the question is never simply whether characters are "really" mad; rather, fantasy makes visible how certain experiences are named as witchcraft or insanity depending on who possesses the authority to define reality. By validating Vasya's animist visions while revealing the psychic disintegration of the ostensibly sane Father Konstantin, Arden destabilises the diagnostic gaze that historically silenced women. The text transforms the accusation of madness into a badge of perceptive courage, reclaiming the figure of the "madwoman" from the archive of exclusion. Ultimately, the novel suggests that survival—personal, communal, and ecological—may depend on learning to hear precisely those voices we have been taught to fear.

Keywords: fantasy literature, gender studies, Russian folklore, counter-psychiatry, shadow projection

1. Introduction

Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2017) returns insistently to the intertwined figures of the witch and the madwoman to interrogate how patriarchal cultures define, diagnose, and punish women who see differently. Set in fourteenth-century northern Rus', the novel centres on Vasilisa Petrovna (Vasya), a girl who can see and speak with the household and forest spirits that sustain her community's fragile survival. As an aggressively Christianising priest, Father Konstantin, convinces the villagers to abandon their animist practices and to regard the old spirits as demons, Vasya's perceptions are increasingly read as signs of witchcraft or insanity, while her stepmother Anna's religious terrors and visions are *pathologised* and exploited in the service of clerical power. The text thus dramatises what Michel Foucault calls the "monologue of reason about madness […]" (Foucault xi)

whereby institutions speak for those they have declared mad and fix them as objects of knowledge and control.

Drawing on Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady*, C. G. Jung's theory of the *shadow* and *archetype*, and PhebeAnn Wolframe's work on "counter-psychiatric epistemologies," this essay argues that Arden uses the fantastic mode not merely to represent individual mental disturbance, but to expose madness as a contested label at the intersection of gender, power, and the more-than-human world. In Arden's novel, the question is never simply whether Vasya, Anna, or Konstantin are "*really*" mad; rather, fantasy makes visible how certain experiences are named as madness or witchcraft depending on *who* has the authority to define reality. The text destabilises the apparent sanity of those—particularly Konstantin—whose religious zeal is institutionally authorised yet psychically disintegrating, while it validates the ontological status of Vasya's animist vision and shows that the community's survival depends precisely on what it most fears and pathologises.

Madness, Gender, and Power: Theoretical Coordinates

Foucault's genealogy of madness provides a crucial starting point. In *Madness and Civilization* he insists that madness is not a timeless natural fact but a historically produced category forged through practices of exclusion and confinement. In the classical age, he argues, "the language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence" (Foucault x-xi). The mad are rendered mute as subjects; they are *spoken about* rather than listened to. What appears as neutral medical objectivity is in fact a "*monologue*" in which institutional reason defines itself by constituting madness as its Other.

On a smaller scale, Arden's northern village reproduces this monologic structure. Clerical and patriarchal authorities—Father Konstantin, Pyotr, the boyars and elders—decide what counts as true perception, as sanctity, as delusion or *"demonic"* influence. Vasya's and Anna's own accounts of their experiences are systematically *overwritten* by ecclesiastical interpretation.

Anna's identification of her imagination as "*sinful*"— "[…] her sinful imagination conjured demons […]" (Arden 45)— reveals the internalisation of patriarchal religious doctrine. In the medieval Russian setting of the novel, women's spiritual and imaginative faculties are *policed* by the Orthodox Church and by a kinship system that values female obedience, domesticity, and silence. Anna's ability to see demons—which, within the fantasy logic of Arden's world, are real supernatural entities—is framed by her society not as a gift or even as a genuine perception, but as a moral failing. The adjective "sinful" is *not* her own judgment; it is the voice of her oppressors *lodged* within her psyche. Her imagination is pathological precisely because it perceives what patriarchy denies: the existence of a magical, animistic world that operates beyond clerical and masculine control.

This dynamic aligns with Michel Foucault's analysis of madness as a social construct deployed to discipline non-conforming minds. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault shows how, in early modern and classical Europe, madness is gradually constituted as a social fact by separating the mad from the poor, the criminal, and the idle and confining them in specialised institutions. *Confinement*, he argues, does not simply protect society from a pre-existing danger, but participates in producing madness as a distinct identity by isolating and naming certain behaviours and perceptions as unreason:

> Confinement merely manifested what madness, in its essence, was: a manifestation of non-being; and by providing this manifestation, confinement thereby suppressed it, since it restored it to its truth as nothingness. Confinement is the practice which corresponds most exactly to madness

> experienced as unreason, that is, as the empty negativity of reason; by confinement, madness is acknowledged to be nothing. (Foucault 116)

Arden's narrative *mirrors* this logic, but transposes confinement into marriage and exile rather than into the asylum. Anna, whose visions cannot be accommodated in the ordered space of the Moscow court, is married off to Pyotr and sent to the remote northern estate of Lesnaya Zemlya—a domestic "asylum" where her unreason can be forgotten or consumed out of sight. Madness becomes a category of non-being—reason's negative image—whose "truth" is defined entirely from outside. Arden's narrative mirrors this logic, but transposes confinement into marriage and exile rather than into the asylum. Anna, whose visions cannot be accommodated in the ordered space of the Moscow court, is married off to Pyotr and sent to the remote northern estate of *Lesnaya Zemlya*—a domestic "asylum" where her unreason can be forgotten or consumed out of sight.

Foucault argues that madness is not a stable, transhistorical biological condition but a *category* produced by specific power structures to exclude and silence those who deviate from the norms of reason, propriety, and productivity. He sees such exclusionary practices as being governed by the unnatural strictness of the human dichotomising tendencies fueled by those in power, and by "reason" and the classical tendency of thought. And yet, according to him, nature does not function on such stark contrasting binarism, and "[m]adness designates the equinox between the vanity of night's hallucinations and the non-being of light's judgments" (Foucault 111).

The patriarchal power of the medieval Rus, however, confines someone like Anna in a double bind of misogynistic suppression and the categorising tendency of deeming any mental deviance in the light of sin or possession. Such perceived mental vulnerability in women was a prevalent way of thinking, explaining the wretched brutality of the witch trials, for instance.

The mad person is not simply ill; they are unreasonable, and unreason becomes a justification for confinement, marginalisation, and the erasure of testimony. Anna's "sinful imagination" would, in Foucault's framework, be a textbook case of what early modern Europe called *démonomanie*: the demonological interpretation of mental disturbance, where spiritual transgression and psychological dysfunction collapse into one.

Foucault describes how the classical age constituted madness as a social fact by separating the mad from the poor, the criminal, and the idle—not out of humanitarian concern, but out of a need to purify the social body. The paradoxicality of this separative tendency cannot go amiss: the very act of categorisation creates the condition it seeks to purge. By isolating the mad, the classical asylum did not eliminate unreason but rather produced it as a distinct, legible, and manageable identity. As Foucault states: "[…] confinement did seek to suppress madness, to eliminate from the social order a figure which did not find its place within it; the essence of confinement was not the exorcism of a danger. Confinement merely manifested what madness, in its essence, was: a manifestation of non-being […]" (Foucault 115).

In this formulation, madness is not a pre-existing essence that confinement targets; rather, confinement reveals madness as a void, an absence of reason—a "non-being" that defines itself only through its expulsion. The asylum does not cure; it labels and excludes, transforming a diffuse social unease into a circumscribed population of the unreasonable.

This logic of exclusion finds a precise literary analogue in the fate of Anna Ivanovna in Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale*. Her family, unable to accommodate her visions—which are, within the novel's fantasy ontology, genuine perceptions of the supernatural—resorts to the

early modern equivalent of confinement: marriage as exile. Anna is married off and dispatched to the remote tundra, to the estate of a "wild lord." The journey from Moscow to the northern wilderness recapitulates the Foucauldian trajectory from the centre of order to the periphery of abandonment. Just as the classical age confined the mad to hospitals and workhouses, so does Anna's society confine the inconvenient woman to the domestic prison of an isolated marriage.

Yet the parallel is not merely structural; it is also epistemological. Anna's society calls her imagination "sinful," her visions demonic. In Foucault's terms, her madness is a "manifestation of non-being" because it does not correspond to the sanctioned reality of Orthodox Christian patriarchy. She is removed from the social body not because she is dangerous in any tangible sense, but because her mode of perception threatens the symbolic order. The remote tundra becomes her asylum—a space where her unreason can be forgotten, or where it can be allowed to consume her without contaminating the community.

Fantasy, however, *complicates* this Foucauldian reading. In Arden's novel, Anna's visions are not delusions but accurate apprehensions of a magical ecology that exists alongside the human world. The reader knows this; the narrative confirms it. Thus, the very mechanism that her society uses to condemn her—the accusation of madness—is revealed to be a failure of perception on the part of the accusers. The "non-being" that confinement manifests is not Anna's madness but the society's willed blindness. Fantasy's externalising capability here performs a critical function: it makes visible the reality that patriarchy and religious orthodoxy conspire to deny. The reader is positioned not as a diagnostician but as a witness to an injustice. In this way, the genre reclaims the figure of the "madwoman" from the archive of exclusion and restores to her a world—literally, a secondary world—in which her perceptions are valid, her testimony credible, and her exile unjust.

Thus, Anna's journey to the tundra is not merely a plot device but a structural enactment of what Foucault calls "the great confinement" (Foucault xii). Yet fantasy, by affirming the ontological reality of what Anna sees, transforms the asylum into a site of critique. The remote estate becomes less a place of punishment than a vantage point from which the oppressive rationality of the centre can be seen for what it is: a machinery for the production of unreason as a tool of social control. Anna's shiver as she removes her sarafan is therefore the tremor of a double awareness—she fears the wilderness, but she also fears the civilisation that has already condemned her. The novel asks its readers to recognise that the true madness may lie not in the one who sees demons, but in the society that refuses to see them and silences those who do.

The mad were confined not because they were sick, but because they were different. Their words were deemed worthless; their visions were dismissed as hallucinations or demonic possession. Anna's fear— "what would it be like alone on the estate of a wild lord?" (Arden 45)—reflects this logic of exclusion precisely. Removed from the relative surveillance of Moscow, she anticipates a space where her perception will be even more vulnerable to being labelled insane, and where she will have no witnesses to validate her reality.

Yet Foucault's analysis also offers a critical tool: it reveals that the labelling of madness is never neutral. It is an act of power. Anna's society calls her sinful, perhaps even mad, not because she is disconnected from reality, but because she perceives a reality that threatens the symbolic order of Christian patriarchy. The demons she sees are, in the novel's fantasy ontology, real. Her madness is not a failure of perception but an excess of it—a capacity to see what others have been trained to deny. The

tragedy is that she has internalised the accusation, shivering not only from cold but from the terror of her own condemned perception.

Fantasy's Externalising Capability

This is where fantasy as a genre performs its distinctive work. In a realist novel, Anna's visions would remain ambiguous—hallucinations, hysteria, the symptoms of untreated mental illness. The reader would be invited to diagnose her from a clinical distance. But in Arden's fantasy, the demons, *domovoi*, and spirits are *literal*. The narrative world *validates* Anna's perception even as her society invalidates it. Fantasy externalises what realism would internalise. *The demons are not merely metaphors for repressed desire or religious anxiety;* they are actual entities that interact with characters, protect households, and threaten those who deny them.

Le Guin, Fantasy, and the Reclamation of Madness in The Bear and the Nightingale

Ursula K. Le Guin's ontological and psychological conception of fantasy constitutes a foundational pillar for understanding how Katherine Arden's novel operates. Her assertion, as synthesised by Kurtz, positions the genre not as a flight from reality but as a transformative hermeneutic apparatus: "[i]ncluding the unreal as a key part of fantasy, Le Guin stresses fantasy's role in helping readers cope with the real world by allowing them to view it in a different way. Fantasy, writes Le Guin, is a journey into the reader's sub-conscious, and 'it will change you'" (Kurtz 574). This compact statement distils a sophisticated theoretical model with multiple, interconnected implications for reading Arden's treatment of madness and gender.

Firstly, the deliberate inclusion of the unreal is framed not as a defect but as the genre's essential functional mechanism. In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, this manifests in the novel's unapologetic validation of its female protagonists' perceptions. Anna's "*sinful*" imagination—her visions of demons that the Church theologically affirms yet socially condemns—and Vasya's communion with *domovoi*, water-spirits, and the frost-demon *Morozko* are not presented as symptoms of mental disturbance but as genuine apprehensions of a supernatural ecology that exists alongside the human world. The unreal acts as a controlled cognitive disruptor, forcibly dismantling the consensus-driven reality of Orthodox patriarchy. It creates the epistemic space necessary for what Le Guin terms "viewing it differently" (Kurtz 574)—a different way of seeing that the novel aligns with the marginalised female perceiver against the authority that condemns her.

Secondly, the purpose of this defamiliarisation is explicitly pragmatic: "helping readers cope with the real world by allowing them to view it in a different way" (Kurtz 574). Arden's novel, by staging its "mad" women as accurate perceivers of a hidden world, invites the reader to question the very categories—sanity, propriety, feminine virtue—that produce the accusation of madness. The "different way of seeing" is not merely aesthetic but strategic: it exposes the constructedness of the norms against which Vasya's wildness and Anna's visions are measured. By navigating a world where the supernatural is real, and the authorities who deny it are revealed as willfully blind, the reader cognitively rehearses a flexibility that transfers to the real-world recognition that what passes for sanity is often only conformity.

Most pertinently, Le Guin locates the engine of this change within the psyche itself, characterising fantasy as a "journey into the reader's subconscious" (Kurtz 574). This moves the model beyond cognitive reframing into the realm of depth psychology. In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, the

fantastical narrative—with its archetypal figures (the frost-demon, the water-spirit, the swan-maiden grandmother) and its dreamlike logic—serves as a socially sanctioned conduit to the personal and collective unconscious. The northern wilderness, the forest, the remote estate of the "wild lord" become projective landscapes where internal conflicts—fears, desires, shadows—are externalised, encountered, and dialogically engaged. Vasya's journey is not merely a physical traversal of the Russian landscape but a psychic descent into the suppressed animistic world that patriarchal Christianity has rendered invisible. The novel's capacity to "change you" (Kurtz 574) underscores a dynamic, transformative process of integration—one that reclaims the "mad" woman's perception as clarity and her exile as a vantage point from which the tyranny of the sane can be seen for what it is.

In Rabkin's terms, *The Bear and the Nightingale* does not simply add marvels to a stable world; it places the very ground rules of knowing in question. Le Guin's framework illuminates how Arden's novel uses fantasy's formal resources to perform this epistemological critique. By validating the visions of its condemned women, by aligning the reader's perception with the marginalised perceiver, and by transforming the accusation of madness into a badge of perceptive courage, the novel stages a cognitive and ethical experiment. It invites us to travel beyond the "Reality" that confines Anna and Vasya, to recognise that what is called madness may be the refusal to stop seeing what power has decreed invisible—and that in such refusal lies not pathology but liberation.

This *externalisation*, thus, has far-reaching implications for the representation of mental health. By making the invisible visible, fantasy liberates the reader from the diagnostic gaze that Foucault identifies as the modern asylum's disciplinary mechanism. We do not stand over Anna, judging whether her perceptions are real; we stand beside her, seeing what she sees. The genre thus creates what your thesis calls a symbolic buffer—a safe, ontologically distinct space where the pathologised mind is not pathologised but witnessed. The reader's mirror neuron system and empathic circuits engage with Anna's fear not as a symptom to be analysed but as an experience to be simulated.

As Professor Christopher French observes, reflecting on the infamous Enfield poltergeist case, which was also the subject of *The Conjuring* series, "[t]his apparent possession… gives license to people to behave in ways that perhaps they really want to but can't due to social conventions. So, the idea of a teenager suddenly being able to swear, use all these obscenities without anybody coming back and telling them this is unacceptable […]" (Real Women/Real Stories, 41:32–41:55). French's insight offers an uncanny reflection of the adolescent psyche under duress: the possession narrative becomes a culturally sanctioned release valve, permitting the eruption of repressed emotion that normative social structures otherwise contain. Within horror contexts, the "demon" functions as a metaphorical vehicle, enabling the psyche—particularly that of a young woman—to violently and supernaturally transgress the grid of acceptable behaviour, giving form to fears, angers, and desires that otherwise find no permissible outlet.

This dynamic finds a powerful and significantly more complex parallel in Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale*. Here, the conventional possession trope is transformed: the external supernatural force is reframed as an externalised manifestation of internal mental and emotional turmoil. Anna Ivanovna's "sinful imagination"—her capacity to perceive the *domovoi*, the *rusalka*, and the demons that haunt the northern wilderness—is pathologised by her society as madness, even as the novel's fantasy ontology validates her sight as genuine. The demons she sees are not invaders from without but projections of a world that patriarchal Orthodox Christianity has rendered invisible. Her

society calls her unreasonable, perhaps even possessed; but the narrative reveals that what she truly perceives is the suppressed animistic reality that the social order must deny to maintain its authority.

Where the possession narrative of horror operates through a logic of invasion and exorcism, Arden's novel operates through a logic of externalisation and witness. Anna is not cured of her visions; she is exiled to the remote estate of a "wild lord," a space that becomes a kind of asylum—both in Foucault's sense of confinement and in the older sense of a sanctuary. The tundra does not silence her perception; it amplifies it. Fantasy's externalising capability here performs a critical function: it makes visible the reality that patriarchy conspires to deny, and it positions the reader not as a diagnostician but as a witness to an injustice. The "demons" Anna sees are real, and their reality indicts the society that labels her mad.

Thus, French's commentary on possession as a release for adolescent repression illuminates a deeper mechanism in Arden's novel. The possession narrative—whether in Enfield, UK or in the medieval Russian setting—becomes a space where the suppressed psyche can speak. But fantasy, by literalising the metaphor, goes further: it transforms the possessed woman into a seer, the asylum into a vantage point, and madness into a form of resistance. Anna's shiver as she removes her sarafan is not merely fear of the wilderness; it is the tremor of a consciousness that has already been condemned by civilisation and is about to discover that its condemned perceptions are, in fact, true.

Most pertinently, Ursula K. Le Guin locates the engine of this faculty of fantasy, which also aids "*defamiliarisation*" on the readerly end, within the psyche itself, characterising fantasy as a "journey into the reader's subconscious" (Kurtz 574). This formulation moves the model beyond cognitive reframing into the domain of depth psychology. The fantastical narrative, with its archetypal symbols and dreamlike logic, serves as a socially sanctioned conduit to the personal and collective unconscious. The secondary world, demons and the mythical beings become a projective landscape—a space where internal conflicts, fears, desires, and shadows are *externalised*, encountered, and dialogically engaged. Fantasy's capacity to effect transformation, in Le Guin's view, resides precisely in this ability to render the invisible terrain of the psyche visible and negotiable (Kurtz 574).

When Anna cries that she sees demons everywhere, her speech is folded into Konstantin's sermonising about Satan's presence rather than being treated as a valid description of a particular mode of perception:

> "Why am I mad?" Her voice came out a hoarse
> whisper.
> "No," Konstantin answered patiently.
> "Why do you *believe* that you are?"
> "I *see*—things. Demons, devils. Everywhere. All the time."
> "But why should that mean you are mad? The Church teaches that demons walk among us. *Do you deny the teachings of the Church*?" (Arden 95)

The dialogue between Anna and Konstantin crystallises the novel's central epistemological conflict: who possesses the authority to define reality, and by what mechanisms is dissent from that reality pathologised? Anna's whispered confession— "I see—things. Demons, devils. Everywhere. All the time" (Arden 95)—internalises the accusation of madness even as she articulates it. Konstantin's response performs a cunning rhetorical reversal, exposing the double bind that structures Anna's existence: if she denies the Church's teaching that demons exist, she is a heretic; if she affirms it, her perception cannot be madness. The trap reveals the arbitrary production of unreason that Foucault

diagnoses in *Madness and Civilization*: Anna's society does not discover her madness; it produces it by invalidating perceptions it theologically affirms. Fantasy's externalising function here performs a critical intervention. The reader knows the demons are real; we are aligned with Anna's perception against the ecclesiastical authority that gaslights her. Her "madness," in this light, is not a failure of perception but a refusal to stop seeing what power has decreed invisible—a refusal that the novel ultimately validates as clarity, not delusion.

When Vasya insists that the *domovoi* and the horses speak to her, her testimony is silently recoded as either childish imagination or a dangerous flirtation with the devil. The village thus enacts its own pre-modern "great confinement," as Foucault had said, not in asylums but through the threat of the convent, social ostracism, the circulation of rumours, and, finally, violence.

Showalter's feminist history sharpens the gendered edge of this process. In *The Female Malady*, she shows how modern psychiatry and popular culture have repeatedly *feminised* madness, identifying "insanity" with failed or excessive femininity. By the late nineteenth century, as she writes, madness had become a female condition since "[e]ven when both men and women had similar symptoms of mental disorder, psychiatry differentiated between an English malady, associated with the intellectual and economic pressures on highly civilized/men, and a female malady; associated with the sexuality and essential nature of women" (Showalter 7).

Though Arden's setting predates the Victorian asylums, the infamous *Bedlam*, the same structural logic is evident. Women who cannot or will not occupy normative positions—pious noblewoman, obedient wife, cloistered nun—are swiftly *reclassified as witches or madwomen.* Vasya's refusal to marry, her habitual roaming of the forest, and her insistence on relations with invisible beings all mark her as dangerously unfeminine. Anna's constant trembling, terror, and obsession with the cross situate her in a recognisable genealogy of the hysterical visionary: excessively devout yet always on the edge of collapse. The novel thus anticipates, in medieval guise, the gendered patterns Showalter identifies: women's suffering is seen through culturally available fantasies of femininity gone wrong, and the label of madness functions to reinstate patriarchal control.

Jungian theory helps explain why the witch and madwoman are such potent figures in this economy. In *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung describes the "shadow" as the sum of the disowned, morally troubling, or simply incompatible aspects of the personality that consciousness refuses to acknowledge. As Jung observes, "[t]he shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself […] and yet is always thrusting itself upon him" (265). This shadow is frequently *projected* onto others, who are then demonised as evil, mad, or dangerous. Cultures, as much as individuals, can project their collective shadow onto scapegoated figures.

Fantasy, with its witches, demons, and spirits, externalises these shadow contents, giving concrete form to what a community cannot bear to know about itself. Eric Rabkin, in *The Fantastic in Literature*, argues that the fantastic does not merely add marvellous events to an otherwise stable reality; instead, it "contradicts perspectives" (Rabkin 4), forcing readers to confront the instability of what they take to be real. Arden's fantastic village, in which *chyerti* (spirits) and humans share space and agency, offers a privileged field for observing how projection functions. When Konstantin preaches that the household spirits are devils and that Vasya is a witch, he is not describing ontological facts; he is displacing his own repressed desires and fears onto her and onto the older animist cosmology she embodies.

Finally, Wolframe's work on *counter-psychiatric epistemologies* in women's narratives of madness provides a contemporary critical lens. Wolframe's work frames madwomen's narratives as counter-psychiatric interventions that contest the authority of psychiatric discourse and make lived experience central to knowledge production (Wolframe 17). Arden's novel, though generic fantasy rather than memoir, can be read as participating in this tradition: it insists on the epistemic value of Vasya's "mad" vision and reveals the catastrophic consequences of subordinating it to clerical and patriarchal monologue.

Arden's narrative is saturated with winter: long months of snow, thin harvests, and the constant threat of starvation or freezing. At the novel's opening, Marina rides through a snowstorm heavily pregnant with Vasya; by the time Vasya is a teenager, the village's survival depends on the precarious balance between human labour, the hospitality of the forest, and the protection of the household spirits. As old Dunya explains, the *domovoi, bannik, vazila,* and other beings each guard a particular space—the oven, the bathhouse, the stable—and must be honoured with crumbs of bread and drops of milk. This everyday reciprocity with the unseen is not presented as idiot superstition; it is a hard-won, pragmatic knowledge of how to live in a hostile environment.

The arrival of Father Konstantin, however, disrupts this negotiated coexistence. Handsome, eloquent, and fervently orthodox, he is appalled by the villagers' offerings to the spirits— "All this while, Konstantin condemned the people's offerings—bread or honey-wine—that they made to their hearth-spirits. 'Give it to God,' he said. 'Forget your demons, lest you burn'" (Arden 101).

From the pulpit, he castigates them for heathen superstition and insists that only God and His saints should be honoured. Under his influence, the villagers stop feeding the *domovoi* and other spirits; icons replace offerings in the corners of houses; firelight and incense displace the older rituals of greeting and propitiation. The spirits, starved of attention, grow thin and powerless. The stable-spirit tells Vasya bleakly that "your people waver, and so the chyerti wither. If the Bear comes now you are unprotected. There will be a reckoning. Beware the dead" (Arden 148).

This abandonment of the old pacts is framed by Konstantin as a triumph of reason and true faith over madness and pagan delusion. Yet in narrative terms, it marks the emergence of what might be called collective unreason. As the spirits weaken, the boundary between village and forest erodes, and the Bear—Medved, an ancient destructive power associated with chaos, plague, and the restless dead—begins to stir. Horses panic at shadows that appear "with a madman's grin, and a single, winking eye" (Arden 149); crops fail; snowstorms intensify; the dead do not rest quietly in their graves. The villagers respond not by noticing the correlation between their new piety and their new peril, but by clinging more desperately to Konstantin's sermons about sin and Satan. Their denial of the spirits' reality, in other words, is not an expansion of rationality but a collectively reinforced blindness to material feedback.

Foucault describes how, from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, "the experience of madness was clouded by images of the Fall and the Will of God, of the Beast and the *Metamorphosis*" (Foucault xii), while the classical period marks a separation of reason from unreason through confinement (Foucault 45). Arden's village embodies this historical pivot. For Dunya and the older generation, spirits coexist with God within daily life; the uncanny and divine remain interwoven. Konstantin, however, demands absolute division: whatever is not God must be demonic. Fantasy literalises Foucault's caesura between these experiential modes. Where the old worldview *accommodates* unreason as part of existence, Konstantin's religious regime enforces rational discourse by *pathologising* Vasya's vision as madness or witchcraft.

The irony, of course, is that in the world of the novel, the spirits and the Bear are unambiguously real. Arden's narrator grants readers full access to their presence and agency. We see the *domovoi* grieving when offerings cease, the *vazila* warning Vasya of danger, the Bear laughing in the shadows. From the reader's vantage, then, it is not Vasya who is deluded, but the community that insists on seeing the world only through Konstantin's narrow theological lens. Rabkin's account of the fantastic as a mode that "contradicts perspectives" becomes literal: the narrative systematically undermines the villagers' notion of what is real, aligning truth not with majority opinion but with the perceptions of the marginal girl whom that majority calls mad.

Brian Attebery's formulation of fantasy as "the lie that speaks truth" (Attebery 9) provides a foundational lens for understanding Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale*. The novel's central paradox lies in its validation of perceptions that its own society condemns as false: Anna Ivanovna's visions of demons, Vasya's communion with *domovoi* and forest spirits, the grandmother's rumoured ability to "tame animals, dream the future, and summon rain" (Arden 15). Within the logic of Orthodox patriarchy, these are lies— "sinful" imagination, madness, witchcraft. Yet the novel's fantasy structure insists they are true. This is Attebery's "lie that speaks truth" operating at the level of epistemological critique: the genre makes visible what power has decreed invisible, aligning the reader's perception with the marginalised female perceiver against the authority that condemns her.

This function is further clarified by Attebery's claim that "fantasy is one of the main techniques for reimagining our relationships with traditional myth" (Attebery 9). Arden's novel performs precisely this reimagining. It draws upon the rich reservoir of Slavic folklore—the *domovoi*, the *rusalka*, the frost-demon *Morozko*—not as quaint ornamentation but as a living cosmology that challenges the hegemony of Orthodox Christianity. The traditional myth of the demonic is reimagined: what the Church calls evil, the novel reveals as a complex spiritual ecology that women, in particular, are positioned to perceive and negotiate. Vasya's relationship with the frost-demon is not demonic possession but a fraught, intimate negotiation between the human and the numinous. The novel thus uses fantasy to reclaim myth from ecclesiastical monopoly, restoring it as a source of female power and perception.

Attebery's observation that "fantasy tends to work indirectly, just as it means obliquely" (Attebery 6) illuminates the novel's narrative strategy. Arden does not directly polemicise against the patriarchal order; instead, she constructs a secondary world—the northern wilderness, the remote estate, the enchanted forest—where the suppressed can speak obliquely. Anna's "madness" is not explained but externalised; Vasya's wildness is not justified but lived. The novel's meaning emerges not through direct statement but through the gradual accumulation of symbolic encounters. This obliquity is precisely what allows fantasy to address the most charged material—gender oppression, the social construction of madness, the violent exclusion of female perception—without being reduced to polemic.

On the question of fear, Attebery writes: "[t]his chapter is about fantasy and the unknown: we fear what we don't know and, of those unknowns, most fear whatever seems most unlike ourselves. Fantasy, however, offers ways to absorb that fear and transmute it into something useful" (Attebery 148). In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, the unknown is figured as the wild, the feminine, the spirit world, the "mad" woman's perception. The society fears Vasya not because she is dangerous but because she is unlike—unlike the obedient daughter, the pious churchgoer, the silent wife. Fantasy absorbs this fear by making the unknown knowable: we enter Vasya's perception; we see what she sees; we learn that her "madness" is clarity. The fear is transmuted into recognition, and recognition into solidarity. This is the

"something useful" that fantasy produces—a cognitive and ethical reorientation toward the marginalised perceiver.

Finally, Attebery's assertion that successful fantasy writers "offer us scenarios for survival. And a scenario that transforms armed camps into neighborhoods is a magical spell much needed in our troubled time" (Attebery 62) speaks directly to the novel's political and therapeutic function. *The Bear and the Nightingale* does not merely depict oppression; it models survival. Vasya does not become sane by submitting to the convent or marriage; she becomes herself by refusing both. The novel offers a scenario in which the "armed camps" of Orthodox patriarchy and pagan spirituality, of masculine authority and feminine perception, of the sane and the so-called mad, are not resolved by conquest but negotiated through Vasya's liminal, unbounded existence. This is the "magical spell" that fantasy casts: it invites the reader to imagine a world where the condemned woman is not cured but believed, where the "mad" perceiver is not exiled but honoured, and where the categories that produce unreason are themselves revealed as the true madness.

In Attebery's terms, *The Bear and the Nightingale* is fantasy at its most potent: it speaks truth through the lie of the unreal; it reimagines myth as a resource for female agency; it works obliquely to expose what direct statement cannot; it transmutes fear of the unknown into solidarity with the marginalised; and it offers a scenario for survival in a world that would silence its most perceptive women. The novel thus exemplifies fantasy's capacity not to escape reality but to redescribe it—to make visible what power hides, and in doing so, to change how we see.

Vasya: Witch, Madwoman, and Seer

From the moment of her birth, Vasya occupies a liminal space. Marina, her mother, who dies bringing her into the world, foretells and suggests that liminality— "'[…] but this one'—Marina's free hand slipped up, shaping a cradle to hold a baby—'this one will be different'" (Arden 16). From the moment of her birth, Vasya occupies a liminal space. Dunya remarks that Vasya has inherited her grandmother's strange qualities, noting that her mother "[…] rode through the kremlin-gates, alone except for her tall gray horse. Despite filth and hunger and weariness, rumors dogged her footsteps. She had such grace, the people said, and eyes like the swan-maiden in a fairy tale" (Arden 14-15). As a child, Vasya plays with the *domovoi*, feeds the household spirits, chats with the water-spirit in the river, and intuits the horses' moods. As an adolescent, she slips out at night to ride bareback and wander the forest. None of these behaviours fits the village's expectations for a well-born girl, who should sew, spin, and prepare for marriage or a convent. Vasya's declaration that she will not marry or enter a convent demonstrates her refusal to be confined by any prescribed social role. Her maternal lineage reinforces this in-between state. Pyotr's internal lament— "[s]he is braver and wilder than any of my sons. But what good is that in a woman? … how can I save her from herself?" (Arden 154)—exposes the tragic paradox at the heart of Vasya's liminal position. He loves the very qualities that his society deems worthless in a daughter, yet he misrecognises the threat as internal to her ("herself") rather than external. The novel's fantasy ontology, however, aligns the reader with Vasya's perception: her wildness is *not* madness but clarity, *not* a flaw but a capacity. Pyotr's desire to "save" her is thus revealed as the desire to conform her—to domesticate the very bravery that makes her who she is. In this light, the true danger is not Vasya's nature but a world that has no place for such a nature, and that pathologises as "mad" what it cannot contain— "Marina, thought Pyotr. You left me this *mad* girl, and I love her well" (Arden 154). Thus, Vasya is positioned from birth at the threshold—between the human and the spirit world,

between obedience and rebellion, between sanity and the accusation of madness. This liminality is not a flaw but the very source of her perception and agency within the novel's fantastical landscape.

Within the cultural scripts available to her community, such a girl can only be a witch or mad. After Vasya rides the stallion Ogon bareback to rescue her nephew from a bolting mare—a feat which Kyril, her would-be suitor, reads as "[b]lack magic might have held that girl on my horse's back, but no mortal art" (Arden 152-53)—he breaks off the betrothal, declaring that he wants "a woman in my house, not a witch or a wood-sprite" (Arden 153). The neighbours mutter that she "rides like a demon," that she made the horse run mad, that she steals horses at night. Pyotr contemplates sending her to a convent, thinking bitterly, "[s]he is braver and wilder than any of my sons. But what good is that in a woman?" (Arden 154). Her *differences*—courage, physical skill, intimacy with animals and spirits—are at once admired, feared, and marked as unfeminine.

Under Showalter's lens, Vasya resembles the nineteenth-century hysteric or "madwoman" whose symptoms express both protest and imprisonment. Showalter understands women's madness and its history of representation, that "[…] these photographic representations were no more objective or scientific than Morison's sketches, but simply made use of another set of visual and psychiatric conventions" (Showalter 87), these representational deviences again thereby used to pathologise and subdue. Vasya's refusal of marriage and seclusion, her bodily freedom, and her connections to non-human beings all challenge patriarchal definitions of femininity, hinting at Showalter's study of the suppressive "rehabilitative" trends, with "woman going through four stages of puerperal mania, from dementia to recovery, Victorianizes Hogarthian conventions of the 'progress'" (Showalter 87). Vasya, undoubtedly, reflects the *dementiatic* end, with "[h]er madness is represented by untidy hair" (Arden 87), and her return to society would be "her return to sanity, primarily by appropriate feminine costume—a matronly bonnet and a nice paisley shawl" (Arden 87). This is a pertinent depiction of the *genderised* idea of madness and impropriety. Labelling her a witch or a lunatic becomes a way of invalidating that challenge and rendering her available for confinement or eradication.

Yet Arden refuses to allow Vasya's story to be captured by those labels. The novel's ontology consistently validates her perceptions. The beings she sees are real; her conversations with them have concrete effects; her actions, based on those conversations, save lives. When she feeds the *domovoi* secretly after her family stops leaving offerings, the household spirit grows stronger and helps protect them. When she heeds the *vazila's* warning and confronts the undead, she prevents the spread of plague. When she rides with *Morozko's* horse Solovey at the climax, she alone can reach the Bear and prevent the destruction of her village. In Jungian terms, Vasya is not simply bearing the community's shadow; she is beginning to integrate her own, recognising that the wildness and danger she perceives are also part of herself.

The village projects onto her much that it cannot admit in itself: fear of the forest, ambivalence about the old gods, envy of freedom, desire for contact with the numinous, and thus judges her unfairly— "said Vasya. 'You are good. You are the best little girl I know. Much better than I am. But, little sister, you don't think I am a witch. Others do.' 'That is true,' said Alyosha. He had also seen the villagers' black stares, heard their whispers during the funeral'" (Arden 260).

Jung writes that projection is "[…] an unconscious, automatic process whereby a content that is unconscious to the subject transfers itself to an object, so that it seems to belong to that object. The projection ceases the moment it becomes conscious, that is to say when it is seen as belonging to the subject" (Jung 72). These create, in a sense, *blind* spots. In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, those blind

spots are deadly. By insisting that Vasya is a witch and that the spirits she honours are demons, the villagers blind themselves to the Bear's awakening and to their responsibility for it. Calling her mad is not a description; it is a defence mechanism that enables collective denial.

Psychologically, the consequences of this scapegoating are visible in Vasya's moments of doubt. She often wonders whether she is, in fact, monstrous or wrong; she contemplates taking the veil simply to relieve her family of the burden she represents. Yet she ultimately refuses self-annihilation. Her decision to ride out into the forest and confront the Bear is both a narrative and a psychic turning point. She accepts that she will be seen as a witch and chooses, nonetheless, to act in accordance with what she knows to be true. In doing so, she inhabits what Wolframe would call a counter-psychiatric position: she asserts the authority of her own experience over the diagnostic categories imposed upon her.

Fantasy as Counter-Discourse on Madness

Because *The Bear and the Nightingale* is a fantasy, not a realist novel, the usual boundary between madness and reality cannot be drawn by appeal to empirical verification. Spirits are real; the dead walk; winter demons ride white horses through the sky. This ontological difference is not an evasion of questions about madness but a deliberate *reconfiguration* of them. In such a world, what distinguishes madness from vision cannot be the mere presence of the impossible. Instead, the novel offers other criteria: relationality, ethical consequence, and openness to the more-than-human.

Vasya's perceptions, though feared and misread, are consistently oriented toward care for her family, her village, and the spirits themselves. She listens to the *domovoi's* grief, feeds the *vazila* even when forbidden, and negotiates with *Morozko* to save her people. Anna's terror, by contrast, is isolating and self-cancelling; she can neither form alliances with the beings she sees nor find a discursive community that might help her interpret them. Konstantin's visions are entirely caught in a self-referential loop of sin, punishment, and power. In other words, Arden is less interested in the *content* of their perceptions (all three experience the supernatural) than in the *forms of life* those perceptions enable or foreclose.

Wolframe argues that literary studies "would benefit from mad perspectives" (Wolframe iii) and that narratives of madness and mad reading practices can operate as "counter-psychiatric perspective[s]" (Wolframe 4) which "invite us to question the limits of reason, truth and subjectivity" (Wolframe iii). Vasya's story exemplifies this. From the standpoint of the village, she is mad or a witch; from the standpoint of the narrative, she is the only character who fully perceives the entanglement of human, spiritual, and ecological forces shaping their world. Her "*madness*" is, in this sense, a situated way of knowing that exposes the blindness of official reason.

Moreover, Arden's specific deployment of the witch figure aligns with recent ecofeminist scholarship that reconceives the "ecowitch [as] a radical, intersectional agent of healing, resistance, and transformation, deeply attuned to the interdependencies between human and more-than-human life," (Sotelo 22-23) and as part of an "ecowitchcraft" that evolves green witchcraft into "a distinctly ecofeminist and ecocritical praxis" (Sotelo 25). This resists "colonial legacies and capitalist patriarchy" (Sotelo 23). Vasya's kinship with horses, spirits, and the winter forest places her in precisely this lineage. Her prosecution as a witch is also a prosecution of a way of being that refuses to regard land, animals, and unseen beings as mere resources or illusions.

Rabkin's central contribution to fantasy theory is his insistence that the fantastic must be understood as a structural, perspectival event rather than as a mere collection of marvellous motifs. He writes that "the fantastic does more than extend experience; the fantastic contradicts perspectives"

(Rabkin 4). This contradiction is not a vague sense of strangeness but a precise formal operation: "[o]ne of the key distinguishing marks of the fantastic is that the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of the narrative world must be diametrically contradicted" (Rabkin 8). In other words, fantasy is *not* defined simply by the presence of dragons, ghosts, or witches, but by the way such figures force a 180-degree reversal in what has been established as possible, meaningful, or coherent within the text's own diegetic order. For a project concerned with madness, this emphasis on perspective and "ground rules" is especially suggestive: insanity, too, is narrated as a breakdown or reversal of the shared rules that make perception legible.

Rabkin's distinction between the "World of Enchantment" and true fantasy sharpens this point. In fairy-tale enchantment, once the marvellous premises are accepted— "a long time ago, there lived a King and Queen" (Rabkin 34)—the narrative proceeds according to stable, foreknown rules: miracles become "a matter of course," and the enchanted world does not continually reconfigure its own logic (Rabkin 35). By contrast, in Fantasy proper, as Rabkin demonstrates through Carroll's *Alice* books, the text persistently turns its own expectations inside out. He notes that once Alice has "got so much into the way of expecting nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen" (Rabkin 37), it is suddenly "dull and stupid for life to go on in the common way" (Rabkin 37), and the narrative can make even a cake that behaves normally feel uncanny. Fantasy, then, is not simply more marvellous than realism; it is more volatile than enchantment itself, because it targets "the very nature of ground rules, how we know things, on what bases we make assumptions, in short, the problem of human knowing" (Rabkin 37).

This is precisely the terrain on which literary representations of madness operate, as they unsettle the reader's confidence in what counts as rational inference, reliable perception, or "normal" affect. In *The Bear and the Nightingale,* Katherine Arden harnesses this volatility to align the reader's epistemology with the marginalised female perceiver. Anna Ivanovna is condemned as mad for seeing demons that the Church theologically affirms; Vasya's communion with *domovoi* and water-spirits is pathologised as wildness precisely because it exceeds sanctioned feminine behaviour. The novel does not simply present an enchanted world of stable marvels; it systematically destabilises the reader's assumptions about who gets to define reality. By validating the visions of its "*mad*" women while exposing the hypocrisy of ecclesiastical and patriarchal authority, Arden's text performs the cognitive work Rabkin identifies as fantasy's highest function: it forces a reckoning with "the very nature of ground rules" and exposes the constructedness of the categories—sanity, gender, propriety—that purport to contain the unruly perceiver. In doing so, the novel reclaims madness not as a failure of perception but as a clarity that power cannot afford to acknowledge.

On Rabkin's account, fantasy is not an optional ornament layered upon Reality but a fundamental cognitive mode. "Fantasy represents a basic mode of human knowing; its polar opposite is Reality," he argues (Rabkin 227). By "reality", he means the sedimented set of perspectives and habits we acquire "in order to survive in the here and now" (Rabkin 227)—the inherited frameworks that tell us what is reasonable, what is visible, and what must be denied. Fantasy, by contrast, is the continual possibility of stepping outside those constraints, of recognising that "beliefs, even beliefs about Reality, are arbitrary" (Rabkin 218).

This epistemological volatility is precisely what Katherine Arden exploits in *The Bear and the Nightingale.* The novel's medieval Russian society operates on a settled Reality: Orthodox Christianity dictates what is holy and what is demonic, what a woman may see and what she must deny. Anna's perception of demons is pathologised as madness, and Vasya's communion with *domovoi* and forest

spirits is dismissed as wildness unbecoming of a girl. Yet the novel's fantasy structure systematically *undermines* that "*Reality.*" The reader knows the spirits are real; we see what the women see. Arden thus uses fantasy not to escape the world but to expose the arbitrariness of the beliefs that claim to constitute it. The accusation of madness, in this light, is revealed as a mechanism for policing perception—a way to enforce the "reality" that power requires. Fantasy, by making visible what that Reality excludes, restores to the "mad" woman a form of knowing that is not deviation but clarity.

In Rabkin's terms, *The Bear and the Nightingale* does not simply add marvels to a stable world; it places the very ground rules of knowing in question. It invites the reader to recognise that what passes for sanity is often only conformity, and that what is condemned as madness may be the refusal to stop seeing what power has decreed invisible.

In a strikingly humanist formulation, Rabkin concludes that "the glory of man is that he is not bounded by reality. Man travels in fantastic worlds" (Rabkin 227). When a text stages madness within a fantastic framework, it therefore does more than pathologise an individual psyche: it dramatises this very capacity to "travel" beyond the prevailing reality-principle, to test how far perspectives can be contradicted before they collapse. Such narratives can be read, following Rabkin, as experiments in cognitive and ethical limits, using the formal resources of Fantasy—the 180-degree reversal of narrative ground rules—to figure the destabilising experience of insanity while also exposing the constructedness of the norms against which "*madness*" is measured.

In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, this experimental function is brought to bear on the specific historical and gendered construction of unreason. Anna Ivanovna's "sinful imagination" and Vasya's uncontainable wildness are not presented as individual pathologies but as perceptual capacities that the dominant reality-principle—Orthodox patriarchy—must suppress to maintain its authority. By aligning the reader's perception with the visions of its condemned women, the novel performs the cognitive work Rabkin identifies: it invites us to travel beyond the "reality" that confines them, to recognise that what passes for sanity is often only conformity, and that what is condemned as madness may be the refusal to stop seeing what power has decreed invisible. Fantasy here becomes not an escape from the world but a mode of critique, using its formal volatility to expose the arbitrariness of the norms that claim to constitute reality itself.

Concludingly, *The Bear and the Nightingale* offers a powerful counter-discourse to both clerical demonology and modern psychiatric monologue. It refuses to stabilise madness as an individual defect located in women's bodies or brains. Instead, it reveals it as a floating signifier deployed to police gender, suppress alternative knowledges, and maintain human exceptionalism. At the same time, it does not romanticise all non-normative perception; Anna's and Konstantin's arcs make clear that some forms of unreason are indeed destructive. What matters is not who sees spirits, but how those spirits are understood, and who gets to decide what that understanding means.

By granting narrative authority to Vasya—the witch-madwoman whom her community would silence—Arden participates in the broader feminist and mad-studies project of listening to those historically pathologised and burned. In a world still inclined to dismiss certain experiences as "crazy" simply because they do not fit available frameworks, *The Bear and the Nightingale* suggests that survival—personal, communal, ecological—may depend on learning to hear exactly those voices we have been taught to fear.

Works Cited

1. Arden, Katherine. *The Bear and the Nightingale*. Del Rey, 2017.
2. Attebery, Brian. *Fantasy: How It Works*. Oxford U P, 2022.
3. BBC News. "Adolescence Lasts into 30s, New Study Shows | BBC News." *YouTube*, 25 Nov. 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3yiEuPzPvA.
4. Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization*: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason. Translated by Richard Howard, Vintage Books, 1988.
5. Jung, C. G. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed., Princeton U P, 1968.
6. Kurtz, Patti J. "Understanding and Appreciating Fantasy Literature." *Choice Reviews Online*, vol. 45, 2007, pp. 571–80.
7. Le Guin, Ursula. *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction.* Harper Perennial, 1992.
8. Rabkin, Eric S. *The Fantastic in Literature*. Princeton University Press, 1976.
9. Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980.* Virago, 1987.
10. Sotelo, Xiana. "Literary Ecowitches in the Symbiocene: Healing the Wounds of the Earth and Its Peoples through Lunarpunk Posthuman Re-Story-ation Narratives." *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 91, 2025, pp. 21–39.
11. Wolframe, PhebeAnn M. *Reading Through Madness: Counter-Psychiatric Epistemologies and the Biopolitics of (In)sanity in Post-World War II Anglo-Atlantic Women's Narratives.* 2013. McMaster University, PhD dissertation.