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# Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell, The Magic of Sociality, and Radical Fantasy

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Received: 17 September 2020; Accepted: 12 October 2020; Published: 21 October 2020



**Abstract:** Despite huge sales and publicity on its issuance in 2004, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* has received comparatively little sustained critical attention. This article argues that much of this neglect proceeds from assumptions that the book is nostalgic for a sovereign magic, when in fact its historicity is a way of shaking up time itself. I argue Clarke is looking to the early nineteenth century as the earliest possible modernity, a time in which magic is intertwined with the world much as it would be today if magic arose now. Examining the sociable magician Norrell, the questionably resurgent medieval king John Uskglass and the African-descended manservant Stephen Black provide different models of what the interrelationship between magic and reality can be and serve to destabilize any sense of a sovereign past in the book. The book's plural magical modernity's counter any atavistic sovereignty. By taking the reading of Clarke's novel beyond nostalgic sovereignty, one can understand how it participates in the twenty-first century revaluation of fantasy as politically progressive and epistemically radical.

**Keywords:** radical fantasy; sovereignty; Susanna Clarke; modernity; multiculturalism

## 1. Clarke as Radical Fantasist

Susanna Clarke's 2004 novel *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* has often been associated with pastiche. Jenny McDonnell described the book as undertaking "a pastiche of nineteenth-century literary conventions" (McDonnell 2015, p. 153). Pastiche is indeed a highly relevant mode to the appreciation and analysis of the book. Clarke's emulation of early nineteenth-century styles of writing and address are a crucial ingredient in creating a fine-grained, discernibly past world, in which magic is still real. As Douglas Charles Kane points out, the book was a "major commercial and critical success" (Kane 2018, p. 133) and won "numerous awards and accolades". The popular success of Clarke's novel (which includes a television adaptation and a board game based on it) did not, however, always lead to a view of the novel as radical and subversive.

Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun argues that *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* aims to bring "repressed voices" (Borowska-Szerszun 2015, p. 4) to light and not only swerves away from but rejects the sovereign and nostalgic proclivities of much of the existing fantasy canon, or at least the interpretation of that canon by certain critics. This essay argues that the novel does indeed assert repressed voices, but it also maintains that we need to understand its complicated sense of modernity and historicity, sovereignty and temporality, to understand just how it does this. We will see this most declaratively in the last section, on the importance of the African-born Stephen Black in the book and the way he represents a very different sort of magic to the comfortably "English".

Most academic commentary on the novel either praises its resurrection of magic or excoriates what is seen as its nostalgic pastiche. I wish to take a different tack, celebrating the novel's fantastic vision but aligning it with a vision that is contemporary and provocatively anti-hegemonic. The first section of the essay will be devoted to Clarke as radical fantasist. There is a lot of evidence in her text that her intentions are highly radical, but the book's historical setting has tended to mask this. By this, I do not

mean that it is historical as such but rather that it is set in a certain period best known for reaction to the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Clarke's novel is set during and after the defeat of Napoleon, so there is a tendency to assume its ostentatious parading of English gentility is intended as a triumphant rebuke to the overweening aspirations of the French Imperial arriviste. Yet there is much that is radical and little that is reassuring in the novel. It looks at a wide range of English society, across class, racial, gender, corporeal, and temporal boundaries, and therefore its magics are varied as well: mendacious and forceful, nostalgic and prophetic, professorial and charismatic. The presence of magic does not augur magical sovereignty. By 'sovereignty', I mean the tendency to see the irruption of magic onto a realistic world as involving a repeal or regression of modernity. Despite appearing, in its rhetoric of the revival of magic and its fusty, mock-scholarly footnotes, to play into such formulation, Clarke's novel actually sketches its own version of a heterogeneous modernity.

Elizabeth Hoiem contends that Clarke goes back into the past as "as a living text, newly received and interpreted in the present" (Hoiem 2008, online). What Hoiem analyzes as the way magic in *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* at once slides in rather inconspicuously yet also subverts hierarchical and establishment ideas of Englishness renders Clarke's sense of the past far from cute or cloying, as pastiche might seem. Hoiem states that Clarke's novel makes readers "rethink our relationship to history, not as something lost that we must recover or anachronistically alter . . . ". Just because Clarke employs history as a setting, it does not mean she posits it as a given or as a substrate. Whether it be the nearer history of the urbane early nineteenth century or the deeper medieval history of magic's medieval sources, Hoiem stresses that Clarke is not looking to history as a stable past but using it to upset the apple-cart of temporality itself through magic. The following question is asked by Jonathan Strange himself, two-thirds of the way through the novel: "How can we restore English magic until we understand what it is we are supposed to be restoring?" (Clarke 2004, p. 686). It is an open question in Clarke's novel, and the reception and interpretation Hoiem speaks of ramifies as much as clarifies the process of understanding of which Jonathan Strange speaks. I would extend Hoiem's analysis by pointing out how variegated magic is in the book, the way it migrates from a category of inefficacy to one of efficacy, and a category of playful bemusement to one of real risk and danger. Magic in the novel hovers between being a quirky adornment of the given society and an existential threat to it in a way that makes every iteration of magic distinct and contingent.

The very figure of Norrell dictates that we cannot, without some form of tension, have both magic and pastiche, thaumaturgy and footnotes. Norrell has learned his magic from books, from within the matrix of print culture, which in many ways is coextensive with modernity itself. Even late in the book, after he has both established his fame and is aware of the currents of magic in the real and spirit worlds, Norrell is still looking for magic from the printed book. He applauds Lord Portishead's latest book of magic, which has "just arrived from the printer" (p. 519). Norrell and Strange (who at this point is cooperating with Norrell) both applaud Lord Portishead's antagonism towards the Raven King and his elision of John Uskglass's deeds from the history of English magic. This might make one think Clarke is belittling this book-bound magician who is fighting a battle against more visceral and primordial forces. However, Clarke herself is evoking magic through the mechanism of print culture. Evoke the Raven King as she might, she is bound to the medium favored by Norrell. If the lesson of Norrell is that print culture cannot fully master magic, Clarke is part, also, of this inability to master. In this sense, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* might augur a unitarily nostalgic identity of pastiche and magic far less likely.

There is a decisive radicalism, an opening of society to responsiveness, in Clarke's representation of nineteenth-century England. Borowska-Szerszun sees *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* as representing the supersession of the domestic by the uncanny. This is a process Farah Mendlesohn has termed "escalation" (Mendlesohn 2008, p. 151). Yet the sociality found in the novel draws Clarke's world towards a modernity intermittently found in our own world, rather than othering magic as grounded in an authoritarian sovereignty. What Douglass Thomson calls the "domestication of the marvelous" (Thomson 2011, p. 325) might also be termed embedding the marvelous in sociality. Sociality, that is to

say a sense of ongoing urbane interrelation in the present, in the novel exudes a sense of commitment to a shared world. But sociality also displays a felt awareness of how all the elements in that world, fantastic and real, impinge on each other in a modern way. That Strange and Norrell's imprisonment in limbo at the novel's conclusion is so wrenching for us is precisely because they seem so much part of our own world. If they can be in limbo, so, potentially, can we. Though Clarke's 2020 novel *Piranesi* is in no way a sequel to *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, it has a similar interweave between magical and real time and a sense that the magical and mundane are not sufficient in their own terms, that each needs to find solutions to its enigmas in the other (Clarke 2020).

Neil Gaiman has noted (Gaiman 2015, online) that the footnotes seem to be written by someone closer to Strange and Norrell's time than our own. This is a sign that the future timeline of the novel does not diverge drastically from ours, that whatever was transacted between Faerie and England does not overly transmogrify the latter. Footnotes provide a narrative *terminus ad quem*. They give a sense that the action of the novel is chronicled retrospectively from a vantage point in which no decisively new order has been established, no ordinary way of being has been overthrown. What critics have seen as atmospheric pastiche in Clarke's novel may be something closer to a reality effect. No figure exemplifies this more than the character at once most prominent in the narrative and easiest to underestimate: Mr Norrell.

## 2. Mr Norrell's Sociable Magic

The remainder of this essay will focus on three major characters: Mr Norrell, the magician who emerges from his Yorkshire sequestration to become the toast of high society during the Napoleonic Wars; John Uskglass, the Raven King, ruler of northern England for three centuries in the Middle Ages and, according to his acolytes, waiting like Arthur to return as king; and, most importantly, Stephen Black, the African-descended servant who, at the end of the book, becomes king in a fairy realm. Each of these characters tug the implications of the book away from pastiche in its most uncomplicated sense. Rather than being situated comfortably within an imagined conservative pastiche, they demonstrate the novel's sociality, in which fantasy itself yields radical political implications.

Norrell himself is a paradox. He represents the modern magician, the magician who is assimilable in polite, urbane society. Jonathan Strange and, later, the renascent specter of the fairy king, John Uskglass, conjured by the street magician Vinculus, come to challenge Norrell. It seems as if the novel is upending Norrell's halfway magic for a full-bore neo-medievalist re-enactment. Yet the book's very register, its embedding in the sociality of the early nineteenth century, is Norrellian. In other words, its most obvious stylistic traits, its Jane Austen-like qualities, are, with respect to the more primal magic of Strange and Uskglass, modern.

Mr Norrell reopens the entire question of English magic after a long abeyance. Magic aside, Norrell is a conventional haute-bourgeois Englishman who is anti-French, anti-revolution and in favor of the politics of Lord Liverpool, for whom he "works on some magic to help guard against Napoleon Buonaparte ever escaping again" (Clarke 2004, p. 590). A footnote says being both a Strangeite and a Norrellite is like deciding to be both Whig and Tory (Clarke 2004, p. 841). The Byronic Strange is more a figure of the Left, but his actions do not impede the British military cause, even if his magic, like Romanticism itself, is an answer to the imaginative emptiness that accompanied Britain's long victory. Certainly, there is nothing like Byron's or Shelley's active resentment of the victory of the given order of things at Waterloo, ratified at the Congress of Vienna, nor even Wordsworth and Coleridge's reluctant embrace of an establishment whose flaws they had condemned as youths. Maria Farrell gets to the heart of the barriers to reacting to the temporal placement of the novel: "Strange & Norrell, and the political and military elite they become part of, share the historical amnesia and blindness to misfortune that is perhaps common to any establishment newly built on a shaky foundation" (Farrell 2006, online). Farrell understands that Clarke means to critique this state, initially, by introducing the more farouche Strange as a counterpart to Norrell's establishmentarian gentility, and later through the more primordial magic of John Uskglass. This is fairly apparent to serious

readers of the book, but the general climate of opinion surrounding *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* has been inhibited by this impression of Regency historical complacency, filtered through the character of Norrell.

However, as Farah Mendlesohn says, Strange's rough magic is an "intrusion" (Mendlesohn 2005, p. 1) that is "brought into the controlled mannered world of society". Norrell wants to keep magic "vested in himself only". He is, according to Mendlesohn, a "knowledge miser" (p. 3). To my mind, Mendlesohn's statement is an under-reading of Norrell. To see him only as a magician, incomplete because he is too rational and establishment-friendly, is to shoehorn Norrell into a position where the novel can only ironize and scourge him. Norrell, as an actual, competent magician, is himself an intrusion into the world of the untalented Friends of English Magic we see at the beginning. He is the novel's sustaining reality-effect. The world of society in which Norrell flourishes, a world of urbanity and even gentlemanliness (unlike in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, magic in Clarke is not dominated by women), is the world in which Clarke's characters live and have their being. As Douglass H. Thomson points out, the novel's title seems to contrast Strange and Norrell. But it may in fact illustrate their alignment, their common cause, and, in the end, their common fate.

Farrell argues that this remains true even when wilder realms come to the forefront. Appearances can be deceiving. In Clarke's work, northern England is presented as a world fundamentally wilder and stranger than southern England. Here, Clarke resembles Sir Walter Scott. In Scott's *Waverley* novels, Highland Scotland is a world whose disjuncture from the urbane, socially sophisticated present of England and Lowland Scotland is so extreme that it seems magical, to challenge the ruling consensus. Conversely, when Scott sets his fiction in urbane and polite settings, it is to defer the very idea of wilder, more primitive magic or to refine it dialectically into modernity. Similarly, Clarke's interest in quirky, remote places is characteristic of her outlook, but her braiding of those places (such as the North of England) into sociality also establishes a dialectic between the tame and the wild.

The animating tension of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is between the magic of its content and the realism of its form. That this dynamic remains a tension is why the question of sovereignty and identity cannot be simply resolved. If either magic or realism were to totally win out—if realism would make magic inoperable, or magic to burst realism's carapace—the terrain of Clarke's novel would cease to exist. From the urbane sociality of the Friends of English Magic, who discover Norrell and lure him out of Hurlfrew Abbey, to the way that even the novel's most eldritch personified figure is labeled "the gentleman with the thistle-down hair", the novel unfolds in a mode of the cultivated, polite Enlightenment male. This urbanity is epitomized by Norrell, who, as a magician, seeks to upend the normative order but who as a social figure very much incarnates the same. Moreover, the setting of the novel is cosmopolitan, including Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Even Venice and Padua, where so much of the action of the latter part of the book transpires, are city-states, not organic nations: places in which refined and mannered life transpires.

As magical as Clarke's world is, it is also ordinary. The magic of sociality and how it is studied in Clarke's world (particularly by Norrell) is reminiscent of the way science was studied by the Royal Society and other real-life learned bodies. Part of this is a gradual effect of ascension, or relapse, into magic from the humdrum world of everyday England. But the magical world of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is also an intensification of the commonplace. Moreover, even as the modern magicians gesture towards a charismatic magical past, the sources of their magic lie in books produced since the late fifteenth century and are therefore part of print culture. Mr. Murray, the bookseller who Drawlight and Lascelles enlist to market Norrell's magicianship within print culture, embraces the "absolute novelty" (Clarke 2004, p. 121) of the subject of magic. Magic is present within print culture and does not supersede that culture in the quest of more mystical antecedents. Even if Norrell rejects Murray's plan to have him write for the *Edinburgh Review* (as Jonathan Strange eventually does) on the grounds of its propensity for "radical opinion" (Clarke 2004, p. 120), this is a rejection of vehicle, not of mode. The work of magic in *Jonathan Strange* is bookish, whether in the books cited by Mr. Norrell, the books cited in the footnotes, or the book that is the body of the London street magician, Vinculus.

Print culture may be a symptom of what John Clute calls Clarke's sense of "the thinning of the world" (Clute 2009, p. 118), evidenced by the decline of magic. But the comeback of magic is only manifest within a print-cultural matrix.

Mr Norrell is a powerful magician, yet he is also a homebody. He is always associated with the ordinary and the everyday, even as the reemergence of magic, of which he is the most prominent example, threatens to transform modern Europe. Norrell is described as "the dullest man in Yorkshire" (Clarke 2004, p. 41) in terms that suggest he must have had considerable competition. Hurtfew Abbey, the secluded abode where Norrell practices magic, has its antiquity "all in the name" (Clarke 2004, p. 13) and is a "handsome and square and solid-looking" product of the banal, modern era of Queen Anne. Norrell's humdrum, near-at-hand qualities both play off against and situate his magicianship. He epitomizes the magic of sociality that pervades the book, even if it is unfolded in ways very different from Norrell's by other practitioners.

Notable here is that Clarke's novel is set directly in the era of Romanticism. Tobin Siebers has suggested that Romantic fantasy, by "aestheticizing superstition" (Siebers 1984, p. 77), came close to epitomizing counterrevolutionary and anti-enlightenment mentalities. Indeed, Jonathan Strange, the more Romantic of the two magicians, encounters Byron in Switzerland, at the height of his fame and his friendship with Shelley. But not only is the rivalry between the magicians highly qualified and as replete with stormy collegiality as mano-a-mano polemics, but the two men end up first as compadres and then similarly at bay at the novel's end. The relationship between the two principal characters does not conjure an unfettered Romanticism.

Magic in the novel is less a substitute for Romanticism than its parallel. There are allusions to Romantic subjects that are both sly and sympathetic, such as the mention of the "poor charcoal-burner" (Clarke 2004, p. 770) of the Wordsworthian locale of Ullswater. Magic provides the same challenge to familiar norms as Romanticism, but it does so through different means. Whereas Romanticism *suggests* magic, the magicians in the novel actually *perform* magic. What Tobin Siebers terms "the Romantic fantastic" is an important strand in Romanticism, but the fantastic in Romanticism is always suggestive and otherworldly. It reveals, in Siebers' words (Siebers 1984, p. 20), "the role of superstition in all literary representation". This is close to Clarke's sense of magic as a phenomenon intermixing with the known world, but rather than propagating a gossamer overlay of the mysterious, Clarke populates her world with practicing magicians drawing upon concrete magical archives. In mien, Clarke's procedure is near to what Siebers sketches, but in modum, it is more grounded in ordinary life through the magic of sociality.

The last name of Emma Wintertowne, later Lady Pole, the first character we meet to be significantly taken to the other-world, signifies this grounding. First of all, "Wintertowne" is not an actual English surname. Secondly, it implies both a sense of location and the emptying out of that location, a winter town, an inhospitable place, a locale that is hard to occupy. Place in *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is at once vital in occasional terms and yet never burdened with a sovereign identity. Even at the end, suspended in otherworldly limbo and stuck in the world where half of Miss Wintertowne has been stuck for much of the book, Norrell abides in the nearby and near-at-hand, the social and sociable. "He need never leave the house is he does not wish it" (Clarke 2004, p. 1006), pronounces Strange. Strange's wife, Arabella, notes that Norrell does not like to travel—even as far as Portsmouth—but now he is suspended in a realm of "Impenetrable Darkness" (Clarke 2004, p. 1005). But Norrell's sociable magic remains urbane and gentlemanly. He is not plunged into a realm of pure rough magic, and nor is the book. Its magic of sociality stays within a social modernity that the re-emergence of magic problematizes but never entirely pierces.

### 3. The Ambiguities of John Uskglass

Jonathan Strange seems, at first, the opposite of Norrell. He is risk-taking and edgy where Norrell is bourgeois and stolid. He is brash and bold where Norrell is studious and sober. He solicits the dark side where Norrell's practice of magic is at once about profiting from and containing the inherent

irrationality of the magical realm. But Clarke leavens this structural antagonism by also making *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* somewhat of a buddy-novel. That the two men are increasingly reliant on each other and are caught in the same predicament at the end underscores how, in the greater sense, they are really alike. Both are white men within modernity who are able to channel aspects of that particular modernity to achieve notoriety and success as magicians. Both, in turn, see their efforts fall short, as there are currents at work in the world that they cannot control. This is the abiding, complex irony contained in the most probative element of the novel's title, the "&" in *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*.

Conversely, the true opposite to Norrell is not Strange but John Uskglass. This section of the essay will concentrate on John Uskglass and how he is antithetical to the modernity of both Norrell and Strange, as well as being cherished as the source of true English magic by those who wish for its decisive reemergence. This is the memory, and possible resurrection, of Uskglass, who was transported to the realm of Faerie as a child and gained magical powers. He returned to England in the early Norman era and ruled the northern part of the country as its fairy king for three hundred years, ending in 1485 when, in both this world and our own, the Tudor dynasty came to power. The eclipse of John Uskglass is matched almost exactly to the emergence of the modern world, in which Columbus and Gutenberg exist alongside multiracial identities and print culture. The wish of Jonathan Strange to revive John Uskglass is at the heart of the potential of magic to fully rend the veil of reality. But in the novel, that veil is only slightly breached.

Douglas Charles Kane states that, "despite the novel's equivocal ending, there is a definite sense that magic has been successfully reincorporated into English life" (Kane 2018, p. 144). The possible reemergence of John Uskglass is undeniably an index of this reincorporation. But I question a reading of Clarke's portrayal of the Raven King as epitomizing a virtuous magical redoubt in northern England. Uskglass is a less definable figure than he at first looks; it is not ever certain that he is definitively returning. He seems to be a metaphor for the medieval because he is a figure whose disappearance makes modern England emerge, even if his potential revival challenges that modernity. As Daniel Baker asserts, Clarke draws parallels between "historical portrayal" (Baker 2011, p. 1) and "fantasy fiction" that are more finely grained than alternate history as we have come to know it. That the book samples genre-fiction conventions while clearly aspiring to a mainstream reception outside genre canons is indicative here. To fully discern the way John Uskglass is important to the book (although not as important as Stephen Black), we will have to understand Baker's insight that the book does not privilege one layer of reality over another. In particular, the reincorporation of the white Uskglass is not given precedence over the emergence of the genuine power of African-descended Stephen Black.

As Baker says, the novel merges "seen and un-seen, reflection and reality" (Baker 2011, p. 2) in a way that does not yield to constructing a sovereign redoubt. In this respect, we might ask: what does 'English' magic mean in the book? What does it mean when opposed to French magic, Portuguese magic? Is it self-satirical, as if there is something inherently un-magical or humdrum in the very idea of Englishness? Is English magic opposed to Celtic magic? Hoiem sees Clarke's rendition of English magic as inclusive of gender and racial pluralism. Clarke bolsters this in her contribution to the *Crooked Timber* symposium on her work, maintaining that "England is a set of contradictions" and that Uskglass is not necessarily uncomplicatedly or essentially English.

The novel depicts northern England, the realm of John Uskglass, as the source of magic. This takes the often-subordinated North and affirms it as the real England because it is the magical England. Norrell is the character who most opposes the Uskglass-based paradigm and seeks to build a "practical magic" (Clarke 2004, p. 9), harnessed and limited for "the principles of reason and science". But even he is Northern, from Yorkshire. Norrell's inconspicuous refuge of Hurlfrew Abbey is a downsized, modern reflection of Uskglass' Northern redoubt. By opposing the wilder North with the more urbane South, Clarke is upending the typical dichotomy of power in English history. She is writing of the time when the North shifted to an industrial mode of production, which, although not shaking the hegemony of the South, did make it more populous and, after parliamentary reform, more electorally

potent. Although the North at times is cast as romantic in 'mainstream' English literature—in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, for example—more often it is seen as prosaic, as in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* or Dickens's *Hard Times*. Indeed, Avebury, Stonehenge, Glastonbury—the traditional locales of magic in England—are all in southern England.

Also, as Clarke realizes, Scotland is a problem for this thematic. When John Uskglass was fairy king of half of England, his realm was the northernmost part claimed by the king in London. But, in the novel, Great Britain is a united island. With the end of the Stuart dynasty after the last claimant Cardinal Henry's death in 1807—coincidentally the same year Norrell emerges to publicly practice magic—George III is incontestably King of Scotland as much as England. So, if John Uskglass were to resume his kingship of the northern half of England, his realm would be a magical enclave, flanked by the British king's realm *on two sides*. Clarke invents the fictional Hebridean island of Athodel (Clarke 2004, p. 376) as an equivalent, though much smaller, northern magical redoubt for Scotland, as was Uskglass' kingdom for England's. That Athodel is inaccessible hints that Uskglass's kingdom is not as solid as it might seem. Relevant here is a footnote (Clarke 2004, p. 769) that tells the reader, even as Childermass is warning Lascelles that he is "in the north now. In John Uskglass's own country", that Uskglass's own subjects often saw him more familiarly than reverently and spoke of him often in ribaldry. Also, his spending time as a boy in the land of Faerie makes him 'other' not just in terms of time but identity. Uskglass is a figure radically un-English even as he epitomizes the force of English magic.

The truth about Uskglass is somewhere between Lascelles' Norrellian view that "his day was done four hundred years ago" and Drawlight's summation of Strange's view that the "old alliances still held" (Clarke 2004, p. 759). Clarke leaves us in suspension between those two alternatives, with the hint that Uskglass's authority was in the grain of daily life, "taking particular delight in stories and ballads that show him at a decided disadvantage". This is corroborated in a story in *The Ladies of Grace Adieu*, "John Uskglass and the Cumbrian Charcoal Burner" (Clarke 2006). Here, the humble northern charcoal burner comes off the best against the Raven King. If, in Clarke's world, magic has returned to England, so have "other changes of a more prosaic nature" (Clarke 2004, p. 25). Indeed, it is in the South, where he never reigned, where Uskglass is treated with more respect. His own subjects are irreverent, treating him more like a lord of misrule than as a monarch. His great contemporary advocate is Vinculus, a street magician who comes off as a hustler and charlatan. Uskglass, in his one manifestation in the present, rewrites the symbols written on Vinculus's body to, as Hoiem argues, signify something not yet apparent, or open to interpretation. It is revealed that Uskglass did not in fact like to rule. Indeed, his chief minister, William Lanchester, was the true power in the realm for many years. Uskglass's capital is in Newcastle, not in the historic cathedral city of York where, paradoxically, the anti-nostalgic Norrell lives. There is always a provisional, ready-to-hand quality to Uskglass's magical reign. Uskglass is a Lord of Misrule, making him a more endearing and comic figure but also making him, for all his Faerie otherness, part of a world of modern manners that is as much comic as tragic or horrifying.

It all comes down to one basic question: who is John Uskglass? Is he a person, a kind of a spirit, a way of looking at the world? It is not coincidental that Uskglass disappears just as the modern age begins, in the fifteenth century, the era of Gutenberg and Columbus. And then magic comes back, in the time of Romanticism, when people have had enough of technological improvement. Clarke's English magic both replaces Romanticism and alludes to it. Francisco Goya is described (Clarke 2004, p. 358) as painting a portrait of Jonathan Strange during the latter's sojourn in Spain with the British Peninsular army, tying Strange into an image-world of anti-Napoleonic resistance that is ipso facto Romantic. Stephen Black's saving Byron from the gentleman with thistle-down hair evinces an empathetic association between magic and Romanticism. But it also hints at a duality: Romanticism is a realm of imagination. Magic is something that is real and can alter reality.

Farah Mendlesohn argues that the novel's end sees "the refreshing of England" by a revived fairy-kingdom. Yet magic is not always associated with sovereignty. The magician Martin Pale,

who was not a king, resembles Dr. Dee of Elizabethan fame more than any potentate. Unlike Uskglass, Pale did not claim to exercise sovereignty or hegemony over a discrete portion of land. Indeed, just as the denizens of Faerie have three times turned to human kings because they “detest the hard work of government” (Clarke 2004, p. 831), magic and sovereignty can be said to have an inherently uneasy relationship. John Uskglass seems ambivalent about his own role as King, and, wherever he is in the ‘now’ of the novel, he may be more comfortable in a perennially residual role than as the outright wielder of authority. Notably, the name “Uskglass” contains the element “Usk”—a Welsh river with more affinities to Celtic figures such as Merlin (Caerleon-on-Usk was an oft-featured place in Arthurian myth) than English magic. In addition, the “-glass” suffix signifies transparency, not sovereignty. “When the magician goes away or dies” (Clarke 2004, p. 838), the houses “disappear”—a condition that Clarke’s footnote-narrator notes in the cases of Martin Pale and Ralph Stokesey. Thus, magic is hard to stabilize as the foundation for permanent authority in modernity. It is more fluid, comical, and social than that—and more radical.

Uskglass seems to possess far more sovereignty if we see him as part of Clarke’s worldbuilding: as a vast backcloth that at once secures the past and re-envelops the present. He would have encompassed this to a greater extent, even with the presence of Stephen Black, if Clarke had written a sequel that decisively chronicled his re-emergence. However, as of 2020, she has not done so. As we must provisionally read *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* as an individual book, not part of a series, we have only the fragmentary suggestion of Uskglass’s re-emergence and no sovereign epiphany of it. Although a full consideration of the plot details of *Piranesi* lies outside the scope of this essay, it is an abstract and suggestive book, spare and un-festooned by the detritus of world-building. As such, *Piranesi* indicates that suggestion rather than realization, interstitial conjuring rather than worldbuilding muscle, may be what Clarke as a fiction writer is more about. This might lead us to see Uskglass less as the heart of the novel’s temporal desire and more as a mixing agent for levels of time and reality that is not meant simply to be the real, vindicated substrate of it all.

Thus, if we read John Uskglass as simply representing the hold of the magical past over the modern present, the book is going to be tugged back more in the direction of high fantasy than is intended. One might conclude that effectual magic would be even more an embodiment of the restraining force of the past on modernity, what Giorgio Agamben, (Agamben 2011, p. 7) drawing on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Thessalonians, have called a *katechon*, that which holds back. A resurgent Uskglass could well be the *katechon*, both in terms of modernity itself and, more particularly, Norrell’s distinctive personal variety of modern magic. Jason Josephson Storm has cautioned against “the myth of disenchantment”: that modernity had often claimed to banish magic but never successfully done so. Certainly, it is important that the novel reveals Uskglass and his wild, medieval magic as a force that is possibility still latent in the fabric of the universe. But it may be that the medieval otherness of Uskglass is thus a *katechon* rather than something heterotopic, other, radical, something more in line, in its revealing of alternate possibilities in modernity, with queer and multiracial discourses than with a nostalgic idea of sovereignty. Or, it may be that we need the presence of Stephen Black to lure the temporal medieval otherness of Uskglass into a truly ontological otherness that would wriggle away from being a *katechon* in favor of being heterotopic. Without the presence of Black, Uskglass might seem a resurgent substrate whose reemergence would convince the world that, in a Latourian sense (Latour 1993), it is, and should be, one that has never been truly modern.

Uskglass is a heterotemporal figure, a rebuke of what Elizabeth Freeman calls “chronobiopolitical” (Freeman 2010, p. 10) normativity. Queer studies scholars such as Freeman have seen temporal regimes of the present as attempting to anneal differences that are as much temporal as sexual. The novel’s male dyads, with their inevitably queer overtones, are echoed by the reemergence of the past as something that questions the present. Thus, Uskglass’s temporal otherness is another way to question the hierarchies whose ultimate subversion is the emergent power of the African-descended manservant in the house of Sir Walter Pole, Stephen Black.



#### 4. The Heroism of Stephen Black

Stephen Black is Uskglass's rival in magical sovereign power. As an African-born man whose rise in society disturbs typical assumptions of how sovereignty and organic authority are bound to whiteness and white privilege, Black represents a very different aspect of the novel than magical restorationism would presume. Black is a testimony to the simple historical fact that there were people of color who participated in ordinary British life long before the post-World War II Windrush generation. Clarke is bearing witness to the reality of black people in Britain in the early 1800s. By having Black so intimately involved in a plot concerning the restoration of English magic, Clarke is also urging the reader to consider black Britishness as part of the very concept of England itself. One could castigate the novel for ending with Black partitioned off from England as the ruler of the kingdom of lost-hope. But, conversely, one could also say that Black is a ruler, and Clarke's world contains many migrations between fairy and real-world kingdoms. Black manifests himself in social terms in a set of linked worlds that, in representamina and social tenors, are contested.

The novel is structurally anchored by male dyads: Stephen Black and the gentleman with thistle-down hair, Drawlight and Lascelles, Honeyfoot and Segundus, necessarily Strange and Norrell themselves. There are also topical dyads: Britain and France, South and North England, the real world and Faerie, and past and present. Elizabeth Freeman's point that different planes of temporality can parallel queer or dissident sexualities renders these dyads more than playful, sometimes startling pairings, allowing them to structurally interrogate the represented world they uphold. Of all these dyads, though, the most consequential may well be that between Black and the gentleman. The gentleman's love for Black prevents him from realizing Black sees through his motives, loathes them, and is determined to stop him. Whereas the gentleman wants to use Black for nostalgic and authoritarian purposes, Black, as Hoiem points out, has an agenda that is about going forward rather than regression into a past where he would not have been included. Black is the member of those dyads most able to break through them.

Stephen Black certainly makes the book more multicultural, but his presence also stands against a sovereign concentration of authority in favor of a more plural one, in which authority is not linked to sovereign mystique. Likewise, Black's diadem is his hand, transformed so that his authority is of England but not *in* it, sourced from Africa but not derived from it, effective on English soil but not authorized by it, possessing both genuine force and elasticity. Black's abjuring of his quest for his own origins dilates any sovereign attachment to place while retaining Black's own particular, specific, and geographically derived identity.

Even the 'bad' side, represented by the gentleman, wants Stephen Black to be king and recognizes his merit. Furthermore, Clarke depicts that merit as potentially raising Black to a good eminence. Daniel Baker perceptively sees Black at the center of discourses of radicalism in the novel. In his steadfast moral compass, Black is reminiscent of Olaudah Equiano, the leading black British writer of the 18th century, though lacking Equiano's Christianity. But in his urbanity and ability to register the British social scene, Black is also reminiscent of Ignatius Sancho, a prominent black British man of the late eighteenth century who was both an abolitionist activist and keen observer of British society. Sancho, like Stephen Black, was born on a slave ship, was closely linked to an English aristocratic family, and operated in British society with brio ([Sancho 1782](#)). Whether Clarke studied either Equiano or Sancho as models for Black, Black as character has some of the best traits of both men. That both men existed means Clarke's pastiche of a period style does not mean whiteness: Sancho and Equiano wrote in the style of their time as much as Jane Austen did. Acknowledging multiracialism can take represented worlds beyond nostalgia.

Stephen Black is a figure of great consequence in the novel. The fact that the actual King of England has lost his mind further elevates the stakes of sovereignty in the novel and makes it a Regency romance in more than one way. The madness of King George III prompts the gentleman with thistle-down hair to see the throne as a *sede vacante*. Black recognizes the incongruity of his becoming king of England. When the gentleman promises him a kingdom, Black suggests that this

kingdom is in Africa, where he has biological roots. But the gentleman says, “it is a kingdom *where you have already been*” (Clarke 2004, p. 340). It is not, then, a question of birth-identity; it is one of association. The combination of his own perceived personal merit and, even if it is not legitimized by blood-ties, the fact that he has been situated in England makes Stephen Black a viable English king. Thus, any racialized stereotypes are disassembled.

Black indeed reveals a basic (if, for normative racialism, uncomfortable) similarity between the white men in the book. Whether upper or lower class, wanting to contain magic or liberate it, overtly evil as the gentleman or tolerably self-applauding as Jonathan Strange, all represent an analogous sort of agency. New wonder-worker is but old squire writ large, if maybe more eldritch. If modern temporality is taken up by the reassertion of an eterotopic medieval or magical temporality, but human agency is stuck in the same ruts of gender and privilege, then what has been accomplished? Clarke does not romanticize or sentimentalize Stephen Black, who, after all, shows he can operate in some pretty tough representational neighborhoods. But she does show how not only his race but his gentle and polite urbanity—mirroring traits manifested in the writings and deeds of real-life African-descended figures such as Equiano and Sancho—render his agency different from any white male in the book: Strange, Norrell, the gentleman, Drawlight, even Uskglass himself.

This radical revision of agency leads to another reading of Stephen Black’s conclusion at the end of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. Black might seem King ‘only’ of the forlorn fairy land of lost-hope, allowing this to be interpreted as an exclusion of a black man from the English polity and implying that a black man can never truly be English (even less King of England or, given the precedent of John Uskglass, *in* England). But Stephen Black *does* become a king, and does so outside of Africa, in a place where he has absolutely no blood-ties: a world that is not even his own. He becomes a king transnationally, in the face of the constraint of blood and identity. He kills the gentleman with thistle-down hair even though he knows it will end his chances of ever finding his true African name and any organic identity. For this, he does not get kingship in England, but he gets kingship nonetheless. When one observes that being a king in a fairy land is, in John Uskglass’ case, very much a *carrière ouverte aux talents* in terms of qualifying as a King in England, Stephen’s monarchic prospects are much brighter. Clarke by no means closes the door to Stephen Black someday wielding power in his adopted England. The scene of Stephen’s defeat of the gentleman with the thistle-down hair shows how the autochthonous elements of England—“rooks and magpies and redwings and chaffinches” (982)—fight for Black against the gentleman, demonstrating Stephen’s earthly authority in England. Here, the most immanent and granular elements of English soil itself fight on behalf of the ideals and convictions of a black man.

Norrell and Strange misread the presence of Stephen Black as that of Uskglass, and when they call out epithets for the Raven King, such as “the king” or the “nameless slave”, they do not imagine that they apply just as aptly to Black. But, as Thomson points out, the prophecy serves as a “simultaneous herald” (Thomson 2011, p. 322) with respect to Uskglass and Black—and, I would add, one that cannot just apply to both equally. “The nameless slave” is, as a sobriquet for John Uskglass, a poignant remnant of his changeling origins, but the term is far more raw when applied to Stephen Black. Even though Norrell only agrees to help summon John Uskglass at the very end of the book under pressure from Strange, Norrell is in a sense the architect of Stephen Black’s ‘kingship’, just as his efforts to save Miss Wintertowne (later Lady Pole) conjure up the gentleman with the thistle-down hair, who saw Stephen Black’s potential. Norrell may not be the most powerful force in the book, but he is connected to all the other forces. A purely medieval John Uskglass would not be inflected by blackness the way a Uskglass re-interpolated in a modern England, where racial pluralism is undeniable, would be. In his review of Lord Portishead’s book on magic in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1815, interpolated as a false document in Clarke’s novel, Jonathan Strange says that English magic is built upon the “foundations” (Clarke 2004, p. 531) that John Uskglass made and that “we ignore these foundations at our peril”. If we do not study them, Jonathan Strange warns, “cracks will appear, letting in winds from God-knows-where” (Clarke 2004, p. 531). Stephen Black constitutes one of those cracks. Norrell

disturbs modernity by practicing magic. Strange disturbs Norrell's conformist magic by championing Uskglass. Yet, as his anxiety about winds and cracks displays, Strange himself knows and fears that the resurgent sovereignty of Uskglass might be destabilized. Could the unwanted cracks and unwelcome winds augur, in the person of Stephen Black, what Toni Morrison calls "an Africanist presence" (Morrison 1992, p. 5) in the represented world of Clarke's novel?

It might be tempting to see both Uskglass and Stephen Black as little more than subversive forces that destabilize the serene façade of the Georgian world. They certainly both function as others to the settled social consensus that the events chronicled in the book so profoundly disturb. But the organic nostalgia represented by Uskglass and the dynamic cultural difference represented by Stephen Black cannot simply be represented on the same plane, as breakers of the consensus. Clarke is aware of the historical discourses of both Romantic medievalism and abolitionism. Even though these flourished at the same time and were perhaps rejoinders to a certain sort of neoclassical absolutism, their challenge to that absolutism is of a fundamentally different character. Likewise, today, anti-racist resistance is of a fundamentally different order than interrogations of modernity's teleological ordering of temporality. Clarke's novel shows how recent events, such as the toppling of the statue of the slave-dealer Edward Colston in Bristol in June 2020, are at once in a long tradition of popular English resistance against a repressive establishment but also introduce a new critique of white hegemony. For all its surface nostalgia, Clarke's inclusion of Black, and her foregrounding of his power, show the heterodoxy of her narrative frame.

Notable also is the way Stephen Black at once accepts the gentleman's estimate of his political potential while rejecting his unseemly motives. Stephen plays along with the gentleman and fools him into believing he is in his thrall, only to turn on him after the (supposed) murder of Vinculus and the threat to Lady Pole. The gentleman does not realize that Stephen has mysteries in him that cannot be penetrated, moral mysteries that, in this world of magicians, have the force of magic. Stephen Black dreams (506) that the city of Birmingham is in a piecrust. Just as the mundane English world at the beginning of the novel does not expect magic, the mundane can be as mysterious as the magical if the magical does not expect it. Black claims a link with England because he happens to be there, because it is his place now. His relation to it is not inherent, although it is extremely specific. Discussions of critical race theory, white fragility, and Afrofuturism in the years since the novel came out have only accentuated and clarified Black's importance.

As much as the emergence of Stephen Black drives home the anti-essentialism and anti-organicism of Clarke's vision, it is important to consider Black's efficacy in this process alongside Norrell's and Uskglass. Without the presence of Norrell's modernity of manners, which the novel questions and suspends but never entirely jettisons, and without the presence of Uskglass's self-exposing, carnivalesque medievalism, which never coalesces around a stable point of archaic atavist, Stephen Black would not matter. Black achieves a kind of citizenship in Clarke's Romantic, magical, and counterfactual world. This is much as Equiano and Sancho achieved a kind of citizenship in the factual Enlightenment world of our timeline. Paul Youngquist refers to Equiano's "characterless person and un/fixed identity" (Youngquist 2013, p. 41) in terms strikingly similar to the aura conjured by Black's namelessness and ability to infiltrate worlds. With regard to the real-life Equiano and Sancho as well as the fictional Black, there were processes afoot in English society that, even though far from intending to be anti-racist, nonetheless ended up contributing to anti-racism. This gestures to the importance of the sociality and urbanity in Black's representation.

That Stephen Black wields power in the book means that the book is not just about illustrating the hold of the past through sovereign magic. Uskglass's otherness in terms of temporality mirrors Black's otherness in terms of race. These alterities are tacitly allied with Norrell's modernity in resisting a nostalgic sovereignty. Readers may feel that, despite the title, both Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell are false bottoms, stalking-horses for the primal magic of John Uskglass. But Clarke's mesh of modernity means there is no way to tell false bottom from true bottom. Instead, there are interchanges between remote and cosmopolitan, present and past, pastiche and passion. John Clute (Clute 2009, p. 119)

says Clarke's novel is "wedded to the thinning it depicts". Clute meant this as a criticism. But, as a characterization, it can be turned into a positive. Clarke's magic of sociality, what Kane calls Norrell's "neurotic avoidance" (Clarke 2004, p. 136) of magic is, in the deepest sense, a form of magic that ramifies and complicates the concomitant, more fundamentalist magics. *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* cannily juxtaposes the past represented by Uskglass, the present represented by Norrell (and Strange), and the future represented by Stephen Black. To fully understand *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, we have understand how its magic of sociality is the source of its radical epistemic challenge.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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