

The Historical and Occultic Blend: the Examination of Sorcery, Satanism and Witchcraft in Marjorie Bowen's Novels *Black Magic* and the *Poisoners*

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The 'other' is a powerful aspect in Marjorie Bowen's supernatural novels. It refers to those who are considered to be different, those who cannot integrate well amongst their peers and fit within the collective social mode of the normal and the ordinary. It represents alienation, isolation and rejection in microcosm. The 'other' can represent a mode of identity for those who do not belong and in this sense the description of the practice of witchcraft is a declaration of the sane and rational world defined by contrast with the supernatural and the occult. Marjorie Bowen's novel *Black Magic*, published in 1909, has been referred to as "the queerest novel in the English Language"¹ as detailed in the preface of the novel and indeed only a lively imagination could have conjured such a story. A weird, haunting and powerful thriller, it has an excellent ending and maintains a strong degree of horror throughout. The accounts of sorcery, satanic worship and the evocative black magic scenes in the novel are of a rare breed and the novel's vivid narration almost presents the plot as an adventurous foray into the darker realms of hell, heaven and the omniscient existence of the supernatural which were to become key themes in much of Bowen's later work in the years to come. Gothic melodrama was a particularly potent focal point in Bowen's work, even when the genre of the novel was predominantly historical, gothic and supernatural themes became the enduring narratives of much of Bowen's literary development.

Based on the legendary figure of Pope Joan, the novel traces the path of how a female sorceress Ursula Rooselaare by pretending to be a man, Dirk Renswoude, becomes the most famous man in Rome, the Pope. According to the website www.newadvent.org which is a catholic website for news, Chronicler Jean De Mally alleged that the female Pope Joan was described as a skilful and talented woman disguised in male clothing and she became notary to the Curia, Cardinal and then the Pope but her gender was finally discovered when she was travelling one day on horseback and gave birth to a son, she was stoned to death.² The New Advent website also describes how Martin of Troppau detailed that the Englishman John of Mainz who had the papal chair for two years was actually a woman, she taught science and gained a great deal of widespread respect, gave birth and perished. The New Advent deny the legend and various reasons for its improbability.³ The Renaissance Scholar, C. A. Patrides (1930-1986) in his book, *Premises and Motifs in Renaissance Thought and Literature*, also denied Pope Joan's existence as he claimed, "Pope Joan is not an historical figure. But she is part of history that in her existence has been so persistently believed in that at times belief threatened to create the thing it contemplated."⁴ It is this improbability that may have attracted Bowen to create such stories based on ancient historical legends due to her ambition to produce stories that were tinged with strangeness, traced with gothic romance, brooding gothic atmospheres, dark and unusual love stories and romances that were set far apart from any realist tendencies.

Black Magic is set in the Middle Ages, the 11th Century, and the protagonist Ursula Rooselaare also known in the novel as Dirk, travels this sinister and mysterious path of sorcery with Thierry of Dendermonde, her accomplice in mastering the dark arts. Dirk exudes a magnetic power, a dynamic influence of extraordinary authority and he seeks to manipulate and destroy those around him, particularly Jacobea of Martzburg, Thierry's beloved.

¹ Marjorie Bowen, *Black Magic*, London, Sphere, 1909, p.9

²<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08407a.htm>, last accessed 28th November 2016

³<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08407a.htm>, last accessed 28th November 2016

⁴ C.A. Patrides, *Premises and Motifs in Renaissance Thought and Literature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 152

After developing what Dirk perceived as a sacred friendship, Thierry eventually rejects him and betrays Dirk to his enemies but Dirk manages to flee, despite his love for Thierry and his severe loss and misery at the betrayal of his adored and most treasured companion. Aided by Satan's helpers, Dirk becomes a great Scholar, he progresses to become Cardinal Michael II of Rome and then eventually the Pope. Thierry, in all his weakness and wretchedness meets Dirk once again, mumbling his insincere apologies while appealing to a God he believes has forsaken him. Dirk forgives him, despite the warnings not to do so from Satan's helpers and offers him promises of great wealth and power, his love for Thierry once again in full force at the sight of his return. Dirk, placing his disguise aside on several different occasions by becoming his real female self, Ursula, but with his face still firmly hidden, encourages Thierry to fall in love with her. Thierry, attracted to Ursula's sexual charisma and the alluring mystery that surrounds her falls in love with her. With bordering suspicions that Ursula and Dirk are the same person forming on the edge of his conscious mind, Thierry once again betrays Dirk to his enemies despite his promises to remain faithful and God's gradual ascending wrath at the Satanic Papacy in addition to the gathering armies marching to seek her destruction reaches a climax. Thierry's final betrayal destroys them both.

Ursula/Dirk's body withers into dust and Thierry dies shortly after while desperately attempting to discover Dirk's true identity and gender among the body's remains. One of the major influences for *Black Magic* may have been Frederick Rolfe's *Hadrian The Seventh* which was a story inspired by Adrian IV, the only English Pope, and based on the imaginary Adrian the seventh, published in 1904 by The Bodley Head where dreams, wish fulfilment, romantic exoticism and fantasy abound.

As the novel was published in 1909, there may have been a neo-romantic interest here in Bowen's work, particularly as the year 1909 was shortly after the period of the decadents and the Wildean cult of opulent luxury which had left its mark on Rolfe's novel. Bowen's novel certainly shows traces of a romantic medievalism combined with an aesthetic relish for traditional and archaic luxury. This is shown in the vividly expressive description of Ursula's lifeless remains.

He looked now at the proud smooth face on the pillow; the gems of the papal crown gleaming above the red locks, the jewelled chasuble sparkling in the strengthening dawn until he was nearly fooled into thinking the bosom heaved beneath. He was alone. At least he could know. The air was like incense, sweet and stifling; his blood seemed to beat in his brain with a little foolish sound of melody; a shaft of grey light fell over the splendours of the bed, the roses and dragons, hawks and hounds sewn on the curtains and coverlets; from the Pope's garments rose a subtle and beautiful perfume...Without the thunder muttered. To know. He lifted the dead Pope's arm; there seemed to be neither weight nor substance under the stiff silk...his cold fingers unclasped the heavy chasuble, underneath lay perfumed samite, white and soft. An awful sensation crept through his veins.⁵

The descriptions of ecclesiastical garments, precious jewels and archaic fabrics hints at a particularly romantic vision and the reference to samite, which was a luxurious silk fabric interlaced with gold used for dressmaking in the Middle Ages, shows a definitive Tennyson influence as Tennyson alluded to samite in his poem *Idylls Of The King*. Bowen's language conjures up the fantasy-medievalism of Tennyson's poetry with such allusions in her prose.

Being a particularly avid enthusiast for the historical but also the gothic and occult genres, Bowen distinctly manages to fuse the three genres together in several of her novels by exploring the major theme of good versus evil, God versus the Devil. Her unique talent for dark narration lends the novel genuine depth and character. In *Religion and The Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas claims, "The personification of Good rested upon the same basis as the personification of Evil, and the two concepts were inextricably interlocked...Above all the immanent Devil was an essential complement to the notion of an immanent God...It was only the triumph of monotheism which made it necessary to explain why there should be evil in the world if God was good. The Devil thus helped to sustain the notion of an all-perfect divinity."⁶*Black Magic* is an exploration of two opposing forces, evil versus good, God versus the Devil. God is minimal in the novel as the Devil's presence appears to be mightier than that of God or so it appears until the novel's conclusion. The power of God is eventually presented as all-encompassing and his angels descend from the heavens above to join the fight.

⁵ Marjorie Bowen, *Black Magic*, London, Sphere, 1909, p.313-315

⁶ Thomas, *Religion And The Decline of Magic*, p.567-568

The mysterious, stormy and extraordinary illustrative portrayal of the weather in this scene symbolises God's vengeance as a result of the acts of the devil worshipping sorceress. God in this novel triumphs. The figures of the witch and the sorceress symbolise the historical gothic and the supernatural concepts in this novel implies proto-feminist ideologies. Keith Thomas' definitions of witchcraft depicts Bowen's portrayal of Ursula in microcosm, "It is possible to isolate that kind of 'witchcraft' which involved the enjoyment...of some occult means of doing harm to other people... In this sense the belief in witchcraft can be defined as the attribution of misfortune to occult human agency. A witch was a person of either sex (but more often female) who could mysteriously injure other people...It was only in the Middle Ages that a new element was added to the European concept of witchcraft...This was the notion that the witch owed her powers to having made a deliberate pact with the Devil...Witchcraft had become a Christian heresy, the greatest of all sins, because it involved the renunciation of God and deliberate adherence to his greatest enemy."⁷ Bowen bridges the gap between the historical and the gothic by choosing to illuminate dark events in history. Her extremely active and distinctly melancholic imagination was uniquely able to recreate stories that were embedded with a gritty historical realism while simultaneously maintaining great degrees of atmospheric and vividly graphic prose. Witchcraft, sorcery, black magic rites, devil worship and the renouncing of God abound within her literature. By choosing to write about so many different historical events, fictional or otherwise, in different periods of history in varying countries and the thematic use of physical and psychological violence, wars, conflict and supernatural transgressions, Bowen makes the darkness within European history significant and all the more apparent. She was fully aware, at the young age of 24 when she composed this novel, of the horrors that occurred throughout the centuries and in portraying characters and narratives such as this, it is possible that she was attempting to bring these horrors to light, by firmly exposing the shadows that lurked throughout European history, particularly the actions of evil and wrongdoing for personal gain. History for Bowen then not only represented elegance, glamour and an affinity for a lost and splendidly luxuriant past but it also exemplified varying degrees of mystery, intrigue, horror and terror.

It is easy to question whether *Black Magic* is actually a gothic novel and not a supernatural novel infused with gothic elements. Certainly Robert Hadji's reference to the novel as a melodramatic thriller in *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural* is an alternative yet also accurate description as Hadji claimed, "The bulk of her weird fiction was written under the 'Bowen' pseudonym, commencing with the novel *Black Magic* (1909), a rousing historical melodrama in which the sorceress Ursula becomes Pope Joan and very nearly the Antichrist. It remains one of the best diabolist thrillers."⁸ However, there are a great many levels to this novel and it is certainly possible that Bowen may have been influenced by the mass growth of gothic literature during the period in which she was writing and interestingly this period also corresponded with the birth of modernist literature. This may have given *Black Magic* several degrees of modernist characteristics in addition to gothic qualities and gothic predispositions. Andrew Smith, the writer of *Gothic Modernisms*, described Gothic Modernism itself as amorality, transgression, forbidden uncontrollable desire, compulsions, hybrids, alienation and the city as a gothic backdrop⁹ and this is evident that the themes portrayed within *Black Magic* are possibly stylistic modes of a typical Gothic Modernist nature and the use of Rome in this novel certainly shows the potent and scary landscape of a gothic city. Bowen's political use of gender placed within gothic characteristics in *Black Magic* suggest a literary awareness of gothic modernism also. The patriarchal oppression framed by the realms of the unhallowed ritual of satanic worship is the crux of the gender explorations here. It is a woman who challenged definitive religious systems, she used the only power she believed was available to her. The supernatural themes of female witchcraft and devilry placed against the religious patriarchal system combine both traditional and modern visions. The representations of the tyrannical power of the medieval past which a woman sought to overcome and therefore seize for herself is a display of feminine power. Religious patriarchal domination and melodramatic evil are key gothic themes and were widely explored in well-known gothic novels such as the eighteenth century novel *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis and the nineteenth century novel, *Melmoth The Wanderer*, by Charles Maturin.

As previously mentioned, *Black Magic* is essentially historical, occultic and gothic in its form and structure and consequently, traces of female gothic comes to the fore which Bowen manages to completely transform by outlining inherent female restrictions while simultaneously acknowledging female agency.

⁷ Ibid, p.519

⁸ Sullivan, *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and The Supernatural*, p. 50

⁹ Andrew Smith, Jeff Wallace, eds. *Gothic Modernism*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, p.3

Her narratives exhibit a detrimental patriarchal society, where women are subject to male torment, subjection, dictation and death at the hands of the men who can either choose to love and protect them or scorn and spurn them. Ursula chooses to become a man to fulfil her worldly ambitions. Thierry, with his superficial beauty and integrally weak nature, is extremely limited in his talents without Ursula beside him. Ursula/Dirk, in a distinctive portrayal of transgender configurations, controls all and in becoming the Pope, the most powerful figure of all religious men, represents the ultimate patriarchal power. As Dirk is actually a woman, this patriarchal power is unusually embedded within the hands of a female sorceress who successfully manages her position with dexterity and strength and it could be perceived that this female pope is a unique fusion of both patriarchal and matriarchal competence – the position a woman can achieve if she had the support of men.

Ursula/Dirk's true gender lies unsuspected until the reappearance of Thierry of Dendermonde. Despite this success, her riches, her wealth, her authority, it is ultimately a man and her undeniable love and allegiance to him that brings her to ruin. This paints a significant picture; that if men and women existed together without betrayal, power struggles and deceit then and only then harmony can truly prevail. The aspect of proto-feminism also lies here within. Ursula, throughout the entire novel, is known to Rome as a man, even to the man she loves, the fact that she does this so convincingly and manages to secure the position of the Pope ascertains that she is just as competent as any man. It may not just have been the legend that Bowen was interested in here as she does not fully delve into the birth, life, apparent childbirth revelations and the stoning to death claims, but the interest lies in what Pope Joan actually represented - extraordinary female power having to be masked within a male identity.

Ursula retains her femininity throughout the novel despite outward appearances. As dominant as she is, she is a feminine heroine in her mannerisms and her tastes and as such represents the female gender as Bowen saw it, powerful yet soft, almost a paradox of and complexity of alternate natures, what a woman genuinely was and still could be in spite of any ambitions.

Bowen uses the figure of the witch to portray the difficulties of being a woman. Women who were unafraid to be their true selves and having and fulfilling their desire to choose their own paths, women who attempted to control their love lives as opposed to having their partners and lovers chosen for them, women who were fully able to express their beliefs and follow their own modes of thought and feeling were perceived by others as witches in her novels. Similarly, naturally enchanting charismatic women who men fell madly in love and lust with were also perceived as witches. Ursula, in addition to Madelon in *The Rocklitz* (1930) and Giovanna in *Because of These Things* (1915), both novels also written by Marjorie Bowen, all contain a degree of proto-feminism but they are trapped within strict patriarchal spheres and slaves to the men they love and even slaves to those men they do not. The character of Ursula here is particularly potent because despite her absolute supremacy in Rome, she meets her downfall due to a weak-willed and impulsive young man whose mental ability compared to hers pales in distinct insignificance.

According to Diane Purkiss in *The Witch in History, Early Modern and Twentieth Century*

Representations, stories about the witch written by women portrayed female anxieties and fears. Purkiss argued, The figuration of witchcraft itself - the witch's power over people and things - is shown to have reflected and reproduced a very specific fantasy about the female body in general and the maternal body in particular. When understood in terms of the magic she performs and the power she exerts, the witch is a fantasy-image of the huge, controlling, scattered, polluted, leaky fantasy of the maternal body of the Imaginary...The body in both elite and popular early modern thought was flowing with humours or liquids, resembling a bag full of potentially populating substances. The idea of the body was shaped by fears that bodies may not be fully confined and kept separate from one another, resulting in problematic contacts and impingements. To the early modern villager or town dweller, one way to understand those impingements was as witchcraft.

Witchcraft was among other things, a form of power which involved exchanges between bodies.¹⁰ Bowen shows this within her work. In the novel *The Rocklitz*, the protagonist Madelon represents the power of the female body and the sexual longing and fantasy it can produce and instil in the men around her. Madelon herself does not dabble in witchcraft, sorcery, black magic and potions but she was familiar with the women around her who chose to do so.

¹⁰ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-century Representations*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 119-120

Ursula represents the sheer power of the witch over other people, circumstances, events and occurrences. Her excess of potions, liquids and also those retained by her fellow friend, the witch Natalie, were of a vast proportion as would be held by a sorceress.

Ursula also represents the fantasy of the female body. The longing she inspires in Thierry when she is dressed as a dancer girl in disguise and his desperate fervour to know at the conclusion if she is a woman or a man alludes to her vital control over his sexual senses. The attractive dancer, in a historical context, has often represented a sexual and feminine figure throughout poetry, film and literature. In *Black Magic*, the dancer displays a type of female eroticism and alluring sex appeal while maintaining grace, beauty and a mysteriously wholesome serenity and intelligence. The mysterious dancing female that Thierry falls in love with may have links to the nineties decadence of the Wildean era as the idea of the female dancer in this novel may possibly be linked to the tragic play *Salomé* written by Oscar Wilde and illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley, a type of representation of the naughty nineties decadent culture.

Giovanna in *Because of These Things* embodies the domesticated mother but her clothes, jewels, beauty and adornments are perceived by her husband Francis and the neighbouring Scots to belong to those of an enchantress, an evil heathen, despite her profound maternal instincts for her son Elphin and her sincere and honourable intentions towards her significant other, Francis. Each of these three female protagonists contains an accumulation of what Purkiss describes as "polluting substances."¹¹ Consequently, it is essentially their femininity that inspired the threat of physical danger in the other people surrounding them which was continually caused by distorted beliefs regarding the abnormality of women and the female body.

The "problematic contacts and impingements"¹² that Purkiss also describes, Bowen uses to facilitate and narrate the emotional problems and acute misunderstandings that can arise between men and women once they have bodily contact of a sexual nature encouraged and instigated by the force of sexual attraction. It is the emotional and the psychological concerns that Bowen was keen to portray, the pain that can result from the wayward journey of a tumultuous relationship between a man and a woman. Keith Thomas claims,

When Henry VIII tired of Anne Boleyn he put it about that he had only been attracted to her in the first place because she had practised witchcraft to seduce him. A similar interpretation appealed to lesser men who found themselves in a similar situation...This is what has been called the 'face-saving' function of witchcraft...Nor does it seem necessary to look for psychological or psychoanalytic explanation of the fact that the majority of accused witches were women. This aspect of the trials is more plausibly explained by economic and social considerations, for it was the women who were the most dependent members of the community, and thus the most vulnerable to accusation...The idea that witch-prosecutions reflected a war between the sexes must be discounted, not least because the victims and witnesses were themselves as likely to be women as men...The most that can be said at present on the sexual aspect of the trials is that the mythology of witchcraft was at its height at a time when women were generally believed to be sexually more voracious than men.¹³

Bowen also did not simply use witchcraft as a means to explore wars between men and women, even though she did use the "face-saving" aspect of witchcraft to portray the actions of men who tire of the women they are with while women in turn feel forced to engage in witchcraft to hold onto the men they love. Rather Bowen used witchcraft to examine gender relations as a whole. As well as examining the difficult relations between men and women, it was also used by Bowen as a narrative tool to explore the simultaneously and sometimes conflicting relations between women themselves.

In his essay *The Making of the Female Witch: Reflections and Gender in the Early Modern Period*, Willem De Blecourt claims, Witchcraft was not sex-specific but it was sex-related, according to a much-quoted statement by Christina Larner...Larner had already offered an explanation for women's involvement in the accusations of other women. This was, she wrote, because women who conformed to the male image of them felt threatened by those who did not...Anne Barstow echoed this: Women...sometimes try to outdo their oppressors in scorning women who were perceived as outsiders, in hope of being tolerated or accepted themselves. Hufton...suggested that women in some cases saw the alleged witch as a poacher on their territory...

¹¹ Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-century Representations*, p. 119-120.

¹² Ibid, p.119-120

¹³ Thomas, *Religion And The Decline of Magic*, p. 643-678

The mere possibility of losing her gender identity compelled her to apply with patriarchal norms of womanhood, a transgression which made it only more probable to incite an accusation of witchcraft. In economic and social terms women who conducted an independent trade or owned their own land were more vulnerable and also those who had moved to new communities...But in principle it sufficed to cross a boundary at the wrong moment. As women were restricted in their actions anyhow, the likelihood of becoming a witch was ever present.¹⁴

Women who were not plain and subordinate were perceived as witches in *The Rocklitz* and *Because of These Things* and although the two main protagonists of these novels were completely innocent of any witchcraft practices themselves, the other female characters in the novels were not.

Bowen appears to be claiming that not all women are entirely blameless and retain certain distinct faults, just as men do, as they too accuse their fellow women of witchcraft. Yet their suspicious accusations actually stems from jealousy, resentment and envy. Francis is disgusted by Giovanna's beauty, wealth and adornments yet it was her unusual appeal that made him fall in love with her to begin with and so he accuses her of enchantment. The male characters are afraid of Madelon's overt sexual magnetism, yet it was Johann who could not deny his continuous love and lust for her, therefore Madelon too is accused of sorcery. The men, in trying to defend themselves from what they perceived as dangerous lust for the females around them, fail to understand their own feelings of attraction and consequently the women were accused of witchcraft and devilry.

In some respects, the accusation of witchcraft was an excuse for their sexual desires which enabled them to shift responsibility for their own formerly repressed urges. The allegations of severe bewitchment were used to correct and defend their lust in the eyes of God and their fellow man. Women who also had much less appealing outward appearances than Giovanna and Madelon, women who considered themselves to be respectable upstanding members of the communities, accused them too. This is similar to a point made by Thomas who wrote, "The penalty emphasised that the delinquent's essential offence was his rejection of the standard of the society to which he belonged.

Facts like these are necessary if we are to appreciate the high value set on social conformity by this tightly-knit, intolerant works with which the witch had parted company. She was the extreme example of the malignant or non-conforming person against whom the local community had always taken punitive action in the interests of social harmony."¹⁵ Madelon and Giovanna, in all their practicability and rational intelligent natures, refused to entertain what they perceived as ridiculous notions and supernatural fancies. In this way, the perception of the Other is again at full force here when considered within the witchcraft framework.

Bowen is not only critiquing gender relations and the frictional responses of women towards other women but also society as a whole and its failure to recognise that differences are not the prerequisite to improperness and indecency and that those who are different are just as worthy. Giovanna, the Italian stranger to Scottish lands and Madelon the newcomer to the royal German elite in the suspicious role of dependent mistress encouraged these accusations.

Blecourt also claimed that "The cat was a metaphor of sexually active women,"¹⁶ and interestingly, Bowen used the figure of the cat in *Black Magic*. Jacobea of Martzburg who was having a love affair with one of her ladies husbands has a little grey cat by her side throughout the novel. However, rather than displaying Jacobea's sexuality as immoral in the novel, it is Ursula disguised as Dirk who uses it to bewitch, pursue and manipulate Jacobea for his own gain. It may be understood that Bowen is not portraying female sexuality here in a negative light, rather the fact that Jacobea becomes a ghostly angel of God towards the novel's conclusion appears to be stating quite the opposite. It is not female sexuality that is a problem in society but rather that some men choose to refute it. There are the men who choose to exploit female sexuality for their own gain and there are the repressed men who feel female sexuality is a religious sin and must be rejected.

¹⁴ Willem De Blecourt, 'The Making of the Female Witch: Reflections and Gender in the Early Modern Period', *Gender & History*, Vol.12, No 2, July 2000,p.3-23

¹⁵ Thomas, *Religion and The Decline of Magic*, p.632

¹⁶ De Blecourt, 'The Making of the Female Witch: Reflections and Gender in the Early Modern Period,' p. 14

Subsequently, the male characters in *Because of These Things*, *The Rocklitz* and *Black Magic*, Francis, Johann and Thierry, are largely responsible for the deaths of Giovanna, Madelon and Ursula. They were dominated by males, their limited free-will implementations only lead to further entrapment. Male dominance only sought to increase when the female denies even herself in order to attempt to remain in the man's favour. Bowen uses the church, the papacy, the devil, financial wealth and society as representations of severe patriarchal authority. In each novel, each of the apparent and alleged witches keenly disregard the male perception of how a woman should be in the eyes of men. The influential and extremely clever Ursula versus the saccharine Jacobea, the virtuous and devout Stacey - a plain and upstanding Scottish cousin of Francis versus the flamboyantly uninhibited Giovanna, the Emperor Johann's wife versus the enigmatic and mysterious Madelon but in all of the novels, these representations of female idealisation are no more successful than their witch counterparts. No woman can succeed when subjected to enforced visions of how they should behave and act.

In addition to *Black Magic*, there were various Marjorie Bowen novels that explored witchcraft and satanic worship. *The King's Favourite* which was published in 1937 and based on the reign of James I and the dark arts endeavours of the young Francis Howard and *The Poisoners* which was published in 1936 and based on the black magic rites under Louis XIV in France which seeks to enhance Bowen's knowledge of French history even further. *The Poisoners* is an excellent novel. It is fast-paced with a conspiratorial and richly atmospheric quality. The real-life historical figures in combination with the fictional characters adheres to Bowen's tendency for creating dark and hugely suspenseful narratives while simultaneously portraying her unique research skills. *The Poisoners* and *Black Magic* are effective examples of where the historical and the gothic blend profoundly in Bowen's work. Bowen used this prolific spread of occultic occurrences throughout history with geographical zealotry in her novels which of course adheres true to the occultic tradition. England, Scotland, Germany, Italy and France were just a few of the settings chosen. *The Poisoners* is an excellent representation of Bowen's literary ability in mixing the historical and the occult and Robert Hadji summarises this ability in microcosm as he claimed, "Bowen possessed an astonishing ability to recreate historical backgrounds in depth, against which intense dramas of human conflict were enacted to a usually tragic end. The supernatural is an integral part of her haunted landscapes, implied in the decayed houses and desolate gardens and essential to her sense of the past. Complementary strains of cruelty and pathos give the narratives dramatic force; beneath runs a subtle undercurrent of melancholy, most evident in her mood pieces. Her best work, after the fear has passed, leaves a lingering sensation of poignancy and haunting beauty, the quintessence of her dark romanticism...*The Poisoners* based on the infamous diabolical cult active at the court of Louis XIV has excellent period flavour and a gruesomely detailed description of the Black Mass."¹⁷ Bowen describes her choice for such a novel as *The Poisoners* in her preface, "What emerged from these labours was not only a valuable picture of the life of a bygone period, full of minute details and the elucidation of a historic mystery that had puzzled generations but the reconstructions of a wild, sinister tale of love and magic that would do credit to the imagination of any novelist and provide ample material for what is now called a "detective story" or "thriller,""¹⁸ and certainly Bowen had the avid qualities of a thriller writer as her novels embedded that severe threat of danger to the social order.

Where men and women fought to destroy the evil that menacingly sought to destroy them, which is similarly discussed by Ralph Harper in *The World of The Thriller*,¹⁹ but more than being a thriller writer, Bowen had a unique ability to combine a variety of different genres with romanticism and gothicism remaining at the fore of much of her work. The gothic exterior of wild and untamed nature such as the cold, distant Scottish lands of Glenillich, the bitter snow and freezing ice of Dresden, the vengeful rumblings of thunder and lightning in Rome and the cruel, deserted and eerie streets of Paris represent acute gothic backdrops for melodramatic excess as Peter Brooks identified it in *The Melodramatic Imagination*²⁰ in which these deceitful transgressions, patriarchal entrapment and fearful mysteries take place. These gothic themes were developed even further with Marjorie Bowen's reinvention of her authorial voice in the 1930s under the pseudonym of Joseph Shearing.

¹⁷ Sullivan, *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and The Supernatural*, p.50

¹⁸ Marjorie Bowen, *The Poisoners*, London, Fontana Books, 1970, p.9

¹⁹ Ralph Harper, *The World of The Thriller*, Cleveland, The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969, pp. viii - 9

²⁰ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination – Balzac, Henry James Melodrama and The Mode of Excess*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 81