Estrangement in the historical novel

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In this paper I argue that writing the past as an estranged history gives authority to the female experience in the historical novel. To do this, I will be discussing how two authors use the sciences to regender ‘the pasts we are permitted to know’ into ‘those we wish to know’, and to ‘explore the deep desires and dreams that lie beneath all constructions of the past’: Naomi Mitchison and Nicola Griffith. ¹

By ‘estrangement’ I am working from Farah Mendlesohn’s formulation of ‘knowingness’, ² of knowing that you are in a created world, that the world is estranged from you because you know it isn’t real. It is also a strange world because it is not your world. In science fiction, fantasy and historical fiction the estrangement can be overt, as in the portal fantasy or the time-travelling historical novel, but it can also be immersive. Mitchison and Griffith both wrote immersive historical novels predicated on the authority of the female experience, that estrange the reader by showing how the woman’s experience has been excluded – estranged, if you like - from the accepted, normalised, written record. I will be looking at how these authors deploy science, and scientific research in their fiction, since both these authors are as well known for their science fiction as for their historical novels.

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Naomi Mitchison began her writing career in the 1920s as a historical novelist, and achieved her first major success with The Corn King and the Spring Queen (1931). In this, and in other novels, she reworks myth and anthropology drawn from J G Fraser and Jane Harrison to explore how ritualised female power could have operated in societies changing under classical Greek influence. The novel focuses on how women’s lives were affected by Stoic philosophy and Spartan and Achaean politics of the 3rd century BC. Mitchison is an unusual literary figure because her early training was in genetics, as the daughter and sister of two
distinguished British scientists, J S and J B S Haldane. Her dual-track competence in science and the humanities can be seen in her occasional work for publishers: she proof-read (and also reviewed) Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and did the same for James Watson’s study of the principles behind DNA, *The Double Helix*, which he dedicated to her.  

Biology for Mitchison was mediated through her feminism. She wrote openly about sexuality from the woman’s perspective – a highly radical stance for the interwar period - and made this a recurring trope in her fiction throughout her life, notably in her first science fiction novel *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962), as well as in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*. She was a formidable advocate for Marie Stopes’s birth control advocacy and served on the management committee of the North Kensington birth control clinic for several years.  

Rob Hardy notes that Mitchison’s interest in women controlling their own fertility through biomechanics – the body controlling its own fertility - stemmed from contemporary beliefs about this in the Trobriand Islands in Papua New Guinea.  

Mitchison’s reworking of anthropological observation has been noted by Maroula Joannou, who commented that ‘thematically Naomi Mitchison is concerned with issues of democracy, questions of power and powerlessness, with the relationships between dominant and subordinate groups, with the nature of group solidarity, and with understanding how individual and collective loyalties come to be shaped’.  

Ruth Hoberman links Mitchison’s interest in anthropology to her agreement with Frazer, and D H Lawrence, that ‘ritual and sexuality played vital, social roles’.  

As an illustration of this, Gill Plain notes that in Mitchison’s 1947 novel *The Bull Calves*, set in 18th-century Scotland, pregnancy is a recurring motif, symbolising regeneration as well as re-inscription. Mitchison uses the figure of the pregnant woman to rewrite female fertility as an expression of both subordination and dominance, of power held by those traditionally considered powerless.  

I think there is an argument to be made that by invoking a physical, biological condition normally hidden from sight by a literary discourse policed by male critics and authors, Mitchison’s project of bringing the past to life with anthropological accuracy also brought women – active, physical, fertile, bleeding and lactating women - into historical fiction. Griffith also follows this path of narratives centred upon the historical woman’s physical experience.
In 1925 Mitchison’s novel *Cloud Cuckoo Land* was brutally honest about death in childbirth, abortion, rape, child exposure and wife abuse. These subjects are present in classical literature, but were banned from appearing in contemporary fiction of Mitchison’s day.

Kristin Bluemel points out that while critics loved *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, no-one noticed that the novel is about the Queen, not the King, and that it contains a groundbreaking passage of female sexual pleasure in an account of breast-feeding. ‘There was little interest in narratives that insisted that women were entitled to the same privileges of sexual and emotional and social experience as men’. ⁹

For most of the twentieth century it was impossible to publish novels about conception – as opposed to sexual pleasure - as an outcome of sexual activity. In the 1930s and 1940s Mitchison’s novels that described sexuality were only acceptable from a legal and publishing perspective if they were historical. She was enraged to find that she could not publish scenes which mentioned both condoms and trouser buttons in a novel with a contemporary setting without unacceptable censorship. Yet if the characters involved were wearing togas or wolfskins, sex and contraception were absolutely fine. Mitchison’s use of estrangement in historical fiction to ‘separate’ the reader from the characters’ homes and lives, since they were so different from the 20thC reader’s own, legitimised the exploration of forbidden subjects, such as getting pregnant. Diana Wallace observes that Mitchison always considers the potential for pregnancy in her fiction, whereas male writers like D H Lawrence did not. ¹⁰

The historical novel, in Mitchison’s hands, became a powerful tool for exploring women’s experience and the possibility of women’s agency because it made female biology a social issue.

Mitchison’s particular style of estrangement in historical settings depended on her trademark technique of simple, modern dialogue and narration uninflected by anachronism or archaism, a significant technical achievement. Wallace considers that this ‘colloquial, often deliberately ungrammatical style made her fictions accessible (not least to women without the classical education their brothers took for granted)’. ¹¹ Thus women readers, as well as women characters, acquired agency by an estranging process. Mitchison took the past out of the privileged area which required specialised education for access, and re-estranged it in fiction that did not intimidate or repel women readers by a traditional dependence on archaic language and masculine concerns. Mitchison remarked that when
she first read Plato ‘I don’t suppose I was ever a Greek woman’, feeling instead like an honorary boy. 12 Wallace observes very astutely that Mitchison questions the masculine ideology that Caesar’s Gallic Wars had imposed upon centuries of readers by rejecting the necessity to write about ‘the conquered’ from the male conquerors’ perspective. 13 The Conquered was also the title of her first novel, in 1923, whose protagonists were Gauls, women, slaves and other captives of the Roman army, not the male military leaders.

A further source of estrangement for Mitchison’s reader was evidence from Classical and anthropological sources that had been otherwise ignored in twentieth- and nineteenth-century historical fiction: that men could and did love other men, and that an adult brother and sister could have a joyful, incestuous, sexual relationship: both culturally normal for their societies. Mitchison’s fictional homosexual lovers were probably the only mainstream fictional representations of men loving men available for sale in the 1930s. Her friends W H Auden and E M Forster certainly responded positively to them. 14

Ruth Hoberman posits that Mitchison used the experience of having a female body to break free from androcentric history that placed male-dominated plots as neutral and normal. 15 Wallace shows that Mitchison, unlike her peer the mid-century historical novelist Mary Renault, took her early-to-mid twentieth-century values back to the past to critique the values of antiquity. 16 Renault accepted Classical values in her novels, but Mitchison did not, because she could see that little had changed for the oppressed in the intervening centuries. Her socialist campaigning instincts drove her particular use of estrangement as a demand for change. She employed a two-stage process of unsettling the reader by (1) taking them out of the present back to the apparently cosy and known past, but then (2) showed them how horrible that past had been to the subordinated and oppressed at the time. This opened her modern readers’ eyes to similar horrors practiced in their own day, as well as taking the gloss off previously unquestioned cultural values drawn from the brutal past and now venerated as a utopian ideal. Her particular use of estrangement in her historical fiction showed ‘the gap between the pasts we are permitted to know and those we wish to know’.

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Moving on now to think about Nicola Griffith’s use of estrangement, in her first novel, Ammonite, from 1993, Griffith explores the control of fertility through biomechanics on a planet that can only be populated by women, due to a planetary virus that kills men. As well
as devising social practices to strengthen social and emotional bonds in the planet’s communities, she invents a biological process for human conception to maintain the all-female population (that’s the sf bit). The novel thus demonstrates how women’s agency in political and social settings does not depend on their fertility when anyone and everyone can become pregnant. Estrangement is achieved by altering the social setting. *Ammonite* plot has an obvious link with Mitchison’s interest in female sexuality. Griffith’s next novel, *Slow River*, develops the idea of the mother and sexuality.

Her three novels about the former Atlanta police officer Aud Torvingen, which are lesbian *noir* set in Georgia, Norway, and Washington State – develop a minor plot point from *Ammonite*, of how women can defend and protect themselves by knowing how to deflect trouble, but also how to attack and kill using self-defence training (which Griffith taught professionally). These three themes: sexuality, the role of the mother, and a woman’s capacity to use her physical skill and strength for defence, are key for Griffith’s most recent and award-winning novel, *Hild*, published in 2013, and set in 7th-century Anglo-Saxon England.

Griffith rewrites the social setting within the historical framework of Anglo-Saxon England to explore ‘the deep desires and dreams that lie beneath all constructions of the past’. *Hild* is the main protagonist, the second daughter of a royal widow, and a seer and prophet for her uncle the king. *Hild* is a *bildungsroman* of the growth of a politician, a war leader and a feudal lord who happens to be a woman. These are male roles, but she can fulfil them because of her privileged access by her skills. Hild becomes a terrifying, piteous, powerful person, a woman whose life IS agency. She earns wealth, commands fighting men as a war leader, and kills to protect her own people. She owns land, receives fealty, and rewards service. She sets up communication links across England to ensure that she has the power that knowledge brings, and will be able to give the king the information he demands. She learns reading, writing, politics and economics from the Roman and Irish priests.

Griffith depicts Hild and her mother Breguswith as the incomparable politicians of their age, moving along two paths in parallel. As women of the court they build relationships, and create kinship and information networks across Anglo-Saxon England. As politicians, they monitor the changing strengths and weaknesses of the Anglo-Saxon kings, and shifting allegiances, keeping alert to be able to handle the consequences of any unexpected death
or birth, or new alliances against their king, or themselves. They also help each other. They may be monitoring a power shift to ensure their survival, but there is no power struggle between them.

Hild learns to use power through her mother’s teaching of psychology and management, and her own powers of what we would now call scientific observation. She is a naturalist from the age of four, and a herbalist from not much older. She plays with the refraction of light through water to persuade her closest friend, and she works out the principles of hydraulics for herself. She knows that dangerously bad weather is coming when she sees exhausted birds struggling in off the North Sea, flying ahead of the storm. She smells the drink that her uncle’s queen has recently taken, and knows that the pennyroyal and sweet gale that it contained caused the fatal, final miscarriage that will remove all chance of Hild and her mother from being supplanted from their positions at court. She understands how the old woman summons, as if by magic, seven ravens to prophesy to the king, because the ravens will come to the sound of a war horn, a Pavlovian response to the signal for food.

Hild’s historical period recorded very little about women’s lives, and what was written was, as Griffith says, ‘steeped in misogynist tradition’. But Griffith’s Hild is based on one of the very few women whose existence was recorded in that time. She will grow up to be St Hilda of Whitby, the most powerful woman in 7th-century Christian England. Griffith wrote this novel as a conscious recreation of the Anglo-Saxon world in which she could place Hild in a central, powerful position, and see her grow up, ‘influenced and influencing’. Griffith says: ‘I learnt what I could of the late sixth and early seventh centuries: ethnography, archaeology, poetry, numismatics, jewellery, textiles, languages, food production, weapons and more. And then I re-created that world and its known historical incidents’. In an interview with her publisher she describes her key research sources and reading, talking to scholars in many fields relating to what she needed to find out about. She lists them: ‘kings and kingship, gender, places, fauna, flora, culture, agriculture, architecture, art, textiles, jewellery, weapons, war, music, religion, even weather. I became utterly addicted. I read conference papers (on everything from Anglo-Saxon notions of slavery to language adaptations of conquered people)’. Obviously all historical novelists will follow these processes: what makes Griffith a little different is that she discusses her research with
readers on her research blog, and engages in online debate and consultation on particular points.

Griffith uses many historical figures, embedding them in known history, and focuses on the kinship networks of Hild and her family. Where a traditional historical novelist like Nigel Tranter would have included women’s names in a genealogy of nobility or royal descent, this denoted their function in the system of dynastic marriage, but did not award agency to these women in any way. Griffith uses back-formation to create functions for women that could have existed in a convincingly historicised narrative.

As an example, she uses a kenning from *Beowulf* – the poetic compounding of two words to embody a separate concept - to describe the royal function of ‘peaceweaver’, the role of an Anglo-Saxon woman married to forge alliances between kingdoms that otherwise might be at war. Griffith gives agency to traditional functions by giving a name to this high-level, diplomatic role predicated on blood relationships and childbirth.

Similarly, she uses the term ‘gemmaeca’ to signify a formalised bond between young adolescent women of the nobility, by which they take care of and influence each other throughout their lifetimes. In Old English the word apparently means ‘mate, equal, one of a pair, comrade, companion’, and ‘husband and wife’, but Griffith invests the term with the specifically female iteration. This was a direct result of her research: archaeological studies of Anglo-Saxon indicate that textile production would have taken up to two-thirds of an Anglo-Saxon woman’s time, especially one of high status, who would have had the access and training to manage retting, skutching, beating, spinning, dyeing and weaving the thread. Much of this textile production was co-operative, women working in pairs, which Griffith developed into a political dimension. ‘I’m seeing it as an informal but desperately necessary bond between ordinary women and a ‘political lady-in-waiting’ kind of thing for royal women’.  

There is a solid purpose to Griffith’s desire to write women in full possession of their world. Her recent article in the *LARB*, a letter to Alice Sheldon, the sf author James Tiptree jr, articulates her belief that isolation and exclusion are powerful forces that drive creativity and change. Griffith’s particular conditions of isolation and exclusion are disability and lesbianism, but she also chose to be Other, as she says, since she saw early on in her life that if she chose what was inevitably going to assigned to her, she could use those choices of
being a woman in a man’s world, a Catholic in an anti-Catholic society, and a lesbian. 22 Mitchison’s were socialism and open sexuality. In their historical novels and science fiction both authors are, I suggest, rewriting worlds for women to have greater access and agency precisely because they have experienced intolerable restrictions and limited expectations by others.

Much like Mitchison did in her novels of the 1920s and 1930s, in *Hild* Griffith constructs a two-stage process of estrangement. Her purpose is to persuade the reader that Anglo-Saxon sexual relations were really very like ours, but without present-day moral judgements because – crucially – she is writing of a society that is just entering the Age of Conversion. The Anglo-Saxons left no prescriptions for sexual behaviour for men or for women. Hild’s orientation is bisexual, so Griffith illustrates how this could have been regarded in Anglo-Saxon society by borrowing a term from animal biology for a female twin calf with masculine characteristics - a freemartin. She deploys this in the mouths of rougher characters as a pejorative slang term for a woman who does not follow female heterosexual norms. In Hild’s society this is just a name, with potential for insult. The freemartin proper is also (mostly) infertile, which reflects on Hild’s social role as an Anglo-Saxon princess, as a potential peacemaker and future mother of kings. Thus the term is a double insult for a woman who looks like a man, behaves sexually like a man with other women, in Hild’s case is as good a warrior as a man, and she can’t even have children, thus making her useless for the formal female role. But homosexuality is not an offence of any kind in this society, and Griffith writes Hild’s experiments with sex, and her mother and friends’ advice and reactions to this, as normal in Anglo-Saxon society. Like Mitchison’s characters, Hild engages in homosexual sex, and also a joyful incestuous relationship. Griffith reconstructs the past for societal and psychological purposes, rejecting isolation and restriction solely on the bounds of sex.

Thus the two-stage process of estrangement works in this novel by (1) introducing the reader to a society in which women having sex with other women is considered normal, objected to only in passing by men who would prefer such women’s attentions for themselves, and then (2) inviting the reader to reflect on how such normality is disrupted by the arrival of Christianity and enforced morals. There are some almost comic passages where the Anglo-Saxon king applies logic to early Christian metaphysics, throwing into focus
just how alien Christian notions of faith and fidelity were to pagan society. More chillingly, there are hints that Christian priests will object publicly to high-born women having casual sex with men before marriage, and that a policing process is becoming normalised by which virginity will become more prized than hitherto, and sexual activity may be penalised, when it is politically or socially convenient. These are new ideas seeping into Hild’s society, and are largely incomprehensible to the Anglo-Saxons, just as the theological rage of the priests on seeing Christ worshipped side by side with Woden is simply mystifying. By asking the reader to read how the policing of sex and sexuality may have emerged in the past, Griffith encourages the reader to consider similar practices in our own time. With Mitchison, she recreates history for women by making it new, writing it differently, using the muscular discipline of science and scientific research as a foundation for their alternative worlds in the past.

1 Both quotations come from the conference CFP.
2 Farah Mendlesohn, Rhetorics of Fantasy (2008), 116
5 Hardy 2015, 45.
11 Wallace 2008, 44.
12 Hoberman 1997, 1-2, citing Mitchison’s All Change Here.
13 Wallace 2008, 44.
15 Hoberman 27
16 Wallace 2008, 114.
17 Pers comm, 11/2/16


https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/the-women-you-didnt-see-a-letter-to-alice-sheldon

Pers comm, 11/2/16