

Margaret Mahy's Liminal Spaces:

Moments of Transformation in *The Changeover*

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Margaret Mahy has made a career out of sitting on the boundaries between genres, borrowing conventions from one type of literature and applying them to another. In *Memory* she wrote a work of realistic fiction that is stuffed so full of bizarre landscapes, odd characters, and strange bits of business that it really feels like fantasy, something more akin to *Alice in Wonderland* than the typical problem novel. In *The Tricksters* she moves back and forth between realism, fantasy, myth, and surrealism, creating a novel that is almost impossible to categorize as to its genre. In *The Catalogue of the Universe*, she created a contemporary novel with no actual fantastic elements that nonetheless manages to feel like science fiction. This refusal to be just one thing applies not only to Mahy's novels but her characters as well. They too are constantly crossing boundaries, making transitions from one psychological state to another, occupying that brief liminal space when and where everything changes, and nowhere is this more evident than in her novel *The Changeover*, which Mahy, conflating genres as usual, has subtitled *A Supernatural Romance*.

The Changeover concerns Laura Chant, a New Zealand teenager, who lives with her younger brother, Jacko, and her divorced mom, Kate, in Gardendale, a shabby blue-collar subdivision. Laura's absent father is not particularly regular with his support payments, and Mom struggles to make ends meet managing a local bookshop. Laura, who is just beginning to come to terms with puberty, finds herself interested in Sorensen ("Sorry") Carlisle, a well-to-do and apparently well-behaved older student with a talent for photography and a mysterious past. Her interest, however, is only partly romantic. Somehow Laura has convinced herself that Sorry is secretly a witch. She doesn't know how she knows this, but she is quite certain. Sorry, who appeared out of nowhere some eighteen months previously, attends Laura's public school despite his wealth because his family's secluded and gated ancestral home is located in but predates the building of the entire subdivision. Gardendale, in fact, is built on land once owned by his family.

Liminality, that barely perceptible change from one state to another, is at the heart of Mahy's novel and functions in many ways. Laura, a year or two past puberty, has grown accustomed to her newly mature body but spends an enormous amount of time staring into mirrors, pondering what she looks like and where she is going. At the very beginning of the book, having just showered, she sees her reflection in the steamy mirror as a "blurred ghost," which vaguely

suit her, for she was uncertain about her reflection and often preferred it misty rather than distinct. No matter how hard she tried to take her face by surprise she could never quite manage it, and found it hard to be sure what she looked like when she wasn't trying, but her body was easy to know about and filled her with a tentative optimism. (2)

Adrienne E. Gavin has argued that Mahy's use of mirrors in this way is quite typical of women's supernatural fiction, a motif repeatedly used to gain entry to the supernatural world, which, she suggests, goes back to the Bronte sisters (Gavin 132-33). She further suggests that Laura's discomfort is caused by her "non-recognition of self: she fears her own future womanhood and her own mysteriousness" (138). Adding to the complexity of what Laura sees in the mirror, it might be noted, is the fact that part of her ancestry on her father's side is indigenous, and she is apparently the only one in the family who has inherited the dark, coarse hair typical of the Maori, leaving her visually at odds with her light haired mother and brother.

The single event upon which the entire novel hinges is a visit that Laura and Jacko make to a rather strange, new antique store. Its oddly manic proprietor, Mr. Carmody Braque, offers her brother a hand stamp of the sort librarians used to put on checked out books or that a concert attendee might receive to prove he has paid his admission. Jacko had happily received just such a stamp on his hand at the library minutes before, but the new one, an amazingly detailed reproduction of Mr. Braque's face, inexplicably fills him with fear. Indeed the entire visit to the store is unnerving, and when she stares into Mr. Braque's face, Laura vaguely senses the presence of something nasty, "something very old looking back at her, something triumphant but also unappeasable" (27). When Laura later examines the stamp on Jacko's hand, it appears to have sunk below the skin like a tattoo. It proves impossible to wash off but later disappears without explanation. Jacko immediately becomes ill, and we eventually discover that Braque is some sort of psychic vampire, a "lemure," a "wicked spirit...of the dead...that has managed to win a body for itself once more and has probably gone on by absorbing the lives of others—their energy—to keep himself alive" (101-03). Braque is incredibly old, and Jacko is merely his most recent victim. The rest of the plot involves Laura's attempts, aided by Sorry Carlisle, his mother, Miryam, and grandmother, Winter, witches all, to save Jacko's life and put an end to Mr. Braque.

Laura has just passed through the great change of puberty but now finds before her the potential for another equally great transformation, as represented by the book's title, *The Changeover*. This refers to the chance offered her by Sorry's family to herself become a witch. Laura, Winter Carlisle insists, is already a "sensitive," which is why she could sense Sorry's own supernatural abilities. She "stand[s] on the threshold of our condition and we can invite you in" (126). The three Carlisle witches cannot defeat Carmody Braque themselves because he knows them for who they are and will be prepared for them, but Laura, they insist, whom he already knows to be mortal, by becoming a witch may be able to catch him by surprise, defeat him, and save Jacko.

Thus, Mahy has set the stage for a veritable cascade of liminal images throughout the novel, leading Josephine Raburn to refer to the book as "a fantasy of opposites" (27). Virtually every major character in *The Changeover* appears to be one thing but is really another or, as often, is one thing but is in the process of becoming something else. These transformations in progress often appear as hybrid images within a mirror or, more directly, as actual faces that somehow do double duty, showing the individual traits of more than one person. For example, the next time Laura looks in the mirror, having just received a psychic warning that something awful is about to happen, she sees her reflection as "treacherous." Somehow it is no longer entirely hers. "If Laura had been asked how she knew this reflection was not hers she could not have pointed out any alien features...the face was not her face for it knew something that she did

not. It looked back at her from some mysterious place alive with fears and pleasures she could not entirely recognize” (4). This new Laura, she of the psychic abilities, potential witch-hood, and emerging uncomfortable sexuality, knows more than the Laura she is used to could possibly know.

Realizing that the girl’s sensitivity has made her aware that he is secretly a witch, Sorry Carlisle, when Laura sees him, sometimes “let[s] her see another face...one that she found very exciting because it looked dangerous” (14), a face whose eyes can change from grey to silver, “tricky, looking-glass eyes with quicksilver surfaces and tunnels, staircases and mirror mazes hidden behind them, none of them leading anywhere that was recognizable” (16). Later, Sorry reveals to Laura that, before returning home, he had spent most of his life as an adopted child and had been badly abused by his adoptive father who had dimly sensed that Sorry was somehow different. When he confesses this, Sorry’s whole visage transforms before Laura’s psychic vision, “an old punishment discolouring his face” (142). Mahy even throws in a couple of references to other great transformations in children’s literature, echoing *Pinocchio*, perhaps, and *The Wizard of Oz* when Sorry warns her to “Find some nice boy with a real heart” (165).

Mr. Braque’s face is also more than it seems, reminding Laura of a grinning puppet, which, when one remembers that the body he is wearing is not really his, is actually true. As the monster gradually takes over Jacko, Laura, looking at him in the hospital, sees Braque and smells his distinctly unpleasant peppermint odor: Jacko “was smiling dreadfully, his teeth unnaturally large, his face in retreat around the smile, but his eyes—at least his eyes were still his own” (64).

When Laura visits Sorry’s ancestral home, tellingly named *Janua Caeli*, Gate to Heaven, it is surely not coincidence that to do so she must leave Gardendale, a place of decidedly tainted innocence, to go through that gate. She is immediately deluged by liminal images and events. The knocker on the front door at first appears to be a face staring at her out of the woods before resolving into mere hardware (72). On one wall of the house is a painting of a creature half-bird and half-man (110). On the wall of Sorry’s study, Laura discovers, to her embarrassment, that he has a large poster of a female nude, to which he has pinned a small photograph of her, thereby instantaneously transforming their relationship, turning what from her point of view had been a perhaps shared vague romantic interest into something more immediately sexual than she is comfortable with or ready to accept at that moment. It might be noted parenthetically at this point both that Sorry is about three years older than Laura, which makes his sexual interest in her, underlined by his touching of her breast, more than a little inappropriate, and, further, that he appears to feel no guilt about his interest either. Indeed it is clear throughout the first part of the novel that, although Sorry is well behaved at school, he has little or no true moral conscience. He is in fact something of a sociopath.

Having discovered the existence of the supernatural and her own direct connection to it, terrified primarily by the potential loss of her brother, but also, secondarily, by her burgeoning relationship with Sorry, Laura reflects that “A week ago she had been complete and continuous with a true face turned to the world, but now she had come entirely to bits” (147). She wonders “what sort of face” Sorry sees when he looks at her (155). Looking into yet another mirror, she “lick[s] her lips and would not have been too surprised to see a serpent’s tongue flicker between them” (169), a hybrid image symbolic, perhaps, of both her recently gained wisdom and her

ongoing sexual awakening. And now, of course, Laura must face the dangers of the Changeover itself, something that will remake her totally.

The Changeover, Laura's transformation into a witch, features one liminal event after another. When Laura goes to Janua Caeli to begin the ritual, Sorry, in a surprising show of concern for her well-being, exclaims that she should "Cut and run! Go while you still can...open the gate and get out into real life again" (165). When she refuses to back down, his mother, describing the ritual, explains that "For tonight this room is a crossways of many lines of space and time.... They cross in all of us all the time, these lines, but only the witches and similar people can catch fish on them" (167). The changeable image of the moon is then invoked, and Miryam proclaims herself the Preparer, Sorensen the Gatekeeper, and Winter the Concluder for Laura's ritual (167).

As the rite commences, Laura is given a ritual bath and a (presumably drugged) cup of wine. Then she feels a "gentle concussion in her head. Then something like an insistent wind parted the silent curtains of her thoughts and feelings, moving through them, and let them fall together once more," and Miryam tells her that she can feel this "because you are a halfway girl" (169). Miryam shows Laura her image in yet another mirror, and she sees herself "shadowed and delicate, her wrists and ankles as slender as if she had hollow bird bones and could rise up against gravity" (169), recalling the picture of the half-man, half-bird mentioned earlier. After repeated images of dark passageways, stairs, doors, black holes, and half-sensed presences, evoked memories from childhood followed by vaguely sexual feelings and thoughts of demon lovers, Laura sees "a crack of bluish light. The darkness was splitting an inch before her eyes.... The light was quite a distance away from her. A door or gate was opening" (173), and she emerges into a simulacrum of her own world, more specifically the Gardendale schoolyard. There she sees Sorry Carlisle with "Two distinct and contrary faces...tangled into one" (174), that of the perfect student and that of the potentially dangerous sexual predator, "as if he were offering to save her and ruin her simultaneously" (174-75). Acting as Gatekeeper, he asks for money, saying "even to cross the Styx you have to pay the ferryman" (175). In a brief space, Mahy invokes *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, sending Laura through "a little gate she had never noticed before tucked in beside the big school entrance" and down "A track of uneven yellow paving," as Sorry tells her to "Follow the yellow brick road and remember, don't look back" (176-77). Doing so she finds herself in "a forest that was all forests, the forest at the heart of fairy tales, the looking-glass forest where names disappeared" (177).

What follows is a brief, but epic journey through a surreal landscape in which elements of her own life combine with various fairytales, many of them containing images of failure, passivity, or resistance, difficulties that she must overcome, all of which are symbolic of her own shortcomings and the things in her past which make change difficult. A tiger stalks her, and we quickly realize that the beast symbolizes the sexual danger implicit in her relationship with Sorry Carlisle. The briars, which she must cut through with a sword, "thrash about in anguish, screaming with a voice Laura dimly recognized as her own" (180). Falling into deep water, she finds herself reborn with Sorry's hand in hers (181). The images of transformation and liminality continue at length. The water flows into a pond where it is directed from one channel to another "by a shutter that swung on a pivot" (182), and Laura must choose which direction to

send it. Following the water to its source, she must “squeeze through cracks no bigger than that under a door which grudgingly gave way...and let her slide through” (184) until, “Like Alice she did not think she would ever be small enough to reach the beautiful garden. `Even if my head did go through,’ she whispered, ...it would be very little use without my shoulders.’ ... [and] it suddenly occurred to her she was being born again” (185).

Laura’s transformation is over although we soon realize that she has never actually left the bathroom at *Janua Caeli*, a fact hinted at throughout the rite by her repeatedly noticing the words *tam htab* (i.e. *bath mat* spelled backwards) at her feet, another *Alice* allusion perhaps. Yet, Sorry, who revives her, implies the simultaneous reality of what has happened (particularly the squeezing through the underground bit) when he says “O, Chant.... I felt the bones of your head move, do you know that?” He looked at her with a look of wonder and dread. ‘I thought you’d die” (185).

That Laura has been significantly changed by her experience and that it has also changed her relationship with Sorry is clear. When the young man, continuing the fairytale theme of her transformation, tries to place himself in the role of the prince who has awakened Sleeping Beauty with a kiss, Laura, realizing that she is in charge of what has happened to her, replies with some asperity, “I woke myself” (186). Looking at Sorry, she sees that he too has been changed by the ritual: “commonplace and supernatural, the divided face he had turned to her earlier [had been] modified, beginning, perhaps to come together under the pressure of something new and nameless in him, as if her adventure had been his as well and was continuing to affect him” (186). Looking into a mirror herself she sees “plainly that she was remade, had brought to life some sleeping part of herself, extending the forest in her head” (186). Her eyes are “eloquent with transformation” (187), but when she looks at Sorry again, she realizes that he is staring at her breasts. Her reaction, however, is different from what it would have been before her transformative experience. No longer cowed by his sexuality, she responds crossly, “You don’t change,” only to have the young man “look...., first startled, then bewildered, and, for the first time that she could remember, ashamed” (187). As a perhaps unexpected outcome of having shared in Laura’s transformation, Sorry has begun to develop a conscience.

When it comes time for Laura to confront Mr. Braque, she finds him transformed into something much more powerful than he was when she first met him, the result, no doubt of his almost complete vampirism of her little brother. She nonetheless defeats Braque, reversing the game, tricking him into letting her past his defenses, and he begins a slow disintegration. Laura, however, soon finds herself in an even more upsetting role reversal: “just as she had once done by Jacko’s bed, watching the reflection of this very man’s smile play wickedly over her brother’s face. Now with shock and triumph, she discerned her own ghost, looking back at her out of her victim’s desperate eyes” (204). In effect Laura has become the vampire, sucking Braque’s stolen life back out of him, returning to Jacko what belongs to him, but finding the action itself subtly intoxicating. She is, we are told, “glad to see him so desperate and reduced. She felt enormously strong as she suddenly became aware of the full extent of her power over him” (225). Laura toys with this power, seeing Braque as outside the scope of human morality and thus not deserving of forgiveness. She considers the possibility that by torturing him she might “discharge her own burden of human anguish” (225) without penalty. It is Sorry Carlisle, however, who makes her realize that what she is doing is wrong. Sorry, who has previously been characterized as

something of a sociopath and who has been equated on several occasions with cats or tigers, now says to her, “Very heavy, Chant.... Are you playing with your mouse a bit?” (226). We are told that Sorry makes this statement without “criticism or rancour” (226), but he goes on to muse, “I don’t know what I think about power...at home in my own room—that’s different. Outside, well—I’d rather knit the world up than tear it apart” (227). When Laura defends her actions—Braque is pure evil, not a person—Sorry replies that

“It’s not him I’m thinking about. It’s you. It’s easy for me to recognize what you’re up to because I’ve thought of it myself sometimes—being merciless, being cruel, really. But.... There are always two people involved in cruelty, aren’t there? One to be vicious and someone to suffer! And what’s the use of getting rid of—of wickedness say—in the outside world if you let it creep back into things from inside you?” (227-28)

Sorenson Carlisle, as a result of having been abused by his stepfather, has been unable to love anyone. He is fascinated by the concept, witness the bookcase full of romance novels in his study, but he has never been able to reach out to anyone. He feels lust for Laura, but, prior to her transformation at least, no deeper connection that he would admit to. Now, however, something has changed, and it seems possible that he is looking at Laura’s actions as a test case for himself. How she conducts herself towards Braque may well determine how he acts towards her and the world in the future. In pondering her conversation with Sorry and what she has done to Braque, Laura wonders, “did you get cruelty out of your system by acting on the chance, or did you invite it in?” (229). There is a very real danger that by seeking revenge on the monster, Laura could indeed become like him. Realizing how complex life is, she wishes vainly for “a single unifying principle that would make sense of all this rich variety, and would explain, too, why suddenly the sight of Sorry standing at the school gate that morning had filled her with a soft electricity, exciting but not totally amiable” (232). Looking at Braque with this feeling inside of her, she realizes that although he is “horrifying, ...she could not be horrified” (233) by him any longer. Confronting the monster for the last time, she exorcizes him for good, saying “You’ve overstayed your welcome. Okay? I was going to punish you slowly, but Sorry Carlisle says it might not be good for me. So go back and let’s get over and done with” (234). By purging herself of horror and anger, Laura destroys the monster and saves herself.

There is no pat happy ending to *The Changeover* because Mahy is too wise to believe in such things. As Lawrence-Pietroni has suggested the author does not appear to believe that life is or should be whole and integrated (34). Laura has transformed herself. She has become both a full-fledged witch and a much wiser person than she was a few days earlier. Looking in the mirror, she realizes that she now has “the very face she had been promised weeks earlier on the day of the warnings” (256). But life’s complexities continue. Her little brother has recovered his health, but her wayward father has come back into her life and wants to reestablish their relationship. Then there is Mom, and Mom’s new boyfriend, the symbolically named Chris Holly, to be dealt with. Most of all, though, there is Sorry Carlisle, sort of her boyfriend, but not quite, something of a mentor in witchcraft, but with built-in problems of a sort that Harry Potter and Ged never had to face.

Their sexual attraction is clear, and Laura realizes that she loves him, but she is also clear that, given their age difference, she is not ready to go any further down that road at present. Both she and Sorry have several years' worth of schooling and further transformation to go through before anything permanent is decided. As the novel ends, Sorry Carlisle, who is developing photographs of Laura at *Janua Caeli*, communicates with her telepathically, venting his frustration at her decision that they must temporarily separate, by making slightly off-colored puns about her being "a wonderfully developed girl," and threatening to "fix" her (262). Her response to Sorry, however, is that "You're the one that's fixed, poor Sorry, fixed by love no matter how scared you are of it" (263). In a life of constant transformation, Laura, tentatively, believes that she has found something that, while constantly changing, will also, magically, remain unchanged.

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