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Magic: The Conference

Take one venue, a dash of technological wizardry, and add a generous pinch of fairy dust and, ‘Just-like-that!’, you have the ingredients for a truly magical conference! When Nickianne asked me to compile a report on the Magic conference held at Glasgow University last summer, I set to work conjuring up a few ideas and, with a bit of luck, hope I have found something to do the trick!

Magic conferences are initially daunting to Muggles or the magically-uninitiated, and much nervous energy was expended considering how to implement defence strategies to deflect spells cast by an unreceptive audience. Risk assessments for this type of conference differed from others with the likelihood of being turned into a toad a distinct possibility. However, I'm relieved to report that no one vanished or was transformed irreversibly during the conference! Having read one of Houdini's advertisements, where audiences were “invited to bring their own padlocks”, I was fearful, but also excited to set foot in the conference venue. Thankfully, delegates at this conference were not invited to bring their own padlocks and certainly in my paper, Houdini's own padlocks were unlocked before any shackling of the speaker could be contemplated.

The alchemist, Adam McLean, once wrote that, “Magical thinking is the ability to see ideas as part of a whole, to see the interconnections, the correspondences between seemingly diverse events, things and ideas”. So it was that speakers entered into the spirit of the conference by engaging in magical thinking. All contributors to the conference ably demonstrated the range of their talents during the sessions. They disseminated research findings and generously shared the wealth of their experience in papers that were lovingly crafted, rich with ideas and both stimulating and entertaining in equal measure. It was a terrific gathering replete with interesting papers and stimulating research material.

‘Magic: The Conference’ was the first graduate conference to be organised by postgraduate students: Karla Benske, Amy Cartwright, Monica Germana, Kirsty Jardine, Katharine Macfarlane, Catherine McSporrán and Ronnie Scott in the Arts and Divinity faculties at Glasgow University. Between them they had the magical ability to make the impossible possible: an illusion, which to my mind, is extremely impressive and certainly dis-‘spelled’ a few myths about the much maligned and misunderstood reputations of students!

The programme included six themed sessions titled: Once Upon A Time, Through The Magic Lens, Metamorphosis, Seeing Is Believing, Divine Inspiration, Magical Mystery Tour. The conference was interdisciplinary in nature, transcending the boundaries of English and Scottish Literature, Scottish History, Divinity, History of

Art, Theatre, Television and Film Studies, amongst others. Sessions were framed by supernatural entertainment such as palm reading, Tarot and crystal ball sessions, Magic Bob, and readings from esteemed writers Alasdair Gray and Tom Leonard. The conveners also conjured up a few free gifts for delegates: a book (not of the 'spell'ing variety) and Nestle Magic Stars chocolate - a truly magical combination! More entertainment was to be had during creative writing performances and last but not least a ceilidh, which was free to all conference participants.

The conference began on the ninth of July and I was fortunate to be asked to chair Panel One, which operated under the title, "Once upon a time" and comprised of three papers delivered by students from the English Literature department at Glasgow University. Catherine McSporran of the English Literature department presented a compelling paper entitled, 'The Kingdom of God, the Republic of Heaven: Depictions of God in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*'. This was followed by Deneka MacDonald's similarly enchanting paper, 'Women Against Women: The Fantastic Fairytale'. Kirsty Jardine then presented a fascinating paper entitled, 'A Myriad of Reflections: I. B. Singer's *The Mirror* and its place in the literature of Magic'. The questions asked of the panel were equally stimulating, ranging from discussions on descriptions and representations of colour and absence of colour in fiction, to the blurring of boundaries between reality and fantasy. So the story goes, "Once upon a time there lived three researchers ... who, I'm delighted to report are, at the time of going to print, living happily ever after!

The first session was washed down with good fare and fine fruit juices and, with a helping hand from special guest Magic Bob, we entered session two. The next panel was aptly titled, "Through the magic lens". Susanne Ramsenthaler of the History of Art department developed an exciting image in her paper entitled, 'Degrees of Transformation: Of Photograms and X-Rays'. A paper entitled, 'Transformation in the Paintings of Francis Bacon' by Rina Arya of the Theology department, hotly followed this. Last but not least came a paper from Monica Germana of the Scottish Literature department entitled, 'Real Gorgons or Fantastic Chimeras? Re-shaping Myth and Tradition: Alice Thompson's *Justine* and *Pandora's Box*'. Monica considered the role of women as dangerous and posing a threat to men. She discussed the blending of two monsters in chimera, androgeny, doublings and dualities, and investigated ambiguity which, she argued, spelled danger in her chosen texts.

That evening, much fun was had at a Magic party organised at the Uisge Beatha bar (*trans.* 'Water of Life') with readings by special guests Alasdair Gray and Tom Leonard, served up with a finger buffet.

Having recovered from the delights of the night before, panellists and audiences both emerged bright eyed and bushy-tailed on the tenth July in readiness for the third panel

connected by the theme of “Metamorphosis”. Amy Cartwright of the English Literature department gave a fascinating account of, 'The Magic of Transformation: Drugs, the Body and the Future'. Here she explored desire and fragmentation in relation to humanity. Next was Kate Robinson’s classical interpretation of, 'The Secret of Transformation in Giulio Camillo's *Theatre of Memory*', followed by the recently qualified Dr Damian Sutton of the French department with his paper on, 'Magic Realism from *Quai des brumes* to *Mulholland Drive*'. Damian added a magical touch of technological wizardry to the conference using Powerpoint and video clips. His paper centred around the theatre of memory and the use of colour to create magic realism, and his paper clearly demonstrated that presenting on this topic, though implausible, was far from impossible – a variation on the theme of his key theorist, Jeffrey Wechsler.

Following a short break, we entered panel four under the theme of “Seeing is believing”. Given that this was a magical conference, it was no surprise to find the occasional glitch with visual aids. This manifested itself in the form of a breakdown in communication between a laptop and the data-projector, so much of the break was spent in anxious wait of technological miracles to occur. Amazingly enough, two minutes before my presentation was due to begin, it worked – as if by magic! Technology, like God, appears to work in mysterious ways! My paper was titled, "Houdinizing' Peter Pan: The Magical Exploits of J.M. Barrie and Harry Houdini”. It explored connections between the writer and magician and considered certain character traits which they shared. Investigation was also made as to the possibility of them ever meeting. Incidentally, the term “houdinizing” appeared for the first time in 1920 in Funk & Wagnall’s New Standard Dictionary, turning Harry’s surname into a verb meaning “To release or extricate oneself from (confinement, bounds, or the like), as by wriggling out”. Karla Benske of the Scottish Literature department was next to speak on, 'Diabolus Ex Machina: Manipulation and Masterly Intrigue in James Kennaway's *Some Gorgeous Accident*' which illuminated our understanding of the blending of technology with humans resulting in alienation. Following Karla, there was an insightful and beautifully illustrated paper presented by Julie Barr of the French department entitled 'Treatment of Magic and related topics in Early Modern Emblem Books'.

Unfortunately, due to other commitments, I was unable to attend the last day of the conference but was reliably informed that it was also a great success. Wednesday night culminated in an evening “Away with the fairies”, not, as some may expect taking delegates on flights of fancy, but it promised to be a delightful evening of creative writing read by the authors and accompanied by food of the gods: fine wine, lovely food and good cheer.

The final day of the conference was divinely inspired, apt as this was also the title for panel five! Brad Johnson of the Divinity School reflected on, 'Learning to Lose: Highrolling in God's Casino'. His colleague, Mark Brummitt, then took the floor to discuss 'Prophecy and Performance'. Katharine Macfarlane of the Scottish History department drew panel five to a close beautifully, securing us in the knowledge that her paper had been divinely inspired.

Although our journey through the conference was nearing an end, panel six took us on a "Magical mystery tour". Ronnie Scott of the Scottish History department kicked this off with the brilliantly titled, 'Pure Dead Magic: Glasgow's Enchanted Landscapes'. Katie Stewart, of the English Literature department then journeyed to, 'The End of the Road: Mexico and its Magic' and then a journey of the supernatural kind took Lyndsay Lunan of the Scottish History department and her audience to the threshold of, 'The Madman, The Witch and The Holy Ghost: Magic and Belief in Scottish Literature'. Guest speakers Ted Cowan and Lizanne Henderson, concluded the conference with a magical consideration of 'Science and Scottish Folk Belief'.

The accompanying ceildh was a fitting way to conclude an entirely successful conference. I'm also glad to report that after the conference, neither the organisers nor the delegates were found to be 'reeling' from the experience!

So, how was the conference received? - A cornucopia of magical terms is required to describe its delights, its enchanting appeal and its magical effect. Its brilliance reflects that its success was much more than mere illusion. What's more, this was achieved without the use of wands – a truly magical feat! It was a spellbinding conference, thoroughly enjoyed by participants and audiences alike. As to the secret of conference success? – Well, as we are all aware, good conference organisers, like good magicians, never reveal their tricks!