
Broomsticks Flying in Circles

Playing with Narrative in Eleanor Estes's *The Witch Family*



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The author contends that reading some narratives of make-believe can become for many children the ultimate form of fantasy play, providing them with a sense of control absent in their real world. She employs terms from French structuralist critic Gérard Genette, from Austrian child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, and from English pediatrician D. W. Winnicott, to discuss Eleanor Estes's classic 1960s children's novel *The Witch Family*. The author shows how the embedded stories of the work engage its young readers in narrative games and offers them a complex picture of children at play, one they recognize and enjoy. She contends that young readers come not only to relish the structurally transgressive manipulations of the story but that, because they do so, they are better able to face the world at large. As children learn to handle the monsters and witches of Estes's narrative fantasy, they learn to cope with the doubts and worries of childhood itself, and this proves key to the book's longevity and continued popularity.

In a crucial scene in Eleanor Estes's *The Witch Family* (1960), two human girls, Amy and her best friend Clarissa, attend the birthday party of a young witch and find themselves unable to join in the children's games because they lack magical powers. "Little Witch Girl wanted her guests to play," the narrator informs us, "and urged them to try and ride the broomsticks" essential to their game of flying in circles in quest of a gold ring. "But Amy and Clarissa could not make [the broomsticks] . . . go."¹ The children's game appears stymied until Little Witch Girl remembers that she owns two mechanical flying brooms that her human guests can ride. With the mechanical brooms, Amy and Clarissa participate in the game, and Amy even wins the gold ring. Although Little Witch Girl claims to remember the brooms, their appearance can also be read as a magical wish fulfillment, the supernatural enactment of her desire to keep

the game going. The text has made no previous reference to the brooms, and they appear in the nick of time as if by magic.

But the situation is even more complex because Little Witch Girl and her magical birthday party have themselves been conjured up by Amy's imagination. While playing with Clarissa, Amy narrates stories about witches who magically come to life. Thus, Amy's winning the gold ring constitutes a wish fulfillment as well, a fantasy game within a game, in which Amy invents, stipulates, and finally alters the rules at will. As theorists of play have noted, "Fantasy play gives children a sense of power and mastery that is not possible in the real world," in part because it involves creating "themes and metaphors" that can "enrich, structure, and energize childhood experiences."² In *The Witch Family*, storytelling becomes the ultimate form of fantasy play; for Amy, narration is one game that can continue indefinitely, allowing the narrator to serve as a character in her own story. Ultimately, the novel implies, such a form of narrative play can enrich both the tale and the teller, allowing children to transform themselves through the fictions they create. This classic children's work has much to teach us about the centrality of narrative to creative play. My article investigates both psychological and narratological perspectives on play in order to track Estes's depiction of play as both emotional transformation and narrative process.

The Witch Family is a rich example of what Gérard Genette describes as *narrative metalepsis*, a "transgressive" relationship between frame narrative and embedded narrative that unsettles our expectations about storytelling and produces in readers a sense of "strangeness" or "uneasiness."³ In this novel, the frame narrative at first appears relatively straightforward; it depicts the play sessions of Amy and Clarissa who listen to Amy's mother's stories about a magical witch family, then embellish the stories with new characters and events in their own crayon drawings. For instance, Amy banishes Old Witch, the supposedly villainous character invented by her mother, to a glass mountain. Later, feeling sorry for the exiled witch, she provides her with a companion, Little Witch Girl, who strongly resembles Amy herself. From the start of the novel, however, the embedded stories about the witch family take on a vitality and vividness that the frame narrative lacks.

Metalepsis occurs when the embedded stories transgress the boundaries of narrative—in Genette's words, the "shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds"⁴—and begin to affect the frame narrative. In other words, the tale reaches into the world of the teller. Exemplifying metalepsis, Little Witch Girl and Old

Witch freely discuss Amy, who has helped create them. Further, in two crucial scenes, Amy and Little Witch Girl make extended visits to each other. As noted, Amy attends Little Witch Girl's party, and later Little Witch Girl enters Amy's world on Halloween. Both of these visits are metaleptic encounters, breaking down the boundaries between teller and tale. The novel's opening pages intensify the metaleptic effect by discussing characters from both the frame narrative and the embedded stories as if they are equally real. Genette describes metalepsis as a "game" that plays with narrative expectations: "All these games [narrative transgressions involving metalepsis], by the intensity of their effects, demonstrate the importance of the boundary they tax their ingenuity to overstep, in defiance of verisimilitude—a boundary *that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself*"⁵ [italics in original]. Thus, *The Witch Family* not only offers a psychologically complex and accurate depiction of children at play, it also enacts a playful metalepsis at the level of narrative form.

Although written nearly half a century ago, *The Witch Family* appears in many respects a startlingly innovative and experimental work. Nevertheless, little has been written about this remarkable, ambiguous, and complex novel. In a relatively recent essay, Claudia Nelson categorizes the work as a species of subversive metafiction allowing Amy to write narratives "that explore the possibilities of rebelling against one's parent figure."⁶ For Nelson, Amy's imposition of punishments on Little Witch Girl's guardian Old Witch, the tyrannical figure originally appearing in her mother's stories, constitutes an implicit, indirect rebellion against maternal authority.⁷ In a similar vein, Lois R. Kuznets, writing three decades ago, contends that Amy's invention of Little Witch Girl constitutes projecting her own experience onto her magical playmate: "If the witch girl that Amy creates resembles Amy and has some problems, they are similar to both Amy's and Clarissa's in a generic way: they are the common problems of childhood. The human girl is clearly powerful enough to find clever solutions to these problems for herself and her witch friends."⁸ Both Nelson and Kuznets suggest that Amy uses her fantasy narratives to address psychological concerns that exist in her daily life. Clearly, the novel lends itself to such psychological analysis, because it sets up parallels between its frame narrative (Amy's everyday life) and its embedded narratives (Amy's stories of the often cantankerous Old Witch and her surrogate daughter Little Witch Girl). Both Amy and Little Witch Girl often feel shy and timid around new people, both are creative and imaginative, and both ultimately find ways of demonstrating their courage and affirming their potential, in part by interacting with each other. By

creating permeability between the frame narrative and the embedded narrative, by allowing Amy and Little Witch Girl to move into each other's stories, Estes enhances the complexity and significance of both narratives. Specifically, she suggests that people's everyday lives are inflected and orchestrated by the stories they tell, especially by the narratives they create about themselves, whether in speaking, in writing, or only in their own thinking.

In *The Witch Family*, the narratives created by Amy and her mother take four forms. Some appear to be narrated orally by Amy or her mother, some are recorded in the pictures that Amy draws of the witch family, and some appear in fragmentary form in the letters that Amy writes and sends to her witch friends, while still others take place in Amy's imagination and need not be conveyed to any audience. Undoubtedly, Amy's magical encounters with her supernatural friends can be regarded as merely imaginative excursions having no basis in physical reality, and the text sometimes implies that this is the case. At the same time, Estes is careful to allow her younger readers the possibility that the magical characters are real. She always provides detailed explanations for Amy's entrance into the magical world inhabited by Little Witch Girl and emphasizes Amy's view that such interactions between the world of prosaic existence and magical experience are entirely possible. Thus, this shrewd, playful, and sophisticated text speaks with a double voice, allowing always two explanations (psychological or magical) for every encounter. All of Amy's narratives emerge from moments of play, and all deal in substantive ways with the nature and function of play in childhood development. While the novel focuses on play as a form of psychological development and growth specific to children, it also suggests play is an inherent component in the creation of—and engagement with—narrative, as something typical of the universal human process of storytelling. While Estes shows that playing and narrative are often inextricably intertwined, they can also have a sequential and complementary relationship. *The Witch Family* initially foregrounds acts of storytelling, then focuses on playing, and, finally, leads us back to stories and storytelling as the novel concludes.

The Uses of Storytelling

As D. W. Winnicott argues in *Playing and Reality* (1971), "playing facilitates growth and therefore health." For Winnicott, playing helps lay the groundwork for "group relationships" and can also be "self-healing" for children facing

problems in their lives.⁹ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud famously describes how small children use games to establish their control of objects and relationships.¹⁰ Developing this theme, Winnicott delineates in more specific terms the temporal and spatial dynamics of play. Of particular interest is his spatial analysis: he describes play as a space of “potential” that bridges the gap between “external phenomena” and “inner psychic reality.”¹¹ Thus, the “area of playing” is neither *inside* nor *outside* the child; rather, it is a space of relationship, of in-betweenness, that is both ambiguous and rich in possibilities. In Winnicott’s words, “the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream.” Because of its unstable nature, “playing is both exciting and precarious.” As it opens new vistas into our psychic terrain and releases repressed drives and instincts, “playing is liable to become frightening.” In fact, organized games, with their elaborate rules and designated roles, function, in one way, to “forestall the frightening aspect of playing.”¹² Winnicott’s analysis sheds light on the highly attractive but also dangerous games that emanate from Amy’s rich fantasy life in *The Witch Family*.

Recording numerous psychoanalytic sessions involving children’s play, *Playing and Reality* also documents the connection between games and narrative. Repeatedly, Winnicott describes children at play who also make up stories that serve as a commentary on—or an explanation for—their games.¹³ This sympathetic understanding of the healing powers of games and narrative also animates Bruno Bettelheim’s analysis of how children process fairy tales in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1975), published only four years later. Like Winnicott, Bettelheim depicts children who actively engage with the process of storytelling, interpreting, or even modifying narratives to fit their psychic needs. In a well-known example, Bettelheim describes parental splitting, or the split parent figure, in fairy tales. In the universally popular tale of Cinderella, for instance, the evil stepmother constitutes the dark or fearful side of a child’s feelings toward a mother or mother-figure, while Cinderella’s fairy godmother serves as a projection of idealized and positive feelings. For Bettelheim, such narrative splitting allows a child to explore angry and rebellious feelings toward a parent without fear and anxiety, since the symbolic connection to the child’s parent remains just below the threshold of consciousness; in addition, the narrative’s ability to replace a bad parent with a positive one offers reassurance, implying that, despite a parent’s temporary anger, the good parent will always return.¹⁴ More crucially for our purposes, however, Bettelheim further elucidates the link between narrative and play. “In normal play,” Bettelheim asserts, “objects

such as dolls and toy animals are used to embody various aspects of the child's personality which are too complex, unacceptable, and contradictory for him to handle." Yet, as Bettelheim goes on to argue, many "unconscious pressures" do not "lend themselves to [play] because they are too complex and contradictory or too dangerous and socially disapproved. . . . Here, knowing fairy tales is a great help to the child." Once familiar with traditional stories, Bettelheim contends, children will, in fact, use them in their play: "many fairy stories are acted out by children, but only after the children have become familiar with the story, which they never could have invented on their own."¹⁵ Thus, such magical tales constitute an invitation to "play," a specific constellation of emotions invoked through narrative and repeated in play with endless variations.

Using Play to Tame the Monsters

Appearing fifteen years before Bettelheim's work, *The Witch Family* anticipates some of its crucial insights: Amy's mother creates the magical tale (the specific constellation of emotions and tensions) that Amy then continues to playfully revise—enacting, reshaping, and establishing her own specific variations. As noted, Nelson emphasizes that Amy's stories (generated in part through a series of crayon drawings) mask a covert rebellion against her mother, because she chooses to discipline and punish Old Witch, a figure originally created in her mother's stories. Such a perspective supports Bettelheim's contention that children use the magical transformations in fairy tales to help process their changing feelings toward parental power.

In my view, the narrative lends itself to a more ambiguous reading, because it implies that Amy's mother cooperates in Old Witch's punishments and happily includes them in the stories she tells Amy and Clarissa. In the first chapter, readers learn that Amy is indeed fascinated by her mother's tales of the evil witch: "Summer, spring, winter, fall, Amy loved to hear stories about Old Witch. 'One day, Old Witch' Mama always began" (4). Yet, as we have seen, Amy also participates in her mother's acts of storytelling. In fact, instead of rebelling against her mother, Amy seems to be imitating her imaginative tale spinning, serving as an apprentice storyteller who helps to shape her mother's narrative choices: "Today [her mother]. . . had . . . told an awful, though not too awful, story about Old Witch, with many interruptions and suggestions from Amy" (4). As Estes emphasizes, the mother's tale of Old Witch is "awful, but not too

awful.” In other words, Amy’s mother is at pains to create dramatic tension and allow vicarious enjoyment of Old Witch’s bad behavior, without going so far as to scare her daughter.

In Bettelheim’s terms, the mother creates a crucial distance between reality and story, one which allows “externalization” (Amy’s projection of her own feelings into the tale) without arousing a dangerous level of fear or anxiety.¹⁶ As Bettelheim emphasizes, “‘Once upon a time,’ ‘In a certain country,’ . . . such beginnings suggest that what follows does not pertain to the here and now that we know. This deliberate vagueness in the beginnings of fairy tales symbolizes that we are leaving the concrete world of ordinary reality.”¹⁷ And in fact, Amy’s mother’s stories always begin with just such a vague narrative tag, one which, in Bettelheim’s words, “locates” the typical magical story “in a unique fairy-tale time.”¹⁸ As Estes emphasizes, all of Amy’s mother’s stories must start with the words, “One day, Old Witch . . .,” fencing off fairy-tale time from Amy’s everyday existence.

Yet Estes’s clever and ambiguous narration further complicates matters, since the whole novel begins with the opening tag phrase for Amy’s mother’s stories: “One day, Old Witch, the head witch of all the witches, was banished. Amy, just an ordinary real girl, not a witch, said Old Witch would have to go” (1). Only later do we connect this tag phrase with the novel’s embedded tales and grasp the implication that Old Witch’s banishment is narrated by Amy’s mother. Further, Amy’s decree of banishment suggests not just her ambivalent feelings toward Old Witch, but also her status as an assistant storyteller who makes suggestions that her mother then incorporates into her stories. Like the first chapter, chapters 2, 5, and 8 begin with a similar tag phrase, hinting that Amy’s mother continues the story cycle throughout much of the novel. As we learn in the second chapter, “One day, Old Witch was rocking in her wicker rocker on the creaky front porch of the witch house. She was not happy. . . . She did not like it up here on this bare, bleak glass hill” (14). With relish, the narrator—presumably Amy’s mother—consigns Old Witch to her bleak banishment, reducing the once powerful Old Witch to a hapless captive. Similarly, chapter 5, which recounts the story of Amy’s ability to befuddle Old Witch by attending Little Witch Girl’s birthday party while protected by an invisibility charm, seems to be told by Amy’s mother: “One day, Old Witch was very busy . . . preparing for her Little Witch Girl’s birthday party” (55). Finally, in chapter 8, Amy’s mother apparently stages further punishments for Old Witch in the guise of Malachi the bumblebee, who delights in stinging Old Witch when she

commits a bad act. Initially, Old Witch tries to find a rune to destroy Malachi's magical ability to scold and discipline her—a magical spell enables Malachi to talk—but she is foiled by both the bee and Little Witch Girl: "One day, Old Witch . . . was searching for a rune that would get the magic off Malachi. . . . She was so absorbed that she didn't hear the murmur of the bee, 'MEND THY WAYS!'" (97).

If Amy is not, in fact, rebelling against her mother's stand-in and if her mother happily collaborates with her in disciplining Old Witch, what are we to make of the odd plot line that sets up Old Witch as a hugely powerful figure but allows Amy, a mere mortal child, to banish her to a mysterious glass hill where she is isolated and can do no harm? In addition, why does Amy have the power to call Old Witch back for socially sanctioned occasions such as Halloween, when a bit of witchy behavior is considered acceptable?

The answer lies in Amy's magical encounters with the witch family, metaleptic encounters that straddle and merge the two levels of narrative—the embedded stories and the enclosing frame of Amy's daily life. Amy is able to break through the division between her two levels of narrative on two important occasions. During the first, as noted, she attends Little Witch Girl's birthday party, and not only flies like a witch, but also beats the witches at their own game. Despite her fear of the slightly sinister Old Witch, she succeeds in tricking her by attending the party while invisible, no mean accomplishment since Old Witch prides herself on *her* ability to trick others. In the second example of metalepsis, Amy dresses up as a witch on Halloween, flies once more on a magical broomstick, and travels to Old Witch's house and to a school for young witches. Yet again, Amy succeeds in outwitting witches, in this case Little Witch Girl's classmates.

Both metaleptic encounters involve festive occasions when some witchy behavior might be socially acceptable. Both meetings suggest a hint of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the *carnavalesque*, a chaotic festival involving "games, masquerades, laughter, pranks, and dances." In fact, the festivities Amy attends share all these elements. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque defies any "utilitarian connotation" and "transgresses all limited objectives" and goals, allowing the experience of pleasure for its own sake.¹⁹ On both festive occasions, Amy masquerades as a witchlike figure, plays pranks on Old Witch and other young witches, participates in games, and shudders at the even wilder games and dances of the witches around her. As Winnicott argues, play is always in danger of turning frightening. As it releases instinctual responses, it can

create “a high degree of anxiety,” which in turn “destroys playing.”²⁰ In order to remain in control, Amy must end her playful encounter when the witches’ games become so wild that they begin to frighten her. In sum, Amy assumes some of the fearsome power of Old Witch, while also controlling the potential excesses of this power; she enjoys the “badness” of witchlike behavior vicariously while taming and disciplining it.

Clearly, then, Amy’s need to discipline Old Witch has less to do with her mother than with her own internal struggles. Like the rebellious boy Max in Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, Amy dresses up like a monstrous creature in order to release the monster within; also like Max, Amy understands that her internal demons, once released, can become a threat to her. Just as Max learns to control the wild things by becoming their king, so Amy must continue to assert her role as the authority figure who can both banish Old Witch and yet call her back at will. Amy’s close connection to Old Witch is established by the way she signs her numerous letters to the head witch: “I love you and you love me” (17). If Old Witch is, in fact, an aspect of Amy’s psyche—the internal monster from the depths of the unconscious that must be tamed—Amy’s metaleptic ability to move between her real world and the magical narratives gains an additional significance. Amy can fuse these two narratives only in moments of play, when she acts out the submerged elements of her psyche. By taking on the witchy personification of her own desires through games of dress-up or make-believe, Amy releases an empowering psychic energy and also tames it. She calls up, and then controls, the Old Witch within herself. In Bettelheim’s words, by embodying “all his destructive wishes in an evil witch” and then separating this destructive element from other aspects of his personality, a “child can finally begin to sort out his contradictory tendencies.”²¹

Taming a monster, whether internal or external, is a difficult task, and Amy fears Old Witch’s power; Estes repeatedly stresses Amy’s courage in facing down and resisting Old Witch. When Amy attends Little Witch Girl’s birthday party, her anxiety matches her exhilaration. Unlike her friend Clarissa, who happily devours the birthday food, “Amy did not eat one bite of anything. She had not forgotten the poison apple in ‘Snow White’ and the gingerbread house in ‘Hansel and Gretel.’ She knew more about witches and their wicked ways than Clarissa did, for she had thought up not only this witch house and the family in it, but the glass hill as well. . . . The food smelled good—all the more dangerous” (73). Unlike Clarissa, Amy has good reason to be vigilant: whether conjured in nightmares or simply in stories we make up about our lives, our

own internal monsters are always the most frightening. Not yet seven years old, Amy risks being overwhelmed by the monstrous witch that she summons up to externalize her conflict between transgressive impulses and social norms.

In fact, Amy would be powerless to control her encounters with Old Witch were it not for Malachi the enchanted bumblebee, designated by Amy as her official “representatiff” in Old Witch’s domain (80). Also a product of Amy’s stories, Malachi has no power to act on his own behalf. Instead, all his magic aims to control the destructive impulses of Old Witch in order to protect Amy and her friends. Speaking often in the imperative, Malachi issues commands (spelled out in capital letters) and scolds Old Witch for her too frequent failure to obey. Punctuating his injunctions with bee stings, Malachi personifies Amy’s own vigilance. Just as Amy turns invisible at Little Witch Girl’s party to protect herself, Malachi, too, remains invisible to Old Witch. If Amy must work hard to scrutinize Old Witch’s nefarious actions, Malachi can do the job effortlessly: he is blessed with three ruby-red eyes to facilitate his continual surveillance. In sum, if Old Witch embodies the seductive but sometimes terrifying enchantments of the Freudian id—she conjures up both enticing treats and frightening tricks—Malachi signifies the restraint and control of the superego. At the birthday party, when Amy’s invisibility charm wears off, Old Witch begins to dance the “backanally” dance that, for her, “always precede[s] a real wickedness” (78). As the dance intensifies, it signifies the transition from carnivalesque exuberance to a potentially dangerous bacchanalia. Intent on using her dark magic against Amy and Clarissa, Old Witch is stopped by Malachi’s monitory bee stings, enabling Amy and Clarissa to escape: “Thank you, dear Malachi” Amy whispers, “you are a good representatiff” (80).

While Old Witch and Malachi personify contesting elements of Amy’s psyche, Little Witch Girl serves the purpose of fusing these elements within the magical narrative. Attached to both Old Witch and Malachi, Little Witch Girl often mediates between the transgressions of Old Witch and the monitory injunctions of the bee.²² Little Witch Girl’s intermediary position aligns her with the Freudian ego; similarly, she functions as Amy’s alter ego on the level of embedded narrative. Malachi defends Amy when the magical birthday games bring her in contact with Old Witch; so too, he defends Little Witch Girl on her first day of school, when her witchy classmates torment her with the stomping game (47). Jealous of Little Witch Girl’s magical talents, the school-girls surround her in their aggressive game: “The little witch girls stomped up to Little Witch Girl, and they pulled her long, light hair. . . . They tweaked her

nose, and they stepped on her toes, trying to make her say ‘Ee-eek!’ She did not say ‘Ee-eek!’ She remained staunch, and she still did not flinch” (48–49).

As we have seen in this novel, play raises subversive energies that need to be tamed or controlled. In this passage, Estes invites her young readers to enjoy both the wildness of the game and Little Witch Girl’s courage. Form reflects content: as the language describes how the little witches play, it also turns playful, incorporating elements of comic verse, rhyming “toes” and “nose,” setting up strong iambic rhythms that mirror the stomping of the schoolgirls’ feet, and even creating a playful slant rhyme between “staunch” and “flinch.” “She remained staunch, and she still did not flinch.”

Unable to hold out on her own, Little Witch Girl whispers a rune that brings Malachi to her aid; once again, his bee stings tamp down the transgressive playtime energies. Further, once “all the little witch girls under[stand] the magical connection between the bites and the new little witch girl,” they conceive “a great admiration for the new girl” who can weave such powerful enchantments (49). Summoning up the powerful magic of the superego, Little Witch Girl, like Amy, gains mastery of the chaotic impulses typified by the world of witches and paradoxically earns her peers’ approval. This connection clarifies the purpose of the narrative collaboration through which Amy and her mother control and manipulate Old Witch and the witch pupils: if Amy is free to play with her mother’s stories by adding characters and events, her mother’s narratives have already initiated the process of taming the witch within. By doing so, Amy can win her mother’s approval and prepare for a life in the adult society that awaits her.

In fact, most of the embedded stories act out just this conflict. One major subplot, for instance, involves Old Witch subversively trying to enter and dominate a spring holiday story that does not belong to her. Eager to devour the festive Easter bunnies who are painting holiday eggs in the valley below the glass hill of her exile, Old Witch flies down to attack them. However, since Malachi has already warned the rabbits, they are able to trick her into eating toy bunnies stuffed with sawdust and small rocks painted to look like Easter eggs. Punished for her greed by a terrible stomach ache, Old Witch is graciously forgiven by Amy because she did no real harm. But since Amy clearly creates this plot line through her crayon drawings, rich ironies pervade the narrative. Bored by Old Witch’s blandness once she has been controlled, Amy must summon her out of exile and induce her to commit an act of “wickedness.” At the same time, Amy’s conscience cannot allow Old Witch to devour the innocent

Easter bunnies, and Amy's inner monster must be both punished and forgiven. Amy's enjoyment of Old Witch's transgression is emphasized by her imitation of Old Witch's mannerisms and expression while coloring her story: "Amy's mother did not like the way Amy said, 'Heh-heh!'" (112). When her mother chides her and warns that Amy will "ruin [her] voice," Amy merely repeats her witch's cackle and continues coloring (112). As Nelson indicates, Amy is clearly rebelling against her mother here; however, far from identifying her mother with Old Witch, Amy sees Old Witch as the conduit for her own witchlike desires and impulses.

The Transgressive Freedom of Play

So far, Amy's playful interactions with Old Witch, Malachi, and Little Witch Girl have been primarily linked to storytelling. For instance, Amy banishes Old Witch as a result of her mother's scary tales, and her mother then narrates the banishment. Similarly, Amy's visit to Little Witch Girl's birthday party is embedded in two levels of narrative—Amy's mother's narration of the party and Amy's portrayal of it in her crayon drawings. But as the novel moves toward its climax, the emphasis shifts in part from storytelling to play; Amy's mother's stories, signaled by their introductory tag ("One day Old Witch . . ."), fade away for a time, becoming less central as Amy prepares for Halloween, which will allow her to dress up and play at being a witch in a socially sanctioned setting.

Earlier, Amy could not allow Old Witch's wickedness to taint the Easter holiday. Now, however, she looks forward to Halloween when Old Witch will leave her exile to stir up magic and mischief. This long-awaited festivity, the climactic action of the closing chapters, is an opportunity for Amy to identify herself even more closely with the chaotic world of witches. On Halloween night, when Amy puts on her witch costume and mask, she appears identical to Little Witch Girl, who has secretly flown down to visit her. At this point in the novel, active play replaces both Amy's crayon drawings and her mother's stories. In Bettelheim's terms, the magical narratives have done their work, and Amy can now enact their conflicts through her own playful actions and fantasies, which are further endorsed by the transgressive nature of Halloween festivities.

At this magical moment, another metaleptic encounter occurs: Little Witch Girl joins Amy's friends for trick-or-treating, while Amy flies up into the sky, hoping to ride witchlike across the face of the moon. However, Amy flies, not

as before on a mechanical toy, but on a real witch's broom. Little Witch Girl has charmed her own broom so it will carry Amy. In Amy's earlier metaleptic encounter with Little Witch Girl, she entered the witch's narrative. Here something much more dramatic has happened: Amy and Little Witch Girl have traded narratives. In Winnicott's terms, while Little Witch Girl enters the realm of "external phenomena," Amy is temporarily free to inhabit the world of "dream potential."²³ In both encounters, flying typifies the transgressive freedom of play. Moving through time and space with uncanny and magical speed, the broomstick's flight navigates that area of in-betweenness, the ambiguous and unstable potential that Winnicott describes as the space of play. And, as Amy plays in this in-between space, the novel symmetrically plays with narrative, staging the metaleptic encounters that transgress traditional conventions of storytelling.

Earlier, Amy flew in restrictive circles within the confines of a game that imposed orderly rules on the potentially amorphous experience of play. Losing and winning were clearly defined, and Amy's circular flight ended when she seized the gold ring. In the last chapters, she engages with a deeper level of play, one that veers closer to the realm of hallucination and dream. Amy no longer has clearly defined goals and limits, and the enchanted broomstick appears to sense this. Rejecting Amy's guidance, the broom carries her on an erratic journey to the magical places she has imagined, including Old Witch's house and the school for young witches.

Once again, danger threatens Amy in the world of fantasy, but this time the threat looms larger. At the school, the pupils first threaten to turn Amy into a rabbit and then subject her to the stomping game they once employed to intimidate Little Witch Girl. Thus, Amy's Halloween game of dress-up and make-believe has led to an even more dangerous playtime activity: transforming herself from an ordinary girl into a magical flying witch, Amy now risks a further transformation into one of the rabbits on whom Old Witch preys. Through the logic of her imaginative games, Amy shape shifts from the embodiment of power to an emblem of victimhood. Significantly, Amy's game combines elements of earlier narratives. It reiterates Little Witch Girl's experience with the stomping game as well as Old Witch's predatory attempts on the Easter bunnies. As we have come to expect, only Malachi, that emblem of restraint and control, can save Amy. By summoning her "representatiff" and allowing him to discipline the witch girls, Amy becomes powerful again. But this time

her power is in a guise that is socially approved, allowing her to end the game and return to the safety of her own house on Garden Street at the close of her Halloween flight of fancy. Although she has transcended the simple goal of reaching for the gold ring according to the rules, Amy is still flying in circles. Her flight of fancy loops into the realm of dream and imagination and back again, for the game of flying is only valuable if it helps us navigate both ways through play's mysterious space of in-betweenness.

Written in the mid-twentieth century, Estes' modern fairy tale reflects the child-raising assumptions of its historical moment. Play is encouraged because it fosters rich creative potential, but it occurs in a safe environment supervised by parents. Amy and Clarissa draw their pictures at a table in Amy's mother's bedroom, indicating that the mother may be present as they play. According to Winnicott, because play can be inherently frightening, "responsible persons must be available when children play," not to control or direct the game but to forestall its more fearful aspects (50). As numerous critics have noted, traditional children's literature helps children forge a superego, embedding, in more or less covert ways, monitory injunctions and moral values in enticing narratives.²⁴ As we have seen, Amy's drawings, the shared narratives that Amy and her mother create, and the novel itself participate in this process, conjuring transgressive magical games, then limiting their scope and duration.

Yet, what makes Estes's book striking is the way it resists psychological resolution in favor of psychological process, just as it rejects narrative closure in favor of keeping the story going. The novel ends with Amy conjuring up yet another transgressive narrative about Old Witch, this one involving the poison apple that Amy claimed to be afraid of earlier. Once again, Amy instructs her mother about what to say: "'Well, come on,' Amy said to her mother. 'Come on . . . One day, Old Witch. . .'" (223). Thus, the novel ends with the same words that opened its first chapter, creating a narrative loop that might continue endlessly, balancing subversive energies and monitory control.

For Amy, such a dynamic balance can best be achieved by means of creative play that revolves around constructing and revising narratives. In fact, play in this specific sense is best defined as the metaleptic intersection of two narratives that we usually see as distinct and separate: the linear story of our daily lives and the errant, erratic, and often circular stories imagined in our daydreams, wishes, and fantasies. Along with the novel that frames them, the stories of Old Witch also create an endlessly productive narrative loop, since the circle of narrative

closure is achieved only to open again. Like Amy's enchanted broomsticks, this novel flies in circles, leading us up to an ending that echoes its opening words, inviting us to engage, once again, with the play of narrative.

NOTES

1. Eleanor Estes, *The Witch Family* (1960), 68–69. All future references to the text will be to this Harcourt, Brace edition, and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

2. Linda E. Homeyer and Mary O. Morrison, "Play Therapy: Practice, Issues, and Trends," *American Journal of Play* 1 (2008): 212. Homeyer and Morrison focus primarily on developments in play therapy for children who have suffered from trauma, offering a detailed review of the field. In this passage, they draw on the research and writings of Charles E. Schaefer.

3. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (1980), 235, 236. Genette cites numerous works—from Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* to Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*—as examples of metalepsis. As Genette emphasizes, the transgressions involving metalepsis may be relatively brief, "as innocent and ordinary as those of classical rhetoric," or they may pervade nearly all aspects of the work. Thus, Pirandello's play, "where the same actors are in turn characters and players, is nothing but a vast expansion of metalepsis" (235).

4. *Ibid.*, 236.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Claudia Nelson, "Writing the Reader: The Literary Child in and Beyond the Book," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 31 (2006): 232.

7. As Nelson goes on to assert, "The assorted minor hurts and embarrassments visited upon Old Witch may be seen as expressions of Amy's repressed hostility toward Old Witch's creator, Amy's mother" *ibid.*, (232).

8. Lois R. Kuznets, "Games of Dark: Psychofantasy in Children's Literature," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 1 (1977): 21. It should be noted that Kuznets's remarks on *The Witch Family* are a passing reference for purposes of comparison. Her main concern is with darker psychofantasies where problems are less easily resolved.

9. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971), 41, 46.

10. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud famously analyzed the *fort/da* game, in which a child plays with a wooden spool on a string. The boy first casts the spool away, making it disappear, and then retrieves it with the string. As he plays, he creates the simplest possible narrative to accompany his game, one consisting of only two words, *fort* (gone) and *da* (there).

11. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 47, 51.

12. Ibid., 50–52.

13. In one case, a young child (Diana) explains to Winnicott that two stuffed animals, a teddy bear and a lamb, are her children. She first pretends that she is pregnant with them, describes their birth, and then mimics taking care of them, putting them to bed surrounded by a cluster of other subordinate toys. When the therapist adds to her story, suggesting that the surrounding toys constitute the “dreams” of the “sleeping” teddy bear and lamb, the “idea intrigue[s] her,” and she incorporates additional stories into the game: “She went on developing the various themes as if dreaming their dreams for the babies” (ibid., 45).

14. “Many a girl is so convinced at moments that her bad (step) mother is the source of all her troubles that, on her own, she is not likely to imagine that it could all suddenly change. But when the idea is presented to her through ‘Cinderella,’ she can believe that at any moment a good (fairy) mother may come to the rescue, since the fairy tale tells her in a convincing fashion that this will be the case.” Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976), 56.

15. Ibid., 55.

16. In Bettelheim’s words, “Fairy tales offer figures onto which the child can externalize what goes on in his mind, in controllable ways. Fairy tales show the child how he can embody his destructive wishes in one figure . . . [and] gain desired satisfactions from another . . . as his needs of the moment require” (ibid., 65–66).

17. Ibid., 62.

18. Ibid.

19. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (1984, first pub. 1965), 276.

20. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 52.

21. Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment*, 66.

22. Unlike Old Witch, Little Witch Girl is able to see Malachi. The rune that has enchanted him renders him invisible only to Old Witch.

23. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 51.

24. See Lucy Rollin and Mark I. West, *Psychoanalytic Responses to Children’s Literature* (1999), 152.