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Wrestling with Religion: Pullman, Pratchett, and the Uses of Story

Elisabeth Rose Gruner

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While children's and young adult fantasy literature is often concerned with "first things," with the struggle between good and evil, or with the fate of the cosmos, still it is rarely overtly religious in the sense of direct engagement with "faith, religion and church(es)" (Ghesquière 307). Perhaps it is children's literature's vexed relationship with didacticism that keeps fantasy writers for children from engaging directly with religious language and concepts, or perhaps it is the setting in an alternate world that enables an allegorizing impulse rather than direct engagement. In either case, despite a tradition of fables, parables, and allegorical treatments of Christianity that ranges from George MacDonald and Charles Kingsley through C. S. Lewis to Madeleine L'Engle, children's fantasy has typically cloaked its religious allegiances.¹

The central exception to this generalization is, of course, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Published between 1995 and 2000, the trilogy famously stirred religious debate by casting as villains the representatives of a quasi-medieval theocracy, "the Church," and by explicitly linking that Church to Christianity in our world.² Pullman's antagonism toward religion, especially religious fundamentalism, is well known, and there is little need to rehearse it here. What strikes me as more interesting is the way in which contemporary fantasies for children such as Pullman's trilogy have directly engaged with religion, and what that suggests for a readership which has been characterized as "spiritual, but not religious"³—a readership, in other words, for whom many of the details of Pullman's depiction of the Church seem just as fantastic as the concept of the dæmon or the existence of sentient armored bears. (I have yet to meet a young reader for whom the alternate-historical revelation of John Calvin's papacy is meaningful, for example.) In his trilogy, Pullman explores

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Christianity's relationship to stories through both his retelling of Genesis and the examination of Lyra's storytelling; these explorations offer a productive way to think through the trilogy's examination of religion beyond the specific engagement with "the Church."

Terry Pratchett's fiction, although deeply engaged with storytelling, approaches religion quite differently from Pullman's. In his Discworld fantasies for adult readers, such as *Small Gods* and *Hogfather*, religious belief is of central thematic concern, even if the gods believed in are frequently ridiculous; in his work for young readers, he engages in what initially seems a kind of postmodern play with religion and its narratives. The rats of *The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents* and the nomes of the Bromeliad trilogy, for example, have sacred texts which are, to the reader and even some of the characters, absurd—but at the same time enabling. More recently, *Nation* depicts a crisis of two faiths that arises from colonial contact.⁴ In the Tiffany Aching series, however, religion initially appears to play little part; despite the Nac Mac Feegles' belief that they are living a heavenly afterlife, it is initially unclear that religious belief has much to do with the people of the Chalk. But Pratchett offers, I believe, an interesting counterpoint to Pullman's engagement with religion in his series' deepening concern with what he calls "narrative causality." Both series, I will argue, link the narrative impulse with the religious impulse; narrative causality exposes this link.

Pratchett defines narrative causality as "the idea that there are 'story shapes' into which human history, both large scale and at the personal level, attempts to fit [. . . or] that we ourselves for some reason have the story shapes in our mind, and attempt to fit the facts of history into them" ("Imaginary Worlds" 166). In *Witches Abroad* he writes: "the theory of narrative causality [. . .] means that a story, once started, takes a shape. It picks up all the vibrations of all the other workings of that story that have ever been. [. . .] Stories don't care who takes part in them. All that matters is that the story gets told, that the story repeats" (2). In both Pullman's and Pratchett's series, narrative causality is at work—and may be, it seems, another term for destiny, or even for the divine. But narrative causality alone is not a valid substitute for religion, particularly religion in modern crisis; it can seem, after all, simply to replicate the concept of fate or predestination and the concomitant denial of free will. In both series, some kind of destiny seems to be operative, but it is not absolute; human choice, human intervention, and human agency can all change fate, just as human storytellers can change the story. The human characters in the series—particularly the two heroines, Lyra Belacqua and Tiffany Aching—become co-creators within their texts, storytellers who alter their own destinies by revising and reworking familiar tales, and by resisting the extremes of narrative causality.

Throughout the course of their respective series, Lyra reshapes the biblical fall story by not being Eve, and Tiffany reworks (and finally restores) the cycle of the seasons by not being Summer, just as she finally defeats the Cunning Man by both being and not being the kind of witch he has imagined. Not only

do these heroines resist being shaped by narrative causality, they teach their readers to resist as well. In so doing, however, they turn story-making into a religious act, rejecting fundamentalism but also (ironically) revitalizing the very traditions, rituals, and/or beliefs that their actions might seem to undermine. As we shall see, Tiffany, though perhaps less of a storyteller than Lyra, is ultimately more successful in resisting narrative causality and in providing a workable alternative to the tales that control her world.

According to Melody Briggs and Richard Briggs, children's fantasy is "stepping into the gap" between science and religion—but these texts do more than provide alternative means for thinking about transcendence or "questions of life's meaning," as Briggs and Briggs suggest many children's fantasies do (31). Rather, they engage, directly or indirectly, with religion as a cultural force.⁵ Both take seriously the threat posed by unquestioning belief in the unseen, in a truth beyond knowing expressed especially in religious texts. Indeed, religion kills in both series. Neither author is satisfied, however, with elevating science (or, really, anything else) in religion's place—nor do they retreat into cynicism. Rather, they recognize the value of religious story, and, as I have suggested, the relationship between storytelling and the religious impulse. While Pullman's plot discredits religion, his method ironically revitalizes the very myths the series overtly works to discredit. Pratchett's tales, less concerned with institutional religion than is Pullman's series, are more subtly infused with Tiffany's spirit of transcendence or sense of the numinous (a word she learns from Nanny Ogg). By the fourth volume, this spirit comes to take its place as a force with religious power and purpose, as Tiffany begins to take on something of the role of a traditional parish priest—though with a uniquely Pratchettian twist.⁶ In both series, we may see elements of the progressive theologies inspired by both narrative theologians and feminist theologians over the last thirty years: a theology of inclusion, of cooperation, and of co-creation. While in both series divinity itself is distant or dying, the sense of the divine is active in the two heroines, who come to embody a new theology for a new world.

Narrative Theology and Rewriting Sacred Texts

"Religions of the book," of course, express their central doctrines through story—indeed, their sacred texts *are* stories. For theologian John Dominic Crossan, grounding faith in story is both a dangerous and an unavoidable prospect. In *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*, he begins with the by now fairly familiar proposition that "there is only story" (25).⁷ But having established, like a good deconstructionist, that story is the soup we swim in, Crossan the theologian then goes on as follows:

If there is only story, then God, or the referent of transcendental experience, is either inside my story and, in that case, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition I know best, God is merely an idol I have created; or, God is outside my story, and I have just argued that what is "out there" is completely unknowable. So it

would seem that any transcendental experience has been ruled out, if we can only live in story. (25)

Where does this leave the theologian—or, for that matter, the storyteller? For Crossan and other narrative theologians, only at the beginning: without recapitulating his whole argument, it may suffice to say that for Crossan the sacred texts, especially the parables, which constitute his own Christianity (and which may have larger ramifications within the monotheistic tradition of the West) are “stories which shatter the deep structure of our accepted world and thereby render clear and evident to us the relativity of story itself [. . .] My own term for this [. . .] is transcendence” (100).⁸ That is, paradigm-shattering stories are both a challenge to religious faith and, paradoxically, constitutive of it. Crossan, along with Paul Ricoeur (to whom his analysis is largely indebted), William Bausch, and others, here articulates a theology of story. According to Bausch, “Logic is one avenue of truth, however limited. Imagination as myth and story is another avenue, but one that involves, disturbs and challenges us and as such is to be preferred” (27).⁹ Of course, sacred story can quickly harden into dogma, as found in Pullman’s Church as well as in much of our world’s contemporary Christianity, or devolve into superstition, as we see in Pratchett’s Tiffany Aching series. Either transformation perverts the unsettling narrativism of the Christian story, and that of many other story-based religions as well. The solution to this impasse, however, is not to deny story but to revitalize it, to “tell it slant,” in order to uncover what may still be of value within. For Pullman and Pratchett, this new telling takes on a variety of forms; both, however, reassert the importance of story-making as a religious act. Their own revisions and the revisionary acts of their heroines within the texts combine to articulate the necessity of a story-based faith grounded in relationship.

One significant way in which Pullman deploys religious narrative is through repeated evocations of the fall story in Genesis.¹⁰ In a horrific scene near the end of *The Subtle Knife*, Marisa Coulter tortures the witch Lena Feldt to find out who the witches say her daughter is:

Lena Feldt gasped, “She will be the mother—she will be life—mother—she will disobey—she will—”

“Name her! You are saying everything but the most important thing! Name her!” cried Mrs. Coulter.

“Eve! Mother of all! Eve, again! Mother Eve!” stammered Lena Feldt, sobbing. (314)

If Lyra is, indeed, as the witch says, “Eve, Mother of us all,” then we can see the entire trilogy as a revision of Genesis. And certainly in the final pages we get a specific reimagining of the Genesis story in which Lyra and Will come to consciousness, as their forebears did, but with joyful rather than tragic consequences. Despite the *felix culpa* quality of their “fall,” however, the story still has its way with them, and they choose exile from the garden and separa-

tion—much like the joint expulsion of Eve and Adam. While throughout the trilogy story both constrains and enables, finally the tale that Will and Lyra find themselves within has intentions for them that they cannot resist.¹¹

By the time Lyra reenacts the fall toward the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, we have already read two other versions of Genesis. The first, in *The Golden Compass*, changes little from the familiar story but does add the *dæmons* who have been a central part of Pullman's mythology. The moment of awareness here is significant: after the man and the woman eat the forbidden fruit, "*the eyes of them both were opened, and they saw the true form of their dæmons, and spoke with them [. . . but] until that moment it had seemed that they were at one with all the creatures of the earth and the air, and there was no difference between them*" (372). Asriel calls this version something "like an imaginary number, like the square root of minus one: you can never see any concrete proof that it exists, but if you include it in your equations, you can calculate all manner of things that couldn't be imagined without it" (372–73). For Asriel, both versions are both "true" and "not-true," rendering the binary distinction somewhat moot. Even in this early scene, then, the novel grants religious story significant value while at the same time rejecting a fundamentalist understanding of it.

The second version, which Mary Malone hears from the *mulefa* in *The Amber Spyglass*, is a significant shift. When Atal tells Mary their origin myth, two things are particularly significant: first, the story concerns a female, an Eve figure who does not fall but nonetheless comes into self-awareness; second, although Atal calls it a "make-like" (metaphor), she also calls it a history¹²—like Asriel, claiming for it a significance beyond literalism:

One day a creature with no name discovered a seedpod and began to play, and as she played she—

She?

She, yes. She had no name before then. She saw a snake coiling itself through the hole in a seedpod, and the snake said—

The snake spoke to her?

No, no! It is a make-like. The story tells that the snake said, "What do you know? What do you remember? What do you see ahead?" And she said, "Nothing, nothing, nothing." So the snake said, "Put your foot through the hole in the seedpod where I was playing, and you will become wise." So she put a foot in where the snake had been. And the oil entered her blood and helped her see more clearly than before, and the first thing she saw was the sraf. It was so strange and pleasant that she wanted to share it at once with her kindred. So she and her mate took the seedpods, and they discovered that they knew who they were, they knew they were mulefa and not grazers. They gave each other names. They named themselves mulefa. They named the seed tree, and all the creatures and plants. (224–25)

In the *mulefa*'s story, Pullman retains significant elements from the story of Eve's temptation: a female creature comes into consciousness through the agency of a snake. But this joyful scene carries none of the weight of either our world's Genesis or Asriel's version. Self-awareness brings with it no shame, but is associated with the creative act of naming (which, in Genesis, precedes rather

than follows the fall narrative). By retelling the familiar fall story without a fall, the *mulefa* perform what Paul Ricoeur calls “the task of the hermeneut”: they help us by “transferring ourselves into another universe of meaning and thereby putting ourselves at a kind of distance with regard to *our* actual discourse” (224; emphasis in original). Of course, fantasy literature always “puts us at a kind of distance” with regard to our consensus reality, and thus, presumably, to our “actual discourse”—it defamiliarizes or, as J. R. R. Tolkien says, “recovers” our everyday reality by not taking it for granted.¹³ But both Pullman and Pratchett go one step further than Tolkien’s formulation implies; they recover and defamiliarize stories that form the groundwork of faith for many people. As we shall later see, however, Pullman also reintroduces some fundamentalism—or at least determinism—about narrative even as he calls the details of the Christian narrative into question.

By the time Lyra offers Will a red fruit, Pullman’s trilogy has already defamiliarized the Genesis story to the point that it is almost unrecognizable. This third retelling looks nothing like the *mulefa*’s story, and besides the red fruit and the couple, very little like the Genesis story either. What it shares with Genesis, however, is a moment of awareness that is juxtaposed with a moment of very great evil: just as Will and Lyra are coming together, Father Gomez is stalking them. As they kiss, the narrative cuts away from the couple to describe the struggle between Balthamos and Father Gomez in which the latter is killed. Despite the narrative’s insistence that this fall is “fortunate,” it cannot be fully divorced from its biblical relationship with mortality. But the moment Will and Lyra share departs importantly from the Genesis story:

Then Lyra took one of those little red fruits. With a fast-beating heart, she turned to him and said, “Will . . .”

And she lifted the fruit gently to his mouth.

She could see from his eyes that he knew at once what she meant, and that he was too joyful to speak. (AS 465)¹⁴

When Lyra and Will come into sexual knowledge, they do so joyfully, without shame, without anxiety.¹⁵ No commandment is abrogated; rather, as in the *mulefa* version of the story, we might say that Will and Lyra “discovered that they knew who they were” (225).¹⁶

What follows from their coming into consciousness, however, does resemble the end of the Genesis story as we know it: exile, pain, loss. We might say, then, that the story has intentions beyond its tellers, bringing us back to something far more like the Christian reading of Genesis than we might have expected. That is, as in Pratchett’s theory of narrative causality, it seems that a retelling of the fall story, even so attenuated and fortunate a fall as Will and Lyra’s, must end in exile and separation.¹⁷ The difference, of course, is that here the exile is freely chosen: Lyra realizes, and convinces Will, that they must close the windows between the worlds to prevent Dust from leaking out, and choose to remain each in his/her own world, to carry on whatever work they can find

to do. Thus Lyra's reworking of Genesis recapitulates all the others as it goes from innocence to wisdom—even, perhaps, a tragic wisdom—but she is left, we are to hope, with a wisdom she can embrace. Yet such an optimistic reading ignores the ways in which narrative causality seems in some ways to undermine Pullman's emancipatory impulses. While Lyra is free of the fundamentalism of the Church that has controlled her world, she is still in thrall to a story that she did not invent, and it is far from clear that she will be able to continue to reshape the stories that surround her.

Story-making and Control

Both *His Dark Materials* and the Tiffany Aching series are full of many other stories beyond such religious and mythic retellings. Lyra, of course, tells lies throughout the trilogy, but there are other important stories as well, such as the story Ma Costa tells her of her parents, or Iorek Byrnison's tale of betrayal and trickery. Lyra, like a magpie, stores up details of stories she has heard and reuses them later, as when she remembers learning that Iofur Raknison wants a dæmon, and invents the tale that allows Iorek to defeat him. Lyra trusts stories, and for most of the trilogy they repay her trust. For Tiffany, however, stories are initially a threat. The first stories we encounter in her series come from *The Goode Childe's Booke of Faerie Tales*, one of the few books in her parents' sparsely furnished home:

She'd never really liked the book. It seemed to her that it tried to tell her what to do and what to think. Don't stray from the path, don't open the door, but hate the wicked witch because she is *wicked*. Oh, and believe that shoe size is a good way of choosing a wife.

A lot of the stories were highly suspicious, in her opinion. There was the one that ended when the two good children pushed the wicked witch into her own oven. Tiffany had worried about that after all the trouble with Mrs. Snapperly. Stories like this stopped people thinking properly, she was sure. She'd read that one and thought, Excuse me? *No one* has an oven big enough to get a whole person in, and what made the children think they could just walk around eating people's houses in any case? And why does some boy too stupid to know a cow is worth a lot more than five beans have the *right* to murder a giant and steal all his gold? Not to mention commit an act of ecological vandalism? And some girl who can't tell the difference between a wolf and her grandmother must either have been as dense as teak or come from an extremely ugly family. The stories *weren't real*. But Mrs. Snapperly had died because of the stories. (*WFM* 66–67)

While Lord Asriel finds the fairy-tale quality of the book of Genesis freeing ("if you include it in your equations, you can calculate all manner of things that couldn't be imagined without it" [*GC* 372–73]), Tiffany sees the danger in allowing stories that "aren't real" to shape action. Ultimately, however, Tiffany's solution is like Lyra's: to take control of the story, to edit and shape and retell it, a process that goes on throughout the series. As Granny Weatherwax says, "change the story, change the world"—and Tiffany does, repeatedly, both

bowing to narrative causality and resisting it (*Hat* 338). I shall return to Tiffany's relationship to narrative causality in the third section of this essay; first, though, I want to examine Lyra's story-making powers.

Lyra comes to storytelling and reshaping almost unconsciously—lying is “familiar” to her, it comes (almost) naturally (*GC* 281). Interestingly, though, lying also gives her a fairly frequent, though at first unknowing, access to truth. We first see evidence of Lyra's strangely truthful lying just after she escapes from Mrs. Coulter; on her own with Pan in London, she encounters an older man who seems far too interested in her. Identifying herself as “Alice” (an homage to Wonderland?), Lyra tells him she is on her way to meet her father, a murderer (100). At the time she does not know that Asriel is her father, nor that he has killed Mrs. Coulter's husband. Yet she seems to have intuited Asriel's violent past even earlier, when she tells Roger wild tales of Asriel—here identified as her uncle—murdering men with a look (46). Similarly, her fantasy of uniting Asriel with Mrs. Coulter seems to betray the later revealed truth that they are indeed her parents (see 85, 121–24).

This kind of storytelling is not predictive, as it often reveals past events, nor does it seem to call into being the truths it inadvertently reveals. But it does indicate a kind of truth-telling in fiction, a way of accessing as yet unknown truths. What Lyra does with her stories, her lies, is similar to what she is doing with the alethiometer, the truth-meter: she is accessing truth that she doesn't yet know, through narrative or symbolic manipulation.¹⁸ This happens, of course, on a much deeper level when she learns to read the alethiometer. When the process first begins, Lyra explains it this way: “It's almost like talking to someone, only you can't quite hear them, and you feel kind of stupid because they're cleverer than you, only they don't get cross or anything. . . .” (*GC* 150). Like overhearing her uncle, reading the alethiometer indicates to her that there is a story, a knowledge, embodied in the words/symbols she does not yet understand. As she gropes her way to greater understanding, the stories begin to signify beyond her ability to read the symbols. The first time she fully reads the compass, for example, she intuits that the “lizard thing” she is seeing means “air,” although, unlike Farder Coram, she does not know that this is because the “lizard thing” is a chameleon, said to live on air (155). Through the process of story-making, which is what reading the alethiometer is, Lyra almost inadvertently becomes a truth-teller.

She is also, of course, still a liar. But, tellingly, her lying and her ability to know the truth through the alethiometer are explicitly linked. After Mrs. Coulter finds her in Bolvangar, she lies about her journey there:

With every second that went past, with every sentence she spoke, she felt a little strength flowing back. And now that she was doing something difficult and familiar and never-quite-predictable, namely lying, she felt a sort of mastery again, the same sense of complexity and control that the alethiometer gave her. She had to be careful not to say anything obviously impossible; she had to be vague in some places and invent plausible details in others; she had to be an artist, in short. (*GC* 281)¹⁹

The “complexity and control” Lyra attains through reading the alethiometer and storytelling are centrally connected. While there may be a transcendental truth that Lyra accesses through the alethiometer, it is by no means transparent—there is no such thing as a fundamentalist reading of the device. Lyra, then, both makes and interprets stories that are at their heart ways of accessing an as yet unacknowledged or unknown truth.

Throughout the series, the same language connects her reading of the alethiometer with her mastery of lies, and the loss of one skill seems directly connected with the loss of the other. Separated from Pan in the world of the dead, Lyra tries to read the alethiometer:

How wearily Lyra turned the wheels; on what leaden feet her thoughts moved. The ladders of meaning that led from every one of the alethiometer’s thirty-six symbols, down which she used to move so lightly and confidently, felt loose and shaky. And holding the connections between them in her mind . . . It had once been like running, or singing, or *telling a story*: something natural. Now she had to do it laboriously, and her grip was failing, and she mustn’t fail because otherwise everything would fail . . . (AS 384; emphasis added, ellipses in original)

While Lyra’s loss of the ability to read the alethiometer may seem like a consequence of her fall—that is, of her sexual encounter with Will—Lyra herself interprets the loss differently. Reunited with her *dæmon* in the world of the *mulefa*, she tries to read the alethiometer and fails: “It’s no good—I can tell—it’s gone forever—it just came when I needed it, for all the things I had to do—for rescuing Roger, and then for us two—and now that it’s over, now that everything’s finished, it’s just left me . . . It’s gone, Will! I’ve lost it! It’ll never come back!” The narrator, focalizing Will, notes that “he didn’t know how to comfort her, because it was plain that she was right” (490). While it’s not clear exactly what she was “right” about—the loss, its cause, or both?—it does seem plausible that both losses, the lying and the truth-reading, are linked. Lyra has lost her sense of agency, of control, at the same time that she has fulfilled her destiny.

What this suggests to me is twofold: one, that truth and lies are simply two different ways of getting at the same thing; and, two, that that same thing is the larger narrative (destiny, fate, prophecy) into which all the characters of the trilogy are bound. The sense of mastery, of control, of free will (as it were) that Lyra’s abilities have given her are to some extent illusory, given to her only to fulfill her destiny. This is, of course, literally true: Lyra is a character in a novel, her destiny controlled by an all-powerful author; as the conclusion draws near, her narrative destiny almost complete, her illusory sense of agency must inevitably vanish.²⁰ Even within the text, though, the link between agency and destiny becomes clear: Lyra’s ability to act, to author her own tale, dissipates as the larger narrative within which she participates shifts. Lyra can do many things, but ultimately she is subject to the same mysteries that animate the alethiometer, mysteries that Pullman as author refuses to dispel.

Paul Ricoeur notes in his essay “The Language of Faith” that one way humans develop a sense of agency, of control, is through secularization and its concomitant denial of the mystery of the divine: “at the same time that the totality of the world, with man understood as part of nature, appears to us as an object susceptible of being explained, this same man comes of age as a being responsible for his destiny” (225). Asriel represents this self-making man. Resisting destiny as well as mystery, he seeks to control his environment with science—as does the theocratic Church that regulates the study of “experimental theology,” or physics. Pullman, however, resists the secularizing impulse shared by Asriel and the Church: to explain, understand, objectify.²¹ It is the *mulefa*, the witches, and the harpies in the world of the dead who may best exemplify this rejection of secularization. All three groups lack a written culture, or anything that we would call science, but share an emphasis on storytelling and on the long view. No-Name the harpy, for example, once provided with Lyra’s truth, recognizes it instantly:

“[W]hen she spoke just now,” [Tialys asks,] “you all listened, every one of you, and you kept silent and still. Again, why was that?”

“Because it was true,” said No-Name. “Because she spoke the truth. Because it was nourishing. Because it was feeding us. Because we couldn’t help it. Because it was true. Because we had no idea that there was anything but wickedness. Because it brought us news of the world and the sun and the wind and the rain. Because it was true.” (AS 317)

No-Name’s truth is firmly grounded in the material world, but resists the totalizing control of the scientific approach. “News of the world” comes to her through story (like the “make-like” or history of the *mulefa*), which, in a telling choice of verbs, nourishes and feeds rather than explaining or proving. Storytelling is thus linked explicitly here with caregiving, a care that both Lyra and, perhaps even more, Tiffany embody throughout their respective series. It is worth noting here that witches and harpies are all female, and the *mulefa* we encounter the most often are also female, although they clearly have two sexes. Rather than the patriarchal world of the Church (it’s noted more than once that Mrs. Coulter is unusual in her power within that institution), it is these matriarchies or quasi-matriarchal societies that have access to truth through story.

Pullman’s trilogy, however, centers not on these societies but on Lyra, who inhabits a far more conventional society—and plot—than do these resistant females. Her story-making ability is therefore limited, and in the end she seems to be subject to the same narrative causality—the Genesis story of exile—that Pullman’s ideology otherwise resists. Tiffany’s stories far more explicitly resist and reshape the conventions that would restrict her to either the happily-ever-after of fairy-tale courtship (suggested but never fulfilled in her relationship with Roland) or the punishment of witches envisioned by the Cunning Man.

Storytelling and the Ethic of Care

The all-female witches of the Tiffany Aching series link story and care even more explicitly than Lyra links them in *His Dark Materials*. But Pratchett's series initially evinces a deep distrust of stories, especially those that shape belief. While even in Discworld "fairy tale" means the opposite of "gospel" (a synonym for truth that appears in neither Pullman's series nor Pratchett's), the *Goode Childe's Booke of Faerie Tales* nonetheless, like a sacred text, directs the behavior and belief of the people who burn down Mrs. Snapperly's cottage. It also furnishes at least some of the monsters deployed by the Fairy Queen in her incursions into Tiffany's world.

Rather than rewriting stories out of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Pratchett works in the Tiffany Aching books with the pagan origins of story in England: fairy tales, tradition, and superstition. In other words, with what are already quite explicitly stories instead of sacred texts. So rather than demystify them, as Pullman does with the Christian stories that are his material, Pratchett reanimates what might have been thought to have devolved into fairy tale, legend, and superstition. His characters enter into stories that they are somewhat embarrassed to find may actually be worthy of belief. Like Pullman, then, though working with quite different material to quite different ends, Pratchett refreshes and defamiliarizes stories that may form the groundwork of faith. Although unlike Pullman Pratchett does not explicitly frame his series' concerns as religious, the language of "sin" and "soul," of caregiving and persecution, is prevalent, especially in *I Shall Wear Midnight*, suggesting an ongoing concern with the functions of religion in society.

Like Lyra, Tiffany occasionally finds herself caught in a story not of her own making. For example, at the end of *The Wee Free Men*, she overhears a new story coming into being out of the bits and pieces she and Roland have provided:

She heard the Baron and her father talking downstairs. She heard the story being woven between them as they tried to make sense of it all. Obviously the girl had been very brave (this was the Baron speaking), but well, she was nine, wasn't she? And didn't even know how to use a sword! Whereas Roland had had fencing lessons at his school . . .

[. . .]

So . . . Roland with the beefy face was the hero, was he? And she was just like the stupid princess who broke her ankle and fainted all the time? That was *completely* unfair. (364; emphasis in original)

But Tiffany might have predicted this outcome from the beginning, when she recognizes that there is no heroic place for her in stories. Early on, she asks, "did the book have any adventures of people who had brown eyes and brown hair? No, no, no . . . it was the blond people with blue eyes and the redheads with green eyes who got the stories. If you had brown hair you were probably just a servant or a woodcutter or something. Or a dairymaid. Well, that was not going to happen, even if she *was* good at cheese" (35–36; emphasis in original).

Tiffany questions the way that stories seem to control the direction of human life, resenting especially that her own options are so limited by the stories that surround her. But while she reluctantly accepts the tale her father and the Baron create, she later finds ways to rework it, knowingly embracing the role of witch in order to test and reshape the tales she finds dangerous and threatening. In *A Hat Full of Sky* and *Wintersmith*, Tiffany learns to tell stories herself—indeed, as she discovers from Granny Weatherwax, stories form a large part of what it means to be a witch. For example, Granny Weatherwax, despite her understanding of germ theory, nonetheless uses a story of goblins to convince the Raddles to move their privy (*Hat* 294–95). Granny’s stories, like many of Lyra’s, are explicitly lies, enabling fictions that she herself does not believe. But Granny is not a cynical manipulator of her innocent believers, as is, for example, Mrs. Coulter when she lures children to Bolvangar. Her stories are compassionate, part of a caregiving ethic of meeting her charges where they are and giving them what they need.

Tiffany learns to tell stories like Granny’s, but her storytelling also involves writing or telling her own story. We begin to see indications that she will do so when, for example, she refuses to wear the black clothes that are traditional among the witches, preferring the green of the hillsides or the blue of the sky. But this tendency is most striking in two separate instances—in *A Hat Full of Sky* when she defeats the hiver, and in *Wintersmith* when she kisses the Wintersmith and restores the seasons.

The particular story that defeats the hiver offers an interesting twist on Pullman’s reworking of Genesis, for what Tiffany offers the hiver is another origin story. Tiffany’s story narrativizes an evolutionary development, however, providing a tale of continuity, of connection, of union, rather than a story of exile and despair:

“Here is a story to believe,” she said. “Once we were blobs in the sea, and then fishes, and then lizards and rats, and then monkeys, and hundreds of things in between. This hand was once a fin, this hand once had claws! In my human mouth I have the pointy teeth of a wolf and the chisel teeth of a rabbit and the grinding teeth of a cow! Our blood is as salty as the sea we used to live in! When we’re frightened, the hair on our skin stands up, just like it did when we had fur. We *are* history! Everything we’ve ever been on the way to becoming us, we still are. Would you like the rest of the story?” (*Hat* 351; emphasis in original)²²

This story, unlike the one into which Lyra and Will find themselves written at the end of *His Dark Materials*, is a joyful celebration. And as Tiffany continues, she names the hiver Arthur—much as Lyra names No-Name the harpy—and in so doing releases him from the “monkey” story of uncontrolled desire that he has been living and imposing on others. Like the souls of the dead in *His Dark Materials*, the hiver needs a story to free him from an immortality that has become painful:

What's on the other side? asked Arthur.

Tiffany hesitated.

"Some people think you go to a better world," she said. "Some people think you come back to this one in a different body. And some think there's just nothing. They think you just stop."

And what do you think? Arthur asked.

"I think that there are no words to describe it," said Tiffany. (*Hat* 353)

Tiffany releases the hiver—freeing herself from its influence, and, at least temporarily, ridding her community of the evil it represents—through both story and humility: a story of origins, a humility about the future. Tiffany here recasts science as narrative, potentially suggesting a solution, through figurative reading, to the struggles over Genesis that oppose science to religion. In the final words of the story—"I think there are no words to describe it"—Tiffany gestures toward the numinous, the unnarratable aspect of the story she is telling.

The scene also demonstrates what we have already seen in her interaction with the Fairy Queen in *Wee Free Men*, and what we will see again with the Wintersmith: Tiffany's stories come out of a deep sense of sympathy for others. Hers is clearly what Carol Gilligan and others have called an ethic of care; abstract justice is of far less value to her than is responding to immediate human need. The language she employs as she explains her calling to her father also resonates with Jesus's injunctions to care for those in need: "Well, Dad, you know how Granny Aching always used to say, 'Feed them as is hungry, clothe them as is naked, and speak up for them as has no voices'? Well, I reckon there is room in there for 'Grasp for them as can't bend, reach for them as can't stretch, wipe for them as can't twist,' don't you?" (28).²³ Feminist theologians attribute such an ethic to the divine. Carol Christ, for example, argues that "We are constituted by our relationships and would be nothing without them. [...] Relationships are what we are. This is true of human beings and all other animals, and cells and atoms as well. It is also true of Goddess/God. There is no reality that is not social" (86).²⁴ Thus Tiffany's sympathetic storytelling may, like Lyra's, participate in the divine—both as a way of shaping events and as an essentially social and caregiving act.

In her encounters with the Wintersmith and the Cunning Man, Tiffany does not tell a story but, like Lyra at the end of *His Dark Materials*, enacts one. Indeed, she is only one of many actors in the retelling of the seasonal story that ends *Wintersmith*. The Nac Mac Feegle enlist Roland, the Baron's son, to play the part of the hero who brings Summer back from the Underworld; it is, it seems, his ineptitude in that role (as well as the Feegles' own general obnoxiousness) that remakes this part of the story more positively.²⁵

But Pratchett takes on religion most directly in *I Shall Wear Midnight*. Here we are not working with a specific myth or legend but with a pattern: the story of the witchfinder and the witch, of frightened people swayed by religious language to turn on the women who love and care for them. As Eskarina Smith tells the Cunning Man's story to Tiffany, it seems that Tiffany already knows it:

“Imagine a man, still quite young, and he is a witchfinder and a book burner and a torturer, because people older than him who are far more vile than him have told him that this is what the Great God Om wants him to be. And on this day he has found a woman who is a witch, and she is beautiful, astonishingly beautiful, which is rather unusual among witches, at least in those days—”

“He falls in love with her, doesn’t he?” Tiffany interrupted.

“Of course,” said Miss Smith. “Boy meets girl, one of the greatest engines of narrative causality in the multiverse, or as some people might put it, ‘It had to happen.’” (156)

Not only does he have to fall in love with her, as Tiffany quickly learns, he also “has to” kill her—and in his ambivalent resistance to his narrative (and hers) is born the evil she must contend with. It is an evil, again, with a long history, a familiar story:

Sometimes you got wandering preachers around who didn’t like witches, and people would listen to them. It seemed to Tiffany that people lived in a very strange world sometimes. Everybody knew, in some mysterious way, that witches blighted crops and ran away with babies, and all the other nonsense. And at the same time, they would come running to the witch when they needed help. (58)

Tiffany actively chooses to take on the prejudice against witches that she notes here, overtly marking herself as a witch with hat, broom, and—finally—even a black dress while she goes about caring for her people. Only by inserting herself into the story that people tell—taking on the role of witch, then subverting their expectations—can she change it.

Both as witch and storyteller, Tiffany’s work is explicitly gendered. Early in the novel Tiffany’s father, at first dismayed by but also proud of the daily care she offers to the people of the Chalk, says it’s a “man’s job” she is doing (28); Tiffany demurs silently at the time, but at the end, Granny Weatherwax says, “it seems to us that you’ve done a woman’s job today” (342). The witches know, as most of the men around them seem not to, that caring for others involves both story and dirt, both the “whizzing about” that is part of every story about witches and cutting old ladies’ toenails—which doesn’t make it into the stories but is just as important (see, e.g., 27–28). Not only does Tiffany perform the thankless tasks of caring that others neglect (cutting old women’s toenails, caring for Amber, etc.), she eschews a sense of abstract moral justice for the here and now. As Mrs. Proust notes, she is one of those “unofficial people who understand the difference between right and wrong, and when right is wrong and when wrong is right” (138).²⁶ Her care for others occasionally threatens to overwhelm her, but it is, as the other witches see, the center around which her “steading” spins (342).

As witch of the Chalk, Tiffany does not simply care for the elderly and infirm, of course, though that is a large part of what she does. She also represents to her community the possibility of magic. Witchcraft, in Pratchett’s novels, is a complex mixture of psychology (or what Granny Weatherwax calls “headol-

ogy”); “Boffo,” or disguise; and something else that remains mysterious, but has mostly to do with balance.²⁷ Witches do not do magic in the way that they do, for example, in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series; while they may on occasion use a wand or a spell, for the most part such trappings are dismissed as “Boffo.” Rather, they care, they tell stories, they pay attention, and they manipulate appearances. In *I Shall Wear Midnight* Tiffany’s storytelling and her care for others are so intertwined as to be inextricable. Much like Lyra, who is motivated by care for Roger, and later Will, Tiffany embodies a feminist ethic of care. Tiffany’s ethical circle seems much larger than Lyra’s, however, growing to encompass her entire “steading” on the Chalk.

There is a humility in the witches’ magic, a resistance to totalizing explanations, a care for the immediate, the poor, and the sick, that again recalls the core teachings of almost all world religions, though they are often imperfectly enacted or forgotten altogether by many adherents of those religions.²⁸ By performing the tasks of a witch, Tiffany reinfuses her world with a sense of the numinous and a reverence for creation that it had lacked, bringing into being a better reality than what had gone before. According to Sallie McFague, “In the picture of the mother-creator, the goal is neither the condemnation nor the rescue of the guilty but the just ordering of the cosmic household in a fashion beneficial to all” (“Ethic” 256). At the end of *I Shall Wear Midnight*, the witch-wizard Eskarina Smith tells Tiffany that she has written the appropriate endings to the stories that have threaded throughout the novel: “Classic endings to a romantic story are a wedding or a legacy, and you have been the engineer for one of each. Well done” (340). The “just ordering” of the “household,” then, is a kind of storytelling—and Tiffany the witch has become the origin, as well as the subject, of her own story.

* * * *

Both series, then, suggest that humans are in fact interdependent with the divine; while humans rely on a variety of kinds of magical and otherwise mysterious assistance, the Authority needs Lyra and Will to release him, just as the Wintersmith needs Tiffany to restore his story and the people of the Chalk need her to tell a new one. But even more importantly, both series also suggest that it is in our storytelling capacity that we are in fact most like the divine, most able to make things happen—but also most profoundly human. Stories, it is true, can serve as a constraint on the development of human agency: the stories the Church tells in *His Dark Materials*, *The Goode Child’s Booke of Faerie Tales* in *Wee Free Men*, even the story of the Wintersmith as Tiffany first encounters it, set limits and constrain the people who see themselves as their characters. Rather than binding themselves or others through religious story, however, Lyra and Tiffany learn to tell their own stories and so take on agency, liberating themselves and others.

Tiffany enters into her stories as a resisting reader, determined not to let narrative causality have its way with her, and she succeeds. Lyra, on the other

hand, enters her story as the direct lineal descendant of one of fantasy's, and Christian allegory's, most well-known heroines—Lucy Pevensie, hiding in a wardrobe among the fur coats—even before she later earns the title “Mother Eve.” While she does reshape her story, Lyra's power is transitory: the result of “grace,” perhaps, rather than the hard work Tiffany engages in.²⁹ Ultimately, Tiffany's resistance to narrative causality—her ability to reshape the story and offer a new alternative—is more powerful than Lyra's. Pratchett, by working outside the constraints of religious language and overtly religious (especially Christian) narrative, more subtly empowers his heroine to wrestle successfully with religion itself.

Children's fantasy does not substitute for religion, nor does it only “step into the gap” between totalizing systems. At its best, as in these series, it teaches us as readers to emulate the revisionist storytellers whose stories it tells. “Change the story, change the world,” say the witches, and so, by refiguring stories both sacred and profane, these two series provide new models for their heroines' lives—and for our own storytelling selves.

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Notes

1. This is not to say, of course, that it has no religious concerns. See, for example, David Gooderham's claim: “Just occasionally in Victorian fantasy for children there are references to saying prayers or ‘knowing’ God, but explicit reference to religious institutions, practices and beliefs disappears almost completely in the works of the fantasists of the 1860s and '70s, Charles Kingsley and George MacDonald. The absence of religious terminology in these texts derives not, however, from the excision of religious themes, but rather from their metaphorical transposition into the landscape, beings and activities of the secondary worlds of the fantasies. So powerful and effective was this innovation in their work that it has continued significantly to shape the genre” (156).

2. Pat Pinsent, William Gray, David Gooderham, and Donna Freitas and Jason King are among the scholars who have recently explored the interconnections between fantasy and spirituality or religion; all but Pinsent focus particularly on Pullman's trilogy. Pinsent suggests that fantasy literature eschews the religious for the spiritual (“Revisioning” 49); Gooderham concurs, noting that “children's fantasy texts have not infrequently been an important means for the undogmatic mediation of new ideas about the world and human life to the next generation in their early and formative years” (165)—though he notes that Pullman's trilogy may constitute an important exception to this rule. Freitas and King, in their study of Pullman's “spiritual imagination,” note parallels between Pullman's texts and various progressive Christian theological traditions; Gray reads Pullman and others through the Romantic project of reinterpreting Christianity.

3. See Robert Fuller for a more thorough and nuanced description of this issue. Fuller differentiates between a European gap between “the relatively small number of religious persons [and] the nonreligious majority” and, in the US, a “gap between the churched and unchurched” which is not analogous to the European split: “In the United States [. . .] only a small percentage of the population can be considered wholly without spiritual interests” (171). Nonetheless, as a recent Pew Foundation survey confirms, many self-described religious people are strikingly ignorant of their own traditions.
4. A more extensive discussion of these texts is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it’s worth noting that Malicia Grim of *The Amazing Maurice* serves as something of a precursor to Tiffany Aching in her awareness of, and resistance to, narrative causality. Malicia resists by over-preparing and playing alternate roles, while Tiffany’s resistance, discussed at length below, is far deeper and more involved.
5. While nothing like the Church of Pullman’s trilogy exists in Pratchett’s series, the Cunning Man’s witch-hunting is religiously inspired, and Omnianism (the Disc’s only monotheistic religion, and a possible analog for Christianity) lies behind much of the novels’ action.
6. In her arguably “priestly” function, Tiffany attends the Baron’s deathbed and performs two marriages.
7. Crossan, writing in 1975—though I quote from his 1988 reissue—does not cite Derrida, though of course he might.
8. Cf. Naomi Wood’s citation of late Derrida here: “the scriptures of the great religions of the book are rife with ‘tensions, heterogeneity, disruptive volcanoes, sometimes texts, especially those of the prophets, which cannot be reduced to an institution, to a corpus, to a system. I want to keep the right to read these texts in a way which has to be constantly reinvented. It is something which can be totally new at every moment’” (“Terry Pratchett and Religions of the Book” 4, quoting Caputo 21). Crossan outlines a taxonomy of story ranging from myth at one end to parable at the other, with myth being the most reified and parable being the most disruptive; his method for rereading the parables of Jesus anticipates Derrida’s comments on constant reinvention.
9. See also Ann Loades, who quotes feminist theologian Nicola Slee on the function of parables: “at the heart of the parabolic method ‘lies a recognition of the power of language in our lives, to awaken the imagination, to stir the will, to shape our very understanding of reality and to call us into being and response’” (40).
10. David Gooderham notes that Pullman’s retelling is quite selective, making only “oblique reference to the creation myth, but emphatic reference to *the fall*” (160–61; emphasis in original), and similarly focusing on judgment but not redemption.
11. Gooderham suggests that the “old myth bit[es] back” when Will and Lyr, like Adam and Eve before them, face “exile” after their “fall” (170).
12. Feminist theologians have explored the ways in which metaphor can function as an emancipatory strategy: “Genuine metaphor is not primarily a rhetorical decoration or an abbreviated comparison. It is a proposition (explicit or implied) constituted by an irresolvable tension between what it affirms (which is somehow true) and what it necessarily denies (namely, the literal truth of the assertion). . . . It forces the mind to reach toward meaning that exceeds or escapes effective literal expression” (Schneiders 38).

13. See “On Fairy Stories” for Tolkien’s explication of “recovery,” which we might also call “defamiliarization.”
14. See Freitas and King for another reading of this scene as a revision not only of Genesis but also of Mary Malone’s earlier story of her break with the Church (43).
15. See also the earlier exchange: “she smiled at him, a smile of such sweet knowledge and joy that his senses felt confused. He smiled back, and Mary thought his expression showed more perfect trust than she’d ever seen on a human face” (AS 439).
16. Note that this kind of self-knowledge is also explicitly Tiffany’s goal for the school she asks the new Baron to build; see below.
17. See Gooderham’s reading of this passage, which has influenced my own: “In the logic of the myth the fall-section is followed, causally, by an expulsion-section and, in Pullman’s plotting of the new story, the one again follows the other, although the link is simply that of narrative sequence” (170).
18. In a somewhat different context, Naomi Wood claims that “Pullman argues that storymaking should not be an escape from this world but a way to reinvent it” (“Paradise Lost and Found” 254).
19. Lying and reading the alethiometer continue their association throughout the series, until in the final volume Lyra loses both skills; separated from Pan during her sojourn among the dead, her lies no longer serve her, and she very soon after loses the ability to read the alethiometer.
20. Gray suggests that “Pullman, the ‘Author-God’ (to borrow Barthes’s phrase) might [...] be accused of exercising the literary equivalent of Calvinist ‘double predestination’, with Lyra predestined to salvation and Gomez [her would-be assassin] to perdition” (171).
21. While it may seem contradictory to link Pullman’s Church with Ricoeur’s “secularization,” their shared totalizing projects reveal their essential similarity. See Michael W. Kaufmann for an illuminating discussion of the relationship between the secular and the religious with regard to literary study.
22. If this creation story has any links to the Judeo-Christian narrative, it is to the first chapter of Genesis, the familiar “seven days” story which narrates creation from chaos to order, from water to dry land.
23. Compare Matthew 25:34–36: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of this world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Religious language like this is, of course, utterly lacking in *His Dark Materials*.
24. See also Sallie McFague’s claim that “human beings might be seen as partners in creation, as the self-conscious, reflexive part of the creation that could participate in furthering the process” (“Human Beings” 150).
25. Roland is hardly a hero, but by paying the ferryman, remembering his aunts, and inventing an imaginary sword, he revises the heroic story just enough to succeed (305–06).

26. See Gilligan: “morality and the preservation of life are contingent on sustaining connection, seeing the consequences of action by keeping the web of relationship intact. [...] an absolute judgment yields to the complexity of relationships” (59).
27. There are some interesting connections in this regard to the way magic works in Ursula LeGuin’s Earthsea books.
28. I am indebted to an anonymous reader for *ChLAQ* for this phrasing. It’s also worth noting here that the Church of *His Dark Materials* appears not to share these values.
29. For a more sustained discussion of Lyra’s grace, see Claudia Fitzherbert’s interview with Philip Pullman, in which he suggests that Lyra’s unconscious reading of the alethiometer (linked throughout the series with her storytelling ability) is the result of grace. For contrast, see the conversation between Tiffany and Eskarina Smith in which Eskarina tells Tiffany that she was “not born with a talent for witchcraft” but has “found it [...] and grabbed it by its scrawny neck and made it work for” her (*Midnight* 279–80).

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