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God the Father or Mother Divine? : Subversive Theology in John Milton's Paradise Lost and Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

God the Father or Mother Divine? : Subversive Theology in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*
and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

submitted by

Jordan Pace 2017

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For my Mom, who taught me independence and self-sacrifice.

For my Dad, who showed me gentility and faith.

For Caroline: every atom of me, every atom of you.

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*

Introduction

Even the most celebrated critics of John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* concede that his choice of language often obscures his intentions. These odd contradictions throughout *Paradise Lost* serve a very distinct purpose: to alert the reader that the author has more to say about the Biblical narrative than initially suggested by the bare bones of the story. The inconsistencies in Eve's personality are an obvious clue for the educated reader to delve deeper into Milton's multilevel agenda. It must be noted when engaging with Milton's subversive elements that *Paradise Lost* does not intend to offer a secular system of beliefs to replace the Christian ideology; instead, it suggests alternate ways of considering the structure of beliefs—namely regarding the creation narrative in Genesis—in relation to modern seventeenth century scientific inquiry. I suggest that Milton's text offers two narratives, one theological, one scientific, in order to establish a system by which his modern world could be understood.

Milton, as a theologian and a man educated in classical literature, must have felt disconnected from the Biblical creation story—its characters, their motives, and the outcome—when taking into account how inadequately Genesis affirms the ideals of mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and above all, inquisitiveness. Milton's contemporary academic society exalts the luxury of education; indeed, Milton's entire individual identity is shaped by his pursuit and application of knowledge. In straightforward theory, the things that Milton enjoys most in the world—arguing his opinions and augmenting his wisdom—are precisely the same things that the Bible condemns. Indeed, if mercy is one of the highest virtues, then why is it conspicuously absent? Thus, engaging with the

Bible is an inherently complex experience for Milton; indeed, equally steeped in theology and scientific fact, *Paradise Lost* seems to subtly address many of those concerns.

His Dark Materials tells the story of a young girl, Lyra Belacqua, who undergoes a fantastical adventure to understand a mysterious substance by the name of Dust. On her quest, she travels from her home in Oxford to the Arctic, encountering powerful witches, fearsome armored bears, a Texan aeronaut and ultimately, great evil. At the end of *The Golden Compass*, Lyra crosses into another world. There, she meets a young boy, Will Parry, with whom she continues her quest and a woman, Mary Malone, whose scientific focus lies in “dark matter”—Dust, by another name. Along the way, the children and Mary acquire three magical objects for which the three books of the series are named: an alethiometer—the “golden compass”—a knife that can cut through anything—“the subtle knife”—and a telescope of sorts that makes Dust visible to the viewer—“the amber spyglass.” Ultimately, their quest to understand Dust leads them on the most important journey anyone has ever embarked upon: overthrowing a false and tyrannous God, saving the Dead from imprisonment and ultimately saving Dust—and therefore human consciousness.¹ On the one hand, *His Dark Materials* is a fantastical adventure filled with immense bravery in the face of insurmountable odds, and on the other, a deeply engaged theological treatise.

To understand the series, one must first understand Pullman’s own religious Weltanschauung: raised a Catholic in mid-twentieth century England, he became conflicted about his faith, torn between his inherent appreciation for the intentions of

¹ Pullman, *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*.

religion and the corrupt reality of the Catholic Church.² How is a Christian author supposed to teach the tenets of Judeo-Christianity while disagreeing with many of the most elementary features of the religion as a whole? It seems as though the situation would constitute an untenable paradox; however, scholars within the Christian European literary tradition have been considering this ideological contradiction for centuries, albeit subversively. As a young man, Pullman read John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and felt an instant connection with the poet's battle to reconcile his Christian self with the self that conformed to Christianity but ultimately questioned major elements of it. Pullman writes that upon first reading *Paradise Lost*, he encountered "a story about devils...not a story about God."³ Of course, *Paradise Lost* is a quintessentially Christian text; however, Pullman recognized a point of access within the epic poem's many meanings and felt compelled to extrapolate on the ideas subversively suggested throughout the poem.

Indeed, Pullman's theological language is incredibly dense throughout the series.⁴ David Gooderham neatly summarizes Pullman's narrative voice as having a "more explicit and extensive use of religious terminology and of specific allusion to Christian institutions and concepts than is usual in high fantasy."⁵ This confluence of high fantasy and ecclesiastical discourse is common—JRR Tolkien, JK Rowling, and CS Lewis are all

² In fact, Pullman's formative years are so important to a critical understanding of his texts that scholars often open their critical reviews/essays with a short account of his childhood/youth. In *Philip Pullman: Master Storyteller*, Claire Squires devotes the entire first chapter of her book to an autobiographical account of the author's life. Moreover, Donna Freitas and Jason King, in their *Killing the Imposter God* introduce the entire text with a chapter entitled "A Theologian in Spite of Himself," indicating that Pullman as author and Pullman as man have conflicting or complex conceptions of his theological arguments, i.e. the man and the scholar believe different things.

³ Oxford World Classics *Paradise Lost*, 5.

⁴ For further explanation of this idea, see *Fantasizing It As It Is: Religious Language in Philip Pullman's Trilogy*, His Dark Materials by David Gooderham.

⁵ Gooderham, 156.

famous for their stances in this matter—however, where Pullman differs is in his repeated public disavowals of the entire institution of religion. Moreover, critics have been incredibly harsh on Pullman in regards to his perceived misotheism. In fact, it can be argued that Pullman has received equal praise and condemnation for *His Dark Materials*, particularly following the release of a poorly received Hollywood adaptation of *The Golden Compass*. Jessica Garrahy’s short essay “His Controversial Materials: Philip Pullman and Religious Narrative Identity” synthesizes the general anti-Pullman rhetoric, stating that most conservative Christian critics consider Pullman’s narrative on par with the word of Satan himself.⁶

It may seem overreaching to state that these books could “[damage] the spiritual well-being of young readers” but many reviewers have argued for censoring the texts.⁷ Pullman, for his part, has largely met critics head-on with a particular kind of irreligious glee. Quoted as having stated, “if you find that you have inadvertently become a Satanist, you can write to the publisher and get your money back,” it appears that he thrives off of public response to his controversial opinions.⁸ However, some scholars of Pullman’s work ultimately argue that he “remains secretly in love with theology and the theological re-enchantment of the world,” though he outwardly seeks to discredit it.⁹ Though critical discourse regarding Milton/Pullman and Pullman/theology exists, there has been almost no scholarship firmly linking the theological genealogy of these two texts.

If Milton’s allegiance to knowledge is only a suggestion, Pullman’s is explicit: instead of merely casting the figures of God and Eve in a subversive light, Pullman

⁶ Garrahy, 110.

⁷ Garrahy, 109.

⁸ Garrahy, 112.

⁹ Rayment-Pickard, 3.

conceptualizes Eve as the ultimate heroine and God as the ultimate imposter. Pullman finds his point of access for the God's treachery in *His Dark Materials* by expanding on the idea of authoritarian absolutism, and contrasting it with an entirely different vision of divinity known as Dust. However, whereas Milton merely suggests that tyranny could be derived from the unfair distribution of knowledge—in which God is at the top of the hierarchy—Pullman takes this notion one step further by conceptualizing a God that cunningly establishes precisely that hierarchy to seize power from all other creations.

In Pullman, God is a fraud; Milton's God decisively remains God, though Milton navigates the story of Genesis with a piercing critical eye toward God's actions. Each author's literary quest stems from a desire to reconcile modernity with theology, science with faith. In this thesis, I will argue that Milton's critical quest to understand Genesis and Pullman's modern retelling of the poem stem from the same catalyzing inquiry. However, whereas Milton ultimately asserts the glory of the Christian God, I will suggest that Pullman successfully provides a new framework for the conflicted contemporary reader to understand and participate in religious faith.

CHAPTER I: GOD THE FATHER

Introduction

God is a complex character for any author to tackle. In fact, is it ever appropriate to describe God as a literary figure? This paradox is central to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In the seventeenth century, idolatry was a serious offense—to anthropomorphize God by imagining his thoughts and agendas as Milton does borders on blasphemous. Milton's God is a subject of great critical contention: why did the Christian author decide to make God knowable, even though the Bible includes no such interactions between the Father and the Son?¹⁰ As we shall see, Pullman owes his entire conception of the

¹⁰ Throughout the rest of this thesis, I will use the terms “knowable” and “unknowable” to reference how Milton chooses to portray certain figures, namely God and chaos. To be “knowable” is to be bound by a certain set of criteria: namely, being described throughout *Paradise Lost* with human traits and motives. God is “knowable” because we can understand his motives. It was common in religious art of the 13th century to paint the Virgin and Child Enthroned with a purely gold background. This constitutes the notion of the “unknowable.” It was not that the artists were incapable of painting a realistic background, they simply acknowledged that heaven was a place that no mortal was supposed to be able to visualize whatsoever. Thus, the background was painted pure gold to suggest Heaven, but remained blank because the viewer is barred from even imagining what the heavenly realm could look like. “Unknowable” will be used in this thesis to suggest the same concept—a confusing pocket of space in which nothing is added, where there is a break in the continuity of the narrative that suggests something is going on behind the scenes that will not explicitly be described by the poet. In keeping with religious norms of the 17th century regarding idolatry, Milton should theoretically not have portrayed God in such a human manner; to do so is antithetical to the notion of his omniscience and omnipotence. Moreover, not only does Milton portray God in such a contentious manner, but he also does include a “pure gold background”—so to speak—in the form of chaos. Chaos is “unknowable” in that it makes absolutely no sense. This confusion borne from chaos' paradoxical nature *should* be how Milton describes God as it connotes a hierarchy of “known-ness” that places God below chaos. By making chaos embody all of the characteristics of “unknowable” paradox, Milton assigns qualities of divinity that should be attached to the conception of God alone. This strange conception creates tension between the two ideas because not only does Milton pit them against one another in this new hierarchy of “known-ness,” but he also conflates chaos with the

Authority—the “imposter God” and antagonistic figure central to *His Dark Materials*—to Milton’s divine tyrant.¹¹

Furthermore, though Milton’s God ultimately conceives of and creates the universes, he does not do so alone. The inclusion of a generative source other than God within the text is odd; to make that source chaos—largely incomprehensible but clearly important—is extremely subversive. Chaos is described as a womb, separate from God but absolutely essential to his prolific abilities. This maternal imagery is not coincidental; indeed, I will argue in this section that Milton includes chaos as a female generative space in contrast to the anthropomorphized male God in an attempt to reconcile his contemporary knowledge of science with his deep Christian faith.

Pullman’s interpretation of this dichotomy is far more explicit thanks to modern freedom of expression. His parallel figure for Milton’s God, the Authority, is cast in the same mold as the unforgiving, self-righteous figure so negatively portrayed in *Paradise Lost*. However, the genealogy of chaos as a divine space is far more nuanced—if Milton includes chaos to satisfy his humanist education in the natural sciences, Pullman includes a comparable entity, Dust, to entirely usurp the established Biblical hierarchy and assert a new framework for the modern reader to experience divinity. In this section, I will first present an analysis of Milton’s conceptions of God and chaos as anomalous entities within the epic poem. Then, I will move into a discussion of Pullman’s vision of the

womb of creation, i.e. implies that God would not have been able to complete his creative processes without chaos. Making God not only “knowable” but also dependent on another “unknowable” power is thus inherently subversive.

¹¹ For further explanation of this idea, see *Killing the Imposter God* by Donna Freitas and Jason King.

Authority, ultimately highlighting a clear progression from Milton's ideas to the resulting figure in *His Dark Materials*.

God the Tyrant

One of the most mystifying elements included in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is the anthropomorphized, recognizable, feeling and thinking representation of God. It should be a futile exercise to try and describe God, mainly due to the fact that his very existence is predicated on being unknowable. Moreover, it borders on idolatry to minimize the entire omnipotence of God into a character with motives, thoughts and actions just like every other member of the poem's cast. As a practicing and well-educated Christian, Milton would have been well aware of these literary and theological constraints—and yet, Milton's God is not only recognizable but also quite unlikeable; indeed, one of the central concerns regarding Milton's God is the ambiguity of his actions—is he or is he not liable for his creations' mistakes, and therefore the propagation of sin on earth? In *His Dark Materials*, Pullman takes this concept and uses it to frame the entire narrative; indeed, Pullman's "God" is the unquestionable source of evil and oppression in the universe. Pullman utilizes the bizarrely idolatrous nature of Milton's God and creates a false idol in his image—the series' antagonist, a force of hypocritical oppression known as the Authority.

Pullman demands what Milton does not quite ask: if God is omniscient, unfettered to the basic constraints of space and time, then why did he not act to stop his creations from their ruinous decisions? Why does his decision-making seem capricious and petty, even cruel and self-fulfilling? If God knows all that has been, and will be, then why

would he allow his children to fall prey to doubt and temptation? It seems incomprehensible that God would know the intimate details of Satan's quest for vengeance and how it affects Adam and Eve, and still do nothing to stop it. Indeed, it could even be argued that God rewards mindless servile followers over those with independent thoughts and divergent hopes. God is supposed love and guide his children through their mistakes; why, then, did he choose to continue punishing Satan and Eve if both expressed regret for their actions? Would it not be more powerful to forgive them their trespasses, thereby cementing their loyalty and respect, rather than brutally disciplining both?

Milton, it would seem, felt that there was more to be said about the narrative than what was offered in the Bible; moreover, the language he chooses to employ throughout the poem implies that it is acceptable to feel sympathy for the vilified figures of Eve and Satan. In Book III, God observes Satan as he traverses the abyss on his way from Hell toward Earth. God is not imagined as an omniscient narrator; instead, he appears as the clichéd old man in the sky, observing both Satan and the “past, present, [and] future” from “prospect high” (III.78) (III.77). He rhetorically asks the Son, “whose fault” Satan's demise is and answers his own question with none “but [Satan's] own” (III.96) (III.97). In this moment, as God stares down at Satan, he seems obsessive, punitive, haughty and cruel, exclaiming that Satan is an “ingrate,” ungrateful and foolish. God continues, stating that Satan “had of [him] / all he could have,” and that he had made Satan “just and right,” giving him free will so that he could prove his “true allegiance” with full knowledge of what his actions meant (III.97) (III.97-8) (III.98) (III.104). God exclaims, “what pleasure [could be derived] from...obedience paid” in indentured servitude (III.107)? In this

moment, God does not seem very godlike—sitting in Heaven, speaking to himself, to the Son, a manifestation of himself that he created, staring down at his rebellious creation, ranting and justifying his actions as creator. Indeed, it is a logical progression from this un-Godlike behavior to Pullman’s conception of a false idol.

The most bizarre passage of this rant involves God’s explanation for Satan’s rebellion and the Fall of Man. Before analyzing the language itself, one must account for tone: God is distinctly enraged. He seems almost manic in his justifications for allowing both Falls, exclaiming that neither Satan nor Man can “justly accuse their maker, or their making, or their fate” for their mistakes (III.112-13). His diatribe reaches a climax as he exclaims that “predestination [cannot overrule]” disloyalty or “their will[s]” (III.114) (III.115). God articulates, bizarrely and emphatically, that blame should be laid squarely on his creations and not on himself. He is supposed to be a loving parent, yet sounds like a petulant child. He continues, exclaiming that his “foreknowledge” as the omnipotent Almighty had “no influence on their fault;” in other words, that they would have made the same choice no matter if God knew in advance or not (III.118) (III.118). In this moment, God is not only undignified, but sullen—he lambasts his creations for being “self-tempted, self-depraved” but in the same breath, states that “[he] formed them free” to make their own decisions (III.130) (III.124). In essence, he is blaming them for fulfilling the exact predetermined path that he laid out, railing against their very natures.

To read this passage harshly, one could argue that God is sulking about a situation that only *he* has the power to rectify. God does not have to experience the pain of rejection from the Creator, the disillusionment of separation, or the fear of what the future holds; indeed, Milton seems to argue against the logistics of God’s divine agenda. If the

Bible states that God is all-loving, all-forgiving, and all-knowing, why, then, does he not respond with forgiveness if he knows that Satan and Man both experience regret for their actions? Why does he force each of his unequal foes into fulfilling a destiny that he has the power to save them from? Predicating his creations' existence on free will and then punishing them for fulfilling that destiny seems unfair, even illogical. Instead of ranting about how it is not his fault that they were ungrateful, why not use this moment to teach them the true meaning of love and loyalty? Is there not more power in forgiveness of a grievous trespass than in remorseless discipline?

The Knowable Nature of Milton's Divinity

Critics cannot seem to agree at all on the nature of Milton's God. The seminal text that refutes God's ultimate benevolence—William Empson's *Milton's God*—argues that the capriciousness and cruelty of God's unknowable plan actually renders him a malicious, rather than compassionate, force in the universe. Empson asserts that God's 'plan' has a net result of pain and disillusionment, not loyalty and love—and that Milton, genius that he was, could not reconcile the didactic motives of such a tyrant with his knowledge of true faith. He recognizes that Milton sympathizes with Satan and Eve for seeking autonomy and individuality outside of God's personal narrative. After all, they were programmed by none other than God to experience feelings of self-worth and curiosity. He also argues quite beautifully that Satan and Eve are tragic not because they disobeyed God, but because they trusted him. That implicit, childlike trust led each directly to his or her ultimate demise, for instead of welcoming his creations back into the

fold, God sentenced them to an eternity of agony and exclusion.¹² Empson's argument captures the depth and breadth of Milton's odd authorial choices.

In the introduction of his text *The Tyranny of Heaven*, scholar Michael Bryson states that the long-standing "interpretive conflicts" of *Paradise Lost* stem from an "unhelpful conflagration of theology and religion."¹³ This circumstance left Milton seeking to deconstruct and itemize 'God as he is' and 'God as he is imagined.' In other words, the act of man attempting to know or write about divinity, is in itself a "combination of good and evil."¹⁴

To scholar Victoria Silver, God is an allegory, personified to meet the "accommodations [of]... human understanding."¹⁵ For the majority of her argument, Silver maintains that it is the deity's "freedom to manifest itself only as it wills" that allows the reader to perceive him as speaking, thinking, and humanoid.¹⁶ Her article, "The Problem of God," neatly summarizes this notion: how can God exist in the text without operating as a paradox? If God is truly the most powerful being in the cosmos, then He is not supposed to occupy any form that can readily be perceived by man. His very existence is predicated on His inaccessibility to the human mind. That Milton would seek to cast Him in the role of an enormously powerful but ultimately recognizable being is actually quite antithetical to the contemporary Christian doctrine regarding idolatry. Silver is unsure of Milton's intentions—either his personification of God is a blunder, or

¹² Empson, *Milton's God*.

¹³ Bryson, 13.

¹⁴ Bryson, 16.

¹⁵ Silver, 47.

¹⁶ Silver, 47.

refers to a level of genius that is beyond the critic's grasp.¹⁷ She asserts that Milton utilizes illogic as a signal for God's presence or actions—actively confusing the reader in an effort to describe something equally inaccessible. Moments in “Heaven that he and we might not understand,” further obscure God's true self from the reader and establish him as a being of divine unknowable power.¹⁸ This paradox in representation thus saves Milton from the offense of idolatry, as following this logic implies that God has allowed himself to be minimized so as to be recognizable within the boundaries of written narrative.

She completes her argument by stating that Satan's “self-idolatry” prevents him from understanding that it is the “illogic” of the “deity's incomprehensible being” that makes him so powerful, rather than the logic.¹⁹ Her final point maintains that in God's fluid time-space, he is never in a position of defeat, since the Son has already been born in the future and sacrificed himself for the salvation of man. This illogic also appears in the form of the sounds made by the angelic choir and the inorganic temporality that Milton employs to describe God's thoughts.²⁰

Indeed, though Silver makes a good argument for God as an allegory, created thus so as to be comprehensible for the sake of the story, there is plenty of evidence to refute her ultimate conclusion that God's all-powerful omniscience works for the “goodness immense” in ways we cannot understand (XII.469). Why include God's thoughts at all? Milton is a well-recorded Christian, as well as a literary genius. Why even tempt the wrath of the Church and God that he believed in? Milton even goes so far as to imply that

¹⁷ Silver.

¹⁸ Silver, 51.

¹⁹ Silver, 53.

²⁰ Silver.

God, in his inaction regarding both Satan's rebellion and Eve's Fall, is actually responsible for the propagation of evil on Earth.

Indeed, it seems as though two opposing ideologies are at war within the author—the first, his boyhood adulation of the Bible, Christianity and the church; the second, and perhaps far more subversively embedded in his works than one would expect, the influence of the scientific revolution. Ultimately, Milton's God serves many purposes, the most important of which is the space that his conception creates for something new, something other, to fill the vacuum left in his wake. Milton created an unfulfilling, idolatrous God—why do so unless he sought to include another option for divinity and creation within the epic poem? Why even allow a space for confusion or interpretation if he did not actually intend to bait his readers into seeking an alternate creation narrative?

Access to the Unknown: Where Milton *Does* Obscure

Chaos is presented as a key generative space twice in the narrative of *Paradise Lost*: first, as Satan passes through it, and second, as the Son manipulates it to create the earth.²¹ In this section, I will argue that Milton's inclusion of chaos as a generative womb was purposeful, and satisfies his need to explain the confluence of science and theology. In his essay *Milton's God and the Matter of Chaos*, critic John Rumrich argues "chaos is the essential dimension of God."²² Instead of the commonly accepted theory that chaos is the opposite of God, Rumrich asserts that chaos and "first matter" are one and the same,

²¹ When I refer to chaos in this thesis, I refer to the lowercase "chaos" not the proper noun "Chaos" except when explicitly stated otherwise.

²² Rumrich, 1043.

and that first matter is a womb containing “all subsequent good.”²³ The hypothesis that God’s potential lies “boundless and infinite” but “latent” in the first matter implies that without chaos, there could be no God.²⁴ Moreover, “far from being hostile to creation,” chaos actually fosters the growth of ideas and of new beings.²⁵ The two times that Satan and Christ enter chaos, it stands to reason that chaos would realign itself into an image of whatever each expected or ordered it to become. In other words, Satan’s chaos is discordant and frightening while Christ’s is glorious.

In both instances, Milton inundates the text with birth imagery, highlighting the subtle connections to the womb. Book II of *Paradise Lost* ends with Satan’s journey towards and across chaos. After leaving the counsel of devils, he proceeds towards the nine gates barring Hell, and their guardians, Sin and Death—two figures who he soon realizes are his own offspring. Birth imagery enters the text for the first time quite violently: Sin addresses Satan as her “Father” and recounts the story of her birth to him (II.727). He experienced a “sudden miserable pain,” borne of his heavenly conspiracy against God, generating “out of [his] head” a fully formed “Goddess” (II.752) (II.758) (II.757). The parallels to the Greek goddess Athena’s birth from her father Zeus’ head are unmistakable; moreover, both female children represent two sides of the knowledge coin: wisdom and sin. The pain that Satan experienced is also likened to childbirth in its “[surprising],” labor-like nature (II.753). That Satan proceeds to impregnate Sin with their son, Death, only compounds the notion that birth and the “womb” are inextricably linked to this location, chaos, that she guards (II.766). Milton does not exalt birth,

²³ Rumrich, 1037, 1042.

²⁴ Rumrich, 1043.

²⁵ Rumrich, 1039.

pregnancy and the womb in this moment—Death’s birth is violent and he is described as Satan’s “odious offspring” (II.781). However, it is logical that the birth of Death would not be lauded as a celebration of life, as the “[pregnancy]” is a perversion in and of itself (II.779). Milton continues to describe Sin’s punishment, as the hounds around her waist constantly reenact a violent cycle of ingestion, birth, and pain. Indeed, this is a cautionary tale: the womb is not exclusively a haven for seeds of pure, uncorrupted goodness; the womb is impartial until a force is enacted upon its materials, giving them agency and motive.

After gaining access to the Gates of Hell, Satan confronts chaos for the first time, a location “without dimension,” a space defined by its lack of definition (II.893). For the first time in the narrative, the reader is confronted with a truly unknowable location: chaos is the place where “length, breadth and [height], and time and place are lost” (II.893-894). The “noise” in this “wild abyss” is indescribable, except as “[confused]” and “endless” (II.896) (II.910) (II.897) (II.897). Chaos is both inhabited and uninhabited, traversable and yet formless, dark, and yet fiery. It is a mass of contradictions: it has a Gate, and yet there are no true boundaries to it. In a way, it is described exclusively in oxymoronic terms—it is the “womb of nature” and “her grave,” the place where she is born and where she dies (II.911). However, the “causes,” or elements, that constitute the materials of chaos do not suffocate—they “[mix]” and “[impregnate]” one another, constantly forming and reforming to create both nothing and everything simultaneously (II.913) (II.913). Into this roiling nothingness Satan stares, pausing, “wary” of this place that he cannot understand or interpret (II.917). Thus, chaos is presented as the first true

space of unknowing in the text—generated by paradox, attainable to the reader only in the knowledge that it is an unattainable space.

After establishing chaos as both a womb and an unknowable space, Milton forces Satan to traverse its expanse as a method of further asserting both its monumentality and its generative qualities. It is filled with “stunning sounds” and “voices all confused” and is referred to as “wild” four separate times (II.952) (II.951). One can sense the power of this location—it plucks Satan up and tosses him through its core with ease. In many ways, the “wild expanse” is not a traditional depiction of a womb in any sense of the word (II.1014). It is pure, unformed energy, filled with infinite possibility and defined by its location as a fertile breeding ground for the generation of new things. There is no order in chaos, and while many would argue that the disorganization of this realm subordinates it to divine authority, in reality, its unstructured mutability actually frees it from the matrix of predetermination that fetters God to fate. It is no surprise that Satan, in seeking freedom from this ancient and powerful realm, must “with difficulty and labor”, wrestle with the “dark abyss” and “boiling gulf” to find his way free (II.1021-1022) (II.1027). Labor is the process of giving birth. Milton makes sure to repeat the phrase twice, affirming that in order to be expelled from the chaotic realm, one must undergo a similar experience of pain.

It is no coincidence that this passage is the exact one from which Pullman pulls his epigraph in *The Golden Compass*. This bizarre moment of inaccessibility seems out of place—if Milton had been capable this entire time of creating an unknowable space within the text, why did he choose to leave God on the page? Thus, it is obvious that Milton’s agenda strays from the traditional theological path—more so, even, as one

considers his retelling of creation. Milton begins Book VII—the creation chapter—by invoking the Urania, muse of astronomy, linking him to science even as he begins the story of Biblical creation. Creation is one of the most beautiful chapters in the entire epic, and most clearly illuminates chaos as the womb from which the Son of God is able to create the world. As Christ rides deep into the “vast profundity obscure” that constitutes chaos, he moves farther into the “world unborn,” calling out to the amorphous abyss (VII.229) (VII.220). In a complete reversal from Satan’s journey into chaos, Christ descends on the “wings of cherubim,” “girt with omnipotence, [and] with radiance crowned” (VII.218) (VII.194).

Instead of the confused, warlike tumult that greeted the fiend, chaos “[hears] his voice” and begins to form itself to his specifications (VII.221). God calls for light, and light blooms; he calls for the Earth to be formed, and the “womb” creates an “[immature] embryo” to be nurtured as Christ proceeds (VII.276) (VII.277). The elements that before swirled formlessly take recognizable shape. He calls to chaos, and chaos responds by “opening her fertile womb,” allowing the “birth” of the “innumerable living creatures, [the] perfect forms” that would comprise life on earth (VII.454) (VII.454) (VII.455). It doesn’t seem as though Christ merely invented these beings out of nothingness—their creation is an organic process, a meeting of two sexes to give birth to something new. That chaos is female and Christ male is not overtly stressed, although it is his imagination and her body that join in reproduction. Thus, the anthropomorphic qualities of God are somewhat forgiven: chaos does not subvert God, but instead work with Him to produce the Earth and its inhabitants.

If chaos in Book II is representative of negative influence, and chaos in Book VII is representative of good influence, then chaos in Book X is a result of those two encounters. Leaving the realm of the cosmic womb, the story narrows to one single womb, Eve's, and its new role as the bearer of the burden of creation. The movement from macrocosm—chaos' womb—to microcosm—Eve's womb—is unsurprising, as chaos has largely completed its role in the story. The pain that Satan had to feel when traversing the abyss is imparted to Eve in the “sorrow” of childbirth (X.195). The gates to chaos, opened by Satan on his first journey, allow Death and Sin to cross over and meet Satan as he returns to their realm.

Indeed, chaos is not inherently evil, merely extremely generative—after Christ returns to heaven, chaos is “wild” again, a “womb of... night,” left in its original state of unknowable confusion and darkness (X.477) (X.476-477). In a way, this moment is what makes chaos divine. Moreover, it has passed on its generative ability to Eve, who will create and be “[compensated with] joy” for every “fruit of [her] womb” born (X.1052) (X.1053). By including the reward of parenthood as a positive result of the Fall, Milton aligns generative ability with happiness, the womb with a propagation of enlightened feelings towards the pain that women must undergo in order to reproduce. Eve's final position as mother of humanity is a strange but satisfying combination of the chaotic womb that Satan experienced—labor and pain—and that of Christ—joyful procreation.

Alternate Creation Narrative: Chaos, the Womb of Nature

Chaos has been a topic of interest, but ultimate confusion, for many scholars. Walter Clyde Curry devoted an entire book to Milton's ontology, cosmology and physics,

ultimately concluding, after almost two hundred pages, that there are manifold precedents for disparate elements of Milton's chaos, but none of them explain the "inclusion of [the] vivid [qualities]" that make it so utterly incomprehensible.²⁶ He continues to comment that Milton is "unusually original in his conception of chaos" and, after writing an entire book on the topic, even he remains mystified as to Milton's true intentions.²⁷ Chaos was created to serve on two levels of complexity: first, as a counterpoint to God, and second, as an alternate explanation for creation as a whole. The text actively conditions the reader to seek meaning beyond the obvious assertion—in fact, one of the conundrums that critics most comment on, God and Satan as unlikeable and likeable characters, points to multiple levels of meaning and intention.

Chaos appears chaotically throughout the text. If one were not looking for a thread of connection between all of chaos' actions, one would be unlikely to argue for chaos as an alternative, subversive, and equally—perhaps even more—powerful generative source to God in Milton's universe. However, should the reader choose to follow Milton's convoluted but concretely recognizable logic, predicated by the inconsistencies built into the very characters of Eve and Satan, one will find that chaos, in its infinite mutability as the womb of creation, actually serves as a counterweight to God's creative abilities. Each character that enters the womb creates something different out of it: Satan, horrors, and God, the earth and all living beings. However, the undeniable truth is that without chaos, neither character would have been able to create anything at all. Chaos is introduced as fundamentally necessary to the birth of new things, dark matter waiting for a spark of consciousness and ingenuity to give it form, purpose,

²⁶ Curry, 87.

²⁷ Curry, 88.

and life. Without chaos, the Son would not have been capable of completing God's task in creating the earth—in Milton's universe, it seems, even God cannot will nothingness into sentience.

These limitations—completely unnecessary to a retelling of the Biblical creation narrative—indicate that Milton, albeit quietly, sought to propose another, more scientific, technical method of Creation to parallel the theology that he had been taught his entire life. By offering an alternative—even more curiously, a *womb*—it can be argued that the author struggled to reconcile the educated man of science and the lifelong man of God within him. The desire to acquire knowledge, to push back against oppression, and to disagree with the parent—these are all things that Milton could recognize and respect in these Biblical characters. Though the author had to ultimately argue for the punishment of curiosity and individuality—as is written in the Bible—one cannot help the feeling that *Paradise Lost* renders the ultimate punishments with a hollowness that feels multidimensional.

Milton and the Natural World

Throughout Milton's life, the natural sciences gained exponentially increasing momentum as well as legitimacy. As a man educated in the works of classical antiquity as well as contemporary science, it is unsurprising that Milton would be unable to ignore the larger context of his lived experience when writing the epic poem. In her book *Milton and the Natural World*, Karen L. Edwards explores the relationship between science and Miltonic creation in terms of its “indecipherability,” a theme that cannot be overstated

when considering the relationship of chaos and the womb to God.²⁸ If indecipherability is indicative of God's presence, then chaos is inherently divine. That God and chaos must work in synchronicity to create only further supports the notion that Milton does not want to let go of the Christian narrative entirely. Indeed, the two cannot be separated, but instead balance one another.

Chaos is symbolic of many things, but primarily represents infinite possibility in ways that Milton's God cannot. Chaos is indescribable when it has no purpose and no forces acting upon it—the noise it makes, the shape and dimensions that it takes on, even the method through which Satan enters it are all constructions of his mind. Milton leaves the interpretation of chaos up to the reader—although the one uncorrupted description that he does assert is that chaos is a womb. Wombs are generative—they harbor and eventually expel new things, ideas, concepts, objects, and beings. The power of the imagination that manipulates the matter of chaos will produce equally powerful results. When the reader perceives the womb of chaos as Satan's companion, it reflects his memories of war, darkness, hate, rape, wildness and confusion. It is an unpleasant place because Satan inputs an unpleasant power into it. In contrast, when God sends the Son down into chaos in order to create the world, there are few more beautiful passages ever written. Chaos is glorious, a blank canvas for the stunning first light that God commands it to become.

The womb, then, serves a dual purpose: first, to act as the true unknowable space, and second, to reconcile the Christian creation narrative with Milton's scientific understanding of the universe. The anthropomorphized God exists to satisfy the masses:

²⁸ Edwards, 127.

without Him, the story would be difficult to follow and probably deemed heretical. Chaos plays a more subversive, multipurpose role—by accepting the inability to truly understand the role that it plays, one conversely comes closer to a more traditional Christian conception of God as ultimately inconceivable by man. Additionally, chaos also plays the role of science: it is a womb, the technical method of birth; it is also reflective of the subconscious and thus, a psychological method of creation.

By adding the element of chaos, Milton included a proprietor of knowledge that has no place in the Biblical binary; in other words, chaos possesses a unique rank in the creative hierarchy—a spot undefined and left deliberately ambiguous. Milton describes chaos as inert and without sentience, and yet the opposite truth could be argued with a similar effectiveness. If Milton's chaos is a womb and a grave, the place of birth and death, lightness and darkness, sound and silence—what happens in the depths of that unknowable abyss is not for Milton to guess at. Milton simply does not know what chaos does or does not know.

Indeed, Milton's knowledge of both science and theology is what makes the story so remarkable. Because he could not directly reconcile the Biblical narrative with his understanding of modern natural science, Milton created a story that borrows from both, but ultimately leaves interpretation to the reader. Indeed, the reader's knowledge is perhaps the most valuable currency of all—what the reader brings into the poem shapes it in its entirety. Nearly anything can be extracted from Milton's verse, so long as the reader has the repository of information to recognize his manifold conceptions of singular ideas. In *Paradise Lost*, the narrative of creation can be explained in terms of its contradictory elements—as can Satan, Eve, Adam, and more. Based on the reader's knowledge, infinite

explanations can be derived from what information Milton offers with his verse. Each concept in the epic can be traced to its roots and precedents—Greek mythology, Roman philosophy, contemporary science and more—and different meanings can be derived based on whichever point of departure the reader chooses to take.

It is the same principle that allows Satan, God and Eve to be at once heroes and villains. This impetus takes shape in the image of two generative systems working independently and in harmony with one another to create the universe. Without God, chaos would not have formed Earth; but without chaos, God would have had no “dark materials” with which he could bring his imagination to life (II.916). On the one hand, it is easy to read *Paradise Lost* and utterly ignore the role of chaos as vital to creation; on the other, the text rewards those who seek beyond what they have been taught is the truth. This sympathy for interpretation is perhaps the singular unifying element of the poem, the single thing that every critic agrees on—that there is no one way to read the epic, no one lesson, no one hero, no one tyrant, no one victor, and no one fool. In a way, *Paradise Lost* does what the Bible cannot: it mimics the true mutability of life. That there are no definitive answers in *Paradise Lost* is perhaps its most trustworthy assertion of all. Indeed, that sly open-endedness says more about Milton’s motives than anything—but you didn’t hear it from him.

The First Lie

It can be argued that the Authority is a direct echo of Milton’s tyrannous God and that Pullman’s story continues that narrative, picking up thirty-three thousand years after *Paradise Lost* left off. At the beginning of *The Subtle Knife*, the witch Serafina Pekkala

embarks on a journey seeking answers in regards to the whereabouts of Lyra Belacqua. On a snowy mountaintop in the far north in what was Lord Asriel's fortress, she encounters Thorold, his abandoned manservant, who reveals the first inklings of precisely what Asriel's rebellion sought to accomplish. He states that, "the Church teaches that some of the angels rebelled before the world was created, and got flung out of heaven and into hell," implying that though the Church teaches this story as fact, it is not necessarily reflective of the whole truth (SK 47). For the rest of the second novel, the truth is similarly obscured: though the protagonists are aware that something is amiss with the Authority—after all, his the major antagonists are all openly acting in his name—it is only in the third novel that the angel Balthamos reveals the truth to Will Parry as they journey to save Lyra from Mrs. Coulter. He states:

"The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty—those were all names he gave himself. He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves—the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed. The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie. One of those who came later was wiser than he was, and she found out the truth, so he banished her. We serve her still. And the Authority still reigns in the Kingdom." (AS 28)

Out of all three novels in the series, this moment is by far the most subversive and theologically shocking: God is a lie? Moreover, as King Ogunwe and the original

rebellious angel Xaphania expound on later in *The Amber Spyglass*, not only did the Authority lie about his nature as the creator, but his subsequent rule has also been defined by “tyranny” (AS 186).²⁹ The word choice is unmistakable: Pullman deliberately and explicitly aligns his treacherous Authority with Milton’s tyrant God. Ogunwe continues by stating that the Authority “has been suppressing [the angels] since he came into being” (AS 187). When Mrs. Coulter exclaims that this story must be impossible, how could the Authority have “come into being” if he “existed before everything,” Pullman reveals his piece de resistance, the moment that all three novels have been working toward: the war in heaven as described by Milton was true, yes, but the wrong side won (AS 188). Moreover, if the victor writes history, then the entirety of Western theology as it has subsequently manifested has been predicated on one very large, very damaging lie.

Moreover, Milton’s God’s petty cruelty, confusing jealousy, and inordinate rage at his subjects suddenly makes more sense, as does the clichéd description of him as an ‘old man in the sky on a throne.’ It is necessary to understand that Milton did not write *Paradise Lost* with the explicit intention for it to forcefully echo the sentiments of a postmodernist world; Pullman merely amplifies and extrapolates on the evidence present in the text. However, Pullman’s narrative, when examined in tandem with Milton’s, illuminates those incongruous moments of anthropomorphism in a new light. Asriel’s rebellion against the Authority parallels that of Milton’s Satan, although Asriel’s emerges from a markedly different set of intentions. Xaphania the angel’s original rebellion is more closely aligned with the Biblical precedent—she, leader of the “rebel angels,” otherwise known as the “followers of wisdom” have spent thousands of years “[trying] to

²⁹ Ogunwe and Xaphania are two of Asriel’s allies on the war council.

open minds” while “the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed” (AS 429). In other words, Xaphania has spent the thirty-three thousand years in exile as the snake, tempting those who would listen into pursuing wisdom and knowledge.

Asriel, by contrast, is merely a man: his intention is to “[set] up a world where there are no kingdoms at all...no kings, no bishops, no priests” (AS 188). Pullman’s conception of the war against God is divided between two characters, Xaphania and Asriel, whereas Satan is the sole antagonist in *Paradise Lost*. Their combined efforts to dismantle organized religion from the top down are much more incendiary than what the Biblical—and Miltonic—Satan sought to achieve. Pullman uses these characters to illuminate evidence that the Biblical-Miltonic God could also be a lie, and the exalted Kingdom of Heaven nothing but a construction borne from the mind of a divine dictator. Serafina Pekkala explains to Mary Malone toward the end of *The Amber Spyglass* that “all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity”, an endless cycle that began when “the Authority first set himself above the rest of the angels” (AS 429) (AS 188). In this arena, Pullman is stridently irreligious—if religion means subscribing to the injustices and hypocrisies perpetrated in the Church’s name. Pullman’s assertion that all angels are created equal—and that the Authority’s only claim to superiority lays in the fact that he was the first angel—explodes the Bible, and more explicitly, *Paradise Lost*.

Satan’s entire argument for the rebellion against God lay in his belief that he and God were equals, and that submitting himself to servitude was unjust. If one were to remove the supposition that Satan is inherently evil, then what is so wrong with

questioning God as his supreme ruler? If knowledge of the self came to Satan organically, and he simply sought answers to his purpose in the universe outside of what God decreed, is that truly so blasphemous? Pullman would argue not. Ogunwe states in the war council that the “Kingdom of Heaven has been known by that name” *only* since the Authority deemed himself at the top of that hierarchy (AS 188). He continues saying that the rebels want “no part of [that system of oppression],” instead, they intend to be “free citizens of the Republic of Heaven” (AS 188).

The claim that God lied to the rest of creation about the nature of their births and their purposes in the cosmic scheme is by far the most incendiary within the series. *Paradise Lost* distinctly does not paint God as an infallible being; Pullman simply followed the logical progression of thought regarding a God who proclaims certain things but behaves in a distinctly differently. When Ogunwe says, “there may have been a creator, or there may not; we don’t know,” he speaks to the vast unknown that buffets the Biblical narrative on all sides. If the Bible were written under a false God’s command and taken as truth for thousands of years, how is anyone supposed to access the forgotten creation story? “All we know,” Ogunwe continues, is that “at some point, the Authority took charge, and since then, angels have rebelled, and human beings have struggled against him too” (AS 188). This retelling of the Biblical story is most shocking in its plausibility—and this notion is the point of entry that Pullman cannot seem to leave. The distinct genealogy through Milton’s only serves to add more dimensions of realism to this vast claim. He is not just saying *I, Philip Pullman, think the Christian God is a phony*, he is saying *and I think parts of Milton do too*.

The Oppressive Cycle: Distribution of Knowledge

“It’s death among our people... to challenge the Church”—so states the old manservant Thorold to Serafina Pekkala as the latter begins her quest to follow Lyra into another universe (SK 45). Though he does not know precisely why his master, Lord Asriel, has decided to rebel against the angelic hierarchy, one thing Thorold does know to be true is that to question anything the Church does is to suffer horrific consequences. At the beginning of *The Subtle Knife*, the ferocious witch queen Ruta Skadi gives a solemn address to her council regarding the nature and power of their enemy, the Church. “For all its history,” Ruta Skadi states, “[the Church has] tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. And when it can’t control them, it cuts them out” (SK 50). She continues, elaborating that the Church seeks only one thing: to “control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling” (SK 50). All of these “hideous cruelties,” these absolute “horrors,” are “committed in the name of the Authority” and are specifically designed to “destroy the joys and truthfulness of life” (SK 271) (SK 272).

These are extremely bold claims, and explain much of the critical uproar regarding the ultimate message of Pullman’s series as a whole. Indeed, Pullman’s language is very deliberate: one of the most concrete foundational ideas for *His Dark Materials* concerns a systematic and unflattering examination of the Authority and his Church’s actions. In this arena, Pullman’s atheism is at its most cutting. Unlike Milton’s subliminal discomfort with God’s lack of mercy and petulant attitude, Pullman’s accusations of oppression are absolutely explicit. Of course, Milton was operating in an entirely different era where questioning the Church was very risky—inquisitions into atheism were taken very seriously and could result in serious punishment or

imprisonment. In contrast, Pullman is jeopardizing nothing but his reputation amongst certain circles. In Pullman's universe, Satan and the rebel angels fight for all that is free, true, and good whereas the Authority is only concerned with hoarding his power and keeping his entire following in servile ignorance.

For thousands of years, Christianity has bought into the victor's version of history: that God, in his omniscience, has punished certain actions (and allowed certain evils to exist) because his position of privileged knowledge makes his judgment correct no matter what. His followers are taught not to question that truth. *Paradise Lost* does not question that truth explicitly, but does quietly make its own judgments. However, the very premise of *His Dark Materials* lies in exposing an alternate, equally as plausible, reality of divine history: that there is no reason to take God at his word, especially in the face of the atrocities committed in his name. Those who would simply allow themselves to languish in ignorance are the ultimate cancer to civilization, and the reason, if any, for its ultimate decline.

In many ways, Pullman's anti-God rhetoric is engaging due to its pure plausibility. When John and Will Parry finally meet moments before John's death, John explains the nature of the Authority and the truth of the rebel angels to his son:

“There are two great powers...and they've been fighting since time began. Every advance in human life, every scrap of knowledge and wisdom and decency we have has been torn by one side from the teeth of the other. Every little increase in human freedom has been fought over ferociously between those who want us to know more and be wiser and stronger, and those who want us to obey and be humble and submit.” (SK 320)

This notion plays against every tenet of ecclesiastical doctrine: first, that God has no equal, and second, that God always does the right thing. The sole difference between our universe and the universe of *His Dark Materials* is that the characters are actually able to interact with the rebellious army and hear firsthand why they have chosen to liberate themselves and others. Pullman's rhetoric is incredibly subversive due to the fact that it could be true—Christianity has certainly been guilty of crimes and corruption in the name of religion, particularly during periods of illiteracy and ignorance. In fact, religious injustices are most common when the victim does not know better and has no reason to fight back, particularly if it seems the consequences of doing so would be dire. There is nothing quite so disgusting to Pullman as an abuse of power over victims whose only crime is their ignorance.

Thus, the Authority's attack on humanity is two-pronged—it concerns both the body and the soul. His followers commit unbelievable violence against their fellow man in the form of intercision, a process by which they forcibly separate the victim's soul from his or her body. Even in death, mankind is not safe: the Authority constructed a barren wasteland comparable to the Fields of Asphodel in which every deceased must remain, milling in nothingness for all eternity. However, the most egregious crime that the Authority and his followers perpetrate is the subtlest of all: hypocrisy. Pullman wants to make his condemnation explicit: the Authority and his followers consider nothing sacred. Whereas Milton's God simply acts like a petulant tyrant, the Authority has nearly ruined civilization with his actions. Moreover, the Authority is an imposter: he is no more entitled to the privilege of deciding the fate of humanity than any other angel—he simply

has the privilege of knowledge, and uses it to maintain the eons-long oppressive cycle of power.

Intercision: Rape of the Soul

When a child reaches maturity in Pullman’s universe, his or her daemon settles into one shape, whereas previously, it could change shape at will. This transition is linked directly to maturity, in particular sexual maturity. The daemon is partly a projection of a person’s soul: heterosexual individuals will have a daemon of the opposite gender, while homosexual individuals have a daemon of the same gender. In Lyra’s world, a “human being without a daemon is like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out,” something completely “unnatural and uncanny” that deeply opposes the natural order of things (GC 214). Indeed, the daemon is representative of what the Church would refer to as ‘original sin’—it settles after the child becomes an adult due to sexual awakening. Following the logic, it is clear where Pullman stands when it comes to the necessity of maturity and the purity in performing the act of love: anyone who suppresses or denies these basic needs is inhuman, or dead.

The only major taboo in Lyra’s world concerns the daemon: it is “utterly forbidden” to touch another’s, the “prohibition” running so deeply that “even in battle no warrior would touch an enemy’s” (GC 142). Therefore, when it is revealed toward the end of *The Golden Compass* that the Gobblers—the frightening General Oblation Board, Church-sponsored and spearheaded by Mrs. Coulter—had been performing a process on the kidnapped children called “intercision”—during which a child is separated forcefully from his or her daemon—Pullman implies that there is no greater trespass. Intercision is

rape of the soul, and anyone who would organize such a violation against another human being is the ultimate evil. Maturity is a natural part of being human: having desires and acting upon them is a knowledge that all adults should rejoice in. There is nothing wrong or sinful about acting on impulses that every single human is wired to feel—in fact, why does desire even exist if acting upon it is only supposed to bring the individual shame? That the Church would commit these atrocities against innocent children is unthinkable.

Even Mrs. Coulter’s explanation of the procedure is sickening: she says, “all that happens is a little cut, then everything’s peaceful. Forever!” (GC 283). Indeed, those who have undergone intercision are essentially lobotomized—they have “no fear... no imagination, and no free will” (SK 199). In other churches, the witches discover, more experiments are being conducted in an attempt to preserve innocence via castration. Ruta Skadi tells her council that the churches “cut [children’s] sexual organs...with knives so that they shan’t feel” (SK 50). Moreover, many of these experiments fail, resulting in “the deaths of children;” indeed, “killing is not difficult for [the church.]” The Pope, John Calvin, “ordered [these] deaths” himself—with “pomp and ceremony and psalms and hymns,” Ogunwe explains to Mrs. Coulter, the church will justify its murderous actions and falsely legitimize them (AS 184) (AS 184). That the victims are children and completely innocent is irrelevant to their end goal of eradicating sin. After traveling through many worlds seeking answers, Ruta Skadi reveals that nothing is sacrosanct to the church. She states, “in every world, agents of the Authority are sacrificing children to their cruel God”—nothing is protected or sacred, not even children (SK 274). Thus does Pullman make his first major point against the power of organized religion: in their

ferocity to preserve innocence and eradicate ‘sin,’ the Church is willing to commit the most heinous crimes imaginable.

Imprisonment of the Dead

The Authority and his agents’ assault on humanity continues even after death. Perhaps the most shocking and disturbing twist in the series lies in the afterlife that all human souls have been trapped in since the Authority first took power. The Land of the Dead was “established in the early ages” and is essentially a “prison camp”—not the idyllic and peaceful “Heaven” that the churches “tell their believers” about (AS 29). In fact, nobody is exempt from the Land of the Dead—any afterlife aside from that barren wasteland is “a lie” (AS 29).

Pullman derives the Land of the Dead from the abysmal Fields of Asphodel in Greek mythology. Once the ghosts cross the River Styx in the boatman’s vessel, they are deposited on the shore of an endless field of milling souls—restless, scared, fading, confused wisps of humanity. The guardians of this muted place are vicious harpies who have been “[given] the power to see the worst in everyone” and who torture those souls that they deem soiled (AS 283). Instead of imbuing his guardians with protective instincts, the Authority commands them to “[feed] on the worst” that they can find in the ghosts’ souls until their “blood is rank with it and [their] very hearts are sickened” (AS 283) (AS 283). Indeed, the harpies are not inherently evil—this process of nourishment was “all [they] had to feed on” (AS 283). The Authority not only forced them to exist purely on hate, but also gave them nothing else to hold onto through the centuries of loneliness. Soon, all that was left was a need to punish those around them.

When Will and Lyra embark on their Orphean quest to reach Roger and John Parry's ghosts and find answers to their questions, neither truly understood what such a journey would mean. When they arrive—after being ripped from their daemons—it is to find the population of history in its entirety locked in a dismal prison. The harpies shriek terrifying things at the children, haunting Will in particular with the threat of torturing his mother in her sleep with “nightmares...[and] screams” (AS 259). It is nothing like the Heaven described by the Church, and exists purely to oppress and imprison the souls within it.

The Land of the Dead acts as a physical manifestation of the social and theological paralysis characteristic of the Authority's rule. Pullman makes it explicitly clear that hindering another being from finding a final resting place and rejoining the cosmos is a heinous affront. Moreover, daemons cannot travel into the Land of the Dead, effectively rendering every ghost a lobotomized shadow of his or her former self, forever doomed to seek and never find the other half of his or her soul. It is a cosmic waiting room, an expanding, blurry tank of ghosts without souls, of dead matter and of paralysis. Thus does Pullman extrapolate on his two-pronged condemnation of the imposter God: not only does He disregard the lives of innocent children, but He has also impeded every individual born in any universe from finding peace in the afterlife.

Hypocrisy

Perhaps the most devastating and effective method that Pullman takes to reveal the Authority's cruelty lies in uncovering examples of His and His followers' hypocrisy. The most insidious method of displaying corruption is not to announce it, but rather to

simply illuminate the multitude of double standards supported by the Church. Indeed, not only do the Authority's followers commit atrocious crimes and dole out heinous punishments in His name, but they often also exempt themselves from the same things that others are grievously harmed for.

When the rebel angel Baruch describes the Authority's Regent, Metatron, to Lord Asriel in the war council, he describes the antithesis of an angelic being. Metatron is "proud" with "[limitless] ambition" (AS 54). His duties as regent include setting up a "permanent inquisition in every world" due to the Authority's fear that "conscious beings of every kind have become dangerously independent" (AS 54). Once a man himself, the Biblical Enoch, Metatron was chosen to mete out punishments and conduct investigations regarding the spread of uncensored knowledge. He is supposed to enforce all of the Authority's doctrines and presumably reflect them himself. The absurdity of Metatron's despicable behavior perfectly highlights the inherent hypocrisy in the Authority's regime—how is one supposed to be the Almighty if one does not actually run the show? Metatron's very existence contradicts the Authority's supreme omniscience. Moreover, Metatron's lustful attitude towards females, specifically Mrs. Coulter, is diametrically opposed to the Church's entire doctrine regarding sexual desire: he craves her "flesh" and lasciviously recalls the time when he was human and had "wives in plenty" to enact his desires with (AS 357).

The hypocrisy of Metatron's sexual appetite does not go unnoted by the rebels; in fact, his blind and consuming lust eventually results in his downfall. Mrs. Coulter briefly acts as though she "[cannot] control the impulses of her body" and Metatron, mindless in his need for her, "[gulps] at the scent of her flesh" and drops his defenses, allowing Asriel

to attack (AS 361). Metatron is “blinded by his twin obsessions: to destroy Lyra and possess her mother”—none of the words Pullman uses to describe the Regent are flattering or angelic (AS 361). He is blind, obsessed, and possessive—all qualities that a true divine being would not have the inclination to engage with. If Metatron were human and unaffiliated with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, he would be grossly punished for his impulses. He forcefully flirts with Mrs. Coulter, describing how he “loved [female] flesh” when he was a man, and how he wishes he could possess her (AS 357). In the moment that Metatron tests her truthfulness, the moment in which she feels “most exposed and in most danger,” Mrs. Coulter “[trusts] her flesh” to obscure her true motives (AS 357). It succeeds, and Metatron foolishly trusts her to lead him to Lord Asriel; in reality, she leads him to his death.

The irony is not lost on Pullman, who describes Metatron in his last moments as a “being whose profound intellect had had...thousands of years to deepen and strengthen”, but who is vanquished in a moment by a woman who recognized his all-consuming covetous attitude towards her body (AS 361). Pullman seems to mock the sacred hierarchy by derisively illuminating the sheer hypocrisy in Metatron’s desires. He wants to engage in a sexual relationship with Mrs. Coulter and at the same time, destroy Lyra for being the new Eve. This sanctimonious double standard perfectly encapsulates the corrupt nature of the Authority’s minions.

Moreover, the Church itself is filled with near-absurd hypocrisy. During the opening chapters of *The Amber Spyglass*, Pullman explains the idea of “preemptive penance,” one of the church’s methods for forgiving their agents of sin before the agent even commits a crime (AS 64). Essentially, the church constructed a system that allows a

“penitent... to build up, as it were, a store of credit” that, once “[it reaches] the appropriate level for a particular sin...[grants] absolution in advance” (AS 64). This is patently absurd, and Pullman makes sure that the reader understands precisely how revolting he finds the concept. His ruthlessly saccharine sarcasm oozes off of the page as he continues the explanation of preemptive penance, stating “it was sometimes necessary to kill people...and it was so much less troubling for the assassin if he could do so in a state of grace” (AS 64). A Church that teaches that killing is bad, and yet constructs a set of motions for its cronies to go through to receive absolution, is ridiculous. Pullman wants the reader to acknowledge the complete illogic of preemptive contrition; indeed, he is disgusted by any manufactured methods that allow certain individuals to continue committing crimes while simultaneously congratulating themselves for upstanding piety.

Perhaps the most hypocritical human character is the self-proclaimed “pitiless agent of the Church, the fanatical persecutor of children, the inventor of hideous machines to slice them apart [in order to]...look in their terrified little beings for any evidence of sin”: Marisa Coulter (AS 179). Though she eventually redeems herself somewhat, it is clear that Pullman delights in Mrs. Coulter’s obvious hypocrisy. She is a woman who uses her sexuality to advance in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and yet she has devoted her life to eradicating the world of sexual maturity. When she saves Lyra from intercision at the last moment, she recalls that her “heart nearly stopped” seeing her *own* child about to be lobotomized and castrated (AS 183). She lured hundreds of children to their deaths, but “when it was [her child],” her “horror” at the process was inconceivable (AS 183). It seems as though Pullman seeks to draw out the worst qualities of organized religion and amplify them, astutely investigating the self-righteousness inherent in such

arbitrary hierarchies. That their God is a phony only deepens his argument for the overall elimination of the Church; indeed, not only are the Authority's followers not adhering to the tenets that they are supposedly charged with protecting, but they are also actively engaging in violent and hypocritical behaviors. When the church council states that they will self-destruct to ensure that Dust is also destroyed, it is the ultimate idiocy. They unilaterally and irrationally agree that the world will be "better with no Church and no Dust" than with the Church and "sin" both alive and well (AS 63). They maintain that the "hideous burden" of Dust must be "purged," but if they were to succeed in that endeavor, the universe would have nothing left but shambling drones (AS 63). It is an inherently flawed system of addressing their enemies, at once myopic and naïve, a strategy belonging to zealous imbeciles with no foresight and an inflated sense of self-importance.

Indeed, where do these revelations leave the reader? Are we supposed to realize that God has been manipulating us for thousands of years to suit his own ends and maintain his position of power? Not only is Pullman suggesting that God has created a system of oppression predicated on violence, stupidity and hypocrisy, but he also intimates that this system is not mere fiction. The first step in a dictatorship is to isolate and brainwash the followers, something that Pullman would argue the Bible has successfully accomplished. Punishment for seeking knowledge outside of the established narrative is the main form of censure present in the Bible, and it has served certain Church figures well to continue promoting those ideas. Pullman's Authority and His followers restrict access to information and destroy anything that could threaten that delicate balance—even going so far as murdering innocent children and wrongfully imprisoning the dead. Pullman's surgical disassembly of the Church's oppressive

machinations is flawless; he takes a particular glee in observing how sanctimoniously they trumpet their piety. Obviously, his constructed God and church are fiction, but to what extent?

Perhaps a more advantageous question to ask would concern his motives: why continue to use theological language? If he truly sought to dismantle the grand narrative, why continue to operate within its boundaries, drawing on its plots and figures and engaging in its questions and terms? For indeed, angels and Heaven are two of the most sacred elements of *His Dark Materials*. As we shall see, like Milton, Pullman sought to construct an alternate source of divinity. Moreover, unlike Milton's largely pagan womb of chaos, Pullman's divinity actually shares almost all of its qualities with feminist theology—placing it squarely within the Christian tradition that Pullman appears to disdain so deeply. Pullman does not seek, therefore, to delegitimize the system of beliefs supported by the Bible; instead, it seems as though he seeks to cull the corrupt and unjust elements of Christianity while elevating the virtuous and inclusive ones. Moreover, perhaps the most beautiful element of *His Dark Materials* lies not in the liberation of the average reader from a religious chokehold, but rather how Pullman so artfully steeps him or her in his ironclad faith.

CHAPTER II: DIVINE MOTHER

Introduction

The principal punishment meted out for Eve after her Fall is the pain of motherhood. The physical agony of birth is visceral and inescapable. No matter how much the mother and her loved ones wish it were so when the time comes to bring life into the world, nobody else can share that bodily torment. As the woman crosses the threshold into motherhood, she experiences intense agony and extreme joy all at once; indeed, it is a vastly personal ordeal and yet infinitely similar for every woman. Only the woman feels this strange juxtaposition of physical torture and emotional elation—this trial is hers and hers alone to undergo. Indeed, the uniqueness of this event fosters a kind of attachment to the child that cannot be replicated or falsified: maternal love. No matter how much the father or family adore the child, it is impossible to replicate the precise relationship of a mother to her baby.

In *His Dark Materials*, motherhood is equated with many things; first and foremost, it is associated with loss of innocence. However, motherhood also acts as a vehicle by which Pullman chooses to exemplify divine love, particularly in terms of personal sacrifice. Mothers in *His Dark Materials* are manifold—for better or worse, motherhood changes these women. Pullman does not exclusively assign motherhood to women who have physically given birth; motherhood is a mentality as much as it is a literal action. To Pullman, motherhood is the state of being in which a woman is capable of sacrificing herself for the good of another, of defending the weak, of telling true stories and of teaching lessons.

Indeed, the woman who becomes a mother has left one state of being behind in order to pursue a higher, more complex existence. It is the most powerful action that a woman can take to link herself to another human being and accept all of the pain, fear, and most importantly, love that that new existence will entail. Though Pullman does not ignore fatherhood—in fact, a large part of *His Dark Materials* consists of various examples of fathering—it is the mother alone whose body must experience the pain of childbirth and the visceral connection to that child. Indeed, Pullman inundates the text with maternity in his quest to illuminate the transcendent power of maternal love. Marisa Coulter is a hateful woman—the anti-mother. She devotes her life to self-advancement and makes a living murdering innocent children. However, when she embraces maternal love, Pullman suggests that even the deepest evil in the universe is capable of reflecting the divinity inherently present in all of humanity.

Lyra is Eve, the Biblical first mother. Lyra's complex maternal relationships, as well as her role as Mother Eve, allow Pullman to illuminate a very specific kind of love in contrast to the love of the Judeo-Christian God—the kind that transcends time and space, generated by humans but ultimately divine in nature. Motherhood, thus, can be read in two ways: first, in the one-to-one nature that birth is predicated on—mother to child; second, in terms of its nature as an elevated space of existence. The defining element of motherhood, however, is its variable nature. Women who choose to become mothers are not all necessarily good at it, or unselfish in their approach to maturity. This distinction is absolutely vital to Pullman's argument: though every woman has the ability to generate divine love, many squander their experience for selfish reasons. However, all mothers impart wisdom to their offspring—some by painful means, some with love. In

other words, Pullman asserts, Eve's choice extends beyond her simple decision to pursue knowledge and accept the pain that it brings—she opening herself up to many more choices, and many more painful decisions that will be recognizable only after she has given of herself to her child. This ongoing sacrifice, Pullman argues, generates the most powerful and noble love of all.

The first point of access into motherhood within *His Dark Materials* lies in Pullman's relationship to Milton's Eve. Milton's Eve, by many accounts, is a controversially autonomous figure in the prelapsarian Paradise. Strangely, Milton frames her story by contrasting her distinct personality with the actions of others, namely God and Adam, to create a tension and sympathy for her not present in the original Biblical narrative. Much scholarly contention exists around Milton's ultimate re-assertion of traditional Christian values in Book X of *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, his postlapsarian condemnation of Eve rings false, especially in conjunction with a lackluster attempt to ennoble Adam's accusatory attitude toward her. Pullman finds his point of access in the odd dichotomy between the poem's announced intention to glorify Christianity and the subversive reality of the story itself. Within this tradition, Pullman imagines his own mother Eve predicated on the Miltonic prototype but forged on the premise of salvation, rather than damnation.

Why choose the most vilified female character in the Bible and transform her into a powerful, necessary and sacrificial savior of man? In this chapter, I will discuss the significance of the choices that Pullman's Eve makes in both the prelapsarian and postlapsarian worlds. Indeed, though Lyra is born from the Miltonic tradition, her actions and decisions as the protagonist reflect a far more complex argument than the one hinted

at throughout *Paradise Lost*. By suggesting that the innocence—or, more appropriately, the ignorance—of childhood is not only unsustainable but also detrimental to society if an outside force attempts to unnaturally prolong it, Pullman argues for the necessity of maturity. Moreover, Pullman's Eve ultimately undergoes three major sacrifices to become the mother of a new universe.

Most importantly, however, are the ways in which human mothers and their sacrifices reflect back upon the divine mother, Dust. Pullman finds a deep connection with the tenets of feminist theology, encapsulated in birth-based philosophies of creation, Mother-Sophia and Spirit-Sophia. Indeed, Pullman's human mothers embody the same qualities as his divinity, both amplifying and exemplifying how the divine is reflected in humanity. Thus, Pullman's divinity is not some autocratic tyrant whose power stems from fear and shame; rather, in *His Dark Materials*, divinity can manifest in any and all beings, so long as they practice self-sacrifice and open themselves up to love.

Milton's Eve: Weak Fool or Tragic Heroine?

To understand the point of Philip Pullman's Lyra, one must first understand the complexity of John Milton's Eve, for Pullman is deeply indebted to Milton's first mother. Even the most conservative of Milton's critics concedes that that his enigmatic manipulation of the traditional Biblical narrative often obscures, even contradicts, the Christian objective. In the simplest terms, Milton's Eve strays obviously and often from the conventional binary. Instead of being described in terms of her one-dimensional weakness and selfishness, Milton chooses to portray her as a deeply complex individual with sympathetic motives. Though he meets the narrative requirements for retelling a

Biblical event—Eve is tempted, Falls, and is punished accordingly—it seems as though Milton takes every opportunity to include distracting incongruities in her personality. These subversive clues scattered throughout the epic poem indicate Milton’s uneasiness with the authoritarian Judeo-Christian relationship to humanity’s natural desire to acquire knowledge about itself. By examining Eve’s quiet postlapsarian humility in contrast to her prelapsarian autonomy, I will argue that Pullman shaped Lyra with them in mind.

When God creates Eve as a companion for Adam, Milton imagines her as untamed and brand new, reveling in her newfound existence. Adam is immediately smitten with her, marveling at God’s power to create something so beautiful, a perfect compliment to his masculinity. But Eve, uncaring of her new admirer, runs to examine herself, joyfully remarking on her own magnificence. Most scholars read her exhilaration as self-absorption—but Milton leaves this moment ambiguous.³⁰ Eve, it would seem, has been created with a kind of autonomy and self-reflection that Adam conspicuously lacks. He is a childlike sycophant, entirely enraptured by the power of Eve’s self-love. Meanwhile, Eve revels in her body and in her beauty, ignoring Adam in favor of herself for her first few moments of life. Ultimately, that independence leads to her temptation and the Fall of Man; however, Milton intentionally presents her as a freely conscious being, arguably far more powerful than Adam, who embodies ingratiating servility. The relationship between Adam and Eve is one of many such decisions in which the author takes curiously liberal license with the facts of the original Biblical story.

³⁰ For further explanation of this idea, see: Lewis, C.S., “The Fall.” In *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey. WW Norton & Co., 2005. Originally published in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, (Oxford UP, 1942).

Eve's autonomy is undeniable in the beginning of Book IX. What is clear in this book is Milton's obvious intention to invert the traditional gender roles of man and woman, what is less accessible is why. When Eve suggests that she and Adam part ways and "divide [their] labors" until they have "more hands" to help them, Adam responds flatteringly, but irrationally (IX.214) (IX.207). He states that the Lord has not "imposed labor [so strictly]" that they need to separate—their duties are more to give them something to do and less about a fear of the garden uncontrollably overgrowing (IX.235-36). Furthermore, he states, if they separate, they will not be able to engage in "sweet intercourse" when the mood strikes them (IX.238). They are not, he maintains, creatures intended for "irksome toil" but rather "delight" (IX.242). However, his major blunder lies in his insistence that alone, Eve would fall prey to the "malicious foe" that Raphael had warned him of (IX.253). He insists that "asunder", Eve will fall to the "danger [and] dishonor [that lurks]" with them (IX.258) (IX.267).

Eve becomes increasingly agitated as Adam refuses to capitulate. Filled with the knowledge of Satan's wiles that Raphael conveniently imparted exclusively to him, Adam insists that Eve's foolishness will doom them both. Unsurprisingly, Milton's characteristically independent Eve ignores Adam, insisting that she would rather find and face Satan than cower and wait for him to find her. Reading between the lines, Milton has seemingly inverted the traditional gender roles—Adam desires to stay in safety, together, while Eve behaves like a warrior: she would rather size up the enemy than trust secondhand advice about his treachery from her husband. It seems as if Milton hints that if Raphael had actively included Eve in his conversation with Adam—instead of forcing her to eavesdrop—or if Adam had not imparted Raphael's warnings so patronizingly, the

disaster could have been averted. Indeed, why imagine this specific argument between these two protagonists if not to engender sympathy for Eve's situation?

Moreover, Adam is cast as the querulous figure who seeks refuge in numbers, whereas Eve is undaunted by his warnings, so confident is she in her sense of self. Ultimately, Milton must follow the Biblical narrative and Eve must fall; however, it can be argued that in these moments before Eve and Satan meet, she is actually provided with a very legitimate motive to want to disobey her husband and ignore his warnings. There is nothing worse than being patronized, and Eve is only human—it seems to make logical sense that she would not be on her guard against temptation in the way that she likely usually would be. Additionally, Eve was excluded from Raphael's original warning—perhaps, had she been included, the entire mess could have been avoided. Milton, by including this moment of departure from the traditional narrative, seems to indicate that Eve's Fall was the culmination of events, rather than a spontaneous decision to disobey.

Furthermore, when Adam and Eve fight in Book X after the Fall, Milton chooses to contrast Adam's disproportionate rage with Eve's quiet nobility. Though it was Eve who fell first, it was Adam who chose to follow her—this is a fact that Milton does not let the reader forget. Book X closes with Adam's vicious lambasting of Eve for her mistake—he asserts that she stupidly “rejected [his] forewarning” because she is “crooked by nature” (X.876) (X.885). She has “female snares / in straight conjunction with [her] sex” that constituted the sole reason for their predicament (X.897-98). She is nothing but a “fair defect” that has ruined everything for the two of them, and Adam cannot believe that he fell for her wiles (X.891). This speech is unfair in various regards, but perhaps most jarringly in tone. Adam blames Eve with a rage so vicious, so

degrading, that it comes across as shocking—is this how the Fall has perverted man’s love for woman?

However, the most surprising element of the exchange is Eve’s response—penitence and humility. Out of the two of them, Eve is the nobler, though it is her fault that they have fallen. She states that Adam can find a new “heaven” in her “sincere [love] and [the] reverence in her heart” (X.914-15). She begs him to let there be “peace [between them]” and fully accepts her blame as the one who betrayed both her husband and God (X.923). In her uncharacteristic meekness, there is power: she does not shy away from the magnitude of her actions or seek to lay the blame on anyone but herself. In contrast, Adam does nothing but blame her for his choice to follow her into sin, insisting that she was created for the express purpose of ruining everything. When Adam finally relents and is able to “[commiserate]” with her, it is because she presented herself as “at his feet submissive in distress”—degrading herself to achieve peace between them. He pompously states that “[her] frailty and infirmer sex [is] forgiven,” for she was simply created to be weak (X.939) (X.942) (X.956).

Is this an instance of Milton’s patriarchal and misogynistic values overshadowing the narrative? I would argue that it is not. Why give Eve any autonomy or gumption in the story at all if she was ultimately designed to become a limp, uninteresting character bound by her poor decisions? Instead, it seems as though by contrasting the powerful, autonomous Eve with the humble, deferential Eve, Milton actually illuminates the purity and beauty of her character in opposition to Adam. Adam is painted as incapable of owning up to his mistakes, while Eve, bizarrely, is Christ-like in her submissive

honesty.³¹ When Adam reaches the conclusion that they can “lighten / each other’s burden in [their shares] of woe,” it is not because he reached that benevolent conclusion naturally, but instead, because Eve was willing to sacrifice her pride on the altar of humility (X.960-61). Indeed, Milton weaves a complex tale of blame and motive, preparing the reader to seek out deeper subversive elements elsewhere in the text.

Reading *Paradise Lost* as a young man, it seems as though Pullman was instantly drawn to Milton’s subversive presentation of the logic behind Eve’s actions within the garden, both before and after the Fall. The basic premise of Milton’s Eve is easily identifiable throughout *His Dark Materials* in Pullman’s Lyra. By many accounts, Eve could be considered the prelapsarian protagonist in Milton’s garden—she is the figure who acts, thinks, and feels for herself. Though she is painted ultimately as the weak figure who fell to temptation, it is Adam who occupies that position for the majority of their interactions as a couple. She falls not because she sought to usurp God or Adam, but simply because she sought knowledge of herself and of the world around her. Her solemn acceptance of the burden of motherhood is far nobler than Adam’s panicked regret. Pullman, like Milton, sympathizes with her, and with the difficult path she—and all subsequent mothers—will have to walk.

The strongest connection, however, between Milton’s Eve and Pullman’s Lyra lies in Pullman’s explicit celebration of Lyra’s choice to pursue knowledge, even at the expense of her personal safety and happiness. Knowledge, Pullman asserts, is not a detrimental thing—in fact, without Eve’s choice to pursue it, mankind would have remained in servile ignorance for all eternity. The Fall, then, is cast as the most pivotal

³¹ Miller, 162.

moment in human history for *good*, not for evil. Whereas Milton merely hints at his sympathy for Eve's decision, Pullman elevates it to the noblest action any person—male or female, human or angel—has ever undertaken. The impetus to question the rule of an established authority and seek personal independence is not inherently evil. In fact, blindly accepting the word of an authority and languishing in ignorance as Adam did in *Paradise Lost* could be read as cowardly and myopic.

One cannot hate Milton's Eve as many have subsequently come to hate her Biblical precedent. In fact, it is far easier to praise her stoic nobility as she prepares to leave Eden than it is to heartily agree with Adam's self-righteous tirade. Ultimately, Milton sides with the Bible—he cannot overtly disagree with the established scripture or risk being punished for heresy. Additionally, Milton *was* a seventeenth century Christian—a fact that cannot be ignored in the context of his poem. He *wanted* to agree with the Bible but, whether inadvertently or not, found himself in a bizarre position of concord with Eve. Pullman, in his quest to understand both the poem and his resonance with it, found a point of entry with Eve and caught himself asking the question: what if Eve's choice were to save mankind, rather than condemn it? Thus, the tension present in *Paradise Lost* becomes the catalyst for the entire narrative of *His Dark Materials*.

The Anti-Mother

Marisa Coulter, for all intents and purposes, is not a mother in the sentimental sense of the word. Though she physically gave birth to Lyra, there is nothing maternal or divine about her actions. The self-proclaimed “worst mother in the world,” Mrs. Coulter bore Lyra due to an extra-marital affair with Lord Asriel (AS 183). She “let [her] only

child be taken away from [her]” when Lyra was only a “tiny infant” because she “didn’t care about [the baby]” at all (AS 183). She admits that she was “concerned only with [her] own advancement” both within society and within the Church hierarchy (AS 183). “For years,” she continues, she “didn’t think of [her own baby]” whatsoever unless it was to “regret the embarrassment of her birth” (AS 183). Quite deliberately, Pullman has conceived of the anti-mother: a woman so consumed by her egocentrism and cruelty that she completely annihilates her natural maternal instincts. Moreover, Marisa Coulter makes a living luring children to their deaths with no care for the devastated families that they leave behind. Truly, she embodies the antithesis of every nurturing instinct that mothers are supposed to possess.

Pullman’s conception of Mrs. Coulter is almost an exercise in how many hateful qualities he can combine into one person, much like the Authority and his followers. Mrs. Coulter has devoted her life to the Church, and to eradicating original sin at any cost—ironically, of course, as she utilizes her sexuality like a weapon to achieve her own agenda. She is poisonous, obsequious, greedy, and selfish. More than anything, she wants to establish herself in a position of power. In a way, Mrs. Coulter is analogous to the Authority—using the tools she has been gifted with, namely her looks, wealth and wily intelligence, to oppress others and advance herself. Having a child nearly ruined all of those things, and for that, Mrs. Coulter detests children.

When she arrives at Jordan College and decides to take Lyra home with her, it becomes clear that she is curious if she will be able to prolong Lyra’s innocence while ushering her into a kind of sterile adulthood. She bathes Lyra, and when Pantalaimon “[watches] with a powerful curiosity,” she “[looks at him]” until he “[averts] his eyes

modestly from [the] feminine [mystery]" as Mrs. Coulter's daemon, "the golden monkey" was doing (GC 77). But her veneer of sweetness is short lived: when Lyra disobeys her as twelve-year-old girls are wont to do, her daemon attacks Pantalaimon, "[overmastering]" him with a "cold furious force that was horrifying to see" (GC 86). Mrs. Coulter remains eerily calm throughout the entire exchange. Indeed, Pullman asserts, the woman is willing to seriously frighten, intimidate and hurt her own child when Lyra displays even a hint of disobedience. This is not the behavior of a mother freshly reunited with her daughter.

For every horrific deed that Pullman has Mrs. Coulter enact, for every instance that he deepens the reader's hatred for her, he cultivates the suspense regarding her guaranteed defeat. This is an adventure novel, after all—don't our fearless protagonists always defeat the bad guy and save the universe?

Redemption of the Anti-Mother

When Marisa Coulter is captured by Asriel's forces in the middle of *The Amber Spyglass* and is imprisoned in his fortress, it marks the first time that Lyra's parents have truly been alone together since her conception. At this point in the narrative, much has happened since those six short weeks Lyra spent in her care at the beginning of *The Golden Compass*. During this interim, Lyra has traveled through many worlds and learned much about herself and her origins. At the end of *The Subtle Knife*, Mrs. Coulter kidnaps Lyra and sequesters her—drugged and insensible—in a cave high in the Himalayas. Will comes to Lyra's rescue just as Asriel's forces descend on the mountain as well.

They escape, though not before Mrs. Coulter—paralyzed by a neurotoxin, unable to pursue them—cries out to her fleeing daughter, begging her not “[to] go” (AS 143).³² She screams, “my heart’s treasure, my little child, my only one,” wailing that Lyra is “tearing [her] heart” out of her chest (AS 143). Lyra is “anguished” to witness “the only mother she would ever have” be consumed by grief, her “face... a mask of tragic passion” (AS 143). Nevertheless, the children flee; indeed, they are greatly confused as to why Mrs. Coulter, zealous Church agent, had kidnapped her organization’s number one target for execution, rendered her completely defenseless, and then held her hostage. Why protect her? Handing Lyra over to her superiors would have guaranteed Coulter’s position in the Church hierarchy forever. Quite strangely, it seems as though Mrs. Coulter has experienced her very first maternal instinct—misguided and clumsy, to be sure, but borne from a previously unearthed corner of her soul.

Indeed, when Mrs. Coulter comes to in Asriel’s quarters, the first words from her lips are “my child! My daughter! Where is she? What have you done?” (AS 178). She continues, screaming that Asriel would have done better “[tearing] the fibers from [her] heart” than separating her from her child (AS 178). Asriel believes she is acting—nothing, to his knowledge, could ever have swayed the “pitiless agent of the Church” to shirk her duties, let alone a “foulmouthed, ignorant little brat with dirty fingernails” (AS 179). However, it seems as if that is precisely what happened.

Marisa Coulter is an evil, vain woman who has brought death upon many children; it stands to reason that she would not care at all what happened to Lyra.

³² Chevalier Tialys is one of Asriel’s Gallivespian spies, along with the Lady Salmakia. They accompany the children on the rest of their journey and are tiny humanoid creatures with poisonous spurs.

However, as she explains to Asriel and his war council, something shifted inside of her when she found out “who [Lyra] is” going to become: Eve (AS 183). In that moment, she knew that she had to “set [herself] against the Church, against everything they believed in, and if need be, against the Authority himself” (AS 183). Why would she do this? She explains that it is quite simple: they are trying “to kill [her] daughter” (AS 182). The remorseless Church enforcer, brought to her knees by love? She continues, stating that she has “[plucked Lyra] out of danger [three times],” and each time, the visceral fear she felt for her child chipped away at her “[loyalty]...[faithfulness]...and [devotion]” to the Church (AS 183). When Ogunwe questions why she kept Lyra drugged, Mrs. Coulter exclaims, “because she [hates] me...and she would have fled fro my presence like a bird from a cat” (AS 184).

“Do you know what that means to a mother?” she sobs to the war council—can any of them possibly understand the “love... [and] tenderness” a mother feels as she cares for her helpless child (AS 183)? Asriel is not convinced—in fact, he is “[disgusted]” at what he perceives to be a very convincing charade (AS 184). And it is—but, strangely, though Mrs. Coulter is actively manipulating the war council to further her agenda, she truly does seek to protect Lyra. She escapes but Asriel allows her to do so—he is confident that she will actually find “the girl” and lead Asriel’s team to her (AS 196). In this moment, as Mrs. Coulter disappears, Asriel refers to her not as Marisa but rather, “Lyra’s mother” (AS 196). Thus, when Mrs. Coulter commits an action for the good of another, she is perceived not in terms of her individual identity, but instead, in terms of her motherhood.

Maternal love is fierce and boundless—in fact, Pullman argues that maternal love is the most powerful love of all. It can transform anyone, even the most evil villain. In fact, when Asriel derisively scoffs that Marisa’s “fire has been quenched in a drizzle of sentimental piety,” his word choice is deliberate: Pullman is asserting that committing oneself to motherhood is the closest that one can come to divine love on earth (AS 179). Divine love is about vulnerability, about sacrifice and about selflessness. Marisa Coulter embodied none of these things—not, Pullman illuminates, until she became a mother in more than name only.

When the final battle occurs between Asriel and the Authority’s forces, Mrs. Coulter utilizes her sexuality to trick the Regent, Metatron, into following her into a trap. Before following her, Metatron declares that he must look into her soul to see if she has any nefarious intentions towards him; indeed, in this moment as Metatron scours her soul—the moment that she faces the most danger—“Lyra’s mother” allows herself to be entirely vulnerable to convince him of her innocence (AS 356). Indeed, in this moment, she is not Marisa Coulter, she is Lyra’s mother. When she and Metatron arrive and Asriel attacks, there comes a moment when it seems as though the angel is going to overpower them, and Mrs. Coulter must make a choice: save herself and let the angel escape, or sacrifice herself and ensure a victory. The decision takes her an instant to make: her love for Lyra, the love that “came to her like a thief in the night,” instantly and wholly overshadows her instinct for self-preservation (AS 362). Without hesitation, “Lyra’s mother... [hurls] herself against the angel...[seizes his] beating wings, and [bears] them... down together into the abyss” (AS 365).

Indeed, Pullman suggests, giving oneself over to the power of maternal love—even if it means sacrificing oneself or rendering oneself vulnerable to attack—is the closest that humanity can come to divinity. It is no chance action that when Marisa Coulter refers to her love for Lyra, her symbol of choice is derived from Scripture: a mustard seed. This specific description references the indomitable power of Jesus’ faith in Matthew 17:20 and Luke 17:6.³³ When Serafaina Pekkala recounts Mrs. Coulter’s death, she states that she “sacrificed herself... to fight the angel and make the world safe for Lyra” (AS 430). That moment, that decision, that choice—that is what makes her great. This love that she feels for her child elevates her above her past actions—she does not seek to be forgiven for the evil that she has done, she does not leap to her death for the purposes of ennobling her memory. No—she simply must save her daughter. In her mind, there is no other option, and it is that pure, blazing selflessness that Pullman presents as divine.

The Three Sacrifices of Lyra Belacqua

Unlike her mother, Lyra never actually gives birth or conceives a child. However, Pullman designates a very specific role for her, one that he keeps shrouded in mystery until the very end of *The Subtle Knife*. It is the witch Lena Feldt, brutally tortured by Marisa Coulter, who finally reveals Lyra’s role in the cosmic narrative: “she will be the mother—she will be life—mother—she will disobey—she will... Eve! Mother of all! Eve, again! Mother Eve!” (SK 314). In Pullman’s narrative, Eve’s choice to pursue knowledge and maturity actually results in the salvation of mankind, rather than its

³³ Colbert, 83.

damnation; however, the Fall comes at great personal cost to Lyra herself. To generate enough wisdom to negate the Authority's disastrous effect on the cosmic divinity, Dust, Lyra walks a path of great sacrifice. The knowledge that she must inherit is crucial to the liberation and preservation of civilization, and she must choose to experience all of it of her own free will. Indeed, Pullman has taken the traditional story of the Fall and entirely inverted its meaning: temptation arrives not in the form of choosing knowledge, but rather, in the form of self-sacrifice. Three times in the series, Lyra must choose either her own personal wellbeing and happiness, or the wellbeing and happiness of mankind.

Death

When Lyra and Will realize that they must travel to the Land of the Dead, Lyra's immediate admission is that she is "frightened" (AS 163). She reads the alethiometer and it tells her that if they do not travel there, the future contains nothing but "blankness" and "emptiness" (AS 163). However, once they begin their quest, it will not be like any other journey that they have previously undertaken; if they decide to follow this lonely path to a place "worse than Bolvangar" there "won't be any help" (AS 164). They will be utterly, completely on their own. When Will expresses that his fear of traveling to the Land of the Dead is based on "never seeing [his] mother again," Lyra wholeheartedly agrees to the validity of this worry. Most poignantly, she continues by stating that she "grew up on [her] own...[and doesn't] remember anyone ever holding [her] or cuddling [her]" at Jordan College—she is willing to sacrifice herself, and yet has never even experienced the joy of truly feeling the safety of a mother's arms (AS 164).

Lyra's entire system of values rests on something as powerful as maternal love, though far less rewarding: her word. Pullman, for all the mothers that he includes in the series, does not allow any to truly belong to Lyra in the way that Elaine Parry belongs to Will. She has no warm figure to soothe her fears in the night, no sacrificial adoration to mimic and exalt. For Will, maternal love comes quite easily—too easily, in fact, as it ends up breaking the knife. Lyra is alone in the world, but for the friends that she meets along the way—all of which treat her as an equal, not a child. Thus, even though she is “deadly scared” of her task, she insists that “if Will can open a way into the world of the dead” then “[they] must do it” (AS 174). When Iorek states that “can is not the same as must,” Lyra replies that “if you must and you can, then there's no excuse” (AS 174). Already, Pullman asserts, Lyra's wisdom is growing and deepening into mature knowledge—all without the help of a true maternal role model.³⁴ Iorek believes that she is foolish: while she “[is] alive, [her] business is with life” (AS 174). She gently disagrees, and begins the process of her first sacrifice as mother Eve: her “business is to keep promises, no matter how difficult they are,” no matter if she lives or dies (AS 174). In fact, the first sacrifice toward wisdom requires exactly that: Lyra must die.

When she and Will find their way down to death, neither truly understand what that will mean for them as living beings. It is only as Pantalaimon, the manifestation of her very soul, tries to board the boatman's vessel to cross the River Styx, that “Lyra truly realized what she was doing...[that] this was the real consequence”: she must leave him behind (AS 251). Never in her entire existence had Lyra been parted from her soul—why would she? Severance from the daemon is a fate worse than death; indeed, this is

³⁴ Serafina and Mary count as this, but neither has truly become close to Lyra yet.

precisely what Lyra must accept as the expense if she chooses to keep her promise and pursue the vital knowledge contained in the underworld. Her decision is instantaneous, though no less horrific. She does the “cruellest thing she had ever done,” and leaves Pantalaimon behind, “hating herself, hating the deed” but knowing that it is necessary (AS 253). This choice—to “tear the heart out of her breast,” but continue onward due to the strength of her conviction—is the first step toward divine knowledge (AS 254).

Indeed, Lyra sacrifices her life and passes into the Land of the Dead without knowing that eventually, she will liberate the ghosts. She simply loves Roger, her poor friend, and Will, her companion, who wants to speak with his father again. That selfless act of vulnerability and loyalty—the kind that no ignorant, selfish, close-minded individual would ever undertake—is extremely powerful.

Temptation of the Knife

After Lyra and Will free the dead, they join Dr. Mary Malone and their daemons in the land of the Mulefa. Amongst other things, the new Adam and Eve fall in love, thereby Biblically Falling as well. However, their bliss is short lived. The angel Xaphania appears one night, along with their missing daemons, to share the horrible knowledge that she has acquired since the Authority and his Regent’s defeats: every window made by the subtle knife must be closed in all worlds in order to begin healing the universe. Will is the sole wielder of that weapon, but anyone can be taught to close those wounds in the fabric of the cosmos—and Xaphania needs to begin as quickly as she can. The two young lovers immediately realize that if every window must be closed, and every human being can

only survive in the world that he or she was born into, then they must be separated forever.

Xaphania states that Will and Lyra must “think hard and painfully” but that she knows they will “make the best choice”—of course they will, Pullman asserts, because this is the price of wisdom, and the bitter reward of knowledge (AS 426). Indeed, unlike in the Bible, the painful knowledge that the protagonists must contend with is the temptation to keep the knife and travel between their worlds. They will be able to get married, have children, and grow old together—but only if they keep the knife and acknowledge that every time they use it, another piece of divinity dies. The choice is “[theirs] to make and no one else’s”—and, as they quickly agree, it is not much of a choice at all to anyone with the wisdom that they possess (AS 426). Finally, John Parry’s enigmatic explanation that they “have to build the Republic of Heaven where [they] are” makes sense: he knew, even as they left him, that they would not be able to be together (AS 437).

The fate of the entire cosmos, of future generations and of their own generation rests on this singular decision. If they stay together, neither will be able to disseminate the incredibly precious stories that they have been tasked with sharing; neither will be able to achieve peace knowing that others are suffering. Lyra does not have anyone to go home to—Will has his mother and Mary Malone, but Lyra must go alone. This solitude is the most important distinction that Pullman makes when it comes to her choice: by isolating her, he separates her decision from any kind of personal agenda. Thus, she truly embodies the first mother in this moment: Mother Eve, whose children are the billions of souls that have come and will come, sacrificing herself for them without ever expecting

gratitude in return. The purity of this choice—self or multitude—is Christ-like in both its loneliness, and in its extreme difficulty. In the agony of this moment, Xaphania expresses her regret, stating that “every single being [that] knows of [her] dilemma wishes things could be otherwise”—but everyone present knows that there is only one choice (AS 440). Nobody imbued with the love that these two individuals are could ever choose themselves over the good of the universe.

And so, they choose: amidst a “great wave of despair,” punctuated by “gasping” and “shaking” and “crying aloud with more anger and pain than [they] had ever felt in [their lives],” Adam and Eve *choose* to destroy the only object that could lead to their happiness, sacrificing their love to save divinity (AS 442). This choice, Pullman asserts, is truly predicated on maternal love: Eve’s motherhood has given her the wisdom to know what is right, and the strength to follow through with completing that action.

Leaving Eden: Love and Self-Expulsion

“I’ll be looking for you, Will, every moment, every single moment. And when we do find each other again, we’ll cling together so tight that nothing and no one’ll ever tear us apart. Every atom of me and every atom of you... we’ll live in birds and flowers and dragonflies and pine trees and in clouds and in those little specks of light you see floating in sunbeams...and when they use our atoms to make new lives, they won’t just be able to take *one*, they’ll have to take *two*, one of you and one of me, we’ll be joined so tight...” (AS 445)

What would you sacrifice for your child? What would you sacrifice for your love of God? Would you have the strength to forfeit your individual happiness to save legions

of strangers? In the Bible, this same question is phrased differently: would you be weak enough to take a bite of the apple? This question lies at the center of *His Dark Materials*, and comprises the conclusion to the protagonist's tale. We, the readers, have fallen in love with Lyra, and in love with her love for Will. As spectators of their courtship, we have decided—with solemn gravity—that the two lovers are made for one another. We wait, patiently, for our beloved duo to be rewarded with the happiness that they so richly deserve. Indeed, by the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, we have fallen entirely into Pullman's masterfully laid trap.

The trap, artfully constructed and ignored for most of the series, concerns Pullman's relationship to faith. Indeed, rather than venerating the omniscient, tyrannous, cruel God, Pullman venerates the woman—the Mother—that is tempted, has eaten, has suffered, gives birth and leaves Eden to become a necessary source of human wisdom. In Pullman's universe, Eve's pain is a catalyst for growth of individual power, of her ultimate sacrifice for the rest of humanity, rather than a sign of suffering and humiliation as it is described in the Bible. The mother who uses her womb to create a new life and her pain to teach valuable lessons is exalted far above the despotic 'God' who seeks to do nothing but cling to his own power and manipulate his servile followers through shame and fear.

“What is worth having is worth working for”—love is not true until it requires self-sacrifice, and wisdom is not genuine until it asks the wise to make an impossible decision (AS 443). When Lyra and Will find love, it is absolutely perfect. Every single word on the page is saturated with incandescent joy—as the two lovers consummate their union, the “entire world [holds] it's breath” (AS 416). When they return to the Mulefa

village after their Fall, they appear to be the “true image of what human beings always could be, once they...come into their inheritance” (AS 421). The divine wisdom, the beautiful, loving consciousness of Dust had “found a living home again, and these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, [are] the cause of it all” (AS 421).

When they realize that they must part, Will thinks that Lyra will “die of her grief there and then” (AS 434). Pullman, for his part, does not spare the reader any agony either. He writes that “sixty years and more would go by, and as an old man [Will] would still feel [these] sensations as bright and fresh as ever”—his adoration and despair, so deeply entwined but no less beautiful (AS 432). If the reader sought to distance his or herself from the pain, these moments drag him or her directly into the swirling storm of impotent rage.

However, Pullman asserts, this emotional journey is necessary for both the protagonists and his readers if they are truly to grasp precisely the gravity of the choice that must be made. Love, then, means expelling oneself from Eden—it means to choose to share the knowledge that has been so hard won. Eve, in all her glorious love, can only teach others to pursue that same knowledge—thereby enriching the universe and saving civilization from stagnation and decay—firsthand. She must choose to enlighten not the physical children of her womb—indeed, she has forfeited that joy—but instead, the children of the universe, humanity at large.

Milton’s Eve, in her quiet nobility, will teach subsequent generations how to accept their mistakes and embrace the hardships of life. As she strides from the Garden, terrified of her fate but willing to embrace it, she becomes a beacon of hope. She knows what is right and what is wrong, what is evil and what is good. She knows that she must

sacrifice herself for those who require it, and forgive those who have wronged her just as she forgives Adam for violently castigating her. She knows that knowledge is hard-won, and that she can only trust herself to acquire it. She knows that it will be difficult, and that there will be pain. But she *knows*. Knowing, then, is better than not knowing; the strength to face what will inevitably come ahead can only be forged in the fires of pain and expulsion. She answers to nobody but herself, and expects to face cruelties, injustices and wrongdoings in this world. She is not the idyllic, innocent, ignorant girl that she once was—but that transformation makes her capable of so much more than she would ever have believed. It makes her capable of loving with the conviction of the divine. It fulfills her. And she would not trade that existence for anything.

Dust, All-Mother

Pullman's disavowal of organized religion is a red herring to many of his readers. Oftentimes, this point is where the Christian critics leave him—they have seen enough with the Church's murderous actions toward children, the blasphemous Land of the Dead, the lies, and the rebellion. However, Pullman is at his most theologically engaged when he begins to expand upon the mysterious nature of his enigmatic Dust.

Dust appears for the first time in the series in the very first chapter of *The Golden Compass* and is only truly explained nearly one thousand pages later. When Lyra travels into Will's world at the beginning of *The Subtle Knife*, the alethiometer tells her to seek the aid of a "Scholar"—a female physicist who was once a nun—Mary Malone, to help her understand the next steps in her quest (SK 237). She arrives at Dr. Malone's lab and discovers that the woman is studying dark matter—flippantly referred to as "Shadows" in

reference to Plato's Cave—and that these particles are actually the same substance as her Dust. Dr. Malone has constructed a rudimentary system through which one is able to communicate with the “strange little devils”—the Cave—and has made the discovery that they are “conscious” (SK 88). Moreover, they are “particles of consciousness,” present only when creative ingenuity is introduced to any form of inert matter, from human beings to inanimate objects (SK 88). As Lyra explains to the shell-shocked physicist, “dark matter research” is not as unscientific as Dr. Malone's colleagues would suggest—in other words, her self-appointed title as “Director: Lazarus” is far less warranted than she would have believed (SK 83). Lyra quickly proves her legitimacy to Dr. Malone and is allowed to test the Cave's capacities for channeling Dust.

Pullman's first true explanation of Dust is deliberately scientific—he steeps it in Platonic philosophy and applied physics. Lyra is hooked up to a computer, and uses it to commune with Dr. Malone's Shadows immediately. She asks it how it would be possible for the physicist to commune with Dust herself, and the machine responds by likening itself to the Chinese form of divination, the “I Ching” (SK 95). Pullman expands his philosophy enough in this moment to suggest that Dust is a universal element—it can be seen in both Eastern and Western civilizations, and almost every society acknowledges it in one way or another. It then explains how Dr. Malone will be able to configure it to respond in typeface—a critical development, though the protagonists do not know it yet. Lyra leaves with a promise to return, and Dr. Malone is left reeling with the new information that has been revealed to her.

Though Dr. Malone and Lyra do not meet again until the end of the series, the former nun is quickly able to commune with her dark matter via the Cave—and what she

learns reveals an entirely different dimension of Pullman's theological narrative. Dust is not only conscious, but it has an urgent agenda. It enigmatically refers to itself as "angels," and states that "from what we are, Spirit; from what we do, Matter" (SK 249). It uses the plural "we," though it speaks with only one voice. When Dr. Malone asks if "angels are creatures of shadow matter," Dust responds by stating that the simplest way to understand it is to imagine "structures" or "complexifications" of matter (SK 249).

In the simplest terms, Dust is a conscious, ever-expanding divine matrix. What is most curious is the way that it chooses to explain itself to Mary Malone, former nun: in theological terms. As it seeks a word to encompass the enormity of its identity to this human, it lands on a recognizably ecclesiastical term. The word "angel," even to an avowed atheist, is imbued with rich historical and visual connotations. Indeed, when Dust manifests as its physical form later on in the novel in front of the witch Ruta Skadi, she sees anthropomorphic beings only "because she expects to" (SK 141). In reality, their "awareness [spreads] out beyond her like filamentary tentacles to the remotest corners of universes that she had never dreamed of"—in other words, these angels are entirely unknowable in nature, though they allow other beings to utilize whatever tools of perception that they possess to assign recognizable meaning to them (SK 141).

As the witch queen watches the angels pass by, Pullman comments that if she were able to "perceive their true form," they would be seen "more like architecture than organism, like huge structures composed of intelligence and feeling" (SK 141). Thus, "angel" becomes an approximation, minimized for purposes of clarity. This precise concept is the idolatrous downfall of Milton's God. Whereas Milton's God is bound by his human emotions and form, Pullman's angels are a conception of true unknowable

divinity—they call themselves angels not because that is their title, but because that label bears closest resemblance to the truth of their nature. It seems improbable that Pullman has made this distinction by accident, particularly when taking into account that the epigraph of *The Golden Compass* describes the paradoxical and inaccessible womb of chaos.

Birth-Based Philosophy of Creation

Indeed, Pullman's Dust finds an unexpected ally in the religious subgenre.³⁵ His basic question for the series lies in how to explain God without relying on traditional theology. The notion of Dust as knowledge and consciousness is quickly established, but what is most difficult to explain is why it has a strange reliance on humans in the narrative to save it from extinction. Feminist theology helps us cultivate a nuanced understanding of Pullman's contradictory divinity.

Birth-based philosophy explores the interrelatedness of all life and the assertion true theology is built upon the act of creation, not destruction.³⁶ Birth is inherently a female experience—the child is carried within her body and eventually expelled from it. In contrast, the kind of oppressive afterlife exemplified by the Land of the Dead acts is a negation or elimination of that organic experience. Symbolically, birth and divine creation resonate deeply. If Pullman's Dust can ever be truly explained, it is within these parameters. Birth and rebirth are extremely attractive notions to Pullman. The significance and power of this primal life-giving process are reflected in *Paradise Lost* in

³⁵ For further explanation of this idea, see: Pinset, Pat. *Unexpected Allies? Pullman and the Feminist Theologians*.

³⁶ Explored deeply in Sally McFague's *God As Mother* and in Grace Jantzen's *Becoming Divine*.

the form of the womb as a generative space; indeed, Pullman clearly draws on the immediacy and earthiness of this idea in his conception of Dust as a maternal energy. A birth-based philosophy of creation echoes Milton's interest in the scientific method of birth, and ties into Pullman's desire to eradicate the emotional distance between his Creator, Dust, and the created. Whereas the Authority is operating in a death-based philosophy of creation, distancing himself from his subjects and negating their souls in the afterlife, Dust is profoundly attached to humanity and seeks to be a part of everything that man does. Dust is present at birth and in death; it comprises the consciousness in all sentient beings and desires to propagate within them. This notion constitutes the birth-based philosophy of creation affirmed by the tenets of feminist theology.

Famed theologian Grace Jantzen asserts that Western culture's historic preoccupation with "violence, sacrifice and death" is the opposite of the "love of wisdom" that she cites as the fundamental notion of a feminist philosophy of religion.³⁷ Pullman's Dust is described as being bound by these exact same characteristics. Biological life, as the physical manifestation of unfettered consciousness and energy, begins in a woman's womb. Milton tapped into this notion with his conception of chaos, though by no means is Milton a feminist theologian. All women must undergo, upon pregnancy, an awakening of the body to the grounding principles that underscore the proliferation of sentient life. This scientific approach to procreation appeals to both Milton and Pullman as it occupies a one-to-one ratio of accessibility. Women who become pregnant generate a new life—to a literary mind, pregnancy is a minimized version of the divine creation narrative.

³⁷ Jantzen, 2, 6.

Diametrically opposed to this concept is the fear-and-death based philosophy upon which organized Western religion has built its foundations of meaningful existence and the afterlife. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, Pullman is vehemently opposed to a death-based philosophy of divinity. The Land of the Dead is the antithesis of the feminist theologian's perception of the afterlife. It is sterile, established on the twin pillars of paralysis and oppression. The souls who enter the Land of the Dead are trapped for all of eternity, unable to recycle back into the universe. This forced purgatory is a violation of the basic rights that should be extended to every living creature.

Moreover, birth-based philosophy attacks the Christian idea that the relationship of God to man is that of father to child, asserting that no man, no father or child, would exist without a woman undertaking the journey into motherhood. Feminist theology is extremely concerned with differentiating between the feminine and the female—“mothering is a female activity; that is, to give birth to and to feed the young is simply what females do.”³⁸ As guardians of creation, women and the divine Creator share much in common—though this philosophy does not exclude the father entirely from the picture. Pullman's novels subscribe extensively to this notion. Additionally, femininity and female are not mutually exclusive—ergo, birth should be recognized as a purely generative action, not one that should be minimized to the patriarchal notion of maternity. Females bear young, but do not necessarily do so in a ‘feminine’ manner. This distinction is key to understanding the birth-based philosophy of religion—feminist theology is not stating that every woman that bears a child is divine because of this act; it is simply drawing a parallel between the specific power of a mother's love and the love that the

³⁸ McFague, 142.

divine creator has for her creations. That particular brand of love carries specific connotations and draws its strength from procreation, not extinction.

Mother-Sophia, Spirit-Sophia, Sophia-wisdom

Feminist theology only truly became a mainstream conception of religion over the course of the last sixty years. What began as a “feminist critique of traditional Anglo-American philosophy of religion” became an entire subgenre of religious thought “[that uses] the standard topics and boundaries of the discipline [to attempt] to bring a feminist consciousness to bear on them.”³⁹ Instead of beginning with violence and death, feminist theologians like Grace M. Jantzen thought why not “begin with birth” and the “hope and possibility and wonder implicit in it?”⁴⁰ Indeed, the entire basis of feminist theology revolves around the idea that scholars, and more broadly, humanity, should treat “this world” and “this life” with the “same philosophical seriousness” as they have treated “mortality” and death.⁴¹ The philosophy seeks to challenge the androcentric nature of “western philosophy” that accounts for much of the instruction regarding contemporary religious discourse.

The word “philosophy in its ancient meaning is ‘the love of wisdom,’ *Sophia*, which in Greek (as in Hebrew, and many other languages) is female, and divine.”⁴² According to acclaimed feminist theologian Lucie Irigaray, the “wisdom that men and women in the postmodern world most require” is the “wisdom of becoming divine,

³⁹ Jantzen, 1.

⁴⁰ Jantzen, 2.

⁴¹ Jantzen, 2.

⁴² Jantzen, 6.

without which [we will] ‘shrivel and die.’”⁴³ Indeed, feminist theologians view the traditional Western philosophy of religion as “sterile” and argue that a “creative alternative is required” for today’s postmodern society to continue operating healthily.⁴⁴ The philosophy maintains that it is actively detrimental to the prosperity of civilization to remain subservient to the idea that only “male gods, and above all the Father-God of Judeo-Christianity” should occupy a position of divinity.⁴⁵ Additionally, feminist theology addresses the “[paradoxical]” legitimacy of “the domination of the [Judeo-Christian God (the phallus)]” as a leader, citing the long held belief that “the God of Christendom is beyond *all* language”⁴⁶ and should therefore be largely inaccessible via text. This concept is critically relevant to my reading of Philip Pullman’s *Authority*, as well as Milton’s *God*.

Feminist theology has many iterations; however, one of the most centrally important concepts of the overall philosophy is the strength of motherhood and wisdom. Elizabeth Johnson’s seminal text *She Who Is* offers the deepest insight into the interconnected philosophies of Mother-Sophia, Spirit-Sophia and Sophia-wisdom. Derived from the original Greek, *Sophia*—and her many facets of existence: mother, spirit and wisdom—is symbolic of the feminine divine. In this section, I argue for the critical importance of feminist theology when analyzing the meaning of *Dust* throughout *His Dark Materials*.

⁴³ Jantzen, 6.

⁴⁴ Jantzen, 7.

⁴⁵ Jantzen, 7.

⁴⁶ Jantzen, 172.

The Mother-Sophia is a conception of Holy Wisdom, “mother of the universe, the unoriginate, living source of all that exists.”⁴⁷ She is described as this “unimaginable livingness [generating the] life of all creatures, being herself, in the beginning and continuously, the power of being within all being.”⁴⁸ In less complicated words, the Mother-Sophia is a sentient, loving energy out of which the universe was made and who embodies all living things. She is everything, and yet she is separate—she gave her creations life and set them free, instating free will and watching over them with the adoration and protectiveness of a mother. These are the fundamental principles upon which the ideas of ‘Mother-Sophia’ and her cosmic womb have been established.

Johnson maintains the idea that the Spirit-Sophia is a formulation of God as a Creator, “[encompassing the world as a great matrix [and pervading] the universe as one who holds all things together.”⁴⁹ She is described as a constantly mutable force materializing in an endless pattern of “enduring, delighting, suffering, sympathizing, participating, playing, and glorifying.”⁵⁰ She acknowledges that sin and brokenness exist, but insists that the harmony inherent in her creations—humanity—will triumph as she “initiates novelty, instigates change and transforms what is dead into new stretches of life.”⁵¹

Her successes as Creator are marked by the progression of civilization, and the liberation of the oppressed. She is an embodiment of pure love, a “divine subsistence” that is “present and active in the world” and who “drives everything that is towards

⁴⁷ Johnson, 178.

⁴⁸ Johnson, 178.

⁴⁹ Johnson, 134.

⁵⁰ Johnson, 135.

⁵¹ Johnson, 136.

everything else that is.”⁵² Dust shares almost every defining quality with the Mother-Sophia as creator and caretaker of all life on earth. The Creator as Mother-Sophia is one that has been deliberately excised from all Biblical writings since the dawn of Western religion. Johnson examines the characteristics of Christian speech, and how it names the relationship between the “caregiver of all things” almost exclusively “in terms of the paternal relationship.”⁵³ She continues to establish how Western religious doctrine has continuously omitted maternal imagery in any of its forms. Pullman has already inundated the text with mother figures to support this notion, but his piece de resistance in terms of feminist theology is his clear conception of Dust as mother of creation.

The experience of creation is not one exclusively occupied by women, but on a fundamental biological level it is intensely female—“women conceive, bear in their own bodies, and give birth to new persons,” willingly experiencing the visceral bodily trauma of childbirth in order to give a new being life.⁵⁴ The intensely personal and female nature of childbirth cannot be ignored, but, as Johnson illustrates, mothers are not always incorruptibly and universally good. Where there are “strong and loving [mothers]” there are also “inadequate and abusive” ones.⁵⁵ Mothering stems from the intuitive activity of beginning, nurturing, and providing for the life that has been created, both physically and intellectually. Pullman’s Marisa Coulter is a biological mother, and a horrible one at that. Mary Malone never bears young, and yet she is an ideal substitute mother.

⁵² Johnson, 142.

⁵³ Johnson, 172.

⁵⁴ Johnson, 175.

⁵⁵ Johnson, 178.

Vulnerability of Maternal Love

Feminist theology states that the divine source of creation in the universe can be described as a limitless maternal, loving energy whose vulnerability is its greatest strength. The feminine divine gives of herself freely to the next generation, accepting that she cannot control her creations after they leave her womb. Regardless of their actions in life, in the end she will welcome every creation back into her energy to be reborn anew—dust to dust, so to speak.

Pullman's Authority is able to control Dust not because he is more powerful, but because ultimate ironclad control over the universe is not the purpose of divinity—the purpose of divinity is to rejoice in the proliferation of self-knowledge and the beauty of individual creation. Pain is necessary to experience pleasure, knowledge necessary to meaningful decision-making. To sit at the knee of some Godlike being and blindly accept whatever he hands down as truth is to waste the gift of existence, of human potential, of individuality. Pullman's Dust has no capacity for hate, for revenge, for punishment—it is entirely comprised of love. Love begets sex, begets knowledge, begets action and reaction—and, most importantly, love begets selflessness. Indeed, the selfless love of a parent is the wisest and most powerful love of all. Without the journey towards hard-earned wisdom that becomes one's only legacy to one's young, Pullman argues, there is no point to living at all.

In the land of the Mulefa, Mary is free to pursue knowledge of Dust, and how she can help stop the seedpod trees from dying. She constructs the amber spyglass out of seedpod lacquer, and it allows her to see Dust. To her perception, it is “gold [everywhere],” surrounding all sentient beings (AS 206). The first thing she realizes after

this breakthrough moment is that Dust is in “the most horrible danger” (AS 327). It is leaving the world at a faster rate than intelligent beings can replenish it. In response to this discovery, she devises a meditation experiment to try to connect with Dust and find where it is leaking out.

The experiment works too well, and her consciousness leaves her body, carried away in the torrent of Dust flowing out of the universe. Panicking, lost from her body, she “[flings] out a mental lifeline to [her] physical self” and finds that “a little patch of stillness” forms around her “where the particles were resisting the flow” (AS 327). The Dust closes to Mary “[feels] her anxiety and [responds] to it,” carrying her “back to her deserted body” (AS 328). This experience teaches Mary many things, but most importantly, it causes her to recognize the “helpless regret...abroad in the air” (AS 329). Dust, she realizes, “[knows] what [is] happening [to it] and [is] sorrowful” (AS 329). Dust recognizes that its love and compassion for its creations cannot prevent it from being destroyed—no matter how much it wants to live. This vulnerability to its own creations is the defining element of Dust, and the singular quality that cements its alliance with feminist theology. If Dust were a traditional omniscient deity, it would simply manipulate the humans into protecting and preserving it. However, because free will is a cornerstone of ingenuity, Dust must make itself vulnerable to any and every being that it creates. Thus, when the Authority decided to enact his treacheries on the human race—eventually leading to the near-destruction of Dust—the feminine, maternal divine was unable to do anything to stop him. Dust can create, it can love, and it can forgive. Indeed, Pullman asserts, those are the most powerful actions that anybody—divine source of wisdom or human mother—can hope to achieve in this life.

The best evidence that Pullman seeks to elevate a birth-based philosophy of creation within *His Dark Materials* lies, perhaps, in the death of the Authority. It is supposed to be the most climactic moment in the entire series: the death of a false idol, a being so powerful, so evil, that he enslaved not only humanity, but also his angelic brethren. All three books in *His Dark Materials* have been leading up to this moment, and as a reader, one expects a battle so violent that it shakes the heavens and the earth below it. However, the death that Pullman describes is almost exactly the same as Johnson would describe returning to Mother-Sophia in death. Love is the universal sensation experienced by those who subscribe to this specific theological vision—love and forgiveness. Thus, feminist theology not only adds multiple dimensions to Pullman’s untraditional divinity, but also helps the reader to expand his or her definition of faith.

Compassion of a Child: Accidental Defeat

Unlike human mothers, “God the Mother will never forget the children of her womb,” and the force of her compassion or “womb-love” has the power to “wipe out offenses, restoring a clean heart to those who seek forgiveness.”⁵⁶ In Johnson’s words, God the Mother “loves the weak and dispossessed as well as the strong and beautiful;” a love that is a virtue of the “maternal relationship itself.”⁵⁷ In this belief system, human energy is collapsible—the Mother-Sophia harnesses and manipulates it to give life, and when it is time for that energy to disperse back into the Mother, returning from whence it came, she welcomes it with open arms. Dovetailing nicely with birth-based philosophies of religion is the concept of the afterlife as rebirth.

⁵⁶ Johnson, 180.

⁵⁷ Johnson, 180.

It is the perfect irony—the sweetest affirmation of the power of love—that defeat is accidentally brought upon the Authority not by an act of violence, but rather by act of compassion. After nearly three entire novels devoted to unveiling and dissecting the Authority’s despicable actions, the reader expects a grand defeat: a desperate God defending his position of power against those who would try to usurp him, struck down on an epic Miltonic battlefield. Instead, when the two children find a “crystal litter” forgotten on the mountainside, the last thing they expect is to confront their mortal enemy. However, the Authority is no frightening villain—he is “old and . . . terrified, crying like a baby and cowering away into the lowest corner” (A 366). When Lyra sees the being whose sole purpose she believes is to destroy Dust and enslave the universes to his will, she feels nothing but poignant compassion. She exclaims that she has “never seen anyone suffering like that” and “[presses] her hands against the crystal, trying to reach the angel [to] comfort him” (AS 366). The angel who sought to subjugate the cosmos is nothing but a “demented and powerless” shadow of his former self, only capable of “[weeping] and [mumbling] in fear and pain and misery” while “[shrinking] away” from the two children (AS 366). When they open his litter and both reach in to help him out, he “[tries] to smile, and to bow” out of respect for these two kind strangers. As she looks down into his “ancient eyes, deep in their wrinkles,” they “[blink]” up at her with “innocent wonder” (AS 366).

In this moment, the Authority is not the tyrant—Pullman is deliberate in his word choice, and with great purpose: the being that is slowly released from the “crystal cell” is referred to as “the ancient of days,” a title intended to carry respect (AS 366). Pullman may have spent the majority of *His Dark Materials* raging against organized religion and

an authoritarian God, but in this moment, it seems as though he simply cannot help himself from acknowledging the power of this relic in the scheme of the universe. The Authority, then, is a metaphor for traditional Christianity as a whole; indeed, in his moment of victory, Pullman feels nothing but nostalgic pity. There is no violent defeat for the Authority—and, following the metaphor, for Christianity at large. In a way, the death of the Authority is a tribute to the religion as a whole—like everything else, it is recycled back into the universe to be reincarnated as something new.

In a way, this moment marks Lyra's last truly pivotal experience as the prelapsarian Eve, mother of all things. She is fierce and saturated with tenderness, determined to help the pitiful creature exit his crystal womb. Pullman's imagery is explicit: Lyra and Will, Adam and Eve, reach together into the vessel to help an ancient God be born again—ashes to ashes, dust to dust. They did not expect him to “loosen and dissolve” in the way that he does—but in a way, it is the most beautiful ending that Pullman could have imagined (AS 367). The last fleeting impression of him is his “eyes, blinking in wonder” and the sound of his “sigh [of] profound and exhausted relief” (AS 367). As the reader observes the child, the new Mother Eve, giving new life to an ancient God, the only emotion evoked is visceral compassion—not triumph or victory. Lyra's protectiveness over her arch nemesis and her ability to care for a being that has “no will of his own” except to “[respond] to [her] simple kindness” is powerful and humbling to witness (AS 366). Moreover, vengeance does not even begin to cross her mind—she is suffused with the glory of forgiveness.

Forgiveness and Return to the Mother

Forgiveness is the most powerful act that any one person can commit. To forgive is to rid oneself of the burden of hate. By no means is it easy—to let go, one must accept that there have been deliberate actions committed against one’s wellbeing, violating what is for many people a basic tenet of human existence: treat others the way you would like to be treated. For the most part, those treated with inhumane violence have the right to remain angry and will be vindicated in their inability to let go. Forgiveness requires the forgiver to truly renounce the onus of resentment in favor of embracing the unwritten future; indeed, to absolve another being for their harmful actions requires strength of character that many individuals do not possess. Throughout this series, Pullman suggests that there is one type of love that inspires universal forgiveness: the love of a mother for her child. Furthermore, Pullman’s version of divinity can directly be explained when compared to a cosmic mother.

Pullman’s true divinity, Dust, is incredibly generative, propagating in instances where human consciousness is engaged in a creative task; indeed, it is also supposed to be comprised of the souls of those who have passed. When the Authority created the Land of the Dead and imprisoned all of humanity’s ghosts, he was not only preventing them from reuniting with their souls, but he was also preventing them from joining the grand cosmic system of reincarnation. The ghosts are initially frightened: what will happen to their individual identities if they “drift apart” (AS 286)? There is nothing to fear from that, Lyra states, because “[they’ll] be out in the open” and “part of everything again”—implying that to be human is to confine consciousness only briefly into a corporeal identity (AS 286).

Thus, when Will cuts the window from the abyss and into the land of the Mulefa and the ghosts “[tremble] with hope” at the thought of freedom, Pullman asserts that this moment, this burgeoning joy, *this* is the victorious moment that his readers have been waiting for (AS 325). As the ghosts look “up and ahead,” brimming with “delight and wonder,” their resemblance to babies freshly born is unmistakable (AS 325). This is not only the emancipation, but also the rebirth of the oppressed: they are being freed into the night to rejoin their mother, Dust, the feminine divinity that has awaited and loved them for thousands of years. Ghosts old and new blink their “poor starved eyes,” unable to process the loving acceptance that awaits them (AS 325).

The first ghost to venture into the deep, dark, beautiful night is Roger: victim and friend, the catalyst for this entire adventure. Symbolically, he embodies forgiveness—after all, Lyra traveled all the way to the Land of the Dead in order to atone for inadvertently leading him to his death. In this moment, as he “[laughs] in surprise... [finding] himself turning into the night, the starlight, [and] the air,” both the protagonists and the reader realize what they had already suspected to be true: in the afterlife, there is no room for hate or oppression, shame or bitterness (AS 325). There is no room, even, for injustice: it simply dissolves along with the souls as they rejoin Dust, their mother who loves them so fiercely. The “vivid little burst of happiness” left behind by Roger as he departs is so triumphant, so devastating in its perfection, that it leaves the reader with a sense of closeness to that something more, to divinity (AS 325).

How glorious it is to imagine one’s own death as dissolving like the “bubbles in a glass of champagne” into a great, welcoming hereafter (AS 325). And not only is death built on a foundation of joy, but also of love. When Lee Scoresby, the valiant aeronaut

who gave his life to protect John Parry, “[floats] upward...through the heavy clouds...[and comes] out under the brilliant stars,” he does not simply rejoice in freedom from the abyss—no, he is reunited with the “atoms of his beloved daemon, Hester,” who had been “waiting for him” (AS 373). When the Mulefa call Mary Malone to come and witness souls departing from the door into the Land of the Dead, she is humbled and awed by what she sees: souls, “[taking] a few steps in the world of grass and air and silver light,” their “faces transformed with joy,” before dissolving back into the cosmic energy (AS 386).

Witnessing the dead rejoining Dust is a sublime experience. It is the closest that a living being can come to the divine before his or her own experience of the afterlife. It is the sensation of touching something far greater than oneself, of being a part of the great, wide, glorious, infinite energy that manifests itself in knowledge and love. Pullman’s true thesis has nothing at all to do with God or religion, unless those are the words that his reader needs in order to be able to understand the exhilaration borne from lack of fear about death and what happens to us next. Pullman’s vast and complex narrative swirls around this single kernel: it is okay to let go. Fear is natural, as is pain, but at the end of the day, there is no such thing as true imprisonment; in fact, there is no such thing as evil, because even the vilest of individuals will be welcomed back into Dust with open and loving arms. Dust rejoices in becoming one again with her beloved creations—and nobody is exempt from that forgiveness, not even the tyrannous Authority, not even the prejudiced, pompous, and evil church officials.

When the dead “[hold] out their arms” at the door to the Land of the Dead “as if they [are] embracing the universe,” the image is explicit—like billions of children before

them, and like billions that will come after them, each soul is an infant reaching up to the mother, confident in the loving embrace that awaits them above (AS 386). When they “simply [drift] away, becoming part of the earth and the dew and the night breeze,” they are reborn (AS 386). It was the most grievous trespass for the Authority to separate the ghosts from their souls, and it is the most poignant triumph to see them reunited. This, Pullman asserts, is salvation—this is the closest we can come to faith, to the divine. This is wisdom hard won, knowledge culled from experiencing life and allowing oneself to revel in the complexities and hardships. Thus, life and divinity are cyclical. To impose the human condition upon swirling, unformed matter is both as meaningless and as meaningful as one makes it. There is nobody to answer to but oneself, nobody to impress or let down. Life has meaning only when there are stories to tell, love to be shared, and sacrifices to be made. Being able to recognize this divine love is the closest thing that we have to God here on this earth. The sublime awe inspired by the simplicity of this grand narrative is the only answer.

Though it is only the briefest of moments in the series as a whole, Pullman’s entire argument can be condensed into a single interaction between a lizard and a corpse. When the evil Father Gomez, Church assassin and bigot, is anticlimactically slain in a wooded area deep the land of the Mulefa without ever confronting the protagonists, it seems as though Pullman is taking a narrative cop out to avoid a forced altercation. However, there is a quiet beauty in this death—Gomez is a violent threat rendered impotent before he could hurt anybody. His killer is a terrified angel spurred to sacrifice himself out of love for the protagonists. They barely battle. Afterward, a large mother lizard happens upon the assassin’s corpse—she “[drags] the priest’s body back to her

nest” and her “children [feast] very well” upon it (AS 430). The weapon that Father Gomez brought with him, a rifle, “[lies] in the grass where [he] had [lain] it down, quietly turning to rust” (AS 430).

And so, Pullman asserts, the cycle of life will go on: those who would commit violence perish just like anyone else. The flesh that was once inhabited by an evil man is just flesh—it is not poisonous like the brainwashed soul inside it was. It should not be feared. In fact, in death, the flesh is meat that can be repurposed to help a mother feed her young—to help them grow large and strong. The weapon that Gomez sought to use in the murder of two innocent children is nothing but inert metal, lost to the forest and to time. Moreover, Gomez’ soul is a soul like every other: he will be accepted back into Dust the same as everyone else, providing that he tells his true story to the harpies. There is no judgment, no hell, and no punishment for the would-be assassin. There is only organic rebirth as nourishment, and forgiveness.

God Found: Purpose and Socratic Dialogue

“When Mary reappears in the main narrative, towards the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra and Will have already released the spirits of the dead, seen Metatron destroyed, and watched God wither and die. There is nothing left for Mary to do: the mission has been accomplished.”⁵⁸

So begins critic Hugh Rayment-Pickard’s explanation of Mary Malone’s seemingly unnecessary role within the narrative flow of *His Dark Materials*. Rayment-Pickard is not entirely wrong in his analysis: the scenes involving Mary and the children

⁵⁸ Rayment-Pickard, 52.

after the second War on Heaven *do* operate outside of the overarching adventure narrative; Pullman has unambiguously concluded their fantastical journey by this point. However, what Rayment-Pickard entirely fails to see is that this narrative shift is as calculated and deliberate as every other decision that Pullman has made so far—and not because Pullman wants to continue dismantling organized religion, as Rayment-Pickard would suggest.

Every character in the novels has a specific relationship to Dust, but none quite so theoretically as Dr. Mary Malone. I suggest that Mary is a metaphorical manifestation of Pullman's own experiences regarding theology, particularly in her role as the "serpent," but most importantly in how she explicates Pullman's theological apprehensions (SK 250). In many ways, the role fits: the Virgin Mary is the mother of Jesus, bearer of the savior but no savior in and of herself, just as Pullman is the bearer of *His Dark Materials* but is no prophet in and of himself. Some critics dismiss the lengthy theoretical chapters included in *The Amber Spyglass* in which Mary interacts with the Mulefa as major detractors from the narrative, others simply devote a short cursory explanation of her role as the Biblical serpent.⁵⁹ Those critics quite simply do not understand the major philosophical enterprise undertaken in these chapters.

"[Mary Malone's] story is not so much a sub-plot as a parallel plot, which contributes nothing to the main narrative. The rescue of the Mulefa makes no difference to the outcome of the story. Interesting as Mary's character is, she is largely redundant to the structure of the main plot."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ For further explanation of this idea, see:

⁶⁰ Rayment-Pickard, 52.

Hugh Rayment-Pickard is amongst these critics, and one of the only Christian Pullman scholars to argue for the importance of Pullman’s theological implications, rather than the immorality of his atheism. However, to discount Mary Malone’s narrative value largely reflects an imprecise and shallow reading of these scenes.

Indeed, I argue that large parts of *The Amber Spyglass* are actually comprised of a Socratic dialogue between Mary—representative of Pullman, the facilitator—and the Mulefa, her chosen group of intelligent individuals. The anthropological time she spends learning their language and customs is paramount to her construction of the instrument for which the novel is named: the spyglass that allows her to see Dust. Without these lengthy exchanges between Mary and the Mulefa, Pullman would not be able to arrange his players to debate upon an analytical stage. The dialogue is divided into distinct phases beginning with Mary’s ignorance and ending with her temptation of the new Adam and Eve. Indeed, rather than playing a “redundant” role in the narrative of the third book, Mary’s specific function as facilitator of theoretical discussion is the most important throughout the entire series.⁶¹

The Mulefa are a peaceful and intelligent mammalian people whose livelihood depends on seedpod trees. Seedpod trees, Mary soon learns, are the source of all of the Mulefas’ knowledge. “Thirty-three thousand years” ago—the same as in Mary’s world—the Mulefa experienced the Biblical Fall (AS 199). Before they were exposed directly to “sraf”—the Mulefa word for Dust—by a “snake coiling itself through the hole in a seedpod” (AS 200), they had no “memory or wakefulness” (AS 198) (AS 200). The original Mulefa who spoke with the snake was told to “put [her] foot through the hole in

⁶¹ Rayment-Pickard, 52.

the seedpod” to become “wise” (AS 200). Since the moment that the first Mulefa listened to the snake’s advice, she could see *sraf*, otherwise known as Dust. She returned to her people and gave them the gift of the seedpod: identity, complexity, wisdom, history, and civilization. They lived peacefully for the subsequent thirty three thousand years in their Paradisal savannah until roughly three hundred years before Mary’s arrival.

Pullman clearly draws the parallel of the Fall and the Mulefa to indicate that without an organized system of religion, society would still be able to maintain an idyllic Edenic existence. The Mulefas’ entire society is based upon their postlapsarian knowledge—in fact, Mary notes that it is “as if the Mulefa and the seedpod [are] one creature” (AS 204-5). Much of the explanations that Mary expounds upon while with the Mulefa regard only her raw experience of their people—she is like a child, learning how to live all over again. This is entirely purposeful, as Pullman desires to separate Mary’s time with the Mulefa from the rest of his fast-paced adventure narrative. The moments that she takes to contemplate their civilization are intended to provoke the reader’s sense of personal investment in her discoveries.

Three hundred years before Mary arrives in the Mulefa land, the guild of alchemists invented the subtle knife. The blade can cut through any substance, even the fabric of the universe. Neither the knife’s creators nor Mary understand—yet—that with every cut the knife makes, a little bit of Dust is lost to the abyss. The Socratic dialogue is based on the question: why are the seedpod trees dying? Indeed, when Mary finally decides to climb a seedpod tree to discover why they are not being pollinated, she realizes that the tide of escaping Dust is far more powerful than she could have imagined. As far as the eye can see, Dust is “moving out toward the sea” (AS 245). It is as if “happiness

and life and hope [are] drifting away with them” (AS 326). The metaphor is very clear: Pullman is stating that with the scientific revolution, certain scholars began to plague Christianity with doubts. Milton himself belonged to this generation of religious individuals who struggled with reconciling faith and scientific fact. Moreover, because of this waning of true faith, the universe—Dust, the divine complexity, the angels, the conscious particles, and the driving force of civilization—is slowly dying. Within the context of this Socratic dialogue, it becomes clear that Pullman is grappling with what he feels is the central issue of mankind today: the place of theology in contemporary society.

In Pullman’s parallel nonfictional dialogue, he has observed instances in which Judeo-Christianity suffocates elements of society’s natural creativeness, thereby setting civilization on a path toward intellectual stagnation and paralysis. Raised Catholic, he was attracted to atheism for a reason—precisely the same reason that Mary began her career a nun and eventually abandoned that life to pursue science. When Will and Lyra finally end up in the land of the Mulefa—after an exhausting and endless journey into the Land of the Dead—the narrative seems to lurch. What, the reader wonders, could possibly happen for another hundred pages? Indeed, these last few chapters of *The Amber Spyglass* are the most important in the entire series and largely revolve around the protagonists telling stories about their experiences.

While Will and Lyra sleep after their ordeal, the Mulefa call Mary to come and investigate the door to the Land of the Dead. As she approaches and witnesses the dead dissipating back into the universe, one of the ghosts—not coincidentally, an “old woman”—beckons to her and declares that Mary needs to “tell [the children] stories” because “they need the truth” (AS 386). If Mary tells them “true stories,” then, the old

woman continues, “everything will be well” (AS 386). Twice more on this page, Pullman echoes that sentiment: Mary—and by association, Pullman—need to tell children true stories and let them make what they will. If this constitutes temptation, then temptation is what is needed. There is simply no other way forward.

Thus, when Mary, Will and Lyra share a dinner together, she tells them the story of her life and how it all changed with the sweet taste of marzipan. She explains how she “used to be a nun” and how she believed that “physics could be done to the glory of God” until she realized that “there wasn’t any God at all” (AS 393). She recalls attending a physics conference in Lisbon and the “excitement” such an experience incited within her (AS 394). She remembers her sheer “[innocence],” for she had always been a “good little girl,” “[wanting] to serve God with all [her] heart” (AS 394). She had ached to take her “whole life and offer it up...[to] Jesus to do as he liked with” (AS 394). She wryly recalls her own self-satisfaction at being both “holy and... clever” (AS 394).

However, it all changed when she sat down to eat with some colleagues in a “garden” filled with “passionflowers” and “lemon [trees]” (AS 394). She met a kind man who engendered the strangest sensation within her. She recalls the moment that she realized “[she had] made [herself] believe something that wasn’t true” (AS 395). Her realization was that “[she] was [not] fine and happy and fulfilled...without the love of anyone else” (AS 395). When another member of the dinner party offers her some marzipan and she tastes it, she is instantly transported to a “dance” she attended as a twelve year old where a boy “took a bit of marzipan and... gently put it in [her] mouth” (AS 396). She “[had fallen] in love” in that moment, but had forgotten it during her years in the convent (AS 396).

As Lyra listens to this story of temptation and fall, she feels as though she “had been handed the key to a great house she hadn’t known was there” and that as she opens it, “she [feels] other doors open deep in the darkness, and lights coming on” (AS 396). It is a beautiful image of temptation, and one that Pullman drives home with the conclusion of Mary’s story: that she and the man “[kissed] each other... and it was paradise” (AS 396). Pullman could not be more explicit: leaving the isolation of organized religion behind to embrace embodied love *is* Paradise. It is the closest that we can come on earth to that heavenly synergy and to divinity itself. Lyra listens to the story and acknowledges that it has changed her—whereas “half an hour earlier” she would have “had no idea” what this sensation was, now she simply acknowledges that where there used to be nothing, something now awaits, “expectant” (AS 396). This Fall is as natural as breathing—it is so obvious, so intrinsic, that it almost seems too obvious.

Mary recalls leaving the dinner party in a whirlwind of realization. She asked herself if “anyone [would] be better off if [she went] straight back to [her] hotel [to] say her prayers and confess to the priest and promise never to fall into temptation again” and the answer came immediately: no (AS 397). In this moment, she realized: “Heaven [is] empty” (AS 397). She doesn’t know if “God had died” or if there “had been a God at all”—the only thing that she knows is “something very strange had happened” (AS 397). The only difficulty she felt when leaving the Church was everyone’s “[disappointment]” in her (AS 397).

After her story comes to a close, Will asks the former nun an intensely personal question: “[Do] you miss God?” (AS 399). Mary answers without hesitation: “Yes... terribly” (AS 399). She explains that what she misses most about Christianity is the

“sense of being connected to the whole of the universe,” and being “connected to God” (AS 399). Because of her connection to God, Mary recalls, she knew that she was “connected to the whole of his creation” (AS 399). The loneliness spawned by the vacuum of atheism actively hurts her—not enough to change her mind, but enough to plague her with the need to uncover the meaning of the universe, therefore creating something to believe in. This conversation marks the climax of the Socratic dialogue between Pullman and his atheism: the heart of the matter, the true concern that all three of the novels in *His Dark Materials* constantly circle. Pullman does not feel connected to God in the way that others do—perhaps even in the same way that he did as a boy—and it is this specific sensation of loss that has haunted him into adulthood. This internal void is the singular catalyst for the entire series—it is the central question of his life, and the lives of many others. Belief and disbelief, loneliness and comfort, right and wrong, good and evil—Pullman constantly circles these concepts. Indeed, as the Socratic dialogue comes to a close, our weary author appears to find his answer.

Homecoming

After the dinner, Mary is unable to sleep, consumed by her own thoughts. Restless and plagued with the sensation that something is happening within her, she leaves her hut and begins to walk. As she crests a hill, she witnesses the night: whipped with a “lively wind,” she stares out at the “great landscape...mottled with cloud-shadows” moving like the “migration of some herd of unimaginable beasts” (AS 400). The moment is sublime, hearkening back to Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*. She is haunted by the sensation that a grand cosmic conversation is happening around her—she

tries to tell herself that the clouds “[are] moving as the result of pure chance” and are the “effect of utterly random events at the level of atoms and molecules” (AS 400). She insists to herself that the “shadows speeding over the grassland [have] no meaning at all” (AS 400).

But as she stares, her scientific resolve cracks. She admits, finally, that the clouds appear “tense and driven with purpose;” in fact, the “whole night” and the “entire world” feels “alive and conscious” (AS 400-1). Everything, from the “clouds” to the “wind” and the “grass”—*everything*—“[knows]” what that elusive but patently obvious purpose is (AS 401). The clouds, she acknowledges, look as though they are “fleeing something frightful behind them, or hastening to embrace something wonderful ahead” (AS 401). It is as if the universe is screaming its story to her, but she simply cannot understand the language. The universe has “things to say” but she can’t “hear them” (AS 401).

The “excitement of the night” makes her “desperate to join in” (AS 401). This sensation, she confides to herself, is the “very thing she [had] told Will about when he asked if she missed God” (AS 401). She sees “her climbing tree... tossing its great head in a dialogue with the urgent wind” and becomes consumed with the need to understand what it is saying (AS 401). Losing God meant that she had disconnected herself from the “sense that the whole universe was alive, and that everything was connected to everything else by threads of meaning” (AS 401). As Mary feverishly crosses the plains to reach her tree, one can almost imagine Pullman stalking alongside her, similarly consumed with the need to understand the warring halves within him. In a world where they have lost God, Mary and Pullman both feel “loose and free and light” but suddenly bound to a “universe without purpose” (AS 401).

But, Mary realizes, within the heart of “this vivid night,” it becomes “plain that everything *was* throbbing with purpose and meaning” (AS 401). Furthermore, she realizes in a deluge of frustration and impotence, she is “cut off from it;” even more painfully, it is “impossible to find a connection, because there was no God” (AS 401). She approaches her tree, torn between “exultation” at her discovery and “despair” that she cannot understand it (AS 401). However, suddenly, her tree begins to topple over in the thrashing wind—and Mary, shocked, suddenly slams into a connection with the universe. “Dizzy” with surprise, Mary finally understands “what [nature’s] great urgent purpose [is]”: it is “trying to hold back the Dust flood... striving to put some barriers up against the terrible stream” (AS 403). Everything, “wind, moon, clouds, leaves, grass, all those lovely things” are “crying out and hurling themselves into the struggle to keep the shadow particles in this universe, which they so enriched” (AS 404).

Suddenly, the narrative in its entirety becomes crystal clear to Mary, Pullman and reader alike, almost as if the story has taken on a life of its own and finally decides to reveal the truth to all desperately seeking parties.

“Dust came into being when living things became conscious of themselves; but it needed some feedback system to reinforce it and make it safe, as the *mulefa* had their wheels and the oil from the trees. Without something like that, it would all vanish. Thought, imagination, feeling, would all wither and blow away, leaving nothing but brutish automatism; and that brief period when life was conscious of itself would flicker out like a candle in every one of the billions of worlds where it had burned brightly.” (AS 403)

That is the truth of things written into the very atoms of nature. The answer is that “matter [*loves*] Dust. It [doesn’t] want to see it go”—this realization “is the meaning of this night” and it is “Mary’s meaning too” (AS 404). Almost seamlessly, Pullman has made it his meaning and the reader’s meaning as well. Subsequently, both author and reader echo Mary’s internal exclamation: “Had she thought that there was no meaning in life, no purpose, when God had gone?” (AS 404). “Yes,” all three parties answer: we “had thought that” (AS 404). We had fallen into the trap of contemporary society. We had forgotten our connection to the earth, to our parents, to divinity, to something larger than ourselves suffused with meaning. “Well,” we yell back to the universe, all of us in tandem, “there is now... and again, louder: there is now!” (AS 404).

Wisdom and Knowledge

Having been given the answers we sought, Pullman closes the narrative with a few twists, the least of which is a beautiful closing to the cycle of Lyra’s adventure. Imbued with the wisdom and knowledge of her journey into maturity, she finds herself back where she started: Jordan College. It is the same, and yet it is entirely different just as we, the author and reader, are the same, and yet entirely different. It is a lonely road that she has chosen, but a necessary one. We can see that now, although we are no less devastated for it. Her final conversation with the angel Xaphania before her departure from the land of the Mulefa confirms what the reader already knows to be true:

“Dust is not constant. There’s not a fixed quantity that has always been the same. Conscious beings make Dust—they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on. And if you help everyone

else in your worlds to do that, by helping them to learn and understand about themselves and each other and the way everything works, and by showing them how to be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all how to keep their minds open and free and curious... then they will renew enough to replace what is lost through one window.” (AS 440-1)

This is the price of wisdom, and it is a steep one. This is the price of maturity, in particular of maturity that recognizes the necessity of faith in a greater divinity. The reward Lyra receives in recompense for her loss—the knowledge of death, and the comfort that her soul will rejoin Dust in the afterlife—seems strangely hollow in the face of a life spent alone, lived in service to telling “true stories” for the salvation of mankind (AS 441). Wisdom and knowledge, as Mary Malone’s Platonic metaphor suggested so long ago, are not always filled with life-affirming joy. In fact, it is often more pleasurable to live in ignorance, though it is not right. Lyra and Will come to this conclusion very quickly once they realize that they must be separated: without them to spread the truth of their journey to others, the dead will remain trapped in “the world of the dead,” unable to leave because “they’ve got nothing to tell” the harpies (AS 441).

And so they leave: burdened and enlightened by their knowledge, Adam and Eve part. Though it is devastating, Pullman makes it clear that not all is lost. Lyra will continue her education at “St. Sophia’s” under the tutelage of Dame Hannah Relf, a woman who the mature Lyra finds “much cleverer, and more interesting, and kindlier by far than the dim and frumpy person she [remembers]” (AS 458). She will “make St. Sophia’s her school,” and not just literally: she will make Sophia-Wisdom her school of thought just as much as the physical place will become her home (AS 462). This

newfound wisdom allows her to hide what she once would have flaunted—her ability to separate from Pantalaimon; Will had “taught her the value of silence and discretion” (AS 462). When speaking to Pan later that night, Lyra acknowledges that building the “Republic of Heaven”—their charge, the single thing that they must do—cannot be done if they “[put themselves] first” (AS 464). They must “study and think and work hard” and sacrifice themselves because not everyone has the luxury of what they know. Indeed, Lyra’s story is the most important one ever told (AS 464).

And so, as “[zealots are] toppled,” and the Church flounders, “confused and leaderless,” the world needs something to look to—everyone needs to find the purpose, as Mary, Lyra and Will did before them (AS 464). Pullman understands the difficulty, but insists that civilization will thrive under the tutelage of this hard-won wisdom. To tell true stories is not simply going to enhance mankind—it will save it. Here, Pullman says, I have done most of the work for you: I have revealed organized religion to be fraudulent, I have unmasked the first lie and drawn comparisons throughout history to back up my claims. I have sweat and cried, ruminated and raged, realized and written: I have told my true story. It is now your turn to tell yours.

Conclusion: How to Be a Christian

“Surrounding the two children were a dozen or more angels, gazing down at them. And then Serafina understood something for which the witches had no word: it was the idea of pilgrimage. She understood why these beings would wait for thousands of years and travel vast distances in order to be close to something important, and how they would feel differently for the rest of time, having been briefly in its presence. That was how these creatures looked now, these beautiful pilgrims of rarefied light, standing around the girl with the dirty face and the tartan skirt and the boy with the wounded hand who was frowning in his sleep.”

(SK 276)

The notion of pilgrimage is barely discussed within *His Dark Materials*, and yet it speaks very strongly to what Pullman seeks to reveal with his novels. To embark on a pilgrimage has become a largely antiquated notion in the technological age as things have become immediately accessible via the Internet. Why fly to Santiago de Compostela if Googling it is free? The meaning of things has been diminished in our age, the solemnity of believing in something bigger than oneself lost to the postmodern condition that promotes itself as too progressive for something so archaic as religion.

What, then, is the reward of this series? To dismantle the patriarchal, oppressive, fear-and-death based Judeo-Christian hierarchy? To no longer consider oneself beholden to a fearsomely powerful being whose judgment will decide one's fate in the afterlife? To be free? Paradoxically, though both Milton and Pullman spend the majority of their texts questioning and subverting the Judeo-Christian faith, both ultimately affirm that the works are positively theologically engaged, even Christian.

How is it that a self-proclaimed atheist is able to write a deeply theological text under the guise of dismantling religion? Indeed, Pullman's thesis boils down to one single concept: we cannot abandon religion. The point of departure for both authors—a critical disagreement with how the Bible's teachings have manifested in the subsequent two thousand years since Christ was born—does not ultimately negate the power or validity of the Bible itself. To attempt to destroy religion entirely is not only unrealistic, but incredibly myopic—the Bible is the most pervasive text ever written, and to ignore or negate it defeats the purpose of the exercise. Moreover, Pullman wants to understand not just how but *why* he cannot shake his Catholic upbringing though he has spent an entire career establishing himself as an atheist.

Indeed, it seems as though Pullman's books come both literally and metaphorically full circle. Lyra returns to Jordan College, to right where she began, but she is not the same: she is fundamentally different after undergoing her journey, a woman not a girl, wise though still young, cognizant of right and wrong, good and evil. Pullman has distracted us with fantastical and complex elements to his incredibly rich narrative—sex, sin, gender, patriarchy, blame, ignorance, sacrifice, and blindness, to name a few—but ultimately, his quiet faith subordinates all of these loud subversive elements.

His Dark Materials, though it would never claim this inheritance outright, takes the reader on an influential journey much like the Bible. At the end of the trilogy, the reader decides what to take from the series—is it an anti-Christian manifesto or a celebration of divinity? Pullman is deliberately misleading in his terminology, and for good reason—he *does* want to disavow the corrupt patriarchal Catholic Church, but he does not want to disavow the reasons that man decided to invent religion.

Pullman states in his introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of *Paradise Lost* that the story he retells in *His Dark Materials*—which is a retelling of *Paradise Lost*, a retelling of the Bible—is “the central story of our lives, the story that more than any other tells us what it means to be human.”⁶² It seems as though the atheist, in his journey to abandon God, has, instead, quite entirely by chance, found Him again. Of course, the key word here is journey: one must undergo a long, painful and enlightening adventure to end up right where one began, albeit entirely changed. As Lyra sits in the Botanical Garden in the closing paragraphs of the final novel, one cannot help but cry for her: cry for what she has lost and cry for what she has gained. She has learned how to live a good life—how to collect stories for the harpies, how to pass her wisdom on and expand it through hard work and perseverance, and, most importantly, how to forgive. However, to gain this knowledge, she must forfeit almost all of her relationships—a lonely conclusion to this rich tale.

Her path is parallel to Pullman’s: you must lose something—in this case, faith—in order to realize its value once it is gone. You cannot stay in childlike ignorance, just as you cannot blindly accept what the Church dictates. Pullman’s proffered—though thickly veiled—conception of Christianity is laughably simple: be brave, confront adversity with wisdom and composure, love fiercely, and above all, forgive those who have wronged you.

Pullman, thus, does not see true Christianity as the factory setting for all self-proclaimed Christians; moreover, Pullman’s insistence in his own atheism actually serves as a valid argument against his embodiment of that very identity. One only has to read his

⁶² Pullman, 10.

books to see that the man loves God—though he spends over one thousand pages loudly proclaiming the opposite. To truly love God, Pullman quietly reflects, one must undergo the pain of accepting that life is painful—ultimate knowledge does not predicate ultimate happiness. In fact, the greater the knowledge that one accumulates, the greater and more complex the pain that one is likely to experience. To be able to willingly sacrifice the self-defensive safety of ignorance for the sake of bettering the world, even with a full understanding that it is impossible to defeat every adversary and continuing *in spite of* that reality—that, Pullman explains, is true faith. In today’s age, filled as it is with prejudice, inequality, and hatred, to seek the journey that will bring you toward wisdom is nothing short of an act of courage.

The final step is the ability to let go. When Lyra parts from Will, there is no greater agony than the moment that he closes the final window. The pure impotent rage that one feels, the desperate grief, the near-hate for an author who could do this to his loyal reader—this reaction constitutes the single kernel of truth Pullman hopes to impart to his reader. We must grieve the loss of a happy ending to feel the purity of our protagonists’ sacrifice, the glorious unity of their knowledge and purpose. Though it is not the ending we would hope for, the message is crystal clear: only in the face of true sacrifice can we understand the necessity of faith. Lyra and Will must part to do God’s work—their paths have not been easy, nor has the journey resulted in a clichéd happily ever after, but they have saved something that was almost entirely eradicated in the centuries of various powers perverting it for personal gain: the true meaning of religion.

To have religion is to let go of all of the things that we use to protect ourselves against the vast unknown. First and foremost, we must let go of other people—Lyra and

Will are required continue their difficult journeys alone. Pullman's conception of the unknown is quite beautiful—infinite love meeting infinite consciousness, far too complex for man to ever truly understand but founded on the principle of humanity's ability to shape it. To have religion is an acceptance of the necessity of journeying into the unknown, and of forgiving the universe for forcing you to experience the agony of loss. To have religion means being unafraid, calm in the face of whatever life confronts you with: it is loving even knowing that you could lose that person the next day, procreating even though you know that your children will be independent of you, and forgiving without expecting forgiveness in return.

Indeed, how, then, Milton and Pullman ask, can the tyrannous God be the divine source of all existence? If we are all capable of producing divine love for our fellow man, how is it possible that our entire Western civilization be built upon an act of punishment? Thus, the answer is that we must separate religion from itself—we must dissect the elements of religion that serve only a few and motivate the rest of humanity to celebrate the joy of existence. Man and woman, adult and child, curious and content—we must better ourselves by living up to an ideal doctrine that applies to *all*. We are all ashes to ashes, dust to dust—consciousness given form, loving itself, each soul complicating the vast infinity of all that we do not know. Seeking the approval of a cruel God who would punish you or a Church who would oppress you does not bring you closer to divinity—divinity is generated within, a deliberate choice, a selfless release of expectation.

So, what if the Bible were wrong? To that, I would say: let us reframe the question. The true question, answered most eloquently with every word of *His Dark Materials*, reads this: what if you can be a Christian and not need the Bible to tell you

how? For Philip Pullman, and for myself, this journey has returned us to a faith that we insisted was gone—lost to the irrefutable engine of science and to systematic injustice, lost particularly to the recognition of kindred spirits within the deplorable Satan and the weak-willed Eve. Stripping Christianity down to the framework leaves us, quite beautifully, with the same precepts upon which Pullman conceptualized Dust. Faith—in the Christian God or in Pullmanic Dust—is defined by the universal application of selfless love, the wisdom to do what is right, the ability to forgive your enemy, and the desire to share these convictions with the rest of mankind. Pullman has given us his own language—Christianity—with which we may interpret and speak this universal truth. Perhaps within the pages of the Bible, you will find your peace; perhaps not. Proclaim yourself an irreversible atheist and denounce all religion, Pullman says; divinity will not exclude you, for you are made of it and it is made of you.

Perhaps it will be the glory of a particularly bright night sky, the safety of a lover's embrace, the warmth of a parent's glowing pride, or the agony of an incomparable loss that brings you face to face with God—Pullman doesn't care to, or need to, explain it any further. God is everywhere, in everything, present in all human activity, utterly indescribable, utterly miraculous.

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Roger and Will goes to speak with his father; the Authority established the Underworld, ghosts reminded by Harpies of their earthly transgressions; spirits passing through Will and Lyra = like Eucharist?; Lyra disarms the Harpies by telling the truth (her whole life otherwise is peppered with lies, yet another inversion); atoms (science) as being sentient, in persisting human desire; no immortality; conclusion: Pullman is religious!

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gain general insight from reading this, as well as particular insight on Philip Pullman's revolting agenda. Entertaining and well-written, this book is a must-read for anyone who has kids."

Further investigation into the people who believe that his text is irreligious is needed; fascinating