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The Portrayal of the Main Female Characters in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* Trilogy

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Abstract

This thesis, based on Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, analyses, from a gender perspective, the depiction of the two main female characters, the main protagonist Lyra and her mother Marisa Coulter, by contemplating their developments throughout the story and by comparing them to the depiction and development of their male counterparts: the second protagonist Will, and Lyra's father Lord Asriel. By examining how they relate to stereotypes and traditional gender roles; how femininity and masculinity are applied to the characters; how power is attributed differently depending on gender and by demonstrating how Lyra and Marisa both undergo radical transformations during the course of the plot, inhabiting conventional female roles, I argue that the novels support notions of innate inequality between men and women, from a feminist viewpoint, on the level of character portrayal.

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Introduction

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, a fantasy trilogy consisting of *Northern Lights* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997) and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000) (abbreviated into references as *NL*, *SK* and *AS*), tells a story about a war between science and religion, which takes place across several parallel worlds; a war in which all of human consciousness as well as free will is at stake. The trilogy partially alludes to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, inventing a modern version of Genesis: the story of Eve and Adam committing Original Sin in the Garden of Eden – but instead of condemning this “Fall of Man” the trilogy celebrates mankind's “fall” into knowledge and consciousness. In the story, the Church is trying to reset the innocence of man by trying to eliminate consciousness altogether (consciousness takes physical form here as a newly discovered type of particle, named “Dust”), whilst their opponents, depicted as the righteous forces, counter their attempts by endeavouring to destroy the very core of Christianity, through killing the Authority himself, i.e. God.

The protagonist is Lyra Belacqua, a young girl who is prophesied to play a great part in this war by taking the role of the second Eve and so again “fall into temptation” and thus hinder Dust from draining out from existence. Despite being symbolically presented as the not-yet-seduced Eve, Lyra is not the vision of an innocent little girl; instead she is vigorous, headstrong and disobedient. Thus, Pullman adopts one of our most ancient myths, that of Eve, representing woman, causing humanity to fall into sin, and inverts it, making a new Eve the very saviour of humanity.

From a feminist viewpoint it would be close at hand to argue that this is a tale which brings redemption to womankind in rewriting this legend to women's advantage, and in doing so using not only a strong heroine, but a number of strong female characters, as Robin Anne Reid mentions in her book: “The worlds of Pullman's imagination are populated by scores of strong, dynamic female characters [...] Pullman's characters transcend traditional gender roles” (248). The purpose of this essay is to critically analyse whether or not Pullman has really succeeded in creating characters that “transcend traditional gender roles” and if the story is as feminist as it may appear. In applying a gender analysis on this trilogy my main intention is to reveal underlying messages concerning masculinity and femininity. This essay departs from the feminist notion that femininity and masculinity are cultural constructions, as Mary Evans mentions in her book on gender and social theory: “we construct our gendered selves

through ‘performativity’ – the ‘performance’ of socially established expectations of the masculine or the feminine” (57). Feminism is as much about looking at how masculine ideals affect men as it is about how feminine ideals affect women and in my analysis I will look at the portrayal of men as well as women. However, I will mostly examine the male characters for comparison-purposes as my main focus will be on the female characters.

I will focus my analysis on the female protagonist, Lyra, and her mother, Marisa Coulter, who besides Lyra is the most prominent female character, and like her daughter, she also changes considerably through the tale. My main focus will be on Lyra and Marisa, and during the analysis I will compare them to their male counterparts: Will, who is Lyra’s symbolical Adam and the trilogy's second protagonist, and Lord Asriel, who is Marisa’s former lover and Lyra’s father.

I will argue that both Lyra and Marisa undergo a softening process through the trilogy, starting out in unconventional female roles, but ending up in more traditional ones. Regarding Marisa, the main issues addressed will be how female sexuality is depicted and related to the gaining of power, how her role as a powerful woman contrasts to powerful male characters, Lord Asriel in particular, and how her personality changes as her latent maternal feelings come to surface. Thereafter, I will consider the meaning of the inversed Genesis narrative and contemplate Lyra’s maturity process, looking at how she adapts herself to Will, and argue that both Lyra and Will assume more conservative gender identities in the end.

The mother and the patriarchy

Power and motherhood are two central themes in *His Dark Materials*. In Marisa Coulter, we find the two concepts combined with femininity, making her the perfect candidate for a feminist analysis. Although the first description of Lyra’s mother announces her as seemingly “angelic” as well as “sweet and kind” (NL 42), we soon learn that this is just a deceitful appearance concealing her cold and ruthless nature. She is the perfect charlatan, because “[w]ho could doubt someone so charming, so well-connected, so sweet and reasonable?” (NL 317). She is the ego-centric beautiful femme-fatale and callous career woman, whose thirst for power seems endless. Facing the

hardships of gaining power in a patriarchal society, she both hides behind and uses her femininity in order to get power.

The men do not have to try as hard to gain power. The word “powerful” is frequently used to describe several of the main male characters, and most notably Lyra’s father, Lord Asriel. When we are first introduced to Asriel, we find that he is “a tall man with powerful shoulders, a fierce dark face, and eyes that [seem] to flash and glitter with savage laughter. It [is] a face to be dominated by, or to fight: never a face to patronise or pity” (*NL* 17). He is presented with straightforward and exceedingly masculine characteristics, which he keeps throughout the story. He is depicted as strong, brave and utterly consumed by his ideological mission: destroying, what is illustrated as, the ancient dictatorship of God, in order to create the “Republic of Heaven” – which, though never really thoroughly explained, indicates democracy and freedom. A rebelling angel tells Mrs Coulter: if Asriel does not succeed in “destroying the tyranny at last”, then “we shall all be destroyed, and cruelty will reign for ever” (*AS* 822). Though Asriel is the leader of all those representing the good side, he is hard and pitiless, as he does not let anything stand in his way when it comes to reaching his goal – not the life of Lyra’s best friend Roger, whom he kills for the good cause, and, as it turns out, not even his own life. It is, Claire Squires points out, uncertain “whether Asriel is in fact a force for good or for evil” (60). His power seems infinite and innate, which is described, for example, when he is imprisoned by armoured bears¹, who “had never met anything quite like Lord Asriel’s own haughty and imperious nature. He dominated even Iofur [the bear king]” (*NL* 307). Even to the witches his power seems supernatural, as one of the witches expresses in awe after witnessing Asriel’s massive fortress and war supplies:

I think he must have been preparing for this for a long time, for aeons. He was preparing this before we were born, sisters, even though he is so much younger... But how can that be? I don’t know. I can’t understand. I think he commands time, he makes it run fast or slow according to his will. (*SK* 580).

There are four other male characters in the trilogy, which, like Asriel, are described as “powerful” by the omniscient narrator (*NL* 101; *SK* 452, 614; *AS* 982) and their

¹ Bears wearing armor, who, like people talk, and have their own society.

powerfulness is thus presented as a natural fact, rather than someone's subjective opinion.

Although Marisa Coulter is a female character that is also described as powerful, it seems that her power is not a natural trait, like it appears to be with the male characters; instead her power comes as a result of her eagerness to have it, which Lord Asriel tells his daughter:

...your mother's always been ambitious for power. At first she tried to get it the normal way, through marriage, but that didn't work... So she had to turn to the Church. Naturally she couldn't take the route a man could have taken – priesthood and so on – it had to be unorthodox; she had to set up her own order, her own channels of influence and work through that. ”(NL 316).

It is again confirmed in the “Lantern slides”² in *Northern Lights* that “Mrs Coulter selected her lovers for their power and influence” (5th “slide”); of course, as implied in the quotes, this is due to the highly patriarchal society from which she derives and in which women are not allowed power in the ways men are. Marisa, the reader is told, became Mrs Coulter in a power-climbing marriage to a politician, who was “a member of the King's party” and a “rising man” (NL 108), whom she cheated on, with the powerful Lord Asriel. As she became pregnant with Lyra, her husband tried to kill Asriel, as “the law allows any man to avenge the violation of his wife” (NL 108) – a law which, from the reader's point of view, seems to derive from the 18th century – and the husband himself got killed in the process. Thereafter Mrs Coulter and Lord Asriel both turned their backs on their child, as well as on each other, continuing with their different careers, leaving Lyra to grow up in a college.

Being the mother, Mrs Coulter is inevitably depicted as the colder and harder one for leaving her baby behind, while Lord Asriel is “caring” enough to pay for Lyra's maintenance and giving the master of the college orders “to look after [her] and keep [her] safe from [her] mother” (NL 112). Indeed Mrs Coulter is depicted as someone you would not want near your children, as we learn that the order of the Church that she set up and is the leader of, specialises in abducting children to perform cruel experiments on them, in the hope of finding a way to prevent the sexual maturity that arises along with puberty. However, everything in her personality seems to contradict her anti-sexual

² Short, random notes or scenes commenting on the plot, added after the end of each book in the trilogy.

endeavours; they are, as Squires puts it: “profoundly dubious: she is a very sexual being and repeatedly uses her powers of seduction to achieve her own ends”, and further that “[i]t is evident that Mrs Coulter takes on this role in response to the limited options available to her in a male-dominated society” (75).

So, Pullman does not describe women as powerful in the way men are, but he repeatedly points out the power they have over men in using their femininity and sexuality; in fact, this is how Marisa Coulter finally eliminates the greatest enemy, the regent of heaven, the archangel Metatron, who cannot resist her and is “trembling with desire” (AS 987) as she lures him into his death. This is the ultimate but not the only one of Mrs Coulter’s deadly seductions. Earlier in the story she uses her charms on a man called Sir Charles, described as “an older man, grey-haired and powerful, with a serpent-daemon”³ (SK 614), from whom she needs a piece of information, which she gets by letting her daemon “slowly [run] his hands along the emerald serpent again and again, squeezing just a little, lifting, stroking, as Sir Charles [sighs] with pleasure” (SK 616). With the serpent as an obvious phallus symbol, this is not a very subtle representation of sex. When she has extracted the information she needs from him, she secretly poisons him while his eyes are shut from satisfaction.

The hard and ruthless nature of Marisa Coulter, depicted in the first and second volume of the trilogy, will transform in the beginning of *The Amber Spyglass*, when her determined ambition for power suddenly become secondary, as she quite unexpectedly realises her maternal feelings for Lyra. She is still one for brutal methods and control, as she, due to her motherly epiphany, captures Lyra and drugs her into a long-lasting sleep, holding her captive in a cave, to keep her safe. When she kidnaps Lyra, she leaves Lyra’s alethiometer⁴ behind, and according to Mary Harris Russell, she is thus symbolically “renouncing the quest for knowledge and, slowly, the quest for maternal identity emerges as the center of her actions” (Lenz 216). Hence, Pullman seems to withdraw the apple of knowledge from Mrs Coulter; though, it could be argued, that he instead actually is giving it to her, offering her the true knowledge, that of realising her role as a mother. To perhaps further imply the unnaturalness of having denied her

³ In Lyra's world, people have “daemons”, explained as an externalized part of the human's spirit or soul that takes the shape of an animal.

⁴ “Truth-measurer”, through which it is possible to access infinite truth and knowledge.

motherhood when Lyra was a baby, Mrs Coulter is suddenly given a split personality: one moment she violently forces Lyra to drink a sleeping potion:

Mrs Coulter snarled and with her free hand slapped Lyra hard across the face, a vicious backhand crack that threw her flat; and before Lyra could get together her wits, the beaker was at her mouth and she had to swallow or choke. (AS688)

and immediately afterwards she is “singing softly, crooning baby-songs, smoothing the hair off the girl’s brow, patting her hot face dry”, all in all seeming to try to make up for lost time by deliriously treating Lyra’s unconscious body as an infant. Pugh comments upon the cave she had chosen as refuge, saying it is “a setting that symbolises Mrs. Coulter’s efforts to return her daughter to the safety and innocence of the womb” (69).

While Mrs Coulter is unable to ignore her motherly affections, Lyra’s father has no problem with disregarding his parenthood. He despises her sentimentality and scorns their daughter:

To have tamed and softened you – that’s no everyday feat. She’s drawn your poison, Marisa. She’s taken your teeth out. Your fire’s been quenched in a drizzle of sentimental piety. Who would have thought it? The pitiless agent of the church, the fanatical persecutor of children...and along comes a foul-mouthed ignorant little brat with dirty fingernails, and you cluck and settle your feathers over her like a hen. Well, I admit: the child must have some gift I’ve never seen myself. But if all it does is turn you into a doting mother, it’s a pretty thin, drab, puny little gift. (AS 815)

Regardless of Asriel’s opinion, it is when Mrs Coulter starts caring for her daughter that the reader is invited to feel sympathy for her and is able to make sense of her actions. In the end, Marisa declares that there is no good in her except her love for Lyra: a love that came to her “like a thief in the night” (AS 989), and a love that transforms her from the evil antagonist to a self-effacing mother. Her transformation is absolute when she heroically sacrifices her life for Lyra’s sake, and in the very end, as Harris Russell points out, she has left the rest of her previous identity behind and is now only referred to as “Lyra’s mother” (Lenz 217).

Lord Asriel sacrifices his life as well, though his reasons for it seem to have to do more with his realisation that all his endeavours will have been for nothing, unless the prophecy about Lyra is carried out; as he says to his war-officers: “to sum it up: all of us, our republic, the future of every conscious being – we all depend on my daughter’s

remaining alive” (AS 964). Thus both Lyra’s parents sacrifice themselves heroically, but with different intentions: Lord Asriel dies his heroic death to save the future of everyone in all the worlds, and Marisa Coulter dies her heroic death to save her daughter. Mrs Coulter also tells Asriel that she wishes that they had married and raised Lyra together themselves (AS 967) – a statement that adds a wifely connotation to her, in addition to the motherly one. In the end the fierce independent woman has become a mother and wife, and the fierce independent man has become a war-champion.

Initially being this evil seductress who desires power above all, not, it seems, to achieve some higher ambition, but for the sole purpose of being powerful, Marisa Coulter matches Johanna Russ’ description of a “Bitch Goddess”. Russ writes: “Look for reasons...to explain the conduct of the Bitch Goddess and you will not find them; there is no explanation in terms of human motivation or the woman’s own inner life; she simply behaves like she does because she is a bitch”. Further she states that the “Bitch Goddess”, referred to as “it”, does not have the “...motives that you and I have; [it] contains a mysterious *essence* which causes it to behave as it does; in fact “it” is not a person at all, but a projected wish or fear” (6). The concept of the Bitch Goddess applies to Mrs Coulter. Unlike Lord Asriel, who has a specific, and indeed high, purpose for his malicious means, Marisa Coulter, in spite of her forceful determination, seems, in the first two books, to act the way she does just for the sake of being cruel and in control; and whatever reasons she has in mind, they remain quite mysterious to the reader. The experiments on children that she is in charge of, and has invented herself, consist of cutting off the strong invisible link between children and their daemons, depriving the child of free will and sexual maturity, and, in some cases, causing death. Her innate malice combined with, what is depicted as, an unnatural curiosity and her questionable purposes can be illustrated in a conversation between two of her subordinates:

’Her *attitude* worries me...’

’Not philosophical, you mean?’

’Exactly. A *personal* interest. I don’t like to use the word, but it’s almost ghoulish.’

’That’s a bit strong.’

’But do you remember the first experiments, when she was so keen to see them pulled apart –’ (NL 234).

Her hypocrisy, as well as the first sign of maternal feeling, become obvious when she, despite her former keenness to perform the experiments, “horror-struck” saves Lyra from falling victim to the procedure (*NL* 237). Her motherly feelings are her only traits conceivable as humane; her other intentions are invariably part of some *mysterious essence*, as we are only presented with hints that point to a sadistic mind and/or some uncanny curiosity. If it is indeed curiosity that fuels all her actions through the first two books, this somewhat contradicts the message that seems to be intended with the reversal of the Genesis story in *His Dark Materials*: that of redeeming the image of woman demanding knowledge. Ultimately her aspirations remain quite unclear and the reader is not invited to understand or to look with sympathy upon Mrs Coulter’s possible agenda for behaving as she does, unlike the case with Lord Asriel, in which the reader is offered a most utopian motive for his brutal actions.

One thing besides obsessive curiosity that could be a possible reason for Mrs Coulter’s deeds is competition. She could be competing with Lord Asriel, obstinately choosing to work for his enemies, even though she does not herself seem to believe in her cause. Should competition in fact be her cause, it would imply that she, despite her confidence, does see herself as inferior to Lord Asriel, needing to live up to him, and at the same time indicating that she does not really do it for herself, but for his attention. In the end of *Northern Lights* they meet, and it is clear that Asriel’s attention is very hard to gain, as he asks Mrs Coulter to join him in his war: “Come with me, work with me, and I’ll care whether you live or die. Stay here, and you lose my interest at once. Don’t flatter yourself that I’d give you a second’s thought” – she declines him though, with tears and “an infinite beautiful sadness” in her eyes (335). Competition, or, paradoxically, negatively depicted curiosity might be her reasons for her evil actions, but none of those causes are really made clear in the books. In the end, Mrs Coulter’s motives seem to exist within the realm of *mysterious essence*.

Concerning the concept of “projected wish or fear”, Marisa Coulter’s being an attractive, dominant and sensual woman, a man-eating femme-fatale, can be seen as an erotic fantasy as well as a threat. Seeing to the deadly outcomes of her sexual actions, I would say Marisa is no erotic fantasy, but a projected fear of Pullman’s. In the first and second volume she is the projected fear: the ultimate evil antagonist, dangerous and unstoppable, an independent woman who sets herself above men and seeks power only

to fulfil her own ego. In the third book, however, she is beginning to be portrayed in a new favourable light and has thus turned into Pullman's projected wish: the self-sacrificing mother, who in the end has no other identity besides her mother-role – a role connected with what is considered to be natural. According to Susan Matthews, Mrs Coulter's "negative female figure is associated with culture (by her punning name⁵) rather than with nature or the body" (Lenz 132). How to interpret this depends fully on one's point of view: one could either see it as criticism of modern day's career woman, who is competing with men for power, when, to make a bit excessive a point, her place should be at home with the children; or as criticism of power climbing in general and socially constructed femininity in particular, declaring it a fake and treacherous appearance that causes women to forget their genuine nature, which here evidently consists in motherliness. However sacred motherhood is, Pullman presents an either-or-concept that implies that being a mother is woman's only true identity, and whatever greatness she can achieve is through the love for her family; while the fatherly bond is not illustrated as having the same potency and the man is depicted as being more naturally adapted to managing power. Relating Marisa's development to the madonna/whore dichotomy, it is easily recognised that she starts out as the latter: the manipulative seductress, and ends up a more domestic and virtuous madonna-type.

Lyra and Will and the new Genesis

Marisa is not the only mother in *His Dark Materials*. Lyra is to symbolically become the new Eve, whose name means, as Donna Freitas and Jason King note, "mother of all the living"; and Lyra, representing Eve, is prophesied to become "the new mother of all" (123). In inventing a war against God and the Church, in a world where "the Church's power over every aspect of life [is] absolute" (NL 31-32), Pullman invites us to question power structures in general, and notably extremely patriarchal structures. However, in the end it is not the war that determines the outcome, but Lyra in her role as Eve. When she and Will decide that they will use the subtle knife⁶ to cut an opening through and out from the terrible world of the dead and let the souls from everyone that ever died out into the living world, Lyra literally provides them all with a sort of rebirth,

⁵"Coulter" versus "culture".

⁶The knife that has the ability to cut through anything, even through the layer between parallel worlds.

thus symbolically turns into *a new mother of all*. In hearing of their great plan, one of Lord Asriel's spies says: "This will undo everything. It's the greatest blow you could strike. The Authority will be powerless after this" (AS 908). To free the souls, Lyra and Will lead them past a giant abyss, and out in the world that figure as paradise in the story. There the souls dissolve, "embracing the whole universe... becoming part of the earth and the dew and the night breeze" (AS 1012). This is an example of how Pullman plays around with symbols of Carl Jung's mother archetype: the abyss, the night, transformation and rebirth (16), as well as an illustration of how he celebrates, what can be seen as the patriarchy's opposed part: that of mother earth. The very invention of Dust, the substance around which the whole story circles, connotes the notion of mother earth, as "[m]atter and spirit are one" (SK 563) – an interpretation affirmed by Mary and John Gribbin: "In *His Dark Materials*, Dust is like the soul of Gaia⁷" (145). Dust is the consciousness of matter: "Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself" (AS 671). Apart from liberating the souls of the dead, Lyra must also "fall" again by committing "sin", which here is only seen as sin in the eyes of the "evil" church, and otherwise depicted as virtue: sexual awakening and love. This is seen as entering a new consciousness that is to represent "the movement from innocence to experience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden" (Frost 319), through which the prophecy is fulfilled and Dust is saved from extermination. Despite Pullman's proclaiming himself an atheist, Dust is, as Freitas and King discuss in their book, certainly depicted as divine (33-34) – something that Pullman himself does not seem to deny, illustrated through a quote by him from Frost's book: "Instead of being the dependent children of an all-powerful king, we are partners and equals with Dust in the great project of keeping the universe alive" (320). So, in his trilogy, Pullman is replacing God with Dust, where God symbolises the father and Dust the mother, and God symbolises hierarchy, while Dust symbolises equality.

Growing up in a super-patriarchal society, Lyra is reluctant to identify with women and the feminine, which has made her into a real stereotypical tomboy, assuming the values of her society. In the beginning of *Northern Lights* she is described as a "barbarian" (35), "savage" and "half-wild cat" (36) who has no interest for the academic life, despite growing up at the prestigious Jordan College in Oxford (in her

⁷ Greek earth-goddess and another term for 'mother earth'.

universe). The college is a men's world and when Lyra encounters Marisa Coulter – for what she believes is the first time, as she has no memory of her mother – she is “entranced” (62) by her, as Marisa is the first woman ever to impress her. Lyra can scarcely believe that Mrs Coulter is a Scholar since Lyra, as a product of her culture, truly disapproves of women accessing the male-dominated sphere of education: “She regarded female Scholars with proper Jordan disdain: there *were* such people but, poor things, they could never be taken more seriously than animals dressed up and acting a play” (62). However, she soon accepts Mrs Coulter's unexpected superiority to other women, and blatantly describes her tomboyish existence:

Within five minutes Lyra had told her everything about her half-wild life: her favourite routes over the roof-tops, the battle of the Claybeds, the time she and Roger had caught and roasted a rook, her intention to capture a narrow-boat from the gyptians⁸ and sail to Abingdon, and so on. (62).

All this is mischief that Lyra is in charge of, we learn from the preceding pages (44-54), since she is, as the omniscient narrator mentions, a “natural leader” (*NL* 216). Lyra has no interest in anything considered feminine, until she meets Mrs Coulter, who brings Lyra with her to her home in London, where she is introduced to shopping, cocktail-parties and “ladies, as well-dressed as Mrs Coulter if not so beautiful or accomplished: women so unlike female scholars or gyptian boat-mothers or college servants as almost to be a new sex altogether, one with *dangerous* powers and qualities such as elegance, charm and grace” [my emphasis] (*NL* 74). Again we see how the feminine is depicted as dangerous. Lyra is for a brief time dazzled by this new setting, but soon she feels like “a universal pet” (79) and discovers enough of Mrs Coulter's false nature to rebel against this feminine world and runs away.

Lyra's role as a wilful and disobedient child is apparent in the very first scene in *Northern Lights*, when she sneaks into the Retiring Room at Jordan College, in which “only Scholars and their guests were allowed ... and never females” (10) – a room representing knowledge that are denied women, a prohibition Lyra gladly ignores. Through this trespass she learns secrets of Dust and parts of Lord Asriel's plan, which marks the beginning of her adventure. She is later bestowed with a rare, valuable and seemingly magical object called “alethiometer”: a “truth-measurer”. To everyone's

⁸ The gypsies of Lyra's world, a nomad-people living on boats.

disbelief she quickly learns how to read it and, consequently, she has a key to truth and knowledge, explained as direct communication with Dust. Besides Lyra's brave and forceful character, it is the alethiometer that enables her to follow through with her undertakings. So, quite ironically, it is the new Eve's access to knowledge that leads her on the path to her "fall", which in itself consists of knowledge. Here Pullman separates the concepts of knowledge and consciousness, having to do with knowledge taken for granted and knowledge consciously obtained. In the end of the last book, as Lyra loses her innocence, she also loses her gift of reading the alethiometer. However, the angel Xaphania tells her that she may regain the ability through hard work and that her skill "will be even better then, after a lifetime of thought and effort, because it will come from conscious understanding" (AS 1064). Leonard Wheat points out that this is one of the ways in which Pullman encourages the questioning of authority; as Lyra is no longer a child that needs to be told what to do, but has entered a "state of free will" (265), she must start to think and reflect for herself, as Wheat puts it: "[s]he must develop a healthy scepticism toward the claims of authorities who would have her accept unsupported and irrational 'truth' on the basis of faith" (266). Although Wheat here primarily draws parallels to Pullman's criticism of religion, it also exemplifies Pullman's support of critical thinking in general and "conscious understanding" towards authorial instances, as well as all concepts proclaiming themselves to be true.

As Lyra is destined to become the new Eve and as such being reformed from biblical scapegoat to saviour of all living, she does not only represent woman's right to knowledge, but also to gender equality, and in the name of equality she will not be alone this time. Will Parry will play as important a part as her – they meet in *The Subtle Knife*, thereafter they continue the journey together. Pugh points out how unusual it is "[f]or a mythic hero to engage in a mutually erotic relationship with a lover as an equal" (64); although, it could be argued that Lyra's and Will's equality gradually shifts through the tale, since Lyra appears to soften, and Will, on the other hand, seems to harden. Pugh separates the concepts of fairy tale-hero and myth-hero, meaning that the former typically strives to accomplish victory within a small and personal context, for example within his or her family, and the latter in a larger more world-wide context. He further states that the fairy tale-hero is more likely to be female and the myth-hero more likely to be male (63). Thus, it is unconventional that Pullman has chosen to create a

female myth-hero in his epic adventure-story. Indeed Lyra starts out strong, as she in *Northern Lights* is the sole heroine who forcefully and bravely drives the plot forward, with the intention to save her friend Roger, who has been kidnapped together with other children by underlings of the Church. Thus, Pullman takes the standard fairy tale-concept of boy saving girl and inverts it. She impresses several of the people she meets on her way, among them the aeronaut Lee Scorsby, who becomes very devoted to her and later tells Will's father: "I ain't never seen a child like that. If I had a daughter of my own, I hope she'd be half as strong and brave and good" (SK 535). However, in the following two books her role as myth-heroine can be questioned.

In *The Subtle Knife*, the narrative is not as dependent on Lyra being as strong and brave as in *Northern Lights*, since another forceful protagonist now enters the picture and takes control. When Lyra encounters Will in *The Subtle Knife* she finds that he "was strong and stocky, not formed as a grown man, of course, because he wasn't much older than she was, but he'd be powerful one day" (SK 377). Again, we meet this innate powerfulness that seems to come naturally with manhood, and she learns that though they are the same age, he is more responsible and mature than she is, which she comments: "If you start behaving like a grown-up, the Spectres'll⁹ get you," she said, but she didn't know whether she could tease him yet, or whether she should be afraid of him" (SK 407). While Lyra apparently looks upon Will with immediate respect, Will is a bit less respectful, ordering her to do the dishes, change her clothes and wash her hair, as he does not want her to attract attention when they enter into "his" Oxford, and warning her that: "if you give me away, I'll kill you" (SK 405). In the very beginning of the book, focus is shifted from Lyra's quest to Will's, as the alethiometer tells her that her task is to help him, rather than continue with her own concerns (SK 421). Later, without him requesting so, Lyra promises him that: "I'm only going to do what you ask, from now on" (542), implying that she will now only use the alethiometer when he requests it, and is thus subordinating herself on behalf of his, now more important, quest. Rachel Falconer has also detected this inequality between Lyra and Will, which she exemplifies with a scene in which Lyra understands how to use the subtle knife faster than Will, but not wanting to tell him what to do, she stays quiet (508), and Falconer comments: "Indeed Lyra surpasses even Milton's prelapsarian Eve in her

⁹ The Spectres are parasite ghosts feeding on grown-up humans' consciousnesses, eliminating almost all adults in the world in which most of the plot *The Subtle Knife* is unfolding.

deference to Adam, so much that one wonders if Lyra's exaggerated performance is meant to underline that she is acting, rather than inhabiting, the dutiful wifely role" (82). I would say that Lyra's adapting "the dutiful wifely role" is something that occurs on other occasions in the story as well.

In the end of *The Subtle Knife* Lyra is abducted by Mrs Coulter, and in the beginning of *The Amber Spyglass* she is already incapacitated in her drugged sleep. Squires compares this with the traditional fairy tale design: Lyra being the captured princess and Will the hero who is coming to save her (127). She is immobilised as this "enchanted sleeper" (the name of the first chapter, which surely brings fairytales to mind (645)) for approximately one third of the book, and in the meantime Will goes on a long and dangerous journey to find and free her. Hence, Lyra started out as the obvious myth-hero in *Northern Lights*, thereafter she had to start sharing that title with Will in the following book, and, suddenly, in the third book, her status as myth-hero seems significantly reduced and almost taken over by Will, while she is depicted as a maiden in need of a brave man's rescue. Then, when Will has finally saved Lyra, she again inhabits "the dutiful wifely role", obvious in the scene following their escape: "How lucky Will was that she was awake now to look after him! He was truly fearless, and she admired that beyond measure" (AS 790). This subservient stance is a recurring occurrence, as Lyra appears to go from being a brave independent girl into being a maiden needing protection. The scene where this might be most apparent is when they encounter horrific harpies in the world of the dead: "Will had the girl pressed against his chest, with his shoulder curved over to protect her, and he felt her shaking and sobbing against him" (893) and "Lyra shrank to the ground at once, covering her ears, and Will, knife in hand, crouched over her" (897). Though they are both in the same dreadful place and situation, Lyra seems super-fragile and is relying on Will to be composed and strong.

One could have thought that with everything Lyra has come up against during the course of the plot, she should have toughened rather than weakened. In *Northern Lights* Lyra seems almost fearless. The only one that appears to scare her is Mrs Coulter:

...all the fear in her nature was drawn to Mrs Coulter as a compass needle is drawn to the Pole. All the other things she'd seen, and even the hideous cruelty of intercision¹⁰, she could cope with; she was strong enough... (226).

Will's greatest fear has also to do with his mother, which he admits to Lyra: "What *I'm* afraid of...is getting stuck somewhere and never seeing my mother again" (AS 801). Thoughts about his mother, whom he worries greatly about as she is mentally ill, repeatedly sabotage his focus, which becomes most apparent as he needs to concentrate when using the knife to cut openings between worlds. At one point he cannot hold his feelings back, and the knife breaks. Pugh argues that the broken "phallic knife" symbolises failed masculinity and that the whole story depends on him "surpassing his childhood dependence on maternal figures" in order to become the hero he needs to be (70). This connects to his hardening-process, mentioned earlier: in crude terms, Will must stop being a mama's boy, cut the umbilical cord and become a man.

So, while Will must become a man, Lyra apparently must become a woman. The "Guerilla Girls" write in their book on female stereotypes: a "Tomboy [is] amusing and accepted [while she is still a child], but at puberty she [is] expected to 'grow out of it' and become ladylike" (14). This is precisely what seems to happen to Lyra. In the beginning she is undoubtedly the uncontroversial female myth-heroine whose anti-authoritarianism and willpower constantly drive her forward. Then she meets Will, whose very name suggests strength of will, and indeed the contrast is evident when Lyra now obediently decides to dedicate herself to his cause and according to his will, while he, as Lauren Shohet points out, is full of "self-determination" and refuses to take orders (Lenz 27), and even declares that: "Whatever I do, I will choose it, no one else" (AS 1068). In the last book Lyra is much altered into a "Sleeping Beauty"-role, where after she maintains much of the fairytale-princess features, as she becomes more passive and submissive. In the end everything is turned into a love story, and, as Russ states, there is nothing uncontroversial about a female protagonist in a love story (9). It could even be said that Lyra is a myth-hero no longer, but has turned into the much more feminine fairy-tale hero. Russ also points out that other sort of plot she knows in which "heroines can figure equally with heroes" is totally dependent on the heroine's still being a child (8). Russ also exemplifies her statement with the case of Jane Eyre, who is

¹⁰ The experimental procedure in which human and daemon are separated.

a passionate and outspoken child that grows into a modest and dutiful woman. In briefly paralleling *Jane Eyre* with *His Dark Materials*, one could say that Lyra's being genderless as a child and later submitting to femininity, seems a pretty conventional coming of age story-trait. In the end Lyra returns to her world a changed person. Not unlike *Jane Eyre* she is now more modest and dutiful and quite content with settling in her new feminine role. As she now is able to identify with the feminine, she also has let go of her patronising view of women and can appreciate how "much cleverer, and more interesting, and kindlier" (AS 1081) one of the female Scholars is, as opposed to how Lyra remembers her. In the last pages we glimpse her future through the master of Jordan's "awe of the beautiful adult she would be, so soon" (1084) and her own worries about the girls at the girl school she will attend:

They might be cleverer than she was, or more sophisticated, and they were sure to know a lot more than she did about all the things that were important to girls of their age. (1086).

It seems Lyra's vigorous and forceful spirit is now gone; it simply drained away, as if only compatible with the nature of a child.

Conclusion

Through the reversal of the Genesis-story, Pullman clearly intends to redeem womankind. The concept of Dust seem to signify equality, rather than hierarchy, and it is obvious that Pullman supports questioning of hierarchies and power structures.

But even though the underlying message in *His Dark Materials* appears to stand for equality, as it condemns socially invented hierarchical structures, Pullman's depiction of his two main female characters in relation to the male ones, does not seem to contribute to that same message of equality. Despite first appearances, Lyra and Mrs Coulter fail to "transcend traditional gender roles"; rather, they seem to transcend *into* traditional gender roles. In their patriarchal world, nifty methods are required by women in order to not be immediately classified as second-rate citizens. Lyra and Marisa Coulter represent two different reactions to the male-dominated society. The former responds by adopting its prejudice values and the latter by trying to use those values to her advantage. That is to say: Marisa handles it by exaggerating her femininity, using it to climb the social ladder and seducing men, portrayed as helpless to her alluring

means, all for the sake of power and influence. Lyra, on the other hand, starts out a tomboy who refuses to be at all associated with femininity, with the exception of the small detour into her mother's feminine world, and her stance towards the patriarchal system is to recognise herself as belonging to the "superior" side of the gender division.

Then they change. Marisa and Lyra do both, in a sense, become mothers and wives – Marisa does this by "renouncing the quest for knowledge" and Lyra by following her quest for knowledge: Lyra's curiosity is rewarded, Marisa's is not. In the end the types of knowledge that count as most true and important are self-knowledge and consciously obtained knowledge. Marisa softens into, what is portrayed as, the natural female role of a mother, by abandoning her aggressive femininity, as well as her previous identity. Lyra softens by inhabiting a very non-aggressive form of femininity: the gentle little girl in need of a strong man to protect her.

In comparing Marisa and Lyra to their male counterparts inequality is easily detected. Lord Asriel is completely indifferent to his fatherhood and is depicted as excessively masculine, and this is portrayed not so much as a social construction but rather as his innate properties. Will also seems to be unavoidably destined to enter this realm, but first he needs to mature past his emotional attachment to his mother. So, unlike the women, the men seem intended for independence beyond family bonds, and powerfulness is depicted as a natural quality that comes with being a man.

Seeing to how Mrs Coulter is portrayed, it is apparent that Pullman criticises socially constructed gender roles turning extreme. Though Lord Asriel is pitiless, his cause as well as his nature are depicted as highly impressive, while Marisa in her state of extreme femininity represents the ultimate villain, a fact that encourages the reading that exaggerated femininity is being criticised in a way that exaggerated masculinity is not. Although, Pullman seems to promote a more modest form of femininity, as in the case with Lyra. While it is, of course, positive that Lyra does no longer despise her own gender, her development is quite a disappointment to the feminist reader, who would have liked for her vigour and courageousness to prevail.

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