The *Aeneid* with Rabbits:

Children's Fantasy as Modern Epic

by

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Abstract

Despite their apparent dissimilarity, children's literature and the epic tradition are often intertwined. This is seen perhaps most clearly in the frequent retelling and repackaging of epics such as *Beowulf* and the *Odyssey* as children's books. If there is potential for epic to become children's stories, however, there is also potential for children's stories to become epic, and a number of important works of children's fantasy have been discussed as epics in their own right.

In this thesis, I examine the extent to which writers of children's fantasy can be viewed as working in an epic tradition, drawing on and adapting epic texts for the modern age as Virgil and Milton did for their own times. Looking specifically at key works of British fantasy written post-WWI, I argue that children's literature and epic serve similar social and cultural functions, including the ability to mythologise communal experience and explore codes of heroism that are absorbed by their intended audience. Rosemary Sutcliff's retellings of epic texts for children suggest the ways in which epic can be reworked to create new heroic codes that are a combination of their source material, the values of their new cultural context, and the author's own personal worldview. This potential is further explored through Richard Adams's *Watership Down*, an animal story that functions in part as a retelling of Virgil's *Aeneid* with rabbits. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* uses the tension between epic and children's fairy-tale to examine the codes at the heart of Norse and Anglo-Saxon epic, and suggest an alternative that nonetheless allows for the glory of an epic worldview. Both T.H. White and Sutcliff engage with the Arthurian myth and the Matter of Britain in ways that use children's literature as a starting point for national epic. Finally, C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman each make use of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (and, in Pullman's case, of Lewis's earlier work) to produce very different fantasies that each look ahead to the end of epic.

Cumulatively, these books illustrate the manner in which children's texts provide a home for the epic in a postmodern age in which many critics suggest the epic in its pure form can no longer survive. The rise of scientific empiricism, combined with national disillusionment following WWI, has been argued to have left epic's traditional worldview of myth, religion and the supernatural impossible to be used without irony. Children's fantasy, ostensibly addressed to "an audience that is still innocent" (Gillian Adams 109), allows authors to

eschew irony in favour of story-telling, and explore ideas such as courage, honour and transcendence that lie at the heart of epic.

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Introduction

At first glance, children's fantasy and the epic tradition seem to have little in common: one, after all, is a genre written to entertain children, while the other is what the Renaissance viewed as the "noblest literary form" (Tillyard 2). Yet the two are often intertwined. As Anna Smol argues, citing Allen Frantzen, the influence of romantic historians who "linked past and present in the paradigm of parent-child relationships, in which the present was the fulfillment – the adult form – of the past" has often meant that the literature of the past becomes viewed as appropriate for "those usually taken to be the simple and unlearned always in our midst – children" (93). As such, epics are frequently directly retold and repackaged as children's fantasy in the same manner as myths, folk tales and fairy tales. Besides these "straight" retellings, a number of children's and young adult writers draw knowingly on individual epics to create new stories (Adele Geras's *Troy* and *Ithaka*, for example, are set against the backdrop of the Trojan War but deal largely with original characters), or to retell the old ones from a different perspective (such as Clemence McLaren's *Inside the Walls of Troy*, which gives the Trojan War from the first-person perspectives of Helen and Cassandra). At its most general, children's literature and fantasy in particular seems simply to have what Lisa Scally terms a "natural epic slant" (211). Many of the features identified with epic are equally applicable to children's fantasy: a cosmic scale, a setting in the distant past, the presence of heroic and supernatural characters, plots pivoting on wars or quests (Martin 10), and even the "persistent motif of travel, symbolic of a search for identity" (Merchant "Epic in Translation" 246).

The basic compatibility of the two genres, however, can also work in reverse, and if epic can become children's literature, there is also increasingly potential for children's literature to become epic. In her 2004 thesis on Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Scally proposes that Pullman has written what Franco Moretti defines as a modern epic, and goes on to consider children's literature as one of the possible locations of epic in a "pluralistic and secular age" (212). Moretti argues that the ability of the epic to function as an "encyclopaedia of a society's own culture" (cited in Scally 212) was lost with the rise of scientific empiricism, which has left epic's traditional worldview of myth, religion and magic unable to be taken seriously and thus epic itself only able to survive as ironic affectation. The true epic impulse for Moretti resides in magical realism, a genre discussed also by Paul Merchant as he

similarly charts the effect on epic of the "sense of disintegration" and loss of old certainties following World War I ("Epic in Translation" 257; 262). Scally sees children's literature as analogous to magical realism in its ability to engage with fantastic myths and serious themes in a manner not otherwise permitted in a fragmented literary landscape, and in its potential to revitalise an "impoverished postmodern adult culture" (222).

The fact that children's fantasy has a relationship with the epic tradition does not necessarily imply that children's literature is a part of that tradition: as critical writers on the epic genre agree without exception, the epic is notoriously difficult to define, and texts can contain features generally considered "epic" without necessarily being epics themselves (and vice-versa) (Martin 10). The idea that certain individual works of children's fantasy can be read or categorised as works of epic, though, is one that has been addressed by a number of critics. In particular, Scally's claim for *His Dark Materials* notably echoes that made by Gillian Adams for Richard Adams's animal fantasy *Watership Down*. "*Watership Down* as Double Journey", citing as inspiration "a remark in the *Times Literary Supplement* about the sorry condition of a modern literature whose only successful epic is about rabbits" (106), claims that *Watership Down* is a novel that functions in two distinct ways for two different sets of readers: as a "Virgilian epic journey which operates on a socio-political level" for a "college-educated adult", and as a "personal journey of a group of brave rabbits who form a composite hero with whom [a child] can identify" (106). Drawing a number of convincing connections between the book and both Virgil's *Aeneid* and a wider epic tradition of heroes, shamans, myths and underworld journeys, Gillian Adams argues that *Watership Down* as epic successfully navigates "the problems [identified by Umberto Eco] faced by a writer who wants to say certain things in a postmodern age which is no longer innocent" (109). As Eco does in texts such as *The Name of the Rose*, Adams employs intertextuality, referencing ancient texts that have been able to deal with his intended subjects without irony, and distancing, setting his book within the microcosm of the animal world, in order to "speak with high seriousness of courage, heroism, faith, honour, dignity, and transcendence" (109). Adams, however, has used the form of a children's book in order to do so, addressing "an audience which is still innocent" and thus will not, like some adults, be "embarrassed by the idea that animals can be heroic and honourable and clever and believe in, even be in contact with, some power higher than themselves" (109). Like Scally, Gillian Adams raises the possibility of children's literature as not only a possible but a necessary location for modern epic.

These critics are primarily arguing for individual works to be read as part of the epic tradition, rather than for a connection between the epic tradition and that of children's fantasy. Nonetheless, both arguments raise interesting questions about how the epic tradition can be defined, and to what extent other writers of contemporary children's fantasy can be seen as contributing to that tradition in the manner attributed to Pullman and Adams. In this thesis, I examine the relationship between epic and children's fantasy by looking at the way in which epic themes, structures and characters are drawn on and modified in young adult and children's fantasy; in particular, British texts, and those published post-WWI. I also argue that children's literature has become a home for epic themes in a literary landscape otherwise often hostile toward their perceived simplicity and moral didacticism, and offers a possibility for the survival of the epic tradition in a modern world.

Given epic's overlap with myth, fantasy and folk-tale, it seems important first to define what distinguishes the epic as a narrative mode. While Peter Toohey's statement that virtually anything can be regarded as epic seems over-inclusive, critical examinations of what exactly constitutes an epic do seem to support his identification of epic as "the most capacious of genres" (31). With the exception of Toohey, though, who considers comic or parodic epics as viable epics in their own right, critics generally agree that epic is characterised by a "high seriousness and elevated style" (Griffin 21; also Tillyard 6; Dixon 24; Martin 10; Reichl 63), the presence of great heroes who are superior to common men and yet mortal (Griffin 18; Toohey 34), the presence of gods and supernatural beings (Griffin 16), and the use of formulaic phrases and recurrent motifs (Martin 10). Although original classical and Anglo-Saxon epics are in verse, most agree that the genre can easily shift forms, with both Catherine Bates and Merchant acknowledging modernist texts such as Joyce's *Ulysses* as well as works of contemporary fantasy as working in an epic tradition (Bates ix, Merchant *The Epic* 24). More important, in Richard Martin's words, is the idea that epics play "a necessary role that transcends genre" (9). The origins of classical and Anglo-Saxon epic arguably lie in the need for a "book of the tribe" (Merchant *The Epic* 21), and serve at once as a record of custom and tradition, a means to glorify heroes believed to be the ancestors of the audience, and a source of popular entertainment (Griffin 13; Toohey 33; Reichl 57; Merchant 21). As such, a traditional epic "sorts through and makes comprehensible important communal experience" (Toohey 33), retelling known stories that transform history through "oral tradition, legend building, myth-making, and poetic licence" (Riechl 57). E.M.W Tillyard defines this function

as "choric": while not necessarily national, "the epic writer must express the feelings of a large group of people living in or near his own time" (12).

In general, "high seriousness" is not considered a feature of children's literature, and children's fantasies are rarely characterised as possessing an "elevated style": in fact, the shift from the epic register to the demotic register and the effects of this shift on meaning is one of the issues of adapting myth into children's stories discussed by John Stephens and Robyn McCallum in their book *Retelling Stories: Framing Culture* (11-12; and throughout). Despite this, the style of epic as well as the subject matter is often discussed by critics as a feature of children's literature. Without intending any wider implications, Maria Nikolajeva defines the traditional mode of narration for children's literature as "epic; that is, based on typical epic narrative structures, telling a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end, with a clear-cut plot, a permanent setting, a set of characters with pre-determined roles, an unambivalent message and moral" ("Exit Children's Literature?" 225). Even more surprisingly, the comparisons occasionally work in reverse, with critics of the epic using children's fiction to illustrate a particular point about the way in which epic functions. Dixon's 1912 book *English Epic and Heroic Poetry*, for example, described the epic's transmutation of "passions and wounds and death … into objects of tranquil and delighted contemplation" as mimicking the pleasure of a "child's fairy tale" (23-24), while Griffin's more recent article describes the relation of the heroes and heroines of epic to their ancient audience as that of "the adults that we saw with the magnifying gaze of childhood, when we ourselves were young" (16). Without it being overtly examined, there seems to be an assumption that epic shares with children's literature a narrative simplicity and focus on story over character that perhaps partially accounts for its perceived suitability for children. This has sometimes been exploited by more sophisticated authors who are thus able to use a shift from an otherwise demotic register into the "elevated style" of epic at key moments as a sign of a shift into "high seriousness", as noted of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* by C.S. Lewis ("*The Hobbit*" 81) and Pullman's *His Dark Materials* by Scally (210).

One of the most commonly identified features of the epic genre is what Bates characterises as its ability to "refer back to and revise what went before" (ix). Wilkie argues that "the great paradox of the epic lies in the fact that the partial repudiation of earlier epic tradition is itself traditional" (cited in Scally 211), while Merchant describes one of the "main characteristic[s]" of the original epics as "the ability to generate successors ... Not only do we

recognise influences and lines of descent from epic into other genres (lyric, theatre, novel, opera), but almost without exception both major and minor practitioners of epic have themselves operated with an unusual sense of their ancestors, and acknowledged pietas" (*The Epic* 246). To Merchant, the ability of epic to translate itself into new narrative modes while maintaining fidelity to tradition is not only important but "begins to seem the key quality of epic" (247). This conception of an epic tradition that constantly and consciously rewrites earlier epics clearly manifests itself in children's fantasy. The most obvious example is perhaps Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, which the author famously described as "*Paradise Lost* in three volumes for teenagers" ("Talking to Philip Pullman" 126). Pullman is far from alone: Gillian Adams, Kenneth F. Kitchell, Edward A. Schmoll and Celia Anderson have all written of the connections between *Watership Down* and the *Aeneid*; John Rateliff's exhaustive *The History of The Hobbit* notes various ways in which Tolkien draws on and modifies *Beowulf* and the Norse sagas; Geraldine Poss has written of the complex relationship between *The Wind in the Willows* and classical epic; and Michael Drout has discussed the influence of *Beowulf* on Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* series, to give only a selection. Though each of these critics argues only for their chosen texts, it is evident that children's literature not only has a "natural epic slant" (Scally 211), but has in fact long been operating as part of a wider epic framework.

Moreover, despite its simpler language and forms, children's fantasy has been seen to engage with the same ideas and arguments as traditional epics, and with an equal seriousness of purpose. The manner in which Pullman deals with the issues at the heart of *Paradise Lost* has been well-documented, often in connection with C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Hatlen 86-91; Bird 111ff; Wood 237ff; and others). More extensively, William Gray's *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth* examines the works of a number of children's fantasy writers, namely Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien and Macdonald, in relation to "a literary tradition that might broadly be described as Romantic" (1). He argues that their texts follow in the footsteps of Romantic writers such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley in their concern with a "High Argument" that addresses "central religious questions that have major cultural implications" (1). Interestingly, like Adams and Scally, though without mentioning epic, Gray indirectly links the use of children's literature and desire to express a "high argument" to an ambivalence toward postmodernism, with Pullman's "desire to create a new mythology ... in tension with any postmodern scepticism towards grand narratives" (4). Though Gray does not argue that these "grand narratives" are enabled by children's literature

in the way that Scally does, discussing the authors' adult books alongside their children's writing with no apparent distinction, it raises some interesting questions. If, as Lewis claimed of his Narnia books, these writers are choosing to write children's books because "a children's story is the best art-form for something [they] have to say" ("On Three Ways of Writing for Children" 32), then what is it that makes children's fantasy so compelling a site for epic themes?

Part of the answer to this may lie in the fact that children's literature seems to share many of the social and cultural functions critics identify as intrinsic to epic. As Toohey argues, ancient epics are among other things "communal works that espouse communal values" (34), glorifying the deeds of national heroes and thus illustrating social and heroic conventions. Children's literature, similarly, has traditionally served a didactic purpose in instructing children, whether explicitly or through the examples of heroic protagonists. Moreover, it has historically, as Peter Hunt points out in his *Introduction to Children's Literature,* reinforced national ideologies and institutions, giving it an importance to "social and political stability [that] can scarcely be underestimated" (35). Both epic and children's literature in their own ways mythologise communal experience, providing codes of heroism and social behaviour that are absorbed and adopted by their intended audience. It is this overlap which most agree has contributed to the proliferation of epic texts retold as children's stories (Smol; Stephen and McCallum 3-4; Hourihan 4). Smol's essay "Heroic Ideology and the Children's *Beowulf*" examines the ways in which Beowulf has been used as an exemplary national hero by English and American writers who seek to make "heroes in the present" through heroes of the past, while Stephens's and McCallum's book *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture* looks far more exhaustively at a range of retellings of traditional stories for younger readers in search of what they term a common impulse or "metanarrative" apparent in the way the stories have been altered in the telling. Stephens and McCallum argue that texts purporting to be retellings of particular traditional stories are in fact "re-versions" (4), "always dealt with in relation to or in dialogue with an overarching cultural and moral perspective" they term the "Western metaethic" (x). These reversions then are intended not only to introduce children to their culture's literary heritage, but to "initiate children into aspects of a social heritage" (3), "offering positive role models, proscribing undesirable behaviour, and affirming the culture's ideologies, systems, and institutions" (4). Margaret Hourihan similarly argues that the traditional heroic patterns found both in children's retellings of myth, epic and folk story and in contemporary fantasy/adventure literature work as "agents of cultural transmission" (4),

perpetuating traditional ideas and social norms. Hourihan goes further that Stephens and McCallum in arguing that this pattern is fixed and inherently harmful, transmitting an adversarial view of the world that sets up binaries between good and evil, men and woman, civilisation and chaos. Her declaration that "we need to tell new stories" (8) is in many ways an echo of the Modernist sensibilities that saw literary trends shift away from epic at the beginning of the twentieth century: Ezra Pound, though himself a proponent of the epic, also famously urged writers to "Make it new." Her numerous examples of this underlying pattern in action, however, inadvertently testify to the appeal of epic themes and motifs while ignoring their essential malleability. If part of the strength and power of epic is indeed its ability to "express the feelings of a large group of people living in or near [the epic writer's] own time" (Tillyard 12), then by definition it must be able to alter to suit changing times and authorial intentions without losing its inherent qualities.

Perhaps the most unexpected and potent connection between the two forms is that both are at heart stories of a vanished age. The action of primary epic invariably takes place in a version of the past that blends mythology and history: the "great heroes" are believed to be the ancestors of those present (Griffin 13), but they exist in a mythical time when men were "closer to the gods ... greater than they are nowadays, in the degenerate present" (Griffin 16). The poets often comment specifically on the decline of humanity since the heroic age, such as when Aeneas easily picks up "a stone, a huge thing which no two men could carry / such as men are now" (*Il.* 20.286-7); and yet, the heroes within the poems themselves also lament their decline from a greater age yet, as when old Nestor claims that the previous generation of heroes were "the strongest generation of earth-born mortals, / the strongest, and they fought against the strongest, the beast men / living in the mountains" (*Il.* 1.267-269). As Griffin goes on to argue, "It follows that no one has actually lived in an heroic age. That is a perspective reserved for posterity, looking back with admiration, or with envy, at the truly great and memorable actions of the past" (16). As a result, "the waning of the heroic world seems to be an internal and an integral element of the epic" (Schmoll 23), and nostalgia for this partly historical and partly constructed age is inherent in the form.

The tradition of children's literature, too, is often discussed critically as inherently nostalgic or idealising – in its case, of childhood experience. In early Victorian works, as Humphrey Carpenter argues, children are treated as implicitly better and wiser than their adult contemporaries, with "a clear, even heightened, vision of the world" (9), and in the later half

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of the nineteenth century the children's book became a location for "an Arcadia, a Good Place, a Secret Garden" (13) for a Britain increasingly gripped by "widespread uncertainty" (15) and scepticism of progress. The result is frequently termed the golden age of children's literature – yet, as Valerie Krips argues, "golden ages have nothing much to do with history-as-it-is-lived; they shine in retrospect, a vision to backward-looking eyes" (9). In her book *The Presence of the Past: Memory, Heritage and Childhood in Postwar Britain*, Krips discusses the power of child characters such as Lewis Carroll's Alice to represent a social and personal past, "walk[ing] out of worlds we have lost, both the historical world of ... the Victorian Age ... as well as our own childhoods in which we met her fresh as paint" (8). Sarah Gilead, whilst discussing the contradictions that complicate this view, summarises:

> Because the postulated reader is a child, dominant themes in children's literature have centered on the idyll of childhood as a prelapsarian kingdom free from the anxiety, social pressures, and self-division we identify with adulthood … In fact, the concepts 'child' and 'childhood' are insubstantial and secondary reflections of adults' wishes, memories, and fantasies rather than ontologically independent concepts or direct representations of external reality. (145-146)

Like the world of ancient Troy, the world inhabited by children in their books is an adult construction based on nostalgia for a time when the world was smaller and simpler, and thus, paradoxically, seemed greater. Growing up and out of this world, while a necessary conclusion of many books in the *Bildungsroman* tradition, is frequently presented with the mingled glory and regret that the epic writers reserve for the end of the Heroic Age. It is perhaps because of this that in fantasies ostensibly for children, childhood and the epic age are able to coexist comfortably as a realm, built partially on fact and experience and partly on idealised construction, where cultural traditions are celebrated and interrogated.

Children's literature, then, and particularly fantasy, has been written about as operating in a similar narrative mode to epic, using characters and motifs common to epic, examining similar ideas with comparable seriousness to epic, serving a similar social and cultural function to epic, alluding to or retelling specific epics in a way elsewhere described as central to the epic tradition, and even, at least in the case of Adams and Pullman, as being able to function as modern epics. What is missing is one single study that attempts to read important children's texts as works of modern epic, examining the way in which features of the epic

genre are interacting with both conventions of children's literature and the agendas of the respective authors to create works that are part of the epic tradition in their own right. If, as Bates claims, "in order to understand Renaissance epic texts ... it is necessary to see them as speaking to and communicating upon a millennia-long tradition that stretches back as far as Homer if not beyond; while they, in turn, set up new (Christian or Romance) agendas that are crucial to understanding the development of epic in texts of later periods" (ix), then it follows that understanding the way in which texts such as *Watership Down*, *The Hobbit* and *His Dark Materials* operate as part of this same tradition is equally crucial.

In this thesis, I want to showcase some of the different ways that epic and children's literature interact, across a number of texts written in Britain from the 1930s to the present day. These texts will be discussed according to an escalating scale of complexity, from relatively straightforward retellings, to more ambitious works that draw not only on single epics but on a wider tradition of epic, romance, religion, and other children's books along similar lines. As the conclusion will suggest, this selection is by no means comprehensive, and many other titles could have been included. The texts selected, however, are among those that have a claim to be regarded as classics or even epics in their own right. They are also all texts that seem to be deliberately engaging with epic predecessors, and with themes that have preoccupied earlier epic poets. As well as providing a means of understanding the texts themselves, this thesis aims to suggest some of the ways in which children's fantasy works not only *with* epic but *as* epic: glorifying its own heroic codes, honouring its own heroes, and communicating grand narratives dependent on belief to a "postmodern world that is no longer innocent" (Gillian Adams 109).

"This is the Story of Odysseus": Rosemary Sutcliff's Adaptations of Epic for Children

Rewriting myth and epic as children's tales is a tradition in and of itself. Just as I will later argue that certain works of children's literature can become epics in their own right, certain key retellings of epics have become classics of children's literature, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* and, later, Rosemary Sutcliff's *Black Ships Before Troy*, *The Wanderings of Odysseus* and *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*. Books such as these represent the simplest and most obvious relationship between children's literature and the epic, as the stories and characters of works such the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf* are distilled into versions designed to provide children with their first experience of a vast mythic tradition. By focusing specifically on Sutcliff's retellings, I want in this chapter to suggest the ways in which epic can be reworked into children's books to create new heroic codes that are a combination of their source material, the values of their new cultural context, and the author's own personal worldview.

The fact that a children's book adaptation of a myth or epic is a product of its cultural context, genre and the personal concerns of its author should not be particularly surprising, given that it holds true for all authors' use of mythic material from Homer onwards. Yet children's adaptations of myth and epic are perhaps unique in literary criticism in that the standard of excellence against which they are measured is often one of fidelity rather than originality. Positive reviews for Sutcliff's *The Wanderings of Odysseus* often single out her ability to "preserve a certain formality of language" and retain "all the important episodes" of the *Odyssey* (*Kirkus Review*), while her adaptation of *Beowulf* is criticised by Alice Mills for relatively minor changes to the original. Even a book such as Robert Nye's *Bee Hunter: Adventures of Beowulf,* which departs radically from its source text, is not advertised as a bold new interpretation by its own 1968 dustcover, but explained and justified as "not dictated by any craving for novelty; [the changes] are a serious attempt to get to the essentials of the tale as [Nye] sees them and to make it live in a way that children will understand and enjoy".

Despite these claims, children's adaptations of epic are still inevitably products of the age and culture in which they are written, arguably to an even greater extent than they are of the age and culture they purport to describe. This idea is examined in great detail throughout Stephens and McCallum's *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture,* where it is argued that such retellings "under the guise of offering children access to strange and exciting worlds removed from everyday experiences … serve to initiate children into aspects of a social heritage, transmitting many of a culture's central

values and assumptions and a body of shared allusions and experiences" (3). By "offering positive role models, proscribing undesirable behaviour, and affirming the culture's ideologies, systems, and institutions" (4), retellings of epic for children become directly or indirectly didactic, and as a result must be altered to better reflect the didactic impulse of contemporary society. As Stephens and McCallum phrase it, "any particular retelling may purport to transmit elements of a culture's formative traditions and even its sustaining beliefs and assumptions, but what it always discloses is some aspect of the attitudes and ideologies pertaining at the cultural moment in which that retelling is produced" (ix).

Rosemary's Sutcliff's adaptations, including those of *Beowulf* and the *Odyssey,* perhaps best exemplify this paradox, largely because her attempts to transmit a literary heritage rather than interpret are among the most sincere and the most successful. Unlike many adaptors, Sutcliff remains largely faithful to the original epics, preserving not only plot and characterisation but often language and style. This very fidelity, however, by necessity draws attention to the rare occasions where Sutcliff does make an addition or an amendment to the original text, and proves an interesting guide to where the province of epic can be seen to overlap with that of children's fantasy. More importantly, it illustrates the manner in which epic material can blend with children's literature to create a new heroic code out of the old, and the extent to which this code becomes that of the author responsible for their adaptation rather than solely that of Stephens's and McCallum's "Western metaethic". The weight given to retellings as agents of cultural transmission often seems to preclude their potential for recognition as works of a particular author, with a particular set of stylistic and thematic choices. Yet Sutcliff's adaptations are not only faithful adaptations but also wholly characteristic of her more famous historical works. Her adaptations of *Beowulf* and the *Odyssey* are rarely, if ever, intentionally didactic, and yet the behaviour of her heroes embodies particular ways of viewing the world that belong as much to Sutcliff herself as to the original epics and her cultural context.

Constructing the Hero in *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*

According to Anna Smol, *Beowulf* emerged as children's literature at the turn of the twentieth century largely due to its ability to serve as "the story of an exemplary hero who could teach boys the virtues of their race" (90). In the hands of contemporary American and British writers, the character of Beowulf became a manifestation of national character, a "pure Teutonic hero not yet corrupted by more refined, effeminate Latin, French, and Christian influences" (91), and one who could comfortably accommodate "the prevailing heroic ideology evident in books such as those by

G. A. Henty or boys' magazines such as *Chums* that propounded an image of an Anglo-Saxon hero as a muscular good sport unafraid of staring down the enemy in a heroic last stand" (MacDonald, cited by Smol 90). Stephens and McCallum similarly argue that "cultural conservation and nationalism combine to give *Beowulf* a unique status" (93) among epics seen as potential children's texts: as the earliest English epic, *Beowulf* is seen as being able to transmit to children a sense of the perceived origins of their race and nation (Smol 91). Such adaptations of *Beowulf* are specifically instructive texts, some of the earliest of which explicitly claim that their intention is to "not only pass on the fame of the heroes of the past but help make heroes in the present" (Mabie, cited in Smol 90).

Whether Sutcliff saw her books as "making heroes in the present" is debatable, especially given that she herself believed "the thing that makes a Hero cannot survive in the Modern world" (cited Stephens and McCallum 94). Her generally faithful depiction of Beowulf in her 1961 adaptation *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer* does, though, follow the tradition of constructing an exemplary hero. Although Sutcliff's version is no more didactic than the epic itself, which also offers guidance or at least voices commonly-agreed cultural values through the mouths of the characters, the morality thus voiced is subtly altered to better reflect contemporary cultural values. In both versions, for example, the Geats are reluctant to lose Beowulf, but while in the epic they "urged him on, / Observed omens, figured the fates, / Called his quest good" (42), Sutcliff's Hygelac understands that "a man should pay his debts" (14). Without voicing a concept at all alien to the Anglo-Saxons, Sutcliff replaces the abstract concepts of fate and questing with a more immediately applicable and humanistic one, suggesting that the heroic code of the book's heterocosm is intended to be directly relatable to the modern child reader in ways that cannot reasonably be expected of the original.

More specifically, Beowulf himself is cast in a modern heroic mode, largely through the addition of direct descriptions of his character and person not found in the original poem. Though such descriptions are, as Mills notes, a necessity when adapting an epic into the conventions of a novel (Mills 78), it also enables (or forces) Sutcliff to directly suggest the qualities that make Beowulf a hero, and by implication the qualities held by modern culture to be heroic: "a peaceable man, slow to anger and quick to forgive" (29) yet still able to be "angry" when scorned (29). Contributing to this characterisation is the fact that the behaviour of Sutcliff's Beowulf is considerably more modest than that of the original. With the social context that expects heroes to proclaim their deeds and lineage removed, Beowulf's original boast that he is "the healer who can help Hrothgar – I bring a remedy for the sickening foe" is replaced by the less ostentatious explanation that "a few days since, word came to Hygelac's court that Hrothgar of the Danes was in need of champions to rid

him of the monster… and so we are come" (18), and he offers his help to Hrothgar with a gesture "half-proud and half-pleading" (27). This is partially a symptom of Sutcliff's own particular moral code, evident throughout her books: in her autobiography of her early years, she describes boasting as "the next most shameful thing to crying in public" (Sutcliff *Blue Remembered Hills* 94). It also follows a common practice in rewriting Beowulf as a hero figure: even Nye's myopic, toothache-afflicted, trickster Beowulf, who otherwise departs greatly from exemplary heroism, is explicitly "not given to boasting" (40). Though Beowulf still fights Grendel without weapons in both Sutcliff's and Nye's versions, he does so not to display his own abilities and prove that he does not "claim any lesser strength, / Any poorer power, any weaker will, / Than Grendel" (677-679), but purely because "mortal weapons were of no use against the Troll-kind; such creatures must be mastered, if they could be mastered at all, by a man's naked strength, and the red courage of his heart" (Sutcliff 34). Beowulf's only outburst of heroic boasting in *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*, occasioned by Hunferth's mocking and excused by his anger, is supported by the "sympathies of every man in Heorot" (30), and is followed by Beowulf returning to his place "quietly, as though nothing had happened" (30).[1]

This latter action in fact speaks directly to Sutcliff's handling of one of the most contentious issues in translating *Beowulf*: the idea of the hero's place within his society, and hence the potential danger he represents to the fabric of this society. As Stephens and McCallum argue, narratives that centre on an exemplary hero often display a tension between the hero's "articulated sociality and exemplary individuality" (95), where the hero's power threatens to rise above sociality and become "located in his uncommon individual qualities as a person" rather than "grounded in any social role" (95). Though Stephens and McCallum discuss the idea as a problem of modern hero narratives, Jackson outlines similar themes in ancient heroic epic, including *Beowulf*, arguing that all major epics involve some form of tension between a hero and a king after the intrusion of an outsider into an established society "who often proves more powerful than the ruler to whose court he comes" (4). Seemingly, to be a hero powerful enough to protect an ordered society by necessity is to be powerful enough to rise above that society, and thus threaten the order upon which it is founded. Sutcliff is apparently aware of this paradox, and Beowulf is described upon his first appearance in a way that marks him as both of his society, yet superior to it. He is "fair-haired and

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Sutcliff's Hunferth serves as far more of a foil to Beowulf's exemplary manhood than does the poem's Unferth. While the latter is a thyle and a kinslayer, Hunferth is referred to as "the Jester", who "loung[es]" at the king's feet and repeatedly "flush[es]" with anger and drink (28). (Sutcliff's Telemachus in *The Wanderings of Odysseus* is similarly described as "flush[ing] like a girl" (53) when embarrassed, implying a lack of masculinity.)

grey-eyed as most of his fellows were", but at the same time "taller than them by half a head"; sitting "in a place that was not particularly high, nor yet particularly lowly", but only because "he was one who seldom cared about his rightful place unless another man thought to deny it to him" and nonetheless possessing "something in his face and his whole bearing that … marked him for what he was" (12). Instead of being used to illustrate this potential tension, however, Beowulf's heroism is consistently framed in such a way that ties it to social belonging rather than to exemplary individuality. Sutcliff reminds us constantly of Beowulf's role as a sea captain and his subsequent connection to his "shoulder-to-shoulder brothers" (13), who echo his resolution to go to Heorot with "brightening eyes, once more a brotherhood and a war-boat's crew" (13). While the concept of loyalty toward a lord is certainly not foreign to Anglo-Saxon culture, Sutcliff expands and intensifies episodes such as Beowulf's men waiting for his return when the Scyldings have given up hope, and reframes them in more applicable terms of brotherhood: when Beowulf asks his kinsman why he stayed, Waegmund replies, "As to hope, there was little enough of that left to us, but we were still your war-boat's crew, your shoulder-to-shoulder men" (63). Later, this sense of duty is echoed in Sutcliff's depiction of Beowulf as ruler, as he goes to face the dragon not for glory but because "he was the King; and for him the last resort was the duty and the privilege of dying for the life of his people" (78). The figure of "the King Sacrifice ... the god, the king, the hero, who must die for the people when the call comes" (Sutcliff *Sword at Sunset* 357) is a common one throughout Sutcliff's own books, as is the strength of the bonds between the leader and their followers. Sutcliff characteristically avoids the tension between the "Hero and the King" that Jackson argues is inherent to any epic because her Beowulf's identity as a hero is contained by, as well as having its roots in, his identity as a member of his society.

Similarly, the female characters in *Beowulf* are, without being marginalised, gently shaped into roles that are less problematic or more conventional for a modern audience. Unlike many versions which mention Wealhtheow only in passing, Sutcliff reproduces her appearances and speeches from the epic and even hints at her power as "the cheerful uproar lull[s] as her coming" (31). She is depicted, though, as strictly outside the masculine rule of the hall, emerging with her handmaids from behind a curtain and professing that Beowulf's arrival has been heard "even in the women's quarters" (32). Beowulf's attitude toward her is respectful yet superior, as he gently corrects her praise of him by "smiling" (32) and chiding her that "valour is a word to use when the battle is over" (32). Moreover, in keeping with Sutcliff's avoidance of examining the "fragility of heroic social structure" (Stephens and McCallum 98), the moment which sees Hrothgar apparently tempted to dispossess his kin and name Beowulf heir apparent when Beowulf's "generous heroism almost overreaches Hrothgar's capacity to reciprocate it" (98) is avoided in the retelling. As a result, Wealhtheow no

longer wields political power by diplomatically advising Hrothgar to "use well your gifts and give rewards / While you may, but leave your kingdom / To kinsmen when you go, to folk and family" (1180-1182). Instead, Wealhtheow smilingly refers to Beowulf as Hrothgar's "new son" (43), and gives him "gifts of [her] own from the women's quarters" (43).

By contrast, the dangerous femininity represented by Grendel's mother often capitalised on in modern adaptations[2] is downplayed by Sutcliff. Though she is still characterised entirely as the mother of Grendel, she is, as Mills points out, usually referred to as the Sea-Hag or Grendel's Dam, alleviating contemporary anxiety about viewing a creature who is identified solely as a mother as alien and monstrous (Mills 79). Her maternal characteristics are moreover depicted in terms of an animal rather than a human mother, described as "mad with grief as a bitch-wolf whose cubs are taken from her" (46) and later attacking Beowulf with tooth and claw "as though she were a wolf indeed" (57). Just as Beowulf's heroic role is safely confined to the boundaries of society, Wealhtheow's role is defined by contemporary (at the time of writing) social expectations of femininity, while Grendel's mother is deliberately placed so far outside human society that she is no longer in any human sense female.

This polarisation of society and chaos hinted at in Wealhtheow and Grendel's Mother is assisted by Sutcliff's almost relentless historicisation of the epic. Historicising *Beowulf* is a common practice among children's adaptors, partially stemming from the nationalistic sense of the story as, in the words of the introduction to the 1908 *Brave Beowulf*, "an interesting first book of Anglo-Saxon history" (Cartwright, cited in Smol 92). Perhaps the most radical of these is Turner's *Beowulf's Downfall*, which omits Grendel entirely in order to focus on Beowulf's historicised upbringing and frequently presents the more mythic elements as attributed rather than recorded (Stephens and McCallum 99-100). In *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*, this is more subtly achieved through a style often owing more to Greek and Roman epic than to Anglo-Saxon, in which domestic and environmental details of the book's society are encoded within extended similes: the Geats' war-gear, for example, "sound[s] on them as the feathers of wild swans sound in flight" (21), while the feasting in Heorot "roar[s] up like a fire when dry birch bark is flung on to it" (28). Sutcliff also directly includes details such as the layout of the hall, the warriors' weapons and war-gear, and the food served at the

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[2] Nye's *Bee Hunter*, for example, depicts Grendel's mother (usually referred to as She) as a monstrously tentacled creature with "a spoor that smells as sweet as mother's milk" (64), who wraps Beowulf in "spongy, intangible fingers ... irresistibly insistent, coaxing, maternal" (71) and draws him towards her "making kissing and swallowing noises" (72). As Stephens and McCallum point out, Beowulf defeats her by asserting his own masculinity as he "chants a litany of masculine self-creation which effaces women", declaring himself "Beowulf, father of himself", and finally turning "the sex act which is death back against her" (116): "Gently, carefully, with a stroking softness that was nearly pity, Beowulf ... strangled her" (Nye 73).

feast clearly drawn from history, grounding the story in realism. Unusually, though, she also alters more minor details of the epic in order to remove extraneous monsters. Not only does Beowulf's swimming duel and sea-monster fight become a boat-race "off the coast of Finland" (29) culminating in a walrus hunt, but the monster speared at the entrance to Grendel's mother's cave is in Sutcliff's version a walrus that is marvelled at not for its strangeness but because "it was a great brute and would yield much ivory" (52). Mills in particular strongly criticises Sutcliff for this, seeing it as an attempt at rationalisation that, given the impossibility of rationalising Grendel and his mother, only serves to rob the story of its "shivery sense that everywhere outside monsters and danger may lurk" (76). While this is true, by keeping Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon as the only mythic intrusions into an otherwise rational world, Sutcliff also strengthens the contrast between the order and society represented by Beowulf and Heorot, and the chaos represented by the monsters with their "charmed hide[s]" (37) and swords "dwarf-wrought ... for giants in the far-past days" (59).

This all, to some extent, touches on the most contentious issue surrounding the adaptation of *Beowulf* into children's fiction: the perceived simplification of the story into a story of man against "simply delineated hostile forces" (Stephens and McCallum 98) that serves as a paradigm of good and evil respectively. Though Hourihan argues that Beowulf has always been a story of a hero who "preserve[s] society from the inroads of darkness" (89), Stephens and McCallum argue that in fact the monsters in *Beowulf* can be read as doublings of the hero himself, or at least as intrinsic to the problems of a heroic society where the existence of the hall as the site and source of social life "calls into being the very conditions which are the opposite to its aspirations: isolation and exile, treachery, greed, and envy" (93). These ambiguities are not generally part of children's retellings. Instead, the deliberate contrast between light and dark that is already implicit in *Beowulf* is frequently accentuated by modern authors, as seen in Nye's depiction of the fight between Beowulf and Grendel:

> But all at once the light had caught [Grendel]. It had him by the claw. It was Beowulf! ... To Grendel, it was as if the sun itself had caught him in its clutch. Made of wickedness as he was, the good in this man burned him. (46)

Sutcliff's historical novels – as will be discussed later in relation to her Arthurian stories – are not concerned so much with the threat of evil to good as they are with the threat of barbarism to civilisation: what Stephens and McCallum, speaking of her Roman Britain novels, refer to as a "continuing conflict between the transforming forces of order and rationality, and the 'darkness' of

superstition and the submission to the imperatives of natural rhythms" (152). Grendel and his mother are therefore not emphasised as evil, but instead as primitive "Troll-kind" with only an animalistic inner life (in keeping with Grendel's mother as the "bitch-wolf", Grendel is depicted "snuff[ing] about [the door]" of Hrothgar's hall and "snarling in rage" at the "man-smell" (36)). Her clear delineation between the rational, historical world of Beowulf and his men and the primal darkness of the three monsters (including the dragon) emphasises Beowulf's victory in *Dragon Slayer* as moral and symbolic victory of order over chaos.

What is also characteristic of Sutcliff is her awareness that this victory is only temporary, and yet her insistence that it is nonetheless worth celebrating. Sutcliff's Roman Britain books frequently emphasise the ultimate failure of the Roman troops, particularly those left behind after the Roman evacuation of Britain, to hold back the Saxon invaders; her Roman characters, though, see value in the struggle for its own sake. Likewise, although the end of *Dragon Slayer* does not emphasise, as the original epic does, the collapse of Beowulf's people after his death, it does not leave out the detail that after Beowulf's fight with the dragon "the War Chieftains will come against [the Geats] as they have not dared to do for fifty years, and Beowulf who should have led us against them is dead" (91). Nor does it hint, unlike Nye's version, that Beowulf's actions have any wider cosmic significance beyond their immediate protection of first Hrothgar's and then his own kingdom. In fact, as Wiglaf tells the deserters, with Beowulf's death "the joy and honour he gave us are fled from the land" (91). This, though, matters less to the end of the book than "the love [his people] had borne him" (93), and the fact that Beowulf has "gladly … paid away his life to save his people from the Terror-that-flew-by-Night" (92). In this, he fulfils the common Sutcliffean role of the King Sacrifice or "Sacred King, the Leader whose divine right, ultimately, is to die for the life of the people" (Sutcliff *Sword at Sunset* vii), however short that life might be. For Sutcliff, the key to *Beowulf* is found in Beowulf's advice to Hrothgar, which she replicates in the book and which echoes throughout her Beowulf's actions: "Each of us must wait the end of our life, and if a man gains honour while he lives … that is best for a warrior when the time comes that Wyrd cuts the web of his living from the loom" (48). Beowulf can say upon his death that he has "not sought out feuds, nor sworn many oaths and lightly broken them; and when [his] life goes out from [his] body [he] shall not have to answer to the All-Father for slain kinsfolk or unjust rule" (89). This, from the epic and yet interpreted through the lens of Sutcliff's own preoccupations, is what ultimately becomes the heroic code of the book.

The Wanderings of Odysseus and the Sutcliffean Hero

This balance of faithfully reproducing an epic text and interpreting it for young readers can be seen even more clearly in Sutcliff's retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*, *The Wanderings of Odysseus*, published posthumously in 1995. The hero of the *Odyssey* comes from both a very different cultural background and a very different heroic tradition to Beowulf. Not only is Odysseus a hero of the Ancient Greeks rather than the Anglo-Saxons, but unlike Beowulf he is an uncomfortable hero even within his original cultural context: not entirely a trickster hero, yet with his penchant for trickery and disguise often at odds with more conventional heroic ideals. Despite this, the folk-tale aspects of the *Odyssey* have led to it being frequently adapted for children either whole or in part, and Sutcliff's *The Wanderings of Odysseus* works to make Odysseus a contemporary – and Sutcliffean – heroic figure while maintaining fidelity to the original epic.

Odysseus is in many ways the classical hero least suited to didactic purposes: notoriously morally ambiguous, his famous intelligence, eloquence, adaptability and skill at deceit have led to him being both admired and vilified by a range of authors from Homer onwards. Nonetheless, one of the most popular early children's versions of the *Odyssey,* featured in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales,* is undeniably a didactic text. "Circe's Palace" adapts Book Ten of Homer's epic, with brief summaries of the previous wanderings, altering the language from an epic register to a demotic (except when Odysseus speaks, when his heroism is sometimes signified by a quasi-medieval dialect) and the narrative voice from that of Odysseus to that of Hawthorne's genial narrator. It also, crucially, changes several details of the original story. Most notably, in Hawthorne's version, Circe does not simply transform men into animals but "changes every human being into the brute, beast or fowl whom he happens most to resemble" (104), in keeping with the tradition established in the Renaissance by writers such as Spenser and Milton. While here this is not necessarily a moral punishment – it is never said why Odysseus, according to Quicksilver/Hermes, is in danger of having his "royal and sagacious self" (104) transformed into a fox[3] – it is certainly framed as such for King Picus, who has been imported from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and has here become a bird for being "rather too proud of his purple robe, and his crown, and the golden chain about his neck" (104), and even more so for Odysseus's men. The sailors, constantly described by Hawthorne as "terrible gormandisers" (86), become parodic representations of a gluttonous upper class, and after gorging themselves on the enchanted food are transformed into pigs by Circe as she tells them,

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[3]   The necessary threat of Odysseus' possible transformation clearly poses problems for Hawthorne, who seeks to present the transformations as evidence of inherent "brutishness" and yet Odysseus himself as a hero without flaws. Clearly the idea of Odysseus as a fox is actually a punishment for the epic hero's cunning, with Circe telling him to "go exercise your craft in stealing poultry" (108), yet to depict him as escaping punishment for craftiness through divinely sanctioned craftiness would ruin the moral, and Hawthorne's Odysseus is consistently described as "wise" rather than clever or wily.

"You have abused a lady's hospitality; and in this princely saloon your behaviour has been suited to a hog-pen. You are already swine in everything but the human form, which you disgrace ... Assume your proper shapes, gormandisers, and begone to the sty!" (100). This behaviour is set against that of both "prudent Eurylochus" (112) and Odysseus himself, "a bold man as well as a prudent one" (86), who at Circe's table fills his lungs instead with the "pure and simple fragrance" of the flower whose "virtue" causes him to grow "even more manly and king-like than before" (108). Though the men themselves humorously fail to learn a moral lesson (Odysseus tells Circe that his men "are hardly worth the trouble of changing them into human form again", and he will have it done only "lest their bad example should corrupt the other hogs" (110)), the authorial warnings against gluttony and brutishness are clearly intended to be absorbed by the child reader, as is the restored Picus's final decision to no longer be "proud of his crown and his trappings of royalty" but instead regard himself as "merely the upper servant of his people, and ... make them better and happier" (111).

Overt moralising, even in children's books, is not as fashionable in a postmodern literary landscape. Anthony Horowitz's "The Eye of the Cyclops" even goes so far as to parody the very concept of the *Odyssey* as moral text: when Odysseus (who himself receives no punishment for declaring his name to Polyphemus) tells Polyphemus that his blinding might teach him to remember the sacred laws of hospitality, we are told instead that the Cyclops in fact "never showed anyone the slightest trace of hospitality ... And who can blame him?" (121). Instead, the "moral" offered by Horowitz, in a very loose paraphrase of Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is that "to lose one eye when you have two of them is a great misfortune, but if you have only one to begin with, it is nothing short of a catastrophe" (121). Despite this, the idea of Odysseus as a moral hero set against the uncivilised behaviour of both his crew and the wild races he encounters is one that has survived in children's adaptations to varying extents. Robin Lister's 1987 retelling, for example, freely alters Odysseus's behaviour in several parts of the story, allowing him to serve as a moral compass for his crew onto whom dishonourable behaviour is deflected. When Odysseus's men begin to plunder Polyphemus' cave, an act clearly against ancient and modern rules of hospitality but in which Homer's Odysseus participates without a qualm, Lister's Odysseus is "outraged", telling his men, "We're not mean, sneaking beggars but men of honour!" (40). This not only frames Odysseus as a hero in the chivalric mode, following a code of honour largely foreign to Greek notions of heroism, but does so in a way that explicitly rejects a key traditional element of Odyssean heroism: Homer's Odysseus, of course, *is* a "sneaking beggar", at least some of the time.

Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Wanderings of Odysseus,* by contrast, is meticulous in retaining not only

Odysseus' original actions, but the language and simile Homer uses to describe them, albeit in simplified form. The only arguable moments of didacticism can be explained as an effect of transferring what in the epic is Odysseus' storytelling into third person (observations such as "there was no help in weeping" (33), while direct translations of the epic, have different connotations coming from an omniscient author figure than they do coming from the hero of the story), and her narration is carefully non-judgemental. At the same time, as with her Beowulf, Sutcliff's Odysseus is subtly guided toward a certain heroic paradigm. Most notably, while Sutcliff rarely refrains from depicting elements of Odysseus's behaviour that by Western standards would be considered dishonourable, she does frequently insert explanations that justify this behaviour in Western terms. An obvious example of this can be found in the opening pages, which (as Sutcliff reorders the epic chronologically) deals with Odysseus and his men sacking the city of Ismarus. While the morality of plundering Ismarus is something the epic is not troubled by, Sutcliff is careful to point out, "Now, the Thracians had been allies of Troy during the war, and Odysseus's men considered themselves still at war with them" (3), framing the subsequent plunder as an act of legitimate warfare rather than piracy. Similarly, she goes on to describe not the plundering itself, but Odysseus's protection of Maron and his wife and child, and the priest's gratitude that results in a gift of wine. While this detail is Homeric, it is not mentioned in the epic until the Cyclops's cave, and the effect of its placement into chronological order is two-fold: it shifts the focus from Odysseus's unprovoked attack on a town to his display of mercy, and, since the wine is later used to lull Polyphemus to sleep, it establishes Odysseus's later escape from the Cyclops as a direct result of this mercy. Odysseus is therefore immediately established as kind and respectful of "sacred place[s]" (4).[4] In similar fashion, actions that in the epic are either dangerous or problematic are attributed to an innocent "hunger after any kind of strange experience" (30) comparable to Beowulf's "longing for adventure that was in his blood" (*Beowulf: Dragon Slayer* 13), while Odysseus's worst mistake, revealing his name to Polyphemus in a burst of pride and anger, is excused by Odysseus being "still a little crazed with all that he had been through" (15).

Perhaps the most consistent change in Odysseus's characterisation comes in the portrayal of the hero's relationship with his doomed crew. In Homer's epic, Odysseus is continually distrusted by his men because of his cunning intelligence (*metis*) and his propensity towards deception, leading to continual conflict and often mutiny on their part. Sutcliff's Odysseus, by contrast, follows in the

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[4]   Reordering our introduction to Odysseus in this way also ensures that the first time we see him he is not a dispossessed beggar who takes five books to make an appearance in his own epic, but a captain and a war hero. This lessens the sense that Odysseus' wanderings cause him to become divorced from his own identity, echoing Potter's description of Sutcliff's Beowulf as "always consistent with himself" (108) and arguably allowing him to better serve as an exemplary hero.

footsteps of her Beowulf (and many of the heroes of her historical books) in possessing a strong sense of duty toward and camaraderie with his men, as with Beowulf often couched in the terms of a contemporary naval captain. (Sutcliff's father was a naval officer.) As in the epic, Odysseus contemplates suicide upon waking to find the released winds carrying him away from Ithaka, but Sutcliff has him refrain explicitly through duty: "But he still had his men to think of, though the evil was of their making, and he strengthened his heart within him and took command of his ship" (19). Similarly, Odysseus stays with his ship upon reaching the Laestrygonians despite being "bitter" with his men "because he was their captain" (20), and later agrees to stay with Circe partially because "he knew that he and his men needed rest and fresh supplies before they took to the seaways again" (30). Even when Odysseus, as in Homer, is gripped by the desire to kill Eurylochus when the sailor refuses to accept Circe's hospitality, it is not simply through anger, but from concern that Eurylochus will "spread his fear among the rest" (30). (Lister is again even more strict, and does not even allow Odysseus to consider violence; instead his Odysseus, fearing he "had been too hard on [Eurylochus]", puts his arm around his shoulders and speaks "more gently" (66).) Here, Sutcliff follows Hawthorne rather than Homer, who has Odysseus go to rescue his men with the claim that, "As I am your king ... and wiser than any of you, it is therefore the more my duty to see what has befallen our comrades" (102). The negation of this sense of conflict is further aided by Sutcliff's shift in narrative voice from Odysseus himself, who in the epic tells the entirety of his dealings with his men, to an omniscient third-person. The repeatedly used "they" therefore becomes not a reference to Odysseus' men apart from him, but Odysseus and his men as a collective, occasionally referred to simply as "the Greeks" (4) or "the living men" (37). The effect of this can be clearly seen in Sutcliff's opening episode, the sacking of Ismarus. After plundering the city, we are told that "Odysseus's men ... would not set sail that evening" (4), but no mention is made of Odysseus attempting to dissuade them or of the epic's resulting conflict, and from then on Odysseus and his men are referred to as one:

> And while they feasted, men from the town slipped out to warn the people in the farms and outlying settlements ... And at dawn they attacked the Greeks on the shore. The Greeks were woolly-witted with so much eating and drinking. They put up the stoutest fight they could; but it was a running fight back to their ships, and when they pushed off ... they left more than seventy of their number lying dead along the beach. (4)

From a hero who frequently operates outside of social and heroic codes, Sutcliff's Odysseus is gently shaped into a hero with a firm place in the social order that is maintained even when adrift from the trappings of civilisation. As in *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*, the idea of a hero as a figure at

once essential to society and dangerously superior is negated, and a sense of duty and brotherhood is prefigured as key to heroic identity.

If Odysseus, like Beowulf, is made to conform at least to some extent to modern heroic archetypes, the women of the *Odyssey* similarly lose the ambiguity that surrounds them in the original epic. Women in Greek epic are generally presented from a masculine viewpoint as "fascinating, yet inscrutable and dangerous" (Griffin 19), and Penelope's exemplary faithfulness in the *Odyssey* is held in tension with the unfaithfulness of Helen and Clytemnestra. Both these women provide paradigms for Penelope, both suggesting her potential for dangerous betrayal (the ambiguity of Helen's attitude towards her abductors has been suggested by critics as hinting at Penelope's attitude toward the suitors, while Agamemnon's homecoming provides a dark parallel to that of Odysseus), and glorifying her fidelity by contrast. In Sutcliff's version, Helen is an entirely benign presence, and Sutcliff omits troubling details such as Menelaus's story of her mimicking the voices of the Greeks' wives in order to entice them from the Trojan horse. Similarly, though Agamemnon's death at the hands of "his wife's lover" (36) is mentioned, there is no real blame attached to Clytemnestra, and Agamemnon does not draw the parallel between his homecoming and Odysseus's by warning him not to trust his own wife. Sutcliff's Penelope is both less of a potential threat, and less of a formidable force, at least in relation to her husband. While Penelope maintains her propensity for Odyssean wiles, the account of her deception of the suitors remaining intact, Sutcliff alters Odysseus's responses in a way that arguably robs them of some of their power. When Penelope tests the beggar Odysseus's story by asking him to describe her husband's clothes, Odysseus "smile[s] within himself. But he answered her seriously enough" (102). Similarly, instead of responding to Penelope's later, more famous, tactic of asking that their immovable bed be moved from their room with anger and frustration, as Homer's Odysseus does, Sutcliff's Odysseus once again responds indulgently: "Odysseus knew what she was about, and smiled in his heart. But he pretended to be angry" (123). Though still presented as intelligent, Penelope's tricks are contained by Odysseus's own sense of superiority, and he essentially plays along in order to beat her at her own game. The danger of Penelope not recognising Odysseus, and the threat this would pose to his successful reintegration into the household and thus the reclamation of his social identity, is entirely absent. Instead, like Wealhtheow, Penelope is the model of a faithful wife because the text never suggests that any other possibility is open to her.

Not all the changes made to the book are the result of the characters' subtle reshaping into Western archetypes. Some, of course, are the product of ideas about what is and is not suitable material for children in a story more concerned with adult sexuality and human violence than *Beowulf*. Perhaps

most obviously, Sutcliff follows Hawthorne's example in omitting the sexual relationship between Odysseus and Circe, although her non-Homeric additions and phrasing of the encounter do retain a degree of sensuality: Odysseus "thrust[s] the plant [given by Hermes] into the breast of his tunic, where it lay cool against his skin" (27), and later stands over Circe "holding his sword naked in his hands" (28). She also follows Lister in avoiding any mention of the treacherous maids who are hanged upon Odysseus's return home, and without omitting the slaughter of the suitors, makes the violence less explicit, with Odysseus and Telemachus vaguely going into battle "slaying all about them" (118). It is interesting, though, that while Sutcliff makes these reasonable modifications to Odysseus's behaviour, she does not seem to find it as necessary to bowdlerise the behaviour of characters characterised as 'other'. The children of Aeolus, surprisingly, are still "married to each other after the manner of the kings of Egypt" (17). More significantly, the violence from and toward Polyphemus, more often referred to as "the giant", is far more detailed and bloodthirsty than that toward the human suitors, in a way that mirrors the violence associated with Grendel in *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*. As Stephens and McCallum point out, adaptations of Beowulf tend to emphasise or at least include descriptions of Grendel's cannibalism, and Sutcliff accordingly describes Grendel tearing his victim "limb from limb and [drinking] the warm blood" (36). She also, though, does not censor Beowulf's violence toward Grendel, with the blood from Grendel's severed head "stream[ing] out into the water in a murky crimson flood" (60). Similarly, Polyphemus tears Odysseus's crewmen "limb from limb and devoured them ... washing down the flesh with long drafts of milk" (11), and Odysseus eventually repays him by plunging a stake through his eye: "The huge eyeball hissed, like hot iron when men plunged it into cold water to temper it, and the giant struggled to his knees and then to his feet with a fearful shriek, tearing the still glowing stake from his blood-streaming eye socket" (13). This implies that the concern is less of children being exposed to violence and sexual content, and more of such content being normalised through a hero whose behaviour they might be expected to read as exemplary. It also, though, touches on the polarisation of good and evil (or at least social order and barbarism) that features prominently in *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*. In both, Sutcliff groups her cannibalistic (or at least human-eating) characters into a category of monster that stands in stark contrast to her human heroes,[5] creating a binary struggle between chaos and civilisation in which detailed violence is acceptable because it is symbolic and unreal.

While this and numerous other omissions are clearly deemed necessary to adapt the text for a child

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[5]   Within *The Wanderings of Odysseus* Sutcliff even makes the link between the human-eating Laestrygonians and Polyphemus explicit, stating that "the welcome the [Laestrygonian] king bestowed upon them was not so different from the welcome they had received from Polyphemus" (21).

reader, sometimes in terms of content and more often in terms of length, more interesting are a number of additions to Homer that are not necessary in terms of didacticism or clarity but instead work to humanise the epic hero. In a book that by necessity contracts the original epic, Sutcliff chooses for example to expand Homer's account of the death of Odysseus's dog, adding details of Odysseus's emotional response:

> Odysseus stood a moment longer beside Argus, his dog. He would have liked to have squatted down and taken the old tired head on his knee, but there were many onlookers round about, and he could not. And in that instant a shudder ran through the gaunt body: Argus, having seen again the master he had waited for through nineteen years, was dead. (98)

Besides the additions to the text, the encounter with Argus is also notably one of comparatively few instances in the book when Sutcliff retains Homer's depiction of Odysseus weeping, albeit only by implication as he "rub[s] his eyes hastily with the back of his hand" (97): otherwise, in keeping with conventional modern notions of masculinity and Sutcliff's own personal aversion to "crying in public", her hero remains consistently dry-eyed throughout numerous trials that in the original epic cause him to break down in tears.[6] The heroes of Sutcliff's Roman Britain novels frequently have close relationships with dogs (such as Artos in *Sword at Sunset* and Prosper in *The Shining Company*), and this characterisation brings Odysseus closer to this mould. Her description of Argus as "no more than a pup when the black ships sailed" (98) also links the moment explicitly with Odysseus's first encounter with Telemachus, who is similarly described as "last seen as a babe in his mother's arms when the black ships sailed for Troy" (90), and suggests that Sutcliff is using the pathos of Argus's death to stand in for a wider sense of Odysseus's mixed joy and grief in coming home, framed in a way that children can comprehend. This is borne out by the fact that while Odysseus has almost no emotional reaction to seeing or being reunited with his wife, seeing his son for the first time causes his "breath [to] catch in his throat" (90), and the relationship between father and son, of more relevance to the experience of a child reader than that between a husband and wife, is given time to develop as both cry and laugh together.

The very act of describing these emotions rather than expressing them through monologue, action

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[6]   This would seem to be an obvious alteration to make to the original epic for a modern audience, but in fact Lister's *The Odyssey* does the opposite. Odysseus in this version cries continually, even revealing his name to the Phaeacians "taking several deep breaths and fighting back tears" (33). This is possibly a deliberate attempt to deconstruct traditional heroic stereotypes; Athene's first words in the book are to reassure Odysseus that "It is good that you should ease your heart with tears" (108).

or simile, begins to move the text towards the territory of the novel rather than the epic. However briefly, Sutcliff is interested in the inner life of the characters in a way that Homer is not. This humanistic focus, identified by Stephens and McCallum as key to the Western metaethic (18), is perhaps also responsible for the slight shift in the way in which the gods are treated by Sutcliff. While Athene in particular retains her presence as a character, continually influencing the story on a physical level, the overarching sense of human life as at the power of fate and the gods is diminished. Scenes of the gods' politics are largely omitted, as are many of the more ambiguous instances of a god, for example, "breath[ing] enormous strength" (24.574) into a hero rather than acting openly. Moreover, the gods are noticeably absent from the cultural life of the heroes. Odysseus still asks for shelter from Polyphemus in the manner of a suppliant, claiming to be "hoping in the name of Zeus the All-Father [Polyphemus] will show [them] the kindness and hospitality that men show to way-weary guests beneath their roof" (10). However, Sutcliff's narration goes on to tell us that "in truth he expected little kindness in that place" (10), framing Odysseus's request in terms of generosity rather than of guest-rights. This is partially symptomatic of Sutcliff's avoidance of the epic's preoccupation with *xenia*, perhaps because establishing hospitality rites would mark Odysseus's culture as unduly foreign to that of the reader. Similarly, though, Elpenor's ghost in this version asks Odysseus to "burn his body, for until that was done he might not mingle with his fellow shades" (34), but unlike in the epic does not ask him to "perform [his] rites" (11.86) lest his "curse ... draw god's fury on [Odysseus's] head" (11.81). Consequently, there is no reference to funeral rites upon Odysseus's return to Aeaea, though we are told he saw "Elpenor burned and a mound piled over his ashes and his oar set up on the crest for a marker" (38). While Sutcliff never attempts to diminish the presence of the gods themselves or the fact that they were worshipped (the last lines of the book are "So Pallas Athene of the Shining Eyes made peace between them with all the proper rites and sacrifices; peace in Ithaca and among the islands" (131)), she nonetheless retains a humanistic emphasis on human beings and their "freedom of choice and will" (Stephens and McCallum 19). Odysseus still warns Eurycleia that "it is an ill thing to gloat aloud over dead men" (119), but it is no longer because "these men were destroyed by the doom of the gods and their own hard actions" (22.438-9) but simply because it is the wrong thing to do.

The ambiguity regarding the role of the divine is found to a far greater extent in *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*, which sees the poem's numerous references to Christianity omitted, although some references to the Norse idea of wyrd (usually translated as fate) still remain. Where in the epic, for example, Beowulf would have died fighting Grendel's mother "if holy God, / Guarding the right, had not shaped victory / for the greatest of Geats" (1555-1557), in Sutcliff's version Beowulf is saved purely by the giant's sword and his own ability. Mills again criticises Sutcliff for these

omissions, arguing that much of the tension of the original poem comes precisely from the poem's hesitation between an optimistic Christian world-view and the more pessimistic Norse view where life is governed by remorseless fate (77). By avoiding the references to Christianity, "the poem's hesitancy becomes the retelling's bleak certainty that it is 'Wyrd who weaves the fates of man'" (77). It is notable, though, that the characters rather than the narrator refer to Wyrd guiding the lives of men, and that Wyrd is capitalised in a way that implies a pagan goddess (and therefore a character in her own right much like Athene) rather than an ineffable force that guides human lives. This may be attributed once again to Sutcliff's tendency toward historicity, and unwillingness to include a religion that would not yet have been a part of her characters' society. Moreover, unlike Christianity, a religion still widely practised, the religious presence Sutcliff retains in *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer* is one that is certain to be read as a sign of pagan culture rather than a genuinely applicable modern worldview. While both Homer and the Beowulf poet presumably believed in the role of the Olympian gods and Wyrd in human lives, Sutcliff and her audience do not, and to an extent the achievements of both Beowulf and Odysseus are therefore human achievements.

Despite their extreme fidelity to their source material, then, Sutcliff's retellings of *Beowulf* and the *Odyssey* ultimately stand as a mixture of supplementary traditions and influences. The grand narratives, language and cultural expectations of the epic are filtered, albeit as little as possible, through the expectations of the children's book, with its emphasis on simplicity of language, exemplary heroism, and transmission of a cultural heritage. They are filtered, however, in a distinctly Sutcliffean way, and both Beowulf and Odysseus finally emerge as heroes in the vein of Sutcliff's Roman Britain series, and of each other: brave men who are at once apart from and strongly tied to their own people, and who stand for civilisation in a world beset from all sides with chaos and barbarism. This image is not particularly radical, nor does it challenge any of the binaries that critics like Hourihan condemn as intrinsic to the epic worldview. Instead, it illustrates that in the space between epic and children's literature, there is room for new heroic codes and new heroes to emerge from the old, blending elements of both traditions with a distinct authorial vision. These codes are at once a continuance and a revision of the epic tradition, keeping the epic's vision of the world yet adjusting aspects of that vision for a new generation. If this is true for straight retellings of epic stories – what Sutcliff, referring to her *Chronicles of Robin Hood*, termed "foster child[ren]" (*Blue Remembered Hills* 140) – the potential for reworking and reimagining obviously becomes still greater with original stories born from epic sources.

"A Modern Literature Whose Only Successful Epic is About Rabbits": Richard Adams's *Watership Down*

The model provided by Sutcliff in her adaptations can be seen in more complex form in Richard Adams's *Watership Down*, first published in 1972. Like Sutcliff, Adams is working (for the most part) with a single epic and adapting it ostensibly for an audience of children – in this case, Virgil's *Aeneid.* His book, too, creates a heroic code that combines Virgil's ethos, contemporary values, and the beliefs and experiences of its author. Rather than a straightforward retelling, though, Adams adapts the *Aeneid* into an entirely new story, one that has often been discussed as an epic in its own right.

Of the many children's books that draw on epic works, *Watership Down* is perhaps the one whose epic roots are most frequently acknowledged, at least by critics. Kenneth F. Kitchell's essay "The Shrinking of the Epic Hero", which discusses the applicability of the term to *Watership Down*, cites a "veritable army" of early reviewers who referred to the book as an "epic" comparable (for better or worse) to those of Homer and Virgil (13); Edmund Fuller, perhaps most notably, described the book as a "rabbit *Aeneid*" in which "the rabbits have found their Homer" (Kitchell 13).

While it is doubtful that rabbits were ever looking for a Homer, animal stories are in many ways a natural vehicle for epic themes in children's stories. Children are used to anthropomorphised, and often symbolic, animal characters, and the animal world is able to provide a substitute for the adult world whose inhabitants would otherwise be difficult for children to relate to. Rat and Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*, for example, could not for the sake of the plot be human children requiring adult supervision, yet would be unlikely to appeal to children as a pair of human adults who spend the day "messing about in boats" (12); as animals, they make enjoyable for children what Peter Hunt argues is essentially an adult fantasy ("Introduction: Fantasy and Alternative Worlds" 29-30). The more adult themes of epic omitted from most children's adaptations can also be directly addressed when the characters involved are animals: it is doubtful if the conversation regarding enforced mating in Efrafa ("Well, if you want a doe, you can have one ... We're not officers for nothing, are we? The does are under orders and none of the bucks can stop you" (324)) would be deemed children's book material if it were about humans. Moreover, Kitchell argues that in the modern, "demystified" world, epic becomes possible by "shrinking the hero and his 'landscape of adventure'" (25) by the use of animal characters whose worldview is still primitive and world still

dangerous. A cannibalistic giant, Kitchell points out, "is after all, a matter of scale. For Odysseus, it is a cyclops; for Hazel, a fox. And one man's small stream is another creature's ocean. The size of the raft each needs for the crossing may differ, but the courage required does not" (25).[7]

The epic tendencies inherent in animal stories have been emphasised by other writers since Adams: William Horwood's adult series *Duncton Wood* and Kathryn Lasky's more recent children's series *Guardians of Ga'hoole* both feature heroic societies of moles and owls respectively, while Brian Jacques's *Redwall* series draws perhaps more on C.S. Lewis with its armoured, castle-dwelling mice and other woodland creatures. *Watership Down*'s relationship to classical epic, however, remains the most sustained and the most explicit, referencing not only wider epic themes but specific epics and epic conventions. Adams effectively exploits the shared interest of both epic and animal stories in journeys, homecomings, and the foundation of a kingdom, using the framework of Virgil's *Aeneid* and elements of Homer's *Odyssey* to create a new heroic code for the modern world.

The extent to which Adams is consciously creating an epic is somewhat open to interpretation. In an interview in 1978, Adams stated bluntly that his work was conceived as an epic, and one intended for a specific child audience. Citing similar ideas to Kitchell regarding the epic possibilities inherent in the animal story, he claimed:

> I wrote the book for my daughters, Juliet and Rosamond … If I had been a millionaire, I suppose I might have given my daughters a golf course, but as it was, I decided I would write a novel for them, the best novel I could possibly write. An epic. Human beings don't feel epics any more. Rabbits do – they are down on the ground. I would write about rabbits and incorporate the wonderful countryside in which I was born. And I would make it true. Every novel highlights some fundamental aspect of life, so *Watership Down* is a novel about leadership. ("An Evening with Richard Adams")

Adams has not repeated this assertion since, instead usually choosing to recount the book's origins as a story told to his daughters on a long car ride to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1966. This account puts

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 It should be noted that Kitchell, arguing for *Watership Down* as an epic, does not appear to consider it a children's book, perhaps because he feels the two genres to be incompatible: he describes it instead as "first promoted as children's literature, a choice contrary to Adams's tastes" (13). Adams originally wrote the story for his children, but has always claimed the book as intended for no specific audience: "It's a book, and anyone who wants to read it can read it" ("Interview: Richard Adams").

Watership Down squarely in a tradition of children's stories including, most famously, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and emphasises its nature as a spontaneous act of storytelling rather than a deliberate attempt at epic (or, indeed, a novel about leadership). In his 1975 essay "Some Ingredients of *Watership Down*", Adams originally acknowledged neither Virgil nor Homer as inspirations, citing instead sources such as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and Walter de la Mare's animal fantasy *The Three Mulla-Mulgars*. Yet, as Gillian Adams points out, contemporary critics have always found far more similarities to classical epic than to any of his cited sources, and have certainly resisted Adams's frequent insistence that the book is "simply a spontaneous story, and … should be seen as such" ("I Am Richard Adams" 2013). In more recent interviews, Adams does list Homer and Virgil (alongside Dante, Shakespeare, and the Ancient Greek playwrights) as inspirations for his writing, along with the influence of his education at "a very old-fashioned prep school. In those days, they had the Victorian classical education – you did Latin and Greek until it was coming out of your eyes" ("The Godfather of Harry Potter"). The quotations at the start of each chapter often reflect this familiarity with the classical world; in particular, as both Gillian Adams and Kitchell point out, the opening quotation from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* immediately recalls the Trojan War and invites the reader to draw parallels between the book and classical epic. Adams himself describes the passage as central to his conception of the story: "The first thing that came into my head [when asked by his daughters to tell a story] was the bit in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, when Cassandra is left outside the palace with the chorus, and she foresees the palace walls dripping with blood. So I pinched that, and took it from there" ("The Godfather of Harry Potter").

This immediate parallel with the Trojan War becomes even more interesting given that when Adams has cited a direct inspiration for the book, he has frequently cited his experiences of WWII. Published in 1972, *Watership Down* is not a contemporary response to WWII in the way that, as will be discussed later, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* is an overt attempt to create a heroic code for wartime Britain. Nonetheless, in his autobiography *The Day Gone By* Adams describes *Watership Down*'s "idea of the wandering, endangered and interdependent band, different from each other yet mutually reliant" (304) as a result of his wartime service with 205 Light Company. He also discusses two of the rabbits as direct parallels to two members of the company: Hazel was based on his commanding officer Major John Gifford, a "quiet, crisp and unassuming" man with excellent organisational skills and "self-effacing" bravery (304), while the model for Bigwig was Captain Paddy Kavanagh, "good-natured, debonair, generous, always in high spirits ... a deviser of dares, afraid of nothing" (307). (It is perhaps telling that in the original version of *Watership Down*, Bigwig was killed in the final battle; Kavanagh too was killed in action whilst covering the retreat

of his fellow soldiers. Bigwig was allowed to survive at the insistence of Adams's wife and daughters ("Interview: Richard Adams").) The story of "El-ahrairah and the Black Rabbit of Inle", perhaps the most serious of the many rabbit myths throughout the book, seems an overt commentary on the failings of post-war Britain. When rabbit hero El-ahrairah returns from a long and painful voyage through the Underworld to save his warren from war, he finds that his people no longer remember or value his heroism. "That war lark, old fellow?" one of them says. "That's all finished now. That's got nothing to do with us" (286). Another maintains that "It was all a very wicked thing … Shameful, really. If nobody fought in wars there wouldn't be any, would there? But you can't get old rabbits to see that" (286). Adams has confirmed that the myth was inspired by "ex-servicemen after the war, including myself, who sometimes wanted to talk about the war, but people weren't interested. I remember meeting a child in 1946 who had never heard of El-Alamein. So I let off a bit of steam there" ("The Godfather of Harry Potter").

In his essay "Epic in Translation", Paul Merchant discusses the problems of epic amidst the "sense of disintegration" that followed WWI and later WWII, when "it was obvious the old certainties had been illusions" (262). As a result, other literary forms began to take precedence, while epic itself began to evolve into bricolage "collections of disparate personal records" (262) such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Adams's description of the aftermath of WWII reflect this sense of a broken world:

> To anyone at all who lived through it, in whatever capacity, the Second World War was an enormous, shattering experience. It was – and I say this in all seriousness – difficult to believe that it was really over; one could not remember what things had been like before. Anyway, that no longer mattered much: they weren't ever going to be the same again. (*The Day Gone By* 379)[8]

Despite this, Adams appears to firmly reject modern and postmodern responses to a post-war environment. Forgetting the trauma of the past is condemned through the myth of El-ahrairah as well as in his autobiography, but accepting death and evil with what might be termed a postmodern fatalism is condemned at more length through Hazel's encounter with Cowslip's burrow. There, as will be discussed in more depth later, rabbits have abandoned traditional folk-tales and belief in tricks and courage in favour of intellectualism, abstract art, nihilistic poetry and "the will to accept their fate" (111). In contrast to both of these, through Hazel and his rabbits Adams continually

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[8] Adams echoes this assertion, but about the First World War, in his 1980 novel *The Girl in a Swing*, when the protagonist recalls "an old man … once telling me that what he remembered most vividly about the 1914-18 war was the frightening realisation, upon reaching the front, that here all lifelong assumptions … did not apply" (159).

depicts and celebrates acts of physical courage carried out for the good of a wider society, and the final chapters of the book see Hazel and Bigwig, perhaps unlike their counterparts Gifford and Kavanagh, revered in a warren that exists as a result of their heroism.

The epic model therefore becomes a way of processing the "enormous, shattering experience" of war rather than a form rendered obsolete by it. Hazel and his rabbits emerge from the destruction of their home, Sandleford warren, and forge a new society from the old by keeping alive the memory and traditions of their people as well as learning what they can from their travels and experiences. In this, while drawing from a vast array of other material, Adams is following most closely the pattern set down by Virgil's *Aeneid*, which also sees a new society emerging from the destruction of the old. With its animal story premise providing an intense, often lyrical, focus on the English landscape and wildlife ("the wonderful countryside in which I was born"), *Watership Down* works as secondary epic that is at once national, aetiological, and an argument for the necessity of old ideals and stories in a new age.

"This Rabbit *Aeneid*": Connections between Adams and Virgil

The argument for *Watership Down* as epic, not only in the modern sense ("an epic fantasy") but in the classical, has been made frequently. As Gillian Adams argues, *Watership Down* itself fulfils nearly all the requirements of epic, particularly secondary epic:

> [T]he narrative stance is objective, supernatural forces are operative, the context is cosmic and there is a sense of what C. S. Lewis, quoting Shakespeare, calls "the abyss of time" (64). In addition Hazel as epic hero is superior in a degree to others but not to his environment; he lacks immortality, but is willing to risk his own life for the sake of the community and to fulfil his duty to the gods and to the state; and what he does makes an important difference to his people. Adams' subject is for the microcosm of rabbits what Thomas Greene sees as the subject of all epic: "politics, but a politics not limited to society, a politics embracing the natural and the fabulous worlds, embracing even the moral or spiritual worlds they sometimes shadow forth, and involving ultimately the divine" (17). (106)

Although the book is indeed lacking "the epic opening couched in elevated language: *Arma leporemque cano* 'I sing of arms and the rabbit'" (Gillian Adams 106), the generally demotic style of *Watership Down* does, as Kitchell notes, employ a number of "fairly obvious Homeric similes" (21), the lengthiest of which lasts for nearly a page. Similarly, though the setting may not at first

glance seem epic, Celia Anderson points out that Adams's use of maps and insistence on the geographic reality of the area in which he sets his story "combines the actual and the allegorical in a manner reminiscent of the classical epics" (12). Rabbit culture as depicted by Adams is furthermore clearly heroic: continually compared with that of primitive human cultures, it is built around storytelling, warfare, mating, loyalty to lords, and hospitality, with the hall (or rather warren) as the centre of social life. The rabbits are in fact viewed by Adams in comparison with humans in much the same way heroes in epic are viewed by classical poets in comparison with men of their own, less heroic age. As Griffin explains, the action of classical epics takes place in a mythologised "heroic past" when men were greater and closer to the gods (16), allowing the heroes to demonstrate abilities specifically not possible in the age in which the poet himself is living.[9] The rabbits, similarly, are described as having abilities once available to humans but now beyond our abilities, able to judge time in a way "that civilised human beings have lost the power to feel" (55), sense their surroundings without vision in a way possible for "no human beings, except the courageous and experienced blind" (83), and feel without "any of the reserve of detachment that the kindest of civilised humans retains as he reads his newspaper" (169), to list only a few examples. Though epic elements do not necessarily make a book an epic, there is a clear argument for *Watership Down* operating at least on the fringes of an epic tradition.

Watership Down's connections to the *Aeneid* in particular have also been frequently acknowledged: both Gillian Adams and Anderson suggest structural parallels between Virgil's epic and Adams's book, for example, while Kitchell cites specific references to the *Aeneid* among other classical texts. Because these essays are brief and discuss different aspects of the epic, it is perhaps overlooked just how close and detailed these parallels are, and the extent to which they work to uphold and revise a particular vision of Virgilian heroism. In fact, the similarities between *Watership Down* and the *Aeneid* are extensive enough for the book to function in the way I have argued in Chapter One for Sutcliff's straight retellings of the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf*: as an interaction between an original epic, the traditions of children's literature, and a distinct authorial vision.

As Adams himself observed, the book begins in more than one sense with Cassandra's vision of a house "dripping blood": the relevant quote from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* appears at the start of the first chapter, and is quickly mirrored by the action of the book as the young seer rabbit, Fiver, has a vision of the fields outside their warren "covered in blood" (19). In fact, Cassandra's vision in the

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[9]   Examples from the *Iliad* have been quoted in the Introduction. In the *Aeneid*, more specifically, Turnus throws a stone at Aeneas that "twice-six chosen men with bodies such / as earth produces now could scarcely lift / ... upon their shoulders" (12.1198-1200).

play refers to Agamemnon's death at the hands of Clytemnestra upon his return home, and not the fall of Troy. Nonetheless, the fact that Fiver's vision heralds the destruction of Sandleford Warren itself evokes Cassandra's more famous prophecies of the destruction of Troy, as well as the vision of Hector with hair "thick with blood" (2.382) that in the *Aeneid* warns Aeneas to leave the city before its fall. Though Fiver's warnings are, like Cassandra's, not believed by those in authority (or at least, not considered practical to act upon: as the Threarah points out to Holly, evacuating an entire warren is potentially a remedy "worse than the disease" (159)), Hazel and a number of other rabbits leave the doomed Sandleford in search of a new home. Much later, after the rabbits have reached Watership Down, the destruction of Sandleford after their departure is related to Hazel and his followers by a survivor, Captain Holly, in terms that Anderson argues resembles Aeneas's account of the destruction of Troy in its shared "tone of lamentation" (12). Holly's warning that his tale will "strike the frost into the heart of every rabbit that hears it" (156), for example, echoes Aeneas's reluctance to tell a tale that no "soldier ... / could keep from tears in telling" (2.10-11), while the graphic images of "rabbits clambering and clawing over each other" (162) to escape amidst "cries for help, kittens squealing for their mothers, Owsla trying to give orders, rabbits cursing and fighting each other" (163) evoke Aeneas's descriptions of the "vaulted / walls echo[ing] with the wail and woe of women, / lament that beats against the golden stars" (2.650-53) (Anderson 12). Throughout both stories, Troy and Sandleford stand as lost ages: after their destruction, as Adams said of the world after WWII, nothing is "ever going to be the same again" (379).

Adams's strategy of delaying the account of Sandleford's destruction is in keeping with the *Aeneid*, which (like the *Odyssey*) opens *in medias res* with the hero adrift in the ocean, and has the story of the destruction of Troy told by Aeneas himself upon his arrival in Carthage. In the case of *Watership Down*, leaving the fate of Sandleford until after the initial journey also allows Adams to gradually adjust the register of the book from animal story to epic. The first few chapters of the journey from Sandleford to Watership Down are perhaps the least obviously epic sequence of the book. Without obvious Virgilian parallels, the sequence operates in a tradition of children's stories regarding a party of animals travelling across country to an old or new home: *The Animals of Farthing Wood*, for instance, published less than a decade later and probably heavily influenced by this aspect of *Watership Down,* features the inhabitants of a wood threatened by construction working together to reach a nature reserve where they can live free from human interference. Like the animals of Farthing Wood, the rabbits led by Hazel first encounter a number of realistic threats and difficulties, including a river crossing, a large dog, a vicious crow, and a road, and Adams includes detailed descriptions of natural landscape and animal behaviour from the rabbits' own perspective.

The difference between *Watership Down* and *Farthing Wood*, even at this stage, is that *Farthing Wood* has not already opened with a divine premonition. This added dimension of the numinous means that already there are aspects of a heroic ethos underlying the journey which more closely resemble the voyage of Aeneas and his followers to Italy than a traditional animal story. While the Farthing Wood animals seek the protection of White Deer Park after learning of it from their friend Toad, a concrete destination chosen by the characters for practical reasons, Hazel's rabbits have a predestined end seen by Fiver in a vision: a vague location of "high, lonely hills, where the wind and the sound carry and the ground's dry as straw in a barn" (63). In this, they parallel Aeneas and his followers, who must journey to the unspecified site of "a second citadel of Troy" (3.114) given to them by the gods that will later become the foundation of the Roman Empire. For both, the journey is an act of belief in a place that none of them have seen or have any concrete assurances actually exists. Perhaps understandably, the journeys of both Hazel and Aeneas are therefore plagued with uncertainty, mutiny, and false stopping-places. Aeneas and Anchises mistake the prophesised location of Rome, first journeying to Crete on a misreading of Apollo's instruction to "seek out your ancient mother" (3.128) only to encounter an outbreak of sickness and later, though without the intention of staying, visiting the city where Helenus and Andromache have created an imitation of Troy "alongside waves that mimed the Simois" (3.392). Hazel, having not yet learned to trust Fiver's insight, at first similarly tries to repeat the past and find "some quiet field or copse-like bank like those they had been used to" (63). Their attempt to build a new home in the meadow is short-lived and uncomfortable, and indirectly places them in the path of danger when they encounter Cowslip's burrow. Like the women of Aeneas's followers, several of the rabbits begin to mutiny against the seemingly endless journey, with Speedwell's and Hawkbit's protests that "it gets worse and worse the further we go ... How long will it be before some of us stop running for good and all?" echoing the Trojan women's lament "that so many shoals, so wide a sea, / are still left for the weary!" (5.810-11). Much as Aeneas struggles to decide "whether / to settle in the fields of Sicily, / forgetful of the fates, or else to try / for the Italian coast" (5.925-928), Hazel is torn between avoiding the difficulties in leading his followers through "miles of danger" by finding "a safe place soon" (63), and listening to divine guidance.

It is the rabbits' main false stopping place, Cowslip's burrow, that truly begins to move the book out of traditional animal story territory, and at the same time to more directly confront some of the struggles at the heart of both the *Aeneid* and *Watership Down*. Cowslip's burrow is introduced to us in Chapter 13 ("Hospitality") with a quote from Tennyson's "The Lotus-Eaters" (in contrast to the preceding chapter, which references Lockley's factual *The Private Life of the Rabbit*), once more encouraging the reader to view it in terms of Homeric epic rather than animal story. Kitchell aptly

reads this section as a version of the Lotus Eater episode of the *Odyssey*, arguing that "Cowslip and his warren are ... the 'lettuce-eaters'. The ecstasy of lettuce on rabbits is every bit as strong as that of lotus on Greeks, and Hazel must drag his crew away just as Odysseus did before him" (19). While this comparison is certainly valid, a number of critics including Gillian Adams and Anderson have also read Cowslip's burrow as a stand-in for Carthage, both structurally and thematically. Like Carthage, Cowslip's warren is a kingdom already comfortably established, in opposition to the potentially greater yet continually elusive kingdom the heroes are destined to build for themselves. Hazel's previous realisations of the difficulty of digging new burrows and "how much they had left behind" (77) are countered by the "largest burrow [Hazel] had ever been in; sandy, warm and dry, with a hard bare floor" (83) – perhaps echoing Aeneas's first sight of the city and his cry of "How fortunate are those / whose walls already rise!" (1.619-20) – and the rabbits are seduced by the plentiful food and freedom from danger. Although there is no specific Dido equivalent, the warren represents the potential for domestic stability and procreation as Hazel admires Strawberry's doe Nildro-hrain and wonders if "there are more like her in the warren" (87) and, unlike Odysseus among the Lotus Eaters, it is not only Hazel's followers but Hazel himself who is seduced by the plenty and prosperity the warren provides. Despite Fiver's continual warnings and insistence that they continue to the hills, Hazel and his followers continue "squandering their ease" (*Aen*. 4.363) among the decadent "aristocratic" rabbits of the warren.

The major difference between Carthage and Cowslip's burrow is that while Carthage is a thriving society only wrong for Aeneas because of his greater destiny, Cowslip's burrow is "unnatural and evil" (99). The plentiful food and freedom from predators are revealed to be provided by a human farmer, who fattens and protects the warren in order to trap the rabbits for their meat and skins, something they have accepted in return for a comfortable life. This, like Efrafa later, has been read as an allegorical comment on various human institutions including communism and academia, shifting the story into the realm of animal fables such as Orwell's *Animal Farm*.[10] It is interesting, therefore, that Adams foreshadows this social disorder partially through epic terms and, specifically, through the use of *xenia* or hospitality that gives the chapter its name. In classical epic, hospitality scenes follow strict patterns which are understood by both the audience and the parties within the epic as markers of civilisation and good will: in the *Odyssey*, the formulaic way in which Telemachus is received by Nestor and Menelaus shows both to be good hosts, while the suitors' abuse of *xenia* when Athene visits Ithaka shows both their barbarity and the breakdown of social

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[10]   This blend of animal fable with children's epic is in fact surprisingly common, even in stories without animal central characters. Nathaniel Hawthorne's retelling of the *Odyssey*, discussed in Chapter One, also uses elements of the fable in the transformation of Odysseus's men, while Wart in *The Once and Future King* lives among ants and geese that represent systems of human government.

norms in Odysseus's absence. Cowslip's rabbits, in a similar vein, welcome Hazel and his followers by employing conventions that are unknown to other rabbits, causing them to feel "mystified and slightly ill-at-ease":

> Both rabbits together made a curious, dancing movement of the head and front paws. Apart from sniffing, as Hazel and Cowslip had done when they met, formal gestures – except between mating rabbits – were unknown to Hazel and his companions ... The dancers paused, evidently waiting for some acknowledgement or reciprocal gesture, but there was none. (82)

Just as the presence of unfamiliar conventions of hospitality signals something "unnatural" (99) about the burrow, the corresponding absence of familiar conventions signals a heathen disregard for the underlying principles of heroic life. Rabbit culture, like those of classical epics, is built around the telling of stories, both of their own heroic deeds and of the rabbit culture hero, El-ahrairah. Hazel's offer to tell the rabbits of Cowslip's warren the story of their journey is met with uncomfortable silence, while Dandelion's substitute, the story of El-ahrairah, is received with a tolerant superiority completely at odds with heroic culture ("I always think these traditional stories retain a lot of charm ... especially when they're told in the real, old-fashioned spirit" (111)). This fall from traditional modes of expression is intrinsically linked to the evil at the heart of the warren, as Fiver later reveals (crucially, in the form of a story):

> [Cowslip's burrow] forgot El-ahrairah, for what use had they for tricks and cunning, living in the enemy's warren and paying his price? They found other marvellous arts to take the place of tricks and old stories. They danced in ceremonious greeting ... Who wants to hear about brave deeds when he's ashamed of his own, and who likes an open, honest tale from someone he's deceiving? (125-6).

As in epic, moral disorder is signalled by social disorder, and departure from the norms of hospitality is a sign of something amiss within the society. In this case, what is amiss also hints at the problem underlying both the *Aeneid* and *Watership Down*: how to balance reverence for old traditions with the foundation of a new society. Hazel's desire to remain in the burrow implies a turning away from his own destiny, ignoring as it does Fiver's vision of their final home, but also because acceptance of its way of life entails a rejection of their traditions and heroic codes. The search for a new home is one that must negotiate the perfect balance between respect for tradition and new heroic codes and ideas of heroism.

By the time the rabbits arrive at Watership Down, the epic tone is firmly established. It is unsurprising then that the latter half of the book equates to the latter half of the *Aeneid* "as the newcomers fight to keep their place and to solidify intermarriages and alliances" (Kitchell 19). Once settled on the down that Fiver foresaw as their home, the rabbits begin to build, but realise quickly the need for female rabbits to ensure the warren will not die with them. They manage to rescue some hutch rabbits from a nearby farm, a raid compared by Gillian Adams with that of Book Nine of the *Aeneid*, but the continuity of the warren depends on either making an alliance with Efrafa, a nearby warren, or taking Efrafa's does by force. This alliance is opposed by General Woundwort, Efrafa's clever, ferocious leader who knows how to "encourage other rabbits and fill them with a spirit of emulation" (312). Woundwort here serves as a substitute for the *Aeneid*'s Turnus, and Efrafa – which in a fable context can be read as a fascist state – as a substitute for Latium in terms of its narrative function (Gillian Adams 109). Crucially, both Turnus and Woundwort act in opposition to the prevailing ethos of their stories: Woundwort opposes Hazel's attempts to establish a warren at Watership Down by withholding his does for the sake of his own power, while Turnus opposes Aeneas's marriage with Lavinia and thus the future Roman Empire because of the insult to his own pride. Despite this, both are also paradoxically heroic, "no mere bull[ies]" (312) but battle-scarred warriors and clever tacticians. Characterised by his insistence of fighting even in the face of certain death ("Flight's the last thing he ever thinks of" (370)) just as Turnus is "ignorant of cowardice" (12.861), Woundwort's bravery and skill in combat comes to be reluctantly admired by both Bigwig and Holly (370; 470), even though like Turnus he carries it to an extent that is unnatural and incorrect: Woundwort's aggression drives him to fight in a way that "Frith never meant any rabbit to do" (470), while Turnus places himself against the will of the Olympian gods, describing Jupiter as his "enemy" (12.1192). Despite their admirable qualities, both Turnus and Woundwort must die ultimately because they are tied to individualistic, Homeric heroism based on strength and skill in battle in the service of personal glory, and are unable to accept the new form of social heroism represented by Aeneas and by Hazel. Turnus refuses the Council's demands that he relinquish his claim to Lavinia for the good of both sides, preferring instead the "glory to be gained by courage" (11.591) in defeating Aeneas. Similarly, when offered the chance to join Efrafa to Watership Down in a partnership of "free, independent warrens" (425), Woundwort is explicitly offered "the opportunity to show whether he really was the leader of vision and genius which he believed himself to be, or whether he was no more than a tyrant with the courage and cunning of a pirate" (425). His refusal to relinquish "the bloodshed which he had prepared with so much energy and care" (425) marks him as a remnant of the past, and seals his fate.

In the climax of the book, after employing Odysseus-like "cunning" (419) and trickery to infiltrate and escape Efrafa with a party of does,[11] Hazel and his followers find themselves once again within a warren under threat from a hostile force, mirroring their situation at the beginning of the book. The parallels between the final battle and the destruction of their first home are also repeatedly emphasised in the *Aeneid*, as Turnus's men refer to the Trojans being "hemmed in again by siege and ramparts" (9.799), Aeneas as guilty of repeating Paris's crime of abduction (9.181-188) and Turnus himself as a second Achilles (9.990). Aeneas and Hazel are both forced into situations where they must in essence repeat the destruction of their homes, and this time save them. Though Blackavar warns Hazel, as Fiver once did of the approaching bulldozers, that they "ought to leave at once" and get "quite a long way [away] before they come" (416), this time Hazel knows they must remain and attempt to save the warren: "Anyone who wants to go can go ... We made this warren ourselves and Frith only knows what we've been through on account of it. I'm not going to leave now" (416). The battle itself contains a number of epic features: the fight between Bigwig and Woundwort is described in epic style, complete with taunts, detailed and graphic description of close-quarter combat, and simile; and there is genuine supernatural intervention in the form of Fiver's mysterious possession and trance, as well as similar human intervention as Hazel is returned to the burrow in a car (referred to by the chapter title as a "Dea ex machina"). More importantly, both battles end with the passing away of one society and the foundation of a new. Turnus's defeat in single combat by Aeneas means that the city destined to be Rome is able to be built, ushering in a new heroic age, while Woundwort's death means not only the assured continuation of Watership Down but the assimilation of what remains of Efrafa into the Watership Down warren, essentially creating a new democratic empire where rabbits can "tell stories in the Honeycomb and silflay whenever [they] feel like it" (336).

Both the *Aeneid* and *Watership Down*, then, tell the story of the passing of one kingdom and the foundation of a new by the efforts of an extraordinary social hero. The horrific destruction of the old world allows for the construction of a new, ideal society. It also, however, entails loss and regret, and the heroes must negotiate the perfect balance between respect for tradition and new heroic codes and ideas of heroism. At the end of *Watership Down*, the rabbits have recovered from the trauma of Sandleford warren's destruction and the resulting conflicts, and the final chapter

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[11]   As will be discussed later, rabbit heroism is largely based around trickery, with their culture hero El-ahrairah specifically compared to Odysseus among others (35). Though Bigwig himself is more of an Achilles than an Odysseus figure, his infiltration of Efrafa here is particularly Odyssean, relying on disguise and trickery when "fighting and fair words" (257) are deemed useless. Kitchell also sees parallels between the escape from Efrafa on a boat and Odysseus's raft, with the passage where the rabbits drag themselves to shore and sleep under twigs and leaves virtually identical to the end of Book 5 (Kitchell 20).

stresses that the warren includes rabbits from Efrafa, Cowslip's burrow and Nuthanger Farm living in harmony with Hazel's rabbits; Hazel's plans to "encourage some of the youngsters to start a new warren between here and Efrafa" (471) even hints at benevolent imperial expansion.

Watership Down and the Foundation of a Kingdom

There is, of course, one great difference between the two texts, aside from the fact that one is about rabbits. The *Aeneid* is aetiological in nature, in that the kingdom in question is the Roman Empire in which Virgil and his audience were living. This is usual in epic, whose heroes are traditionally pre-existing mythological figures glorified as the listeners' "predecessors and, as they often believed, their ancestors" (Griffin 13), and whose stories are a blend of established history and invention (Griffin 17). *Watership Down,* by contrast, obviously has no basis in history, and the kingdom that has been founded by its conclusion is not only fictional, but not even human. Instead, the kingdom it founds is an imaginative rather than actual kingdom, one that blends Virgilian heroism with Adams's own public school influenced ethos and is tied to the English landscape. In this way, Adams is able to not only adapt but also build on the epic model provided by Virgil to create a heroic code for his own age.

In his early comments on *Watership Down*, Adams described the book not only as an epic but as a novel about leadership ("An Evening with Richard Adams"), and the leader of the rabbits, Hazel, is in many ways the book's exemplary hero. Hazel's heroic qualities are from the first reminiscent of the *pietas* praised by Virgil, characterised by "virtue, duty, loyalty, responsibility – duty to one's family, to one's people, and to the gods" (Jenkyns 56). These qualities are certainly not unusual in an English hero: in fact, the similarity between this definition and the "fair play, responsibility, and loyalty" (Knuth 47) identified as the ethos of the British school story suggests that Adams owes more than his knowledge of epic to his "Victorian classical education". Mediated through the resolutely middle-class English language spoken by the rabbits, however, Hazel displays notably Aeneas-like strategies of leadership. Hazel twice "though sick with heavy cares / ... counterfeits hope in his face" (*Aen.* 1.290-291) to encourage his followers, once when encouraging them to cross the marshes and once before the battle at Watership Down, and early takes the leadership role of surveying a new place while his followers sleep as does Aeneas (and Odysseus). Like *pius* Aeneas, Hazel is characterised by a sense of respect for the divine, not only willing to listen to Fiver's visions but praying for guidance and once receiving a vision himself. Most importantly, Hazel's heroic acts are not motivated by desire for fame or glory like those of Homeric heroes.

Instead, Hazel's heroism is one of self-sacrifice – in Dandelion's words, Hazel is "running our risks for us ... like El-ahrairah" (35) – in order to ensure the foundation of the prophesised warren on Watership Down.[12] Unlike Aeneas, who knows he will die shortly after the foundation of his city, Hazel does benefit from the warren himself, living longer, in fact, than rabbits are able to according to "the wise Mr Lockley" (476). It is notable, though, that none of the does which Hazel risks his life to help obtain are apparently for him, and, more importantly, that the book itself does end with his death. This death, like that of Aeneas, is counterbalanced by the survival of his warren, a connection made explicit as Hazel's ghost or spirit pauses to "watch his rabbits and to try to get used to the extraordinary feeling that strength and speed were flowing inexhaustibly out of him into their sleek young bodies and healthy senses" (478). As Aeneas in the Underworld is told of the shining future awaiting his Roman descendants, Hazel is told by El-ahrairah that he "needn't worry about [his people] ... They'll be all right – and thousands like them" (478). Ultimately, Hazel's life is transient, but its heroism ensures the continuity of the warren, and the book which begins in a doomed warren with the sentence "the primroses were over" (15) ends in a thriving one "where the first primroses were beginning to bloom" (478).

Though Hazel embodies the major aspects of Virgilian heroism, Adams makes it clear that he does not embody all aspects of lapine heroism as presented in *Watership Down*. Most notably, El-ahrairah is not merely a leader, but a trickster hero, and the rabbit characters place an almost obsessive emphasis on cunning throughout the book: even Woundwort, otherwise unnatural for a rabbit, prides himself on being "cunning and resourceful in adversity" (419) and feels his command threatened when Hazel's rabbits prove "their own cunning greater than his" (419). Hazel, by contrast, is a leader without particular cunning, explicitly delegating the devising of tricks to Blackberry when the occasion calls for them. Instead, while in Virgil there is only one major hero (Aeneas) and only one form of correct heroism (*pietas*), *Watership Down* features a co-operative of heroes, all of whom correspond to archetypes of ancient epic. Fiver, for example, is a seer whose heroism consists of visions and spiritual voyages to a mysterious underworld, a point reinforced by the quote from Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that prefaces the chapter "Fiver Beyond", while Bigwig embodies the traditional physical heroism of an Achilles or Beowulf figure. Blackberry, meanwhile, is an Odyssean hero, valued for his "wits" (131) and his ability to devise

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[12] It is telling that the one time Hazel does act for his personal glory, he is soundly punished for it. His raid on Nuthanger Farm, while Holly and several other rabbits have been sent as envoys to Efrafa, is enacted solely to "show [Holly and Silver] that their Chief Rabbit was up to anything that they were up to" (205-6); as Fiver points out, Hazel is "trying to be clever" by "risking [his] life and other rabbits' lives for something that's of little or no value to [them]" (215). As a result, Hazel is almost killed, and his status as hero and leader maintained only because the raid has an inadvertent social outcome: Efrafa's hostility causes the hutch does to unexpectedly become valuable, causing Hazel to gain a "magical quality" (259) in the eyes of the rabbits, while the story of Hazel's "heroic dash out of the ditch" is heroic because undertaken in order to "save his friends from the farmers" (259).

tricks but mistrusted by Kehaar who "prefer[s] straightforward characters such as Bigwig, Buckthorn and Silver" (307). Though each is heroic in their own right, it is only together that they present a complete unit, composed of "Bigwig's strength, Fiver's insight, Blackberry's wits [and] Hazel's authority" (131).

This conception of heroism is in keeping with the classical conception of *arete,* excellence that is based around each person's individual strengths rather than a single heroic ideal: the *Iliad* and the *Argonautica* also feature collections of very different heroes. The important difference is that while the heroes of these epics all manifest heroic individualism, with each warrior fighting for their own personal glory even when they do elect to follow Agamemnon or Jason, the heroic individualism in *Watership Down* is always subordinate to larger social impulses. This is seen most clearly in Bigwig, whose martial heroism at first glance appears not dissimilar to that of General Woundwort. Both Bigwig and Woundwort are abnormally large – in fact, they are continually compared to one another in terms of which is the larger – and characterised by their courage and skill in battle, particularly their desire to fight continually more dangerous predators (Bigwig, for example, asserts that "a good rabbit's a match for a cat, any day" (215), while Woundwort aspires "one day to kill a stoat, if not a weasel" (311)). Bigwig's response to Woundwort's attack on the warren is, as Hazel wryly notes, to look forward to the prospect of "the best way to sell his life as dearly as he could" (430). In the *Aeneid*, this aspect of out-dated, individual heroism is one that Aeneas must turn away from. As Troy falls, his thoughts on "how fine a thing it is to die at arms" (*Aen.* 2.433) are corrected by Venus, who instead urges him to follow his social obligations by abandoning the last stand and thus ensuring the survival of his family and the foundation of Rome. In Bigwig's case, though, such heroism is valid precisely because it serves a social function, protecting the burrow even if it means blocking it with his dead body (451), and because he is, by his own admission, doing so under the orders of Hazel as Chief Rabbit (454). In many ways, this mirrors the treatment given to both Beowulf and Odysseus in Sutcliff's retellings, where the exemplary individuality of both is made subordinate to their duties as members of their respective societies. Consequently, Hazel's strength as leader lies largely in his ability to recognise these abilities in others, and turn them to the good of the warren.[13]

It is interesting that though Hazel is acknowledged as the leader "superior to others but not to his natural environment", this leadership is shown as something that must be achieved and performed

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[13]   This quality is derived from Hazel's model John Gifford: as Adams explains, Gifford "was an excellent organiser. One of his strongly held principles was that it was important to get the right person into the right job, and the wrong person out … I had never consciously thought about this principle before ('Anybody can do anything'), but I realised it all right after I had been under John Gifford's command for two or three weeks" (304).

rather than a natural effect of divine lineage as in the case of Aeneas. Kitchell argues that Hazel's heroism is "quite out of the epic tradition" (23) in that Hazel is not marked as a hero from the first, but must grow from humble beginnings to a "heroic stature that did not seem his at the start" (23). This is somewhat misleading: although Hazel is introduced as one of those who "lacking either aristocratic parentage or unusual size or strength, get sat on by their elders and live as best they can" (16), he is also introduced as markedly superior to this group, without the "harassed look of most of the 'outskirters'" and with a "shrewd, buoyant air about him" (16). Apart from some brief power struggles with Bigwig and some of the more reluctant followers, Hazel is accepted within the group as a leader and a superior, and he himself seems to find it natural to think and plan for the group. What is true, though, is that Hazel's more conventional epic superiority in the eyes of the other rabbits is balanced, less conventionally, by our novelistic insight into Hazel's inner fears and doubts. Adams is clearly interested not only in the epic hero, but in how such a hero figure may be created in the eyes of others.

This idea of leadership as performance is in fact touched on briefly by Virgil, when Aeneas "though sick with heavy cares / ... counterfeits hope in his face" (1.290-291) for the sake of his men. As already mentioned, Hazel also often pretends a confidence he does not feel. In his case, the necessity of this for maintaining command and the false impression of himself it constructs in the eyes of his followers is made explicit. Hazel's promise to get his followers through the marsh by sunset is pretence, based on the knowledge that, in his own words, "if I don't, they'll most likely tear me to pieces" (65), and his ensuing encouragement is a "mere refrain" largely intended to give himself "support against his own weariness" (66). The difference in Hazel's true actions and their effect swiftly becomes apparent after they reach the other side of the marsh, as Blackberry exclaims:

> Oh, Hazel ... I was so tired and confused, I actually began to wonder if you knew where you were going. I could hear you in the heather saying "Not far now" and it was annoying me. I thought you were making it up. I should have known better. Frithrah, you're what I call a Chief Rabbit! (67)

What is almost accidental here later grows more calculated as the story goes on, as Hazel becomes increasingly careful not to show doubt or physical weakness. Upon his return from Nuthanger Farm, Hazel is almost too badly hurt to endure the enthusiastic greeting of the other rabbits, but knows that if he "lay down under it" they would likely "kick [him] out ... They wouldn't have a crippled Chief Rabbit" (260). More interestingly, this same physical weakness is used to excuse what would

otherwise seem unheroic behaviour, in a way that parallels and subverts a technique used in the *Aeneid*. Aeneas, in his final combat with Turnus, fights and pursues his opponent still feeling the effects of an arrow wound. As such, Turnus's ability to briefly outrun Aeneas does not lessen Aeneas' status as the greater hero, because it is "the arrow wound within his knees" rather than lesser ability that "stays and delays him" (12.988-989): rather, because it is a wound sustained in battle and even, Virgil claims, inflicted by a god, it emphasises his abilities as a warrior. Hazel similarly spends the latter part the book suffering from a wounded leg sustained in what his followers deem heroic circumstances, which Adams uses as a means of excluding Hazel from the action without calling his heroism into question. Hazel, for example, is reluctantly relegated to gnawing the rope to release the boat in the escape from Efrafa after Fiver tells him that his leg is not steady enough for the run to the arch, allowing Bigwig to act as the main hero without challenging Hazel's authority.[14] In *Watership Down*, however, this plot device is also a tactic consciously employed by the rabbits themselves, allowing Hazel to disguise occasional weakness of resolve beneath physical weakness: when Hazel is afraid to cross a bridge, Fiver suggests, "Would you like me to take them over? Say it's because of your leg" (300). Hazel, then, is to his followers a hero purely in the epic tradition, "recognised from the start as an extraordinary being" (Bowra, cited in Kitchell 22), and to the reader simultaneously a hero in the modern tradition, who must overcome his own fears and self-doubt to achieve the greatness inherent in him.

This emphasis on the gap between what is real and what is believed about a heroic figure anticipates the questions the book finally poses regarding the mythologisation of such figures. Storytelling and mythology is of vital importance to lapine culture in *Watership Down*, and the narrative is interspersed with stories of El-ahrairah, the sun-god Frith, and the Black Rabbit of Inlè that follow recognisable mythic archetypes. These stories blur the line between folktale and epic, with El-ahrariah compared to both Brer Rabbit and Odysseus (35), and the use made of them is comparable to the use made of stories and storytelling in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*: in both cases, stories of heroic adventures serve a social function for the characters, told by an acknowledged bard to inspire, comfort, or impress, and a literary function for the author, with the stories providing analogues for the main action. Schmoll argues that this device of the "story within a story" (23) adds to *Watership Down*'s epic effect by providing the Homeric theme of diminishment. According to Schmoll, the heroes of epic are not only living in a heroic past, but are looking back themselves to an earlier, mythic past where the heroes were still greater. When Nestor laments that the previous generation of heroes were "the strongest generation of earth-born mortals, / the strongest, and they fought

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[14] Similarly, Bigwig's injuries prevent him from taking further part in the action once they rejoin Hazel, allowing Hazel to equally painlessly resume his role as leader.

against the strongest, the beast men / living in the mountains" (*Il.* 1.267-269), he is both claiming superiority for the past over the present and providing a model of heroism for his contemporaries to emulate (22-23). Likewise, in *Watership Down*, El-ahrairah is set up as a hero from "a misty, mythical past" (23) to be "admired and emulated, if not on a scale with the past, then in the relatively prosaic present" (24). While El-ahrairah certainly serves this function to the rabbits within the story, as the book progresses we begin to receive hints that the stories of El-ahrairah are in fact not necessarily consigned to a mythic past, but are still taking place in the present day. The last story told, "Rowsby Woof and the Fairy Wogdog", not only features cars and tyres, but rabbits in a recognisably realistic relationship to human beings and dogs compared to the mythic social structure of, for example, "The Trial of El-ahrairah". These hints finally culminate in the penultimate chapter, when Hazel finally hears his own story being told, but in mythic form as an adventure of El-ahrairah. Although we recognise it, and are meant to, Hazel himself does not, telling the others, "I seem to know this story … but I can't remember where I've heard it" (474).

This idea of a "true" story beneath the mythology is a preoccupation with retellings, particularly those involving Odysseus and other trickster heroes, and often serves as a means to critique or examine the gap between realism and idealism, or what constitutes heroic behaviour. Nye's treatment of *Beowulf,* for instance, has his unheroic Beowulf tricking the dragon into being killed by a swarm of bees, yet becoming mythologised as slaying a dragon. Beowulf, dying, questions the value of conventionally heroic behaviour as he asks Wiglaf: "When I was young I would never have done a thing like that. I'd have thought it was dishonourable, or something. Well, the dragon lies dead and the treasure is there for the good of our people. Who was right? Old Beowulf or young Beowulf?" (106). Adams, by contrast, uses the complex relationship between reality and mythology not to lessen the importance of the myths, but rather to claim a truth for them. Hazel's "real-life" courage and deeds are no less conventionally heroic than those believed by his followers and given to El-ahrairah, and his apotheosis at the end of the book elevates him, by classical standards, even beyond most epic heroes. In fact, by the terms of social heroism presented by *Watership Down*, it is crucial that Hazel be remembered only in mythic form. Rabbits, like epic heroes, see their own deeds as valid material for story: Blackberry attempts to offer the story of their own adventures to Cowslip's burrow, Hazel praises Bigwig's escape from Efrafa with the rabbit proverb "Our children's children will hear a good story" (374), and Bluebell jokingly asks Dandelion to tell the story of this escape under the title "How I Nearly Missed the Boat" (which Dandelion retitles "Woundwort Dismayed") (400). It is telling, though, that the deeds of Hazel, the greatest of the collection of heroes, are not remembered as his, but are instead absorbed into the cultural figure of El-ahrairah until even he can no longer recognise them as his own. By contrast, Woundwort, the

powerful individual hero who seeks only his own glory and power, is excluded from the community myth, becoming instead a nightmare version of himself: a "great and solitary rabbit, a giant who drove the Elil like mice and sometimes went to silflay in the sky" (477). If true heroism involves danger selflessly undertaken for the good of the community rather than for renown, "like El-ahrairah", then its reward must ultimately be to receive no lasting renown, but to become El-ahrairah for the next generation of that community.

In the end, perhaps the most important aspect of *Watership Down*'s heroic code is the overwhelming importance that it places on myth and epic. To Chapman, "*Watership Down* is essentially about the survival of intuitive and imaginative man in his conflict with modern technology and industrial civilization ... The rabbit exiles succeed ... because they are guided by the visions of a shaman, the rabbit Fiver, and because they have a leader, Hazel, who not only listens to the shaman and believes in his insights, but also knows and respects the traditional myths of Rabbit culture" (cited Gillian Adams). Rabbits of *Watership Down* are redeemed or condemned by the degree of respect they hold for stories and mythology. As Schmoll points out, the rabbits of Cowslip's warren have consciously rejected the old stories, and as a result live "an existence devoid of epic possibility and a life divested of all vigour" (24). Their rejection of the old stories ("El-ahrairah doesn't mean very much to us" (111)) is directly tied to their acceptance of death, replacing trickery and bravery with "dignity and ... the will to accept their fate" (111). The fact that the rabbits of Cowslip's warren are characterised by unnaturally human behaviour and that the fragmentary poems of despair which have replaced the El-ahrairah myths are clearly modelled on post-war poetry make them equivalent to contemporary society in the way that Hazel and his followers are equivalent to our primitive ancestors. Although their philosophy is acknowledged as "the truth" (114), and a more rational truth than the mysticism that guides Hazel's followers, it is a dangerous truth to live by: as Fiver tells Hazel, "a thing can be true and still be desperate folly" (114). By contrast, Hazel's group "completely embraces the universal stories of El-ahrairah and incorporates them into their existence" (Schmoll 25), and are rewarded for it. Bigwig, otherwise the hero who most exists in the physical realm, "even more than most rabbits ... love[s] a story" (325), and is rescued by explicitly supernatural means when he evokes Frith to Woundwort upon the escape from Efrafa.[15] It is Holly's familiarity with "The King's Lettuce" that gives him the idea to escape Efrafa (246), and he is later saved by a train that "Lord Frith sent ... to save us from the Efrafan Owsla" (249). Even the reader, by the end, is required to be familiar with rabbit mythology to understand the hint being given to

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[15]   Bigwig is also the only one of Hazel's followers implicitly punished for failing to respect Fiver's insight, when his angry dismissal of Fiver's fears about Cowslip's warren is instantly followed by his capture in the "shining wire". After this, Bigwig apologises, and follows Fiver's advice.

Hazel through Fiver's trance: the refrain Fiver barks is the same as that of Rowsby Woof on guard. Ultimately, these stories tie the rabbits to both the natural and the supernatural world,[16] and the penultimate chapter assures us of the continuation of the warren by assuring us of the continuation of Fiver's visions and of storytelling. The importance of telling stories and of the content of old stories are common features of animal stories with epic elements: in the first *Guardians of Ga'hoole* book, for instance, the two young owls Soren and Gylfie are able to resist the "mind blinking" techniques of St. Aggie's by telling each other the Ga'Hoolian legends, while the legends of Martin the Warrior form a backdrop to *Redwall* and prove crucial to Matthias's own heroic destiny. However, while both the Ga'hoolian legends and the legends of Martin the Warrior are important because they are literally true within the context of the story, the relation between truth and story in *Watership Down* is slightly more complicated. There may never have been an historical El-ahrairah, yet the stories remain true because every rabbit can be El-ahrairah. "El-ahrairah was a trickster," one of Hazel's followers points out, "and rabbits will always need tricks" (111).

Ultimately, the importance of myth and story is something Adams claims not just within the book, but for the world at large and, by association, for *Watership Down* as an epic in its own right. Like the stories of El-ahrairah, *Watership Down* follows epic archetypes and models of heroism, and – despite the fact that they are being applied to rabbits – makes ultimately unironic use of them to tell what Adams insists is "simply a tale" ("Interview: Richard Adams"). For the power of such tales to be realised, as Strawberry states patronisingly in Cowslip's burrow, "you have to really *believe* in El-ahrairah and Prince Rainbow, don't you? Then all the rest follows" (111). This degree of belief, as numerous critics of the epic have pointed out, is no longer possible for adults in a post-modern world who know that "it is not a deep-browed god who causes thunder, and … recognise a microbe and not Apollo as the source of the dreadful plague in Book 1 of the *Iliad*" (Kitchell 23). It is, however, allowed and even expected in literature ostensibly for children. Like many writers of serious-minded fantasy (such as Pullman and Lewis), Adams has maintained that his book was not intended for children specifically but for audiences of any age, and it is hard to argue that the epic themes in the book are solely or even primarily applicable to a young audience. The form of the animal story is, though, one traditionally associated with children (particularly before *Watership Down*'s publication), and the fact that the story itself was famously composed for Adams's own children enables the book to be read as such even by those who are reading it as adults. Rabbits in the text are thus associated with not only primitivism but with childhood, and the invitation to enter

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[16]   There is a strong link in *Watership Down* between behaving in accordance with nature and closeness to the divine: Cowslip's warren's rejection of El-ahrairah is linked to their unnatural behaviour, while Woundwort's rabbits live an unnatural life because they "go days at a time without the sight of Frith" (242). Kitchell discusses the relationship between natural and unnatural behaviour in *Watership Down* in his essay "The Shrinking of the Epic Hero".

their world-view is thus an invitation (or an excuse) to suspend modern and adult cynicism and treat ideas of "courage, heroism, faith, honour, dignity, and transcendence" with the "high seriousness" (Gillian Adams 109) that were their due in the time of Homer and Virgil. As Gillian Adams argues:

> Within the text Adams is addressing not adults like Hunt but his own children and the child in the text – an audience that is still innocent. This audience will not think that rabbits are "silly," they will not be reminded of "a hundred B-picture war stories" (Hunt 232), they will not be embarrassed by the idea that animals can be heroic and honourable and clever and believe in, even be in contact with, some power higher than themselves. Other children's books like those of Grahame, Harris, and Carroll, also quoted in the chapter headings, have made this set of readers quite comfortable with such a picture of the animal world. (109)

While Aeneas and his followers survive because they reject much of the old codes of heroism, and establish an entirely new kingdom, Hazel and his followers survive because they remember and abide by the (often Virgilian) codes of rabbit heroism and the lessons of mythology. In this sense, *Watership Down* is an epic about the importance of epic, and an argument for why it can and must survive in the modern world.

"A Little Fellow in a Wide World": J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, published in 1937, can in many ways be read according to this same model of adaptation. Just as critics swiftly began to draw parallels between the *Aeneid* and *Watership Down*, the influence of traditional epic on *The Hobbit* was remarked upon almost immediately after its publication, with a letter published in the *Observer* in January 1938 inquiring whether "the hobbit's stealing of the dragon's cup was based on the cup-stealing episode in *Beowulf*" (*Letters* 30). Tolkien, not unlike Richard Adams, responded by disclaiming direct influence but conceded the inspiration of the source itself: while "the episode of the theft arose naturally (and almost inevitably) from the circumstances" of the story without *Beowulf* being "consciously present in the mind in the process of writing", the story itself is "derived from (previously digested) epic, mythology and fairy-story" and *Beowulf* was indeed one of his "most valued sources" (*Letters* 31). Since then, the influence of Tolkien's background in medieval studies has been one of the most widely studied areas of Tolkien criticism. *The Hobbit* alone has been written about as drawing from not only *Beowulf* (Bonniejean Christiensen, for example, goes so far as to argue for the book as an explicit Christian retelling of the epic), but also the prose and poetic *Edda*, the *Saga of the Volsungs*, the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki,* the *Battle of Maldon, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Finnish *Kalevala,* among others. Inevitably, Tolkien takes elements from these works and shapes them according to his own ideas and beliefs, leading to the creation of what he once described as an attempt "to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own" (*Letters* 231); in this case, one so vast that a *Guardian* review of the *Silmarillion* described Tolkien himself as "the creative equivalent of a people".

Unlike writers such as Adams, however, Tolkien does not use any one epic or myth (such as the *Aeneid*) as a basis for his story, but rather freely borrows and adapts from a variety of sources to create an entirely new mythic framework. Nor do these sources, at least in *The Hobbit*, unite to create a heroic code as clear and unambiguous as that of *Watership Down,* despite Tolkien's own passionately held Catholic beliefs. In her book *Perilous Realms*, Marjorie Burns argues convincingly that Tolkien's complexity in comparison to many of his imitators is largely indebted to his own contradictory feelings towards aspects of the traditions from which he is drawing. Tolkien both condemns and upholds many of the ideas of heroism he uses, and he is often simultaneously drawn to mutually incompatible heroic cultures and ideals:

Tolkien, for example, both rejects and makes use of allegory, both laments and idealises the

pagans, both scorns and reveres the Celts. He is strongly attracted to the loner, to independence of thought, and to singularity (qualities closely associated with the heroic North). At the same time, however, he is deeply committed to kingship, inheritance, and ritual, to the idea that blood will sooner or later tell (qualities far more English in their reliance on position and community). (31)

Similar tensions are noted by George Clark, who claims that Tolkien "sought a true hero motivated by a heroic ideal consistent with his own religious and moral ideals, but ... could not rid himself of his desire for the glorious heroes of old" (39). These tensions are present arguably to an even greater extent in *The Hobbit* than in *The Lord of the Rings*. *The Lord of the Rings* has been criticised for its straightforward depiction of good and evil: Pullman, at a 2002 Sea of Faith conference, remarked scathingly that "Tolkien ... didn't question anything ... No-one [in *The Lord of the Rings*] wonders what the right thing is: they only doubt their own capacity to do it" ("Writing Fantasy Realistically"). Absolute evil is indeed clearly delineated in *The Hobbit* in the form of the "cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted" goblins (57), and Bilbo, as will be discussed later, is a reliable if complicated moral compass. The majority of the characters, however, are motivated neither by good nor evil but by the pagan heroic ideals of glory, homeland, family, revenge and the acquisition of wealth, and at the climax of the book the majority of the 'good' characters (the dwarves, Bard and the elves) are preparing to fight not the goblins but each other.

If Richard Adams can be seen as analogous to Virgil – an epic writer knowingly crafting a kingdom whose ideals reflect what he perceives as the best of his nation – Tolkien is, as Clark argues, an epic writer analogous to the *Beowulf* poet, or at least Tolkien's own perception of the *Beowulf* poet. In Tolkien's famous essay "The Monsters and the Critics", his critical analysis constructs an idea of the unknown *Beowulf* poet as "a learned Christian who recreated a heroic world and story in an implicitly Christian universe governed by a God whose existence and nature the poem's wiser characters intuit without the benefit of revelation" (Clark 40). Whether or not this is an accurate image of the *Beowulf* poet (there continues to be debate over whether *Beowulf* is a pagan poem with later Christian interpolations or a Christian poem about pre-Christian times), it can clearly be applied to Tolkien with regards to his own writings. Tolkien's strategy – also shared by the Icelandic saga writers – allows him to tell stories of a pre-Christian world without reference to Christianity, and yet in a way that nevertheless implies the existence and permanence of Christian ideals (Clark 40). In this way, *The Hobbit* engages with epic (and specifically Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic) ideas of heroism in a way that simultaneously glorifies, laments, and criticises, as well as implying a more lasting form of heroism through the actions of the characters singled out for praise. In this

chapter, I want to examine the way in which Tolkien adapts a tradition rather than a single epic, and does so using the conventions of children's literature to interrogate epic heroism as well as uphold it.

It is interesting that, while *The Hobbit* features heavily in such Tolkien criticism (though to a lesser degree than *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*), it is rarely acknowledged within this criticism as a children's book. When it is, it is usually to excuse or critique what are perceived as the book's shortcomings in comparison to *The Lord of the Rings*, in particular the asides to juvenile readers (Carpenter 179, Crabb 28, among others). Despite *The Hobbit* being one of the most popular children's books of all time, it sometimes seems that Tolkien's critics would prefer that it had not been written for children, or at least not so explicitly. This distaste extends to (or perhaps originates from) Tolkien himself, who commented more than once that, "The desire to address children ... had some unfortunate effects on the mode of expression and narrative method, which if I had not been rushed, I should have corrected. Intelligent children of good taste (of which there seem quite a number) have always, I am glad to say, singled out the points in manner where the address is to children as blemishes" (*Letters* 297). He attributes his reason for doing so to the "contemporary delusions about 'fairy-stories' and children" (*Letters* 310) at the time, the correlation between which he almost immediately challenged in "On Fairy Stories" (first delivered as a lecture in 1938). Nonetheless, at the time the idea of the child reader was clearly an enabling one. Though Tolkien had been working for decades on the history and languages of Middle-earth, it was *The Hobbit* that allowed him to begin to bring such work to the public, and arguably the hobbits themselves who provided the bridge between the pure mythology of the *Silmarillion* and the more accessible narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*. *The Lord of the Rings* itself was, after all, famously described by Edmund Wilson as a "children's story that has somehow got out of hand" (312).

For better or for worse, if *The Lord of the Rings* is pulled between, among other things, Norse and Anglo-Saxon traditions, *The Hobbit* is pulled in yet another direction: between the traditionally adult world of these conflicting sources, and the "desire to address children" (*Letters* 297) not present in Tolkien's other works of Middle-earth. Whatever the faults Tolkien himself found in his mode of addressing children, he had a strong background in addressing his own, both orally and through the written word. Tolkien, as Carpenter illuminates in his biography, was drawn not only to the serious literary landscape of myth and poetry in his early writing but also, less seriously, to children's fairy tales. The "amiably childlike sense of humour" that characterises much of his writing about hobbits manifests itself in the stories Tolkien would tell his son Michael about the villainous Bill Stickers (named from a notice on an Oxford gate reading "Bill Stickers Will Be

Prosecuted") and his nemesis, Major Road Ahead (Carpenter 161). Later stories come to blend this desire to amuse his children with various mythic and fairy tale elements. *Roverandom*, for example, was written for John and Michael Tolkien after the younger lost a toy dog on a summer holiday, and features a small dog who has been turned into a toy and left on a beach by a boy. The dog is rescued by the sand-sorcerer Psamathos Psamithides, and sent on an adventure to the moon where he encounters the White Dragon. Similarly, the stories of Tom Bombadil which would later become a vital part of Middle-earth mythology originated with a Dutch doll that Tolkien's son Michael disliked and tried to flush down the lavatory, and the Father Christmas letters written every year for his children feature an elven secretary named Ilbereth. Tolkien was also, through his children and his own tastes, immersed in classic and then-contemporary children's literature: while Tolkien himself named the influence of George MacDonald, Carpenter draws attention also to E. A. Wyke-Smith's *The Marvellous Land of the Snergs* (1927), featuring a race Tolkien described as "people only slightly taller than the average table but broad in the shoulders and of great strength" (165). These elements become part of what Tolkien referred to as the "soup" of the story, blending the high seriousness of epic with parodic humour and fairy tale.

Regardless of how erroneous Tolkien later felt his "contemporary delusions about 'fairy-stories' and children" to be, the complex interplay between children's narrative and epic is crucial to the heroic ethos of the story. In his essay "On Fairy Stories", Tolkien argues with Andrew Lang's assertion that what children most wish to know when reading or listening to a story is, "Is it true?" Instead, Tolkien says, the question children ask in his experience is, "'Was he good? Was he wicked?' ... They were more concerned to get the right and the wrong side clear. For that is the question equally important in History and in Faerie" (38). This question mirrors Tolkien's own doubts regarding the glorious pagan ideals of the North, and is one that becomes increasingly important to *The Hobbit* as Bilbo Baggins (who can perhaps be considered the most conventional children's book hero of the text) moves through a world that becomes steadily more epic in tone. The blend of the two literary forms allows Tolkien to simultaneously glorify and revise traditional epic worldviews, creating a heroic code of its own.

"The World Into Which Mr Baggins Had Strayed": Tolkien and Northern Epic

The Hobbit's famous opening line is not what might be thought of the prelude to an epic: the 'hero' is not even human, but a hobbit living in a "hole in the ground", the key feature of which is not danger or suffering but "comfort" (1). In my MA thesis, I argued that the world of hobbits in which the story begins is not only devoid of epic conventions, but works as a comic parody of epic, with

Tolkien often knowingly subverting established tropes of the genre (10). Honour among hobbits is gained specifically through the lack of deeds, with the Bagginses considered "very respectable... because they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected" (1), rather than through the accomplishment of great deeds as in traditional epic. More elaborately, where *Beowulf* features an extended sequence where the hero is ritualistically welcomed to Heorot, following a clear pattern of hospitality, Bilbo is tricked by Gandalf into playing host to the dwarves (and by extension to "a most wretched adventure" (10)) against his will. Like hosts in both classical and northern epic, Bilbo is clearly aware of a set of guidelines to which he must adhere in his welcome of guests – he knows, for example, "the correct thing to say" (9) when greeting a guest – but the forms these take are comically realistic rather than ritualised and gently ridicule Bilbo's unsuitability for a heroic world: the dwarves fall forward onto the mat when Bilbo opens the door "like a pop-gun" (10), the practicalities of preparing food for fifteen leaves him "very hot, and red in the face, and annoyed" (11), his duty "as the host" which he knows and "stick[s] to… however painful" (7) involves the possibility of going without cakes if they "run short" (7), and the dwarves' role as guests (apart from Thorin who is "too important" (11)) involves helping with the washing up with Bilbo terrified of the possibility of broken crockery. Likewise, the heroic ethos of northern epic is comically recreated in both Bilbo and the dwarves. As Clark points out, Bilbo is motivated to join the adventure by a desire for *lof*, or praise, but this desire takes the form of "suddenly [feeling] he would go without bed and breakfast to be thought fierce" (17) (Clark 42), and his attempt to draw on his ancestry in a fit of traditional heroic boasting is dismissed by the dwarves with, "yes, but that was long ago" (18). Warriors and Heroes are dealt with matter-of-factly by Gandalf in terms of a job description, and the dwarves' suitably heroic quest for a dragon's treasure is placed in the unheroic language of a business transaction: "cash on delivery, up to and not exceeding one fourteenth of total profits (if any); all travelling expenses guaranteed in any event; funeral expenses to be defrayed by us or our representatives" (38). If Bilbo is a Beowulf figure, setting out with fourteen companions to help a people not his own, he is a comic one, and the world around him appears comic to match.

Tolkien, however, saw *The Hobbit* not as parody but as the story of a "simple ordinary man, neither artistic or noble or heroic ... against a high setting" (*Letters* 159), and as the story progresses this "high setting" begins to resemble more and more that of the epic tradition. It is ironic that what is perhaps the least epic episode of the book – the meeting of Bilbo and Gollum – can in many ways be read as the book's first true connection to *Beowulf*, and thus to Anglo-Saxon epic.[17] While riddles

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are a vital element of Old English culture, trading them instead of doing battle is not usually the strategy of any epic hero, and Gollum himself possesses a verbalised psychological complexity more familiar to the modern novel than to epic, folk-tale or myth. Nonetheless, a relationship between *Beowulf* and Bilbo's encounter with Gollum has been argued by many critics, beginning with Christiensen's reading of the scene as a conflation of Beowulf's encounters with Unferth and Grendel's mother. Both Hodge and Glenn see it instead as a conflation of Beowulf's conflicts with Grendel's mother and Grendel himself, a reading which has the advantage of balancing Bilbo's later conflict with Smaug in much the same way as Tolkien praises the Grendel episode of *Beowulf* for balancing Beowulf's later conflict with the dragon (Glenn). Tolkien describes Grendel in "The Monsters and the Critics" as "the lesser and more nearly human" (32) of Beowulf's famous adversaries, whose defeat comes in terms of Beowulf's career "not in earliest youth ... and not during the later period of recognized ability and prowess; but in that first moment, which often comes in great lives, when men look up in surprise and see that a hero has unawares leaped forth" (32). As Glenn points out, both adversary and placement mirror Bilbo's own heroic career. It is after Bilbo's escape from Gollum's subterranean home that we are told "Bilbo's reputation went up a good deal with the dwarves" (86),[18] while, more notably, Gollum stands in clear contrast to Smaug as one of two enemies with whom Bilbo has a direct and prolonged confrontation.

Aside from their similar positions in the hero's journey, Gollum and Grendel share a number of attributes in their own right, many of which have been discussed by critics.[19] Grendel occupies a liminal position in *Beowulf*, clearly monstrous and yet described in human terms as an exile and an outcast left without home or kin as divine punishment for his ancestor Cain's murder of Abel (102-114). Even in the original version of the story, Gollum is similarly an exile, with memories of "ages and ages and ages before, when he lived with his grandmother in a hole in a bank by a river" (69) and "days when he had been less lonely and sneaky and nasty" (69). While the original cause of

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It should be noted that Tolkien disliked the categorisation of *Beowulf* as an epic, saying that "No terms borrowed from Greek or other literatures exactly fit ... [t]hough if we must have a term, we should choose rather 'elegy'" ("The Monsters and the Critics" 31). This, however, is mostly intended to differentiate it from classical epic and hence rescue the poem from the criticism for its perceived shortcomings it had historically received. The language Tolkien uses to describe the poem, in particular its "high tone, the sense of dignity ... [and] the presence of a mind lofty and thoughtful" (13), is in fact very much in keeping with the "high quality and high seriousness" (6) and poet of "psychological strength and healthy balance of mental parts" (10) that Tillyard counts among his qualifications of the epic.

18   In fact, Bilbo's ring-assisted reappearance in the midst of the startled dwarves ("Bless me, how they jumped!" (86)) amusingly, and almost certainly unintentionally, literalises Tolkien's description of "the moment ... when men look up in surprise and see that a hero has unawares leaped forth."

19   The most extensive discussion of the two is perhaps Brent Nelson's essay, "Cain-Leivathan Typology in Gollum and Grendel", although this, like most such criticism, focuses more on *The Lord of the Rings* than on *The Hobbit*.

Gollum's exile is an invasion of the goblins, which "cut [him] off from his friends far under the mountains" (Rateliff 156), Gollum in the revised version of *The Hobbit* is referred to as one who has "lost all his friends and been driven away, alone, and crept down, down, into the dark under the mountains" (68). This exile is revealed in *The Lord of the Rings* to be an indirect punishment for Gollum's murder of his friend Deagol: like Grendel, Gollum has found "no good from committing that murder" but has been made an "anathema", suffering in "the curse of his exile" (*Beowulf* 109-111). As Christiensen points out briefly, the cave to which Gollum has been driven bears a strong resemblance to the lair of Grendel's mother (6). Aside from more superficial similarities, there is a strong verbal echo of the description of the "writhing sea-dragons" (*Beowulf* 1426) marvelled at by Beowulf's men and Tolkien's description of

> nasty slimy things with big bulging eyes, wriggling in the water. There are strange things living in the pools and lakes in the hearts of the mountains: fish whose fathers swam in ... and never swam out again, while their eyes grew bigger and bigger and bigger from trying to see in the blackness; also there are other things more slimy than fish. (66)

Grendel's murderous anger at the "din of the loud banquet / every day in the hall" (88-9) – due to the religious content of the songs, but equally, as Stephens and McCallum argue, by his exclusion from them – is mirrored by Gollum's anger at the "aboveground everyday" content of Bilbo's riddles, which "remind him of days when he had been less lonely and sneaky and nasty" (69). Moreover, the revelation in *The Lord of the Rings* that Gollum is explicitly "of hobbit-kind" (51) transforms his desire to eat Bilbo into cannibalism akin to that practised by Grendel and, as mentioned previously, commonly emphasised in adaptations of *Beowulf*. As Grendel revels in "the hope of feasting full" on Beowulf's men and ultimately kills a sleeping warrior, "bit[ing] into his bone-lappings; bolt[ing] down his blood / and gorg[ing] on him in lumps" (*Beowulf* 741-742), so Gollum views Bilbo excitedly as "a choice feast; at least a tasty morsel" (67) and anticipates him being "juicy [and] scrumptiously crunchable" (71).

Tolkien, though, develops the idea of Grendel as the "more nearly human" adversary ("The Monsters and the Critics" 32), by making Gollum not only a hobbit-like adversary but a corrupted version of a hobbit, and thus a representation of the potential for corruption within his hero. Stephens and McCallum point out that it is a "critical commonplace" (109) to read the monsters in *Beowulf* as doublings of the hero, citing Kroll's argument that such a reading "both accounts for the curiously equivocal elements in the hero's nature and deeds and highlights the human dilemmas that make the preservation of political order problematical" (109). In the original version of *The Hobbit*,

Gollum is clearly not intended to function as a double of Bilbo, or indeed as sharing origins with Bilbo at all. As Rateliff points out, Gollum in Tolkien's first manuscript bears no resemblance to a hobbit. Instead, the narrator describes him as "dark as darkness" with flapping webbed feet and eyes "like telescopes" which project light, and early illustrators frequently depicted a "huge, monstrous creature" rather than the emaciated figure that became established later (Rateliff *Mr Baggins* 166). It is not until the revised edition that Gollum's description and therefore origins become more firmly defined, and he becomes "a small slimy creature" with a "thin face" (Rateliff 166). Nonetheless, the revisions made to Gollum's character and origins in the second edition of *The Hobbit* and in *The Lord of the Rings* position Gollum as a very different adversary, and it is equally a critical commonplace to read Gollum as a double of Frodo in particular.

Both the connection between Bilbo and Gollum and the disturbing connotations of such a connection are made explicit within the first few chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, as Frodo reacts with disgust and disbelief to the idea that the "Gollum-creature that Bilbo met" is at all "connected with hobbits, however distantly" (53). Gandalf counters Frodo's denial – born, it is implied, by an unwillingness to recognise potential for evil within hobbit-kind as Frodo tries to argue that hobbits, unlike Gollum, "don't cheat" (53)[20] – by stressing a kinship between Bilbo and Gollum evident in their interaction. "They understood one another," he observes, "remarkably well, very much better than a hobbit would understand, say, a Dwarf, or an Orc, or even an Elf" (53). In fact, this holds true even for the early version of the scene. Bilbo's mind and Gollum's are implied throughout the encounter to be similar in a way that Bilbo's and Smaug's, for example, are not, though at first the parallels between the two thought processes are largely used to comic effect:

> He [Gollum] was anxious to appear friendly, at any rate for the moment, and until he found out more about the sword and the hobbit, whether he was quite alone really, whether he was good to eat, and whether Gollum was really hungry ...

> 'Very well,' said Bilbo, who was anxious to agree, until he found out more about the creature, whether he was quite alone, whether he was fierce or hungry, and whether he was a friend of the goblins. (68)

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[20]   Once again, this marks a deliberate change in Gollum from his original conception. The Gollum of the first edition of *The Hobbit* does not intend to cheat, but considers himself bound by the rules of the competition. He genuinely intends to give his magic ring to Bilbo as a prize and becomes very distressed at his inability to do so upon the loss of the ring, to the point where Tolkien observes, "I don't know how many times Gollum begged Bilbo's pardon" (cited in Rateliff 160). It is Bilbo who cheats, and is excused for doing so by the narrator.

At the climax of the encounter, the understanding between Bilbo and Gollum deepens into what later becomes the defining moment of both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as Bilbo spares Gollum's life from "a sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror ... a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering" (80).[21] This positive potential for mercy born of understanding, however, is almost immediately followed by a reminder of Bilbo's equal potential for corruption: Bilbo's first conscious use of the Ring, after finding it unexpectedly missing from his finger, is accompanied by a "pang of fear and loss, like an echo of Gollum's misery" (82). The idea of Grendel as monstrous double for the hero, then, which Stephens and McCallum argue is almost always absent from children's retellings of *Beowulf* (109), holds a potent charge in *The Hobbit*. Though the potential for darkness in Bilbo is developed no further until *The Lord of the Rings*, his encounter with Gollum seeds the ideas of temptation, greed and human weakness as potentially destructive forces that come to shape the latter half of the story.

The elements of Northern epic arguably intensify after this encounter with Gollum, or in any event become steadily less rooted in the world of folktale. The company immediately afterwards encounters wolves and eagles, both standard elements of Northern heroic poetry, and with it the first hint of epic warfare as Gandalf prepares to "spring down from on high right among the spears of the goblins" with "sudden splendour flash[ing] from his wand like lightning" (99). More significantly, the next episode introduces them to Beorn, the skin-changer whose name, appearance and hall work to characterise him as "belong[ing] unquestionably to a Norse and pagan world" (Burns 33). The relationship between Beorn and both Norse and Anglo-Saxon epic tradition has been thoroughly discussed, most thoroughly by Burns and by Glenn, and he is generally recognised as being drawn from both Beowulf himself (whose name, like that of Beorn, means 'bear' in Old English) and from Bjorn and his son Bodvar Bjarki of the Norse *Hrolf Kraki* (itself thought to be an analogue of *Beowulf*). In terms of the heroic ethos of the story, Beorn is notable for introducing seriously the idea of violent revenge. While the dwarves' desire to "bring [their] curses home to Smaug, if they can" (23) is almost an afterthought to regaining the treasure and Thorin's desire for revenge on the Necromancer is dismissed by Gandalf as "absurd" (25), Beorn's vengeance on the goblins is bloody and, to Bilbo, frightening, as he listens to the sounds outside wondering if Beorn will "come in as a bear and kill them" (118). Later, Beorn, "in a splendidly good humour" (121), shows them "a goblin's head ... stuck outside the gate and a warg-skin ... nailed to a tree just beyond" (122), a

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[21]   This link between pity and understanding, particularly understanding based on shared experience of evil, continues throughout *The Lord of the Rings,* most notably when Sam himself finally refrains from killing Gollum: "He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's shrivelled mind and body, enslaved to the Ring, unable to find peace or relief in life ever again" (923).

"highly Norse stunt" (Burns 34) also reminiscent of Beowulf nailing Grendel's arm to Heorot. Glenn points out that this is a very long way from Gandalf's warning in *The Lord of the Rings* not to "deal out death in judgement" (58), and argues that Beorn is deliberately set apart as the sole figure in Tolkien able to dispense justice, thereby removing from the other heroes "what the Beowulfian hero proudly takes as his duty and his right – the enforcement of justice against all wrong, whether monster of the dark underground or the fiery dragon of the ancient hoards". It seems more likely, though, that Beorn simply *is* a Beowulfian hero, acting in line with an older and more primitive heroic code than that of many of the other characters. (It should be noted that even in *The Lord of Rings*, the Ents – who occupy a similar position as older and more primitive forest-guardians – are considered perfectly within their rights to exact similarly violent revenge on Saruman and his orcs for harming their land.) In keeping with Tolkien's stance as a recorder of a pre-Christian time, Beorn's actions are neither justified nor condemned: instead, they introduce a form of heroism seemingly in the process of passing away but not yet entirely passed, and open the possibility for the world of the story to include not only folk-tale trickery and "fireworks" (114), but violent retribution without mercy.

These elements of epic come to fruition when the company finally reach the Lonely Mountain. Smaug's connection to the *Beowulf* dragon is by far the most widely acknowledged epic allusion in criticism of *The Hobbit*: both sleep on hoards of treasure, both are angered by the stealing of a cup from this hoard by a thief, and both subsequently seek violent revenge until their destruction. Tolkien's criticism of Beowulf's dragon that it is "not dragon enough", but too often a "personification of malice, greed, destruction ... and of the undiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad" rather than a "real worm, with a bestial life and thought of his own" ("The Monsters and the Critics" 17) seems to be deliberately rectified in Smaug, partially through blending the *Beowulf* dragon with the more specifically characterised Fafnir of *The Saga of the Volsungs* (whom Tolkien considered, alongside the Beowulf dragon, one of the only two significant dragons of northern literature ("The Monsters and the Critics" 12)). Smaug, like Fafnir, has a name and history, and is able to engage in "riddling talk" (205) in an attempt to extract information from the hero. Moreover, Tolkien expands the lines of *Beowulf* he praises as making the dragon "a real worm, with a bestial life and thought of his own" (17) – when the dragon wakes to discover the cup missing – into a lengthy section largely focalised through Smaug's thoughts. Like Beowulf's dragon, Smaug awakens to notice the theft with horror ("Thieves! Fire! Murder!" (200)), searches first the cave and then the surrounding area for signs of the thief, and then returns, his "pent-up fury / at the loss of his vessel ma[king] him long to hit back / and lash out in flames" (*Beowulf* 2304-6). Smaug is even more clearly a personality in his own right rather than a symbolic dragon: vain, rather than

an allegory of Vanity, and evil, rather than an allegory of Evil. At the same time, this does not negate his ability to serve the allegorical purpose of the *Beowulf* dragon, nor, as Glenn points out, to serve as the "older and more elemental" ("The Monsters and the Critics" 32) of Bilbo's major foes just as the *Beowulf* dragon does of Beowulf's.

The introduction of a dragon sees the nature of the story essentially outgrow Bilbo, whose function as a parodic or fairy-tale Beowulf is only possible when the world around him is parodic or fairy-tale to match. Bilbo's encounter with his Grendel figure is adapted to fit him: Gollum is hobbit-like evil instead of human-like evil, and thus engages in a folk-tale contest of riddles rather than an epic contest of wrestling. As a result, Bilbo's failure to kill Gollum is explicitly a conscious choice on his part rather than a lack of ability to fulfil the role of Beowulf to his Grendel (although it can, and does, signify that he is acting according to a different heroic code to the other characters). To an extent, folk-tale crosses over into epic in the *Saga of the Volsungs*, with Sigurd employing trickery and riddles as well as prowess as a warrior in his defeat of Fafnir, and Bilbo is thus able to engage with Smaug on the level of "riddling talk" (205) that he earlier employed with Gollum. This conversation closely mirrors Sigurd's with Fafnir: Sigurd, for example, tries to hide his name by declaring himself "called the noble beast" (63), while Bilbo declares himself "the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly" (205); and both Smaug and Fafnir tell the heroes that their dwarvish companions seek to betray them. While Sigurd's conversation takes place as his dragon lies dying beside him, neither Bilbo or the dwarves are able to even think of a way to kill Smaug (which, as Bilbo points out, "had always been a weak point in their plans" (202)), and the encounter ends with merely a successful escape that still scorches Bilbo badly. Tolkien, arguing for the literary value of the *Beowulf* dragon, points out that for both Beowulf and Sigurd, "the slaying of [a dragon is] the chief deed of the greatest heroes" ("The Monsters and the Critics" 16). Smaug, therefore, represents the book's full immersion in an epic or heroic world, and for Bilbo to kill him would be to aspire to a form of epic heroism that would, as will be argued later, negate his function in the book. It is significant that after this point, as many including C.S. Lewis have noted, the authorial voice used by Tolkien begins to shift from a colloquial, first-person address to an increasingly elevated style ("*The Hobbit*" 81); at the same time, the narrative abruptly shifts to the world of men, and thus to the book's one human hero, Bard.

If Tolkien judges Fafnir and the *Beowulf* dragon as northern literature's only true dragons, it follows that Beowulf and Sigurd remain northern literature's only true dragon-slayers, and Bard's portrayal borrows liberally from both. Introduced with the alliterative "grim-voiced and grim-faced" (229) in a way that evokes the form of Old English heroic poetry (Beowulf, for example, is described as

"hréoh ond heorogrim" ("fierce and deadly-grim") (1564)), Bard is, like Beowulf, a hero of noble lineage who will eventually become king of a people not his own. His ability to understand the speech of birds, revealed in the crucial moment before he slays the dragon, reflects the Fafnir episode of the *Saga of the Volsungs*, as Sigurd gains the ability to do the same after tasting the blood of Fafnir.[22] Moreover, his slaying of Smaug combines elements of both dragon-slayings. Fafnir, who also meets his death near water, is able to be killed by being stabbed through the chest, and in his death throes "thrash[es] his head and tail, destroying everything that got in his way" (63) much like Smaug's "last throes splinter [the town] to sparks and gledes" (236). Though the black arrow itself appears to be entirely Tolkien's own invention, the idea of slaying a monster with a weapon of special lineage that is lost in the battle is crucial to a number of Anglo-Saxon texts including *Beowulf:* Beowulf breaks his sword Naegling attempting to slay the dragon, and slays Grendel's mother with a sword forged by giants that later melts away at the touch of the venomous blood. According to Tolkien's notes, Bard was initially intended to die slaying his dragon (Rateliff *There and Back Again* 555), thus fulfilling the parallels between the hero and Beowulf as well as the Anglo-Saxon and Norse tradition of a battle culminating in mutual destruction. Tolkien's resurrection of Bard nonetheless borrows from *Beowulf*, though at an earlier point in the hero's career. After descending underwater to kill Grendel's mother (with yet another weapon that is destroyed in the victory), Beowulf is feared dead by his companions only to return unexpectedly in triumph. Likewise, Bard is considered lost beneath the water and lamented by the people of Esgaroth, but returns wet and with "a fierce light in his eyes" (230) to announce: "Bard is not lost! ... He dived from Esgaroth, when the enemy was slain. I am Bard, of the line of Girion; I am the slayer of the dragon!" (230).

Bilbo, who as will be argued later is continually operating in the realm of a children's story, feels "that the adventure [is], properly speaking, over with the death of the dragon" (238), and according to the narrative rules laid out at the beginning of the book he should indeed be correct. The story, however, has grown in seriousness until it has "pass[ed] insensibly into the world of epic" (Lewis "On Stories" 18) and, as in both *Beowulf* and the *Saga of the Volsungs*, the defeat of the dragon and the acquisition of the treasure does not bring about a resolution but rather sets in motion a seemingly unending series of conflicts. Smaug's death at the hands of Bard halts the destruction of the town, but also threatens the city with internal warfare as the people attempt to replace the Master of Laketown with "King Bard" (231). The tension between an ineffectual leader and a

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[22]   Although Sigurd has already killed his dragon at this point while Bard has yet to do so, both receive critical information from the birds they understand: Bard is told of Smaug's weak spot, while Sigurd hears a warning to kill his companion and take the treasure for himself.

powerful hero is an underlying theme of many epic texts, and arguably exists in subtle form between Beowulf and Hrothgar in *Beowulf* itself (as, for example, Jackson argues in his book *The Hero and the King*). Though this disruption is avoided in *The Hobbit*, this is accomplished only by the Master's displacement of the people's resentment onto Thorin and the dwarves, and thus the potential for further external warfare. The plot shifts from a straightforward quest to reclaim treasure from a dragon to a war between three "good" races – Men, Dwarves and Elves – for the wealth and recompense the treasure represents.

The idea of cursed treasure that brings with it trouble rather than reward is common to Anglo-Saxon and Norse literature: the dragon-hoards of both Beowulf's dragon and Fafnir carry their own curses with them. Tolkien complicates this idea by making the conflict not only a result of "dragon-sickness" but an unavoidable and explicit result of the pagan heroic code and characters' personal weakness. As Rateliff points out, Smaug's treasure does not carry with it an outright curse of death (as, for example, the dragon's treasure in *Beowulf* is "until doomsday so accursed / that whoever robbed it would be guilty of wrong / and grimly punished for their transgression, / hasped in hell-bounds in heathen shrines" (3070-3073)), and is ultimately able to be put to use to rebuild Smaug's damage rather than lost or reburied as in the case of both *Beowulf* and the *Saga of the Volsungs* (599-600). Instead, "dragon-sickness" is depicted as an external force, but one dependent on internal weakness, a configuration of temptation and madness that is common in Tolkien's works. Thorin's desire to make war over the treasure rather than pay reparation to the people of Esgaroth is attributed to both "the power that gold has upon which a dragon has long brooded" and Thorin's own "dwarvish heart" (242), while the Master succumbs quickly (and fatally) to dragon-sickness because he is "of the kind who easily catches such disease" (278).[23] Bilbo, by contrast, feels the lure of the treasure but is able to "ke[ep] his head more clear of the bewitchment of the hoard" (220), implicitly because it is not so accordant with his own nature. Similarly, the attempts of both Dale and the Elvenking to claim the treasure are not dependent on dragon-sickness, but are motivated by the nature of the northern heroic code. Upon the destruction of the dragon, Roac the raven warns Thorin:

> So much for joy, Thorin Oakenshield. You may go back to your halls in safety: all the treasure is yours – for the moment. But many are gathering hither beside the birds. The news of the death of the guardian has already gone far and wide, and the legend of the wealth of Thror has not lost in the telling during many years; many are eager for a share of the spoil.

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23   The Master's death also neatly solves Laketown's internal conflicts, allowing Bard to rule at the end of the book without violently displacing the former ruler.

Already a host of the elves is on the way, and carrion birds are with them hoping for battle and slaughter. By the lake men murmur that their sorrows are due to the dwarves; for they are homeless and many have died; and Smaug has destroyed their town. They too think to find amends from your treasure, whether you are alive or dead. (237)

The world evoked through Roac's description is one that lives by the pagan ethos of the acquisition of legendary hoarded gold (the elves) and the need for recompense that can easily become revenge (the people of Esgaroth), each eventuating in "battle and slaughter" amidst swarming carrion birds.[24] While in the early stages of the book treasure-hunting and revenge are comical or positive, here they threaten to result in what Tolkien described as "the dark side to heroic life": "malice, greed [and] destruction" ("The Monsters and the Critics" 17).

The Hobbit is saved from a bleak ending of mutual destruction ironically only by the arrival of yet another army, as the dwarves' attack on Bard and the elves is interrupted by the goblins and the resulting Battle of Five Armies. I have argued in my MA that the shift in language used to describe the Battle of Five Armies, most notably the descriptions of the goblins as a "sea of locusts" (257) that burst onto the field "like a tide" (259), owes more to classical epic than to the Old English equivalent, both in the continual use of epic simile and the specific images (14-15). However, the details of the battle, unsurprisingly, draw from Anglo-Saxon and Norse heroic poetry. The most notable of these is Beorn's presence "in bear's shape" (265), described as so powerful that "no weapon seemed to bite down upon him. He scattered the bodyguard, and pulled down Bolg himself and crushed him. Then dismay fell on the goblins and they fled in all directions" (266). As many have pointed out, this is similar to the final battle of *Hrolf Kraki,* where the warrior Bodvar Bjarki apparently summons a "great bear" to fight alongside his king (Burns 40; Glenn; and others); it in fact comes close to being a paraphrase: "Blows and missiles glanced off the animal, as it used its weight to crush King Hjorvard's men and their horses. Between its teeth, it tore everything within reach, causing a palpable fear to spread through the ranks of King Hjorvard's army" (*Hrolf Kraki* 74).

More importantly, the fact that the opposing army is not human, as in the *Iliad*, but inhuman, is key to Tolkien's conception of *Beowulf*, and of the potential of such inhuman creatures to elevate stories to "something larger and more significant ... [that] glimpses the cosmic" ("The Monsters and the Critics" 33). Tolkien points out in "The Monsters and the Critics", citing Chambers, that though

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[24]   This is a common motif of northern heroic poetry: around the battle of Maldon, for example, "the ravens wheeled, / The eagle, eager for carrion" (*The Battle of Maldon* 106-107).

both the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf* feature cannibalistic monsters, Odysseus's conflict with Polyphemus is not depicted as a conflict with "the powers of darkness" (19); indeed, Polyphemus is the son of a god and his maiming an offence against Poseidon (24). By contrast, Grendel is specifically an enemy of God and of the ideal order represented by Heorot, and the monsters in *Beowulf* "symbolise ... the powers of evil, even while they remain ... mortal denizens of the material world" (20). Similarly, though Tolkien's depiction of a pre-Christian world extends to his narration, goblins are in Tolkien's wider mythology pre-ordained evil, with no possibility for redemption, and described in children's book terms as entirely "cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted ... [They] hated everybody and everything, and particularly the orderly and prosperous" (58). While they are, like Smaug, creatures of the material world rather than the allegorical, Tolkien's claim that they are responsible for "invent[ing] some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once" (58) suggests their potential to be read in broader terms as manifestations of evil. Because of this, the brewing pagan battle between conflicting armies is able to be transmuted into a spiritual battle in the Christian sense. Where a war with the Elvenking and Bard on one side and the dwarves on the other would be a tragic "war for gold" that the Elvenking himself wishes to avoid (256), a battle where "upon one side were the Goblins and the Wild Wolves, and upon the other were Elves and Men and Dwarves" (257) is a heroic (if "terrible" (259)) conflict that foreshadows those of *The Lord of the Rings*. Though the victory is only temporary in light of the wider history of Middle-earth (as indeed, all such battles are within northern mythology), it is nonetheless a victory of good over evil, and the book is allowed its perfect moment of eucatastrophe as Bilbo looks up and shouts "The Eagles are coming!" (262).

Nonetheless, the tragic ending of *Beowulf* and of the Norse sagas retains a presence in *The Hobbit* through the death of Thorin, and with him Fili and Kili who fall "defending him with shield and body, for he was their mother's eldest brother" (267). Christiensen notes that both Thorin and Beowulf have "time for a dying speech" (9) before their deaths, yet while Beowulf "can look upon death knowing he has not broken the two great pagan prohibitions – false swearing and the murder of kin – and that he has merited the *lof*, the praise, of his kin" (9), Thorin does not have that comfort. This reading, though, overlooks Tolkien's own interpretation of Beowulf's death and the similar death of Beorhtnoth of *The Battle of Maldon*. As many including Clark and Glenn have discussed, Tolkien argues that both heroes' deaths were meant to be read as criticisms of the heroic code, with both placing their own personal honour before the safety of their kingdoms: Beorhtnoth when he allows a party of Vikings to cross to the coast "in his overmastering pride ... as he should not have done", and Beowulf when he attempts to fight the dragon alone, leading to Wiglaf's lament that "by one man's will many must woe endure" ("The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth" 150). Thorin's

desire is more for wealth than for glory, although his claim to the treasure is also a matter of right, bound as it is for him with "old memories of the labours and sorrows of his race" (243). Nonetheless, in his insistence upon carrying what he sees as a point of honour past reasonable limits, Thorin's downfall can be read as dramatising Tolkien's interpretation of Beowulf's death in much the same way Gollum dramatises aspects of his interpretation of Grendel. While Beowulf's desire to obtain the dragon's gold is implied at most and his desire for glory not explicitly criticised, Thorin's "lust" (243) for treasure is condemned outright. Bard's claim to a portion of the treasure is stated with words deemed "fair ... and true" (242) by the narrator, and Bilbo – closely aligned with the narrative voice throughout – expects Thorin to "at once admit what justice was in them" (242). Instead, Thorin remains defiant, despite being warned by Roac that "the treasure is likely to be [his] death" (245) and the death of his people, and begins an impossible battle against superior forces as a result.

Importantly, however, Thorin does not die as a result of his misguided heroism (as do Beowulf and Beorhtnoth), but rather in a way that redeems him for it. The unexpected transition from the opening skirmish (of Thorin's incorrect war) into the Battle of Five Armies means that when Thorin does fight, he does so for the right reasons, and calling both Elves and Men to fight alongside him. His charge against the goblins, coming as it does after "victory vanished from hope" (260), exemplifies Tolkien's ideal of northern courage as "absolute resistance, perfect because without hope" (Ker, cited in "The Monsters and the Critics" 21), and is described in full-fledged heroic language as "the great dwarf gleam[s] like gold in a dying fire" and "wield[s] his axe with mighty strokes" (260). More important are the differences between the heroes' death scenes. Beowulf, while dying, speaks of his satisfaction in having "been allowed to leave my people / so well endowed on the day I die. / Now that I have bartered my last breath / to own this fortune" (2797-800), apparently without realising that without him the treasure is of no use to his doomed people. Thorin, by contrast, recognises that he is leaving "all gold and silver, and go[ing] now where it is of little worth", and uses this recognition to "take back [his] words and deeds" (264) towards Bilbo. With this, as Christiensen points out, Thorin "achieves a reconciliation of himself to the world and what lies beyond Time" (9), conceding the pointlessness of "hoarded gold" (*Hobbit* 264) in a way that hints at wider Christian ideals.

Tolkien himself described the northern heroic spirit as "never quite pure: it is of gold and an alloy. Unalloyed it would direct a man to endure even death unflinching, when necessary; that is when death may help the achievement of some object of will, or when life can only be purchased by denial of what one stands for. But since such conduct is held admirable, the alloy of personal good

name is never wholly absent" ("The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth" 144). This is largely untrue of the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, in which northern and Christian forms of heroism are more balanced: Aragorn's deeds as Strider, for example, are kept secret and therefore unpraised in order to keep those they protect "free from care and fear" (242), and the characters often expect no songs to be sung of their doomed resistance because there will be none left to sing them (*The Lord of the Rings* 718). The epic heroism of *The Hobbit* contains far more such "alloy", and the glory and courage of heroes such as Thorin, Bard and the Elvenking is depicted as intrinsically bound up with greed, pride, suspicion and revenge. Despite this, *The Hobbit* is certainly not primarily tragic. While this world surrounds and shapes Bilbo as he moves through it, it is Bilbo himself who is the book's hero, and who remains at its heart. Thorin, whose death exemplifies both the glory and the tragedy of the northern heroic code, finally acknowledges that "if more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world" (264). It is this ideal of "food and cheer and song", as well as "some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure" (264) that Bilbo represents, and that is held in tension with the darker Northern courage – "perfect because without hope" – that characterises the book's wider epic world.

"Child of the Kindly West": Bilbo as Children's Book Hero

In his biography of Tolkien, Carpenter observes that, for all its epic qualities *The Hobbit* "*is* a children's book. Despite the fact that it had been drawn into his mythology, Tolkien did not allow it to become overwhelmingly serious or even adult in tone, but stuck to his original intention of amusing his own and perhaps other people's children" (179). If this is true, and it is hard to dispute, it is a surprising achievement for a book that includes not only the deaths of three beloved characters (Thorin, Fili and Kili) but the destruction of Esgaroth and subsequent devastation as "many [of the people of Laketown] took ill of wet and cold and sorrow that night, and afterwards died, who had escaped uninjured from the ruin of the town; and in the days that followed there was much sickness and great hunger" (232). *The Hobbit* remains a children's book largely through the perceptions and heroism of its central hero, Bilbo Baggins, whose contrast to the epic world around him balances what would, through the eyes of another character, be "overwhelmingly serious" events. At the same time, the serious nature of such events, and the epics from which they are drawn, is not negated or ridiculed. Instead, the children's book elements of *The Hobbit* balance the elements of straight epic, in a way that enables Tolkien to both uphold and criticise the pagan ideals that underlie his sources.

Tolkien's "desire to address children" (*Letters* 297) in *The Hobbit* is most evident in the way he, or at least his narrator, literally addresses an implied audience of children. Keith O'Sullivan analyses some of the features of Tolkien's narrative voice with regard to the traditions of children's literature, highlighting features such as word-play, real or invented proverbs, a didactic tone of first-person address, and the manner in which "child-readers are guided through a sign-posted narrative": as when, for example, Tolkien tells his readers "there is no need to tell you much of [Bilbo's] adventures that night, for now we are drawing near the end of the eastward journey and coming to the last and greatest adventure, so we must hurry up" (19-20). O'Sullivan's observation that *The Hobbit* displays not only many conventional characteristics of children's literature but often "the very same ones that Karin Lesnik-Oberstein and Jacqueline Rose focus on to argue that children's literature is frequently regressive, arrested and antipathetic to literary invention" (20) is unsurprising considering Tolkien's confession that he was indeed consciously writing for children, and by implication consciously employing the then-accepted conventions of children's books. Even within these conventions, there is in fact more in common with epic than may at first appear: CW Sullivan, for example, draws similarities between the "invasive and didactic narrator of Tolkien's text and the moralising and judgemental narrators" of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (cited O'Sullivan 21). In light of this argument, it is interesting to note that the narrative voice is far less genuinely didactic than it at first appears, and often balances the playful subversion of earlier children's writers such as Edith Nesbit with the assumption of the morality of a pre-Christian world. When Bilbo approaches the trolls, for example, the narrator advises the reader:

> Either [Bilbo] should have gone back quietly and warned his friends ... or else he should have done a good bit of quick burgling. A really first-class and legendary burglar would at this point have picked the trolls' pockets – it is nearly always worthwhile, if you can manage it – pinched the very mutton off the spits, purloined the beer, and walked off without their noticing him. Others more practical but with less professional pride would perhaps have stuck a dagger into each of them before they observed it. Then the night could have been spent cheerily. (33)

This, presumably not meant as genuine advice for an implied child reader, is perfectly in keeping with the illusion Tolkien maintains throughout his adult works that the world he writes of is real rather than invented, with its own morality, and that he is, as Kocher describes it, "a modern scholar who is compiling, editing and eventually translating copies of very ancient records of Middle-Earth that have come into his hands" (148). In the same way, the narrator offers matter-of-fact explanations about hobbits, *cram*, and the correct way to talk to dragons "if you don't want to reveal

your proper name (which is wise); and don't want to infuriate them (which is also very wise)" (205). Nonetheless, it is clear that while in *The Lord of the Rings* the "literary pose" (Kocher 148) is that of a scholar editing a historical text, the narrative voice of *The Hobbit* is generally that of a story-teller relating this history to children.

Tolkien's narrative voice is not always that of a children's book narrator, however, and in fact the changes from traditional children's narration to traditional epic narration, as discussed earlier, often provides useful guidance as to how comic or how serious a scene is intended to be. Bilbo, on the other hand, is consistently a children's book hero, regardless of the world around him, and the children's book elements of the narration are closely linked to him. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien says that Rivendell is "as Bilbo had long ago reported, 'a perfect house, whether you like food or sleep or story-telling or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all'" (219). In fact, Bilbo never reported any such thing: it is Tolkien's narrator who in *The Hobbit* observes that, "[Elrond's] house was perfect, whether you liked food, or sleep, or work, or story-telling, or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all" (48).[25] This is likely symptomatic of Tolkien's desire to distance himself from the children's book narrative voice of *The Hobbit* by attributing the homely observations to the character rather than the story: Elrond's house in *The Lord of the Rings* is clearly a lofty one, at home in a heroic world, and it is implied that, despite Bilbo's original assessment of it, it always was. In achieving this, though, Tolkien perhaps inadvertently suggests that the narrative voice of *The Hobbit* is, at least in some respects, meant to reflect Bilbo's own voice and thoughts.[26] Though the narrative voice in the book is clearly distinct from Bilbo himself (as seen, for instance, when it tells the reader that "I will tell you what Gandalf heard, though Bilbo did not understand it" (94)), the moments when the tone is most clearly that of a children's book rather than an epic are nonetheless frequently inextricable from the perceptions of its children's book hero.

The idea of Bilbo as somehow tied to the children's book elements of the text has been discussed by

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[25]   Interestingly, "work" has been eliminated from the otherwise identical version of the quote in *The Lord of the Rings*. Presumably, Elves do not work.

[26]   This seems to be the vision of Peter Jackson's recent film versions, which, like both books and films of *The Lord of the Rings*, are not aimed specifically at children. The films frequently rewrite Tolkien's narration as Bilbo's dialogue: the observation that Bilbo "liked visitors, but he liked to know them before they arrived, and he preferred to ask them himself" (7), for example, is given to Bilbo as he explains, "I like visitors as much as the next hobbit, but I do like to know them before they come visiting" (*The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*). At the same time, elements that in the books are treated comically at first only to become less so later are freed in the films from the perception of the narrative voice (or, by implication, Bilbo) and thus become clearly part of an epic world from the start, such as Thorin and Rivendell. In the film of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, too, Bilbo is seen telling a party of children the story of his encounter with the trolls more or less as it occurs in the book, further establishing the book as Bilbo's perspective and for a child audience.

many critics, a number of whom put forward the argument that Bilbo, despite his age, is a symbolic child who embodies a child's point of view. John Stephens and Jaume Poveda, for example, both argue that children are encouraged throughout the book to "identify with hobbits as ersatz children, especially in terms of their height, personalities and habits" (cited O'Sullivan 18), while Paul Kocher suggests that the hobbits are "a combination, on the one hand, of human children living in a society where the desires of children are ideally institutionalised because there are no grown-ups and, on the other hand, some of the qualities traditionally ascribed to the "little people" of folklore" (cited Hunt "Introduction" 8). Peter Hunt compares the hobbits to the central characters of *The Wind in the Willows*, who are likewise ambiguously both adults and children: like Rat, Mole and Toad, hobbits as a race "remain largely innocent of the dangerous and evil ways of the world. They have some ambivalent 'childlike' characteristics, and so, for the child-audience of *The Hobbit*, and for the kind of adult reader implied for *The Lord of the Rings*, the hobbits can be empathised with" ("Introduction" 6). Hunt's argument is complicated by *The Lord of the Rings*, whose hobbit characters do indeed learn of the "dangerous and evil ways of the world" in a way the characters of *The Wind in the Willows* do not. Both Merry and Pippin become part of heroic culture, however briefly, as they become warriors of Rohan and Gondor, and both Frodo and Sam undergo hardships from which Frodo at least can never recover. Using Hunt's analogy, these characters grow up over the course of the book, and perhaps by implication so does the book itself. Bilbo, despite the increasingly dark and heroic nature of the world around him, does remain to some extent innocent of it, and his growth as a character is carefully managed by Tolkien to allow him to retain this childlike status even as Gandalf tells him, "You are not the hobbit that you were" (276).

This, it should be noted, is not true of the other characters, even the ones who at the beginning of the story seem just as suited to the world of mock-epic or children's story as Bilbo. Thorin at the beginning of the book is a comical figure, introduced at the bottom of a pile of dwarves as Bilbo opens the door too suddenly and gently teased by the narrator for his self-important speech-making ("If he had been allowed, he would probably have gone on like this until he was out of breath without telling anyone there anything that was not known already" (16)). Though these comical characteristics persist to some extent throughout the book, by the end of the story he has become an epic hero, arriving at Laketown proclaiming himself "Thorin son of Thrain son of Thror, King under the Mountain" (180) and achieving heroic status in the final battle. This is not a character transformation so much as a transformation of story and narrative voice. Thorin, as the appendix material of *The Lord of the Rings* tells, was a hero and a warrior before he came to Bilbo's house, and remains one despite his idiosyncrasies throughout the book: it is the audience (and implicitly Bilbo) who is not aware of this when he first knocks on the door. Bilbo, by contrast, begins as an

inept folk-tale or children's book hero, and grows into a skilled one, without ever achieving epic status. As the dwarves are bidding him farewell according to epic codes of hospitality, wishing him "Good-bye and good luck, where-ever you fare! ... If ever you visit us again, when our halls are made fair once more, then the feast shall indeed be splendid!" (268), Bilbo is still replying cheerfully (and unconsciously) according to the codes of English respectability: "If you are ever passing my way ... don't wait to knock! Tea is at four; but any of you are welcome at any time!" (268).

From the beginning, it is clear that Bilbo is not suited to an epic world, or even to a folktale one. Instead, the world of Bag End is characterised by the resolutely English domesticity of Mole's house in *The Wind in the Willows* or the Beavers' house in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and Bilbo's closest equivilant to a heroic code is the hobbit code of respectability, entailing "never hav[ing] any adventures or [doing] anything unexpected" (1). Though Bilbo, of course, has "an adventure, and [finds] himself doing and saying things altogether unexpected" (2), these unexpected things are not acknowledged as heroic deeds within the text, even if they may deserve to be. When the dwarves are being celebrated as epic heroes in Laketown, for example, with songs sung about the deeds they have yet to actually achieve, Bilbo is at the high table despite the fact that "no songs had alluded to him even in the obscurest way" (183), and, to remove any doubt about his unsuitability for such songs, is mostly prevented from attending celebrations by a "shocking cold" (184). Most notable, though, are Bilbo's continual thoughts of food and comfort at the moments when an epic hero would generally be thinking of honour and glory. Bilbo's escape from the tunnels, for example, which causes the dwarves to look at him with "quite a new respect" (87), is followed by his complaint that he is "so dreadfully hungry" (89), and he prefers "a warm bath and a late breakfast on the lawn afterwards" (104) to flying on the back of an eagle. Correctly or incorrectly, emphasis on food and drink is traditionally seen as a feature of children's rather than adult or epic literature, as C.S. Lewis memorably recounts:

> A man, who has children of his own, said [to Lewis], "Ah, I see how you got to that. If you want to please grown-up readers you give them sex, so you thought to yourself, 'That won't do for children, what shall I give them instead? I know! The little blighters like plenty of good eating.'" ("On Three Ways of Writing for Children" 31)

Bilbo's consciousness of a lack of "plenty of good eating" therefore marks him as a hero better suited to a children's book than an epic, and is a constant source of humour. Even Bilbo's arguably most conventional heroic moment, the combat with and killing of the spiders, is balanced with the

narrator's concern with domestic practicalities: "[Bilbo] felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder *in spite of an empty stomach*, as he wiped his sword on the grass and put it back into its sheath" (144, italics mine).

Within the story, however, these comical and matter-of-fact counters to the epic sentiments voiced by other characters and the epic world around him prove Bilbo's salvation. As Clark argues, Bilbo is a hero who is called to adventure rather than a hero, like Beowulf, who seeks it out. Though Bilbo is given a comical version of traditional heroic reasons for joining the company (desire to be thought fierce, one-fourteenth share of a treasure), he himself does not give these reasons serious consideration once he begins, and in fact afterwards can "never remember how he found himself" (28) on the quest at all. It is Thorin (and to a lesser extent the other dwarves) who possess the correct heroic motivations, as Bilbo recognises when he reminds the leader of the company that "this silly adventure ... is yours after all and not mine" (178). This may limit Bilbo's potential for epic heroism, but it also limits his potential for corruption. While Thorin and the dwarves become overwhelmed by the riches of the hoard, Bilbo is able to keep "his head more clear of the bewitchment" because of the higher value he places on both food and safety: instead, he worries about the return of the dragon, and thinks that he would "give a good many of these precious goblets ... for a drink of something cheering out of one of Beorn's wooden bowls" (220). Bilbo's response to being dressed in a mithril coat recognises both the splendour of his surroundings and his own unfitness for them, thinking that he "feel[s] magnificent ... but I expect I look rather absurd" (220). In even more dire circumstances in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is a similar sentiment – "plain hobbit-sense" (881) – that enables Sam to resist the lure of the Ring, realising that he is "not large enough" for the glory it promises him: "The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm" (881).

Moreover, Bilbo's matter-of-fact commentary on epic events allow Tolkien to voice his own concerns about and amendments to the heroic codes of Norse and Anglo-Saxon texts, in a way that is not tied to the authority of the narrative voice. The question Tolkien argues that children find most important both "in history, and in Faerie" – "Was he good? Was he wicked?" – is one that the narrative voice continually addresses, in a way that it does not in the "adult" *The Lord of the Rings*. The Wood-elves, for example, "are not wicked folk", though "more dangerous and less wise" than the Elves of the West (155), while Thorin and Company are "decent enough people ... if you don't expect too much" (195). After the death of Smaug, this question becomes far more complicated, as characters act according to codes that are both admirable and destructive. As the narrative voice becomes steadily less parodic, it also becomes far less personal, and didactic interjections of this

kind become rare. It falls to Bilbo, at this point, to provide a differing perspective on the traditional motifs of epic that characterise much of the latter chapters of *The Hobbit,* one that gives attention to the practical realities of heroic sentiments. Thorin's parley with Bard, for example, is conveyed almost entirely in heroic diction by both characters and narrator ("Then Thorin seized a bow of horn and shot an arrow at the speaker. It smote into his shield and stuck there quivering" (244)); it is Bilbo who at the end disapproves of being besieged within the Mountain for comically realistic reasons: "'The whole place still stinks of dragon,' he grumbled to himself, 'and it makes me sick'" (244).

A more significant example of this is Bilbo's perception of the Battle of Five Armies. As discussed earlier, this battle is seen as necessary and redemptive by epic standards, without the ambiguity that clouds the potential conflicts between the dwarves, the elves, and the Lakemen, and the narrative voice in general treats the action with the gravity due to an epic conflict. Bilbo, by contrast, who frames a potential alliance between the original warring parties in terms of "peace and quiet" (265), sees the battle only in terms of "misery" (261). As he waits for what he expects to be a "desperate last stand", he reflects, "I have heard songs of many battles, and I have always understood that defeat may be glorious. It seems very uncomfortable, not to say distressing" (262). Mary R. Bowman points out that the phrase "desperate last stand" seems to allude to Tolkien's conception of Northern courage, with its ideal of "absolute resistance, perfect because without hope" ("The Monsters and the Critics" 21), and suggests that Bilbo's "songs of many battles ... [in which] defeat may be glorious" may refer to *The Battle of Maldon* and the defeat which Tolkien would later criticise in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth". While this is very likely, it is important to note that though Bilbo to an extent recognises the darker side of heroism, his realisation that defeat is "very uncomfortable, not to say distressing" (262) and that even victory can be "a very gloomy business" (263) is not a particularly vivid depiction of the horrors of war, and Bilbo certainly does not suffer the psychological trauma that drives Frodo into the West in *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, as we are told at the beginning of the battle, the experience is "the one which at the time [Bilbo] hated most – which is to say it was the one he was most proud of, and most fond of recalling long afterwards" (259). Nor do Bilbo's observations entirely cancel out the genuine glory that is taking place around him, as Thorin "wield[s] his axe with mighty strokes, and nothing seemed to harm him" (260). Instead, Bilbo's perceptions hold the epic motifs in perspective, in a way that reflects Tolkien's own conflicting feelings about the heroic code of the North but also perhaps the ambiguous truth of such codes. Warfare in *The Hobbit* is both glorious and uncomfortable, just as Thorin's defiance is both a tragic surrender to the temptation of enchanted treasure and, as Bilbo perceives, a childish willingness to "sit on a heap of gold and starve" (248).

Nonetheless, Bilbo does come to develop a heroic code of his own, and one which is gently supported rather than parodied by the narrative voice. To an extent, this is recognisably that of the trickster hero rather than the epic hero: Bilbo possesses "some wits, as well as luck and a magic ring" (154), which allows him to defeat spiders with taunting rhymes, engineer an escape for the dwarves by barrel, and finally match Smaug in riddling talk. It is in this guise that he becomes the "real leader of the group" of dwarves, and is looked to by them for answers. He also acts as a more serious alternative to the epic or mock-epic heroics of those around him. Most obviously, and most importantly to the wider mythology of Middle-earth, Bilbo is characterised by the pity he shows to Gollum in the goblin tunnels. If the encounter between Bilbo and Gollum can be read as a version of the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel, then the fact that the two of them engage in riddles rather than physical combat merely marks Bilbo as a version of Beowulf whose strength lies in his wits rather than his body and who therefore requires a slightly different adversary. The fact that Bilbo is faced with the opportunity to kill Gollum, and does not do so, is a deliberate change on Tolkien's part to the pattern set down by Old English epic, and therefore a challenge to it. Bilbo is clearly aware of the former code of behaviour – "He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him" – but ultimately rejects it, first on the arguably epic grounds that it would not be a "fair fight",[27] and then, more significantly, out of "sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror" (80) of the misery of Gollum's life. As Christine Chism puts it, arguing for the scene as a reversal in particular of the scene in which Wagner's Siegfried kills Mime, when Bilbo leaps over Gollum he also leaps "over the whole vicious Siegfriedian, Rosenbergian Nazi mindset that finds it more self-justifying to kill an enemy it views as threatening and contemptible than to try to understand him" (cited Bowman).

Moreover, Bilbo's heroism is one that, like that of Adams's rabbits in *Watership Down*, carefully replaces the motives of honour and personal glory with those of duty and service to others, however reluctantly undertaken. Unlike the quest in *Watership Down* and indeed *The Lord of the Rings*, Bilbo's quest does not entail the salvation of a society, and he himself has no kinship or loyalty to those he travels with beyond the contract that binds him to their employment. Nonetheless, as in *Watership Down*, it becomes increasingly evident that actions taken for pride and reputation in *The Hobbit* are doomed to failure: when Bilbo attempts to pick the pockets of the trolls, feeling he "could not go straight back to Thorin and Company emptyhanded" (33), the entire company are

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[27] Beowulf also chooses to ensure that his fight with Grendel is a fair one, refusing to fight Grendel with a sword as the monster "scorns / in his reckless way to use weapons" (433-434). Bilbo similarly is worried that he is invisible, and that "Gollum had no sword" (80); presumably, if he were to follow Beowulf's logic, he would remove the ring and throw his sword aside before attempting to kill Gollum.

almost eaten, and he is scolded afterwards for choosing a "silly time to go practising pinching and pocket-picking" (39). By contrast, correct heroic behaviour for Bilbo arises from a conscious decision to help his companions, despite risk to himself. After narrowly escaping the goblins, Bilbo struggles with the thought that he should go back into "the horrible, horrible tunnels" after the dwarves, and finally decides that "it [is] his duty" despite how "very miserable he felt about it" (84). His decision is immediately validated as the correct moral choice as he, unexpectedly finding his friends outside, hears Gandalf telling the reluctant dwarves "that they could not possibly go on with their journey leaving Mr Baggins in the hands of the goblins, without trying to find out if he was alive or dead, and without trying to rescue him" (85). This idea of correct behaviour goes unquestioned by Bilbo later in the book. In Mirkwood his thought after killing his first spider is that "obviously he had first of all to look for his friends" (144),[28] and both the ensuing fight with the spiders and escape from the Wood-elves take place in order to save the dwarves when Bilbo himself is free. Even when he expects his friends to turn against him after he has given the Arkenstone to Bard and the Elvenking, Bilbo retains his loyalty, and as the Elvenking warns him of the danger in returning to the dwarves, he replies, "I don't think I ought to leave my friends like this, after all we have gone through together. And I promised to wake old Bombur at midnight, too!" (250). Once again, this behaviour is immediately approved within the text, both by Gandalf (who reappears out of nowhere especially for the purpose) and by Bard and the Elvenking, both of whom "salute him with honour" (250) as he passes.

It is interesting that – although Bilbo does save his friends at later points in the book – this quality first manifests itself at a point when Bilbo does not in fact have to act upon it: Bilbo *intends* to go back into the goblin tunnels, but is immediately prevented from doing so by the appearance of Gandalf and the dwarves. This emphasis on intent rather than deeds themselves is made more explicit later in the book, as Bilbo hesitates to enter Smaug's tunnel for the first time and we are told that "going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait" (197). The idea that a heroic act can be measured by the personal bravery involved rather than by the size or achievement of the deed itself is relatively foreign to epic, but arguably a fitting code for children, whose acts of bravery are likely to be more mundane than facing a dragon or fighting goblins. More importantly, it becomes crucial to the story's understanding of heroism as Bilbo, after facing Smaug, has very little to do with the "tremendous things that happened afterward" (197). Not only does Bilbo not participate directly in

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[28]   Tolkien seems to regard spiders as acceptable opponents for hobbits who would otherwise be out of place fighting. Similarly, Samwise Gamgee's only major victory is over Shelob, and undertaken in order to save the captured Frodo.

either the death of Smaug or the ensuing rivalry between the dwarves, the Lakemen and the Elves, but his attempt to "buy peace and quiet" (265) by giving the Arkenstone to the Elves to trade fails to prevent a battle from taking place. In the resulting battle, he is literally and metaphorically invisible, as he immediately puts on the ring and apparently strikes no blows for his side.[29] Nonetheless, Bilbo's attempt to forestall conflict is not diminished in Gandalf's eyes for having been unsuccessful, as he commends him: "Well done! Mr Baggins! ... There is always more about you than anyone expects" (250).

This emphasis on intent also allows Bilbo to be, in his own way, truly heroic without actually achieving the deeds that would make him so in epic terms. Though he may implicitly criticise it, in his own way Bilbo comes to embody the perfect Northern courage voiced in *The Battle of Maldon*. At the moment when "the dwarves are most despairing" in Smaug's tunnel, Bilbo unexpectedly feels "a strange lightening of the heart, as if a heavy weight had gone from under his waistcoat" (215) and spurs the dwarves on to explore. Later, in the Battle of Five Armies, he takes a stand among the Elves partly for practical reasons (greater chance of escape) but also, "with the more Tookish part of his mind ... because if he was going to be in a desperate last stand, he preferred on the whole to defend the Elvenking" (261). Bilbo does not die or even fight in either case – Smaug is absent from his tunnel, and the arrival of the eagles forestalls a "desperate last stand" (261) – and therefore by epic standards does not achieve heroic status. By the standards of the book, however, Bilbo's feelings alone make him worthy of honour, the more so because they are instinctive rather than part of an established heroic code, and because they are motivated by necessity and the service of others without the taint (or "alloy") of desire for personal glory.

Ultimately, Bilbo's bravery and yet comparative insignificance as a hero – "quite a little fellow in a wide world" (279) – is at the heart of the book's heroic code, and of the wider mythology of Middle-earth. Glenn argues that the slaying of Smaug acts as a counter to Tolkien's criticism of *Beowulf*: where there the dragon is slain through the "one man's will" that dooms a kingdom, Smaug is slain through the efforts of Bilbo (who finds the dragon's weak spot), Roac (who gives Bard the information) and finally Bard (who acts upon it). Bilbo's "link in the causal chain" (Glenn) is not even acknowledged, effectively robbing him of the glory that is the reward and the curse of the epic hero. This idea of a causal chain is far from incidental to the book as a whole. Gandalf says as much directly, when he playfully scolds Bilbo for "disbeliev[ing] the prophecies, because [he]

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[29] This remains true in the *Hobbit* film trilogy: although in the early films Bilbo is able to fulfil a heroic role, even succeeding in killing a Warg at the climax of *An Unexpected Journey*, he remains largely uninvolved and mostly unconscious for the climax of *The Battle of the Five Armies*, leading a number of film reviewers to criticise the way in which Bilbo "feels increasingly like a forlorn bystander in his own franchise" (Robey *Telegraph* review).

had a hand in bringing them about": "You don't really suppose, do you, that all your escapes and adventures were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit?" (278). It is the final appearance of the word "luck" in the book, which has characterised Bilbo's heroism from the start: the dwarves come to respect him as one who possesses "some wits, as well as luck and a magic ring" (154), and his various escapes are a mixture of both his quick-thinking and "luck [being] with him" (164) until his final emergence from the battle causes Gandalf to declare, "I began to wonder if even your luck would see you through" (264). The suggestion in the end, then, is that Bilbo's luck has not been luck at all but rather fate or prophecy, which allows brave and morally correct deeds, even the most small or ineffectual, to gain a long-term significance that more conventional heroic deeds cannot. It is telling that Bilbo's small part in the slaying of the dragon comes as a result of "the bravest thing he ever did" (197), which at the time appeared to have no real benefit; in the same way, by the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, the seemingly insignificant act of Bilbo sparing Gollum's life has explicitly brought about the salvation of Middle-earth where epic warfare has failed to do so. Perhaps more than anything else, this idea marks Tolkien as, like his conception of the *Beowulf* poet, "a learned Christian who recreated a heroic world and story in an implicitly Christian universe governed by a God whose existence and nature the poem's wiser characters intuit without the benefit of revelation" (Clark 40). Because of this, the most important heroic deed undertaken by a hero who begins by measuring his respectability by a lack of deeds does indeed turn out to be the lack of a deed, as Bilbo's decision to show pity and mercy to Gollum rather than kill him finally comes to "rule the fate of many" (*The Lord of the Rings* 53).

Glenn argues that *The Hobbit* as a book prizes and concerns itself with balance, climaxing in Thorin's assessment of Bilbo as a heroic figure: "There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, *blended in measure*" (italics Glenn's). What Bilbo is described as "gain[ing]" in the opening pages of the book, then, turns out in part to be "a sense of his place in the world, a sense of proportion" (Glenn), encompassing both the vastness of the world outside Bag End and his own smallness within it. Toward the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Merry muses that although he and Pippin "cannot live long on the heights"

> But at least, Pippin, we can now see them, and honour them. It is best to love first what you are fitted to love, I suppose ... Still there are things deeper and higher; and not a gaffer could tend his garden in what he calls peace but for them, whether he knows about them or not. I am glad I know about them, a little. But I don't know why I am talking like this. Where is that leaf? And get my pipe out of my pack, if it isn't broken. (852)

With less self-awareness, Bilbo's last words and actions of the book echo a similar philosophy. Bilbo returns to his home with a knowledge of the "deeper and higher" world that surrounds it, but still loving best what he is "fitted to love", with "the sound of the kettle on his hearth … ever after more musical to him than it had been even in the quiet days before the Unexpected Party" (278). When Gandalf reminds him teasingly that he is "only quite a little fellow in a wide world", Bilbo responds with a laughing "Thank goodness!" and, like Merry, reaches for the tobacco jar (279). If Bilbo gains a sense of proportion, though, he also provides it. By embodying his own set of ideals, the ideals traditionally associated with children's books and with middle-class England, Bilbo serves as a contrast to the "deeper and higher" yet also potentially destructive Northern ideals in a way that does not negate them, but instead widens the scope of the epic world. Ultimately, the world of *The Hobbit* is one in which epic is held in perspective by children's literature, just as it is one where pagan ideals are held in perspective with Christianity, heroism with mercy, war with peace, and skill with   fate.

Epic, Romance and the Matter of Britain I: T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*

"I don't care," I said: "I'll be anything. I'll be Sir Kay. Come on!"

Then once more in this country's story the mail-clad knights paced through the greenwood shaw, questing adventure, redressing wrong; and bandits, five to one, broke and fled discomfited to their caves. Once again were damsels rescued, dragons disembowelled, and giants, in every corner of the orchard, deprived of their already superfluous number of heads ... Till at last Lancelot, grim and great, thrusting through the press, unhorsed Sir Tristram (an easy task), and bestrode her, threatening doom; while the Cornish knight, forgetting hard-won fame of old, cried piteously, "You're hurting me, I tell you! and you're tearing my frock!"

– Kenneth Grahame, *The Golden Age*

The most problematic aspect of any discussion of Arthurian epic is the question of whether Arthurian material can be discussed as epic at all. The story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table is "The Matter of Britain", and perhaps the closest Britain comes to a national epic that embodies its cultural and heroic heritage. Paul Merchant claims that the modern epic impulse in British literature centres around the Arthurian myth, with texts designed to work "towards a cultural model that could invigorate … a disillusioned present" ("Epic in Translation" 259). The paradox of this is that there is no single epic of Arthur. Instead, there is "a continuous record of Celtic myths seen in narrative form in the Welsh *Gododdin* … and the same culture's *Mabinogion*, the Irish *Tain*, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, and Spenser's *Faerie Queen*" (Merchant "Epic in Translation" 257). Milton considered it as a subject for his English epic before embarking on *Paradise Lost*, as did Sidney for his *Arcadia*. Later, Tennyson dealt with the stories in verse form in his *Idylls of the King,* but the poetry – as indicated by Tennyson's slightly odd choice of title – is quiet and elegiac rather than epic in scope. Together with the numerous authors of adult fantasy who have taken up the Arthurian story, these writers engage with (or have contemplated engaging with) an epic tradition of Great Britain; no single one of them has written the British Arthurian epic.

Of all the Arthurian writers, Thomas Malory comes the closest to creating an "Arthuriad" with his grand narrative spanning the rise and fall of King Arthur. This is certainly the view of T.H. White, who described *Le Morte Darthur* as "the major British epic – more so than Milton's Italian excursion" (*The Once and Future King* foreword), and by implication for Rosemary Sutcliff, to whom the Arthurian story was "the Matter of Britain" which "came to its fullest flowering" with Malory (Author's Note to *Sword at Sunset* vii). Malory's work, however, is not an epic in the sense that the *Iliad* or even *Beowulf* are epics; rather, it draws together numerous traditions of the Arthurian story, including myth, tragedy and romance, to create a coherent history of Arthur's life

and times. *Le Morte Darthur* and the Arthurian tradition therefore raise questions about the limits of the epic genre, and where it can be seen to overlap with that of chivalric romance.

The line between epic and romance is very fine and frequently blurred. In his expansive 1896 treatise *Epic and Romance*, Ker pointed out that "Romance in its many varieties is to be found inherent in Epic and in Tragedy"[30] and even went so far as to suggest that "possibly Romance is in its best place here, as an element in the epic harmony; perhaps the romantic mystery is most mysterious when it is found as something additional among the graver and more positive affairs of epic or tragic personages" (321). Chivalric romance emerged as a separate entity in twelfth-century France, and spread to other countries until it "displaced the earlier epic and heroic forms" (Abrams 48). According to Abrams, romance is

> distinguished from the epic in that it does not represent a heroic age of tribal wars, but a courtly and chivalric age, often one of highly developed manners and civility. Its standard plot is that of a quest undertaken by a single knight to gain a lady's favour; frequently its central interest is courtly love, together with tournaments fought and dragons and monsters slain for the damsel's sake; it stresses the chivalric ideals of courage, loyalty, honour, mercifulness to an opponent, and elaborate manners; and it delights in wonders and marvels. Supernatural events in the epic usually were attributed to the will and actions of the gods; romance shifts the supernatural to this world, and makes much of the mysterious effect of magic, spells, and enchantments. (48)

M.C. Bradbrook, discussing Malory, similarly stresses the way in which "romance differs from epic in its readiness to include the fantastic, magical, and wishful elements largely within the action" (69). While "in epic, though the world presented is enlarged and ennobled, it remains the world of everyday" (69), the world of the romance is exempt from "all the usual laws of cause and effect in action ... Heads that are cut off may be stuck on again; marvels and wonders are the rule and not the exception. [The knight] rides through vast and shadowy landscapes and forests, where only the cities of Caerleon and Carlisle remind the listener that this is England" (74). Epic is concerned with great heroes, history, and seriousness of purpose, while romance in its purest form is an idealised

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[30] Epic and tragedy are of course also very closely linked, and *Le Morte Darthur* has even been clssed as a tragedy rather than either epic or romance (such as by E.M.W. Tillyard in *The English Epic and its Background*). Tragedy as a genre will not be discussed in detail here, but will be mentioned later in relation to specific authors when relevant.

"warrior's daydream, designed for recreation (or 'solace'), not instruction (or 'doctrine'), and representing the average sensual man's point of view" (Bradbrook 69).

The romance elements of *Le Morte Darthur* are clearly dominant throughout the majority of the tales, which centre around the quests and magical exploits of Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. Yet elements of Malory's work arguably bear traces of an older epic tradition, and highlight where the two traditions can ideally converge. Eugene Vinaver argues that Malory's central hero Lancelot is endowed with the characteristics of an epic hero rather than a hero of courtly romance, with the reasonably continuous narrative of his adventures focusing on his martial prowess rather than love for Guinevere or issues of courtly behaviour (740). (In fact, even the central romance motif of the hero's conflict with his leader finds parallels with the archetypal epic hero, Achilles: there, too, the conflict is fuelled by each man desiring the same woman.) More extensively, Bradbrook argues that Malory's work itself can be considered an epic, at least in part, citing *Le Morte Darthur*'s "strong sense of history" (73) and, in particular, its final "great epic battle, the unsuccessful fight against odds. Whereas incidents of the individual romances defy cause and effect, in the epic of the Round Table morality is always felt behind the action; the ideal is a social and ethical one" (74). Intriguingly, Bradbrook posits that the Arthurian story grows from a relatively light romance tradition into one that engages seriously with its own heroic code as it moves from Arthur's birth to his death:

> In the earliest tales, magic and violence predominate; then the image of a society based on feudal ties of loyalty emerges; the adventures of individuals follow, with, in the more courtly versions, much stress on manners and on wooing, and in the popular versions, simply on adventure and marvels ... Finally, something akin to the older epic style reappears, reflecting also the form of contemporary chronicles and, in Malory, tinged with some shadowing from contemporary struggles. At his greatest, in the final passages dealing with the last battle and death of Arthur, he seems to reflect in an enlarged form all the troubles of his own society, the ruin that civil strife had brought upon him and his kind. This is imaginatively seen in the dissolution of the Round Table, the bond and fellowship of knighthood. Conquest, like true and faithful love, belongs to the past: the first and last campaigns of Arthur represent for Malory a youthful hope of the past contrasted with a tragic present. (74)

The epic potential of the Arthurian story perhaps then lies in the high seriousness and moral weight of Arthur's final battle and the passing of the Arthurian age. As in the epic tradition, *Le Morte Darthur* is clearly located in a past where men were implicitly better and more heroic than the men

of today. The gradual dissolution and self-destruction of the Fellowship of the Round Table and its heroic code binds the earlier episodic adventures together into a coherent narrative, one that displays a seriousness of purpose and an engagement with social and heroic codes that goes beyond the quests and manners of individual knights. By the last few books, *Le Morte Darthur* deals with almost unrelenting warfare. Ultimately, the death of the heroes signals the end of a heroic past that Malory saw as superior to his own time, and Ector's famous lament for Lancelot echoes the epic laments for heroes such as Hector and Beowulf.

It is these elements of Malory as epic writer, and *Le Morte Darthur* as epic text, with which White and Sutcliff engage in their own Arthurian books, and which this chapter and the next will explore in the context of these two authors. Both writers begin their story as children's books, White with *The Sword in the Stone* and Sutcliff with *The Lantern Bearers*, but seamlessly move to adult books as the respective cycles progress in a way that mimics the growth and maturation of the Arthurian cycle. White, operating under the conception of *Le Morte Darthur* as the great British epic, writes the story of Arthur as a model for social change in *The Once and Future King*. This book, which White frequently referred to as his "epic" (see, for example, Warner 185), undertakes to establish a heroic code for the fragmented society of post-WWII Britain in the way White believed Malory's work did for his own equally troubled age. Sutcliff, by contrast, incorporates Arthur into her sequence of children's historical novels dealing with the Roman occupation of Britain, and turns from the romantic tradition to establish Arthur as a Romano-British war leader in a "heroic age of tribal wars" (Abrams 48). Sutcliff, as will be discussed in the following chapter, operates under the belief that Arthur, or Artos, was a true figure of British history, whose deeds became myth during the Dark Ages. In this, she unconsciously echoes Bradbrook's claim for Malory: that "the epic material of one race or culture becomes romance when it is handed over to another race or culture and needs to be reinterpreted; when it has lost its social roots. Romance therefore presupposes epic; Malory recreated an epic story from romance" (69). Sutcliff, to a far greater extent and with more scholarly purpose, attempts to recreate an "original" epic Arthur from whom the romance tradition descended, and therefore to anchor him in Britain's national heritage. In different ways, these writers consciously work within an epic tradition, even if there is no true epic that precedes them. In the process, both White and Sutcliff perhaps come as close as any to an actual epic of Arthur, and closer than most.

Finding an Antidote to War

The first three of the four volumes that comprise *The Once and Future King* were published

separately: *The Sword in the Stone* in 1938, *The Witch in the Wood* (later *The Queen of Air and Darkness*) in 1939, and *The Ill-Made Knight* in 1940. It was not until twenty years later, in 1958, that these three volumes were edited (sometimes heavily) and combined with a fourth volume, *The Candle in the Wind*, to make the final grand narrative. Despite this, and despite the light-hearted nature of the first volume *The Sword in the Stone,* T.H. White was aware from the first that he was, as Merchant argues is characteristic of epic writers, working within an established tradition, "with an unusual sense of [his] ancestors, and acknowledged *pietas*" (246) towards earlier practitioners. In 1939, White wrote with some awe that with *The Sword in the Stone* he was

> doing what Geoffrey of Monmouth, Mallory [sic], Spencer [sic], Hughes, Purcell, the pre-Raphaelites, Tennyson etc. did and what Milton thought of doing. They called it the Matter of Britain … A man who copied out the *Morte D'Arthur* in morse [sic] code would still be a major literary figure. It is the theme which makes it so … It is odd but I feel responsible to it, not to myself. (cited Kellman 80)

The grandeur that White felt naturally belonged to this theme is reflected in the way he spoke of *The Once and Future King*, which he conceived as five distinct volumes that together would tell the tragedy of King Arthur.[31] Although these volumes would each reflect different literary traditions and forms (*The Candle in the Wind* was originally written as a play, in the style of Greek tragedy), the cumulative effect was to be that of "an epic" (cited Lupack 105): as Kellman argues succinctly, "White often referred to his work as an epic and filled it with the concomitants of the form, elevated language, authorial intrusions, apparent digressions and extensive catalogues" (88). Many years later, with somewhat less awe, White announced his success by imagining himself literally among his illustrious predecessors, claiming that, with the publication of *The Once and Future King,* he would be able to "saunter off to Olympus and sit down between Mallory [sic], Chaucer, Milton, Tennyson, with a cold shoulder for the Pre-Raphaelites" (cited Kellman 81).

As these quotes illustrate, White not only believed in the importance of the theme and Arthurian material itself, but also in the importance of the writer who chose to treat it. Of all his literary ancestors, White maintained the greatest "acknowledged *pietas*" for Malory, whom he viewed as "the greatest English writer next to Shakespeare" (cited Kellman 85) and whom he sought to recreate as an epic writer both within and without *The Once and Future King*. White is not alone in arguing Malory as a great writer, or even an epic writer. White, though, not only admired Malory

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[31]   The fifth volume, *The Book of Merlyn*, was rejected by publishers, although White incorporated some of its material into the revised *The Sword in the Stone*. It was published separately in 1977.

but felt a deep affinity with him, declaring himself an "authority on Malory" (cited Kellman 85) and once jokingly writing that Malory "has just told me that I am welcome to speak for him" (cited Kellman 87). Just as Tolkien arguably builds his conception of the *Beowulf* poet in his own image, "a learned Christian who recreated a heroic world and story in an implicitly Christian universe" (Clark 40), White constructs a Malory very much coloured by his own aims as a writer. White had been familiar with Malory since his undergraduate days, but his experience of WWII occasioned what he called a sudden discovery that "the central theme of *Morte d'Arthur* is to find an antidote to war" (cited Lupack 103). In common with Homer and other epic writers, all of whom frequently comment on the superiority of past heroes to the men of their own era, Malory writes of an imagined past that he saw as superior to his own time. For Malory, though, and particularly Malory as White saw him, the superiority of Arthur in particular to men of the present day is not merely physical, as it is for Homer's heroes, but moral. While in the *Iliad* Nestor laments that the previous generation of heroes were "the strongest generation of earth-born mortals, / the strongest, and they fought against the strongest" (1.267-268), Malory's concern is for the earlier generation's superior ability to love: "nowadayes men can nat loue seuen nyghte, but they must haue alle their desyres ... But the old loue was not so" (18.25.28-31). In this context, the work of the epic writer is not only cultural but political, as White and Malory use heroes of the past as "*exempla* of the values" each thought their "own time needed" (Kellman 82).

This abiding sense of both *Le Morte Darthur* and his own *The Once and Future King* as epics makes it all the more interesting that White chose to begin his book with a form distinctly lacking in epic grandeur: that of children's fantasy. Not only is the content of the book's first volume, *The Sword in the Stone,* "the stuff of a tale for young readers" (Lupack 108), with comical adventures and a child protagonist, but in it White deliberately employs the established stylistic features of children's literature. Beginning with a mixture of school story and comic fairy-tale ("On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays it was Court Hand and Summulae Logicales, while the rest of the week it was Organon, Repetition and Astrology" (3)), White's narrator blends avuncular first-person address to children (such as when he explains that his characters are "drinking Metheglyn, not Port, but by mentioning the modern wine it is easier to give you the feel" (4)) with word-play and real or mock didacticism. This choice of tone, and implied audience, is wholly understandable for *The Sword in the Stone* as it was published originally, as a stand-alone account of the childhood of Arthur. When taken as part of *The Once and Future King*, however, it is a strange choice for a story which will ultimately encompass incest, full-scale warfare, and death.

In many ways, of course, this places the book alongside Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, which also

deliberately mingles an address to young readers with a more epic narrative. While in *The Hobbit* the children's book register retains a presence throughout, and holds this in tension with the wider epic world in which the story comes to unfold, the children's book elements of *The Once and Future King* are gradually shed over the course of the story, in what both Lupack and Worthington see as a conscious reflection of the aging of the characters. Drawing attention to the continual emphasis on time passing throughout *The Once and Future King,* Lupack points out that "[i]n a rather brilliant structural experiment, at the same time that the characters age in the sequence, the book itself is growing up with them" (107). When the characters are children, the book itself is a children's book; as the characters move into the world of "adult concerns and dangers" (Lupack 109) in *The Ill-Made Knight*, it becomes what White himself described as a romance. By *The Candle in the Wind*, the form is that of a tragedy, as the aged characters inch toward death and the destruction of their world. As Lupack puts it, "looking from the first book to the fifth [including *The Book of Merlyn*] is like seeing an acquaintance from youth after many years and being surprised at how much the person has changed. But reading through the books in sequence makes the aging process less startling, like living with a person and seeing small changes day by day" (108).

In this context, the use of the children's book form is perhaps less a matter of implied audience than of style, as the initial happy naiveté of the characters reflected in the narrative voice gives way to the pathos of tragedy via bildungsroman and romance. What is interesting is that the shift in forms means that it is not only the characters who age and grow, but also the world and the moral code of the world around them. Arthur is not only a children's book character in *The Sword in the Stone*, but he lives in a children's book world, in which the codes and dangers of *Le Morte Darthur* and epic in general exist in parodic form. Moreover, it is a consciously Edenic world, in which White exploits the romantic associations between childhood and nature to create a pastoral idyll not unlike that of texts such as *The Wind in the Willows*.[32] The text's gradual shift into adult and genuine epic form, then, is not only a maturation but also a tragedy in itself, as adult cares and concerns begin to enter a world in which Arthur was previously as happy in his "innocence and fortune" as "the man in Eden before the fall" (230). It is ironic that, in his preface, White sets up *Le Morte Darthur* in opposition to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (noting as he does so that "Milton himself thought of doing it [the Arthurian story] before he decided to deal with Adam" (Foreword to *The Once and Future King*)), as in White's hands the story of Arthur becomes one of a tragic fall from childhood innocence brought about by "sin coming home to roost" (White 323).

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[32] White is not the only writer to associate Camelot with Eden: as Kellman points out, C.S. Lewis makes a similar connection in *That Hideous Strength* (85).

Ultimately, White's "epic" is one that follows his conception of Malory's work: a conglomeration of stories bound together by an underlying moral imperative (to find "an antidote for war") and the tragedy of its ultimate failure. These stories span the life of Arthur – in White's case, from his childhood to shortly before his death – and the rise and fall of an ideal kingdom. To achieve this, White writes not a straight epic or a children's book, but an epic that encompasses and grows from a children's book, in a way that vividly illustrates the passing of an age that lies at the heart of the Arthurian story.

"The Joy of Life which Belonged to his Boyhood": Old England and the Fall

Though White once claimed that he found it "impossible to determine whether [*The Sword in the Stone*] is for grown-ups or children", he intended it as the latter, fearing its "feeble traces of A.A. Milne" but hoping for it to "be like Masefield's *The Midnight Folk*, a book I love this side idolatry" (*Letters to a Friend* 94). Moreover, White intended it in his plan for his "final epic" to be a book *about* childhood – or, as he described it, "boyhood and animals" (cited Lupack 105) – and specifically an idealised version of childhood: he described it later as a "wish-fulfilment of the things I should have liked to have happened to me as a boy" (*Letters to a Friend* 94). The equation of childhood with both animals and idealised innocence is a common one, and one that White exploits to create a perfect Eden for his characters that contrasts sharply with the more epic adult world they will later inhabit.

The Sword in the Stone opens in "July, and real July weather, such as they had in Old England" (6), and the ensuing descriptions of hay-making establish a world that is a mixture of pastoral and mock-epic. Like Tolkien in the early sections of *The Hobbit*, White in *The Sword in the Stone* often employs comic versions of epic tropes, as when he includes a long list of the names of the castle dogs in the style of Homer's Catalogue of Ships or Malory's various lists of knights. While in Tolkien this gently ridicules Bilbo's unsuitability for the heroic world, in White this is simply the way the heroic world of Old England functions. Epic conventions blend seamlessly with children's book conventions: detailed technical explanations of activities such as hay-making and jousting, for example, reference the depictions of correct modes of combat that characterise epic writing, but are also typical of children's classics such as *Little House on the Prairie*. As in epic, the audience is assumed to be already aware of the story, with White's narrator off-handedly referring to the prowess of Lancelot and Tristram long before they appear in the story (52), but unlike in epic this is deliberately used to highlight the protagonists' innocence of future events (Merlyn excepted). This is, White's narrator reminds us:

old Merry England of Gramarye, when rosy barons ate with their fingers ... when there was no unemployment because there were too few people to be employed – when the forests rang with knights walloping each other on the helm ... [and] the weather behaved itself. (137)

This version of Old England, of course, never actually existed in English history, and White knowingly makes reference to this even as he glorifies his Edenic paradise. The historical context is kept deliberately vague – "the Old England of the twelfth century, or whenever it was" (204) – and the perfections of this imaginary time period are sometimes calculated to draw attention to the imperfections of the real present time, as when "the boys made snowballs ... but never put stones in them to hurt each other" (137). It is, however, the England that does exist, and is permitted to exist even without White's level of irony, in children's literature. In both his blending of Arthurian material and children's games, and his poetic descriptions of rural England, White is in some ways working in a similar vein to Kenneth Grahame in *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days;* by setting this pastoral world against scenes of mock-epic, he also echoes *The Wind in the Willows*.[33] For both White and Grahame, the equation of childhood with both the pastoral and the heroic world allows such a world to be presented wholly positively, but with the implied understanding that such a world is, like childhood, transient. Geraldine Poss's discussion of Grahame's books can equally be applied to White:

He equates the innocence of the children with its [the romance tradition's] ideal world and, to the extent that both are irretrievable, the equation is valid. But he is also aware that the worlds of Homer and Malory are fallen; heroes need villains in order to demonstrate their valour. And he knows that it is only through the uncritical eyes of childhood that the heroic world can truly seem Utopian. (80)

The pastoral nature of *The Sword in the Stone* is emphasised by the continual presence of the natural world, the second half of White's plan for his "boyhood and animals" volume. In part, White's use of animals echoes the animal fables that often seem linked to children's versions of epic: Hawthorne's tale from the *Odyssey* for example, as previously discussed, uses the pigs that Odysseus's men become as metaphorical representations of greed to teach children correct

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[33]   In *The Wind in the Willows*, the mock-epic strain is represented by Toad's adventures, the climax of which is comically titled "The Return of Ulysses". In *The Sword in the Stone*, as will be discussed, epic conventions are most frequently parodied through the questing knight Sir Pellinore.

behaviour. Arthur's transformations into animals are also explicitly lessons – in the case of the wild geese and the ants, two chapters added when the book became part of *The Once and Future King*, particularly politicised lessons about pacifism and fascism – that teach him, and by extension the child reader, how to be a worthy leader. When not being used as metaphors, animals in the story enhance the Edenic quality of the world, and Arthur's connection with animals exploits the romantic associations of childhood with nature. Childhood and animals are linked repeatedly through simile and description: in the space of one page, Kay and Arthur are described as "scolding like a squirrel", "kick[ing] like a salmon" and "looking rather like skinned rabbits", amidst references to their sneaking out at night to "wait for a badger ... or to catch tench" and Kay twice calling Arthur, in approved children's book school slang, a "beast" (82). Arthur learns from the animals, but he is also one of them, even without Merlyn's transformations.

These three strains – innocence, boyhood and animals – culminate in the character of Arthur (here called the Wart to divorce him from the adult of *Le Morte Darthur*), who exemplifies the volume's heroic ideal. Given the deliberate public school atmosphere of the setting, it is unsurprising that the heroic code embodied by Arthur in *The Sword in the Stone* is largely centred around the "fair play, responsibility, and loyalty" (Knuth 47) central to the British school story. Like Tom Brown, Arthur is not unusually clever, but good at the things that matter: in his case, hay-making and hawking, both marks of an affinity with nature. Similarly, he is not particularly well-behaved but, as in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, a degree of rule-breaking is encouraged if done in the proper spirit, and though Sir Ector pretends to scold Arthur for staying out all night when a hawk is lost, "inside himself he was proud of the Wart for staying out after a hawk, and prouder still to see that he had got it" (33). Arthur's quests, in fact, are frequently motivated by rescuing animals (he also insists on rescuing his dog Cavall from Morgan le Fay (101)); when they are not, they are from simple curiosity, or from loyalty to Kay. Unusually for a hero destined to be a legendary king, Arthur is described from the first as "a born follower" and "hero-worshipper" (8) and, despite his own dreams for himself, ultimately (as in Malory) achieves leadership whilst attempting an act of simple service: pulling the sword from the stone for Kay to use in the tournament. In the end, Arthur is innocent and good-natured to the point of being foolish – described in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* as having "a stupid face, or at any rate there was a lack of cunning in it" (225) – but it is this foolishness that allows his essential goodness. Even as he grows, he "continue[s] to be stupid, fond of Kay, and interested in birds" (181), embodying, in White's wry narrative voice, the English virtues of straightforwardness, loyalty, and love of nature.

This ideal of childhood innocence is not only expressed through Arthur, an actual child, but also

through the adult characters, who within the conventions of children's fiction are allowed to function as metaphorical children in a way that would not be possible with a more epic style. In the ambiguous "those days" of White's Old England, we are told, "even the grown-up people were so childish that they saw nothing uninteresting in being turned into owls" (180). This childishness means that knightly activities such as quests and battles, while referred to frequently, are no more serious than a child's game. The facade of chivalry that in later parts of the book conceals true cruelty here conceals only good-natured ridiculousness: though Arthur, in his naivety, thinks his first sight of Sir Pellinore "the most beautiful thing he had seen in his short life so far" (15), Pellinore's visor is swiftly tilted back to reveal "horn-rimmed spectacles; fogged by being inside the helmet" (16) belonging to arguably the most comic character of the book.[34] This is exemplified in the comic joust between Pellinore and Grummore, in which Malory's Middle English is punctuated by grammatical corrections ("I believe it should be 'thou shalt'" (61)) and the battle takes place in ponderous slow motion due to their heavy armour. Even this "proper formula" (61) soon degenerates into a string of schoolboy taunts. When Arthur worries about leaving the knights unconscious at the end, Merlyn dismisses his concerns with, "They'll be best friends when they come to. They always are" (68). While this scene is in some ways a parody of Malory, it is in other ways merely a reading of the early tales of *Le Morte Darthur*, which often do appear to depict quests and chivalry as games without serious consequences. When the book does use material from Malory, the children's book characterisations bring out its innocence and latent humour: there is a very small leap from Malory's whimsical description of the Questing Beast as having "a noyse ... in the bestes bely lyke vnto the questyng of xxx coupyl houndes. But alle the whyle the beeste dranke there was no noyse in the bestes bely" (1.19.21-23) and Pellinore's humorously knowledgeable "Wherever this beast goes he makes a noise in his belly as it had been the noise of thirty couple of hounds questing. Except when he is drinking, of course" (17).

Kay, by contrast, is less heroic because he is less childish, and therefore more psychologically complex. Kay is "older and bigger" than Arthur, but (as if by association) "he was more nervous and imaginative" (82). His bullying behaviour is attributed by Sir Ector to his "youthfulness" (185), as opposed to childishness, and as his knighthood approaches he begins to become sarcastic and bad-tempered, which the narrator notes "he did not seem to want to do" but "could not help" (181). Arthur is able to understand that Kay's actions result from him feeling "scared and miserable" (206), but does not share such feelings: while Kay in battle is able to "imagine the effect of each blow that was aimed at him", Arthur fights better for being "only an infuriated hurricane" (82).

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[34] By contrast, genuinely powerful characters are often introduced looking deceptively ridiculous, most obviously in the case of Merlyn himself. Robin Hood is described as "not ... a romantic man – or not at first" (95).

Similarly, Kay's ineptitude at haymaking – "which he loathed like poison" (7) – and hawking – which he is "not really keen on ... except in so far as it was the proper occupation for a boy in his station of life" (11) – differentiates him from Arthur both in terms of heroic attributes and in terms of his resulting bitterness and self-loathing. Although this behaviour never becomes truly vicious or damaging, it stands in contrast to the heroic ideal of Arthur, whose "heart was still a kind one, being a boy's" (171), and provides a template for the serpents that later infiltrate White's Garden of Eden.

The climax of the book's first part, the moment when Arthur draws the sword from the stone, is also a turning point for the book as a whole, being the point at which White's prequel overlaps with Malory's original. In *Le Morte Darthur*, Arthur's response to obtaining the sword is intriguingly human: rather than rejoice in his new-found ancestry or the power he has gained, he is upset to see Ector kneel to him, and Malory says that he "made grete doole when he vnderstood that Syre Ector was not his fader" (1.6.25-26). This reaction is expanded upon in White and, as Sir Ector lapses into untranslated Malory, Arthur's response is given in the children's book language that is his throughout *The Sword in the Stone*:

> "Oh, do stop," he cried. "Of course [Kay] can be seneshal, if I have got to be this King, and, oh, father, don't kneel down like that, because it breaks my heart. Please get up, Sir Ector, and don't make everything so horrible. Oh, dear, oh, dear, I wish I had never seen the filthy sword at all."
> And the Wart burst into tears. (210)

The effect of Arthur's childish response is two-fold. It reaffirms him as the innocent that White's Edenic Old England requires for its hero, with his focus on family and fear of leadership in character for a "born follower" (8). At the same time, his tears, along with the subtle shift from "father" to "Sir Ector" in addressing his foster-parent, also mark the beginning of the end of innocence, and transform Arthur's tears for the loss of Sir Ector into a mourning for the implied loss of his boyhood. Unlike Malory's Arthur, who pulls the sword from the stone "lightly and fiersly" (1.28) due to his lineage alone, White's Arthur does so specifically as the culmination of years of Merlyn's education. In one of the book's most poetic passages, in which Arthur speaks his thoughts and feelings aloud in the high language of an epic hero, Arthur is at first unable to release the sword, which he wants "not for [him], but for Kay" (207), and calls upon Merlyn to help. In response, he is joined by all the animals he has befriended throughout his boyhood, all of whom have "come to help on account of love" (208) and who repeat the lessons that Arthur has learned from them. It is through them and Merlyn's teaching that Arthur feels "his power grow" and is

finally able to draw the sword out "as gently as from a scabbard" (208).[35] By contrast, his lineage is revealed by Merlyn as an afterthought only at his coronation, and Arthur characteristically does not understand most of it but only wishes to know if Merlyn will remain with him. As Wart's story begins to become that of *Le Morte Darthur*, his education is complete and his childhood comes to an end with the words, "Yes, King Arthur" (213).

The Queen of Air and Darkness, the second and briefest part of *The Once and Future King*, holds a more ambiguous status as children's literature. Lupack labels it a *bildungsroman* in order to differentiate it from the "children's book" *Sword in the Stone* (109), while Worthington groups the first two parts together as "children's fiction" with the narrative register "playful, imaginative, fantastic, and satisfyingly horrific in an appropriately childish way" (106). In fact, the second volume might nowadays be termed Young Adult fiction. In many ways, the focus remains on childhood, as the narrative opens with the Orkney children huddled in their room at the top of a tower, and the language remains that of a children's book even when the concepts arguably do not. The romantic equation of boyhood with goodness and with animals, however, is entirely lost. Though the Orkney brothers are indeed children, they pervert the innocence idealised in Arthur: while Arthur is compared to "the man in Eden before the Fall" (230) who famously had no knowledge of good and evil, the Orkney children have "an imperfect sense of right and wrong ... they could never know when they were being good or when they were being bad" (217). Similarly, Arthur is innocent of his ancestry and thus his role in legend, while the Orkney children are first depicted telling each other the story of their grandparents Uther and Igraine, partially in Malory's own language. When the Orkney children interact with animals, their only bond is mutual acceptance of pain that darkly echoes the understanding of the world Arthur shares with his dogs and hawks:

> Nobody had told them that it was cruel to hurt [the donkeys], but then, nobody had told the donkeys either ... So the small circus was a unity – the beasts reluctant to move and the children vigorous to move them, the two parties bound together by the link of pain to which they both agreed without question. (247)

This shift in narrative, as Worthington points out, coincides with White's introduction of the book's

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[35] The idea of Arthur pulling out the sword as a product of education rather than a divine sign is humorously developed at the coronation, where "everyone sent presents to the Wart, for his prowess in having learned to pull swords out of stones, and several burghers of the City of London asked him to help them in taking stoppers out of unruly bottles, unscrewing taps which had got stuck, and in other household emergencies which had got beyond their control" (211).

first major female character, after the "perfect imaginary childhood" with minimal female presence of *The Sword in the Stone* (100).[36] Morgause is universally acknowledged to be a caricature of White's own mother, on whom White later blamed his misogynistic and sadistic tendencies (Worthington 100), and the confusion of sexual feelings the Orkney children and later Arthur come to feel towards her move the story from the safe realms of childhood (or "boyhood") into the confusion of adolescence. From the perspective of the plot, Morgause is not entirely responsible for the adult elements of the book: Arthur is unaware of her until almost the last page, and the growing seriousness of his war with the rebelling tribes can be largely attributed to the fact that Arthur is now within the period of his life dealt with by Malory rather than White's "preface". Nonetheless, her character and White's hatred of her dominates *The Queen of Air and Darkness* (White's summary of the volume simply reads "that bloody bitch Morgause" (Lupack 105)). While Malory describes Morgause merely as a "possynge fayr lady" (1.19.1), White's Morgause is a nightmare of femininity, introduced as she graphically boils a cat alive as "an excuse for lingering with the mirror" (222) and continually attempting to seduce men for her own vanity or gain. Like her sister Morgan le Faye, who in *The Sword in the Stone* is linked with Homer's Circe (100), Morgause follows the epic conception of women as "fascinating, but inscrutable and dangerous" (Griffin 19). Epic, though, tends to balance dangerous women with faithful wives – Circe for example is balanced by Penelope, as Helen in the *Iliad* is balanced by Andromache – and there is no corresponding positive feminine influence in the lives of either the Orkney children or Arthur.[37] Instead, as Worthington points out, the text "like an adolescent ... veers between childishness and adult sexuality" (102), and this adult sexuality is relentlessly destructive.

With the introduction of the "python" (280) Morgause, the few hints of unease in the first part of White's book are expanded upon in the second, as the world of the children's book (which White saw as wish-fulfilment) begins to blend with the world of adult chivalric romance (which, given the intensely biographical nature of Morgause and later Lancelot, White apparently associated with reality). Kay's comparative psychological complexity, for example, is magnified by the characterisations of the Orkney children, all of whom are severely emotionally disturbed: like Kay, Agravaine is "the bully of the family" and "frightened of pain" because "he had a good imagination and used his head more than the others" (218). Similarly, the references to the imperfections of our

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[36] The original version of *The Sword in the Stone* featured the witch Madame Mim as a major villain; her exclusion from *The Once and Future King* allows feminine danger to enter the book only as Arthur leaves childhood behind him.

[37] Arguably, Pellinore's love interest, Piggy, is a positive female character, but she can only be so by being presented as entirely without feminine beauty or sexuality: his love for her is "fine so far as it went" because she is "a managing, middle-aged, stout-hearted creature, who could cook, ride a straight line, and make beds" (256). Even Merlyn's powers are rendered impotent in advance by his future association with Nimue.

world, which in *The Sword in the Stone* are largely confined to allegory and stones in snowballs, become specific and politicised in *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, as Merlin tells Arthur and Kay about "an Austrian who invented a new way of life and convinced himself he was the chap to make it work" (274). As Lupack points out, the killing of the unicorn by the Orkney children mirrors the killing of the griffin in *The Sword in the Stone*, but with far darker implications. The potential for tragedy implied by the death of the dog in the latter becomes a true tragedy, complete with Oedipal overtones, as the graphic death of the unicorn is depicted as "an offense against the nature that Wart learns to love and respect in the first book" (Lupack 109).

In this context, the innocence of children's literature is thoughtless, and potentially dangerous. While in *The Sword in the Stone* Arthur is able to say that he thinks fighting is "knightly" with no worse consequences than Merlyn calling him a "baby" (172), in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* a similar comment means that Merlyn must guide him into realising that seven hundred of his kerns have been killed while the knights have remained unharmed. Arthur moves from the confusion Merlyn criticises as belonging to a "schoolboy" to a realisation that "I ought to have thought of the people who had no armour ... Might isn't Right, is it, Merlyn?" (229). From this, the book begins to formulate a more adult heroic code, which challenges rather than gently ridicules accepted knightly virtues and interrogates, through Merlyn, ideas of pacifism and war relevant to post-World War II Britain. As Arthur reaches the end of the next stage of Merlyn's teaching, White through his characters explicitly constructs a new code of behaviour, where the pretensions of honour and rules of war that only extend battle are deemed of no intrinsic value: chivalry, Merlyn states, "simply means being rich enough to have a castle and a suit of armour, and then, when you have them, you make the Saxon people do what you like" (229). Rather than abolish these concepts entirely, Arthur aims instead to use them "only on behalf of what is good ... using the Might instead of fighting against it, and turning a bad thing into a good" (254-255). With this, White reframes the heroic code found in Malory as a series of strictly enforced "artificial social conventions [that] could keep the Beast in man from coming out" even though "these conventions [are] not grounded in any reality" (Kellman 4).[38]

If Arthur's intellectual maturation is positive, bringing about the Round Table and its chivalric code, his corresponding sexual maturation immediately sows the seeds for its end as Arthur is seduced by Morgause and fathers Mordred. This event is tastefully skimmed over in the manner of a children's

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[38]   It is telling that at this stage of the book, when Arthur has become "the young king", he no longer remembers that he once transformed into animals, or his adventures involving magic. Aside from being a common trope of children's books, this also signifies that the characters are no longer living in a world where casual magic is a solution, or a possibility.

book, related matter-of-factly with an illustration of a family tree that readers may "have to read ... twice, like something in a history lesson" (323). The tone is indeed that of a history lesson: White's narrator even instructs us to "take note of the parentage of Arthur's son Mordred, and to remember, when the time comes, that Arthur had slept with his sister" (323). With this lesson, though, we are once again reminded of White's source material, as he claims that Mordred's birth is "why Sir Thomas Malory called his very long book the *Death* of Arthur" and frames the story as "the tragedy, the Aristotelian and comprehensive tragedy of sin coming home to roost" (323). Unlike Malory, but like Milton in *Paradise Lost*, White equates his hero's fall from grace with the subsequent fall of mankind; moreover, as Pullman would come to do even more explicitly in *His Dark Materials*, he equates this fall with his hero's first experience of adult sexuality. With this, the book moves firmly out of the realm of children's literature and into the realms of epic, and from now on, as White puts it, "innocence is not enough" (323).

"The Maturest or the Saddest Phase" of Camelot: Epic and Tragedy

As the third volume, *The Ill-Made Knight*, begins, the shift in tone is not immediately apparent. Like the preceding volumes, the story opens with a depiction of a child – in this case, Lancelot – and retains the narrative asides and guidance through the story that O'Sullivan points out is characteristic of children's writing: when explaining Lancelot's self-loathing, White's narrator tells us, "There is no need for us to understand it. We do not have to dabble in a place which he preferred to keep secret" (327). If Lancelot's growth from boyhood to manhood is the focus of *The Ill-Made Knight*, however, it is a growth that continues well into middle-age, and it gradually becomes apparent that the implied audience being addressed in first person is not one of children. By the famous passage in which White explains the seventh sense that "cannot be taught to younger people" (394), the "we" that arguably encompasses both White and the reader is one that has clearly reached middle-age: "We only carry on with our famous knowledge of the world, riding the queer waves in a habitual, petrifying way, because we have reached a stage of deadlock in which we can think of nothing else to do" (395). The world has now become an adult one, of "adult concerns and dangers" (Lupack 109).

Though *The Ill-Made Knight* was conceived by White as a "Romance" (Lupack 110), of his entire "epic" it is also the book that is closest to epic itself. As discussed earlier, critics from the nineteenth century onwards tend to agree that romance is set apart from the epic by, among other things, a focus on "mystery and fantasy" (Ker 4) and the workings of fairyland rather than the divine

intervention that is characteristic of epic. It is therefore notable that, while magic flowed freely in *The Sword in the Stone* and was a dark undercurrent to *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, it is almost entirely eliminated from the last two volumes of *The Once and Future King* even when present in Malory.[39] The role played by Brisen as enchantress in causing Lancelot to twice mistake Elaine for Guenever, for example, is considerably downplayed, replaced by wine given by Brisen's husband (although a love potion "might perhaps have been put in it" (391)) in the first instance and simple trickery in the dark in the second.[40] Likewise, Morgan le Faye's castle "no longer ha[s] its fairy appearance as a castle of food [from the first volume], but its everyday aspect as an ordinary fortress" (358). Instead, magic is confined to Merlyn and Nimue, who arguably fulfil the function of somewhat forgetful deities, to Morgan le Faye, and to the religious mysteries surrounding the Holy Grail. As Kellman discusses, even these mysteries are told entirely through the accounts of returning knights, leaving their credibility as ambiguous as White, an agnostic, felt the modern world required (116). Instead, White stresses the reality of the heroic world without the comicality of the earlier volumes: Lancelot's armour and weapons have real weight, and his training to manage it is meticulously described, while his jerfalcon is "sulky and temperamental" (347) during moulting and her creance prone to becoming tangled. It is also explicitly a British heroic world, with not only place names but their various landscapes continually evoked and related to present day England; in this, it establishes cultural and geographical roots for the stories which romance tends to leave ambiguous.

If White is consciously adopting the general techniques of epic, he is also consciously adopting the techniques of Malory himself. To an extent, the light parody of Malory that characterises *The Sword in the Stone* is still present, most notably in the conversation between Sir Bliant and King Pelles which mingles Malory's dialogue with English colloquialisms ("He had given me a buffet, you know, which troubled my brains" (418)). More and more, however, Malory as well as his subject matter begins to be treated with the "high seriousness" of epic. Where Malory refers throughout to his actual and invented sources, usually "the French book", White's continually referenced source is Malory himself: variations of the phrase "as Malory puts it" (386) occur frequently throughout the volume. Though he continues to humanise his heroes, he takes care to note that these characteristics are found in Malory, as when Lancelot bemoans his inability to climb trees (372). He also takes care to locate his world firmly within Malory's tradition rather than that of the writers he intended to snub on Mount Olympus – he declares early on that his Lancelot would not be recognised by

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[39] It does, of course, return with a vengeance in *The Book of Merlyn*.

[40] Kellman suggests that White's psychological difficulties with women might explain why he is apparently "unconcerned about the improbability that Lancelot can sleep with Elaine and think she is Guenever, not once but twice" (121).

Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites (332) – and, unlike in his earlier and later volumes, follows Malory's narrative and often phrasing closely. Most importantly, White for the first time openly adopts the stance shared by Malory and all epic poets: that of an inhabitant of a contemporary world looking back to a heroic – rather than pastoral – age when men were better and greater. Malory's belief that "nowadayes men can nat loue seuen nyghte, but they must haue alle their desyres ... But the old loue was not so" (18.25.28-31) is echoed, wholly without irony, in White's narrative voice as he claims that the story of Lancelot and Guinevere "is a story of love in the old days, when adults acted faithfully – not a story in the present, in which adolescents pursue the ignoble spasms of a cinematograph" (539). For both writers, the Arthurian myth is a means of writing from a time of political and military conflict back to a better time.

As the world of the book moves from pastoral to epic, it requires an epic rather than a child hero. This role falls not to the grown Arthur (who remains "only a simple and affectionate man, because Merlyn had believed that love and simplicity were worth having" (407)), but to Lancelot. In this, arguably, White continues to follow Malory: Eugene Vinaver believes that Malory also exhibits a "consistent preference" for Lancelot and works throughout *Le Morte Darthur* to endow him with the "characteristics ... of an epic hero" rather than a hero of courtly romance (740).[41] As Vinaver points out, Malory stresses Lancelot's "deeds of arms" and resulting "worship and honour" throughout "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake" rather than the adventures which "illustrate his characteristic role of Guinevere's lover", and condenses his original source to "give a reasonably continuous account of Lancelot's adventures" (744). White, too, stresses the physical heroism and public glory of Lancelot, in a way that deliberately moves him out of the more banal manifestations of chivalric romance. Lancelot's ugliness divorces him from the Lancelot of French courtly tradition, and his prowess is explicitly due to "three years of discipline [in his youth] ... not a merry heart and a capacity for singing tirra-lirra" (334). He is not "romantic or debonair" (332), but is instead compared with animals, modern day sportsmen, or, occasionally, older epic figures: after having been lost and mad for two years, for instance, he is discovered by one of Elaine's girls whilst they are playing "the same game as Nausicaa was playing when Ulysses arrived" (425), drawing a clear parallel between the two wandering, dishevelled heroes about to encounter a sympathetic woman. Likewise, White condenses almost the entirety of *Le Morte Darthur* itself to form a continuous account of Lancelot's adventures, with the tales of Gareth and Tristram in particular only alluded to in conversations that serve to highlight aspects of Lancelot's character. For White,

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[41]   The distinction between an epic and a chivalric hero is as ambiguous as that between epic and romance; for Vinaver, an epic hero appears to be characterised by "brutality" and "human heroism", while a romance hero is more concerned with "subtle issues of courtly behaviour" (740).

though, these varied adventures are made continuous by the motivations that lead Lancelot to undertake them: his love for Arthur and his idea of "a band of knights who believe in justice rather than strength" (328), and his inner self-loathing.

These two motivations allow Lancelot, like Arthur and Merlyn before him, to illustrate the heroic code devised in *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, this time not through teaching or being taught but by embodying its ideals. Unlike in Malory, Lancelot's disparate quests are united as part of a larger "civil war of ideologies" that pits the Round Table against "the conservative ethics of Force Majeur" (370). Arthur sends his knights on quests not at the prompting of divine signs or to prove their own worth, but "to see how the idea would work" (346), and Lancelot's triumphs are a success in terms of Arthur's social experiment where those of earlier knights are not (the Pentecost adventures in Malory are summarised only as: "Gawaine had cut a lady's head off, and even dear old Pellinore had failed to rescue a damsel in distress" (346)). In this, *The Once and Future King* shares with the *Aeneid* a preoccupation with the forging of a new kingdom and social order out of an old one built on violence and revenge. As Virgil admires and glorifies Turnus but insists on the necessity of his death, so Lancelot says of the defeated Turquine, "He was the old school ... It is what we have to stop. But he was a credit to the old school as a fighter, all the same" (369).

While other books that deal with such specific codes of behaviour raise questions about the intended extent of their applicability to contemporary readers, there are no such questions regarding White's intentions for *The Once and Future King*. White believed in the relevance of his book to WWII Europe to such an extent that it motivated him to seek war service himself in 1941, explaining to a friend, "unfortunately I have written an epic about war, one of whose morals is that Hitler is the kind of chap one has to stop. I believe in my book, and, in order to give it a fair start in life, I must show I am ready to practise what I preach" (cited Warner 185). This specific rather than general applicability of the heroic code he adapts from Malory is emphasised by White throughout the book by means of narrative asides: when he summarises Arthur's war against the "Dictator" Lucius, for example, he remarks that "It is strange to reflect that Dictator is the very word Malory uses" (351), directing the reader's attention to the parallel with contemporary events. The characters similarly aid in the quest for political relevance, as when Lancelot responds to a description of Sir Turquine's dungeon as "a sort of concentration camp" (365) with the assurance that this "is what Arthur invented the Round Table to prevent" (366).

More generally, Arthur's heroic code is seen as applicable to contemporary society due to what White, with his interest in Freud's recent developments in psychology, saw as the inherent ugliness

of human nature. Lancelot, as an embodiment of the book's heroic code, also must also embody the human frailty that necessitates it. *The Ill-Made Knight* is prefaced with a quote from Malory: "'Nay,' said Sir Lancelot, '... for once shamed may never be recovered'". What the (incorrectly placed) ellipses hide is that the quote is actually said by "Launcelot *and the other* [knight]" (5.7.15, italics mine), indicating that the sentiment being voiced belongs to a social rather than a personal code. By attributing it solely to Lancelot, the quote becomes reflective of Lancelot as a hero, suggesting a hero whose desire for public glory is driven by his private shame. This is symptomatic of the book as a whole, as the wide-ranging romances of *Le Morte Darthur* become focused through the figure of Lancelot. If Lancelot's quests are framed as social experiments, they are also framed as his desperate attempt to avoid his love for Guenever, and thus to "save his honour, not establish it" (355). This reading of Lancelot's behaviour continues into the minutest details: Lancelot's unexplained sleepiness in Malory becomes weariness from the "struggle inside him about the Queen" (357), for example, and later the unexplained adjective "sadly" as he goes to bed is interpreted as "sadly, for his mind was full of Guenever" (361). Likewise, Lancelot's gentleness is attributed paradoxically to his innate cruelty, which his strict principles are necessary to restrain. As many have noted, the deep-seated psychological issues White's Lancelot struggles against, most notably his sadistic tendencies, are essentially White's own (Warner 150), though Kellman argues that White nonetheless is able to maintain "epic distance" (130) in drawing Lancelot's character. They also serve as a means of illustrating the reasons why a hero of epic may choose to fight according to a strict social code, and why it may be necessary for them to do so. The psychological complexity that in the earlier volumes belonged only to less than positive characters, such as Kay and Aggravaine, now belongs to the book's new hero, and prevents as well as occasions cruelty.

Lancelot's human frailties therefore do not preclude him from heroic status, or even the status of an epic hero. Though psychological complexity is not generally listed as a characteristic of an epic hero, the epic has certainly been used as a format to explore legendary figures whose motivations from earlier sources are less explicit: Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is developed considerably from his appearance in Genesis, and, less problematically, classical heroes such as Odysseus, Achilles and Hector are permitted well-rounded characterisations. Moreover, White clearly shows throughout that such flaws of human nature are not only inevitable, but a desirable part of humanity which the attainment of true heroic perfection would require to be sacrificed. Galahad is loathed by Gawaine for managing to embody moral perfection, and though Lancelot explains and excuses his son's behaviour our narrative distance from him (once he has grown from a "priggish, mute little boy" (434) we never see him except through the reports of others) ensures that he remains unattractive. Bors's "dogmatically sound" decision to "not commit mortal sin, even if twelve lives

depend on it" (469) is greeted with horror by Guenever and Arthur, as are the trials Lancelot is put through by God in order to purge him of his sin: Arthur exclaims that "It is disgusting! ... Why should a good, kind, dear person be tortured like that?" (493). When Lancelot and Guenever surrender and return to their love affair, indirectly dooming the Round Table, this is described as a result not of weakness but as a result of the "eighth deadly sin" generosity: "the hearts of these two lovers were instinctively too generous to fit with dogma" (502). As Arthur muses at the book's climax, "sweeping and drastic remedies could cut out anything – and life with the cut" (671). If Lancelot's "toil" is to be heroic *because* it is "doomed, courageous, [and] vain" (494), heroic ideals need by their very nature to be unattainable. It is the very struggle to attain these artificial standards that has the potential to provide the "antidote to war", just as it is the struggle to find the Holy Grail that is deemed of import in "pull[ing] our Table together" (457) rather than the Grail itself, and it is paradoxically in the forging of the new world that this world is able to be its most ideal. If Arthur is the architect of this new world, Lancelot's high ideals and human fallibility combine to make him its most perfect citizen, "the greatest knight King Arthur had" (330).

Unlike Virgil, however, the perfect kingdom White writes about is not the one in which he claims to currently live, but one that has long since ended. As the story moves into its final volume and the characters into old age, it also makes a final shift from the world of epic and romance into the closely-related world of tragedy. *The Candle in the Wind* began its life as a tragic play, rejected for production by Noel Coward in 1939 for its long speeches and its doubtful "sustaining power" (Warner 175).[42] As critics have noted, the book continues to bear the marks of its initial conception as tragedy even after being converted to prose: the action takes place almost entirely through dialogue, in interior locations with little action (Lupack 110). What has not been noted is the continual use of theatrical language that suddenly pervades the book's narrative passages. Mordred, for instance, is described as resembling "a sort of Hamlet" (628) in black, and makes his entrance "with the bitter drama of a perfect cue" (617). By contrast, Lancelot and Guenever, returning to the court in a failed attempt to restore peace, appear "in the middle of music like a bad pageant", also "waiting for their cue" but looking "like well-meaning actors who were trying to do their best, but were not good at acting" (633). In part, the theatrical nature of Arthur's court in its last days draws attention to the falseness of the base on which it is now built. As Arthur explains to Lancelot and Guenever, in order for the code of the Round Table to be accepted, it was necessary to make it "a fashion ... To get them in, we had to have a gang, as kids have in schools" (381). While this "was a good thing when they thought of it" (380) – when, in fact, they were indeed operating a world of

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[42]   In this, it is once again similar to *Paradise Lost*, passages of which were also originally written as a part of a dramatic tragedy.

kids and schools – it has since degenerated into "sportsmanship" without true heroic impulse: "Everybody," Arthur complains, "gossips and nags and hints and speculates about who unseated whom last, and who has rescued the most virgins ... People will do the basest things on account of their so-called honour. I wish I had never invented honour, or sportsmanship, or civilisation" (381). Honour as fashion is foreshadowed in Sir Tristram, who "had got some garbled notion in his head that famous knights ought to be gentle ... without properly understanding or feeling it himself" (599), and embodied in Mordred and the latter knights. Like White's own era, the court has become "modern" (505), and characterised by the ironic aphorisms and "knowledge of the world" (504) (Mordred wears the courtly fashions "contemptuously: they were a satire on himself" (505)) that Moretti and others have argued renders epic unable to survive.[43] The inability of the protagonists to operate by these new standards of appearance over sincerity is to their detriment, but also, White implies, to their credit. Guenever enters the volume "not like a film star, but like a woman who had grown a soul" (596), while Mordred has become, like Hamlet, a character in a play: "He was acting," the narrator tells us, "and had ceased to be real" (647).

The conscious conversion of epic into tragedy also hints at what White saw as the inevitability of the fall of Camelot. As Guenever realises, as she attempts to plead with a Mordred whose conversation has become "a spoken part", the story will "end according to the script" (651). While epic frequently ends tragically, with both *Beowulf* and the *Iliad* culminating in the death of major heroes, in tragedy the ending is, in White's own paraphrase of Aristotle's *Poetics*, "implicit in the beginning" (cited Warner 98) and brought about by an error made by an otherwise good character. In White's eyes, of course, this is Arthur's Oedipus-like act of unknowing incest. Malory places little stress on the conception of Mordred, blaming the fall of the Round Table instead on Mordred's revelation of the affair between Lancelot and Guenever and by extension the divide between the public and private faces of chivalry. White shifts the focus from Mordred himself – the product of Arthur's incest – to Morgause, whom White sees as the instigator. Unlike in Malory, Morgause and her hatred of Arthur retain a presence throughout White's book, both in her own actions and, more importantly, through the actions of her children for which she is repeatedly blamed. The Orkney faction are unable to grasp Arthur's idea because "Morgause ... brought them up with so little love or security that they find it difficult to understand warm-hearted people themselves" (345); her murder at their hands explicitly signals the beginning of Arthur's "sins ... coming home to roost"

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43   White himself apparently believed strongly in sincerity over cynicism. A student of his described him: "He set before us as an ideal *emotional* sincerity. This was an entirely new idea to the clever boys who were scoring off each other in the style of Aldous Huxley. He made one feel that truth might or might not exist. But what did matter was ... whether your feelings were genuine, personal and sincere; and what was despicable was to serve up stock responses or clever aphorisms or second-hand opinions" (Warner 63).

(450), recalling White's warning at the end of *The Queen of Air and Darkness*; and after her death she "exist[s] in [Mordred] like the vampire" (648) and guides his actions. Mordred himself exists only as an extension of her, and as a symbol of Arthur's guilt. Tellingly, White chooses to have Arthur recount the story of the incest and, for the first time in the book, his attempt to kill Mordred by ordering all babies born at a certain time to be floated out to sea, immediately before Mordred seeks to destroy the Round Table in revenge. The Round Table, it is implied, has been doomed from the start because even the best people are ultimately fallible, in a world that is too deeply committed to revenge for past wrongs to forgive fallibility. If *The Once and Future King* is specifically – as White declared it to be – an attempt to find a heroic code that will serve as "an antidote to war" (Lupack 103), it is the story of a doomed attempt. As both Malory and White depict it, the Arthurian world is at once unlike and too like their own.

The death of Arthur, however, has never been the true ending of the Arthurian story: as the title of White's book reminds us, Arthur himself is always destined to return and rule again. Not surprisingly, given the overwhelming emphasis of *The Once and Future King*, this possibility is held out through education. Bradbrook defines romance as a tradition that "gives an idealized version of the life of the knightly class; it is the warrior's daydream, designed for recreation (or 'solace'), not instruction (or 'doctrine')" (69). The epic and the children's story, by contrast, are intended in part exactly to indoctrinate through recreation, something that White exploits to the utmost in his desire to respond to his contemporary reality. As C.M. Adderley points out, the relationship between child and educator is crucial throughout the story, from Merlyn and the young Wart to Lancelot and Uncle Dap, and White stresses the importance of learning as means of breaking free from the cyclic nature of war. While the majority of the book's ideals turn in on themselves – honour becoming fashion, love becoming incest and adultery, family becoming destructive blood feuds – the one that survives untarnished is Merlyn's oft-quoted:

> The best thing for being sad ... is to learn something ... You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it – to learn. (186)

Arthur, at the close of the book, finds himself in all these positions, and responds by forcing himself to learn from them.

It is fitting, then, that the epic which began as a children's story ends not only with a grown Arthur becoming a teacher, but with a child becoming the story-teller. At the end of *The Once and Future King*, Thomas Malory is mythologised as a future epic author within the text itself, as Arthur gives the young "Tom of Newbold Revell" the task of surviving to tell the story of the Round Table. The figure of the bard is a common and important one in epic, where heroes aim to gain glory and have their names immortalised in songs: Odysseus, for example, hears the song of his own deeds sung by Demodocus in Homer's *Odyssey*. The young Tom's task is slightly different, as Arthur asks him to keep alive not only the deeds of his court but more importantly his idea of "get[ting] the barons fighting for truth, and to help weak people, and to redress wrongs" (673) rather than for personal gain. In this way, the act of telling and being told stories itself becomes a means of creating a world where Arthur's ideals can finally flourish: as Arthur tells himself:

> There would come a day – there must be a day – when he would come back to Granmarye with a new Round Table which had no corners, just as the world had none – a table without boundaries between the nations who would sit to feast there. The hope of making it would lie in culture. If people could be persuaded to read and write, not just to eat and make love, there was still a chance that they might come to reason. (676)

At once an epic writer in his own right and a storyteller figure within the epic, Malory is in White's conception the "light-bringer", carrying the heroic ideals of Arthur as a "candle in the wind" (674) that must not be allowed to blow out. By extension, so is White.

Epic, Romance and the Matter of Britain II: Rosemary Sutcliff, King Arthur and Historical Epic

In many ways, Rosemary Sutcliff's conception of the Arthurian myth and its social and imaginative function matches White's: as she introduces it in her Author's Note to *Sword at Sunset,* it is "the Matter of Britain ... [which] with Sir Thomas Malory ... came to its fullest flowering" (vii). Like White, Sutcliff holds a very clear sense of Arthurian writing as part of a long-established tradition, with national importance comparable to that of "the saga of Charlemagne and his paladins" (vii) to France. In Sutcliff's case, this tradition includes White himself, whose work she admired deeply, and whose influence on aspects of her work is often palpable. It is perhaps not coincidental therefore that her most famous Arthurian text, *Sword at Sunset,* shares with *The Once and Future King* an ambiguous relationship with children's literature: as *The Once and Future King* begins as a children's book yet moves into the realms of adult literature as the story progresses, *Sword at Sunset* was published as an adult novel yet forms a direct sequel to Sutcliff's 1959 children's book *The Lantern Bearers.* This is further complicated by Sutcliff's later, more traditional, trilogy of books – *The Sword and the Circle, The Light Beyond the Forest* and *The Road to Camlann* – which retell Malory explicitly for children, yet often overlap with *Sword at Sunset* in surprising ways. Both writers share a sense of Arthur as national text which transcends the boundary of adult and children's fiction, or at least which resists an initial confinement to the bounds of children's literature.

Where Sutcliff and White differ greatly is with regard to their treatment of history. White, as has been previously discussed, keeps the timeframe of his book deliberately vague – "the Old England of the twelfth century, or whenever it was" (204) – and the text is a mixture of anachronisms and overt comparisons to contemporary events. As it is for Malory, for White the story of Arthur is one of an imagined rather than an actual past, and its key importance lies in the fact that it is superior yet relevant to his own time. The vagueness of the historical content means that *The Once and Future King* becomes at times an overt allegory for post-WWII Britain, and its attempts to find an antidote to war are at once a commentary on the flaws of human nature and an attempt to highlight the ongoing need for something akin to Malory's heroic code.[44] *Sword at Sunset*, by contrast, is a deliberate attempt to return Arthur – or Artos – to what Sutcliff and others considered his original

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[44] Sutcliff seems to touch on both sides of this technique in a 1986 interview with Raymond H. Thompson, where she praises White for keeping the story "so up-to-date because the relationships are so recognizable" but regrets that with the publication of the final *Once and Future King* "T. H. White became more and more a man with a message, and he had to destroy an awful lot of his own gorgeous things [in the original versions of the books] to get that message across" ("Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff").

place in history: that of a Roman-British war leader in early fifth century Britain. Sutcliff's interest in the Arthurian legend is not focused on Malory, as is White's, but on Arthur himself, whom she believed to be a real historical figure. In a letter to her friend J.A. Cowie, Sutcliff outlines in depth her theories as to a historical Arthur:

> My guess (you understand of course that nobody, not even Geoffrey Ashe *knows*) is that the Arthur stories were probably basically about one man, but that after his death and when he had become a folk hero, all the "Round Table" adventures and so on, got tacked on to him. This man, I am sure was born in Wales. The Tintagel legend actually only says that he was conceived there, and never mentions where he was born, and so everyone assumes it was the same place, but it seems to me most unlikely that Utha would have stayed down there for nine months, or left Igraine there on her own. I believe he was the son of the old Welsh Royal house, founded by Maximus Magnus, who I am sure *did* marry a Welsh princess. Though whether his father was really Utha, as I made him in *Sword at Sunset*, is anyone's guess. Surely he lived all over the place, wherever the Saxon invasion and the campaign took him, but I *think* Winchester was his most likely capital, as it was Alfred's. I don't believe South Cadbury was anything exclusively Arthurian, tho' like enough he used it along with all the other suitable hill forts etc. Whoever he was, he certainly took over the leadership after Ambrosius' retirement or death. His battles probably were genuine – a string of battles resulting from the campaigns, but no one can agree where they were. I'm *sure* Mons Badonicus was Liddington Hill. My guess is that he died somewhere not far from Glastonbury, maybe Athelney or the Monmouth Rebellion country.

Sword at Sunset therefore attempts to blend fiction with historical fact in a way of no interest to White (or, arguably, to Malory). Serving as a direct sequel to her children's book *The Lantern Bearers*, which begins with the withdrawal of Roman troops from Britain, the novel chronicles Artos's struggle to hold back Saxon invaders. With this focus on history, Sutcliff foregrounds one of the key cultural functions of epic narratives: that of providing a record of custom and tradition, whilst glorifying the great heroes believed to be the ancestors of the audience.

Sutcliff does not appear to have ever used the word "epic" to describe her Arthurian stories, or indeed any of her books, and critics generally describe the cycle that includes *The Lantern Bearers* and *Sword at Sunset* as historical novels.[45] But epic and history are closely interwoven: Ezra Pound

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[45]   An exception to this is John Withrington, who in a 1991 interview with Sutcliff, asked whether her intention for her Roman history books was to compose "a magnum opus, an epic from start to finish, in which Arthur appeared in the

defines the entire epic genre simply as "a poem including history" (Merchant 1). Despite the monsters and gods that populate the worlds of epic such as the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf*, the worlds of these poems are explicitly those of the ancient Greeks and Danes, and the heroes that populate them were traditionally treated as the original audience's "predecessors and, as they often believed, their ancestors" (Griffin 13). Sutcliff's attempt to recreate "the solitary figure of one great man" from "fragments of known facts, from likelihoods and deductions and guesswork" (Author's Note vii) therefore speaks to this sense of epic as part historical or even, as in the case of Virgil's *Aeneid*, etiological in that it provides an origin story for a civilisation. Throughout, she uses her story to explain archaeological conundrums as much as to rewrite the myths: a mysterious burial site discovered at Tritonium, for instance, is the basis for the chapter "The People of the Hills", working the Arthurian legend solidly into the physical history of Britain. Her claim that "[a]lmost every part of the story ... has some kind of basis outside the author's imagination" (viii), besides alluding to her characteristically meticulous research, is therefore also a claim for the book as the mixture of history and invention that Griffin describes as characteristic of the epic.

A historical novel, of course, is no more necessarily an epic than is a fantasy, despite both sharing elements with the epic tradition. Sutcliff, however, as well as attempting to reconstruct Arthur from history, is also attempting to reconstruct him from what she sees as an older mythic tradition. Like White, who conceived Arthur's life as the "the Aristotelian and comprehensive tragedy of sin coming home to roost" (323), Sutcliff clearly frames the story in terms of "the pitiless purity of classical tragedy", with Mordred's conception the "Sin that carries with it its own retribution" (vii). The second interwoven part of this tragedy, Sutcliff argues, is "the Brotherhood broken by the love between the leader's woman and his closest friend" (vii). By basing her story around these two interrelated elements, Sutcliff deliberately eschews the romance traditions of the Arthurian story for their earlier historical, but also epic, roots. The idea of Arthur's earlier sin bringing about his undoing belongs, as both White and Sutcliff claim, to classical ideas of tragedy rather than the medieval ideas that characterise Malory's version, in which the inevitability of tragedy does not depend on a sin committed by an otherwise good man but on the blind turn of the wheel of fortune. Malory, as argued earlier, does not stress the relationship between Arthur, Morgause and Mordred, and does not seem to argue Arthur's incest as the direct reason for his doom. While White argues that these ideas are inherent in Malory, Sutcliff does not, but rather argues them as a relic from an older underlying framework. Similarly, though the love between Lancelot and Guenever does feature prominently in Malory, Sutcliff again frames it in terms of an older myth that has generated

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middle" (55). Sutcliff's reply – that the series "did that of its own accord" (55) – seems to accept the description as valid if not intended.

the romance tradition: "between the leader's woman and his closest friend" rather than the King's Queen and his best knight. To these, Sutcliff adds (or, in her words, "keeps") "the theme, which seems to me to be implicit in the story, of the Sacred King, the Leader whose divine right, ultimately, is to die for the life of the people" (vii). To Sutcliff, the concept of Arthur as historical figure seems to posit an original Arthurian Dark Age epic archetype from which the romances have stemmed; it is this epic hero, as much as the historical person, which her book recreates.

Sutcliff's sense of history makes the idea of the relevance of the Arthurian heroic code to contemporary Britain less explicit than White's. Characters act according to codes of conduct accurate to the period, and Artos, though obviously honourable, will condone the torture and violence common to his time without any sense that Sutcliff is advocating it for her own. Nonetheless, in a 1991 interview, Sutcliff insists on the importance of the Arthurian story to the modern world:

> I think it contains an essential truth, and I think that at present we're awfully uncertain of our future. Therefore we feel a kind of kinship for the Dark Ages; and I think for this reason we feel in a way the need for something to back us up, in the same way as Arthur "lights up" the Dark Ages. We have the need for an archetype of some sort to pull us together, to get us through this, to spread light into the darkness until we can get through to a better world. (Withrington "An Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff" 54)

The light and dark imagery picks up on the description of the historical Arthur she gives in her foreword, which becomes the true guiding force behind Sutcliff's imagining of the Arthurian story: "a Roman-British war leader, to whom, when the Barbarian darkness came flooding in, the last guttering lights of civilisation seemed worth fighting for" (vii). She repeats this description in perhaps slightly more optimistic terms in her Author's Note to the collected *King Arthur Trilogy*, in which the historical Arthur is "a Romano-British war leader, who when the dark tide of the barbarians came flooding in, did all that a great leader could do to hold them back and save something of civilisation" (8). Ultimately, it is this ideal of Arthur, and of heroism, that Sutcliff examines throughout her Arthurian writing, and attributes to "the Leader whose divine right, ultimately, is to die for the life of the people" (vii). Tied as this notion is to both the hopeless last stand that exemplifies Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon courage and the *pietas* that characterises Roman virtue, Sutcliff constructs a heroic code that is, in the words of the poem she quotes at the start of *Sword at Sunset*, "the miracle of one unwithering shoot / Which was the spirit of Britain" (Young 28-9).

The changes which Sutcliff makes to the Arthurian story in her Roman Britain books become clearer when seen through the lens of her traditional retellings of the legends. The *King Arthur Trilogy* was written and published between 1979-81, sixteen years after *Sword at Sunset,*[46] and represents Sutcliff's version of a continuous traditional retelling of Arthurian legend. Written after the success of her historical novels, it becomes an interesting means of both interpreting Sutcliff's conception of the legend, and differentiating what she sees as the British historical material from what she saw as the "French medieval romance" ("Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff").

As she does in *Sword at Sunset*, Sutcliff begins the collected edition of the *King Arthur Trilogy* with an Author's Note that lays out her intentions and sources for her book, in much the same way as an editor of an older work might describe the principles of their editorial choices. In this, she once again clearly differentiates the historical figure of King Arthur from the "hero-tale" that grew afterwards, realised "most splendidly of all by Sir Thomas Malory in *Morte d'Arthur*" (8). This time, her focus is on the latter rather than the former, arguing that had "the hero-tale never grown up ... we should have lost something beautiful and mysterious and magical out of our heritage" (8). The sources Sutcliff lists for her stories are, unlike the archaeological sources of *Sword at Sunset*, primarily medieval ballads and romances, as well as Malory, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the *Mabinogion.* If *Sword at Sunset* can be argued to be the Arthurian story distilled into epic, the three books that comprise the *King Arthur Trilogy* – *The Sword in the Circle*, *The Light Beyond the Forest*, and *The Road to Camlann* – represent the left-over elements of chivalric romance.

The boundary between epic and romance is, of course, not clear-cut, and inevitably a number of epic elements are retained in the book from *Sword at Sunset,* as well as from other pre-Christian traditions (some of which she refers to as "Celtic echoes" (9)). The beginning of the trilogy once again posits a historical framework, set in "the dark years after Rome was gone from Britain" (13), and features personages familiar to Sutcliff's Roman Britain books such as Vortigern, Hengest, and Ambrosius. In this case, the history is not realist but the mythologised history of Geoffrey of

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[46] Sutcliff had already written a children's retelling of "the Celtic and Saxon legends on which my mother had brought me up [including] Beowulf, Cuchulain, Geraint and Enid [and] Gawain and the Loathely Lady" at some time in the mid-1940s (*Blue Remembered Hills* 121). This was never published, but the latter two of these stories found their way into the trilogy, possibly unchanged. Sutcliff describes this book as being written "not long after the war" (121), which, although she does not identify it as a response to the war in any way, would have made it an interesting companion to *The Once and Future King* had it survived.

Monmouth, also featuring dragons and druids, but this is not untrue to epic's frequent mythologisation of the past. Most notably, Sutcliff emphasises the role of inexorable fate, a concept more common to Germanic saga than to chivalric romance. Sutcliff's King Arthur is aware that Mordred will be his death, but

> the King had a sense of Fate upon him. He knew deep within himself that the pattern was almost finished; and the doom upon himself and all that he had fought for, which he had unleashed when he fathered Mordred on his own half-sister, was hard upon him; and maybe he would hold out his arms to it rather than seek to fend it off, seeing that there was no escape. No escape from the doom, no escape from the ordained end of the pattern... (594)

This conception of fate is a crucial underpinning to *Sword at Sunset*, but it also features heavily in Sutcliff's retelling of *Beowulf*. There, too, Beowulf knows he cannot fight "Wyrd who weaves the fates of man" (*Beowulf: Dragon Slayer* 77), but only face it bravely, and his willingness to do so is a key element of his heroism.[47] In these moments of the trilogy, Arthur becomes a hero in the epic mould.

Primarily, though, the *King Arthur Trilogy* is the Arthurian story as chivalric romance, and emphasises the elements of Malory identified with the romance tradition rather than those which have been argued as epic. From the start, the reader is clearly in the age of chivalry rather than epic's older heroic age, and the world is described accordingly. Bradbrook points out, as previously quoted, that the romance hero "rides through vast and shadowy landscapes and forests, where only the cities of Caerleon and Carlisle remind the listener that this is England" (74). Sutcliff, too, here stresses the lack of specific place, telling the reader that "some people say the place where Camelot once stood is now the city of Winchester, and some that Cadbury Hill is what remains of it today; but no man knows for sure where the towers of Camelot once rose" (45). In contrast to the geographical specificity of *Sword at Sunset*, the heroes of her *King Arthur Trilogy* move through vague landscapes of "dusk-dark forests beginning to flame with autumn" (592); in the words of the book itself, the characters who are in Camelot "might have been on an enchanted island" (354). Likewise, the action of the *King Arthur Trilogy* lacks the visceral reality of epic battle scenes, conveyed instead in images akin to a pre-Raphaelite painting: Lancelot rescues Guenever from the pyre with "the flash of [his sword] Joyeaux's blade" catching the light while she "hold[s] out her

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[47]   As touched upon in Chapter One, Sutcliff seems to find similarities between Beowulf and her conception of Arthur: both are fair-haired and grey-eyed, both are linked throughout with bears, and both fit the King Sacrifice pattern: She describes Beowulf as "the King; and for him the last resort was the duty and the privilege of dying for the life of his people" (*Beowulf: Dragon Slayer* 78).

white arms to her love" (579). Most strikingly, Sutcliff makes full use of the supernatural elements of the Arthurian legends, not only including such elements from Malory but also drawing from Middle English poems and ballads ("Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and "Sir Gawain and the Loathely Lady") and from Geoffrey of Monmoth's *British History* ("The Coming of Arthur"). Of these, the stories Sutcliff chooses are frequently those which follow traditional motifs of knights, dragons, enchantments and ladies; meanwhile, the most epic and least fantastical of the early Malory stories, Arthur's war with Rome, is omitted. As Bradbrook says of romance, in the world of Sutcliff's trilogy "there is suppression of all the usual laws of cause and effect ... Heads that are cut off may be stuck on again; marvels and wonders are the rule and not the exception" (74). The stories are wide-ranging and only vaguely connected, in contrast to the condensing of adventures into the story of a single hero that takes place with White and with Sutcliff's Roman Britain books.

Though the scope of the book remains sprawling, the main focus is on Arthur, and on the fateful pairing of Lancelot and Guenever, and in this too the characters' roles as chivalric rather than epic heroes are stressed. Lancelot here is not quite the romantic hero with "a merry heart and a capacity for singing tirra-lirra" (334) mocked by White: unsurprisingly, given Sutcliff's professed admiration for the relevance of the relationships in *The Once and Future King*, a number of White's changes and novelistic details are incorporated into her Lancelot's character. Most strikingly, Sutcliff's Lancelot, and later her Bedwyr,[48] are ugly, described as having

> two sides of his face that did not match each other, so that one side of his mouth ran straight and sullen and the other lifted towards joy and laughter, and one of his black brows was level as a falcon's wing and one flew wild and ragged like the jaunty ear of a mongrel that has just came well out of a fight. (115)

This outward deformity, as it does slightly more subtly in White, represents a corresponding inner ugliness; in the case of Sutcliff's Lancelot, he is "almost as odd and ill-matching in his hidden innermost self as he was in his face for all to see ... He had a great and terrible hope in him ... that one day, if he proved himself worthy, God would let him perform a miracle" (117). It is notable, though, that Lancelot's inner conflict in Sutcliff has an explicitly supernatural cause, a result of unremembered years fostered by the Lady of the Lake. It is "because of those strange lost years in

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[48]   Bedwyr's face is in fact described in almost identical terms to Sutcliff's Lancelot: he has a face that "seemed to have been put together somewhat casually from the opposite halves of two completely different faces, so that one side of his mouth was higher than the other, and his dark eyes looked out from under one gravely level brow and one that flared with the reckless jauntiness of a mongrel in flight. It was an ugly-beautiful face and it warmed the heart to look at it" (*Sword at Sunset* 58-9).

his childhood" rather than his own sadistic tendencies that "he never felt he was quite like other boys; quite like other men" (117). Moreover, Lancelot's ugliness is in Sutcliff perversely attractive, "an ugliness such as women love" (359) compared to a falcon's wing and a jaunty mongrel (as opposed to White's Lancelot, who looks like "an African ape" (329)). Rather than disassociating him from the romance tradition, in the *King Arthur Trilogy* Lancelot's imperfections serve as part of his qualifications as a romantic hero, linking him with magic and making him appealing to women.

Likewise, while Vinaver argues that Malory depicts Lancelot as an epic hero by emphasising his "deeds of arms" and resulting "worship and honour" rather than the adventures which "illustrate his characteristic role of Guinevere's lover" (744), the Lancelot of the *King Arthur Trilogy* is kept within the bounds of romance convention. Though, as will be argued later, the friendship between Artos and Bedwyr in *Sword at Sunset* is at least as important as either character's relationship with Guenhumara, the *King Arthur Trilogy* emphasises above all the affair between Lancelot and Guenever. Unlike Malory, Sutcliff depicts the two meeting and falling in love in great detail, as their fingers touch while Guenever fastens his sword-belt and "they both [pale] to curd white and the black pupils of their eyes [grow] enormous" (118). Immediately afterwards, Sutcliff borrows from White the notion that Lancelot's quests are motivated by his initial desire to escape his sinful feelings for Guenever: Sutcliff's explanation that "in truth it was to save his honour or the Queen's that he went [on his quests]" (201) paraphrases White's that Lancelot's quests were to "save his honour, not establish it" (355). Later, Sutcliff even follows White in having Lancelot fall asleep "weary with ... the aching heart he carried within him for Guenver's sake" (121), a cause not mentioned in Malory. Without White's corresponding focus on Lancelot's years of training and self-discipline, this attributes Lancelot's martial prowess to his relationship with Guenever, fulfilling, albeit in somewhat ironic terms, the motif of a knight undergoing quests for the love of a woman.

Not only is this adulterous relationship stressed throughout the book, it is also softened from its presentation in Malory, in keeping with the "idealised version of the life of the knightly class" that characterises romance (Bradbrook 69). At the commencement of the affair, Sutcliff acknowledges the darker side to the romance between Lancelot and Guenever, noting the "doubt and jealousy and regret ... and before long, guilt" that complicate it and the "sorrow and loss and darkness" (219) it is destined to bring. In practice, though, Sutcliff reduces both the harmful jealousy and the destructive potential of the affair. The famous argument between the two of them after Lancelot's return from the Grail Quest, which in Malory causes Lancelot to be absent when Guenever is accused of poisoning Sir Patrice, is shifted to a later story; as a result, it no longer adds to the strife in the court over the accusation against the Queen. Even more noticeably, the pair's sexual encounter in

Malory's "The Knight of the Cart" is entirely omitted, and the combat that takes place between Lancelot and Meliagraunce does so because he has abducted Guenever, not because he has accused Guenever of being the lover of a wounded knight. In Malory, Lancelot's successful defeat of Meliagraunce is uneasy, providing the first hint of corruption in a previously validated system of justice; in Sutcliff, his victory is the last sign of Camelot working as it should, and is immediately glorified by Lancelot's healing of Sir Urry. When Aggravane, Mordred and their fellow knights finally come to accuse them, Lancelot and Guenever are explicitly not engaged in anything compromising, but are "talking quietly, content for a while just to be in each other's company" (569).

This is, of course, partly symptomatic of the fact that the trilogy is intended as a retelling for children, which conventionally requires both sexual elements and immorality in heroes to be minimised. However, such considerations do not stop Sutcliff from depicting – albeit tactfully – the incest between Arthur and Morgawse or Elaine's seduction of Lancelot. In the latter case, she also does not hold back from depicting Lancelot's shame, horror and subsequent insanity at his actions.[49] Instead, she alters Malory so that this insanity occurs after *first* sleeping with Elaine in her tower, omitting the second instance at Camelot. Guenever's jealous reaction is therefore no longer even partially responsible for Lancelot's mental breakdown, and could not be given that at this stage they have yet to consummate their affair. In this version, the darkness that comes to pervade Camelot is attributed as little as possible to the affair in itself, and therefore almost entirely to the revelation of the affair by Mordred.

Accordingly, Mordred's role in the events preceding the fall of the Round Table is expanded from Malory, something, like the alterations made to Lancelot and Guenever, made more noticeable by the faithfulness with which Sutcliff otherwise follows Malory in the final volume of her trilogy. For example, while in Malory the attempted poisoning of Gawain is solely attributed to Sir Pinel, Sutcliff has Mordred urge Sir Pinel to the deed as part of his plans to undermine the kingdom: the tale concludes with Mordred considering "enough harm had been done for that one day" (531). Though Mordred's part in the revelation of the affair is traditional, Sutcliff stresses not only his actions but his malicious intent, frequently depicting him "smil[ing] like one who is well content with the skilled work of his hands" (581). Decisions that in Malory are inevitably brought about by the competing loyalties of the chivalric code – such as Gawain's insistence on avenging Gaheris and

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[49] Sutcliff also depicts complicated adult relationships in her children's book *The Lantern Bearers*, notably Flavia's feelings of belonging toward to her Saxon husband after her abduction and forced marriage, and the uneasy, in some way equally forced, marriage between Aquila and Ness.

Gareth – are usually attributed instead to Mordred "drip[ping] a little more poison" (593) into another's ears. Like White, Sutcliff emphasises the element of classical tragedy she feels pervades Malory's text by shifting the focus from the role of Lancelot and Guenever in Camelot's fall to the role of Arthur's incest. While White overtly vilifies Morgause, Sutcliff is careful to remain objective regarding her Morgawse: though Morgawse knows of the relationship between Arthur and herself, Sutcliff states "there can never be any knowing" what her motives for the seduction were, and proceeds to suggest a number of possibilities, including the possibility that she was lonely and Arthur was simply "young and good to look upon" (50). Instead, Sutcliff shifts the blame from Morgawse to Mordred, the product of the incest, vilifying the act rather than the instigator.

Given this, it is significant that unlike Sutcliff's treatment of the other characters, and unlike in *Sword at Sunset*, there is no attempt to humanise Mordred. Sutcliff's Mordred is very close to White's:

> Pale skin, pale hair, eyes pale and opaque ... so that no man could ever see what went on behind them ... he could set fashions for [the men] to follow; fashions for wearing black garments, for playing with a flower or feather between his fingers; a fashion for thinking and secretly speaking ill of the Queen with a shrug of the shoulders and a little laugh. (515)

Where White's Mordred has been driven mad by his mother, however, Sutcliff's is simply evil, without even the justification of Arthur's attempted murder of him as a baby that could be found in Malory. Guenever, looking at him, notes that "he breathes a higher and colder air than other men" (603) and lacks all humanity, and his grievances against the king are never developed even in his own mind. Instead, Mordred with his Iago-like malignity is only a living symbol of the deed that has doomed Arthur, and an instrument of the fate Arthur has innocently brought upon himself. As a result, he is able to absorb the blame that in Malory stems from the complications of the chivalric code and the characters' failure to live up to its ideals. This is particularly significant given that Mordred's description marks him as the antithesis of this very code. With his "pallor of something reared in a dark cellar" in explicit contrast to Arthur's brown skin and hair "like a hayfield at harvest time" (515), Mordred represents a threat to the pastoral world associated with Camelot and Old England. Similarly, his fashions, aside from the dangerous modernity they represent, threaten traditional notions of masculinity and thus the "brotherhood" of the Round Table: it is telling that while "no man" can read Mordred's eyes, Guenever is later able to look at them and realise he is lying. The chivalric code, in Sutcliff's trilogy, is attacked by a villain rather than undermined by its greatest heroes, and its romantic values are able to be exemplified and upheld even as they are

destroyed.

Despite its epic elements, then, the heroic code of the *King Arthur Trilogy* remains that of medieval romance. Sutcliff eschews a number of the elements that complicate Malory, including his use of epic motifs and his criticisms of Arthur's court, and as the heroes and villains become, respectively, better and more evil, they do so according to the notions of chivalry rather than through an attempt to create an epic relevant to the modern world. If Lancelot is made into an exemplary hero, he for the most part is made so according to Malory's notions of heroism: his eulogy, given by Ector, provides a summary of the perfect heroic life, and is a direct translation of *Le Morte Darthur*. It is interesting, however, that Sutcliff, in her Author's Note, chooses to draw attention to the fact that the end of *The Sword in the Circle* is her own invention, arguing, "and why not, when the story of "Beaumains, the Kitchen Knight" seems to have come entirely out of Malory's own head?" (9). This ending sees Percival make a conscious choice to end the feud between himself and the Orkney brothers, perhaps an obvious example of heroism given the role of such feuds in the fall of Camelot. It also features a conversation between Arthur and Lancelot that goes to the heart of Sutcliff's idea of the Arthurian myth. It is this conversation, remembered, that finally becomes the last word of the trilogy. To Malory's ending quoted directly, Sutcliff adds:

> And save for a valiant glimmer here and there, the darkness flooded in over Britain. But Sir Lancelot had once said to the King his friend, while they walked at sunset in the narrow orchard below the walls of Camelot, "We shall have made such a blaze that men will remember us on the other side of the dark."

> And indeed he had spoken truth, for the stories of Arthur and his knights are told and retold even to this day. (652)

The references to glimmering and blazing pick up, perhaps unconsciously, on the image of the candle White's Arthur uses as a metaphor for his idea of the Round Table. As Arthur trusts the young Malory with this figurative candle, which he has "carried ... for many years with a hand to shield it from the wind" (674), White suggests that Malory's book, and by extension his own, has become the light that will educate the world until Arthur is ready to return. Sutcliff, even more explicitly, argues that the trilogy itself – the fact that "stories of Arthur and his knights are told and retold even to this day" – is evidence of Arthur's continued imaginative presence, and thus the power of the "blaze" that survives the dark ages. As the existence of *The Once and Future King* becomes the antidote to war that White's Arthur seeks, the existence of the *King Arthur Trilogy*

becomes Sutcliff's Arthur's victory. This idea, only glimpsed here, touches powerfully on epic's emphasis on bards and glory gained through deeds told in story, and in the more epic setting of her historical books becomes the focus for Sutcliff's conception of heroism.

Holding Back the Dark: *The Lantern Bearers* and *Sword at Sunset*

In strong contrast to her later trilogy, Sutcliff's two Arthurian stories[50] set in Roman Britain are a clear attempt to place Arthur and his followers in a world that can be classified as epic. *The Lantern Bearers*, published in 1959, is a children's book which forms a part of Sutcliff's loosely connected Roman Britain cycle, and takes place during and after the withdrawal of Roman troops from Britain. *Sword at Sunset* (1963) follows immediately after, and with many of the same characters; however, the focus shifts from the soldier Aquila to Artos himself, and it is officially considered an adult novel. Although Sutcliff is arguably not seeking to create an epic with either book, she is certainly seeking to create "a heroic age of tribal wars" rather than a chivalric world, and one that blends the historical clash between Roman and Saxon cultures with the archetypes of classical epic, Celtic lays and Icelandic heroic saga. In the process, Sutcliff rewrites the Arthurian story as an origin story for Britain, and, in her attempt to "recreate … the kind of man this war-leader [Artos] may have been" (vii), creates a heroic code for him rooted in Britain's heritage.

If the *King Arthur Trilogy* takes place in a chivalric age, *The Lantern Bearers* takes place in what can be regarded as a heroic age. Its heroes are warriors rather than knights, abiding by a comparatively primitive code of "honour" (303) rather than chivalry, and the setting is the relentlessly historical world of battle, sea-raids and conquest with only hints of "the fantastic, magical, and wishful elements" (Bradbrook 69) that characterise romance. While without the elevated tone of epic, the book is told with none of the characteristic narrative features of children's writing, and certainly cannot be accused of a lack of epic high seriousness, being almost relentlessly dark and dealing with death, revenge, rape, slavery and the ownership of Britain. The book's treatment of these intertwined issues shares with Northern epic and heroic lays such as the *Volsunga Saga* a concern with the conflicting bonds of marriage, blood, and allegiance: both major female characters, Flavia and Ness, are torn between loyalty to their families and to the men to whom they unwillingly "belong" (109), while Aquila – initially obsessed with the idea of revenge for his father's death – must decide whether to treat Flavia's son by her Saxon abductor as an enemy or his

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[50]   It could actually be argued that three of Sutcliff's historical books are Arthurian: *The Shining Company* is based on the *Gododdin* (composed c. 600 AD), which although not strictly Arthurian is notable in that it provides the earliest mention of Arthur's name. The characters of *The Shining Company* refer frequently to Artos and the events of *Sword at Sunset*, which provide a model for their own heroic sacrifice.

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Foreshadowing the climax of *Sword at Sunset*, emphasis is also placed on the heroic value of the desperate last stand, not only in terms of the wider battle for Britain but in more personal battles. When Aquila chooses to stay behind in Britain after the Roman troops have withdrawn, he and his family wait with drawn swords in their home to be killed by Saxon raiders. In what seem to be their last moments, Aquila notes that "despite the wind, despite the shouting and lowing outside and the red glare that was beginning to beat up from below the terrace" there is a "sense of quietness" that comes partially from "the knowing without any doubt that one was going to die" (34). Perhaps because of its children's book status, neither of the book's adolescent characters – Aquila and his sister Flavia – are in fact killed in this raid alongside their father and tutor, and the final battle of the book ends with a victory over the barbarian invaders. Nonetheless, this victory is clearly only temporary, and that the Saxons can only be held off "for a long while … not for ever" (304). Tolkien's epic ideal of "absolute resistance, perfect because without hope" (Ker, cited in "The Monsters and the Critics" 21) finds its most vivid expression in Aquila's lighting of the torches at Rutupiae on the night the Romans sail from Britain, which he sees as a mingled "farewell" and "defiance against the dark" (26). This action resonates throughout the book as what the characters themselves identify as a "symbol" (304) that paradoxically allows the possibility of ultimate hope beyond inevitable defeat. In an eerie echo of *The Candle in the Wind*, published the same year, Eugenius muses:

> I sometimes think we stand at sunset ... It may be that the night will close over us in the end, but I believe that morning will come again ... We are the Lantern Bearers, my friend; for us to keep something burning, to carry what light we can forward into the darkness and the wind. (305)

Ker claims of epic that "no kind of adventure is so common or better told in the early heroic manner than the defence of a narrow place against odds" (5); on a grander scale, this is exactly the adventure of both *The Lantern Bearers* and *Sword at Sunset*, as its heroes fight to defend Britain in the knowledge of their own inevitable failure.

The extent to which *The Lantern Bearers* itself could be argued as an epic is questionable: despite the backdrop of historical events, it is very much the story of Aquila's personal journey, and this journey is not toward kingship (reserved for Ambrosius, and by implication the young Artos) but rather towards a private peace. Nevertheless, this story does make explicit use throughout of one of

the most famous epic works, Homer's *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey*, which is not only referenced but quoted extensively throughout, is first introduced by Aquila himself, in relation to the dolphin tattoo that later becomes central to his identity (he is named for it by his Saxon slave-masters):

> It might come in very useful. If I were away from home for a long, long time, and when I came back nobody knew me again, like Odysseus, I could take you [Flavia] quietly aside and say, "Look, I've got a dolphin tattooed on my shoulder. I'm your long-lost brother." And then you'd know me again, like the old slave when she found the scar of the boar's tusk on Odysseus's thigh. (5)

For the knowing reader, this immediately establishes a parallel to be fulfilled, which is only reinforced when Aquila later listens to Demetrius reading from the *Odyssey* shortly before the Saxon attack. It is telling, though, that the passage Demetrius reads – and which Aquila later reads to his Saxon captors – is not from Odysseus's homecoming, but from a failed homecoming, where Odysseus "all but came unscathed to [his] homeland, only for the swell and the sea currents and a north wind which united against [him] ... and drove [him] wide to Cythera" (30). When Aquila does return to Britain and encounters Flavia, he remembers the old joke, but the changes that render each almost unrecognisable to the other seem too great to be overcome: Flavia has become the wife of her abductor, and has borne his child, while Aquila has been enslaved and embittered by the Saxons. Like that of Odysseus, Aquila's home has become overrun with usurpers, but unlike Odysseus he has no hope of defeating them. Instead, Aquila's true homecoming – which takes place after "twenty years of commanding men" (289) in what seems a direct reference to Odysseus's twenty years of wandering – comes when he rescues Flavia's half-Saxon son, and is ambiguously able to come to a form of acceptance about his past. It is at this point that he is able to complete the parallel, telling Flavia's son Mull:

> Ask [Flavia] if she remembers the terrace steps under the damson tree at home. Ask her if she remembers the talk that we had there once, about Odysseus coming home. Say to her – as though it were I who spoke through you, "Look. I've a dolphin on my shoulder. I'm your long-lost brother." (292)

Aquila's return, then, is one to an identity he believed lost rather than a place, and this is given the epic weight of a classical hero's journey. Though the *Odyssey* is not directly mentioned again, it is fitting that the book ends with a nautical metaphor of homecoming as Aquila, having finally "in some way ... found Flavia again" (306), stands outside with "a feeling of quietness in him, a feeling

of coming into harbour" (305).

Given this, it is interesting that these references to the *Odyssey* consistently appear in the context of a common bond between the competing cultures of Britain. Aquila first listens to the epic being read to his father by the Greek stoic Demetrius, whom Aquila immediately remembers "had been a slave until their father had bought him to be their tutor, and given him his freedom ... He had stayed on to be Flavian's steward and his eyes" (31). Later, Aquila reads to his Saxon captors from the ninth book of the *Odyssey*, translating a Latin (rather than Greek) edition into their language, and the words trigger a strong response in his listeners. Since the passage quoted clearly speaks to Aquila's own feelings for his home, it is interesting that Bruni immediately applies it to himself, saying:

> Aye, aye, we have all known the homing hunger, just as we have all known the other hunger that comes when the birch-buds thicken and the seaways call again ... Speak me more words of this seafarer who felt even as I have felt when I was young and followed the whale's road. (52)

Though Bruni does not mean to include Aquila in the "we", his statement nonetheless links the two cultures (as well as the mythic Odysseus) in an acknowledgement of the universal love of homeland, and that "in every man's sight there is nothing better than his native land" (51). Despite Aquila's continued hostility, the epic continues to form a shared understanding between himself and Bruni: on his deathbed, Bruni is still calling for Aquila to "read to him of the wanderings of Odysseus, that by now he knew almost by heart" (71).[51] From this point, the Saxons become intertwined with Aquila's experience of – or as – Odysseus. When Aquila finds Flavia and remembers their teasing plans for a potential homecoming, she has become the wife of one of the Saxon band who destroyed their home; when Aquila finally asks her to remember "the talk we had once, about Odysseus coming home" (292) and says the long-awaited line, it is through her son, whom Aquila has saved from the battlefield due to their bonds of kinship. This potential for epic to serve as a common story behind the differing cultures that encompass Roman Britain – moving from Greek, to Roman, to Saxon, to Roman British – is one that becomes deeply significant as the story resumes with *Sword at Sunset*.

Sword at Sunset takes up the narrative only three days after the close of *The Lantern Bearers*, and

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[51]   *The Wanderings of Odysseus* later became the title of Sutcliff's retelling of the *Odyssey*, though since the book was published posthumously it is uncertain whether this title was of her own choosing.

features many of the same characters including Aquila, Minnow, Ambrosius, and Artos. Though as with the succeeding volumes of *The Once and Future King* there is a shift from the form of children's book to that of adult book (at least according to Sutcliff's publishers), this shift is not immediately apparent as it is with White. As *The Lantern Bearers* lacks any of the features that mark an address to children, Sutcliff's often lyrical prose remains unaltered in the transition to adult narration, and it would be hard to deal with darker subject matter than that of Aquila's life. Instead, there is a shift in perspective, as the narrative moves from third person narration largely focalised on Aquila to first person focused on Artos himself.[52] Artos appears first as a child in *The Lantern Bearers*, following White's depiction of a young Arthur, and hints are seeded as to his identity as he grows and proves himself over the course of the book. In *Sword at Sunset*, he becomes the main protagonist as well as one of the heroes, and the story begins to be that of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* in earnest. While epic is rarely told solely in first-person – though heroes themselves often recount their own adventures at length, most notably in the *Odyssey* – the deliberate shift in focus to the life of a single hero, and a hero who will indeed become a king, instantly signals a move to more traditionally epic subject matter. As with particularly Homeric epic, it is a retelling of a known story, set against a backdrop that blends real and invented history, and takes place in the heroic world of swords and brotherhood established by *The Lantern Bearers*. However, while the *Odyssey* is one of the few (arguably the only) epic that presents a happy ending for its hero, making it ultimately appropriate for Aquila's story, *Sword at Sunset'*s opening paragraphs remind readers that it will inevitably end in the hero's death, as does not only Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* but also the *Iliad* and *Beowulf*. It is arguably this, as well as the more explicit sexual content, that begins to move *Sword at Sunset* further into both an adult and an epic world.

The lineage of Sutcliff's Artos is a realist version of Malory's account, picking up on the undertones of rape and illegitimacy that haunt the original: Utha, Ambrosius's brother, fathered him "under a hawthorn bush, in sheer lightness of heart after a good day's hunting" (15) to a British woman who died giving birth to him. Though Artos remains a hero of royal lineage, as is appropriate for an epic hero, the casual nature of his conception seems at first to be at odds with the strange or divine

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[52] This was Sutcliff's first attempt at first person narration, and her account of the experience intriguingly mirrors the epic idea of a bard as a vessel for a story gifted to him by the Muses: "It was very strange because I have never written a book which was so possessive. It was extraordinary – almost frightening. ... It was almost like having the story fed through to me, at times. I do my writing usually in three drafts, and I would go from the first to the second draft, from the second to the third, and find bits of the book that I had no recollection of having written at all. It was interesting, almost scary, but much of the material had this effect of being almost fed through to me, rather than being the result of my own research" ("Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff"). While Sutcliff is not actually claiming divine possession, as an account of how the book came about it strengthens the idea of her role as the medium through which an original Dark Age epic and hero is being recreated, rather than an author whose work is entirely her own creation.

origins typical of other heroes of myth (including the traditional Arthur). The function of this is to give Artos a sense of belonging both to Roman Britain, his "right-hand people" who "deal in law and order and can argue a question in cold blood" and to the "left-hand" Celtic people, "the dark side, the women's side, the side closest to [his] heart" (28). Patricia Kennon in her essay on Sutcliff's young adult Roman Britain novels notes that the paradigm of heroic male behaviour at work in the novels is

> predicated upon a binary system of self and other, civilization and wilderness, colonizer and native, masculine and feminine, order and chaos, master and slave. The task of maintaining a secure and confident personal masculine identity is invested with especial resonance during the inevitable decline of the larger framework of the patriarchal, imperial and military Roman world. (78)

Artos's mixed ancestry allows him to break free of the majority of these paradigms, and to negotiate both halves of Britain without ties to any particular people or religion over another. Where it is important that Malory's Arthur is a Christian king, Artos is "a follower of Christos... But I have prayed to too many different gods in my time, to set any very great store by the names that men cry out to in aid, or the form of prayers they use" (105). He serves Rome, yet befriends the Little Dark People and looks upon their rites, such as eating the hearts of their loved ones after death, with equanimity, reasoning that their ally "had only done what the custom of his people demanded, and the act had been in love" (134). There is a danger that this philosophical outlook could set Artos apart from both cultures in a way that makes his status as a national hero problematic, and indeed he is "always … a little in exile" (28). At the same time as she stresses Artos's independence of any particular clan or people, though, Sutcliff stresses Artos's links to his own war-band and those he adopts as part of the "Brotherhood", as she does with heroes such as Beowulf and Odysseus in her retellings for children. This is exemplified in his relationship with Bedwyr, the Lancelot figure, who is not only Artos's closest friend but himself a blend of both warrior and singer, and Roman and Celtic. Much like Sutcliff's Beowulf and Odysseus, Artos is characterised at once by his superiority to either of Britain's two major cultures, and by his sense of duty and brotherhood to both.

The challenge of characterising Arthur as an ideal hero (rather than a flawed hero such as Lancelot) is one of the most interesting that confronts writers seeking to adapt *Le Morte Darthur*, requiring them to identify what exactly constitutes ideal heroism. To Sutcliff, it is this ability to belong to both worlds and thus unite the people of the country that is central; characteristically, given the frequent concern with what Thompson calls "bridging the gap between two communities"

("Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff") that characterises many of her novels including *The Lantern Bearers*. Bedwyr argues for Artos's rights to be king on these very grounds, saying:

> You speak of Britain as though it were one, my Lord Dubricus; but we are from many tribes and many peoples ... We have only one thing to bind us together, we are the Bear's [Artos's] Companions, and our swords belong first to the Bear and then to Britain. (374-5)

Artos's coronation similarly reflects this, as he is "made Emperor … with something of the rites of every Faith that could still claim a follower among the war-host", by a crowd encompassing not only his own troops but "men from the villages … [and] little dark men in skins on the edge of the torchlight" (390). The famous image of the sword in the stone here becomes a bridge between pagan and Roman Britain, as Artos, brandishing the sword set with the symbol of the Royal Line, leaps upon the stone that he suddenly knows is "not a throne but a coronation stone like the Lia Fail of the High Kings of Erin, a stone for the King to stand on at his king-making" (391). His speech upon being throned consciously speaks to both the Roman world and his "mother's world", creating an ethos that fuses a classical emphasis on deeds glorified after death with a Northern emphasis on fealty to and from lords:

> Ye have called me by the name of Caesar … So be it then, my brothers in arms. ... We have fought today such a battle that the harpers shall sing of for a thousand years! ... But because I am not Emperor alone, but Prince of Arfon and a lord in Britain, because I am native-born and native-bred, and learned my first words in my mother's tongue, I can claim to be yours as no other Emperor has ever been, and therefore I swear my faith to you now, by the oath that we of the Tribes have counted the most sacred since first we came out of the West. And after, you shall swear your faiths to me. (391-2)

Artos is consistently able to see and appreciate the humanity not only in his allies but his enemies, as it takes actual family connection for Aquila to be able to do, and it is unsurprising that his ultimate act as king is not to defeat the invaders but to come to terms of peace with them.

The image of Artos as a strong, living hero, however, is haunted throughout the book by the contrasting, or perhaps complementary, vision of what Sutcliff calls the "Sacred King, the Leader whose divine right, ultimately, is to die for the life of the people" (vii). The book is framed as Artos's memories as he lies dying, and occasional interjections from his narrative voice remind readers familiar with how the traditional story ends that everything built throughout the book is

doomed to fall again. This image of the hero as sacrificial victim is foreshadowed and embodied in the figure of Ambrosius. As Artos's commander and mentor, as well as Aquila's, Ambrosius is the ideal of a king throughout both *The Lantern Bearers* and *Sword at Sunset*, yet readers know from the beginning that it is necessary for him to die in order for Artos to fulfil his destiny. Sutcliff dramatises this plot necessity powerfully, as the dying Ambrosius deliberately allows himself to be killed in a hunt before naming an heir, in order for Artos to be able to potentially claim the kingship despite his illegitimacy. Looking at his body, Artos identifies him, and the ultimate form of heroism, as "the King Sacrifice; older than either Christos or Mithras, reaching back and forward into all time until the two met and the circle was complete. Always the god, the king, the hero, who must die for the people when the call comes" (357).[53]

As such, while both *The Lantern Bearers* and *Sword at Sunset* deal with dark and potentially adult subject matter, the focus of *Sword at Sunset* remains inevitably on the fall rather than the redemption of its central hero, and the subsequent dissolution of his kingdom. In strong contrast to the romantic *King Arthur Trilogy*, the source of this fall comes firmly from within. Sutcliff names the two key ingredients of the death of Arthur, interestingly, as the two key ingredients of the Arthurian story itself: "sin that carries with it its own retribution; [and] the Brotherhood broken by the love between the leader's woman and his closest friend" (vii). It would be more accurate in Sutcliff's version to describe the Brotherhood as broken by love between any man and woman, as relations across the gender divide prove without exception poisonous to the male friendships that hold the heroic world together. Artos himself states flatly that bonds forged with women are destructive to a camp, interestingly preferring his men to indulge in casual sex (114) and same-sex relationships (85), and his friendship with Bedwyr is by far the strongest relationship of the book. Male friendships between cultures feature frequently in Sutcliff's books, such as the friendship between the Roman Marcus and his freed British slave Esca in *The Eagle of the Ninth*, and Bedwyr and Artos are, in Artos's words, "in some ways nearer to each other than Guenhumara and I had ever been" (431). From the first, Artos is drawn to Bedwyr's "ugly-beautiful face" (59), and barring their brief conflict over Guenhumara the two are virtually inseparable until Artos ends the book with Bedwyr's "sound arm under my head, a better pillow than a saddle – as good as a hound's flank when you sleep beside the watch fire with the apple tree branches overhead" (480).

By contrast, unlike in the *King Arthur Trilogy* which focuses largely on Lancelot and Guenuever, Sutcliff barely describes the relationship between Bedwyr and Guenhumara; there is, in fact, no

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[53]   Again, this figure is very common in Sutcliff, as discussed in Barbara L. Talcroft's book, *Death of the Corn King: kings and goddesses in Rosemary Sutcliff's historical fiction for young adults*.

physical relationship until the very night Artos catches them together. Likewise, while Arthur in the *King Arthur Trilogy* falls in love with Guenever, Artos marries her against his will (though comes to love her), and the marriage is troubled from the first. Sutcliff's portrayal of Guenhumara is far from misogynistic, and the reasons for her failed relationship with Artos are various and sympathetic: they are married for the sake of political alliance, Artos is only once able to consummate the relationship, and the death of their young daughter (an invention of Sutcliff's) further estranges them from each other as Guenhumara blames Artos's trust in the Dark People for the child's illness. Tellingly, though, Guenhumara's insistence on attributing their daughter's death to a spell of the Dark People is directly contrary to the unification of the British peoples that Artos embodies, and their inability to "cross each other's thresholds" (430) is one of Artos's few failed attempts to forge understandings with others in the book, the other being with the Mordred figure, Medraut. At the end of the book, Bedwyr returns to Artos in time for the final battle as Lancelot does not in Malory, and their bond is renewed; Artos, notably, feels he "could have cried out to him … by the forbidden love names that are not used between men" (462). Guenhumara is estranged from them both, having been unable to find happiness with Bedwyr with Artos "always between [them]" (464), and her only mention in Artos's final thoughts continues to stress his relationship with Bedwyr over that with her: Bedwyr's face is "wet with tears like a woman's – but I do not think I ever knew Guenhumara weep" (480).[54]

Given this, it is not surprising that Sutcliff, like White, chooses to make the Morgause figure (here, interestingly, called Ygerna) far more central to the story than she is in Malory. While Morgawse in the *King Arthur Trilogy* is deliberately devoid of motive or personality, as is fitting for a romance where villains are not required to be anything but villainous, Ygerna fits the model of an epic enchantress: "fascinating, but inscrutable and dangerous" (Griffin 19). Though for the most part the world of both *The Lantern Bearers* and *Sword at Sunset* is historical, both books allow for the possibility of magic wrought by women. In *The Lantern Bearers*, Vortigern is enchanted by the "singing magic" of Rowena (whose body is discovered with her son by Artos in *Sword at Sunset*), while Flavia deliberately refrains from "ma[king] a singing magic" (31) to bring Aquila home as she "couldn't bear that [he] should not feel the same about [her]" as he had previously (32). Similarly, Ygerna is strongly implied to possess magical powers. Artos's approach to her house is necessitated by the onset of what he jokingly calls "magic mist" (32), and her position alone

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[54]   Sutcliff's intense focus on male homosocial bonds and the conscious exclusion of female characters from such bonds had been discussed frequently by critics, with Neil Philip going so far as to criticise Sutcliff's female characters as "fiery … [but] little more than ciphers" while praising her for "in her treament of male comradeship provid[ing] the most sensitive and sustained representation of male homosexual feeling in children's literature" (cited Kennon 84).

surrounded only by her servants (while Morgause is married) echoes that of Circe in particular. As Circe does to Odysseus, Ygerna gives Artos food and drink that is "drugged [or] enchanted" (38), and attempts to lure him to her bed. While Odysseus has been warned both against the drugged food and the potential that Circe will "when she has you stripped … rob you of your manhood" (163), Artos is helpless against Ygerna, and is indeed "robbed ... of the spearpoint of [his] manhood" (235). Later, Artos's inability to have satisfactory sexual relations with Guenhumara is a direct result of his "mating with a wild cat" (234).

If Ygerna's outward depiction owes something to classical epic, her characterisation owes more to Norse family sagas. In the *Saga of the Volsungs*, Signy – married to the man who slaughtered her family – attempts to raise a son strong enough to take revenge, killing each child when they prove too weak in her eyes. She finally succeeds by committing incest with her unknowing brother, giving birth to Sjinfotli; for Ygerna, of course, the family she wishes to commit revenge against is her own.[55] When Medraut finally comes to Artos, he has, like Sinfjotli, been explicitly bred and raised as an instrument of vengeance: he tells Artos, "I am your guilt made flesh" (405). In many ways, this follows White's treatment of Morgause as monstrous, particularly in the association with cats: where Morgause is introduced murdering a cat with whom she shares black hair and blue eyes, Ygerna is "silken-footed as a mountain cat" (36) and moves with the "speed and liquid grace of a cat" (37). Ygerna, though, is treated with less judgement and more sympathy, as a victim of Utha's abandonment and a mother who has taught her the "corroding, soul-destroying lesson of hate" (40) that she, Miss Havisham-like, will in turn teach Medraut. When Artos threatens to kill her, she urges him to do so, telling him, "it might be the best way for both of us" (41).

This measured sympathy is extended to the adult Medraut. Sutcliff's image of Mordred as essentially a product of Ygerna, and of Artos's incestuous union with Ygerna, again follows White but delves even deeper into the Freudian implications. While Mordred in the *King Arthur Trilogy* acts according to his own Machiavellian schemes, like Morgawse without real motive, Medraut follows White's model of a Mordred utterly consumed by his mother. Given Ygerna's repeated comparisons to a cat, it is telling that she names Medraut after a rat she owned as a child, already implying an intent to "devour him as a wildcat in captivity will devour her young" (326). Artos explains to Bedwyr that Medraut

  was begotten in hate ... and in hate he was bred by his mother, and held by her all these

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[55] The name Ygerna – usually Arthur's mother – intensifies the incestuous nature of the legend: Malory's Morgause, already Arthur's half-sister, would technically be old enough to be his mother.

years. It is the only thing he truly understands; he is a stranger in the world, and at odds with it, because his mother never truly gave him birth until her own death tore him from her ... He wants to get back to the warm darkness of his mother's womb; and failing to escape from it, he will be revenged on the world if he can. (334 – 335)

Artos not only understands Medraut's "destruction", but feels pity and guilt over it. Unlike White, Sutcliff omits Malory's depiction of Arthur ordering all babies born at a certain time destroyed in order to prevent his own fate; Artos, rather, refuses to have Medraut killed out of the awareness of his own fate that characterises heroes of Norse sagas. He does, however, willingly take blame for "the wrongs that had been done to him [Medraut]", both as a child of Utha, and more interestingly for "g[iving] him to [Ygerna's] destroying love" in the first place (405). (Whether Artos blames himself for conceiving or abandoning Medraut is unclear.) Despite his repellent descriptions, Medraut's portrayal is that of a victim rather than the villain he is in Sutcliff's later trilogy, who craves Artos's love and finds it "lonely to have never been loved, only devoured" (405). This psychologically complex depiction of Medraut can partly be attributed to the requirements of a modern novel, and particularly the model set up by White. It is also, though, in keeping with classical epic tradition, which frequently depicts opposing heroes as characters with their own set of motivations rather than as manifestations of pure evil.[56]

Medraut's relatively sympathetic character does not prevent him from being ultimately at once a potent symbol of Artos's guilt, an antithesis to all his Brotherhood stands for, and the direct instrument of his downfall. Although Medraut is athletic and attractive, in contrast to the pale, bookish Mordred of both White and the *King Arthur Trilogy*, he is nonetheless a feminine threat to the Brotherhood, laying his head on Artos's knee with a "horrible womanish gesture" (405), wearing brooches given to him by his older female lovers, and with eyes that seem "painted like a woman's" (443). He exhibits the "cool assurance" and cynicism that, as in White, is the antithesis of the sincerity required of epic, as well as the untrustworthy ability to "blend into the surroundings of his life … [and] take on the colour of one's own thoughts" that could only belong to a trickster hero (441).[57] Despite his ability in war and psychological complexity, there is no sense that Medraut can be redeemed or changed: there is "something, somewhere … horribly amiss with him" (327) that

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[56]   Achilles and Hector, for example, fight on opposite sides in the *Iliad* without either being vilified, while Turnus is rendered admirable despite his furious opposition to Aeneas and therefore the future of Rome in the *Aeneid*.

[57]   It should be noted that trickster heroism is simply not valid in *Sword at Sunset*, and any hint of concealment or deception is kept as far as possible from the three protagonists. Even Bedwyr and Guenhumara here do not have an affair, but only love each other and attempt to keep apart, and Artos discovers them on the first occasion they fail to do so. Artos, too, is entirely oblivious to the attraction developing, while in Malory it is strongly implied that he knows about the affair but will say nothing for fear of the end of the Round Table.

makes him inhuman. Fittingly, Medraut's arrival comes immediately after the death of Artos's daughter, replacing his hope for the future with the doom from his past. Even more interestingly, Medraut's arrival immediately precedes the revelation that Ambrosius is dying from a disease that "devours the body" (337), which heralds Artos's impending kingship but does so with image of it already rotting from the inside. This motif of both sickness and betrayal from within is carried through to the final demise of Artos's kingship. While in Malory, Arthur is drawn away from Camelot besieging Lancelot when Mordred openly seizes power, Artos is ill with a fever (perhaps not coincidentally called "the Yellow Hag") while Medraut secretly conspires with the Saxon invaders.

In stark contrast to the romantic images of battle in the *King Arthur Trilogy*, the final conflict between Artos's men and the Saxon invaders aided by Medraut retains both the scale and the bloodshed of those in Malory or indeed in Homer or Virgil. In a 1960 letter to Barbara Leonie Picard, Sutcliff seems to shy away from the overtly epic, saying of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, "I suppose they *are* much greater books [than White's], but so thunderous and almost overwhelming, and I don't think I shall want to read them over and over again, as I do *The Sword in the Stone*." Despite this, the battle scenes of *Sword at Sunset* are far closer to those in Tolkien than to anything in White, and share with *The Lord of the Rings* imagery from Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Though dealt with as individuals at other times, the enemy in battle becomes an impersonal "solid mass of Saxons" that "burst upon us like the roar of a charging sea when a sand bar goes" (380).[58] Without necessarily intending a direct reference to any particular epic, the style is often undeniably that of epic simile: when Artos asks how narrow his final victory has been, he is told, "As when two hounds fight until their flanks are laid open and their throats in ribbons, and one breaks off and runs howling; and yet for both hounds alike, there is no more that they can do for a while and a while save crawl into a dark place and lick their wounds" (477). At the same time, the detail is graphic and anatomical in true Homeric fashion, as when Medraut finally deals Artos a (possibly symbolic) spear-thrust "under the skirts of my war-shirt and entered at the groin" (475) and Artos reciprocates with a stab through the throat that causes blood to "spurt in little bright jets through his fingers … [Medraut] opened his mouth gasping for air and blood came out of that too, and with it his last breath in a kind of thin bubbling retch" (476).

This mutual destruction of kin, taken from Malory, also hearkens back to Norse sagas, in which it is

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[58] Compare with the *Iliad*'s comparison of an advancing army with "the great rollers of the Icarian Sea when they are swollen by a south-easter rushing down from Father Zeus' clouds" (2.144-5) and the *Aeneid*'s with "a wave [that], beneath the wind's first breath, / begins to whiten; slow by slow, the sea / will lift its combers higher until, at last, / it climbs to heaven from its lowest depths" (7.695-8).

common for enemies, especially related enemies, to be "each … the death of the other" (476). Perhaps more importantly, the death of Artos enables him to grow to true heroic status according to the terms of the book, which has foreshadowed his role throughout as that of the sacrificial "Corn King, who helps the crops to grow" (467). Artos's heroism is rooted in the Northern conception of fate, which heroes refuse to avoid and meet unflinchingly in order to prove themselves superior to destiny. Artos similarly knows from the start that Medraut is his "fate – my doom, if you like", but refuses both Guenhumara's warning and Bedwyr's offer to kill him, telling Guenhumara, "No man can escape his doom; better to face it than be taken between the shoulders as one tries to run" (331). Like the young Aquila in *The Lantern Bearers*, who stands with his family to defend his home expecting his own death, Artos and his men face the Saxons in the archetypal desperate "last stand" (474), feeling the comfort that comes with choosing the place and company in which one dies (473). Unlike Aquila's, Artos's stand truly is his last, and the book ends with him fatally wounded awaiting death and with Constantine prepared to carry on what he can of his legacy before the Saxons inevitably triumph.[59]

Interestingly, while Artos's behaviour as war leader is almost entirely instinctive, with only the occasional thought given as to how to inspire his men, the idea of the Sacred King seems bound in intentional, or at least knowing, construction of mythology. Ambrosius muses as the three men watch the Northern Lights that "later, men will tell each other that there were strange lights in the sky on the night before Ambrosius Aurelanius died; and later still, it will become Aquila's dragon, or a sword of light with the seven stars of Orion set as jewels in the hilt" (349). When Artos is about to become king, Bedwyr unconsciously echoes the image as advice, telling him to "always speak to your war host before battle, at sunset with the fire behind you ... It will make even a small man look like a tall one, and a man of your height becomes a hero-giant out of our oldest songs; a fit rider, half a hillside high, for the Sun of the White Horse Vale, with the seven stars of Orion for the jewels in his sword hilt" (374). Finally, Artos himself consciously constructs his own mythology on his death-bed, instructing that "nobody save [Bedwyr] and the brown Brothers here must see my body once the breath is out of it, and no one must know the place of my grave. So they will maybe fight on with a better heart" (478). The passing of the epic hero into memory and story – the "hero-tale" that Sutcliff represents in the *King Arthur Trilogy* – is a crucial part of the epic tradition, and one that is treated with bittersweet realism by Sutcliff. Though the story presents a heroic code to live

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[59] It is interesting that neither *The Once and Future King* or *Sword at Sunset* actually end with Arthur's death, but rather Arthur at peace with and awaiting his death. While this does allow for an element of hope, it is perhaps functional rather than symbolic: White intended *The Book of Merlyn*, which does feature Arthur's death, to complete the book, and Sutcliff would have a difficult (though not impossible) task depicting Artos's actual death in first person.

by, it is also keenly aware that the mythologisation after death that is key to any heroic figure first requires a death.

It is this, perhaps, that forces *Sword at Sunset* out of the realms of children's literature in which it began in *The Lantern Bearers*, just as *The Once and Future King* ends an adult book despite its children's book beginnings. Though children's books can certainly feature the deaths of characters, and children's heroes can and should certainly be prepared to die for their cause, their heroism is rarely if ever explicitly dependent on their doing so. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo prepares to die in a desperate last stand, but survives to live a happy life: it is Thorin who dies, and, in the adult sequel, Frodo who as hero is forced to "lose [Middle-earth] so that others may keep it" (*The Lord of the Rings* 1006). The *Chronicles of Narnia* circumvents the deaths of the heroes at the end of the book through Lewis's Christian vision of an afterlife, while *His Dark Materials*, at least on the surface, insists upon the importance of continued life for its child heroes at all costs.[60] If the purpose of a children's book, and indeed children's epic, is to teach them how to live, it is problematic for it to end by telling them how to die. Instead, Sutcliff's books move from the personal to the social as they move from an implied audience of children to one of adults, and the concern with individual peace and survival comes to be held in perspective against the survival of a people, or simply an idea. In this way, despite their very different tones, the development of the story from *The Lantern Bearers* to *Sword at Sunset* mirrors the coming-of-age implicit in *The Once and Future King*'s progression from children's book to adult.

If the end of *Sword at Sunset* retains the bleakness of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, perhaps even accentuated through the lens of classical tragedy and Northern epic through which Sutcliff writes, it also retains its vision of a return for Arthur. While White leaves Arthur's planned return both literal and metaphorical, there is little doubt that in Sutcliff's historical epic Artos will remain dead when he finally dies: Bedwyr casting the sword into the lake, in fact, in this version depends on it. The possibility of continued presence in the world after death, however, is central to Artos's function as the sacrificial king. Artos's final speech to his men, in which he urges them to "fight so that whether we win or whether we die, the Harpers shall sing of us for a thousand years!" (467) is a common idea of epic heroism in any tradition, and the reward promised to Achilles in the *Iliad* in exchange for giving up a long peaceful life for a short life of war. In the context of King Arthur, though, and of Sutcliff's conception of him, the idea of songs sung after death has a far wider significance than personal glory. Toward the end of the book, Artos tells Bedwyr of seeing a Saxon boy and a Roman

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[60]   *Watership Down*, of course, ends with the death of Hazel, but a natural death at the end of a long life is a different thing to a heroic death in battle.

boy befriending each other during the negotiations, and his belief in their purpose in holding back the tide of darkness for as long as possible despite their inevitable defeat:

> The longer we can hold off the Saxons, the more we can slow their advance, even at the cost of our heart's blood, the more time there will be for other boys to learn to pick thorns out of each other's feet and learn the words for hearth and hound and honey-cake in each other's tongue ... Every year that we can hold the Saxons back may well mean that the darkness will engulf us less completely in the end, that more of what we fight for will survive until the light comes again. (410)

The idea, with its emphasis on education and an end to war, once again echoes the end of *The Once and Future King*, and it is not surprising that both books see this as being ultimately achieved through the power of songs and story. In the face of Bedwyr's despair at the close of the book, Artos knows suddenly that they "have held the Pass long enough – something will remain. 'There will be more songs – more songs tomorrow, though it is not we who shall sing them'" (480). Where White, writing in the midst and immediate aftermath of a world war, sees this process as ongoing, Sutcliff more optimistically sees the modern world – one in which "stories of Arthur and his knights are told and retold even to this day" (*The King Arthur Trilogy* 652) – as evidence of Artos's victory and his continued importance to Britain's national character. In many ways, the heroic last stand of Artos and his men perfectly fits the summation of Northern courage used by Tolkien: "perfect because without hope" ("The Monsters and the Critics" 21). In Sutcliff's world, however, "the dream can live on, even when hope dies" (409) and, for both Sutcliff and White, the epic itself becomes the vessel for keeping this dream alive.

An Epic Holiday: C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*

> "An angel with a fiery sword
> Came to send Adam and Eve abroad;
> And as they journeyed through the skies
> They took one look at Paradise
> They thought of all the happy hours
> Among the birds and fragrant bowers,
> And Eve, she wept and Adam bawled
> And both together they loudly squalled."

Dorry snickered at this, but sedate Clover hushed him.
"You mustn't," she said, "it's about the Bible, you know."
– Susan Coolidge, *What Katy Did* 60

Of all the writers under discussion, C.S. Lewis is the one perhaps best qualified to write an epic. Throughout the course of his academic career, he wrote with admiration about epic poets as varied as Virgil, Spenser, Dante, and Milton, and his lectures and critical essays on them remain highly regarded. He wrote extensively about the nature of epic itself, most notably in his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, and upon his death left incomplete a verse translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* and a long Arthurian poem in rhyming couplets. It is therefore unsurprising that the influence of epic works on his books, including *The Chronicles of Narnia*, has been frequently noted by critics, and acknowledged by Lewis himself. While these influences are scattered throughout the entire *Chronicles*, *The Magician's Nephew* in particular bears sustained comparison with *Paradise Lost* in the way each deal with the Biblical story of the Fall of Mankind.

It is equally true, however, that of all the texts under discussion, *The Chronicles of Narnia* are the ones perhaps most unequivocally children's books. While the status of *Watership Down* and *His Dark Materials* as children's literature is ambiguous, and the children's books of Tolkien, White and Sutcliff all eventually grow into adult sequels, Lewis's books are written for children, in the E. Nesbit-like language of children's literature. *The Hobbit*, as Lewis himself points out, grows from this children's book of "matter of fact" language to that of older epic and myth as the action moves into encounters with dragons and warfare ("The Hobbit" 81); Lewis's books do not, even when dealing with what Lewis would certainly have considered the far more serious topics of the creation and end of a world.

Lewis's first book to deal with the Fall of Mankind was adult science fiction, his 1943 novel *Perelandra*. In this novel, which he considered his favourite until he wrote *Till We Have Faces*, his hero Ransom is sent to Perelandra (Venus) where an alien Adam and Eve are facing the test failed

by those of our world. Lewis himself thought the influence of Milton on *Perelandra* was "possibly over-rate[d]: it is difficult to distinguish him from Dante and St Augustine" (cited Hooper 222). Nonetheless, as Hooper points out, the origins of the idea of an averted Fall and speculations on what this would mean can be found in *Preface to Paradise Lost*, and Lewis undeniably faced similar challenges in the writing to those he identifies for Milton in those same lectures.[61] Ironically, criticism of the book upon its release often centred around the fact that it was written not only as science fiction, but in prose at all. Leonard Bacon, for example, commented in the *Saturday Review of Literature* that "*Perelandra* is the result of the poetic imagination in full blast and should never have been written in prose" (1946), while Kate O'Brien in *The Spectator* asserted as an unbreakable rule that "the things [Lewis] intends ... cannot be done at the pace and within the structure of narrative prose. It is a subject for verse, and verse at its most immense" (1943) (cited Hooper 229). The accusation, amidst the praise, is that if Lewis wished to write of the Fall of Mankind, even an averted Fall of a species other than mankind, he should have written an epic, and an epic in the most conventional sense of an epic poem. While praising Lewis and the book, Victor M. Hamm similarly drew a distinction between the grandeur of high verse and the comparative lowness of prose: "Dante ... is loftier, of course, and more sustained, *and he writes poetry instead of prose*; but read and see whether the prophetic imagination is not in Lewis too, and something of the high style as well" (1946, cited Hooper 230, italics mine). The fact that when Lewis next returned to the idea of a Christian mythology, he did so with the arguably even less reputable form of a children's book rather than in the verse epic preferred, suggests that if he considered their criticisms at all, he did so only as a challenge.

If Lewis possessed a sophisticated understanding of epic (and science fiction), he also possessed (or at least would come to possess) an equally sophisticated understanding of children's literature as a particular form, and one that could be used for literary purposes aside from a desire to address children. In his 1952 paper "On Three Ways of Writing for Children", Lewis identifies his own method of writing as that of the writer who writes a children's story "because a children's story is the best art-form for something you have to say: just as a composer may write a Dead March not because there was a public funeral in view but because certain musical ideas that had occurred to him went best into that form" (32). Exactly what the form of a children's fairy tale enabled Lewis himself to say is something that he does not address in the essay, though in the similarly themed

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[61]   Lewis speculates in *Preface* about "what would have happened if instead of his 'compliance bad' Adam had scolded or even chastised Eve and then interceded with God on her behalf" (127), which while not the plot of *Perelandra* opens the "supposition" of an averted Fall within which the novel operates. Whilst writing, his letters mirror his discussion of Milton's attempt to portray unfallen sexuality as he points out that his Eve "has got to combine characteristics which the Fall has put poles apart – she's got to be in some ways like a Pagan goddess and in some ways like the Blessed Virgin. But if one can get even a fraction of it into words it is worth doing" *(Letters* 361).

article "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said" he cites his love for "the Form itself: its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its inflexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and 'gas'" (46).[62] Elsewhere, though, supporting Tolkien's famous argument for fairy tales in "On Fairy Stories", Lewis argues that though children have no more universal love for fantastic stories than do adults, they differ from adults in their immunity from "fashions in literary taste" ("On Juvenile Tastes" 50). These fashions, which "come and go among the adults … when good, do not improve the taste of children, and, when bad, do not corrupt it; for children read only to enjoy". As a result, children's tastes remain "simply human taste, going from age to age … regardless of modes, movements, and literary revolutions" (51). As Gray argues of Pullman in his book *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth,* the "desire to create a new mythology" is at odds with the "postmodern scepticism towards grand narratives" (4). It is for this reason, according to Lewis, that

> When the literary establishment – the approved canon of taste – is so extremely jejune and narrow as it is today, much has to be addressed to children if it is to get printed at all. Those who have a story to tell must appeal to the audience that still cares for story-telling. (51)

While Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is a children's story because, according to Lewis, of a desire to address specific children ("On Three Ways" 32) and, according to Tolkien, because of his own "contemporary delusions about 'fairy-stories' and children" (Tolkien *Letters* 310) at the time, Lewis himself chooses the form very deliberately as a vehicle for epic themes.

The stories that Lewis refers to are what he considers fairy tales, not epic, and it is the fairy tale rather than epic that he argues has falsely become equated with children's literature. Lewis's thoughts on the epic genre in *Preface to Paradise Lost* do, however, mirror a number of his thoughts on children's literature, particularly his own books. Both, for example, he considers falsely assumed to proceed from a didactic impulse. In *Preface*, he praises his friend Charles Williams for understanding Milton's ideas of chastity: "When the old poets made some virtue their theme they were not teaching but adoring, and ... what we take for the didactic is often the enchanted" (v). Similarly, Lewis insists elsewhere that his *Narnia* books do not, as "some people seem to think", stem from him "ask[ing] myself how I could say something about Christianity to children … then

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[62] Lewis is very careful to avoid the automatic conflation of fairy tale with children's book, frequently citing Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories" as an argument against the "accidental" association of the two ("Three Ways" 35). His own fairy tales, however, he certainly does acknowledge as being written for children, and he classifies such fairy tales and fantasy as part of the "sub-species" within the "species 'children's story'" (32) despite their equal relevance for adults.

dr[awing] up a list of basic Christian truths and hammer[ing] out 'allegories' to embody them"
("Sometimes Fairy Stories" 46). Instead, he holds that any morals in children's literature should not
come from a desire to instruct but emerge naturally from "whatever spiritual roots you have
succeeded in striking during the whole course of your life" ("Three Ways" 41). The question of
didacticism, of course, is not confined to epic and children's literature: Lewis made the same claim
about *Perelandra* when discussing science fiction ("Unreal Estates" 144-5). More interestingly,
despite his refusal to equate older literature with "the infancy of the species" ("Juvenile Tastes" 50),
in *Preface* Lewis himself explicitly equates primary and secondary epic to childhood and adulthood.
Because Virgil, unlike Homer, contains a spiritual component, Lewis argues that "with Virgil
European poetry grows up" (37). Equating Achilles to a "passionate boy" in contrast to Aeneas as a
"man", Lewis maintains that after Virgil

> any return to the *merely* heroic, any lay, however good, that tells merely of brave men
> fighting to save their lives or to get home or to avenge their kinsmen, will now be an
> anachronism. You cannot be young twice. The explicitly religious subject for any future epic
> has been dictated by Virgil; it is the only further development left. (39, italics Lewis's)

By extension, the transition from Homeric heroic material to the religious epic equates to the
growth of the reader: "No man who has once read [the *Aeneid*] with full perception remains an
adolescent" (37). Given the implicitly religious subject matter of the *Narnia* books, the suggestion
that perception of religious themes constitutes a growth to adulthood raises interesting questions
about the books' intended role in their readers' intellectual and spiritual lives.

Perhaps the most telling observation Lewis makes about the role of epic, and of *Paradise Lost* in
particular, comes toward the end of *Preface*, when he discusses the perceived failure of the poem as
religious poetry. To Lewis, one of the beauties of Milton's epic is that it is not explicitly religious
poetry, but instead grants the reader the ability to look at the story of Genesis from the outside:

> When we remember that we also have our places in this plot, that we also, at any given
> moment, are moving either toward the Messianic or the Satanic position, then we are
> entering the world of religion. But when we do that, our epic holiday is over: we quite
> rightly shut up our Milton. In the religious life man faces God and God faces man. But in the
> epic it is feigned, for the moment, that we, as readers, can step aside and see the faces of
> both God and man in profile. (*Preface* 132)

This idea of epic as distancing is a common one, echoing Dixon's comment thirty years earlier that the epic's ability to transmute "passions and wounds and death… into objects of tranquil and delighted contemplation" is similar to the "child's fairy tale" (23-24). The idea of epic enabling its readers to step outside a religion that, at least in Lewis's view, concerns them greatly, however, bears interesting similarities to Lewis's conception of the Narnia books. After beginning to write from images, Lewis by his own account was struck by the possibility for

> stories of this kind to steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings … But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world … one might make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? ("Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said" 47)

While *Paradise Lost*, according to Lewis, allows its readers to step outside religion to consider the Biblical story from an intellectual distance, *The Chronicles of Narnia* allow their readers to step outside religion to feel the emotions associated with the Biblical stories without the "reverence" which can make them seem "something medical" (47). In some ways this is the opposite of Milton's intent: a removal of the "blankets ... between us and our object" (*Preface* 132) rather than their interposition. But in their desire to allow readers to experience what they see as a true "cosmic story ... a real, irreversible, unrepeatable process in the history of the universe" (*Preface* 132-133) as myth, the two writers can be seen as sharing a similar goal.

It is perhaps this question of belief in their central material that not only unites Milton and Lewis, but sets Lewis's fiction apart from that of his contemporaries. Writers attempting to deal with epic material in a modern literary landscape traditionally face the problem that the level of belief in universal myths required for epic no longer exists; though Gray, conversely, argues that it is precisely Pullman's lack of belief in the subject matter of *Paradise Lost* that gives him the freedom to use it as mythology (5).[63] Lewis, as a committed Christian writing a Christian mythology, holds his stories to be not just spiritually true, but reflective of real, factual truth, as did Milton and older epic poets of their own works.[64] Moreover, to Lewis, who famously came to Christianity through an

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[63] This will be discussed in the next chapter.
[64]   Lewis did not, of course, believe in Narnia as a real place in the way that Milton believed in Heaven and Hell, but nonetheless events such as Aslan's Resurrection mirror what Lewis saw as real events in our world – and certainly

understanding that "the story of Christ was simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it *really happened*" (cited Wilson 126, italics Lewis's), fairy tale and mythology are deeply connected to the idea of religious truth. It is this idea of an implicit "vaster theme" that underlies the idea of epic for Lewis, and that he sees Virgil as having "altered the very meaning of the word epic" by introducing (*Preface* 33). By extension, then, for Lewis the children's fantasy, in its crucial ability to deal with the grand and the "cosmic" narrative, is perhaps as natural a site for epic themes as the epic genre once was itself.

Narnia and the Fall: *The Magician's Nephew* and *Paradise Lost*

Although the first book chronologically, *The Magician's Nephew* was the last *Narnia* book to be completed, and apparently the one that Lewis found the most difficult: it was not ultimately revised until after the completion of *The Last Battle*. From the first, the subject matter was to be "the Narnian equivalent of the Fall" (Hooper 405); and, though as with the other Narnia books the sources range from Norse mythology to E. Nesbit, it is unsurprising that one of the major texts it came to engage with was *Paradise Lost*. If Milton's stated intent in the writing of *Paradise Lost* is to "justify" and illuminate God's actions in Genesis, Lewis's intent throughout the *Chronicles*, as discussed earlier, is to make such actions appear "for the first time ... in their real potency" ("Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said" 47). It is this that guides Lewis's transmutation of religious epic into children's book, as he removes the distance intrinsic to both pure epic and pure religion and allows events of Biblical significance to be seen through a lens of myth and common humanity. For Lewis, this transmutation does not diminish the epic and religious elements of his books, but rather moves his readers closer to the truth at the heart of them.

Like many of the other *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Magician's Nephew* opens with a disarmingly simple direct address from the narrator:

> This is a story about something that happened a long time when your grandfather was a child. It is a very important story because it shows how all the comings and goings between our own world and the land of Narnia first began. (1)

In some ways, of course, this is as far from an epic proem as it would be possible for Lewis to write: the language is conversational, the abrupt opening is closer to the "once upon a time" formula

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he would have believed in the Heaven at the end of *The Last Battle* as an imaginative depiction of a real place.

of fairy tales than the an epic opening *in medias res*, and the tone is clearly that of an adult narrator talking to a child reader rather than an epic poet invoking the aid of the Muses. Beneath the surface, however, the subject matter and the manner of its introduction mirror that of Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Virgil's *Aeneid*. As Milton begins by stating his subject – the temptation and fall of mankind – and intentions – to "justify the ways of God to man" (1.26) – Lewis states the subject and intent of his own story, which will explain the origins of "the comings and goings between our world and the land of Narnia". Moreover, though Lewis does not reveal the religious nature of his material as explicitly as Milton, he claims the subject of his story as a "very important" one, and one that spans worlds and history.

The importance Lewis claims for *The Magician's Nephew* is only in relation to the narrative: it will explain the origin of several elements of the *Narnia* stories. Nonetheless, the introduction to the story, and the way in which the book subsequently unfolds, implies a much greater significance, and one that conforms to epic subject matter. Lewis himself described the "epic subject" as an innovation of Virgil, in which the poet must

> take one single national legend and treat it in such a way that we feel the theme to be somehow implicit in it. He has to tell a comparatively short story and give us the illusion of having lived through a great space of time. He has to deal with a limited number of personages and make us feel as if national, or almost cosmic, issues are involved. He must locate his action in a legendary past and yet make us feel the present, and the intervening centuries, already foreshadowed. (34)

In his opening, Lewis situates his narrative firmly in the real past, in a way that implies to the child reader their own origins – "when your grandfather was a child" (1) – and with enough details, such as the "stiff Eton collar[s]" that Lewis himself wore at school, to ensure its reality. It is also, though, a legendary version of this past, where "Mr Sherlock Holmes [is] still living in Baker Street and the Bastables [are] looking for treasure in the Lewisham Road" (1) and, more importantly, where "the comings and goings" between Narnia and our world are a part of established history. Despite the focus on a "limited number of personages" – essentially Polly, Digory, Uncle Andrew and Jadis – there is no doubt that truly "cosmic issues" are involved in *The Magician's Nephew*, from the destruction of Charn to the creation of Narnia. Like the *Aeneid* or *Paradise Lost*, the story does not only work within the timeframe of the action itself, but is etiological in nature, explaining the origins of the world as is it known in the present day. As *Paradise Lost*'s final books look ahead to Biblical events and our own world and Virgil looks ahead to the history of Rome, *The Magician's*

Nephew is heavy with foreshadowing for the (chronologically) later Narnia books, which in turn encompass the history of an entire world. Perhaps most importantly, though the *Narnia* stories are not exactly a "national legend", *The Magician's Nephew* is, by the end, certainly "treated in such a way that we feel the theme to be implicit in it" – and, moreover, the theme is that of temptation and obedience to divine will shared with Milton's epic.

Tellingly, though the Narnian equivalent of the Garden of Eden does not feature until late in the book, the climactic moment of temptation is foreshadowed twice in the earlier, less obviously Miltonic chapters. In the forbidden yet decidedly unepic space of his study, Uncle Andrew, who enters the room "springing from a trapdoor like a pantomime demon" (12), first enacts a clumsy version of Satan's temptation of Eve as he convinces Polly to take a magical yellow ring. Milton's Eve, as Lewis points out bluntly in *Preface*, is tempted to eat the forbidden fruit initially through Satan's appeal to her vanity: he begins by praising her "celestial beauty" (9.540) and lamenting that it is seen by so few. Uncle Andrew, too, begins by praising the wary Polly as a "very attractive young lady", and she, like Eve, responds instantly, losing her sense of danger and "begin[ning] to think he might not really be mad after all" (15). Moreover, like Satan, Uncle Andrew casts himself in a false light: Satan as a serpent moved by "zeal and love / To man, and indignation at his wrong" (9.675-6), Uncle Andrew as a lonely "old buffer" who feels nothing but "love" toward children (15). Polly, like Eve, is softened both by the words and by the attraction of the object under offer. Just as the forbidden fruit is so beautiful that "to behold / Might tempt alone" (9.735-6), the rings are "strangely attractive" (16) (earlier, the narrator observes that "if Polly had been a very little younger she would have wanted to put one in her mouth" (11)), and Polly takes one despite Digory's shouted warning. This incident perhaps says more about Uncle Andrew's ability to mirror the tricks and intentions of Milton's Satan on a smaller scale than it says about Polly's susceptibility to sin. Polly has no reason to suspect the rings' powers, and is not condemned by Digory or the narrator for being tricked – it is Uncle Andrew who has been "beastly" (36). Nonetheless, just as Adam follows Eve into temptation for her own sake, Digory (without the implied moral condemnation) willingly follows Polly in taking the ring and journeying to the Wood between the Worlds.

It is through these rings that they find themselves in Charn, and both face their second echo of the Fall as they are tempted (or perhaps dared) by Jadis's inscription to ring a bell that will waken her from enchantment. Here, also, there is an element of flattery involved ("adventurous stranger" (57)), and of lies, as Jadis warns that anyone who ignores the bell will be driven mad. Digory is not truly deceived by either of these tactics: he does not appear even to notice the epithet, and he later,

crucially, admits that he was "only pretending" (157) to be enchanted. Instead, his surrender stems from an intense "curiosity" (59) despite the promise of danger, much like that which first drives him to explore Charn in the first place, and that suggests the "knowledge of good bought dear by knowing ill" (PL 4.222) promised by the Tree of Life. The consequences of this surrender are serious, and Digory's failure is undeniably a moral failure. Here, it is Jadis doing the tempting rather than her comparatively pathetic shadow Uncle Andrew, albeit at a remove, and the sense that the children are being tempted to do something wrong (rather than merely dangerous) is far stronger: Polly's fear and Digory's unprecedented "nast[iness]" (59) make this point if nothing else. Neither of these incidents constitutes a Fall in the Biblical sense, particularly as the human race ("Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve") is already inherently fallen. Cumulatively, though, they allow evil to enter Narnia, suggesting perhaps the ultimate significance of any such individual "fallen" acts. Perhaps more importantly, they set a pattern for temptation and surrender that is readily believable and acceptable. In this way, Lewis begins to smooth the path towards making the epic and Biblical events "for the first time appear in their real potency" ("Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said" 47).

Paradise Lost begins *in medias res* with Satan's release from the burning lake into Hell after the war in heaven; the epic plotline of *The Magician's Nephew* can perhaps be said to truly begin after Jadis's release from the throne where she has been enshrined since the war that destroyed Charn. While Uncle Andrew as villain is explicitly a "wicked, cruel magician" like that of "the old fairy tales" (28), Jadis – though possessing fairy tale connotations of her own – mirrors enchantresses from classical and Renaissance epic, as well as Milton's Satan himself. Lewis wrote in a 1954 letter that the White Witch "is of course Circe" (cited Graham 32), while Hardy argues that she echoes Duessa in Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*. The resemblance between Jadis and Circe is evident in her beauty, dangerous femininity, "phallic" wand with transformative powers, and use of enchanted food to tempt the unwary. This use of traditionally feminine powers, and indeed a feminine character, in the construction of Lewis's Satanic figure arguably transforms "the temptation story of Genesis into a message about the dangers of female power and sexuality" (Graham 41), although if so it should be noted that he equally transplants the traditionally feminine weaknesses of Eve onto the male figures of Digory and later Edmund.[65] The resemblance between Jadis and Milton's Satan is, by contrast, ideological rather than in details of description: as Hardy argues, both are motivated by pride, demonstrate a preference for "reigning in hell to serving in heaven", and view themselves as tragic heroes cast down by fates for which they refuse to assume responsibility (30-33).

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[65] This shift in focus interestingly aligns the Fall with the first experience of adult sexuality, with Digory's first wrong act coming after his first sight of the beautiful Jadis. This alignment is drawn far more explicitly by Pullman.

Nonetheless, the manner in which Lewis handles his villainess clearly reflects his reading of Satan in *Paradise Lost,* suggesting a depiction of evil that is universal rather than gendered.

Satan has traditionally been an ambiguous figure in criticism of *Paradise Lost*, since Blake's famous assertion that Milton was of the devil's party without knowing it and Shelley's admiration of his defiance in the face of an unattractive divine authority began a Romantic tradition of Satan as tragic hero. Pullman, whose universe is similarly not characterised by a respect for hierarchy, knowingly exploits this tradition in his *His Dark Materials* trilogy with the attractive figure of Lord Asriel. Lewis, however, argued that Milton's Satan was not intended to be at all admirable: to Milton, as to Lewis, the universe operated or should operate along a system of natural hierarchy in which the rebellion of inferiors against superiors was simply wrong.[66] Moreover, Lewis argues, it would never have occurred to Milton that his conception of Satan would be read as a positive figure, as in Milton's time, "Men still believed that there really was such a person as Satan, and that he was a liar. The poet did not foresee that his work would one day meet the disarming simplicity of critics who take for gospel things said by the father of falsehood in public speeches to his troops" (*Preface* 100).

Whether or not this is true of Milton, in writing Jadis, Lewis is clearly bearing such critics in mind. As he claims of Milton, he is initially "fair to evil", showing it "*first* at the height, with all its rants and melodrama" (*Preface* 100) as Jadis appears in "Godlike imitated state" in the ruins of Charn. Digory in particular echoes the admiration of Satan's apologists as Jadis leads them from the collapsing palace, thinking "She's wonderfully brave. And strong. She's what I call a Queen!" (65-66). Polly's interior commentary, however, continually contradicts Digory's, and her interpretation that the Queen is a "terrible woman" (66) is subtly supported by Lewis's narrator even if her own references to torture chambers and dark magic did not already betray her.[67] Her description of the three-day battle in Charn, which Hinten suggests might be an allusion to Milton's three-day battle in heaven (70), is implied to be a rebellion on the part of Jadis and a challenge to the natural hierarchy much like that of Satan against God: though Jadis refers to her sister's army as the "rebels", the war itself was an attempt to make her sister "yield [Jadis] the throne" (69). While Jadis's actions during this war may be deemed heroic at least by classical terms (though Polly responds to her description of "pour[ing] out the blood of [her] armies like water" with "Beast!" (70)), Hardy points out that her

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[66] Lewis discusses this idea in relation to Milton extensively in his *Preface*, whilst admitting that it "deserves a book" of its own (72). The manner in which the system of hierarchy operates in Narnia has been established by a number of critics, including Downing (111-114).

[67] Lewis's narrator does not explicitly contradict Digory or refer to Jadis as evil at any point in the scene, but descriptions of her beauty are always carefully qualified: her hand, for example, is "white [and] beautiful, but ... strong as steel pincers" (63).

actions afterwards are never brave in any sense of the word. As Lewis argues of Satan, Jadis's acts of cruelty are always inflicted against those weaker than herself, and her ultimate 'victory' over Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* comes only when he is helpless. This makes her "not a hero, or even an antihero; she is a bully and a coward" (Hardy 33).

In *The Magician's Nephew*, Jadis is more than simply a "bully and a coward": Lewis also achieves the more interesting effect of making her, as he saw Satan, inherently ridiculous. The parallels between Jadis and Uncle Andrew, the more overtly comic "pantomime demon" (12), serve a number of functions, but chief among them is the manner in which his easily recognisable foolishness highlights hers. When Uncle Andrew, for example, claims with a "grave and noble and mysterious" look that his "high and lonely destiny" frees him from "common rules just as [he is] cut off from common pleasures", Digory is briefly impressed, but quickly realises that "all it means … is that he thinks he can do anything he likes to get anything he wants" (21). When Jadis in Charn makes the same claim, Digory recognises the words, but thinks that "they sounded much grander when Queen Jadis said them; perhaps because Uncle Andrew was not seven feet tall and dazzlingly beautiful" (71-72). This is undeniably true, but the reader is expected to recognise that they are nonetheless exactly the same, and that height and beauty do not actually make the sentiments any less pompous and self-serving. Polly, who is unable to "see anything specially beautiful about her" (56) is scathing of Jadis's pretensions: Jadis's convoluted assumption that Digory is the envoy of a great King in love with her beauty is brought down to earth by Polly's assertion that "it's absolute bosh from beginning to end" (75). When Jadis is brought from the epic setting of Charn into the realist Victorian London, she becomes the figure of fun that Lewis argues Satan would have been had Milton not chosen to treat him in the epic form and therefore "subordinated [his] absurdity … to the misery which he suffers and inflicts" (*Preface* 95). Although Jadis appears even more terrifying in the domestic setting of Uncle Andrew's house, she is also comically out of place: her grandiose orders to Uncle Andrew to "procure [her] at once a chariot or a flying carpet or a well-trained dragon" (82) is countered by his breathless promise to "go and order a cab at once" (83). Aunt Letty mistakes her for a drunken "shameless hussy" from a circus (92), and Jadis's powerlessness in the real world leaves her unable to correct the mistake with a display of magic. (She is still capable of physical violence, but Letty remains unharmed and her opinion unaltered after being flung across the room.) Worshipped only by a servile and love-struck Uncle Andrew, Jadis's attempts to declare herself Empress is greeted by "roars of laughter" from the Londoners as they declare her "Hempress of Colney 'Atch", while she, unaware of the ridicule, blushes and "bow[s] ever so slightly" (106). Satan, too, is received by laughter in *Paradise Lost*, and Lewis argues in his *Preface* that this, while handled badly by Milton, is justified: "It is a mistake to

demand that Satan … should be able to rant and posture through the whole universe without, sooner or later, awakening the comic spirit … At that precise point where Satan … meets something real, laughter *must* rise, just as steam must when water meets fire" (95). Evil in Narnia is allowed to be beautiful, with qualifications, but not remotely attractive.

Despite rendering her unable to be respected, Lewis nonetheless ensures that Jadis remains dangerous, if only to creatures less powerful than herself. Her progression from rebel enchantress of royal blood to Queen of a dead world to strong woman in London to powerless evil lurking in Narnia mirrors the degradation of Satan that Lewis sees as Milton's intent throughout the poem:[68] she is, appropriately, as ineffectual against Aslan in combat as Satan is against the Son during the War in Heaven. In the climactic garden scene, however, the heavy allusions to *Paradise Lost* ensure that she is also potentially Satan's equal in epic villainy. These allusions have been noted by many critics. As Hinten points out succinctly:

> When Digory and Polly arrive at the garden, they discover it to be set on a hill, with a wall all around it, trees growing higher than the wall, and one set of gates facing due east … In [*Paradise Lost*] 4.144-47 and 178-82 [Milton] gives all these details. When Digory enters the garden, he finds a "fountain which rose near the middle" (158) …; Milton indicates in 9.73 that part of the Tigris river, having gone underground, "rose up like a fountain by the Tree of Life". (75)

Even the classical references bear Edenical connotations through comparison with Lewis's other works: the western location of the garden rather than the more traditional eastern, as Hinten notes, references the garden of the Hesperides (74), a comparison Ransom also makes with the Edenical paradise in *Perelandra*. It is unsurprising, then, that Jadis leaves the garden (and presumably has entered it) by vaulting the wall, as Satan enters Eden, and that her role within it is to test the strength of Digory's obedience to divine will.

Digory's temptation, unsurprisingly, likewise mirrors that of Eve, a comparison that the setting openly invites us to make despite disparities in situation.[69] Like Eve, Digory is under command

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68   Hardy argues this degradation continues across the chronological order of the *Chronicles*, but it is difficult to see the White Witch, who has managed to enslave all of Narnia, as intrinsically lower than Jadis in the garden. Given the order of writing, and the fact that *LWW* was not originally part of a series, it is more likely that Lewis simply did not intend the Miltonesque character arc until long after he had written the first book.

69   Digory, for example, has brought the evil into the world himself, having already failed to resist temptation in Charn. He also "unlike Eve, is already a fallen human being, a 'son of Adam', and by resisting temptation simply resists one sin, while Eve's failure brings about the fall of herself and her descendants" (Hardy 35).

regarding the apples of the Tree of Life, and like Eve he is being tempted to do otherwise by a personification of evil. The way in which Lewis shifts the focus of this temptation, perhaps more than any other passage in the *Narnia* books, exemplifies his method for transmuting the distancing aspects of an "epic holiday" (*Preface* 132) into the "real potency" of the epic narrative. In Milton, Eve's aspirations toward "godhead" and immortality are wholly unsympathetic, though wholly recognisable as part of human nature. Digory, however, rejects appeals of this kind, telling Jadis rather piously that he'd "rather live an ordinary time and die and go to Heaven" (186).[70] He is briefly tempted once again by the "knowledge" that Jadis promises (186), as he was in Charn, but only enough to listen to Jadis and not to act on her words. Crucially, Digory this time holds firm until he is appealed to through his far more relatable desire to heal his dying mother. The temptation to willingly do wrong for the sake of another can also be found in Adam's "less ignoble sin" (*Preface* 126) in *Paradise Lost*: as Adam, at least in Milton, falls deliberately in order to die with Eve, Digory is faced with the possibility of saving his mother from death and his father from heartbreak. Lewis, in *Preface*, makes it clear that Adam's choice, "granting Milton's premises", is wrong, and by extension Digory's would be the same: "if there are things that have an even higher claim on a man, if the universe is imagined to be such that, when the pinch comes, a man ought to reject wife *and mother* and his own life also" (127, italics mine), then "no good" can come of disobedience. The same choice is faced by Aeneas, ordered by the gods to abandon Dido, and the fact that her death results does not, by Virgil's "premises", render Aeneas's choice less inevitable or right. Nonetheless, Digory's struggle with his "terrible choice" (187) is deliberately as sympathetic as Lewis can make it, drawing as it does on the loss of Lewis's own mother and his subsequent loss of childhood innocence in the context of a children's book. "If you or I, reader, ever commit a great crime," Lewis says in his analysis of Eve's fall, "be sure we shall feel very much more Eve than Iago" (126). In the case of *The Magician's Nephew*, the universal grief felt at a parent's death ensures virtually every reader knows that, in Digory's place, they would feel like Digory; and, more importantly, would not be ashamed to admit it. To a far greater extent than is required of Eve, "obedience for its own sake, against all that seems reasonable and humane, seems required of Digory. As in *Perelandra*, temptation is resisted and a kind of Fall averted. But the price for Digory is terrible; he must accept the inevitability of his mother's death" (Gray 146).

Digory, unlike Eve, does not steal the apple. It is notable that Jadis, unlike Satan, does. As Hardy and Hinten point out, among others, both Satan and Jadis use their own experience with the apple as

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70   Curiously, this is one of the few times in *The Chronicles of Narnia* that a character makes a direct reference to God or heaven, perhaps to highlight the Biblical nature of the epic which Lewis is currently using as a model. Digory's wish is prophetic, given that this is exactly what will happen to him at the close *The Last Battle*.

evidence of its great power. Satan tells Eve to "look on me, / Me who have touched and tasted, yet both live, / And life more perfect have attained than fate / Meant me" (9.686-688); Jadis, similarly, tells Digory, "I have tasted it; and I feel such changes in myself that I know I shall never grow old and die" (186). The crucial difference is that while the reader of *Paradise Lost* knows that Satan is lying about having eaten the apple, the reader of *The Magician's Nephew* knows that Jadis is telling the truth, as does Digory. Hardy argues that Jadis's consumption of the apple is necessary in order for Digory's temptation to be plausible: "Unlike Eve, Digory is child of a fallen world; he has experience with lying and does not merely take the Witch's word for truth, as Eve does with Satan's testimony. He must see Jadis actually eating the apple" (34). More importantly, that Jadis does eat the apple also allows its effects to be known and proven in the way that they are through Eve in *Paradise Lost,* and in a way that immediately validates Digory's choice not to steal. Stealing an apple is far from original sin for Jadis, and what comes to her appears to be from the fruit itself as much as the act of disobeying the sign on the gate. Nonetheless, the effects of the apple mirror those on Eve, as Jadis becomes a living warning about "getting your heart's desire and getting despair along with it" (185). Jadis, Digory notes, afterwards looks "stronger and prouder than ever ... but her face was deadly white, as white as salt" (185); Eve's beauty, too, begins to take on hints of ill health as she urges Adam to eat the apple with "countenance blithe ... / But in her cheek distemper flushing glowed" (9.886-7).[71] Both, albeit for different reasons, immediately attempt to pull another into sin after them, with Jadis urging Digory: "eat it; and you and I will both live for ever and be King and Queen of this whole world" (186).[72] Ultimately, both gain the power they wish for, yet only in ways that severely undermine this very power and dignity. Lewis reads Eve's bow to the Tree of Life as a humiliating descent into primitivism: "she who thought it beneath her dignity to bow to Adam or to God, now worships a vegetable" (*Preface* 126). In a reversal of this, Jadis after eating the apple "dare not come within a hundred miles of the Tree, for its smell ... is death and horror and despair to her" (201): the Queen who destroyed her own world and longs for dominion over others now fears a vegetable. In *Preface*, Lewis states that the theme of the poem is, perfectly simply, "'that obedience to the will of God makes men happy and that Disobedience makes them miserable' ... If you can't be interested in that, you can't be interested in *Paradise Lost*" (71). Tellingly, he goes on to relate the theme of obedience to parental commands and finally to children's

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[71] In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Edmund's face too looks "flushed and strange" (41) after eating enchanted Turkish Delight.

[72] Cathy McSporran states that "why the Witch is so keen for the company of Digory, a 'common child' whom she dislikes, is never explained: nor is it relevant. It is merely her idiom: she is a Daughter of Lilith, and therefore she tries to seduce" (195-6). While her method itself clearly points at her dangerous sexuality – rather ludicrously misapplied – her purpose seems fairly evident: Digory has already taken the apple and escaped her, and Jadis needs to prevent him from bringing it to Aslan. The fact that she instantly switches to persuading him to take it to his mother instead denies the suggestion she has any real interest in Digory, any more than Satan has in Eve despite his similar promises to her.

stories, adding that "even Peter Rabbit came to grief because he *would* go into Mr McGregor's garden" (72). The Mr McGregor's garden of children's literature and the Biblical Garden of Eden become conflated in the Narnian garden that the Witch must climb over the wall to enter, and the Witch herself becomes at once the disobedient Eve and the tempter of innocents. In the process, Lewis highlights the sometimes-overlooked fact that Satan's deception of humanity in *Paradise Lost* brings him as much misery as it does Adam and Eve, and would have done so whether it had succeeded or not. At his simplest, Lewis too is saying that doing wrong makes one unhappy.

Digory's choice is further validated upon his return to Aslan, who with the apple is able to protect Narnia. As Hinten points out, Aslan flagrantly breaks the rule throughout the other books that "nobody is ever told what *would have happened*" *(DT* 123*)* by telling Digory exactly "what *would* have happened" (*MN* 203) had he taken the apple:

> Understand, then, that it would have healed [Digory's mother]; but not to your joy or hers. The day would have come when both you and she would have looked back and said it would have been better to die in that illness. (203)

Interestingly, this refusal to speculate about "what would have happened" is also attributed by Lewis to Milton, precisely in relation to the idea of an averted Fall. In Milton's case, this is because the poet himself "does not know ... For all Adam knew, God had other cards in His hand; but Adam never raised the question, and now nobody will ever know. Rejected goods are invisible" (127). Rejected evils, apparently, are not. Digory's subsequent understanding that "there might be things more terrible even than losing someone you love by death" (203) echoes Adam's longing for death after witnessing the world he has created for himself (10.771-82), the more so because Digory's transgression would have been, as Adam's was, on behalf of a loved one without whom he could not imagine life. It is perhaps for this reason that Lewis allows Aslan to break his rule of storytelling: it is something that has, elsewhere, already happened.[73]

If what would have happened in Narnia is essentially what has already happened in our world, then what subsequently happens in Narnia is equally an instance of Lewis himself telling the reader "what *would* have happened" in our own world had either Adam or Eve resisted temptation. As already stated, this question of Earth without a fall is one that Lewis had already addressed in both his criticism of *Paradise Lost* and in *Perelandra*. While *Preface* merely speculates "what would

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[73]   Hinten, more prosaically, suggests that Lewis simply forgot or ignored his own rules (79), which given other discrepancies in the *Chronicles of Narnia* is not unlikely.

have happened if instead of his 'compliance bad' Adam had scolded or even chastised Eve and then interceded with God on her behalf" (127), *Perelandra* offers an image of a world where mankind is willingly granted the knowledge to live as equal or above angels, and counters the arguments of the Fall as a positive stage of human development through its hero, Ransom:

> Of course good came of it ... Whatever you do, He [Maledil/God] will make good of it. But not the good He had prepared for you if you had obeyed him. That is lost forever. The first King and first Mother of our world did the forbidden thing; and He brought good of it in the end. But what they did was not good; and what they have lost we have not seen. And there are some to whom no good came nor ever will come. (253)

Likewise, Aslan willingly grants Digory the apple to save his mother's life just as Digory submits to the necessity of his mother's death, and is told that given by Aslan freely the fruit will bring "joy" (203). Milton, Lewis suggests, refrains from imaginative engagement with "what would have happened ... [because] Milton does not know" (*Preface* 127). Neither, of course, does Lewis, but because he is writing not about the Biblical "history" of our own world but the mythical history of others, he remains free to suggest a happy ending that might have been. As a result, he is able to present the benevolent and attractive image of divine authority that Milton has been criticised for not providing. Obedience to Aslan's will is required, here and in the other Narnia books, but it is also continually validated, as is the children's trust in his commands. It is in this way, perhaps, that Lewis at least attempts the highest function of Milton's religious epic, and "justif[ies] the ways of God to man" (*PL* 1.26).

Paradise Gained: The End of Epic in Narnia

Narnia's relationship to epic, and to one specific epic, is never quite as strong elsewhere as it is in *The Magician's Nephew*. The various books of T.H. White's *The Once and Future King,* as has been argued, reflect a number of genres whilst cumulatively being conceived as an epic; while C.S. Lewis never overtly applied either the term "epic" or this genre-shifting structure to *The Chronicles of Narnia*, his books too can be seen to reflect various forms of storytelling whilst remaining consistent within themselves. *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, for example, was conceived as a fairy tale, while *The Silver Chair* employs the structure and trappings of a medieval romance (including knights, castles, giants and witches), and *The Horse and Boy* depicts the exoticised Eastern desert of *The Arabian Nights*. While White's "epic" is closest in tone to a true epic in its

third volume of "adult concerns and dangers" (Lupack 109), Lewis turns to epic for the birth of Narnia: when read chronologically, the *Chronicles* largely grow away from epic tropes toward the romantic use of enchantments and magic that in turn characterises the earlier volumes of White.

Nonetheless, various structures and motifs of the epic genre retain a presence throughout the series. After the fairy tale *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian* opens *in medias res* as the children are brought into Narnia in the midst of Caspian's bid to reclaim the throne. The prior history of usurpation and subsequent rebellion is related to the children by Trumpkin after his rescue, following the pattern laid down by the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* wherein Odysseus and Aeneas relate their own histories and adventures early in the story upon reaching a temporary haven. Events surrounding Caspian's reclamation of the throne are saturated in both classical mythology (Bacchus, Silenus, the Maenads and a River God feature heavily) and chivalric ideals such as trial by combat: Glozelle and Sopesian claiming treachery and initiating the Battle of Beruna faintly echoes the false cry of treachery that signals the final battle in *Le Morte Darthur*. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* draws partially on the *Odyssey*, as Gray observes (140),[74] but perhaps more specifically on the *Argonautica*, structured as it is around the quests and adventures of a collection of heroes at sea. Unsurprisingly, given Lewis's admiration for Virgil, aspects of the sea voyage can also be linked to the *Aeneid*: most notably, the sailors' reluctance to go forward from Ramandu's island echoes the reluctance of Aeneas's people to continue the voyage in Book Five. Like Aeneas, though with more guile, Caspian allows the faint-hearted to remain and chooses the bravest to carry forward, only to find "the very men ... / who once had found the face and name of the sea / so harsh and unendurable now want / to journey on" (*Aen.* 5.1010-13).

Moreover, these tropes are consistently used with the associated "seriousness of purpose" that characterises the epic. Lewis, as has been discussed, saw "the explicitly religious subject" as "the only further development left" for the epic (*Preface* 39). *The Chronicles of Narnia* are not exactly explicitly (or at least overtly) religious, as the many critics who have written of discovering with horror the Christian allegory beneath the magic Narnia of their childhoods have testified. Nonetheless, the stories are built around this epic subject matter, and Lewis's belief in his own material allows him to use in earnest what critics such as Moretti have argued can now only be used as ironic affectation. *The Silver Chair,* for example, shares with the *Aeneid* a preoccupation with following and interpreting divine signs, in the form of the four signs that Aslan gives Jill in order to

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[74]   When Caspian wishes to seek personal adventure at the expense of his social obligations, itself a Virgilian preoccupation, Edmund threatens to tie him up "like they did with Ulysses when he wanted to go near the Sirens" (182).

complete their quest. More importantly to Lewis, it shares a belief in the importance of doing so despite personal fears or loss. While Aeneas is forced to abandon Dido for his greater purpose at the gods' command, even though doing so entails heartbreak and (for Dido) death, Jill and Eustace are seemingly commanded by the signs to release from bondage a madman who will kill them. Though they are understandably anxious, Puddleglum points out not that "everything will come right" if they follow the signs, but that "Aslan didn't tell Pole what would happen. He only told her what to do. That fellow will be the death of us once he's up, I shouldn't wonder. But that doesn't let us off following the sign" (145). The lesson, that the will of God must be obeyed, is both as simple and as utterly sincere as it is in Virgil. As Digory finds in *The Magician's Nephew*, obedience to the will of Aslan does in fact result in "everything com[ing] right" (145), but, like Digory (and Aeneas, Adam and Eve), the children and Puddleglum are asked to obey with no assurance that this will be the case. In this, they resemble Aeneas's people, whom Lewis described as "men with a vocation, men on whom a burden has been laid" (*Preface* 35).

Lewis's books also share with epic an interest in the cosmic, and the cosmos of Narnia is one that explicitly follows a mythic (or medieval) rather than scientific structure. *The Magician's Nephew* takes from *Paradise Lost* the idea of travelling between multiple worlds: Satan traverses the vast region of Chaos that stands between Hell and Earth, a sequence that forms the basis for the multiple worlds of *His Dark Materials*, and Polly and Digory are transported to the Wood between the Worlds, where they can enter other worlds through pools of water. Later, the structure of Narnia itself is examined in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader,* which centres largely around Reepicheep's desire to find Aslan's country in the far east across the sea. Over the course of this voyage, Narnia is revealed to the reader to be created along the medieval model of "a great round table [with] the waters of all the oceans endlessly pouring over her edge" (175), from the edge of which Reepicheep and the children can see "beyond the End of the World into Aslan's country" (185). Though occupied by the living rather than the dead, the journey through the different regions of the Underland of *The Silver Chair* mirrors those undertaken by epic heroes such as Aeneas. Most importantly, the "cosmos" of Lewis's books includes depictions of divinity, and divine beings, that are meant to be taken seriously as such. Though Bacchus and the River God are a part of Narnia, as are dryads, naiads and living stars, Aslan is obviously the true divinity, described by Lewis as a "supposal" of what form Christ would take on another world rather than an allegory (cited Hooper 424).[75] Given Lewis's criticisms of Milton's God, whom he felt to be uncomfortably

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[75] The depiction of Aslan has been thoroughly discussed by other critics, though it is interesting to note that Lewis himself cites the Holy Grail in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* as inspirations for his descriptions of Aslan (Hooper 441-2).

anthropomorphised rather than "awful, mysterious, and vague" (130), it is clear why Lewis does not choose to depict a Narnian version of God beyond the name of the "Emperor-over-Sea", and why he avoids the "bad tradition ... of trying to make Heaven too like Olympus" (131) by allowing only glimpses of Aslan's country until the very end of the series. Cumulatively, Narnia is explored as a world that exists in a classical or medieval universe, where the different regions of heaven and hell can be accessed and explored at will.

This aspect of epic, of course, is again precisely what critics argue is no longer valid in a modern world where even child readers know that "it is not a deep-browed god who causes thunder, and … recognise a microbe and not Apollo as the source of the dreadful plague in Book 1 of the *Iliad*" (Kitchell 23). Lewis, however, employs the cosmic structures that epic has made familiar to argue not for their "intellectual vitality" but for their "imaginative beauty" (Downing 111). In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis uses Ransom's experience of space to deliberately counter scientific expectations with those of epic: where he had imagined "black, cold vacuity" he instead finds "an empyrean ocean of radiance" that reminds him of *Comus*'s "'happy climes that ly / Where day never shuts his eye / Up in the broad fields of the sky.' [Ransom] quoted Milton's words to himself lovingly, at this time and often" (26-7). As Gray points out, the passage overtly opposes the scientific rationalism of Lewis's scientist character Weston with myth, allowing "the reader to 'taste' and 'feel' the beauty of the Heavens ... in a way which reveals the poverty of Weston's desiccated worldview" (121). Lewis himself did not believe that even science fiction needed to be "strictly tied to scientific probabilities. It is their wonder, or beauty, or strangeness that matters" (cited Gray 119). Likewise, the fact that Narnia is flat like a table is first dismissed by Eustace as "all rot" (175), though conceded to be possible because Narnia is not our world. Clearly, this concession works only by the rules of a children's book, and, even allowing for Narnia to be part of another plane of reality entirely, makes no scientific sense. This does not matter, though, because Eustace's comment is immediately followed by Caspian's excitement over round worlds and Edmund's assurance that "there's nothing particularly exciting about the idea of a round world when you're there" (176): what matters, it is implied, is not that Narnia's structure is scientifically plausible, but that it is more exciting than what we know to be reality. In the process, Lewis advocates a mythic understanding of the universe in the terms Puddleglum employs to argue for the existence of a world above ground:

> In that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones ... We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make up a play-world that licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play-world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a

Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. (*SC* 156-7)

In this respect, Lewis's use of this material is quite different from that of Virgil or Milton, who do not need to argue for the beauty or importance of concepts which are accepted within their culture to be true: as Toohey says of Roman epic, the traditional purpose of the genre is to affirm communal values and assumes the agreement and good-will of its target audience (33). The use of epic to insist on the value of epic, and even of religious epic, in the modern world can also be seen in Adams's *Watership Down.* There, the value of stories and storytelling is affirmed largely by the contrast of Hazel's rabbits with Cowslip's burrow, the latter representing a cynical modern viewpoint. Writing twenty years earlier, Lewis, too, often sets his heroes and heroines against forces that deny the value of mythology, fairy tales and the numinous. Hinten points out that the culture of the Calormenes in *The Horse and his Boy* is deliberately devoid of mythology, based instead around instructive proverbs (67). Caspian's evil uncle likewise tries to prevent him from hearing the (true) "fairy tales" of Narnia after which he hungers, and Eustace's initial awfulness is signalled by his fondness for "books of information ... [with] pictures of grain elevators" (7) rather than "the sort of books those Pevensie kids read" (60). Most insidiously, the Green Witch in *The Silver Chair* attempts to bewitch them with a philosophical argument for reductionist materialism, arguing not only that the world outside is not real, but that it is "a tale, a children's story" (153) for which they are "too old" (155).

The real antithesis of the epic worldview is seen in characters such as Uncle Andrew. Uncle Andrew's prototype can be seen in Weston of *Out of the Silent Planet*, the scientist who takes Ransom to Mars to serve, or so he and his partner believe, as a "human sacrifice" (28) for the inhabitants of Malacandra. As Gray discusses, Weston's "desperately immoral" (Lewis, cited Gray 120) worldview – which Lewis terms 'Westonism' – is "the theory that the development of human technology would allow humans to colonise other planets, and so to live forever" (120) by moving continually to new planets as the old planets die; this, to him, justifies any action he may take in the achievement of his goals. Uncle Andrew similarly sees the voyage to another world as a "great experiment" (24), requiring the sacrifice of others rather than himself; he later, like Weston's ironically named partner Devine, sees it in terms of its "commercial properties" (129). For both, it is not the possibility of other worlds or, in Uncle Andrew's case, even magic, that is unacceptable, but a particular experience of the numinous (what Lewis termed "Joy") that is outside their materialistic worldviews. Moreover, for both, this inability to comprehend climaxes in a scene where they are surrounded by the inhabitants of a world whose language they cannot understand while their companions can, and inadvertently become comic figures as a result. Weston's inability to speak the language of the people of Malacandra is partially symbolic, but also realistic: Ransom is a

philologist, and Weston is not. Uncle Andrew's inability to understand the Narnian animals, by contrast, is self-willed and self-inflicted:

> When the Lion had first begun singing, long ago when it was still quite dark, he had realised that the noise was a song. And he had disliked the song very much. It made him think and feel things he did not want to think and feel. Then, when the sun rose and he saw that the singer was a lion ("only a lion," as he said to himself) he tried his hardest to make believe that it wasn't singing and never had been singing – only roaring as any lion might in a zoo in our own world ... Now the trouble with trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. Soon he couldn't have heard anything else even if he had wanted to. (145-6)

The point is made more explicitly in *The Last Battle*, published later but written earlier or concurrently, in the form of the dwarves whose refusal to be "taken in" renders them unable to see, hear, smell or taste the wonders through the stable door. As Aslan explains:

> They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison, and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out. (141)

For both Uncle Andrew and the dwarves, rationalism is linked to fear and to wilful blindness, a refusal to accept imaginative truths that conflict with their own limited understanding of the universe. Though Gray sees the dwarves as the "real villains" (147) of *The Last Battle*, in fact both they and Uncle Andrew are treated sympathetically by the characters in the text: in both cases, one of the children asks Aslan to help them, and Aslan regrets his inability to rescue them from the "torments [they] have devised for [themselves]" (*MN* 198).[76] Closing the mind to myth not only keeps magic out, but traps the Westons of the world in prisons of their own making: in effect, they are forced to live in the world as they believe it to be.

The final volume of the *Chronicles* sees a return to overt epic, in darker and more concentrated form than before. From the beginning, the world of "the last days of Narnia" (1) is noticeably more serious in tone. While the other stories begin with the children of our world – with the exception of *The Horse and His Boy*, which begins with a child of Narnia – Jill and Eustace do not enter the story until Chapter Five. Instead, after the animal fable-like first chapter, our hero is a warrior and

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[76] Weston, too, becomes in *Perelandra* an object of pity to Ransom rather than hatred after he, like Shift in *The Last Battle*, calls on an evil force he does not believe in and subsequently finds himself at its mercy.

"the Last of the Kings of Narnia" (17), as befits a doomed heroic world. Tirian is not a boy like Caspian or a mythical creature, but a man "between twenty and twenty-five years old", with shoulders "broad and strong" and "limbs full of hard muscle" (17), and we are told that he and Jewel the unicorn have previously fought in "the wars" (18). As a result, the heroes speak at least in the romantic register if not the epic, and the book shares with both epic and romance a preoccupation with correct battle etiquette and hospitality: an early crisis of the book comes when Jewel and Tirian, in anger, kill two unarmed Calormenes and are "dishonoured forever" (19). The last battle itself climaxes in the desperate last stand – "the defence of a narrow place against odds" (Ker 5) – that typifies Northern heroic epic and poetry such as *The Battle of Maldon*. Eustace, Jill, Tirian and their friends find themselves pressed by overwhelming odds against the stable door, aware that they are "doomed" and that each can only hope to, in Tirian's words, "sell his life as dearly as he could" (124). This motif in children's literature is usually followed by a reprieve from death, but in one sense this is not true of *The Last Battle*. While Tirian at least is not explicitly killed, he is forced through the stable door that symbolises death, and, at the close of the book, all the major characters are indeed revealed to be dead.

This battle is not merely the end of the heroes' lives, but the end of the world itself. As a result, *The Last Battle* also sees a return to the explicitly religious, and indeed Miltonic, subject matter of *The Magician's Nephew*. Bradbrook, defining the romantic elements of *Le Morte Darthur* as distinct from the epic, argues that

> it is quite exceptional for romances to carry religious overtones, as in the great fourteenth-century poem of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In Malory, the *Tale of the Sankgreal* is a separate story, in which the religious is simply a particular department of the marvellous. (69)

While Lewis might have disagreed, the idea of the religious as a "department of the marvellous" is one that could perhaps be applied to many of the religious overtones (or undertones) of the *Narnia* books: Reepicheep's quest for Aslan's country in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, for example, is very much in the vein of the quest for the Holy Grail, and events such as Aslan's Christ-like Resurrection are framed as Deep Magic rather than divine. The end of *The Last Battle*, however, is very clearly of cosmic import, and, at least within the world of the story, "records a real, irreversible, unrepeatable process in the history of the universe" (Lewis *Preface* 133). *The Magician's Nephew* saw the creation of Narnia, details of which echo the account of the world's creation in *Paradise Lost*: the animals in Narnia, most strikingly, grow from "humps" in the

"crumbled earth" (131) just as those in *Paradise Lost* grow as "the crumbled earth above them threw / In hillocks" (7.468-9) (Hardy 115). *The Last Battle* sees its end, and while the echo of imagery is less explicit (Lewis felt the section of *Paradise Lost* that deals with, among other events, Judgement Day, to be "curiously bad" (*Preface* 129)), Lewis follows Milton in providing within a single narrative a "sacred history" (129) of a world from its first moment to its last. Hinten argues that Lewis's depiction of the Last Day is free from non-Biblical allusion (85), but in fact the details of Narnia's apocalypse clearly echo not only the Biblical Revelations, but also the Norse Ragnarok. The Seeress in the *Poetic Edda* describes the world ending as "the sun turns black, earth sinks into the sea, / the bright stars vanish from the sky" ("Seeress's Prophecy" 57). Perhaps coincidentally, Tirian earlier describes the idea of Aslan committing acts of cruelty as "if the sun rose one day and were a black sun" (29). When the world does end, the Sun is finally squeezed out by "the great Time-giant" in one hand "as you would squeeze an orange" (149), after the sea has risen to cover Narnia and the stars have indeed fallen from the sky.[77] Narnia ends, like Northern epic, in a battle of mutual destruction, and like *Paradise Lost*, with a vision of the end of the world. In its depiction of a passing of an age of chivalry and heroism, it can perhaps be compared with *Le Morte Darthur*, and the tears Lucy sheds for "all that lies dead and frozen behind that door" (150) are the *Aeneid*'s *lacrimae rerum*.

The Last Battle itself, however, does not end with the end of the world, but continues beyond it, and at the same time beyond the limits of the epic genre. The epic, as critics universally agree, is traditionally the story of mortals in the mortal world, albeit the mortal world "enlarged and ennobled" (Bradbrook 69); the world beyond the stable door, where "the further in you go, the bigger everything gets" (170), has become too big for the form, as have the now-immortal (or dead) heroes. Though it is common for epic poetry to end with the death of a mortal hero – whether Beowulf, Hector or even Turnus – it does not follow them beyond their funerals. Lewis does, and, unsurprisingly, what lies beyond epic is a glimpse of heaven. For Lewis, whose religious conversion took the form of understanding the story of Christ as a myth that "*really happened*" (cited Wilson 126), this movement to religious revelation is not a shift in genre, but the natural culmination of such myth. As Downing summarises, Lewis saw pagan mythology as "a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination" (Lewis, cited 110):

Rather than accepting that there was a fundamental shift between the classical world and the

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[77]   Downing points out that Lewis's depictions of the stars as beings casts a different, more comforting light on the image of falling stars that appears in both Norse and Christian images of the apocalypse: here "All the stars were falling: Aslan had called them home" (143), and continue to light the world from where they stand in the crowd (Downing 129).

Christian era, Lewis continually stressed the continuity between the pagan and the Christian … He called paganism 'the childhood of religion … a prophetic dream.' For him, paganism was an anticipation, Christianity the fulfilment". (Downing 108-109)

A similar idea is given voice in the book by Jewel upon his arrival in heaven when he declares that "the reason why we loved the old Narnia was that it sometimes looked a little like this" (162): the reason we love epic, Lewis might have argued, is because sometimes it looks a little like religion. In the final paragraph of the book, as the trappings of myth fall away and "He [Aslan] no longer looked to them like a lion" (173),[78] the book passes beyond not only the realms of epic but of story and language itself: events become "so great and beautiful that [Lewis] cannot write them" (173). In the process, they cease to be epic events, where "we, as readers, can step aside and see the faces of both God and man in profile", and become a religious experience where "man faces God and God faces man" (Lewis *Preface* 132).

Ultimately, *The Chronicles of Narnia* balance the concerns of the epic and the form of a children's book with remarkable deftness, providing a complete history of a world from beginning to end within the lifetime of a single group of children: as Digory observes, "I saw it [Narnia] begin ... I did not think I would live to see it die" (150). Shifting the epic to the children's fairy tale, with the form's "severe restraints on description ... [and] inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and 'gas'" ("Sometimes Fairy Stories" 46), enables Lewis to strip the epic of the aspects that are emotionally distancing: indeed, the narrator continually encourages children to relate his descriptions to their own experiences. Children's literature's "inflexible traditionalism" (46), however, allows for the heart of epic – its transmutation of religion into myth, its high seriousness, its interest in "courage, heroism, faith, honour, dignity, and transcendence" (Gillian Adams 109), and its ability to encompass the cosmic and the heroic – to be retained. It is this, perhaps, that enables the children's story, for Lewis, to "say best what's to be said", as to some degree it does for Adams, White and Tolkien. "What's to be said" is for Lewis not only moral or heroic but also religious, and the story of Aslan is to Lewis the story of a real being whom the mythic framework only allows to be seen in a different light. *The Chronicles of Narnia* can therefore be seen as, in the terms Lewis spoke of *Paradise Lost*, an "epic holiday" (*Preface* 132), and it is fitting that when Aslan's true identity is, though obliquely, revealed and we enter "the world of religion ... our epic holiday is over" (132). At its end, however, comes Aslan's promise that with the end of epic, "the

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[78] Downing points out that Lewis's depictions of the stars as beings casts a different, more comforting light on the image of falling stars that appears in both Norse and Christian images of the apocalypse: here "All the stars were falling: Aslan had called them home" (143), and continue to light the world from where they stand in the crowd (Downing 129).

term is over: the holidays have begun" (173). In this sense, if epic is a "holiday" from religion, it is also a preparation for it. Narnia is, after all, an epic for children, just as myth is "the childhood of religion" (Lewis, cited Downing 109); for Lewis, the "very reason" for both is that, in Aslan's words, "by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there" (*DT* 188). While books such as *Watership Down* and *His Dark Materials* can be seen as true epic disguised as children's story, *The Chronicles of Narnia* present epic and children's story as, beneath the surface details of form and style, essentially one and the same, as they do religion and fantasy, faith and imagination, and truth and story.

"*Paradise Lost* in Three Volumes for Teenagers": Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

"Oh, Paul, it is you who are changed," said Anne. "You have grown too old for the rock people. They like only children for playfellows. I am afraid the Twin Sailors will never again come to you in the pearly, enchanted boat with the sail of moonshine; and the Golden Lady will play no more for you on her golden harp. Even Nora will not meet you much longer. You must pay the penalty of growing up, Paul. You must leave fairyland behind you."
– L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of the Island* 214-15

Many of the trends identified in the relationship between children's literature and epic culminate in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Published between 1995 and 2000, the trilogy adapts a single epic – Milton's *Paradise Lost* – into a new epic for a young audience, much as Richard Adams's *Watership Down* does with the *Aeneid*. Like Tolkien, Pullman draws from a number of mythological sources; like Lewis, whose work the trilogy most resembles, these sources are also Biblical, and by the end of the text Pullman is grappling overtly with theological questions. Where Pullman differs, as this chapter will discuss, is in his attempt to use epic material not to uphold epic ideals, but to argue against these ideals and those of earlier children's fantasy writers working in the same tradition. These attempts, though usually unsuccessful, raise important questions about what an epic can or cannot be made to argue, as well as the contradictory nature of Pullman's own relationship with children's fantasy.

The relationship between Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy and Milton's *Paradise Lost* is, as William Oram puts it, "a critical commonplace" ("Lucretius and Milton in *His Dark Materials*"). Pullman's story of telling his publisher over lunch that he wished to write "*Paradise Lost* in three volumes for teenagers"[79] is well-known, and the connection cemented by his acknowledgement of Milton's epic – as well as Heinreich von Kleist's 1812 essay "On the Marionette Theatre" and the works of William Blake – at the close of *The Amber Spyglass*. In subsequent interviews, Pullman has talked openly of his desire to engage with and subvert the ideas of fate, divine obedience, sin and innocence raised by *Paradise Lost* and its Biblical source. Slightly varying his account of the series' conception in an interview with *More Intelligent Life*, Pullman claimed that when he began writing, he realised early that he was telling the same story as Milton:

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[79]

This raises the question of the books' intended audience, and whether they should be categorised as children's or YA literature (they are also marketed for adults). Pullman himself uses the terms interchangeably, as seen in his Carnegie Award acceptance speech; as a result, it seems valid to discuss them as children's books akin to those he champions in "The Republic of Heaven".

but I didn't think on the one hand, "Oh, bugger, I'm telling the same story," or, on the other hand, "Oh great, I can copy it." I just realised that in his patch Milton had been working on the same thing. ("Philip Pullman's Dark Arts")

In this, Pullman joins an array of "both major and minor practitioners of epic" who operate "with an unusual sense of their ancestors, and acknowledged *pietas*" (Merchant "Epic in Translation" 246). Like T.H. White, who saw himself as participating in an Arthurian tradition that included Geoffrey of Monmouth, Malory, Spenser, the pre-Raphaelites and Tennyson, Pullman aligns himself freely with a tradition of writers, among them Milton and the Romantics, who engage with the religious and cultural implications of the Biblical Fall.

If Pullman joins a tradition of epic writers addressing epic themes, he also of course joins a tradition of writers choosing to do so through children's fiction. Unlike White, Tolkien, Lewis and Adams, who had not written professionally for children before their forays into both epic and children's literature, Pullman had already been a successful children's author for some years before embarking upon the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, making his choice of genre perhaps less surprising than it might have been for his predecessors. In any case, Pullman himself has, characteristically, stated the reasons for his partiality towards children's literature on multiple occasions. As Gray points out, Pullman shares with Lewis and Tolkien a "deep suspicion of ... the modernist contempt for 'the story'" (154), as well as a belief in children's literature as the natural home for epic themes in a postmodern literary culture. In a close echo of Lewis's essay "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said", Pullman claimed in his Carnegie Award acceptance speech that "There are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children's book". As he goes to explain:

> The reason for that is that in adult literary fiction, stories are there on sufferance. Other things are felt to be more important: technique, style, literary knowingness. Adult writers who deal in straightforward stories find themselves sidelined into a genre such as crime or science fiction, where no one expects literary craftsmanship … But what characterizes the best of children's authors is that they're not embarrassed to tell stories. ("Carnegie Medal Acceptance Speech")

Elsewhere, he discusses his belief in the ability of children's books to "express[...] just about any idea, and illuminat[e] just about any subject" – including, most importantly for his purposes, "the

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death of God and its consequences" ("The Republic of Heaven" 654).

What is surprising, then, is not Pullman's "acknowledged *pietas*" towards his epic predecessors nor his decision to emulate them in the form of children's fantasy, but his extreme *lack* of *pietas* for other aspects of the tradition in which he finds himself subsequently participating. While openly attributing his books to the influence of epic, Pullman has continually and forcefully denied his connection to traditional fantasy, describing his trilogy instead as a work of "stark realism" ("Talking to Philip Pullman" 131) and maintaining that

> I don't like fantasy. The only thing about fantasy that interested me as I was writing this was the freedom to invent imagery such as the daemon; but that was only interesting because I could use it to say something truthful and realistic about human nature. If it were just picturesque or ornamental, I wouldn't be interested. (cited Gray 152)

The idea that the use of "imagery such as the daemon" to "say something truthful and realistic about human nature" is the very nature of fantasy rather than an innovation of Pullman's to an "ornamental" genre is not something he is willing to acknowledge, and his outspoken condemnation of most fantasy as "trash" (cited Gray 153) is understandably alienating to readers of his books (who are, by definition, readers of fantasy). Likewise, his attack on Lewis, whose series he has famously termed "one of the most ugly and poisonous things I've ever read" ("The Dark Side of Narnia"), and on Tolkien, in turn deemed "essentially trivial" ("Philip Pullman's Dark Arts"), indicate not merely a dislike of these writers, but a desire to distance his own fiction from that of his predecessors.

It is equally apparent, though, that Pullman actually engages with Lewis in particular as much if not more than he engages with Blake and *Paradise Lost*. Pullman himself has acknowledged the end of *The Amber Spyglass* as a deliberate counter to the end of *The Chronicles of Narnia,* and many critics (among them Naomi Wood, William Gray, Daniel Hade and Marek Ozeiwicz) have demonstrated the ideological as well as stylistic similarities between the two writers' works. It is telling that in the process, such critics often draw attention to the way in which Pullman's readings of Lewis's *Narnia* series – which he variously interprets as racist, misogynist, sadomasochistic and "life-hating" ("Dark Side of Narnia") – arguably distort or simply misread Lewis's books. As has been argued earlier, the epic tradition has often been characterised by its ability to "refer back to and revise what went before" (Bates ix), frequently in ways that contradict or modify the ideas of earlier texts. Pullman's works follow this tradition of revision to an extreme: as Gray discusses, Pullman

"evidently feels a need to misread Lewis's fantasy fiction" – and, indeed, the nature of fantasy fiction in general – "systematically ... in a way that arguably turns it into something that is rather different" from what it actually is, in order to position himself against it (159). In this, Pullman exemplifies what Harold Bloom, in his 1973 book *The Anxiety of Influence,* terms a *clinamen,* a term borrowed from Lecretius. Bloom defines this as a "poetic misreading or misprision proper" in which a poet

> swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* against it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction the new poem moves. (14)

By deliberately misreading Lewis, Pullman attempts to avoid the "anxiety of influence" in the way Bloom describes: insisting that he is not influenced by Lewis, but rather correcting him.[80]

The effect of this is to enable Pullman to position himself not merely as a participant in an epic tradition, but as an opponent in an epic argument, whose work sets out to counter the ideas he attributes to "what went before". This, in fact, also holds true for Pullman's relationship with *Paradise Lost,* despite his evident and self-professed regard for Milton's epic. The proem of *Paradise Lost*, after all, promises to "justify the ways of God to Man"; Pullman, in contrast, wrote his books to argue that the ways of God are essentially unjustifiable:

> Eve must fall. Lyra must be tempted. It is the Church, the ostensibly good guys, who are trying to protect her, and we are with Satan this time, as it were. But this time Satan is understood to be good rather than evil … [The Fall is] the best thing, the most important thing that ever happened to us, and if we had our heads straight on this issue, we would have churches dedicated to Eve instead of the Virgin Mary. That's basically it. ("Talking to Philip Pullman" 119)

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[80] Pullman tellingly shies away from the term "influence" with regard to Lewis during an interview with *The Lion and the Unicorn*, immediately following it with a profession of general ignorance about the fantasy genre and, typically, the claim that his work is not fantasy at all:
PP: [Lewis] was a master craftsman in all sorts of ways but a thoroughly creepy . . . shall I say, *influence*. Has he influenced? Yes, I suppose he has.
Q: Oh, terrifically! Fantasy writers particularly.
PP: This is where I'm at a disadvantage. People talk to me, or talk about me, as if I were a fantasy writer, and then expect me to know all about other fantasy writers. *Northern Lights* is not a fantasy. It's a work of stark realism. I don't read fantasy. ("Talking to Philip Pullman" 131)

As Isabel Walker Ross points out, this is not only a Romantic or neo-Romantic reading, as both William Gray and Burton Hatlen have convincingly argued, but a deliberate and effective misreading in the mould of Bloom's theory: "it swerves from and empties the poem of its original meaning, then completes it so that it has a new meaning" (Ross 69). In this "misreading", Milton's God becomes not merely a tyrant (as he has been read by the Romantics) but no real God at all, rather a lying angel to whom no obedience is owed. Meanwhile, the figure of Satan is not wholly cast as hero, as in Romantic readings, but split into two (human) characters, the morally ambiguous but charismatic "rebel" Lord Asriel and the caring and curious "serpent" Mary Malone. Most crucially, original sin is figured by Pullman as awareness of sexuality, reconfiguring the Fall as a growth of adult self-consciousness that leads to adolescence, and subsequently adulthood. As John Rowe Townsend points out, in *Paradise Lost*

> Eve's sin is not sex; it is disobedience. Milton in fact puts emphasis on the innocent sexual pleasure of Adam and Eve, which he describes with a sensuousness that may surprise those who think of him as a grim Puritan killjoy. The rehabilitation of sexual enjoyment is not really one of the things that correcting Milton needs to be about. (420)

Pullman is not merely using the architecture of a mythological or religious system in which he does not believe, as other writers may do with classical or Arthurian mythology, but using that system – or rather a "caricature" (Gray 1) of that system – to argue against itself, and to appropriate its images for a mythology of his own.

This mythology, which Pullman terms "The Republic of Heaven" both in the books and in an essay of the same name, is essentially secular humanist epic in the way that C.S. Lewis's books are Christian epic. Its exact nature and its relationship to its predecessors has been the subject of a great deal of critical attention, and will be explored in the body of this chapter. Its intentions are outlined by Pullman in his essay "The Republic of Heaven", where he discusses the need for new myths that supplant the old, particularly Christian, stories of humanity's origins and purpose. Working from the premise that the old beliefs and certainties are dead, he argues:

> We need a myth, we need a story, because it's no good persuading people to commit themselves to an idea on the grounds that it's reasonable. How much effect would the Bible have had for generations and generations if it had just been a collection of laws and genealogies? What seized the mind and captured the heart were the stories it contains. (666)

As he goes on to describe, stories – including epic – become a means to transmit the moral code of the Republic of Heaven, and contain metaphorical truth intended to be directly applied to the real world. They must "explain what our true purpose is ... Our purpose is to understand and to help others to understand, to explore, to speculate, to imagine. And that purpose has a moral force" (665). Moreover, they "must provide a sort of framework for understanding why some things are good and others are bad", "make it clear that trying to restrict understanding and put knowledge in chains is bad", and finally "give us a way of accepting death" that does not entail an afterlife (665-666).

The didactic responsibility that Pullman places on mythology is perhaps one reason, consciously or unconsciously, that he sees its themes as best suited for "books that are read by children" ("Republic of Heaven" 667). In this context, the form of the children's book and its resulting child protagonists becomes crucial to the revision of *Paradise Lost*. By Lewis's reading of Milton, Adam and Eve were "never young, never immature or undeveloped. They were created full-grown and perfect" (*Preface* 116). Pullman, by contrast, envisions them as children at least in mind, awaiting the acquisition of knowledge that will bring them to adulthood; Will and Lyra, therefore, are physically children on the cusp of adolescence. Their epic is therefore not truly a Fall or indeed a Redemption, but a coming of age. Lewis, as discussed earlier, argues that "no man who has once read [the *Aeneid*] with full perception [of its religious themes] remains an adolescent" (*Preface* 37). In Pullman, too, the voyage through epic is one of growth and perception, but where Lewis implies a road to the beliefs on which epic is founded, Pullman's novel advocates a movement away from these same beliefs towards the "real" world.

In the process, Pullman can be seen as using epic to argue for the end of epic, or at least suggesting a way that it must be adapted if it is to survive. Despite the intense importance of stories and even of fantasies in *His Dark Materials*, they are in the end merely a path towards realism, and to "lived" stories of the material world. Lyra, in a scene that Pullman describes as the heart of the trilogy, learns to cease lying and make-believe and to begin to tell stories of her own life; crucially, the stories of clay-fights she tells in the Underworld could easily have taken place in our world. Meanwhile, Mary's life-story – again, a story without fantastic elements – becomes the catalyst for the salvation of the worlds. At the end of the trilogy, windows to strange and wonderful realms close, "lies and fantasies" (*AS* 332) are replaced with lived experiences, futures are fixed, and Will and Lyra must learn to live responsible lives in their own, material, world, because "there [is]n't any elsewhere" (*AS* 548). In this, Pullman's code truly does reverse – although, characteristically, also closely align with – that of Lewis, for whom epic and fantasy are a path towards religious stories of

the spiritual world. If for Lewis, epic and fantasy are beautiful because they allow a glimpse of the divine, for Pullman epic and fantasy are valuable because they offer a glimpse of reality. Both, perhaps, would call this "something truthful".

If this is Pullman's intention, his success remains ambiguous. The end of *The Amber Spyglass* does indeed see the undoing of epic, and the characters resuming everyday lives in the manner Pullman illustrates as representative of "The Republic of Heaven". Lyra's stated code on the last page of *The Amber Spyglass*, and by extension Pullman's, is to be "cheerful and kind and curious and brave and patient" (548). Nobody, Lewis included, would be likely to complain that these are not excellent qualities. They are far less exalted versions, though, of Lewis's and Tolkien's corresponding emphasis on joy, goodness, faith, courage and endurance – and no self-respecting epic hero ends their epic by finally agreeing to go to school. At the same time, the first two volumes of the trilogy, and indeed elements of its conclusion, do present an epic world, and it is undeniably these elements that give the story its imaginative strength. As Naomi Wood argues:

> While [Lyra's] paean to human creativity and resourcefulness is inspiring, it undercuts the basis of fantasy writing. Shouldn't we then read and write realism alone, based on the possibilities inherent in 'where we are'? … Doesn't the romance form inevitably glamorise the very ideology against which Lyra and her companions have been fighting? (256)

Thus, to illustrate the lack of an afterlife, Pullman's epic presents us with an afterlife: first, the classical underworld of the Harpies, and then an existence as atoms in which a form of continued consciousness is strongly implied. To illustrate the necessity of using their "full lives" to "study and think and work hard" (*AS* 548), the books present us with characters fighting, travelling between and across fantastic landscapes, and, in many cases, dying heroically. And, above all, to illustrate the need for realism, Pullman presents us with a work that harks back to traditional epic and mythology. Such paradoxes, as Wood points out, demonstrate "the strength and autonomy of the form" *His Dark Materials* uses, and the way in which such a form "intractably unsettle[s]" the author's stated goals (256-7). If children's fantasy provides a site for epic themes, it also perhaps insists on the underlying world-view of these epic themes – on a particular version of "courage, heroism, faith, honour, dignity, and transcendence" (Gillian Adams 109) – in a way that makes postmodern scepticism impossible to maintain.

"Eve Must Fall": *His Dark Materials* **as a Revision of** *Paradise Lost*

The relationship between *His Dark Materials* and epic could be argued even without Pullman's acknowledgement of *Paradise Lost*. As Scally argues, the trilogy satisfies all five of the features of epic laid out by Abrams:

> Lyra is a "figure of great national or even cosmic importance;" the setting of the trilogy is "worldwide, or even larger;" "the action involves superhuman deeds in battle" and also "a long, arduous, and dangerous journey intrepidly accomplished" as Lyra travels across multiple worlds ... "Gods and other supernatural beings take an interest or an active part" in the form of witches, angels and agents of the Authority who follow, assist or attempt to destroy Lyra. (210)

A "ceremonial style" of narration, the problematic element of epic for children's literature, is taken up, as it is by Tolkien and Adams, to signify moments of epic grandeur within the narrative. Both Gray and Scally point out that Iorek's fight with the usurper bear king Iofur Raknison is elevated with deliberate use of epic simile:

> Like two great masses of rock balanced on adjoining peaks and shaken loose by an earthquake, that bound down the mountainsides gathering speed, leaping over crevasses and knocking trees into splinters, until they crash into each other so hard that both are smashed to powder and flying chips of stone: that was how the two bears came together. (*NL* 354)

Moreover, the narration is deliberately objective and distancing, more so than is common in children's literature. Wood compares Pullman's narrative voice to a "documentary with very little voice-over" (244), describing characters and actions rather than explaining as Lewis and Tolkien do in their children's books. This cinematic quality, with its reliance on dialogue to convey the emotional states of the characters, is not unlike that of classical epic; although, where Homer and Virgil are admiring in the epithets applied to their heroes, Pullman is often condescending towards his (Lyra, famously, is described as a "coarse and greedy little savage" (*NL* 36)). The combination of recognisable epic tropes and language with the explicit use of *Paradise Lost*, however, intensifies "the natural epic slant of children's fantasy" (Scally 211), and invites readers to read the book in the context of Milton and the epic tradition. Within this context, Pullman attempts to deliberately undermine and rewrite Milton's epic through the use of Milton's own imagery and themes.

Perhaps the most obvious and most controversial of these rewritings is Pullman's depiction of

Christianity and the Christian (or perhaps the Catholic) church. Pullman's desire to attack organised religion has been well-documented, and the trilogy's Church and its members are depicted as wholly and cartoonishly evil to an extent that even Pullman has conceded to be an "artistic flaw" ("Heat and Dust"): as Gray states, "Whatever Pullman's myth is, it seems to be dependent on the myth of a totally depraved Christianity ... There is something disturbing in a myth that has to invest so much time and energy in demonizing its significant other" (173).[81] In fact, the idea of a corrupt religious order can be seen to have roots in *Paradise Lost*, as Michael describes how

> Wolves shall succeed as teacher, grievous wolves,
>
> Who all the sacred mysteries of heaven
>
> To their own vile advantages shall turn
>
> Of lucre and ambition, and the truth
>
> With superstitions and traditions taint … (12.508-512)

As Ross and Carole Scott point out, however, Pullman is not merely arguing that the church that serves God has grown corrupt but that God himself is corrupt. Milton's God displays characteristics that have been read, particularly in the Romantic tradition, to be tyrannical, but is nonetheless the creator of Heaven and Earth. The trilogy's Authority is not only a tyrant, but a liar: he is in fact no creator, but merely the first angel, and is now a helpless "ancient of days" who dissolves when Will and Lyra finally expose him to the air. Metatron, the angel who keeps him captive and rules in his name, is openly cruel and obsessed with human flesh. Moreover, the crimes that Pullman attributes to the Church – "cruelties and horrors all committed in the name of the Authority, all designed to destroy the joys and the truthfulness of life" (*SK* 283) – are seen as directly attributable to the angels rather than a corrupt religious order working in their name: Asriel, according to the witch Ruta Skadi, "showed [her] that to rebel [against the Authority] was right and just, when you considered what the agents of the Authority did in his name" (*SK* 283). Wood argues that in the *Narnia* books Lewis "aware of [the church's] dismal history, perhaps, exchanges for the institutionalised church a vision of individual relationships with the divine" (243); Pullman, by contrast, transposes the

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[81]   The evil of the Christian church in our world is even more explicit in a partial early draft of *The Subtle Knife*. In this version, Will's mentally disturbed mother commits suicide after a barbaric exorcism carried out by local priests: "In their scheme of things," we are told, "a disordered mind was due to only one thing, and that was the influence of Satan. These inhabitants of late twentieth-century England, with their mobile phones and fax machines and computer databases, were convinced that Elaine Parry was possessed by the devil" (The Subtle Knife Partial TS 42). Will kills the priest responsible in blind fury – Will "[falls] on the man with such savagery that if he hadn't broken his skull on the hall table he would have been dead a minute or so later from the blows Will was raining on his face" (43) – and it is this which occasions his flight into Cittagazze. It is unclear which way this plot would have developed, but Pullman's summary of the draft has Will later gladly agreeing to join Asriel's cause, "most important and noble cause in human history … because the people responsible for his mother's death were religious fanatics, and he is joyful to find himself ranged against the source of their zeal" (Summary TS).

documented offences of institutionalised religion onto the divine. There is no difference in *His Dark Materials,* as there is in Milton, between the wrongs done by the Church and the will of the angels, and to rebel against one is to rebel against the other.

An equally obvious response to *Paradise Lost* is the character of Lord Asriel, whose role as leader of the rebellion against the Authority explicitly links him with Milton's Satan. Asriel is the closest the trilogy comes to an epic hero, a warrior and a traveller characterised by extreme physical strength and bravery. Although his descriptions pick up on the overtones of barbarity and animality that characterise Lyra, Pullman treats these aspects of Asriel with reverence: he is "like a lion" (*NL* 9) and a "wild animal held in a cage too small for it" (11), with "eyes that seem to flash and glitter with savage laughter" (11) and "a face to be dominated by, or to fight: never a face to patronize or pity" (11). His power borders on the supernatural, and his fortress evokes the kingdom that the demons of *Paradise Lost* erect in Hell. Ruta Skadi describes it to the other witches:

> Sisters, it is the greatest castle you can imagine – ramparts of basalt, rearing to the skies, with wide roads coming from every direction, and on them cargoes of gunpowder, of food, or armour-plate; how has he done this? I think he must have been preparing this for aeons. He was preparing this before we were born, sisters, even though he is so much younger. ... I think he commands time, he makes it run fast or slow according to his will. (282)

Like Satan, Asriel is morally ambiguous at best, and throughout the trilogy he lies, manipulates, tortures, abuses, and at the climax of the first book murders Lyra's friend Roger. Despite this, Pullman, unlike Milton, clearly champions his rebellion and ultimately allows him to succeed in overthrowing the Authority. At the cost of their own lives, Asriel and Mrs Coulter throw themselves with Metatron into an abyss, ending the rule of the angels for all time. Asriel's epic therefore ends where Satan's begins – falling from heaven – but where Satan's fall represents a defeat, Asriel's is a triumph.

Scally argues that Asriel's demise is an indication that "the epic template offered by *Paradise Lost* is ultimately rejected by Pullman, even though the epic tradition itself is not" (209). This may be true in so far as the book rejects an epic social structure in favour of a self-governed Republic, and thus neither Asriel nor the Authority are allowed to take the throne. The end of the War in Heaven, however, is neither the climax of the book nor the aspect most important to the plot; as, indeed, it is not in *Paradise Lost*. Despite the differing conclusions to the heavenly battles, in both, the true climax occurs afterwards, with the temptation of Eve – in this case, Lyra, already explicitly

announced in the witches' prophecies to be the second Eve who will bring about another fall of mankind (*AS* 71). The difference lies in the fact that in Pullman's trilogy, Satan the rebel angel and Satan the serpent are envisioned as two separate entities.

The latter role is taken by Mary Malone, a scientist from our world. Gray has discussed Mary as a reinterpretation of Weston, the scientist who becomes the literal vessel for Satan (or a lesser demon) in Lewis's *Perelandra*: while both follow similar lines of scientific theory, blending physics and spiritualism, Mary is open-minded upon finding herself in a new world where Weston is imperialist, and "good" where Weston is "profoundly evil" (166-168). Like Lyra herself, but with the conscious knowledge of her role that Lyra is not allowed to have, Mary is enacting a part that has been ordained for her, told by the angels to "play the serpent" (*SK* 261). Unlike the Biblical and Miltonic serpent, she does not know what this role entails, nor does she intend harm to any other party. Crucially, she does not urge disobedience, to God or otherwise: although her story can be seen as Pullman trying to persuade his readers that "the Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake" (464), Mary has no need to persuade Will and Lyra of this after what they have already experienced. Instead, Mary's role as the serpent consists in "tell[ing] them stories" (456): specifically, the story of her conversion from Christianity after the taste of marzipan and the company of an attractive man recalls her previously forgotten sexual awakening.

Milton's serpent also tells Eve a story of his personal growth of consciousness, and like Mary's story it is linked with intensely evoked sensual pleasure (the smell and taste of the "alluring fruit" (9.588)). In this case, the reader knows that the stories are lies: the serpent is really Satan, who was never "as other beasts that graze / The trodden herb" and "apprehended nothing high" (9.571-4), and the fruit did not give him the ability to speak and understand as he claims. Even the innocent Eve is sceptical of the serpent's "overpraising" (9.615) of the fruit, though not his story. *His Dark Materials,* by contrast, seems to conceptualise a version of *Paradise Lost* in which the serpent is not the same as Satan, and its story is true.[82] Mary as the serpent is separate from Asriel, her story is true, and its effect on Lyra is to awaken her to "the mysteries of her own body" (Gray 166). On listening, Lyra begins to feel "something strange happen to her body" (467) and ends the story trembling with excitement at the feelings whose meaning she will "know very soon" (471). The meaning is ostensibly the nature of her feelings for Will, which have been heavily foreshadowed throughout the book and culminates in their love affair. Interestingly, though, Mary's experiences of love – or perhaps sexual attraction – are presented in her own story as entirely transient. Her

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[82] The mulefa, indeed, have such a myth. Their growth to consciousness, via the seed-pods on which they travel, is prompted by the urging of a serpent, but the serpent is apparently only a serpent, and what it urges is not forbidden.

childhood experience of love was with a boy whom she saw "half a dozen times, no more" (468), and whose appearance she no longer recalls; the man who occasioned her conversion had no lasting presence in her life; and she lived with "someone else" for nearly four years before they "decided we'd be happier not living together" (470). This seems to foreshadow the enforced briefness of the love affair of Will and Lyra. The emphasis, perhaps, is not then on love itself, as has been claimed by critics such as Sarah Zettel, but rather on the experience of (sexual) love as a step in personal development. Lyra's responses to the story are compared to "a key to a great house she hadn't known was there ... somehow inside her" (468) and "a fragile vessel brim-full of new knowledge" (471), neither of which she connects to Will at all. Though later entwined in the realisation of her attraction to Will, what Mary as the serpent actually gives Lyra is knowledge of herself as a sexual being. It is this, in keeping with the celebration of the material body as the "best part" (463) of the spirit-soul-body nature of human beings – that allows the two children to become "the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance" (497).

The power of true stories is a theme largely outside the concerns of *Paradise Lost*: although Adam before the Fall is given a great deal of knowledge by Raphael, including the story of the War in Heaven, it has no transformative power over his consciousness, and Satan's seduction of Eve, as discussed, is achieved through lies and flattery rather than truth. It has already been established as the heart of Pullman's trilogy, however, through the earlier episode in the Underworld – indeed, it is the misunderstood instruction of the ghosts freed from the Underworld to "Tell them stories" that prompts Mary's efforts.[83] Pullman deliberately draws attention to the parallels between Milton's Hell and his Underworld by prefacing Chapter 22 with lines 1.302-4 of *Paradise Lost* ("Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks in Vallombrosa") and repeating the imagery within the chapter: the ghosts speak with voices like "dry leaves falling" (312) and flee the Harpies "like dry leaves scattered by a sudden gust of wind" (313).[84] While the shared imagery aligns the ghosts with Milton's demons as prisoners of God/the Authority, Pullman's Underworld does not really share many attributes with Milton's. Instead, Pullman uses the epic motif of the voyage to the Underworld in order to construct his own myth, which here becomes quite separate from *Paradise Lost*. Lyra and Will's journey to the Underworld to seek out Roger's ghost evokes those undertaken by Odysseus and Aeneas to seek Tiresias and Anchises rather than Satan's unwilling banishment, and

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[83]   It is interesting that the "them" in the ghosts' instructions is in fact the Harpies, and not Will and Lyra at all; and yet, Mary's attempt to obey by telling Will and Lyra stories is the crucial act of the trilogy. This, in Tolkien or Lewis, would imply the work of fate or a higher power, something which would be out of place in Pullman's universe.

[84]   The Milton quote is itself a reference to Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the simile indeed refers to ghosts rather than demons: the souls of unburied dead cluster about the banks of the Styx "thick as the leaves that with the early frost / of autumn drop and fall within the forest" (6.407-408). Ironically, these ghosts are trying desperately to *enter* the Underworld; Pullman's ghosts are trying desperately to leave.

the underworld itself is reached by crossing the river Styx by Charon's ferry and is populated by classical Harpies and ghosts: as Oram points out, the passage in which the ghosts brush against Will and Lyra "recalls the famous moments from the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* in which a mortal being attempts vainly to embrace a shade" (425). In this case, though, the attempted contact comes from the ghosts' hunger for the physical world rather than from a personal connection between the living and the dead characters, and they beg Lyra to "tell them about the things they remembered, the sun and the wind and the sky, and the things they'd forgotten, such as how to play" (328). The ensuing scene is perhaps the most overtly didactic of the trilogy: the Harpies, who have previously attacked Lyra for "lies and fantasies!" (332) after she tells one of her characteristically implausible fictions, crowd to listen "solemn and spell-bound" (331) as Lyra tells the children true stories, "playing on all their senses" (330), of a day spent in the Claybeds. When asked why, the Harpies reply:

> Because it [Lyra's story] was true ... Because she spoke the truth. Because it was nourishing. Because it was feeding us. Because we couldn't help it. Because it was true. Because we had no idea there was anything but wickedness. Because it brought us news of the world and the sun and the wind and the rain. Because it was true. (333)

In response, the chevalier Tialys ("like some miniature Greek hero" (Gray 156)) proposes an adjustment to the system currently in place. Instead of torturing the dead, they may instead demand from them stories that tell "the truth about what they've seen and touched and heard and loved and known in the world" (333). In return for these stories, the Harpies agree to escort them to the door to the outside world that Will proposes to cut with the subtle knife.

The importance of story is, of course, also crucial to Lewis's conception of epic, and indeed his worldview. The similarities between the way Pullman, Lewis and Tolkien talk about story has been meticulously catalogued by Gray and other critics: for all three, and in the works of all three, story is "something more fundamentally important than a literary phenomenon" (Gray 154). Where Lewis and his *Narnia* books argue for the power and beauty of mythic stories, however – the "made-up things [that] seem a good deal more important than the real ones" (*SC* 156) – Pullman is attempting to argue for the importance of stories about the "real" things: physical, lived experiences in the material world (as Mary's story exemplifies). The bargain with the Harpies depends as much on the rejection of "lies" as it does on the beauty of "truth", and the definition of "lies" encompasses not only the fanciful imaginings of Lyra but religious beliefs that Lewis would have deemed true. It is perhaps no coincidence that the depiction of the Underworld also contains perhaps the single most overt instance of Pullman rewriting Lewis, as Lyra and Will encounter the

ghost of a monk with "dark zealous eyes" (336). The monk, who "crosse[s] himself and murmur[s] a prayer", insists that the wasteland in which they live is actually heaven and Lyra an "agent of the Evil One himself!":

> The world we lived in was a vale of corruption and tears. Nothing there could satisfy us. But the Almighty has granted us this blessed place for all eternity, this paradise, which to the fallen soul seems bleak and barren, but which the eyes of faith see as it is, overflowing with milk and honey and resounding with the sweet hymns of angels. (336)

This, as Gray and Oram point out, reverses the famous scene in *The Last Battle* where the dwarves – "so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out" (*LB* 141) – are unable to see the beautiful world through the stable door. In Pullman's Underworld, it is the dwarves who are correct, and the friends of Narnia really are only in a stable. Only strict attention to the material world – to what they can physically see and touch – can get them out, as Will proves when he counters the monk's statement by grabbing Lyra's face "roughly" and telling her "You know that's not true ... just as well as you can feel this" (337). The stories that will free the dead are dependent on a fully experienced life in the material world, as the Harpies reserve the right to refuse help to any with nothing to tell: "If they live in the world," they insist, "they *should* see and touch and hear and learn and know things" (334). And ultimately, it is the material world that Pullman substitutes for heaven: when released from the Underworld, the dead disperse into atoms, "alive again in a thousand blades of grass, and a million leaves ... out there in the physical world which is our true home and always was" (336).

The intertwined importance of true stories and the material world not unexpectedly climaxes in the "Fall" of Lyra and Will, and replaces the original's warning against disobedience with a paean to human sexuality. Much critical attention has justifiably been given to disobedience in the trilogy, throughout which Will and Lyra navigate a world of untrustworthy adults and take responsibility for their own decisions. In the act of the Fall, however – the moment where obedience is crucial to *Paradise Lost* – neither Will nor Lyra are disobeying anybody at all.[85] The Church does seek to kill them before they fall, in what seems a darker version of Ransom's attempt to prevent a second Fall in Lewis's *Perelandra*.[86] It has not, though, *forbidden* the children from falling in love and thus

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[85] There is perhaps a nod to the idea of disobedience as Mary urges them not to go into the trees for fear of the man she has seen. Lyra duly promises, and yet their "fall" ultimately takes place in "a little wood of silver-barked trees" (489). This is neither emphasised nor relevant to their fall, however, and Mary, as the serpent, is hardly a substitute for God.

[86] Pullman himself draws the connection in an interview: "Have you read Lewis's book, *Voyage to Venus* [the alternate

falling from innocence; indeed, such a command would paradoxically mean nothing to Will and Lyra until the moment it happened. Instead, the act of the Fall is purely a "fall" from the innocence associated with childhood celibacy to knowledge of adult sexuality, connected to *Paradise Lost* through the woodland setting and the symbolism of the forbidden fruit:

> Then Lyra took one of those little red fruits. With a fast-beating heart, she turned to him and said, "Will..."
>
> And she lifted the fruit gently to his mouth. (491-2)

To Lyra, the action echoes Mary's story, in which her childhood lover touches her lips gently with marzipan, and the powerfully evoked sensuality of their love and the Edenic garden around them reinforces the ability of such stories to teach us how to live in the physical world. For the readers, though, the action echoes also Eve giving Adam "of that fair enticing fruit / With liberal hand" (9.996-7) as he is "fondly overcome with female charm" (9.999). The Fall is reinterpreted as a positive act, and Eve's dangerous "female charm" becomes a positive depiction of female sexuality. For reasons never quite explained, this act attracts the Dust on which human consciousness depends, and saves the worlds.

Given the way Pullman emphasises the sexual relationship between the Adam and Eve figures, it is, as critics such have Townsend have pointed out, strange that he proceeds to invert the end of *Paradise Lost* in a way that forces the lovers to renounce each other. Milton's Adam and Eve end their epic "hand in hand" (12.648), expelled from Eden with "the world ... all before them" (12.646). Will and Lyra, by contrast, are torn apart, forced to make their "solitary way" (12.649) separate from each other, and the worlds are not spread before them but closed down with the breaking of the subtle knife. As Gray argues, this is particularly strange "given Pullman's strictures on Lewis's apparent refusal of adolescent sexuality" (179): surely, an argument against Lewis would favour the burgeoning sexual relationship between Will and Lyra.[87] The excessively convoluted nature of the reasons for this separation (they cannot survive in each other's worlds for more than

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title of *Perelandra*]? That's one of his adult science fiction books, and the plot there is again the Temptation. There is a new Paradise on the planet Venus. There's an Eve and there's an Adam, and there's a wicked person just like Satan setting off to tempt Eve in the Garden of Eden. There's a wicked scientist from earth who's going to go there and cause her Fall, and we, the good guys, must go there and get to her before he does. There's quite a good in-built tension in that narrative. Only mine is precisely the reverse." ("Talking to Philip Pullman" 119)

[87] Gray goes on to relate the renunciation to a romance tradition of courtly love that includes Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. This relation, while convincing, nonetheless suggests that Pullman is undermining his own principles in favour of a deliberately tragic ending: nobly unconsummated courtly love, after all, is hardly the fully-experienced life that the books advocate.

ten years, *and* they need their full lives to build the Republic of Heaven, *and* they can't cut more windows because every time they do it creates a Spectre, *and* they can't leave the windows open because Dust would escape, *but* they could conceivably leave one window open as long as they taught people to follow the moral code needed to create more Dust, *but* this window must be for the Dead to leave the Underworld) is carefully calculated to make a series of interconnected moral points. The way in which Will and Lyra must choose between a happy short life together or a long life apart doing good directly corresponds to Pullman's criticism of the children's deaths in *The Last Battle*: his problem is that "the children in the *Narnia* books who have gone through all these experiences aren't allowed to stay in the world and make it better for other people – they're whisked off to heaven. That's not a Christian attitude … That's grotesque" ("Heat and Dust"). Staying in the world for as long as possible rather than dying is here given the "moral force" that Pullman ascribes to it in "The Republic of Heaven", as the children must choose it against their own happiness. Equally important is the idea that a wider social good is more important than individual wishes, even in a world that elsewhere stresses "see[ing] and touch[ing] and hear[ing] and lov[ing] and learn[ing] things" (*AS* 334) above all else. The plight of the "lovers" (528) is designed to provide no answer that does not involve hurt to them or someone else (the Dead, the potential victims of the Spectres, a world requiring Dust) to provide instead a didactic lesson in not "put[ting] themselves first" (548). Instead, they must use their "full lives" to "build ... the Republic of Heaven" (548), echoing the social heroism of earlier children's fantasy such as *Watership Down*.

In this, Will and Lyra seem destined to play out the fate of two other epic figures, Aeneas and Dido, who must similarly part in order for a new society to be formed and the greater social good achieved. Given the parallels Milton himself draws between his Adam and Eve and Aeneas and Dido,[88] it is perhaps not surprising that Will and Lyra share points of plot and characterisation with Virgil's lovers. Both couples, for example, share a crucial romantic (arguably sexual)[89] moment in a woodland setting, to which nature itself responds: in the case of Aeneas and Dido, the "primal earth" reacts with "lightning fires flash[ing]" as the "upper air" becomes "witness to their mating"

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[88]   For example, Craig Kallendorf notes that when Raphael "descends from God to warn Adam to keep his sexual passion from deflecting him from his proper duty to those who will come after him" (73), he is compared with "Maia's son" (Mercury) in a way that directly references Mercury's similar message to Aeneas in Book IV (73). For both poems, love carried to excess is a dangerous force in a world where true right can only be found through obedience to divine will.

[89]   The question of whether Will and Lyra consummate their relationship is a contentious one. Pullman, rather disingenuously, has claimed, "I don't know what they did. I wrote about the kiss – that's what I knew happened. I don't know what else they did. Maybe they did, maybe they didn't. I think they were rather young to, but still…" ("Heat and Dust"). As various critics have pointed out, however, the gap in the narrative between the kiss and the two asleep in each other's arms and the emphasis on the children later as "lovers" (*AS* 528) leaves room for interpretation. In a sense, it does not matter to the story: if they do not do so physically, they certainly do so symbolically.

(4.219-222), while the love of Will and Lyra attracts Dust back into the world. Aeneas is swiftly ordered by Mercury to leave Dido for the promised future Rome, and Lyra and Will must also separate for the promise of a future kingdom (or rather Republic). Will's anguish at their parting is conveyed in the same terms of Dido's at her abandonment: Dido's "love rises, surges in her; / she wavers on the giant tide of anger" (4.734-5); Will's "rage and despair" are detailed in nearly a full page of extended metaphor as a wave "crashing down with the whole weight of the ocean behind it against the iron-bound coast of what had to be" (*AS* 521-2). At the same time, the moral imperative is that conveyed by Aeneas, who continually "struggle[s]" against his feelings, "press[ing] / care back within his breast" (4.447-8). Will compares this same struggle to be "cheerful" and hide his feelings with "trying to hold a fighting wolf still in his arms when it wanted to claw at his face and tear out his throat; nevertheless, he did it, and he thought no one could see the effort it cost him" (539). Ironically, given Pullman's rejection of divinity, the need to part is also dictated to Will and Lyra by a divine being, in this case the angel Xaphania rather than Mercury. Unlike the cowardly Balthamos or the evil Metatron, Xaphania is portrayed with imagery similar to that Lewis employs for Aslan. She comes to Will and Lyra "with the light of another world shining on her", and the two children hold each other's hands tightly; when Lyra speaks, she finds "her voice weak and trembling" (*AS* 519). Despite her awe-inspiring appearance, "her expression was austere and compassionate, and both Will and Lyra felt as if she knew them to their hearts" (519). It is Xaphania who explains, apparently speaking in Pullman's voice, the need for Lyra to use "a lifetime of thought and effort" to regain the ability to read the aleithiometer, and lays out the heroic code of the Republic of Heaven: people must learn to "be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all ... keep their minds open and free and curious" (520). As will be discussed later, this use of epic, even religious, machinery to argue against the uses they are in fact being put to is problematic: in this case, Pullman's secular humanist edict is being delivered to his human characters by a traditionally divine being. Pullman might point out, though, that the final choice to leave open the window for the dead to leave rather than for themselves is crucially Will's and Lyra's. The intent at least is to replace the religious imperative guiding Aeneas with a humanist imperative: as Jill Paton Walsh describes it: "what, if God asks nothing of us, we may yet ask of one another" (cited Scally 206).

What is perhaps most interesting about Pullman's use of *Paradise Lost* is that it does not quite do what Pullman implied, in an interview before the publication of *The Amber Spyglass*, that it would do. There, the argument, as previously discussed, is that "Lyra must be tempted" because the Fall is "the best thing, the most important thing that ever happened to us" ("Talking to Philip Pullman" 119). The idea of the Fortunate Fall – that Eve's actions are positive and human consciousness

should be celebrated – is a well-established one in theology; Lewis takes time to argue against it in *Perelandra*. Pullman, however, finally does not so much rewrite the Biblical Fall as positive as rewrite the Fall entirely: as discussed, in *Paradise Lost*, "Eve's sin is not sex; it was disobedience", and sensual pleasure in both the natural world and human sexuality is not something that Milton (or Milton's God) denies his protagonists (Townsend 420). Pullman's decision to make his Adam and Eve figures children in a trilogy that is in part a *bildungsroman* further transforms Milton's argument. Milton's Adam and Eve are adults, "created full-grown and perfect" (Lewis *Preface* 116); Will and Lyra are children in a tradition of storytelling which requires them to come of age. They do so with their first kiss, becoming "children-no-longer-children, saturated with love" (497), and afterwards explicitly enter a world of adult responsibilities. The substitution of the adult Adam and Eve with the children Will and Lyra, and the knowledge of good and evil with the knowledge of adult sexuality, makes the fall a natural – and unconscious – process of growth rather than an avoidable decision. In *Paradise Lost,* Eve can refuse the fruit; in *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory is visibly torn between obeying Aslan or potentially saving his own mother; in *Perelandra*, Ransom's job is to stop a second Fall by means of argument first and destruction of the demon second. That Pullman's Church attempts to kill Lyra rather than persuade her to its point of view speaks to its complete evil, but also to its lack of choice: its members know very well that the only way to stop Lyra from falling from grace in Pullman's world is to stop her from growing up. The idea that Eve's Fall in Genesis and in *Paradise Lost* is *as* natural and positive a process as growing up is exactly the point that Pullman wishes to make; arguably, though, depicting it as *literally* the process of growing up is somewhat of a theological cheat. This is echoed by the manner in which the God of Milton's epic is condemned not on his own terms, but by writing a new mythology wherein the Authority is a decrepit liar and Metatron, the Authority in all but name, is a cruel man-turned-angel who has stolen his throne. As Lewis argues, Milton's epic relies on an ideal hierarchy, involving submission to correct authority. By replacing "correct authority" with a usurper and an imposter, Pullman creates an Authority that, ironically, would be deserving of rebellion by Milton's standards as well at those of the trilogy. If Pullman aims to argue with *Paradise Lost*, then, he does not do so on its own terms. Rather, he uses the epic and its underlying religious text to create a new myth: one that is, in Gray's words, "parasitic on the Christian myth" (172).

This new myth, at its heart, is about a movement away from the worldview of religious epic. By the end of the trilogy, Pullman's message is clear and explicit: fantasy, including the fantasy of a divine authority and heavenly paradise, must be rejected in favour of "true" stories of the material world and lived experience of this material world (which in turn provide the stories); death's greatest reward is a return to this world as atoms; and our role whilst living must be to make this world as

much like a mythical heaven as we can, by being "all those difficult things, like cheerful and kind and curious and brave and patient" (*AS* 548). The force with which Pullman comes to argue this worldview surpasses that of Lewis's *Narnia* books (though not of Lewis's other writings, including *Perelandra*), which largely aim to provide an experience of the Christian stories (to "make them for the first time appear in their real potency") rather than an overt argument for their truth. Pullman, by contrast, frequently puts his arguments – often repeated as his own opinions in interviews and speeches – directly in the mouths of his characters. In this didactic impulse, Pullman resembles White, similarly a "man with a message" ("Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff") who appropriates epic material to bring this message across. While White uses themes he sees as inherent in Malory to argue against the modern world, however, Pullman attempts to use the modern world – or at least, what he sees as the modern "idea that God is dead" – to argue against Milton's epic. The question of whether Pullman's theology is more convincing or attractive than that of Milton or Lewis is largely a matter of opinion, though many critics have addressed it. His use of both religious epic and children's fantasy in order to do so, though, raises the question of whether the epic tradition can be used to argue something directly contrary to the epic worldview; or whether, paradoxically, the world of the trilogy is not so contrary to this worldview as its author intends.

"The Compulsion of the Story": The Epic Form vs Authorial Intention

In her book *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*, Margaret Hourihan argues that the traditional hero myth – in which she includes epic and the fantasies of Lewis and Tolkien – is based on an adversarial way of viewing the world, one that perpetuates harmful binaries of good and evil, civilisation and chaos, and men and women. Her arguments that stories are "agents of cultural transmission" (4) and that as such "it is time to tell new stories and read the old ones differently" (8) is one with which Pullman seems to concur, given his condemnation of the "poisonous" ideas found in Lewis and his insistence upon our need for a "republican myth" to contradict them. It is within this framework – as one of these "new stories" – that *His Dark Materials* attempts in its final book to operate, and why critics who praise the final book in particular do so as "a myth about a transformation of consciousness" (Lentz 4). However, Hourihan's analysis of alternative texts that do seek to deconstruct the hero story often proves its endurance, with the majority of the examples provided by her own admission either unpopular or, more interestingly, misinterpreted by child readers who seek to fit the events into a conventional heroic pattern (223). In the case of *His Dark Materials* – certainly not an unpopular trilogy – the persistence of this heroic pattern in a myth ostensibly created to deconstruct it can be seen at the

narrative level, as Pullman increasingly returns to epic archetypes and patterns that undermine his stated message.

Perhaps the most obvious complication to Pullman's rewriting of Milton and Lewis is the character of Mrs Coulter. Mrs Coulter is, as Wood and Scally have identified, a near-perfect double of Jadis, the White Witch and Lewis's depiction of a female Satan: both beautiful, deadly and − at least at first − a "cess-pit of moral filth" (*AS* 419). In her first appearance as a "a beautiful young lady whose dark hair falls shining delicately under the shadow of her fur-lined hood" (*NL* 40), Mrs Coulter tempts the young Tony Makarios with "chocolatl" in a mirror of the White Witch's temptation of Edmund with Turkish Delight; Lyra is shortly afterwards equally "entranced" by her "air of glamour" (*NL* 65). Mrs Coulter is not a witch, but she is strangely inhuman − she smells of hot metal and has an unexplained power over the Spectres − and is rendered dangerous, Lilith-like, by her extreme attractiveness to men. Where Jadis's power is only implicitly sexual, signified by the humorous attraction of Uncle Andrew (whom she certainly does not seduce) and the fascination her beauty holds for Digory and later Edmund, Mrs Coulter's is explicitly so, as she seduces and murders Sir Charles and later Metatron. Elsewhere in the trilogy, Pullman appears to ridicule the idea of feminine attraction being dangerous, as a drunk Russian priest warns Will against the (good) witch-clans: "Daughters of evil! … They will try to seduce you. They will use all the soft, cunning deceitful ways they have, their flesh, their soft skin, their sweet voices" (*AS* 105). Given how repulsive we are meant to find the priest, and his words, it is strange that only a few chapters later, Mrs Coulter does indeed employ such wiles against Will as he attempts to rescue Lyra, gaining his sympathy with her "low, intoxicating voice" and "bare legs [that] gleamed golden in the sunlight" (AS 145). Will realises later that "the woman had cast a spell on him. It was pleasant and tempting to think about those beautiful eyes and the sweetness of that voice, and to recall the way her arms rose to push back that shining hair" (*AS* 151).

Mrs Coulter, and her ideological implications, become particularly interesting when read against Pullman's alternative to a female Satan, Mary Malone. Mary, as discussed earlier, is intended to serve as a revision of Milton's Satan in that her awakening of Lyra's adolescent consciousness is a positive act. With this, Pullman aims to refute not only *Paradise Lost*, but Lewis, whom he criticises for excluding Susan Pevensie from heaven on account of her interest in "being grown-up" (*LB* 129). In Pullman's reading of *The Last Battle*, Susan is damned for becoming, in Jill's words, "interested in nothing but nylons and lipsticks and invitations" (*LB* 129). "In other words," Pullman argues, "Susan, like Cinderella, is undergoing a transition from one phase of her life to another. Lewis didn't approve of that. He didn't like women in general, or sexuality at all ... He was

frightened and appalled at the notion of wanting to grow up" ("Dark Side of Narnia").[90] By awakening Lyra to her own sexuality, Mary is intended to redeem the concept of "being grown up", particularly for adolescent girls, while Mrs Coulter, who leads the intercision experiments and spends much of the last book keeping Lyra in a drugged sleep, rather surprisingly becomes an advocate of keeping Lyra a child forever. This is complicated, however, by Mrs Coulter's first encounter with Lyra, in which her lessons in feminine sexuality are portrayed as a Miltonic temptation that Lyra must resist at all costs.

When Lyra is brought to Mrs Coulter's house, she is astounded by its overt femininity: to "Lyra's innocent eye", it seems that "everything [is] pretty", with "charming pictures in gilt frames, an antique looking-glass, fanciful sconces bearing anbaric lamps with frilled shades … every surface was covered ... with pretty little china boxes and shepherdesses" (*NL* 74). The attribution of an "innocent eye" to Lyra is interesting, as Lyra's subsequent captivity with Mrs Coulter is portrayed as directly threatening to that innocence. Like Adam and Eve, Lyra and Pantalaimon are taught to be self-conscious of things that border on the sexual: when Mrs Coulter washes Lyra's hair with

> thick scented foam … Pantalaimon watched with powerful curiosity until Mrs Coulter looked at him, and he knew what she meant and turned away, averting his eyes modestly from these feminine mysteries as the golden monkey was doing. He had never had to look away from Lyra before. (*NL* 77)

Curiously, given his criticisms of Lewis, Pullman appears to blend Edmund's temptation at the hands of the White Witch with Susan's more mundane temptation away from Narnia by "nylons and lipstick and invitations". As she continually lies to keep her in her house, Mrs Coulter "gently and subtly" gives Lyra lessons:

> How to wash one's own hair; how to judge which colours suited one; how to say no in such a charming way that no offence is given; how to put on lipstick, powder, scent. To be sure, Mrs Coulter didn't teach Lyra the latter arts directly, but she knew Lyra was watching when she made herself up, and she took care to let Lyra see where she kept the cosmetics, and to

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[90]   As with most of Pullman's readings of Lewis, this is arguably a misreading, and many critics have hastened to defend Lewis. Susan is not actually condemned for being interested in nylons and lipsticks and invitations, but for being interested in "nothing but" (*LB* 129) these things, to the extent of denying Narnia and her childhood experiences entirely. Polly in fact goes on to add, "Grown up, indeed … I wish she *would* grow up. She wasted all her school time trying to be the age she is now, and she'll waste the rest of her life trying to stay that age" (*LB* 129). This statement is perfectly in keeping with Lewis's famous definition of "growth" versus "change" ("On Three Ways of Writing for Children") that Pullman himself praises in "The Republic of Heaven".

allow her time on her own to explore and try them out for herself. (*NL* 83)

According to Pullman's defence of Susan Pevensie, this interest in clothes and cosmetics should entail "normal human development, which includes a growing awareness of your body and its effect on the opposite sex" ("Republic of Heaven" 659). In many ways, it is a more convincing depiction of such development than that occasioned by Mary's story. Instead – and in contrast to her less glamourous sexual education at the hands of Mary – learning these "arts" is damaging to Lyra's sense of self in a way that amounts to the effects of witchcraft. Pantalaimon warns her: "You don't really want to stand around … being all sweet and pretty. She's just making a pet out of you" (*NL* 84); and Lyra soon finds herself following Mrs Coulter "almost as if she were a daemon herself" (*NL* 80). In retrospect, the words evoke Mrs Coulter's description of the "trotting little" intercised daemons as "like a wonderful pet … The best pet in the world!" (*NL* 287) (she immediately afterwards refers to Lyra as "The best assistant in the world!" (*NL* 287). Lyra does not quite know deep down, as Edmund does of Jadis in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, that her protector is "really … bad and cruel" (*LWW* 83), but she knows that Pantalaimon is correct, and is "uneasy" (*NL* 83) at not investigating Roger's disappearance. Against her better judgement, she is being tempted away from what she knows to be right, lured initially by the promise of travel to the Arctic and then by the luxurious surroundings that render her "too enchanted to question anything" (*NL* 77). Upon her escape, she immediately and joyfully rejects life as a "pretty pet" for the "real work" of a gyptian boat (*NL* 110), having passed through "a testing process during which Lyra comes to reject the type of sexuality that Mrs Coulter embodies" (Scally 108). In this, Lyra is not unlike a feminine version of the many classical and medieval heroes who are momentarily trapped by the wiles of a witch, and Mrs Coulter no different to numerous other witches (namely Circe and Morgause) whose dangerous powers are indistinguishable from their femininity.

Pullman's intent is clearly to redeem Mrs Coulter, or at least render her behaviour morally ambiguous. Her final act in the trilogy is to sacrifice herself to protect her daughter, whom she has come to love, and in the process destroy the evil Metatron. This redemption, however, is arguably unsuccessful, due to the underlying force of the archetypes from which she is drawn. Even critics who otherwise praise Pullman tend to agree that Mrs Coulter's reformation is "psychologically implausible" (Nikolejeva "Fairy Tale and Fantasy" 148; see also Gray 180); at the very least, it is largely told in a series of speeches rather than shown, and does little to outweigh the chilling depictions of Mrs Coulter's evil in the first two books. (Similarly, Asriel's magnificence as a general is consistently reported rather than demonstrated, and likewise arguably does little to outweigh the impression given by the murder of Roger.) More importantly, it is notable that Mrs Coulter's

femininity does not become any less dangerous or deceptive as she becomes "Lyra's mother" (*AS* 430), nor is she able to act as a nurturing mother to Lyra. Instead, her sexuality destroys Metatron, and she joins Asriel, the male Satan figure, in his plunge into the abyss in a way that saves Pullman the trouble of finding a place for an attractive and powerful woman in the new world order. Mrs Coulter as a character may be redeemed, but her archetype is neither revised nor validated. It is telling that, despite his apparent approval of female sexuality through Lyra's fall and his criticisms of Susan's exclusion from heaven, Pullman is unable to provide a positive representation of adult female sexuality within *His Dark Materials*. Mary, his alternative to a female Satan, has no seductive aspects and no apparent romantic connections despite her decision to embrace sexual love over religion: she dresses in jeans, a plaid shirt and a rucksack, and has an "open, friendly, clever face" (*AS* 540). Dame Hannah, who gives Lyra a future in her College, is at first glance "dim and frumpy" (*AS* 541) despite Lyra's realisation that the "grey-haired lady" also has a face that is "kindly … and sharp, and wise" (543). The witches' love affairs with men are inevitably doomed due to the witches' longer lifespan: to them, men are "brave, proud, beautiful, clever; and they die almost at once" (*NL* 318). Lyra herself ultimately rejects the fascination of Mrs Coulter's perfume bottles and "dangerous powers and qualities such as elegance, charm, and grace" (*NL* 80), in a way that casts an interesting light on Pullman's swift termination of Lyra's relationship with Will. *His Dark Materials*, then, "along with much of Pullman's other writing, is haunted by an ambivalence towards female sexuality, in which Pullman comes disconcertingly close to the attitudes he dislikes in Lewis" (Scally 111). Despite his efforts to rewrite Satan, Lewis and *Paradise Lost*, Mrs Coulter remains true to the epic model – "fascinating, but inscrutable and dangerous" (Griffin 19) – and embodies the conservative ideas of sexuality, innocence and temptation that Pullman is attempting to undermine.

This pattern is continued with the trilogy's depiction of the Underworld, in which the epic imagery used undermines the attempt to rewrite its ethos. In his essay "The Republic of Heaven", Pullman argues:

> our myth must talk about death in terms that are as true as they can be to what we know of the facts, and it must do what the Christian myth did, and provide some sort of hope or consolation. The myth must give us a way of accepting death, when it comes, of seeing what it means and accepting it; not shrinking from it with terror, or pretending [as Lewis does] that it'll be like the school holidays. (666)

The essence of Pullman's belief here, in common with that of most atheists and agnostics, is that life

ends when the body dies – "there [is]n't any elsewhere" (*AS* 548) – and it is this that gives life its vital importance and meaning. His conception of the afterlife in *His Dark Materials* is one that attempts to replace the value of a pious life with the value of a life fully lived and experienced (there is no overt moral component to the Harpies' criteria for a good life beyond "see[ing] and touch[ing] and hear[ing] and lov[ing] and learn[ing] things" (*AS* 334), though arguably later events of the book imply one).

The use of overt epic and religious concepts to convey his message, however, continues to uphold the idea of a cosmos built on these principles. The punishment for "spend[ing] years in solitary prayer, while all the joy of life [is] going to waste around us" (*AS* 336) is not merely a wasted life (as might be expected according to an atheist worldview), but eternal torment in a grey classical underworld as a prisoner of the Harpies. Moreover, even Pullman's attempt to argue that oblivion is superior to the idea of an afterlife is undermined by the fact that what he promises is not in fact oblivion at all. When the ghosts ask Lyra what will happen when they leave the underworld, she explains that "all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart, just as your daemons did … But your daemons en't just nothing now; they're part of everything" (335). The ghost of a disappointed martyr convinces the other ghosts (and the reader) that this is a desirable fate, echoing Lyra's oft-quoted promise that, "it won't be nothing, we'll be alive again, in a thousand blades of grass, and a million leaves, we'll be falling in the raindrops and blowing in the fresh breeze … out there in the physical world which is our true home and always was" (336). Moloney points out the flaw in this conception of the afterlife rather bluntly: "Pullman is preaching to his readers here. What's more, he is preaching obvious nonsense about the joy of being a raindrop. Atoms are not alive, let alone conscious" (176). Nonetheless, it is continued consciousness after death that Pullman's myth continually promotes. Farder Coram and John Faa discuss the opening from the land of the dead into the "holy place" (531) in the mulefa's world in terms of an afterlife rather than oblivion, proclaiming that "To know that after a spell in the dark we'll come out again to a sweet land like this, to be free of the sky like the birds, well, that's the greatest promise anyone could wish for" (532). Perhaps most strikingly, Will and Lyra see their post-death existence as a chance to be reunited with each other (as, indeed, Lee Scoresby does with his daemon Hester). As they bid a tearful farewell, Will promises Lyra that

> "I *will* love you forever, whatever happens. Till I die and after I die, and when I find my way out of the land of the dead I'll drift about forever, all my atoms, till I find you again..."

> [Lyra:] "I'll be looking for you too, 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 be able to just take one, they'll have to take two, one of you and one of me, we'll be joined so tight." (526)

What Pullman's myth amounts to, then, is an afterlife in which those who have not lived properly must languish in a grey underworld where they will be tormented for eternity, while those who have lived full and useful lives are released to a beautiful land where they can exist with their loved ones "free of the sky like the birds". This is rather a stretch for an atheist myth that "talk[s] about death in terms that are as true as they can be to what we know of the facts"; it would, though, be very familiar to the readers of Milton and Lewis.

The same epic – and indeed religious – ideas prevail when it comes to the question of good and evil. Epic, as Peter Toohey argues, is not historically a forum for complicating or revising ideas of what constitutes correct behaviour. Instead, it is designed to affirm traditional communal values in a forum that relies on the goodwill and interest of its target community (33). Children's literature tends to treat the subject more didactically, but Lewis's works retain the assumption of the epic tradition that its moral code is inherently correct rather than, as in postmodern theory, a matter of perspective. This is embodied in the way that characters instinctively respond to Aslan, who represents absolute good: "those who hate or dismiss the Lion are damned, those who lean towards him, even if they fear, are saved" (Wood 240). By contrast, *His Dark Materials* has been suggested to present characters whose "utter ambiguity … is based on the postmodern concept of indeterminacy, of the relativity of good and evil" (Nikolajeva, cited Gray 181). Carole Scott praises Pullman for his world of enigmatic allegiances and untrustworthy characters, saying that by the end, "Lyra and Will become our only clear touchstones of value: those who love them and whom they truly trust – Iorek Byrnison, John Faa, Lee Scoresby, Serafina Pekkala, Balthamos and Baruch, Will's father, and Mary Malone – emerge as figures of worth, strongly defined by their capacity for love" (93). What Scott overlooks is the way in which this merely replaces Narnia's central moral touchstone, Aslan, with Lyra and Will. Though Pullman elsewhere criticises Lewis's polarisation of good and evil into those who love Aslan and those who do not, he himself, as Wood points out, "create[s] an ambiguous new binary: for or against Lyra, the new Eve" (251). This binary is not even terribly ambiguous, for those of the "right" side are consistently those who identify themselves as "a friend of the child's" (*SK* 53), and those who love Lyra love her with the instinctive devotion that Lewis's protagonists feel toward Aslan. Iorek assists because "if ever a bear loved a human

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being, he loves her" (*NL* 315); Lee Scoresby gives his life for the purpose of "a-helping Lyra" (*SK* 319) because he thinks her so "strong and brave and good" (*SK* 226); Will claims that he "liked [her] straight away because [she] was brave" (*AS* 526). Mrs Coulter's final redemption comes solely from her love of Lyra, as she explains to Asriel:

> I wanted him [Metatron] to find no good in me, and he didn't. There is none. But I love Lyra. Where did this love come from? I don't know; it came to me like a thief in the night, and now I love her so much my heart is bursting with it. All I could hope was that my crimes were so monstrous that the love was no bigger than a mustard-seed in the shadow of them ... (*AS* 426-7)

Her comparison of this love to a mustard-seed, invoking the Biblical scripture that "if ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto the sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you" (Luke 17.6), frames love for Lyra – the new Eve – as Pullman's equivalent of faith in God, and thus a moral absolute.

Moreover, although Lyra herself must question who is lying and who is telling her the truth, she is nonetheless guided by "an innate sense of right and wrong (she is clear on this, even when she's not clear about whom she should obey)" (Wood 251) that echoes that of Lewis's characters. Lyra's codes of conduct are presented as deep and instinctive, even when they are not practically applicable to our world. She knows it is wrong to touch another's daemon, for example, "as instinctively as she felt that nausea was bad and comfort good" (*AS* 143). Throughout the books, Lyra holds stubbornly to her increasingly important convictions: that intercision is "too cruel … nothing justified that" (*NL* 380); that it is her duty to "go down into the land of the dead and find [Roger], and ... say sorry" (*AS* 175); that not acting to stop the Authority's agents would be "feeble, and it'd be wrong too" (*AS* 191); that the dead need the doorway between worlds more than she and Will. The fact that in doing so she must frequently disobey and disagree with adult authority figures casts an interesting light on the book as children's literature, but not as a meditation of good and evil: if *Paradise Lost* insists on obedience to God, it also insists on resisting the commands of the devil, and presumably even Lewis would champion a child's disobedience to parental figures if the child in question was the offspring of Satan and the White Witch. It is telling that, though Pullman has criticised Tolkien and his works for "never question[ing] anything" ("Writing Fantasy Realistically"), Pullman himself has elsewhere professed that "traditional good and evil things" are obvious and inarguable ("there has never been much disagreement about those in all human history: dishonesty is bad and truthfulness is good, selfishness is wrong and generosity is right – we can all

agree about those") and that the point of stories is quite simply to "provide a sort of framework" for understanding them ("The Republic of Heaven" 666).[91] As a result, although the characters in *His Dark Materials* may question what is right and what is wrong, the book does not, nor is the reader encouraged to do so. The end of the third book is, in the words of Susan Matthews, "the end of an essay – it is the end of an argument that is controlled by a single voice" (134). We are expected, in the book's final sentences, to agree with Lyra's straightforward statement of the principles of the Republic of Heaven, and to desire to help build it "in all our different worlds" (*AS* 548). In this, the trilogy is as clear as any epic about its heroic code, and more didactic than most.

As discussed previously, the stated code of *His Dark Materials* is to live this life to the fullest, without hope or fear of another, and to be at all times "those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and brave and patient" (548). This edict is stated overtly twice – first by Xaphania, and then at the very end of the book by Lyra – and foreshadowed in the underworld, as the Lady Salmakia urges the ghosts to "Be brave! … Be patient and cheerful and we'll lead you out, don't fear!" (AS 376). These (indisputably good) qualities are intentionally applicable to real life rather than an epic world. An epic hero is not usually required to be cheerful, and is more likely to possess goodness than mere kindness, particularly when operating simultaneously in a romance tradition (classical or Norse heroes need not be morally good at all). Likewise, bravery and patience seem to be operating in a lower heroic register than courage and endurance. Curiosity is certainly a trait of adventurers such as Odysseus and Arthur's questing knights, but not – as Pullman has it – as an alternative to piety and devotion to the gods. It appears that Pullman is replacing a heroic or religious ethos with a humanist ethos, intended to show his readers how to live and die in the world they actually inhabit and not a fantastical landscape.

It is striking then that the heroic code by which the characters are shown to act until the final chapters of the trilogy is quite different, and very much in line with not only Lewis and Tolkien but the epic tradition. The first book in particular is characterised not by patient study and hard work, but by travels through dangerous landscapes, encounters with fantastic beings, and epic battles. When Lyra rides Iorek through the Arctic by night to investigate the ghost that is really Tony Makarios, she achieves something of epic magnitude, and is praised for her goodness (not her kindness) and her "courage" (*NL* 220); her rescue of the children from Bolvangar is achieved

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[91]   Pullman's statement that "dishonesty is bad and truthfulness is good" (666) would seem to support Gray's reading of Lyra's untruthfulness, which he argues is not a sign of postmodern ambiguity but "related to another genre, the *Bildungsroman* … For it seems that although Lyra is a liar, she *learns* the value of truth … While in her search for truth Lyra may have to grapple with moral ambiguity (she discovers that she has to *reverse* – more than once – what she thinks she knows about Dust and about her parents), this does not speak to me of moral relativism or indeterminacy" (181-2, italics Gray's).

through Odyssean trickery and action that culminates in a large-scale battle between the Tartars, their wolf daemons, the witches, the gyptians and Iorek Byrnison (not unlike *The Hobbit*'s Battle of Five Armies); Iorek Byrnison wins back his kingdom in ritualised single combat narrated in Homeric simile. There is, throughout the trilogy, repeated emphasis on physical hardship and injury – Will and Lyra enter the climax "soaked through, shivering, racked with pain" (*AS* 422) – and on arduous journeys to the underworld and over mountains. Though Pullman argues for a long, full life, citing in "The Republic of Heaven" the young Jane Eyre's answer to Mr Brocklehurst that the way to avoid Hell is to "keep in good health and not die" (661), heroic death is honoured and glorified in the trilogy, most notably through Lee Scoresby's chapter-long final battle and death in aid of Lyra and the sacrifice of Asriel and Mrs Coulter. Despite the professed lack of any divine beings, both angels and witches serve the function of classical deities, aiding and advising the heroes with their magical powers and knowledge of fate and prophecy, and Xaphania and Seraphina at least are treated with respect that borders on reverence. There is, indeed, a strong sense of fate and prophecy throughout the books, common to epic but unusual in an atheist worldview. The characters (notably Will and Lyra) must decide whether to fight or accept their fates, in the manner of classical heroes or characters in Norse sagas, yet as in both traditions they know that neither will change their ultimate destinies; as Seraphina explains: "We are all subject to the fates. But we must all act as if we are not … or die of despair" (*NL* 314).

Most strikingly, and most interestingly at odds with Pullman's deification of physical love and experience, this heroic code is one that prizes above all the renunciation of pleasure and power for the greater good. As discussed earlier, the necessity for Will and Lyra to part for the sake of a new society is one that echoes that of Aeneas and Dido, and in the *Aeneid* is used to exemplify Aeneas's obedience to the gods as well as his duty to his people. Moloney points out that, in direct contrast to Mary's choice to renounce her religious order in favour of the joys of her body, Will and Lyra

> find themselves reasoning in a fashion not unlike that of a person considering a vocation to religious celibacy: "Although love and marriage are great goods, I am clearly called to a greater good. It will not be easy, and I am tempted not to obey, but I realise that my difficult life will have its own rewards, not least the satisfaction of knowing that my choice will help many other people enjoy life now and go to heaven." (183)

Pullman himself describes the ending as outside his conscious control. According to him:

> The reason they have to part in the end is a curious one and it's hard to explain except in

terms of the compulsion of the story. I knew from the very beginning that it would have to end in that sort of renunciation. (I don't know how I know these things, but I knew) … I tried all sorts of ways to prevent it, but the story made me do it … If I'd denied it, the story wouldn't have had a tenth of its power. (cited Moloney 184)

This "compulsion of the story" works to make Pullman's moral point about responsibility and the necessity of sacrifice. It also, in a way that would perhaps be surprising to him, brings him very close to the worldview of several other fantasy works in the epic tradition; most closely, and most famously, with that of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

Although Pullman's similarities to Lewis have been discussed extensively by critics, his similarities with Tolkien have been dealt with more cursorily. This is unsurprising, as Pullman has made it very clear in interviews that it is Lewis whom he regards as his opponent:

I dislike his [Lewis's] *Narnia* books because of the solution he offers to the great questions of human life: is there a God, what is the purpose, all that stuff, which he really does engage with pretty deeply, unlike Tolkien who doesn't touch it at all. *The Lord of the Rings* is essentially trivial. Narnia is essentially serious, though I don't like the answer Lewis comes up with. If I was doing it at all, I was arguing with Narnia. Tolkien is not worth arguing with. ("Philip Pullman's Dark Arts")

Instead, Pullman has confined his criticism of Tolkien's works to artistic rather than ideological grounds, dismissing the characters of *The Lord of the Rings* for everything from their lack of overt sexual relations to, more seriously, their lack of psychological complexity and simplistic moral outlook ("No-one [in *The Lord of the Rings*] wonders what the right thing is: they only doubt their own capacity to do it" ("Writing Fantasy Realistically")). As I have argued elsewhere in this thesis, however, Tolkien's engagement with various heroic and moral codes is both complex and serious despite (or because of) its lack of overt didacticism. *The Lord of the Rings* is not modelled on *Paradise Lost*, but, like *The Hobbit*, on a more general epic worldview influenced by various sources. Nonetheless, its climax bears many similarities to that of Pullman's trilogy. Both feature an army of the dead, the defeat of wraith-like beings with the power to inspire terror, and a climactic plunge into an abyss. Both, despite their large-scale epic battles, ultimately come down to the comparatively small actions of two individuals (the fall of Will and Lyra, and the quest of Frodo and Sam). And on a more minute level, both require sacrifices that hinge around a powerful object with a single "bearer": the One Ring, and the subtle knife.

The One Ring is perhaps the archetypal dangerous magical object of modern fantasy literature: created by the Dark Lord, Sauron, it has a will of its own that inevitably corrupts and destroys its bearers, and yet tempts them with the powers it bestows. The subtle knife, with its power to cut through any substance including the walls between the worlds, is not the focus of its trilogy as the Ring is of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Pullman's insistence that good and evil "have always had a human origin" ("The Republic of Heaven" 666) seems to preclude the idea of an object as a corrupting force. Yet the knife too has intentions of its own, and is inherently dangerous; so dangerous that, in Iorek's opinion, "it would have been infinitely better if it had never been made" (*AS* 190). As Iorek explains:

> What you don't know is what the knife does on its own. Your intentions may be good. The knife has intentions too … Sometimes, in doing what you intend, you do also what the knife intends, without knowing. (*AS* 191)

Iorek's acknowledgement of the usefulness of the knife yet his wish that it had never been made echoes Galadriel's wish that the Ring, despite the power it indirectly gives her, "had never been wrought, or had remained forever lost" (*LOTR* 356). Lyra, in response, argues that the knife nonetheless must be used against "those Bolvangar people", claiming that "if we don't have the knife, then they might get hold of it themselves" and that "now that we [know about it], we *got* to use it ourselves – we can't just not" (*AS* 191). As Scally points out, this noticeably echoes Boromir's argument for using the Ring to defeat the enemy rather than destroying it (96), and the alethiometer's instruction to repair the knife despite the danger seems to suggest that Pullman agrees with Boromir that "valour needs first strength, and then a weapon" (*LOTR* 260). The subtle knife allows them to cut the doorway for the dead to escape their prison in the underworld and to free the Authority from his prison in heaven; both actions, incidentally, leading to the dissolving of those they rescue. Iorek's warning, however, comes back to Will forcibly when it is revealed that cutting holes between the worlds creates the Spectres that feed on human souls, and he – the "knife-bearer" – resolves to destroy the knife as Frodo, the Ring-bearer, must destroy the Ring. It is interesting that, although the knife has no corrupting power, Will's reason for doing so is partially to avoid the temptation of using it to be reunited with Lyra, just as the angels close natural doors between the worlds that do not need to be closed because "if you [Will and Lyra] thought that any remained, you would waste your life searching for one, and that would be a waste of the time you have" (524).

The willing relinquishment of the knife has far greater repercussions than merely the loss of a

weapon, just as the destruction of the Ring means more than the defeat of Sauron. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Galadriel explains to Frodo that her own power is intrinsically bound with that of the One Ring, so that "if you [Frodo] succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlorien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away" (356). As a result, Sauron's defeat also sees the departure of the elves and Gandalf over the seas, "for the Third Age was over, and the Days of the Rings were passed, and an end was come of the story and song of those times" (1006). Though the new age (the "Dominion of Men") is one of peace and prosperity, it comes only through the sacrifice of much that was beautiful and valuable about the old – and through the sacrifice of the hero who has brought it about, as Frodo himself has been "too deeply hurt" (1006) by his adventures to remain in it. Likewise, in *His Dark Materials* Will's knife does not merely create Spectres, but gives Will and Lyra the power to move between worlds. With its destruction, they are not only kept apart but confined each to a single world, and this is a world of school for Lyra and cups of tea and paperwork for Will (*AS* 541). Even the fantastical or heroic elements of Lyra's world become dimmed as the trilogy ends. Iorek, whose clan of warrior bears represents the trilogy's clearest connection to Norse mythology, sees the potential for the end of his kind in Lyra's victory as Galadriel does in Frodo's:

> It may be that in helping you [forge the knife] I have brought final destruction on my kingdom. And it may be that I have not, and that destruction was coming anyway; maybe I have held it off. So I am troubled, having to do un-bearlike deeds and speculate and doubt like a human. (*AS* 204)

Lyra is shocked to realise that Iorek after reforging the knife has become "hungry and old and sad" (*AS* 207); though he may survive, he is unable to recover the heroic position he holds in the first book. Lyra, too, ends the quest with Farder Coram shocked by how the "little girl [they] took to the north-lands" has become "so hurt … so frail and weary" (*AS* 530). Her growth to adolescence is bought at the cost of her ability to read the alethiometer which, in the adult world she has entered, she must regain with hard work and study; despite Xaphania's assurances that Lyra's "reading will be even better then", most would probably prefer the intuitive powers Lyra once possessed to the promise of better after "a lifetime of thought and effort" (520). As Matthews puts it, "The wild child is imagined and valued, but there is no doubt in this book that innocence ends, the connection between worlds must be lost, daemons must stop changing, and the adult world must be entered" (134). In both trilogies, the world is saved, but at a cost, and left more ordinary in the saving.

That this is what Pullman found the "compulsion of the story" led him towards is unsurprising, as it

is, with a few exceptions, the force behind the ending of almost every major epic since Homer. By definition, epics take place in a heroic age that has already passed, and, as discussed earlier in relation to Lewis, the passing of such an age is often hinted at or dramatised outright. The *Iliad* and *Beowulf* both end with funerals that signal the end of a society (Troy and the Geats); the *Aeneid* ends with the death of Turnus, representing the end of the old heroic age; *Le Morte Darthur* ends with the passing of the chivalric age; *Paradise Lost* ends with the loss of Eden.[92] Of these, it is the *Aeneid* that bears the closest similarity with Tolkien's treatment of the end of a heroic age. Unlike Narnia, which is lost only to be regained in Lewis's heaven, the heroic age of the *Aeneid* is repeatedly glorified only to be superseded by a new age with a new moral code, that which will become the Roman Empire. Though this new age is ostensibly superior, it is haunted by regret for old ideals embodied by those such as Turnus and Camilla, and the loss of the old world embodied by Troy and Carthage. As Kenneth Reckford describes it, both Virgil and Tolkien balance the honouring of "virtues and achievements against the 'tears of things,' the accumulated loss and sadness of men and women who live, suffer, and die upon this middle-earth" (176). Despite Pullman's insistence that the fall from the old world is entirely positive, in *His Dark Materials*, too, there are bitter tears for what has passed: Lyra weeps for Iorek's decline upon the reforging of the knife; she "sob[s] with desperate abandon" (518) when she realises the ability to read the alethiometer has gone from her; when she learns she must part from Will she cries so passionately that "he thought she would die of her grief there and then" (513); it is Will's memory of Lyra's tear that shatters the subtle knife. If the trilogy is ultimately an epic about growing up, then to grow out of childhood is also to grow out of the epic world, and this, despite Pullman's assertions, is clearly something to be regretted as well as strengthened by.

It is perhaps these bitter-sweet hints of grief for the old world glorified in *Northern Lights*, rather than the trilogy's ineffective attempts to belittle or dismiss its epic predecessors, that allows *His Dark Materials* to be considered part of an epic tradition. Lyra's transition to adulthood is natural and necessary, but her non-epic ability to be (or strive to be) "cheerful and kind and curious and brave and patient" (548) comes from first demonstrating and witnessing epic heroism on a grand scale. For better or worse, the new world order is haunted by the same archetypes, conceptions of transcendence and immortality, and belief in human life played out against a backdrop of good and evil that characterised its predecessor. Meanwhile, the old world is honoured and remembered, for an hour every year at Midsummer, as Will and Lyra sit on the same bench in their different

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[92] *The Odyssey* comes closer to having a 'happy ending', with Odysseus's return home and reclamation of his kingdom. Even this, though, signifies the end of his travels and adventuring, something emphasised by later poets such as Tennyson.

universes. If Pullman is finally unable to make his epic materials say what he intends them to say, perhaps they nonetheless say, in Lewis's words, "what's to be said".

Conclusion

What I have outlined here are only glimpses or peaks of a much wider and more diffuse tradition. Though I have focused on books published in Britain from WWI to the present day, there are also a number of American children's books set in worlds of high fantasy that draw on the epic tradition, including Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain,* based on Welsh mythology; Tamora Pierce's various quasi-Arthurian cycles set in the kingdom of Tortall including *Song of the Lioness*, *Protector of the Small* and *Wild Magic*; and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series, the third of which climaxes with a journey to the underworld very similar to that in Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. In Australia, Lian Hearn's ambitious *Tales of the Ottori* are set in a fictionalised version of feudal Japan that blends history and mythology.

Besides books set wholly or partially in an epic world, there is a complementary tradition that sees elements from epic brought into or existing side-by-side with the modern world. Alan Garner's 1960 fantasy *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and its 1963 sequel *The Moon of Gomrath* see their child protagonists come into contact with characters and motifs drawn from Norse and Celtic myth and epic in an otherwise contemporary setting. Likewise, Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* sequence (1965-1977) sees the world of Arthurian and Celtic epic interacting with modern child protagonists as the battle between Light and Dark continues into the present day. In her book *The Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn uses the term "intrusion fantasy" to describe a book in which elements of a fantasy world intrude and interact with the realistic world in which the story in set (xvi); Garner's and Cooper's books might be termed "intrusion epic", and create a dynamic between children's book protagonists and epic heroes that is quite different from that in *The Hobbit* or even *The Chronicles of Narnia*. This is particularly interesting in the second book of Cooper's sequence, in which eleven year old Will Stanton comes into his power as an "Old One", an immortal being possessed of ancient knowledge and power. As the books continue, this increasingly allows Will to function at once as child protagonist and epic hero – a small boy, yet "no longer a small boy" (260) – transitioning between the two as the books transition between holiday adventure story and high fantasy.

This double relationship with the epic world is echoed in Anthony Horowitz's more recent series, *The Power of Five* (2005-2012), which also sees ancient evil threatening to invade the modern world. There, too, the child protagonists are revealed as at once modern children, and warriors who fought the demon named Chaos ten thousand years ago. The characters and narrative, also, as in

The Dark is Rising, shift between the present day and a mythic past (and, in the final book, a dystopian future) in a manner reminiscent of children's time-slip fantasies.[93] Likewise, American author Rick Riordan's thematically lighter *Percy Jackson* series (2005-2009) sees its heroes, upon discovering themselves to be the off-spring of Greek gods, interacting with a classical world that exists, like the magical community of the *Harry Potter* series, alongside our own.[94] These recent books offer the potential for an epic world – complete with "magic and witchcraft and battles between supernatural creatures" – to be "all around us but just out of our sight" ("An Interview with Anthony Horowitz"), and raise new questions about the boundaries between the epic and the children's book.

Among their other similarities, the writers in this thesis are united in their insistence that their books were not written from a desire to address children, and that their books should not be confined to an audience of child readers. Adams has claimed that there are no such things as children's books ("An Evening With Richard Adams") and that *Watership Down* is not a book for children but "a book, and anyone who wants to read it can read it" ("Interview: Richard Adams"). Tolkien's *The Hobbit* grew out of the adult *The Silmarillion* and into the equally adult *The Lord of the Rings*, and he maintained that "I am not specially interested in children, and certainly not in writing for them … I write things that may be classified as fairy-stories not because I wish to address children … but because I wish to write this kind of story and no other" (*Letters* 297). The Arthurian stories of both White and Sutcliff also grow from children's books to adult novels as the series progress, and both similarly express doubts about the classifications even of these early volumes: White said of *The Sword in the Stone* that he found it "impossible to determine whether it is for grown-ups or children" (*Letters to a Friend* 94), while Sutcliff, perhaps more conventionally, claimed of *The Lantern Bearers* that "my books are for children of all ages, from nine to ninety" ("Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff"). Lewis famously categorised himself as a children's writer who writes not from a desire to address children but "because a children's story is the best art-form for something you have to say: just as a composer may write a Dead March not because there was a public funeral in view but because certain musical ideas that had occurred to him went best into that form" ("Three

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[93] *The Power of Five* is often more horror than epic, with the monstrous threats openly drawing on the works of H.P. Lovecraft. But Horowitz's background as the writer of numerous retellings of myths and legends also influences the series, and not only the antagonists but also the child heroes have connections to various mythologies including Incan cultural figures, Native American folk heroes, and the Indian epic *Ramayana*. Horowitz himself repeatedly acknowledges the influence of Tolkien and Lewis, "perhaps because I'm using some of the same sources (mythology, religion, ancient history)" ("Author Interview").

[94] The *Harry Potter* series itself is perhaps more difficult to argue as epic: its action is largely confined to Hogwarts school rather than the expansive world of Middle-earth or even Horowitz's globe-spanning series, and the ethos is closer to the school story than the epic. It does, however, often make playful use of classical mythology – Fluffy the three-headed guard dog, for example, is a clear reference to Cerberus – and the later books treat matters of life, death and warfare with an arguably epic seriousness.

Ways" 32). Pullman has frequently echoed this sentiment, and *His Dark Materials* is marketed for adults as often as for children. From at least the 1930s onward, an increasing number of authors with no particular interest in writing for children, but with an interest in writing stories that might be termed part of an epic tradition, have chosen children's fantasy as the "best art-form" for their work; in the case of the later work, even when the prospect of instead writing fantasy for adults was readily available to them. Something about the genre appears to be uniquely enabling for epic stories and motifs.

At its simplest, the children's book form allows both a sense of scale and a sincerity that would be problematic in a modern adult novel, something perhaps most evident in Adams's *Watership Down*. Adams's decision to set his "epic" in the animal world because "human beings don't feel epics any more. Rabbits do – they are down on the ground" ("An Evening with Richard Adams") neatly addresses and solves the problem of writing an epic in a world that can be seen to have out-grown the genre. From the perspective of a rabbit, the orderly English countryside can become a vast and unknown landscape, and the experience of fighting for survival and territory can retain the sense of pride and honour that two world wars had rendered distasteful. The idea of "shrinking" the epic hero in order to paradoxically enlarge the ordinary world to epic proportions already had a literary precedent in children's literature: Toad's adventures in *The Wind in the Willows*, taking place in a landscape of English towns, roads and waterways (and courtrooms), form a glorious mock epic journey that culminates in what the final chapter names "The Return of Ulysses" as Toad retakes his house from the inhabitants of the Wild Wood. What is striking about *Watership Down*, however, is the gravity with which the idea of rabbits as epic heroes is treated by the narrative voice. While the book itself has frequent moments of humour, these never come from the juxtaposition of epic tropes with rabbit characters; instead, scenes such as the destruction of Sandleford warren or Bigwig's heroic last stand against Woundwort are graphic and serious. The attribution to animals of characteristics such as bravery, loyalty and respect for the divine, already a familiar ingredient of children's animal stories, allows the meticulously accurate depiction of the animal world in the early chapters to move easily into a depiction of a heroic world, providing an environment where an epic worldview can flourish amidst the uncertainties and cynicism of a post-war Britain while remaining tied to the English landscape.

Writing a book that, while perhaps not necessarily addressed to children, fits into the children's book genre has another effect: that of shrinking the epic's implied audience. It is notable that Adams did not only wish to write an epic: he wished to write an epic for his young daughters. If rabbits are envisioned as able to "feel epic" while human beings do not, then children might perhaps be

envisioned as able to feel epic in a way that adults no longer can. An adult reader taking up *Watership Down* therefore enters the viewpoint not only of a rabbit hero, but also of an implied child reader, and as such is invited to suspend adult irony and engage with a world steeped in courage, honour and transcendence. Moreover, the adult reader is allowed to expect only what Adams himself insists is "a story, a jolly good story I must admit, but … its power and strength come from being a story told in the car" ("I Just Can't Do Humans"). Children's literature has been described by both Lewis and Pullman as the form of modern literature that is "not embarrassed to tell stories" amidst an adult literary canon that values instead "technique, style, literary knowingness" (Pullman "Carnegie Acceptance Speech"). Given this, it is unsurprising that epic and children's fantasy in the epic vein share above all a belief in the absolute necessity for stories and storytelling. The social practice of "singing of men's fame" (*Il.* 9.189) is crucial to the epic, and epic heroes themselves actively seek immortalisation through story and song. Likewise, in *Watership Down*, myth and storytelling is central to the rabbits' social and spiritual lives; *The Hobbit* is littered with songs and prophecies that deepen in import as the book continues into *The Lord of the Rings*; both White and Sutcliff envision the stories of Arthur as a means of salvation for the present day; under the spell of the Green Witch, Lewis's heroes cling stubbornly to "the made-up things [that] seem a good deal more important than the real ones" (*SC* 156) and are rewarded for their faith; Pullman's worlds, and the ghosts of the underworld, are saved by the command to "tell them stories" (*AS* 456). By claiming the importance of stories within the texts, of course, the authors are also claiming the importance of their own stories, which like the songs of Achilles or the tales of El-ahrairah offer images of ideal heroism that are embraced by their audience and incorporated into an ongoing cultural tradition. Children's literature, perhaps, enables epic because it enables stories of heroes.

This does not mean that children's fantasy presents such heroes uncritically. For Tolkien, as for Adams, the children's book hero provides a viewpoint that enables epic; it also, however, critiques epic, sometimes playfully and sometimes with moral seriousness. As in *Watership Down*, the hero is shrunk: Bilbo Baggins is "quite a little fellow in a wide world" (279). Bilbo, though, is not an epic hero, but rather a conventional children's book hero interacting with an epic world. His contrast with more heroic characters such as Bard and, eventually, Thorin, as well as his comically practical reactions to heroic situations, provide a constant commentary on epic heroism, and presents us with an alternative code that is closer to Tolkien's Christian worldview and own experience of war. Despite Tolkien's uncertainty about the aspects of the book too clearly addressed to a child audience, when *The Hobbit* grows into the adult *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien nonetheless retains a version of this children's book perspective through the hobbits as the action moves from the

pastoral Shire into the wider world. Pippin, in particular, is in Gondor often mistaken for a "lad of nine summers or so" (746) and, at twenty-nine, pronounces himself "little more than a boy in the reckoning of [his] own people" (746); he is more at home in the company of Beregond the guardsman's ten-year-old son than he is with Beregond himself. In the final battle, and the long siege that precedes it, Pippin's viewpoint highlights the practical realities of epic warfare and motifs, as Bilbo's does at the Battle of Five Armies, though with a heightened seriousness: Pippin finds his battle-dress "uncomfortable" rather than ridiculous (789), and his service entails "many slow hours" of "kick[ing] [his] heels at the door of [Denethor's] chamber" (790) without breakfast before the final battle climaxes in his desire to "see cool sunlight and green grass again" (874). It is telling that these aspects of Pippin's experience of war were praised by Lewis for embodying the "very quality of the war [Lewis's and Tolkien's] generation knew" ("The Dethronement of Power" 13). The template provided by *The Hobbit* allows the children's book requirements – the matter-of-fact language and emphasis on food, drink and comfort – to provide a necessary perspective on the more stylised epic elements, and thereby to give them the realism or at least comic practicality that a post-war literary tradition demands, without negating their essential grandeur and heroism.

This idea of using the children's book as a genre with its own set of conventions that can be incorporated into a wider framework, rather than merely a means of identifying a text's readership, resurfaces powerfully in Arthurian texts. As *The Hobbit* evolved into *The Lord of the Rings*, both White's *The Once and Future King* and Sutcliff's *The Lantern Bearers* and *Sword at Sunset* move from children's books to adult novels over the course of telling the story of Arthur's rise and fall. For White, childhood and the children's book world of *The Sword in the Stone* embody a pastoral ideal that shares attributes with the early Arthurian world. As the Arthurian age waxes and wanes, we grow out of the children's book into the complications and possibilities of epic, and then finally into tragedy as those possibilities culminate in the inevitable death of Arthur and the passing of the Arthurian age. Sutcliff's children's book world is far from pastoral, with the events of *The Lantern Bearers* including invasion, rape, violence and moments of despair that in some ways exceed those of its adult sequel. Nonetheless, the sequence's movement from children's book to adult also entails the physical growth of the heroes, from children or young adults in the first to adults in the second, and in the process sees the realisation of the death of the hero that is only feared in *The Lantern Bearers*.

This use of the children's book plays not only on the association of particularly early Arthurian tales with childhood and pastoral innocence, but also perhaps the similarities between the epic and the coming-of-age story: epic, after all, frequently involves the passing of the epic age, and children's

books are frequently concerned with the growth from childhood. Both imply a loss, but also a potential to move beyond the flaws of the old age into a new future armed with the stories and lessons gifted to us by a real or mythic past. It is this potential that White and Sutcliff stress at the close of their Arthurian epics, as the memory and continued transmission of the story of Arthur becomes a means of hope for our own time and place.

The sense of children's literature and epic as stories of the passing of an age is also crucial to both Lewis's *Narnia* books and Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, though in different ways. *The Chronicles of Narnia* shows the creation, history and destruction of Narnia is all experienced within the lifetime of Digory and Polly, beginning (at least in chronological order) with an overt revision of *Paradise Lost* and ending in a cosmic-scale depiction of the end of the world that draws on both Revelations and the *Poetic Edda*. In this, the end of Narnia and childhood is not death, but apotheosis, and the end of epic is the beginning of religious truth. Pullman, who sees the end of the *Narnia* chronicles as "propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology" ("The Dark Side of Narnia"), literalises this connection between the end of epic and the end of childhood differently and perhaps more explicitly, and attempts to use it to glorify the real world over the world of myth and fantasy. Lyra and Will save the world quite literally by growing up, or at least by growing into an adult self-consciousness and sexuality that Pullman equates to the Biblical Fall, and as they grow up they enter a world of adult responsibilities that systematically shuts down the possibilities of fantasy. Will must break his magical knife, Lyra loses the ability to read the alethiometer by childhood "grace" and must enter school to relearn it by hard study, and the bridges between the worlds close forever. The books essentially pass from epic to realism, a change that we are told by the author is both necessary and positive. This attempt to present the end of epic as desirable is not entirely successful: the books themselves, after all, are what they claim to be displacing, and the grief for the passing of the world that the reader has come to know is likely to vastly overshadow the attraction of Pullman's "Republic of Heaven". Nonetheless, this same lack of success reinforces instead the way in which stories of epic and childhood have always been told: as a story about the passing of an age that is lamented and valued, into a new age that is both lesser and greater, keeping the values that can be kept and honouring those that cannot.

It is perhaps this natural connection between the two genres that makes the children's book not only enabling for the epic, but a natural home. In his essay "The Possibilities of Children's Fiction", Victor Watson suggests that children's writers "enter the arena of children's books" above all because "they want to reflect upon Time … Time makes possible the 'high seriousness' that children's books are capable of" (21). He goes on to cite "the poignancy of passing time" as one of

the underlying themes of children's literature: "It is as if books for children are unable to escape their preoccupation with the passing of Time" (21). Given that Watson is making no claim for children's books as epic or even mythic, it is interesting that he uses the exact Arnoldian phrase ("'high seriousness'") most commonly claimed as a quality of the epic tradition. Epic, like children's literature, is also deeply concerned with the passing of time, and the simultaneous growth and perceived diminishment that comes with it. The first audiences of the *Iliad* or *Beowulf* already knew themselves to be hearing stories of a past when men were better and greater, and the *Aeneid* directly addresses this with its depiction of a world that must be sacrificed to bring about the age in which Virgil's audience were currently living. In the same way, writers who choose to write children's books or child characters are writing about an age that for them has already passed, and perhaps never existed except in imagination. Somewhere, as the end to *The House at Pooh Corner* famously states, "in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest a little boy and his Bear will always be playing" (177), but Christopher Robin is already growing away from it, and an adult reader is understood to be excluded from it. Children's literature and epic both depict eras, partially lived and partially constructed, that pass into a less graceful and more troubled age, with sacrifice and with pride, and with the lessons learned from them forming the foundation of our lives.

In an unsent letter to a friend, Tolkien defended the use of archaic language in *The Lord of the Rings* on the grounds that the concepts discussed by the characters would not translate into modern terms. Citing an example from *The Two Towers*, in which King Theoden declares that he will "sleep better" in his grave having died in battle, Tolkien explained:

> Theoden would certainly think, and probably say "thus shall I sleep better"! But people who think like that just do not talk a modern idiom. You can have "I shall lie easier in my grave" … But there would be an insincerity of thought, a disunion of word and meaning. For a King who spoke in a modern style would not really think in such terms at all, and any reference to sleeping quietly in the grave would be a deliberate archaism of expression on his part (however worded) far more bogus than the actual "archaic" English that I have used. (*Letters* 225-6)

This problem of how to give authentic voice to archaic concepts in books for a modern audience speaks to the heart of the difficulties of epic in modern literature. Motifs from epics such as *Beowulf* and the *Iliad*, whose worldview is characterised by a belief in the glory of great heroes and the intervention of supernatural beings, become almost impossible to translate into a modern literature that "recognise[s] a microbe and not Apollo as the source of the dreadful plague in Book 1 of the

Iliad" (Kitchell 23). In the postmodern novel, such motifs risk becoming at best "deliberate archaism" and at worst an ironic affectation that precludes the high seriousness central to the epic tradition. (It is no coincidence that Mordred's destruction of Camelot in *The Once and Future King* begins with his introduction of fashionable irony.) Children's fantasy, with its staunch traditionalism, its allusive humour, its unfashionable sincerity, its sense of the numinous, its concern with the passing of time and its emphasis on courage, honour and story-telling, shares a language with epic that gives it a voice in the modern world. Within books such as *Watership Down*, *The Hobbit*, *The Once and Future King*, *Sword at Sunset, The Chronicles of Narnia* and *His Dark Materials*, the heroic world is celebrated, interrogated, reframed, and reaffirmed as intellectually and imaginatively vital. Most importantly, it is understood as both ever-passing and ever-present. Though individual heroes come to the end of their journeys and heroic ages fade away, we are repeatedly reassured that, through the medium of story itself, the epic tradition is being kept alive, and colouring the way we view the world:

> A few minutes later there was not a rabbit to be seen on the down. The sun sank below Ladle Hill and the autumn stars began to shine in the darkening east – Perseus and the Pleiades, Cassiopeia, faint Pisces and the great square of Pegasus. The wind freshened, and soon myriads of dry beech leaves were filling the ditches and hollows and blowing in gusts across dark miles of open grass. Underground, the story continued. (Adams *Watership Down* 475)

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