“Dream Not of Other Worlds”: C.S. Lewis, Philip Pullman and the Ghost of Milton

Ulrike Susanne Scherer

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Abstract

This thesis examines how two authors of fantasy fiction attempt to re-imagine *Paradise Lost* in their works and analyses how they each deal with Miltonic influence in a markedly different way. The two works that are the main focus of this thesis are C.S. Lewis’s science-fantasy novel *Perelandra*, and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*, a young adult trilogy consisting of the volumes *Northern Lights*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*. I will draw on Harold Bloom’s theory of poetic influence outlined in *The Anxiety of Influence* for my reading of these texts as two distinctive ‘misreadings’ of *Paradise Lost*.

Whereas C.S. Lewis reads *Paradise Lost* as representing Christian orthodoxy, Philip Pullman is partial to a neo-Romantic interpretation of the epic as highly subversive, even satanic. Both of these readings are misreadings in the Bloomian sense, which seek to clear creative space for these authors and their own retellings of the Fall myth. I argue that both Lewis and Pullman intend to strengthen their own authorial profile by intertextually linking their works to Milton’s epic; Lewis, in his self-fashioned role of ‘Christian fantasist’, sets out to correct supposed poetic mistakes that weaken the Christian message of the epic with *Perelandra*, whereas Pullman highlights the subversive elements present in *Paradise Lost* in *His Dark Materials*, in order to support his image of ‘atheist rebel’. Their opposed readings of *Paradise Lost* profit from the critical debate surrounding Milton’s intentions with his epic that has been going on almost from the moment of its publication, and William Blake’s famous notion that Milton was “of the Devil’s party without knowing it”.

It is not my intention to uncover or defend a ‘true’ or ‘correct’ reading of *Paradise Lost*; rather, this thesis seeks to highlight how two authors use the intriguing appeal of Milton and his greatest work to enrich and support their respective self-fashioned authorial images. This thesis will illustrate that *Perelandra* and *His Dark Materials* are so highly indebted to their predecessor’s work, however, that they both are haunted by what I call Milton’s ‘ghost’; Miltonic influence seeps into Lewis’s and Pullman’s works, so much that any attempt to break free from this strong literary predecessor results in a weakening of plot, story and characterisation in *Perelandra* and *His Dark Materials*. By trying to escape Milton’s influence, both authors end up being trapped by it.
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Introduction

When the blind, politically disillusioned poet John Milton decided to craft a grand English epic retelling the story of mankind’s fall from a state of innocence told in Genesis, his proclaimed aim was to “justify the ways of God to men” (I, 26). Addressed specifically to a “fit audience [...] though few” (VII, 31), Paradise Lost can undoubtedly be seen as a cornerstone of the English literary canon. Not only does the epic’s main subject matter intertextually link it to the most canonical work of all, the Bible, its highly polished poetic language, meticulous compliance with epic conventions and Milton’s complex interweaving of scriptural tradition and Greek and Latin mythology all guarantee Paradise Lost a permanent spot in the literary canon. What is surprising, however, is the prevalence of quotes, imagery, characters and even entire plotlines derived from Milton’s epic in works of popular culture. In the introduction to Milton in Popular Culture, Laura Lungers Knoppers and Gregory M. Colón Semenza list a wide range of contemporary musical, visual and literary works which refer to Paradise Lost in more or less obvious ways (1-9) and thus illustrate that the influence of Milton’s epic in popular culture is highly pervasive.

As Knoppers and Semenza remark, this creatively fertile connection between Paradise Lost and works of modern popular culture is somewhat surprising, since “factors in contemporary academe seem to drive a wedge between Milton and popular culture”, with Milton serving as the epitome of “high-brow” culture (4). Milton’s works seem to represent the very opposite of “popular”, as they are intellectually accessible only to a chosen few. As Knoppers and Semenza point out:

> Unlike Shakespeare—whose plays were performed in the public theatres of Southwark and constituted the equivalent of Renaissance popular entertainment—Milton’s complex prose and poetry were geared toward a fit audience, though few. Milton’s high epic style and content seem to require an impossibly broad knowledge of the Bible and classical texts.

With its collection of essays on various re-interpretations of Milton’s works in popular culture, Milton in Popular Culture rightfully challenges this notion of “Milton” and “popular culture” being incompatible.

What Semenza and Knoppers note about all of these re-imaginings of Miltonic material is that “[w]hile some evocations of Milton may be largely to [...] enforce class distinctions, not infrequently, Milton is challenged, subverted, or appropriated in
radical contexts to support values that reshape or seem to invert those of the historical poet” (10). The most prominent example of this subversive re-shaping of Miltonic thought is the Romantics’ radical treatment of Paradise Lost, the re-writing of its original context as a Christian epic into a celebration of satanic freedom from God’s oppression. The Romantics read Paradise Lost as expressing an underlying defiance of God and religion, as a political statement against tyrannical systems and the glorification of the individual’s heroic struggle against an omnipotent, omnipresent opponent. The Romantics were the first, but certainly not the last, artists to intertextually tie the epic to their own works not just to express their reverence for this poetical masterpiece, but also to add political, theological, philosophical and artistic validity to their own writing. The issues and themes these authors see expressed in Paradise Lost are those they seek to express in their own works, and to utilize Miltonic imagery and thought in their writing signals a kinship with an author who is considered one of the ‘greats’.

If Milton serves as the epitome of high-brow, canonical literature, then intertextually aligning oneself with this grand poet serves to strengthen the personal authorial profiles since it gives an author’s own works an air of grandeur and intellectual capacity; by reading and re-writing Milton, an author signals that he or she is part of Milton’s select audience of “fit” readers. This is doubly beneficial for authors of popular literature, such as writers of fantasy fiction, since popular literary genres are often frowned upon as merely serving to entertain, not educate or enlighten the masses. For an author of popular literature to invoke Milton’s great epic provides an opportunity to become part of a larger literary history and rise above the label of ‘low culture’ towards recognition as an artist. Conversely, this betrays a certain anxiety about their status as ‘popular’ authors enjoyed by the masses, and a possibly dormant desire to gear one’s work towards a more elite readership appreciative of allusions to canonical literature.

Thus, when analysing an author’s intertextual indebtedness to Milton’s works, not only does the question arise what this author does to and with the Miltonic text, a question tackled in-depth in Milton and Popular Culture; of equal significance is the question why a modern author would specifically evoke Milton, a poet considered the embodiment of “high-brow” culture, in his own text. The question to ask is not just how these authors of popular fiction rework Milton’s poetry and how this reflects back on the ‘original’, but also what their relationship with the poet signifies about
their own works, their own authorial persona; when scrutinizing these re-writings of *Paradise Lost*, it is crucial to investigate what their choice of Milton’s epic as their source material tells us about them, just as much as what it tells us about Milton’s text.

This thesis focuses on two authors of fantastic fiction, C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman, and scrutinises the intentions underlying the choice of *Paradise Lost* as their main source of inspiration for two of their works. In the case of C.S. Lewis, his science-fiction/fantasy novel *Perelandra*, the second volume in a trilogy of Christian space-travel novels, will be the main focus.1 *Perelandra*, which is the name Lewis gives the planet Venus, features an alien First Couple about to be faced with temptation by a demonic entity, just as Adam and Eve were before them. In this novel, however, the alien ‘Eve’ resists temptation—with the help of the trilogy’s hero from our world, Elwin Ransom—and the fall is prevented, paradise on Venus is retained. Lewis is an author of fantasy stories as well as an Oxford scholar and writer of Christian apologetics, and his re-imagining of the Fall narrative brims with Miltonic imagery. *Perelandra* reflects Lewis’s view of *Paradise Lost* as embodying Christian orthodoxy. In stark contrast to Lewis’s *Perelandra*, Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, its title a quote from *Paradise Lost* (II, 916) celebrates the Fall as a crucial transition from childlike, naïve innocence to maturity, wisdom and self-reliance.2 Pullman insists on the need to ‘fall’ in order to survive; his adolescent heroine, Lyra, is hailed as a second Eve, who re-enacts the Fall and thus frees mankind from the oppressive “Authority”, an angel impostor pretending to be God. In a sense, Pullman returns to the Romantics’ reading of *Paradise Lost* and he explicitly acknowledges William Blake as a source for his trilogy (*AS* 549-50). Pullman’s trilogy has stirred up a remarkable controversy due to its highly critical view of the Christian church and supposed ‘murdering’ of God himself at the end of *His Dark Materials*. Furthermore, Pullman is exceptionally forthright in his condemnation of Lewis’s books for children, the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and the Christian mythology underlying them.

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1 The other two volumes in the trilogy are: *Out of the Silent Planet*, set on Mars and seen as a re-working of especially H.G. Well’s science-driven space travel stories, and *That Hideous Strength*, set on Earth and largely inspired by the works of Lewis’s friend Charles Williams. On the space trilogy see especially Lobdell.

2 The three volumes of the trilogy are titled *Northern Lights* (*NL*), *The Subtle Knife* (*SK*) and *The Amber Spyglass* (*AS*).
The choice of these two writers as the primary focus of this thesis arises from a number of reasons. First, both Lewis and Pullman, despite reading *Paradise Lost* very differently and Pullman having openly declared a strong dislike of Lewis and his Christian fantasy stories, share a number of similarities in their authorial profiles. Both British authors have a strong connection to the city of Oxford and its university. Pullman not only lives in Oxford to this day and is one of its university’s prominent alumni, he also chose Oxford as a setting for extensive parts of his trilogy. C.S. Lewis is connected to Oxford University not only through his time as a student, he also taught and lectured at the university for many years and was part of the now almost legendary group of Oxford dons called the Inklings, a group of men interested in what Tolkien called “mythopoeic” stories, or what Jackson and Todorov term “stories of the marvellous”.

Although this thesis is less concerned with Lewis’s better-known fantasy stories for children, the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and instead focuses on a novel written primarily for adults, Lewis is best known as an author of popular children’s books; Pullman, too, has risen to fame mainly through his young adult books, although he has also written novels geared towards an adult audience. Both authors write about religious and metaphysical topics and embed them in a fantastic setting involving secondary worlds; Lewis primarily reworks myths, folk-tales and legends to give them Christian undertones, whereas Pullman’s trilogy intertwines elements of the fantastic with concepts taken from quantum physics, philosophy and theology, directing his life-affirming message against the (supposed) oppressive power of organised religion.

Not only do both authors engage with questions about the origin and purpose of life, questions about the nature of innocence and experience and the transition from childhood to adulthood also feature strongly in both authors’ works. Their best-known works, respectively Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* and Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*, feature prepubescent protagonists who need to learn what it means to grow up. In *Perelandra*, the innocent and sin-free “Green Lady” is likewise faced with the challenge of “grow[ing] older” (*Perelandra* 59), Lewis’s phrase for the gaining of experience, without being corrupted by the newfound wisdom. In *His Dark Materials*, Lyra and Will need to let go of their childhood freedom in order to save their

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3 For more on the friendship between Lewis and Tolkien and the history of their literary co-creation see Humphrey Carpenter’s *The Inklings*. 
respective universes and gain a new, more profound freedom based on wisdom and maturity. Whereas both authors are largely known as writers of fantasy, Pullman is rather defensive towards this label, while Lewis devoted much of his scholarly work to the defence of fantastic stories, embracing the genre. What both authors have in common, though, is a belief in the value of stories and the importance of story-telling for the human race. A further connection between these two authors is their love for and fascination with *Paradise Lost*; Lewis wrote an extensive scholarly work on the epic, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, and Pullman repeatedly stressed in interviews how reading the epic during his high-school years made a strong impact on his own craft (Carter 187-89). Both authors read the epic in a very different, very specific way, in alignment with their profile as author.

What this thesis seeks to prove is that both Lewis and Pullman (mis)read *Paradise Lost* according to what best helps to strengthen their own authorial image; thus, Lewis reads the epic as confirming Christian dogma, which neatly fits his own authorial persona of ‘Christian fantasist’, whereas Pullman focuses on its subversive, satanic elements, utilising this reading to create an image of himself as rebellious, atheist writer who challenges the very foundation of the Judeo-Christian faith. Both authors try to re-imagine a very particular Milton, as a Milton who expresses with his most famous poetical work precisely what each respective author tries to communicate with his work. By evoking a particular reading of Milton’s persona in their re-imaginings of *Paradise Lost*, they claim ownership of his epic in a way that supports and empowers their own writing; they do not merely cite or allude to *Paradise Lost* to place their works closer to the literary canon, they re-read and re-shape the epic through their own works to signal to their readership that they have an exclusive understanding of Milton’s true purpose in writing the epic. Furthermore, both authors very consciously utilise the critical controversy surrounding this canonical text to support their own political and religious (or anti-religious, respectively) stance and to actively shape an image of themselves as part of an ongoing intellectual and philosophical debate. Milton’s declared aim to “justify the ways of God to men” (I, 26) in *Paradise Lost* has always been viewed as

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4 See Pullman’s article “The Republic of Heaven” for his view on fantasy; Lewis wrote a couple of essays on myth and story, see especially his chapter on myth in *Experiment in Criticism* and his essay collection *On Stories and other Essays*.

5 Pullman talked about the value of story-telling in his acceptance speech of the prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2005.
controversial, due to the fact that God himself is one of the epic characters, but seems rather lifeless and uncomfortably sermonising compared to the energetic, ambitious “fiend” (II, 677; 815; 915) Satan.

Although this thesis is not meant to function as a discussion of genre fiction, the choice to focus on two authors of fantasy fiction is by no means coincidental. *Paradise Lost*, despite being considered rather the retelling of a true story than mere fiction by its author, has always had close ties with the fantastic. Semenza and Knoppers remark that authors of modern fantasy and science fiction in particular feel a fascination with *Paradise Lost*:

The very elements of Milton’s epic—otherworldly settings, grand conflicts of good and evil, heroes who determine the fate of their worlds, space travel, warfare, futuristic visions—have made Paradise Lost highly appealing to fantasy and science fiction writers from the genre’s turn of the century origins, through its cold war phase to its current place in postmodern culture. (11)

Satan’s journey from Hell through Chaos to Paradise makes him “one of the first space-travellers” (Manlove 106), and his character is considered a prototype for the destructive, yet fascinating anti-hero found in gothic horror. As my discussion of Lewis’s treatment of *Paradise Lost* in particular will show, the choice of fantasy as a genre in which to intertextually engage with Milton’s epic allows authors to deal with the Christian mythology that inspired Milton in a ‘safe’ environment, a secondary world removed from our own. In a way, this is also true for Pullman, who can claim that the evil Church in one of his parallel universes has no ties to the churches in our own world.

As Millicent Lenz and Paul Hunt so aptly state in the introduction to *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, the typical first task for any critical work dealing with fantasy fiction is to try to define ‘fantasy’, which “seems to be a fairly defensive exercise” (10). For the purpose of this thesis, I am going to borrow a definition from fantasy writer Ursula Le Guin, quoted in Lenz and Hunt, who describes the fantastic as “a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not anti-rational, but para-rational: not realistic, but surrealistic, superrealistic; a heightening of reality” (in Hunt 10). This definition is particularly useful when considering that *Paradise Lost*, with its ultimate

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6 On *Paradise Lost* as inspiration for the horror genre see Collings.
7 For further definitions of the fantastic as genre see especially Rosemary Jackson’s *Fantasy. Literature of Subversion* and Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*.
battle in Heaven between good and bad angels offers precisely this type of “surrealistic, superrealistic” hyper-reality and thus explains why writers of the genre are so drawn to the epic. Lenz and Hunt offer an enlightening survey of the modern fantasy genre, stating that:

- Fantasy literature is either taken seriously (and enthusiastically), or seriously rejected. It is the root of all literature, an area of advanced literary experimentation, and essential to our mental health; or it is regressive, and associated with self-indulgent catharsis on the part of the writers; or it is linked to a ritualistic, epic, dehumanized world of predetermination and out of tune with post-romantic sensitivity: or it symbolizes the ransom world of the postmodern. (2)

Critics of the fantastic genre have often overlooked or condemned the sort of fantasy that Lewis and Pullman write, broadly labelled stories of “the marvellous” (Jackson 33; Todorov 52), as opposed to the supposedly more subversive sub-genre of the fantastic called “the uncanny” (Jackson 24; Todorov 44). According to Jackson, the marvellous differs from the uncanny, which presents fantasy in its purest and most disturbingly un-natural form, in that “[i]t is a form which discourages reader participation, representing events which are in the long distant past, contained and fixed by a long temporal perspective and carrying the implication that their effects have long since ceased to disturb” (33). Fantasy stories such as Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, or Lewis’s *Narnia* and his science-fantasy trilogy, are condemned by Jackson for offering mere escapism instead of a critique of the ‘real’ world since they “move away from the unsettling implications which are found at the centre of the purely ‘fantastic’ ” and attempt to dispel their anxieties “into religious longing and nostalgia” (8).

This idea of the Tolkienesque fantasy as escapist is as old as the genre itself, resting primarily on the assumption that fantasy stories set in a different world and/or time than our own, presenting us with a so-called secondary world, have no ties with the ‘real’ world. However, as Lenz and Hunt notice, all fantasy—whether set in this world or another—has links to our own: “Fantasy cannot be ‘free-floating’ or entirely original, unless we are prepared to learn a new language and new way of thinking to understand it. It must be understandable in terms of its relationship to, or deviance

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8 Both Tolkien and Lewis have defended the genre against such accusations, or rather, have argued against the need to condemn escapism as bad per se; see Tolkien’s “On Fairy-Stories” and Lewis’s “The Meanings of ‘Fantasy’ ” in *Experiment in Criticism*. Ann Swinfen also makes a strong case for modern fantasy in her *In Defence of Fantasy*. 
from, our known world” (7). Even the most escapist, nostalgic and idealist fantasy offers an indirect critique of the world we live in since “fantasy – things as they cannot be – is very often a very direct critique of things as they are, even if not directly intended to be so” (8). This last remark is of particular interest for this thesis since both Lewis and Pullman—Pullman seemingly more conscious about doing so—are critically commenting on the Christian mythology they both intertextually engage with through their re-shaping of *Paradise Lost*. The mythological background to Milton’s epic, the Fall narrative first recounted in Genesis 3, is treated very differently in Lewis’s and Pullman’s re-imaginings of *Paradise Lost*. The fantasy genre offers both authors a safe environment in which to re-imagine the biblical Fall as either a necessity (as Pullman does), or a calamity that should have been prevented (Lewis’s view).

The reception of fantasy as either-or, as subversive or escapist, as “expressing desire” (Jackson 4) otherwise suppressed within the human subconscious or dispelling this desire into a harmless, nostalgic wishful thinking of better times, mirrors the reception of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* over the centuries as either subversively satanic or orthodox Christian, with little to no middle ground. The debate over whether or not Milton was rooting for the devil had a strong impact on both Lewis’s and Pullman’s treatment of the epic, and especially Lewis’s double role as scholar and fiction writer plays a crucial role in his re-shaping of *Paradise Lost*. The following survey of primarily twentieth-century Milton criticism is by no means intended to present a complete list, since this would reach beyond the scope of this thesis and lead away from the main focus of this work, which is tracing the influence Milton’s epic had on two works of fantasy fiction. Rather, this discussion seeks to outline a certain trend peculiar to Milton criticism, in particular criticism focusing on *Paradise Lost*: the creation of two different ‘Miltons’, one the Christian poet whose faith in God never wavers, and the other the heretical rebel who secretly endorses Satan’s cause, questioning God’s righteousness. These two ‘versions’ of Milton, usually seen as irreconcilable, as an either-or choice with little to no middle ground between them, have led to two very different (mis)readings of *Paradise Lost*, and these in turn have influenced the fictional re-imagining of *Paradise Lost* by the two authors discussed in this thesis. In order to get a sense of these two ‘Miltons’, a brief discussion of the main supporters of both versions will follow.
From its very first public appearance, Milton’s epic re-telling of the biblical Fall of mankind and the war in heaven between obedient and rebelling angels sparked myriad critical responses. Whereas earlier critics such as Samuel Johnson or Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* primarily discussed the aesthetics of the epic, either rejecting *Paradise Lost* for poor execution, or praising Milton for his grand, sweeping boldness in style, the poets of the Romantic movement began to focus more strongly on the epic’s content. The character of Satan became the focal point for the Romantics’ interest in *Paradise Lost*, since they empathised with the fallen angel’s rebellion against God’s omnipotent authority. It was William Blake who claimed that “the reason why Milton wrote in fetters if he wrote of Angels and God and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it” (“MHH”, 52-55), and this idea of an underlying subversive element within an epic depicting a Christian myth appealed to the Romantics. Poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley with *Prometheus Unbound*, Mary Shelley with *Frankenstein*, John Keats with *Endymion* and of course William Blake with his illustrations of Milton’s works and poems such as *Milton* and “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”, were all inspired by *Paradise Lost*, re-interpreting it as a work of a rebellious mind which defied and severely criticised oppressive authority and tyranny.

In the early to mid-twentieth century, critics such as E.M.W. Tillyard in *Milton* (1930), or the French scholar Denis Saurat in *Milton: Man and Thinker* (1944) approached the epic by trying to shed light on the author’s complex and contradictory life and to better understand the literary works by understanding the man who wrote them better. Tillyard’s *Milton* claims clear parallels between Milton’s personal beliefs and political convictions and the epic’s underlying meaning. Tillyard reads *Paradise Lost* from a biographical angle, drawing on Milton’s life and personal development, and attempts to thus discover “what the poem can most truly be said to mean” (238). Through a careful close reading of the epic Tillyard tries to prove that Milton’s conscious aim in writing *Paradise Lost* is not always in accordance with the
unconscious desires or convictions expressed throughout the epic. According to Tillyard: “A close study of the text would reveal many instances of Milton’s betraying what he will not admit or does not realise he feels” (276). Thus, Tillyard’s *Milton* offers a section each on the “Conscious Meaning” (255-275) and “Unconscious Meaning” (276-294) of *Paradise Lost*. Tillyard reads the epic with the help of biographical data, claiming that Milton’s “constant method of generalising from his personal experience” (295) can be seen throughout the text. Saurat’s study of Milton’s poetic works focuses just as strongly on Milton’s life and his political and theological viewpoints, presenting Milton as a man whose tempestuous life is reflected in his poetry and political pamphlets. In his discussion of *Paradise Lost*, Saurat claims that the epic “is first of all [...] the working of Milton’s ideas; but it is also—and this remains to be studied—a sort of transposition of his private and political experience” (178). Just as Tillyard does, Saurat chooses to approach *Paradise Lost* biographically, since he is convinced that “Milton has drawn upon his own life to depict situations similar to those he had known” (178) in the epic. Both these critics see the man and his life experience reflected in his poetry.

Tillyard and Saurat did not necessarily reject the Romantics’ view of *Paradise Lost* as rebellious and defiantly anti-clerical; however, both critics moved back to the more emotionally detached, less ‘personal’ study of the epic’s narrative style and aesthetic merits practised by critics of the pre-Romantic period. The question whether or not Milton truly was “of the devil’s party” as Blake suggested, was debated, but did not present a major focal point for Saurat’s or Tillyard’s discussions of the epic. Both critics do, however, see Satan as almost a dark alter ego of Milton, as representing the darker aspects of his own character. Tillyard, for instance, although not necessarily supporting a reading of *Paradise Lost* as satanic, states that “I do not see how one can avoid admitting that Milton did partly ally himself with Satan, that unwittingly he was led away by the creature of his own imagination” (277). Saurat goes even further than merely presenting Milton as feeling partial towards Satan in stating: “The deep pleasure [Milton] takes in his creation of Satan is the joy of liberating, purging himself of the evil in himself, by concentrating it, outside himself, into a work of art” (184). So, in contrast to the Romantics’ interpretation of Satan as tragic hero of the epic, Saurat and Tillyard, in accordance with their biographical reading of *Paradise Lost*, view Satan as that part of Milton that he despised, yet boldly faced by reworking it into a fictional representation of the origin of all evil. When Saurat states that
“Satan is not only a part of Milton’s character, he is also a part of Milton’s mind” (183), he means to stress that the character of Satan is directly inspired from Milton’s experiences in life, which formed and shaped his creative mind.

Alongside this biographical reading of Milton’s work, the modernist movement generated a new approach to poetry and new ideas on its function, and thus earlier poetic works were also put under renewed critical scrutiny by modernist poets. T.S. Eliot, one of the most prominent modernist literary critics of poetry, rejected Milton’s poetic works, criticising Milton for his “bad influence” on contemporary English poets (10). In his first essay on Milton, published in 1936, Eliot severely criticises Milton’s poetry, claiming that it “could only be an influence for the worse, upon any poet whatever” (10, emphasis in the text), and stating that “Milton writes English like a dead language” (14). Eliot felt that Milton had damaged the English language with his poetic style, and this in turn led to damaging developments in English poetry: the “dead” verse of Milton’s poetry had a paralysing effect on later poetry (10). The subject matter of Paradise Lost likewise displeases Eliot, who finds in Milton’s retelling of Genesis “a glimpse of a theology that I find in large part repellent” (19). When he wrote a further essay on Milton, published in 1947, his rhetoric had somewhat softened, yet he nevertheless remained wary of Milton’s poetry, reiterating the idea of the “bad influence of Milton” on English poets (30). Although acknowledging Milton’s “greatness” (38), he still considers this to be of little benefit to later generations of poets. Adding to the critique of Milton’s poetic style and perceived theological viewpoints, Eliot furthermore claims that Milton “had little interest in, or understanding of, individual human beings”, which made the choice of subject matter for his epic so fitting since, “In Paradise Lost, he was not called upon for any of that understanding which comes from an affectionate observation of men and women” (38-39). Eliot’s second critical essay on Milton’s poetry is rife with statements such as this, with Eliot still seemingly struggling to find merit in Milton’s epic, despite admitting his “greatness” (38). Since the modernist movement was intent on freeing its poetry from the stylistic constrictions of earlier poetic modes and forms, it is no surprise that Eliot would judge Milton’s works so harshly.

Not only T.S. Eliot, but also the renowned literary critic F.R. Leavis condemned Milton’s poetry in his influential study on English poetry, Revaluation. Published in 1936, Revaluation offers an extensive chapter on “Milton’s Verse”, in which Leavis has few positive things to say about Paradise Lost. He considers the epic to be far too
stylised at the expense of the smoothness of the verse and judges its composition as “being almost as mechanical as bricklaying” (60). Just like Eliot, Leavis views Milton as having rather harmed the English language than enriched it, even going so far as to claim that “Milton has forgotten the English language” (53), and concluding that Shakespeare, with whom Milton is compared throughout the chapter, is the stronger poet of the two by far.

In 1942, C.S. Lewis, who stood in direct opposition to Leavis, Tillyard and Eliot and their method of Milton criticism, gave a series of lectures on Paradise Lost, which would later be published as A Preface to Paradise Lost. Lewis had earlier published an essay called “The Personal Heresy in Criticism” (Carpenter 59) as a direct answer to Tillyard’s Milton and the tendency to view the epic as containing hints about the author’s character. As John Carpenter relates in The Inklings, “a public controversy began between them” after Tillyard replied to Lewis’s article (Carpenter 59-60). Carpenter further notes that Lewis’s insistence on keeping the author’s persona separate from the study of his works puts him in direct opposition to Leavis (63). Lewis also rejected Eliot’s line of criticism, and he strongly disliked the entire modernist movement (Carpenter 12; 21). In A Preface to Paradise Lost, Lewis directly answers Eliot’s accusations against Milton’s poetic style as damaging to poetry, addressing “Mr. Eliot” frequently in the chapter titled “Is Criticism Possible?” (9-12).

It was C.S. Lewis who began a new stream of Milton criticism with his Preface, which deliberately set itself against the Romantics’ subversive interpretation of Paradise Lost. Lewis read the epic as undoubtedly representing Christian thought and conviction and he repudiates the Romantics’ interpretation of it as a rebellion against the suppressive nature of organised religion. According to Lewis, after the Romantics, and William Blake in particular, “Hatred or ignorance of [Paradise Lost’s] central theme led critics to praise and to blame for fantastic reasons, or to vent upon supposed flaws in the poet’s art or his theology the horror they really felt at the very shapes of discipline and harmony and humility and creaturely dependence” (134). To Lewis, Milton embodies the perfect Christian poet, whose desire to create poetry is mainly driven by a desire to celebrate God and his creation. Lewis seeks to prove that Milton was so enamoured by the principle of the perfectly balanced chain-of-being, the natural, god-given order, that “The Hierarchical idea is not merely stuck on to his poem at points where doctrine demands it: it is the indwelling life of the whole work,
it foams or burgeons out of it at every moment” (79). We will return to Lewis’s view of *Paradise Lost* as a celebration of “creaturely dependance” (134) in chapter two of this thesis; for now, the main point of interest is that with Lewis and his *Preface*, mainstream Milton criticism shifted away from the idea of inconsistencies and possible subversiveness present in the epic.

The influence that Lewis’s *Preface* had on Milton criticism is still palpable in contemporary scholarly works on the epic; John Rumrich, in his excellent study *Milton Unbound*, claims that neo-Christian critics in particular created what Rumrich terms, “the invented Milton, a rhetorical artifact or paradigm foundational to contemporary Milton scholarship” (2). A writer on Christian thought as well as a literary critic, Lewis was the first to stress the value of *Paradise Lost* as primarily a religiously-inspired epic. To Lewis, there is no doubt that “as far as doctrine goes, the poem is overwhelmingly Christian. Except for a few isolated passages it is not even specifically Protestant or Puritan. It gives the great central tradition” (92). The image of Milton Lewis wishes to create for the readers of his *Preface* is that of a Christian man above all else. Thus, Lewis devotes a large portion of the *Preface* to arguing against the existence of heretical content in the epic. Although Lewis acknowledges heretical notions to a certain extent, he asserts that they “are only discoverable by search: any criticism which forces them into the foreground is mistaken, and ignores the fact that this poem was accepted as orthodox by many generations of acute readers well grounded in theology” (82). Lewis is very quick to make such broad, sweeping statements when it serves his argument for the orthodoxy of *Paradise Lost* despite historic evidence pointing to the fact that the orthodoxy of the epic was questioned from its very beginning.12

In order to support his view of *Paradise Lost* as “overwhelmingly Christian”, Lewis skips over those parts of the epic that do not fit with this idea of Milton as orthodox Christian poet. For instance, he goes to great lengths to prove that Milton’s Satan holds no true fascination for a reader who understands the epic within its historic context: “All hatred of tyranny is expressed in the poem: but the tyrant held up to our execrations is not God. It is Satan. He is the Sultan – a name hateful in Milton’s day to all Europeans both as free men and as Christians” (78; emphasis in the text). So, if we had read the epic “in Milton’s day”, as part of Milton’s “audience

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12 On this see especially Herman’s introduction to *Destabilizing Milton* (1-24) and Rumrich’s *Milton Unbound*. 
fit [...] though few”, we would not have misjudged – as the Romantics later did – Satan’s character or Milton’s intentions for that character. The same is true for Milton’s God, seen as the portrayal of a tyrannical monarch by the Romantics in particular. To Lewis, a dislike of Milton’s God merely betrays our fallenness and inability to accept the divine: “Many of those who say they dislike Milton’s God only mean that they dislike God: infinite sovereignty de jure, combined with infinite power de facto, and love which, by its very nature, includes wrath also—it is not only in poetry that these things offend” (130). Part of Lewis’s mission in the Preface is to rescue the epic from previous (mis)readings of the poem as subversive or even heretical, arguing that this interpretation relies on wrong assumptions about either the author or the historical context in which his work needs to be placed. To “dislike Milton’s God” is not due to a fault in Milton’s theology, but merely results from the modern readers’ inability to be part of Milton’s elect “fit” readership, a readership immersed in and convinced by Christian dogma.

What Lewis is primarily arguing against in his Preface is the idea that Paradise Lost contains meanings that somehow transcend Milton’s conscious intentions for his epic, that there is a hidden, subversive, even ‘satanic’ truth encoded within the text. Of course, as Lewis openly states, his own, supposedly ‘correct’ reading relies on the assumption that only a Christian can fully understand this Christian work. Thus, Lewis ironically warns the reader at the beginning of his discussion of the epic’s theology: “In order to take no unfair advantage I should warn the reader that I myself am a Christian, and that some (by no means all) of the things which the atheist reader must ‘try to feel as if he believed’ I actually, in cold prose, do believe” (65). This is not so much a ‘warning’ as rather a summary of the main problem surrounding the Preface. Lewis is a Christian, and he reads the epic foremost as a Christian, and therefore all his scholarly views on Paradise Lost are coloured (and often clouded) by his attempt to erase any doubts about Milton’s unwavering faith. Lewis’s ‘warning’ that he reads the epic from a Christian viewpoint is turned into his main argument against subversive readings of the epic: “But for the student of Milton my Christianity is an advantage. What would you not give to have a real, live Epicurean at your elbow while reading Lucretius?” (65).

This last statement is crucial for understanding Lewis’s approach to Paradise Lost; he rejects what he calls “the doctrine of the unchanging human heart” (62), the idea that poetry contains abstract ideas that can speak to audiences over the centuries
and need not necessarily be embedded into a precise socio-historical context in order to be understood. Lewis insists upon the need to read the epic bearing in mind Milton’s social and historical background, and his intention to write a grand, Christian epic that seeks to reconcile the doubting human race with the Almighty. According to Lewis, readers must approach the epic from a Christian point-of-view, since Milton so clearly stated his intention to “justify the ways of God to men” in his invocation at the beginning of the epic. The idea that poetry expresses universal ideas and ideals, which can be understood universally throughout the ages, is not acceptable to Lewis: “You must, as far as in you lies, become an Achaean chief while reading Homer, a medieval knight while reading Malory, and an eighteenth-century Londoner while reading Johnson” (64). Following Lewis’s logic, the Christian Lewis seems to be one of the sparse members of Milton’s “audience, fit but few”; the Preface seems to imply that this select audience is a purely Christian one. To understand Paradise Lost, then, is only possible for steadfast Christians familiar with, and fully convinced by, orthodox dogmatic thinking. Of course, this also presents Lewis himself as the only type of critic “fit” to judge the epic, due to his unique double role of Christian apologetic and literary scholar. Lewis’s reading of Paradise Lost as a Christian work, written for a Christian audience, ultimately serves to present Lewis himself as the critic most capable of relaying the one true and correct meaning of the poem.

In the twentieth century, Milton criticism turned into a personal debate, in which the reading of the epic is heavily influenced by the critics’ different worldviews and personal beliefs. What critics of the twentieth century – and, I would argue, continuing on in the twenty-first century – seek to prove with their readings of Paradise Lost is less concerned with its contents or style, but rather with trying to put a specific label on the epic and its author; hence, Rumrich’s term of the “invented Milton”, and this term might just as well be applied to the label ‘Milton the heretical rebel’, as to ‘Milton, the Christian poet’. In what is possibly a direct answer to Lewis’s demand for a purely Christian reading, Rumrich remarks that “[a]n audience can register meaning in contexts that an author never imagined and still remain true to the author’s original intention” (27). Whereas few would deny (in fact, neither did the Romantics) the “overwhelmingly Christian” content of the epic, nor Milton’s intention to, indeed, prove God’s magnanimity and omnipotence, Lewis runs the risk of purposefully overlooking those elements of Paradise Lost that have left readers of the epic feeling uneasy and somewhat unsettled about the Christian God, or the nature
of evil. Lewis does feel the same unease, yet relates it back to a failure in Milton’s style, rather than a possible ambiguity inherent to the epic’s content.\textsuperscript{13} To Lewis, then, it seems that there is no chance for an atheist or even a sceptic Christian, to ever read the epic ‘properly’.

Yet, an atheist critic did read the epic, and, predictably, drew entirely opposing conclusions about Milton’s view on Christianity and the Christian God. William Empson’s \textit{Milton’s God} is a study of the portrayal of God and loyal angels in the epic, and Empson does not hesitate to apply the “doctrine of the unchanging human heart” so despised by Lewis. To Empson, Milton’s God is a tyrant, and he draws extensive evidence from the text to support this claim.\textsuperscript{14} However, Empson’s reading of \textit{Paradise Lost} is clouded by his own personal feud with Christianity (and, possibly, Capitalism), just as Lewis’s Christianity tends to obscure his critical views on the epic. Empson is just as forthright about his ideological agenda as Lewis was before him when admitting that, “I think the traditional God of Christianity very wicked, and have done since I was at school, where nearly all my little playmates thought the same” (10).

In a way, Empson’s reading of Milton’s God as “wicked” supports Lewis’s belief that readers of the epic should not hold a personal grudge against God, since it distorts their interpretation of the epic. Yet, unlike Lewis, Empson specifically concentrates on those moments throughout the poem in which readers feel uneasy when faced with God’s actions and decision. In his treatment of Eve’s Fall in particular, Empson teases out some intriguing contradictions of the original biblical Fall described in Genesis, and points to the fact that God’s prohibition is “a random test of obedience” (161) that Eve can only fail. Indeed, according to Empson, God steers his celestial forces in particular in a way that assures Satan’s success as tempter, and the textual evidence given for these observations is convincing, and offers fascinating new approaches to the epic.

Empson’s main intent, however, seems to be to prove not just Milton’s portrayal of God as “wicked”, but the Judeo-Christian deity in general as despicable. This personal vendetta against Christianity and the Judeo-Christian God leads to curious moments in \textit{Milton’s God}. Some of the book’s passages read less like a critical

\textsuperscript{13} An example would be Lewis’s treatment of sexuality, both human and angelic (112-113; 122-124). Chapter two of this thesis will focus more on Lewis’s view of \textit{Paradise Lost} as poetically flawed.

\textsuperscript{14} Empson’s claim that God in fact actively aids Satan to enter Paradise, whilst pretending to his loyal angels that he seeks to protect the Gates of Heaven, is an example of this; see 111-13.
engagement with the epic than a spiteful sermon against the Judeo-Christian God: “The hypocrisy which the jovial old ruffian feels to be required of him in public has not poisoned his own mind, as we realize when he permits himself his leering joke” (124), is Empson’s comment on God’s glorification of the Son in Book V of the epic, and it is hard not to feel embarrassed by a statement that is so obviously disconnected from a scholarly discourse. *Milton’s God* is too personal to be objective about the epic; Empson handpicks very particular instances within the epic to prove the corruptness of God, just as Lewis tends to draw on very specific scenes in order to verify Milton’s “overwhelmingly Christian” intentions. Clearly, Empson’s reading is driven by his hatred of Christianity and his desire to prove that Milton, too, disapproved of the Judeo-Christian God.

Less than a decade later, Stanley Fish returned to the idea of a clear-cut, straight-forward relation between the poet’s intentions to “justify the ways of God to men” and the successful and just as clear-cut outcome in the epic’s narrative structure, denying any subversive or unconscious deviations from the Christian theme. According to Fish, Milton’s intention was to teach his readership about the true nature of sin, by letting them ‘fall’ through his persuasive, fascinating portrayal of Satan as a heroic figure. Through subtle usage of ambiguous metaphors in Satan’s speech, Milton plays with the reader’s mind in a way that results in utter confusion about the devil’s agenda; the reader gets tempted into believing Satan, and thus learns that he should not trust his own instincts, but humbly accept his own moral and intellectual insufficiency. Fish presents the epic voice of *Paradise Lost* as a stern, unrelenting school-teacher: “We are not warned […], but accused, taunted by an imperious voice which says with no consideration of our feelings, ‘I know that you have been carried away by what you have just heard; you should not have been; you have made a mistake, just as I knew you would’ ”(9). The reader is constantly tricked, and for one reason only: to confront him with his own vices, fears, doubts, uncertainties and hidden desires, and to reveal how much at their mercy he is; Fish sardonically calls this sly didacticism “reader harassment” (4).

This is an uncomfortable representation of Milton and was opposed by Rumrich, who accuses Fish of distorting the diversity of viewpoints actually expressed in the epic. Rumrich traces the “invented Milton”, the paradigm created to promote the reading of *Paradise Lost* as an indisputably orthodox Christian epic, back to Fish’s portrayal of Milton’s epic narrator. To Rumrich, Fish depicts the epic voice
of *Paradise Lost* as “a redundant pedant who already knows the truth of things, humiliates and berates his charges for their errors, and with obnoxious superiority requires conformity to traditional beliefs” (Rumrich 21). In *Milton Unbound*, Rumrich states that “the invented Milton” serves neo-Christian critics such as Fish, and Lewis before him, particularly well, since it allows them to forcibly and often persuasively argue against post-Romantic views on *Paradise Lost* (Rumrich 1-3). It is only by presenting Milton as a steadfastly orthodox Christian poet, and steadfast in his intention to celebrate God’s ultimate goodness, that Lewis, for instance, can claim that, “[t]he heresies of *Paradise Lost* thus reduce themselves to something very small and rather ambiguous” (91); “ambiguous”, in this case, means ‘negligible’.

Lewis’s claim that *Paradise Lost* is “overwhelmingly Christian” and “gives the great central tradition” (95) is challenged by Rumrich’s observation that even the greatest Christian thinkers of past ages were deeply divided on the great central issues of the Christian faith. This disagreement about central Christian matters such as the question of free will does not only happen amongst minor theologians or mere heretics. As Rumrich points out:

> Though they hardly seem like marginal figures, St. Paul, St. Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, all, if not with equal rigor, denied free will. According to Patrides, the Protestant Christian tradition and Milton its epic proponent endorse it; presumably, then, the reformers and the saint [sic] stand ‘on its periphery’. (29)

In England alone, we find a confusing amount of various sects and theological views, right into the seventeenth century and well beyond. Whether or not Milton was indeed a sectarian himself, as some critics claim, there should be no doubt that he hardly felt like following “the great central tradition” of Christianity, since a true unity among the Christian thinkers never existed in the first place.

Rumrich’s observations open up an opportunity to return to a more versatile reading of the epic. Yet, a recent work on *Paradise Lost*, Peter Herman’s *Destabilizing Milton*, argues along the line of Rumrich’s “invented Milton” and claims that Milton criticism in fact actively suppresses, or at least ostracises, critical works that dare to question the “dominant paradigm” (6) in Milton studies. This paradigm, which, according to Herman, “has largely governed Milton studies until very recently, and which continues to hold great sway, consists of three propositions: Milton is a poet of absolute, unqualified certainty; *Paradise Lost* coheres; the critic’s task is to make the poem cohere” (7). Any doubts expressed over Milton’s purpose in
writing the epic, or irregularities and ambiguities discovered in the epic’s construction and contents, are seen as invalid or even wrong observations on an epic work that was, beyond any doubt, written by an author certain of his faith in a benevolent God. Herman discusses a number of influential Milton critics, such as Stanley Fish, Christopher Hill, Regina Schwartz, and Michael Lieb, arguing that although those critics might take different angles when approaching the epic, they nevertheless “are in perfect accord with each other and the governing paradigm of Milton studies” (9).

To reject the existence of subversive or heretical elements within *Paradise Lost* rules out the possibility to learn more about the very reasons why this epic has always intrigued a variety of scholars and poets with various views and entirely different ideologies. Whether they sympathized with Satan, God, or Adam and Eve, they all felt themselves drawn especially to those contradictory, ambiguous moments in the epic’s narrative structure. It is the nature of scholarly criticism to try to ‘understand’ literary works, as far as this is possible, but post-Romantic criticism on *Paradise Lost* has turned into an ideological battlefield, in which the actual text itself – what the author has in actuality stated within his lines – gets contorted to suit a certain religious or political viewpoint. Rarely do any of the great Milton critics of the twentieth century seem to have studied the epic without a specific, predetermined purpose in the back of his (or her) mind. Works on *Paradise Lost*, scholarly as well as poetical, seek to find something within its lines that confirms whatever beliefs and worldviews the reader has, while at the same time claiming that they understand the poet’s personal beliefs and intentions. Each of those critics seems to be convinced that they fully understand Milton, or, that he or she is the only, the first one, to truly understand Milton. With all those critics, but in particular Empson and Lewis, what is most striking is the highly personal way of reading *Paradise Lost*; for Empson, this means finding his very personal vendetta against Christianity and its “wicked” God expressed in the epic, whereas for Lewis, his personal faith leads to a reading that finds Lewis’s self-image as Christian writer and intellectual mirrored in Milton and his work. Other examples can easily be found: Eliot, for instance, sees himself as the poet who is personally offended, even ‘injured’ by Milton’s verse.

What is interesting especially about Eliot and Lewis is that both take an almost defensive, very personalised stance towards certain themes found in the epic and certain narrative and stylistic choices Milton made. An example of this would be Lewis’s critique of the inclusion of prelapsarian sexuality and his claim that Milton
“has made the unfallen [sexuality] already so voluptuous and kept the fallen still so poetical that the contrast is not so sharp as it ought to have been” (Preface 70). The idea that Milton “ought to have” presented the inclusion of sin-free sexuality into paradise more appropriately than he did implies that he, on a certain level, failed as a poet, that someone else could have done a better job here. Considering that both men are not only literary critics, but poets/authors also, their personal involvement with Paradise Lost seems to stem from their understanding of themselves as poets/writers judging a fellow poet more so than as readers. They feel entitled as writers to judge Milton’s poetic style, even to suggest how he could have done better and thus possibly implying that they themselves would not have made such stylistic errors.

What this critique of Milton’s poetic style hints towards is a certain unease about Milton’s status as one of the ‘greats’, as a poet whose influence in English literature is so overtly dominating it can be considered stifling for any poet coming after him. Harold Bloom’s The Anxiety of Influence, written in 1973, claims that: “Poetic history […] is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” (5). The “strong” poet, according to Bloom, engages in a lifelong struggle with his far stronger, superior predecessors, whose influence he subconsciously tries to evade, without ever fully being able to. In order to poetically ‘survive’, a strong poet has to deny, or at least try to deny, any influence another poet’s works might have had on him, since this would otherwise compromise his own poetic genius and claim of originality (Bloom 10).

Although a theory meant to shed light on interrelationships between poets, Bloom’s chief argument, as well as his musings on Milton as the suffocating uber-father of all poets, can readily and very productively be applied for this specific discussion of two novelists reworking an epic poem. One of Bloom’s central arguments is that poetic influence cannot be circumvented, and indeed trying to deny it can only lead to artistic failure: “But poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better” (7). Originality then stems rather from the way a strong poet artistically deals with his predecessors than from creating something ‘new’. Bloom distinguishes six different paths a strong poet can take in his struggle with poetic influence, the so-called “six revisionary movements […] in the strong poet’s life-cycle” (10), defined as “clinamen”, “tessera, “kenosis”, “deamonization”, “askesis”, and “aphophrades, or
the return of the dead” (14-16). For this thesis, the first two revisionary movements will be of prime interest and will be further illustrated in chapter two.

Since there is no escape from poetic influence, the only way for the strong poet to artistically survive is by creating a revisionist work and thus stepping out of the shadow of his predecessor(s). This, surely, is just as true for a prose writer as it is for a poet being faced with the strongest of all poets, John Milton. As Bloom points out: “Poetic Influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation” (30). Bloom argues that the influence of Milton is more stifling than that of any other poet, calling him “the great Inhibitor, the Sphinx who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles” (32). Bloom’s work is informed by Freudian theory, and takes the Oedipal myth and the family drama as his basis for the interrelationship of poets; thus, Milton serves as the dominating father figure that the younger poet needs to challenge. When taking into account that Milton himself was faced with the ultimate father-figure and only true ‘original’ Creator, God himself, as the supposed authority behind the biblical text, a writer’s intertextual reference to the epic becomes even more daunting; not only does a writer who seeks to re-tell Milton’s account of the Fall need to wrestle with the canonical authority of Milton’s text, he also has to deal with the most canonical text of all and face the Father himself. As Bloom notes:

The Protestant God, insofar as He was a Person, yielded His paternal role for poets to the blocking figure of the Precursor. God, the Father, for Collins, is John Milton, and Blake’s early rebellion against Nobodaddy is made complete by the satiric attack upon Paradise Lost that is at the centre of The Book of Urizen and that hovers, much more uneasily, all through the cosmology of The Four Zoas” (152).

So, to Lewis, but also to Pullman, as later discussions will show, Milton becomes the uber-father of their own writing, just as he did for Blake. Both Lewis and Pullman struggle with Miltonic influence, however, due to the nature of their (mis)reading of Paradise Lost this affects their works very differently, which will become clear in my analysis of Perelandra and His Dark Materials. What these two authors have in common is that both try to utilize Milton’s epic for their own purposes, yet both end

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15 Although this thesis is informed by Bloom’s theory on poetic influence, the Freudian framework is not of primary importance for my analysis. Also, I am aware that Bloom’s sole focus on male poets is problematic, yet for the sake of the argument of this thesis, which relies on the discussion of two male authors, this is a negligible problem. In fact, Bloom’s male bias is rather productive especially in regards to Lewis’s view of God as “ultimate masculinity” (110).
up being trapped by Miltonic influence and become entangled in paradoxes and dubious plot developments when they diverge from the original text in an effort to shape their story into something ‘original’.

Returning to Rumrich’s idea of the “invented Milton”, it seems as if Lewis uses this Milton as the basis for his (mis)reading of *Paradise Lost*, whereas Pullman swerves towards a neo-Romantic interpretation of Milton being “of the devil’s party” and indeed presenting an almost Empsonian characterisation of God. So, not only critics, but also authors of fiction try to use the “invented Milton” for their own purposes, to enrich their own texts and polish their authorial profile/image. However, there are in fact two ‘invented’ Miltons: the radical heretic who criticises God and the orthodox Christian who reiterates dogmatic thinking. Thus, fictional re-interpretations of *Paradise Lost* are not just mis-reading the text itself, they are also mis-reading Milton’s authorial persona.

The intention of this thesis is not to uncover the ‘true’ character of Milton and argue against the ‘false’ one; rather, the following chapters will focus on how the two authors chosen for this study utilise the two opposing images of Milton to support and strengthen their own profile as authors. While this thesis does not claim to be a Milton study, and I would not presume to call myself a ‘Miltonist’, the study of Miltonic influence on two works of modern fiction will inevitably shed new light on Milton and his epic. The reason that both authors can draw out such contrasting readings from the same work is the multi-layered nature of *Paradise Lost*. Milton’s epic encapsulated both readings, the subversive and the orthodox, which is precisely why it has always been read so controversially.

This thesis consists of four chapters; chapter one and chapter two focus on C.S. Lewis’s self-image and Miltonic influence on *Perelandra*, chapter three and four deal with Philip Pullman’s authorial profile and the re-working of Miltonic themes in *His Dark Materials*. Chapter one highlights Lewis’s self-fashioned image as ‘Christian warrior’ that persists in writing on Lewis and his works and argues for an unconscious struggle with his role of ‘Christian fantasist’. Chapter two offers a close reading of *Perelandra* informed by Bloom, arguing that Lewis tries to evade Milton’s influence by setting out to ‘correct’ poetic ‘errors’ Milton presumably made in his epic. Chapter three critically explores Philip Pullman’s aggressive self-promotion and his media profile as “most dangerous author in Britain” (Hitchens). In chapter four, Pullman’s intertextual indebtedness to *Paradise Lost* in *His Dark Materials* will be
the primary focus and I will argue that although Pullman seems to invite literary influence into his work, he in fact struggles especially with the religious background of the epic and is unable to shake it off in his re-imagining of the Fall myth.
The Facts Become Myth: C.S. Lewis’s Authorial Profile

“It’s the First Step Is to Try to Forget about the Self Altogether”: The Self-fashioned Christian Warrior and the Denial of the Self

It is hard to find an author who has written in quite as many diverse genres as Clive Staples Lewis: not only is he known as a writer of fantasy fiction for children and adults alike, but he also published widely in the academic field, with works such as *The Allegory of Love* still widely read and referenced today, gave a series of radio talks on Christianity and wrote extensively on questions of Christian thought throughout his life. Not only has C.S. Lewis written in a diverse range of genres, his life also reads rather diversely, and biographical accounts such as James T. Como’s *Remembering C.S. Lewis*, A.N. Wilson’s biography, or Carpenter’s *The Inklings* offer very differing portrayals of him, ranging from that of a bullying tutor to a great mentor, from misogynist to a great admirer of women, from polemicist to gentle Christian teacher. This chapter seeks to explore C.S. Lewis’s image as ‘Christian fantasist’, and question the authorial profile so often depicted in Lewis criticism of the humble, unpretentious author who is unconcerned about his own fame. The discussion of Lewis’s view on fantasy, myth and allegory will reveal that Lewis was very self-aware about his somewhat contradictory role as Christian fantasist and self-consciously tried to project an image of himself as humble and little concerned about his authorial persona to fit in with his own writings on Christian behaviour. Nevertheless, Lewis was far more ambitious in his literary aspirations than critical writing on him tends to suggest.

In 1998, the year of C. S. Lewis’s centenary birthday anniversary, Philip Pullman wrote an article in the British newspaper *The Guardian* titled “The Darkside of Narnia” (DSN) which does anything but celebrate the man and his works; Pullman voices his hatred of Lewis’s best-known works, the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and stressed the more uncomfortable sides of Lewis’s character. After summarising the biographical ‘facts’ about Lewis life, Pullman continues to remark that: “All this is already nearly myth on its own account” (par. 5). Whether or not one tends to agree
with Pullman’s polemical statement here, the truth is that the life of C.S. Lewis indeed presents a fascinating story; episodes in his life such as his conversion to Christianity after a talk with his friend J.R.R. Tolkien, his marriage so late in life (a story turned into a play, and finally into the romantic movie *Shadowlands*, starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger) and his strange attachment to a woman 26 years his senior (“Mrs. Moore”), all have a strangely fascinating appeal.

It is in particular Lewis’s Christian audience which had a marked effect on how the public views him today, so much so that Pullman claims that when faced with the “myth” of Lewis, “I felt (not for the first time) as if Lewis was beyond the reach of ordinary criticism, because the facts are becoming less important than the legend, and the legend, as we know, is what gets printed” (5). The idea that Lewis’s authorial persona is somehow “beyond the reach of ordinary criticism” hints towards Lewis’s role as not merely a writer of fiction, but also a writer of works on Christian thought and behaviour, which have an equally fervid following as his Narnia stories do.

Pullman’s remark is not only aimed at Lewis’s status as not just an author/writer, but also a kind of celebrity especially for Christian readers. By stating that it is “the legend” that “gets printed”, Pullman implies that the image of Lewis as near-saint (par. 13) is being perpetuated in order to cater to the predominantly Christian audience of his writings. This, according to Pullman, is also why such authors as Wilson, who “made the mistake of being fair about Lewis, not partial” in his biography, are being shunned by mainstream Lewis criticism and scholarship since “being fair about saints is doing the Devil’s work” (12).

A.N Wilson, in his biography of C.S. Lewis, notes that “Lewis idolatry, like Christianity itself, has resorted to some ugly tactics as it breaks itself into factions” (xvi), stressing the tendency to portray Lewis almost like a saint. This need to turn Lewis into a saint is not just due to personal attachment to Lewis and his writing and the wish to protect his reputation posthumously, but also follows a purely practical purpose; to promote a certain image of Lewis first and foremost helps to appeal to a certain audience, which in turn literally ‘buys into’ the idea of Lewis as enlightened teacher of Christian thought. Wilson describes how “Lewis’s American publishers actually ask for references to drinking and smoking to be removed from his work”, and ventures the guess that “this is not so much because they themselves disapprove of the activities as because they need a Lewis who was, against all evidence, a non-smoker and a lemonade-drinker” (xvi). What Wilson implies here is something that
Pullman, too, hints at in his critique of the legend created around Lewis’s persona: the representation of Lewis as ideal Christian man is meant to strengthen his authorial profile, which in turn is meant to boost sales of his works since it pleases its target audience. However, what this chapter seeks to stress is that this conscious fashioning of a very particular authorial image did not just happen after Lewis’s death; Lewis himself was far more aware of the sort of authorial persona he wished to project, a fact that criticism on Lewis and his works mostly tends to gloss over. If Lewis reads *Paradise Lost* as “overwhelmingly Christian” and misreads Milton’s own authorial persona as that of an entirely orthodox Christian poet, then this is a direct result from Lewis’s understanding of himself as such a ‘Christian poet’.

There tends to be a certain religious zeal inherent in works which celebrate Lewis’s life, and the tone critics such as Walter Hooper or James T. Como adopt when discussing Lewis’s character and his achievements reads as being highly emotional and personalised. For instance, in his preface to the 2005 edition of *Remembering C.S. Lewis*, Como ponders the question what Lewis’s readers have gained above all else from his works and concludes: “Gather together all of us who have been deeply, permanently, changed by Lewis—maybe rent Yellowstone Park—and ask each of us to consult our indwelling vital Spirit on the question. Surely our answer would be—hope” (30, emphasis in the text). Even though Pullman is deeply polemical in stating that he is certain that Lewis “will be sainted in due course” since “the legend is too potent” (13), Como’s language indeed seems to rather celebrate the life of a saint or prophet than depict that of a writer and scholar. Not only does Como dramatically emphasise the sheer number of those “who have been…changed by Lewis” with his hyperbolic reference to “Yellowstone Park” (one of the largest national parks in the United States), he also uses highly emotive language in describing the effect Lewis has had on his readers: they have been changed “deeply, permanently” down to their very core, where the “indwelling vital Spirit” resides.

This emotionally-charged language is kept throughout Como’s preface; when describing Lewis’s *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, Como depicts it as “tautly structured, compulsively thorough (and autobiographical), dogmatic, belligerent beyond any other Christian work he was ever to write” (37). The use of adjectives and adverbs here, combined with the emotive alliteration “belligerent beyond”, shows Como’s personal involvement with Lewis and his works, that goes beyond that of a mere critic. Como’s rhetoric does little to hide the forceful admiration felt for Lewis’s
genius when he continues to describe the author’s “quickness of mind, the toughness of will, the sheer analytical power, and—most of all—the need to undertake publicly the dialectical enterprise” (37). This reads precisely like the sort of hero-worship Pullman is ironically referring to in his article, painting a picture of Lewis as the Christian warrior whose “quickness of mind” and toughness of will” led him to fight “publicly” for the Christian cause. That the vast audience that can only be contained within the vast outskirts of Yellowstone Park is primarily moved by Lewis’s Christian message becomes increasingly obvious throughout Como’s preface; thus, he muses that such theologically controversial authors as Philip Pullman and Dan Brown might very well lose their appeal to the masses, but is certain that Lewis’s “thought will likely remain the template for describing and responding to our post-Christian world” (27).

The image of Lewis as fighting a battle in the name of Christianity is stressed by Como through his usage of war terminology in his depiction of Lewis’s role of Christian apologetic. According to Como:

We live, he believed, in a post-Christian age, where, we are to pagans what a divorcée is to a virgin; or, to alter the analogy, we are like a population living in enemy-occupied territory. The hopeful news is that good forces, like commandoes, have dropped behind the lines, and it is for each of us to somehow join in the effort. (43)

This description of today’s secularised world creates the impression of a war raging against Christians, who have to survive “in enemy-occupied territory”. Como does not explicitly state who this “enemy” is, but since he mentions “pagans” earlier on we can assume that these are part of the “enemy” a Christian has to battle against. Como uses emotionally-charged language in what almost reads like a call to arms, which describes the “good forces” fighting their way into the ‘enemy’s’ “territory”, demanding from all Christian to “join in the effort” and to join the ranks of the “good forces”. This paints a dramatic picture of Christians bravely fighting against an overwhelming pagan enemy, with Lewis presumably at the forefront. Portraying Lewis in such an emotionally charged way, as the Christian warrior in a war that is still raging (the preface was after all written in 2005), makes it hard to believe that Como could ever see him in a more detached, less subjective way and casts doubt on Como’s selection of ‘testimonials’ about Lewis’s character. Indeed, in the introduction to the first edition of *Remembering C.S. Lewis* Como rages against the “academic disregard” Lewis’s works face, linking it back to “the magnitude of
Lewis’s popular appeal”, as well as “the avowedly Christian substance of the lines themselves” (19).

Again, Como creates an image of Lewis as a brave fighter for the Christian cause who sacrificed academic recognition of his works by choosing an “avowedly Christian substance” as a basis for them. Furthermore, Como portrays Lewis as not only a Christian warrior, but even a martyr to the ‘cause’; the fact that Lewis was never offered a professorial chair at Oxford is presented as resulting from his image as popular Christian writer:

The print and broadcast apologist, the novelist, the children’s fantasist, and the poet (his first and abiding aspiration), the teacher, and the critic—these were never comfortable with international fame; and it is likely that the fame cost Lewis professionally: the animosity of many of his secular-humanist colleagues prevented his being elected Professor of Poetry and made him receptive to the Cambridge invitation. (39)

Como depicts a scene in which Lewis is surrounded by “secular-humanist[s]” who conspire against him; once more, this evokes the idea of a war, this time between the Christian and the secular scholars of Oxford, with the “secular-humanist colleagues” clearly having the upper hand. The “fame” gained from his role as popular writer especially of Christian stories and apologetics “cost Lewis professionally”, cost him a professorial position at Oxford, and led to him accepting the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge. Lewis is presented as a martyr for the Christian cause.

Indeed, not only is Lewis seen as fighting relentlessly for the Christian cause and as a popular writer who changed the lives of many, what is also repeatedly stressed, and not just by Como, is Lewis’s humility in the face of all this popularity. In C.S. Lewis. A Companion and Guide Walter Hooper cites Lewis’s long-time friend Owen Barfield who states that “at a certain stage in [Lewis’s] life he deliberately ceased to take any interest in himself except as a kind of spiritual alumnus taking his moral finals” (Hooper xi). This view of Lewis as being unconcerned with the image he projects and showing no ambition to become famous neatly coincides with ideals upheld by Christianity such as humbleness and meek acceptance of God’s will. Hooper presents Lewis as a literary celebrity who nevertheless has moved beyond any form of self-centredness or narcissism, in keeping with Christian ideals. Hooper notes that “nearly all Lewis’s readers mention ‘prophetic’ as a particularly outstanding quality in his writing” (x), reiterating the idea of Lewis as a spiritually-gifted writer,
and continues on to remark that “if there is one way in which he was unprophetic it was about himself” (x), since he seemingly underestimated his popular appeal and status as literary celebrity. This is not meant to give the impression that Lewis misjudged himself or his works, but instead serves primarily to highlight Lewis’s becoming modesty. Como stresses Lewis’s path to self-knowledge, once more describing it as a “battle”: “His lessons were hard fought, relentlessly so, but the battle makes possible this statement: There must have been very little about himself that he did not know” (40). Self-knowledge and experience, here, lead not to self-absorption and narcissistic hubris, but to wisdom; Como means to show that Lewis has earned the right to instruct others on proper Christian behaviour, since he himself has learned the “lessons” needed to become a wise teacher.

The view of Lewis as modest and rather disinterested in, even shying away from personal fame, stands somewhat in opposition to the fact that he quite actively and openly sought the limelight. As A.N. Wilson so astutely remarks: “Lewis did not ask to become a cult figure, but by writing so faithfully to his correspondents, he allowed the cult to build up” (xiii). However, this need for a public audience can in fact be neatly fit in with the image promoted by such devotees as Como or Hooper of Lewis as Christian warrior. Indeed, Como acknowledges that Lewis “did, as some have claimed, crave an audience”, adding to this that “certainly he craved live, rational opposition” (39), which somewhat excuses this need for an audience, glorifying it as a hunger for yet another form of “battle”. It is possible that Como here had Lewis’s involvement with the Oxford Socratic club in mind here; during his active years in this debating club, Lewis was known to fiercely argue against papers or propositions from atheist intellectuals especially, as Carpenter very vividly describes (215-16). Carpenter notes how meetings at the Socratic Club very much revolved around Lewis as the main, if not even the only speaker for the Club, amidst a “highly partisan audience” (215). Lewis’s need, even active hunger for, a live audience—something that is quite natural for an author or indeed any artist—seems to clash uncomfortably with the ideal of Christian modesty; however, promoting the image of Lewis as Christian fighter for the ‘cause’ makes this need to be in the spotlight appear merely like a call of duty, something that is a necessary evil and yet another sacrifice that needs to be made by Lewis.

What is important to note here is that not only does later criticism on Lewis, primarily written after his death and with the ‘legend’ already intact, tend to promote
a very specific image of the author, Lewis himself was also quite consciously working towards a particular authorial persona. Carpenter describes how after his conversion to Christianity, Lewis came to “adopt” a “Chestertonian manner”, which was noticable, for instance, “when he refers to his Socratic Club atheist opponents as ‘the enemy’, when he declares that Christianity is ‘manly’, and when he talks of his deep regards for ‘common things and common men’” (218). Chesterton, a sharp and witty Christian writer, would naturally appeal to Lewis, and admiration in itself is no proof of authorial self-fashioning; what Carpenter means to point out here, however, is Lewis’s tendency to “adopt” roles or mannerisms, and to act rather as ‘one ought to’, in this case, as a Christian intellectual ‘ought to’. Carpenter remarks how “one can see much of Lewis’s life as a series of masks or postures which he adopted, consciously or unconsciously, as his way of dealing with the world” (244). After his conversion, Lewis seems to have become more self-aware of what sort of behaviour was expected of him in his new role as Christian writer; now that he had embraced Christianity, “he tried to cultivate a detachment from passing shades of sorrow and happiness, and to maintain a calmly cheerful exterior” (Carpenter 60).

Not only did he attempt to appear even-tempered and content, “he also abstained from speculations about his own psychological make-up and that of his friends” (60), hinting towards a certain anxiety that the “cheerful exterior”, the outside persona he was creating for himself, could be probed further. It was during the time of his conversion that Lewis wrote the first essay which was to become The Personal Heresy; Lewis expressed his discomfort with the idea of psychoanalysing an author or a poet in order to gain insights into his works, which is the main reason for his rejection of Tillyard’s Milton and the origin of the scholarly feud between these two. The primary reason for disliking the idea of placing too much importance on an author’s person instead of his work “was that this implied that the personality mattered, which, he said, was the sort of view held by a ‘half-hearted materialist’” (62).

This unease about taking too strong an interest in someone’s (or one’s own) personality is in accordance with Lewis’s view expressed in Mere Christianity that personality does not “matter” since it can only be an illusion; only through God can a creature find his or her true self, every other sense of self is merely self-deception and

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16 Carpenter remarks how Lewis’s friend Owen Barfield noticed the change in Lewis’s personality after his conversion (60-62).
vanity. In his chapter on the “new men” who are emerging now that Christianity is on the rise again (harking back to the idea of an overwhelming pagan majority), Lewis describes these ideal “new men”, who have been transformed by their acceptance of Christ into their lives as people who “do not draw attention to themselves” (175), a statement that is reminiscent of Como’s and Hooper’s depiction of Lewis as uninterested in his personality and Lewis’s notion of the “personal heresy”. According to Lewis, it is God who gives us creatures true ‘personality’: “At the beginning I said there were Personalities in God. I will go further now. There are no real personalities anywhere else. Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self” (177). Clinging too stubbornly to the idea of a self independent from God prevents a Christian from letting God into his or her life: “As long as your own personality is what you are bothering about you are not going to him at all. The very first step is to try to forget about the self altogether” (177). Lewis’s words shed light on the reasons why he himself was so anxious to appear entirely unconcerned about such self-flattering pursuits as the gaining of fame and popularity.

If we return to the idea of Milton criticism promoting a certain kind of ‘Milton’, we can see the same tendency mirrored in Lewis criticism; Milton, too, is hailed as the Christian poet upholding the ideals he seems to express in his works, and the more uncomfortable parts of, for instance, his greatest epic, are purposefully overlooked or glossed over. Lewis himself conveys an idea of Milton as steadfast Christian and argues against a subversive reading of *Paradise Lost* as subversive or heretical in his *Preface*. It might very well be that the often aggressively polemical Milton, who set out to defend God against misunderstandings in his epic, serves as a role-model for the Christian writer Lewis. Milton’s epic narrator adopts the same humble stance towards his “muse” as Lewis was eager to adopt when it comes to his own accomplishments as an author. In his study on the authorial self-fashioning of Spenser, Jonson and Milton, *Self-Crowned Laureates*, Richard Helgerson describes the poets’ aspirations towards a particular image in a way that can also be applied to Lewis’s awareness of the need to project a certain image of himself. Helgerson notes that:

> From their attempt to maintain an ethically normative and unchanging self arise the deepest tensions in the work of Spenser, Jonson and Milton—tensions that reveal themselves in such persistently problematical episodes as [...] the deflation of Satan. In each, readers have long felt that the poet was of the antagonists’ party without knowing it. The seductive, exuberant,
The “attempt to maintain an ethically normative and unchanging self” is reminiscent of Lewis’s effort to retain a composed and emotionally detached exterior worthy of a proper Christian. As the discussion of Perelandra in chapter two of this thesis will further highlight, Lewis’s fiction, too, lays bare the same sort of “deepest tensions” Helgerson sees expressed in, for example, Paradise Lost and its portrayal of the “seductive, exuberant, self-regarding” Satan. Helgerson also notes that especially “when the author first appears before his audience, the pressure on self-presentation is greatest”, which precisely describes the sort of change in persona Carpenter hints at with his depiction of Lewis’s “Chestertonian manner” adopted after his conversion to Christianity. Helgerson remarks on how “each beginning—beginnings of individual works as well as beginnings of careers—brings a renewal of self-presentation pressure. [...] Pressure falls too on endings and on intermediate passages of transition or challenge, when the role seems no longer to fit the world, and these will also demand attention” (13). Lewis’s transition from atheist to theist to Christian certainly required facing a “renewal of self-presentation pressure” and a re-assessment of his authorial persona. Seen in this light it comes as no surprise that Lewis chose to write the Christian allegory The Pilgrim’s Regress immediately after his conversion. It seems that not only has Milton’s epic influenced Lewis’s writing, but Milton’s self-fashioned authorial persona also had an effect on Lewis’s understanding of himself as ‘Christian writer’.

The fact that Lewis is perceived as modest and humble is primarily because Lewis worked towards creating precisely that image, since he saw it as befitting a Christian writer. This is not to say that Lewis was vain, or a narcissist attention-seeker, something which can hardly be proved and would lead to mere speculation; the point of this discussion is merely to show that Lewis criticism has taken for granted Lewis’s supposed negligence of personal appearance and indifference to how the public might perceive him. At least for his target audience, his devoted Christian readership, Lewis adopted a very particular authorial persona, which in later stages of his life, and even more so after his death, turned into the ‘myth’ promoted today by those worshipping the man and his works. By claiming to “forget about the self altogether”, Lewis shapes himself into the very ‘model Christian’ he depicts in Mere Christianity and with that, appears to be living the ideals he teaches and endorses in
his fiction. Contemporary writing on Lewis’s life and works has readily accepted this self-fashioned persona, and his emotional detachedness towards fame and popularity is taken for granted and rarely questioned; in fact, the ‘myth’ created by Lewis devotees of a self-sacrificing servant to the Christian cause benefits from Lewis’s self-fashioned persona and thus in turn serves to strengthen the appeal Lewis and his writings have for a Christian readership. The need to deny any interest in the self furthermore shows how aware Lewis was of himself as Christian above all else and hints towards a certain anxiety about the primarily self-gratifying act of creating literature, or any form of art; as a Christian, Lewis needed to make sure he was writing for the glory of God and not for any personal gain. This anxiety about the somewhat contradictory role of Christian writer especially of fantasy literature will be explored in the following discussions on the pitfalls of ‘Christian fantasy’ and Lewis’s interest in ‘myth’ and ‘Story’.

Christian Fantasy as “Sub-Creation”

It would be wrong to call Paradise Lost ‘fantasy literature’, especially in the sense in which this term is used today. The epic was written and composed in a time when the invention of other worlds, let alone of an entire cosmos, was a rare literary feature. Paradise Lost is an epic meant to re-tell a story supposed to have truly taken place, a historic event shaped into a heroic and ultimately tragic grand narrative. As Alastair Fowler remarks in his introduction to the epic:

Milton was the last great epicist to take for granted a Christian world-picture and to interpret nature as inscribed with the ‘signatures’ of divine meaning. In the next age, the intellectual reach (or the piety) for such imagining of nature no longer seemed possible (36).

Milton believed he was retelling a historical truth, that God did indeed create the world in six days, and that Adam and Eve were the first humans to walk the Earth. The Bible, to him, was not a book of stories and myths, but a sacred text containing ultimate truth. Thus, to call Paradise Lost ‘fantasy’ could be misleading, and would mean misunderstanding Milton’s aim in writing his epic.

17 Certain fairy-tale type stories and poems can possibly be seen as exception to the rule.
18 Despite this seemingly orthodox view on the Creation, Milton was nevertheless acutely aware of the scientific debates of his time, and did not reject scientific explorations into the nature of the universe at all; on this see particularly Svendsen.
Yet, one of the most appealing properties of *Paradise Lost* is its inventiveness, the unique cosmology Milton imagined for his epic; the elaborate depictions of Pandemonium, Heaven, Chaos, and Paradise which were only partly derived from Scripture, add a sense of exoticism and opulence to the straight-forward, unadorned story-telling of the original biblical narrative. Milton primarily drew on his own imagination to envision the prelapsarian perfection of the universe: “With striking originality, Milton has constructed an entire fictive astronomy, based on a premise untrue for the present world” (Fowler 35). The epic is not just a retelling of a well-known story, it is an amalgam of Scripture, myths, philosophy, and astronomy, all blended together into a narrative that can indeed be called ‘fantastic’. Indeed, Fowler’s remark about Milton’s inventiveness is reminiscent of the process usually involved in creating so-called ‘secondary world fantasy’; to invent “an entire fictive astronomy” is one of the things needed in creating a secondary world such as Tolkien’s Middle-Earth.

*Paradise Lost* is a fantastic text in so far as it includes fantastic elements such as Satan’s (space-)travel to Paradise, his encounter with Chaos and Milton’s elaborate portrayal of the War in Heaven, in particular the enemy’s strange machinery and the angels’ super-human strength. Michael Collings notes that “a number [of] Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror scholars have included Milton (usually with references to *Paradise Lost*) into [sic] their discussions of the genres, either directly, indirectly, or inversely connecting Milton’s epic with the fundamental impulses leading to the fantastic” (par. 2). Colin Manlove did not hesitate to include *Paradise Lost* in his study *Christian Fantasy*, arguing that: “With all its participation in a genre, its indebtednesses and analogues, *Paradise Lost* so re-creates the story of man’s fall amid a newly imagined universe that it may be considered as much fantasy as holy fact” (102). To Manlove, all Christian narratives “which give substantial and unambiguous place to other worlds, angels, devils, Christ figures, miraculous or supernatural events (biblical or otherwise), objects of numinous power, and mystical relationship with some approximation of the deity; and all under the aegis of Christian belief” (5), can be called Christian fantasy. Thus, he classifies such diverse texts as

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19 On secondary world fantasy see especially Lenz and Hunt, who devote an entire chapter on Pullman’s parallel universes (122-170), as well as Swinfen for a comparative study of secondary worlds (75-100).
Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Spenser’s *The Fairy Queen*, and more recent works such as Kingley’s *The Water-Babies* and Lewis’s *Perelandra* as Christian fantasy.

*Paradise Lost* can be seen as a forerunner to a genre that would not be consciously created until the late nineteenth century. To call it ‘fantasy’ in that sense is justified, and can help to illuminate the role and aim of ‘Christian fantasy’ which this chapter wishes to examine, as well as helping to shed light on Lewis’s connection to and fascination by *Paradise Lost*. To consider the epic as fantasy is furthermore productive here as it highlights the influence its fantastic elements had on both *Perelandra* as well as *His Dark Materials*. For Lewis, to re-create and alter the Fall narrative within a secondary world setting is a means to escape Miltonic influence, since he can claim that the world of Perelandra has no true ties to Milton’s Eden; however, as the discussion of Lewis’s novel in chapter two will more closely reveal, Miltonic imagery informs Lewis’s created world throughout, and *Perelandra* ends up being more strongly tied to its predecessor than Lewis might have believed or criticism on *Perelandra* usually portrays it to be. In regards to Lewis’s self-fashioned image as ‘Christian fantasist’, perceiving *Paradise Lost* as one of the first true Christian fantasies also hints towards why Lewis might have felt so drawn to the epic and Milton himself. Since Lewis has established Milton’s work as “overwhelmingly Christian”, drawing on *Paradise Lost* for his own fantasy novel offers reassurance about Lewis’s role of ‘Christian fantasist’, which can be perceived as somewhat contradictory, even subversive.

To treat biblical narratives as myth instead of literal truth bears the danger of casting doubt on the Christian faith and the belief that the Bible is the book of holy truth. In his introduction to *Christian Fantasy*, Manlove draws attention to this conflict arising for the Christian fantasist: “Christianity is not fantasy; it is meant to be fact. Surely, if one turns it into a work of imagination, one is suggesting the very thing the atheists maintain – that the Bible story itself may be a fable, created by man to assuage his own uncertainties?” (1). Earlier ‘Christian fantasy’ such as *Paradise Lost*, written long before a genre called ‘fantasy’ or ‘the fantastic’ existed, might have faced criticism for its liberal use of scripture, yet, Milton never departs from the original biblical narrative; the fantastic settings he invents are meant to represent actual places, not new and alien worlds or universes. Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century religiously-inspired fantasy texts on the other hand depart from straightforward biblical retelling, and begin to invent entirely new worlds, exploring various
Christian themes and storylines in far more symbolic, often allegorical terms than the early religious epics did. These fantasy texts are ‘Christian’ in a far less straightforward way than an epic like *Paradise Lost* is, since their Christian context is often hidden and needs to be unpacked by the informed reader.

A novel such as *Perelandra*, while exploring the myth of the biblical Fall, does not truly offer a retelling of the account of the Fall given in the Book of Genesis; in that sense, Lewis can hardly be seen as challenging the authority of the biblical text. However, the main premise of Perelandra, which is the prevention of the Green Lady’s fall, is in itself an indirect comment on the outcome of the biblical Fall, in particular since the Lady is being aided by Ransom. This plot device could be interpreted as Lewis wishing for a similar help having been given to Eve in her moment of temptation.

It could be argued that Lewis’s belief in ‘myth’ as containing truth without necessarily being true as such makes him treat the biblical account more liberally than the epic did or could have done, and these liberties are thus acceptable as non-heretical. For Lewis, ‘fantasy’ is a recognisable genre (developed primarily through the works of Lewis’s close friend J.R.R. Tolkien), and as a writer in this genre he is aware of its conventions and its limitations, but also its possibilities. Lewis is a full-blooded fantasy author, who consciously toys with generic conventions. This is why Collings remarks that “given his epical treatment of character and fable, Milton precludes any sense of the poem as fantasy. When those characters are treated in a different manner, and the setting is altered from mythic Eden to C.S. Lewis’s equally mythic but simultaneously fantastical Perelandra, the result is fantasy [...]” (5).

Nevertheless—and this is crucial here—Lewis has to face criticism from both Christians and atheists with the premise of *Perelandra*, since it takes as its basis one of the most well-known biblical myths. For the Christian reader, for instance, the liberty taken by Lewis in retelling Christian myths can be unsettling. As Manlove puts it: “There has in history been a strong vein of belief, Platonic and later Puritan, that literature is lies; and, since lying is the distinctive ability of the devil, the making of any Christian stories but the biblically authorised ones could constitute a wandering

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20 I will explore the treatment of the Fall motif in *Perelandra* further in chapter two of this thesis.

21 On Lewis’s view of the Fall narrative as myth see *The Problem of Pain* (59-74).
from the true spiritual path” (8).

The idea of “literature as lies” is expressed in Plato’s *Republic*, in which Plato does not include poets as valuable citizens of his idealist state. Fantasy stories are particularly problematic to a Christian, since they seem to prefer other realities and other worlds to the one created by God and given to men.

For the atheist, on the other hand, Lewis’s fantasy novels are Christian propaganda, embedded in a seemingly harmless fantastical story removed from our reality. In general, fantasy stories like Lewis’s ‘Space Trilogy’, the Narnia stories or Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, have often been accused of being escapist tales, which discourage interest in the political, cultural or religious problems of this world by escaping into others. As previously noted, Rosemary Jackson subdivides ‘fantasy’ into stories of “the uncanny” and “the marvellous” in her *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Whereas she praises stories of the uncanny such as Kafka’s surrealist short fiction for jerking the reader out of his comfortable sense of security, she criticizes stories of the marvellous such as Lewis’s and Tolkien’s works for their conservativeness:

> The moral and religious allegories, parables and fables informing the stories of Kingsley and Tolkien move away from the unsettling implications which are found at the centre of the purely ‘fantastic’. Their original impulse may be similar, but they move from it, expelling their desire and frequently displacing it into religious longing and nostalgia. (8)

According to Jackson, stories of the uncanny use the fantastic to “express desire” (4) which has to be repressed in civilized society. They subvert reality by unleashing those desires and transcending the boundaries of the possible as well as the socially acceptable. Stories of the marvellous, however, transport this desire into a safe space, a secondary world, and turn it into “religious longing and nostalgia” (8). Jackson seems to imply that only stories of the uncanny lie “at the heart of the ‘purely’ fantastic”, which would present stories of the marvellous as somehow less ‘pure’ and merely ‘spoilt’ versions of the fantastic. To Jackson, stories of the uncanny can disrupt our sense of safety and the faith in the status quo, since they present us with our deepest and darkest desires; thus, these stories indirectly criticise society in its present state by their use of the fantastic to “express desire”. Stories of the

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22 Recent reactions to fantasy novels and movies such as *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or Philip Pullman’s trilogy show that the hostility towards fantasy fiction from fundamentalist Christian groups is as strong as, if not stronger than ever.
marvellous, on the other hand, “are all of the same kind, functioning as conservative vehicles for social and instinctual repression” (155).

So, according to Jackson, the secondary worlds of Tolkien, Kingsley or Lewis lure the readers away from the troublesome reality and problems of their lives, and thus serve as an escapist vehicle that ensures the status quo of this world. Not only are stories of the marvellous concerned only with worlds that have no connection to ours, a novel such as Perelandra furthermore “discourages reader participation, representing events which are in the long distant past, contained and fixed by a long temporal perspective and carrying the implication that their effects have long since ceased to disturb” (33). Jackson is only the first in a long line of critics that judge fantasy stories set on secondary worlds in such harsh terms and it is especially religiously-inspired fantasy such as Tolkien’s, Kingsley’s and Lewis’s works that face such harsh judgement.

Being confronted with criticism from faithful Christians and suspicious atheists alike, the question arises what Christian fantasists think themselves about their role as writers of mythical fantasy, how they responded to the allegations of encouraging escapism and how they themselves judge the religious impact of their stories. In his essay “On Fairy-Stories”, J.R.R. Tolkien introduces the concept of “sub-creation” as an answer to the question why there is such a need in humans to imagine secondary worlds. Tolkien, who together with Lewis formed a group of Oxford intellectuals known as the Inklings, regularly shared his views on fantasy as “sub-creation” with his close friend Lewis and thus had a lasting impact on Lewis’s understanding of himself as a writer in that genre. To Tolkien, “Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and the likeness of a Maker” (52). Tolkien, a devout Catholic, takes for granted that God is the ultimate creator; since God made humans in his “likeness”, according to Scripture, our impulse to artistically create naturally stems from the fact that we ourselves were created. Secondary world fantasy, the making of other worlds, to Tolkien is thus a re-enactment of the Creation itself, a form of worship of God as the ultimate maker and, in a sense, the ultimate artist. This view presents the writing of secondary world fantasy as almost a ritualistic or even

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23 Again, I warmly recommend Carpenter’s account of the friendship between Tolkien and Lewis, especially the chapter “Mythopeia”, which summarises the shared views of these two men on fantasy as myth very comprehensively (33-45).
sacred act. The fantasist, himself a created being, mimics God the Creator by imagining new worlds: “This aspect of ‘mythology’ – sub-creation, rather than either representation or symbolic interpretation of the beauties and terrors of the world – is, I think, too little considered” (25).

To Tolkien, “sub-creation” means inventing an entirely different reality, with no ties to our own. These secondary worlds are not meant to allegorically represent our own (Tolkien strongly objected to allegorical readings of his works); at their core lies a spiritual truth that can only be expressed with fantasy, or contained within “myth”:

Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it [...]. The peculiar quality of the ‘joy’ in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth” (64).

Although Tolkien does not explicitly state what this “underlying reality or truth” is, he is evidently referring to the one truth and reality he as a Christian believes in: God, the Creator. The Christian fantasist creates secondary worlds in the hope of thus grasping some portion of the ultimate truth, and this truth can only be mystically represented, via the act of sub-creation. As Manlove remarks on the reason for choosing fantasy as a mode for Christian narratives: “God’s imagery is often wholly different from ours, or may be quite other from our capacity to represent it except through fantastical imagery: therefore, if He speaks to men, they can only represent His truth through images that will look strange to us” (3). In order to come close, or at least closer to the mystery that God presents to us, the Christian fantasist has to choose mystical, abstract images and symbols. This, according to Tolkien, is not escaping reality, but rather seeking to understand and represent the very core of our reality via myth.

However, this idea of “sub-creation” as a natural artistic urge of the creature in order to become “a real maker” also betrays anxiety about the act of ‘creating’ literature and questions of originality. When returning to Harold Bloom’s depiction of literature as a succession of misreadings and revisions, instead of truly original, uninfluenced and independent texts, Tolkien’s desire to be seen as “a real maker” shows an unconscious urge to break free from this chain of misreadings, and be able to create something truly unique. By creating a fully self-contained, secondary world which is supposedly free from any comparisons to our own world, the fantasist or
sub-creator can feel somewhat safe in his perceived originality. To be a “real” creator also connotes a glorification of the act of secondary world building as being ‘realer than real’ and thus presenting fantasy literature as an even higher mode of storytelling than fiction labelled as ‘realist’. Again, this hints towards a certain unease about Tolkien’s role as fantasist, the need not only to defend the genre he himself chose to write in, but to also declare it somehow more valid than ‘realistic’ fiction. We can see the same need to stress the validity of fantasy literature over other modes of storytelling expressed in Lewis’s essay “On Stories”, which describes the “power” of fantasy literature as being able “to generalise while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevancies” (48). The idea of fantasy dealing with “whole classes of experience” gives the impression of fantasy being able to grasp higher levels of being than the more narrowly-focused realist fiction can; fantasy is able to “throw off irrelevancies” in order to grasp a truth that is abstractly embedded in myths and symbols.

Unlike his friend Tolkien, whose chief interest lies with the act of creating convincing, self-contained secondary worlds, C.S. Lewis is more concerned with conveying the Christian message to his readers via his fantasy stories. In his essay “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said” he states the reasons why the fairy-tale world of Narnia serves so well as a setting for his retelling of core Christian myths:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood […] But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? (47).

Lewis was strongly influenced by Tolkien’s ideas on fantasy as sub-creation; especially Lewis’s Narnia stories, however, serve a far more specific purpose than, for instance, Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings. While Tolkien was primarily interested in the act of creating a fully-grown, pre-historic myth, Lewis was more intrigued by the potential of such stories; he sought to explore how mythic fantasy can be employed to put forward a certain message to a certain audience. Lewis uses his secondary worlds as a didactic tool, in order to teach children about Christianity via fairy-tale type adventure stories. This in itself is not problematic, since much of the literature aimed
at children has a didactic quality to it. However, Lewis’s intention to “steal past” children’s “inhibition” caused by Christianity sounds suspiciously as if he plans to secretly sneak the Christian content into the impressionable minds of children; it gives his mission to educate children about Christianity in the form of mythical stories a sense of dishonesty.

Lewis’s awareness of the possibilities of the fantasy genre as a didactic tool and the keen awareness of his target audience has been the cause of much criticism of Lewis’s fiction. His stories are rejected as Christian propaganda by some, yet Lewis himself denied this charge, claiming that he was not interested in bringing a certain message across. In his essay “On Stories”, Lewis argues that, to him, the interest in Story is the key factor to his writings; the capitalisation of the word “story” here is meant to signal that story-building in itself has a quality of its own, which is self-dependant and unrelated to stylistic cleverness or artistic merit. The essay illustrates how this quality of Story has been overlooked so far in literary criticism, and Lewis uses as examples such stories he enjoyed himself as a child: myths, adventure stories, and stories of the marvellous. These stories are typically dismissed from the literary canon since they supposedly do not hold any artistic merit and are merely serve to amuse and thrill the reader. Yet, to Lewis, these stories contain something other than stylistic brilliance, something that is nevertheless of equal importance. According to Lewis, a story like the myth of Oedipus “may not be ‘like real life’ in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may be like at some more central reason” (15). So, the fantastical story in fact depicts an ideal reality that stimulates our imagination to arrive at a “more central reason” and helps us experience a higher truth.

Again, Lewis expresses the idea of fantastic or mythical stories representing some core truth that transcends reality and with that, also transcends literary influence. Lewis goes on to remark that: “The real theme [of such a story] may be, and perhaps usually is, something that has no sequence in it, something other than a process and much more like a state or a quality” (17). This view of mythic fantasy as depicting a “state or quality”, something static, instead of a “process”, hints towards a view of literary creation of the kind that Lewis is interested in as existing outside of the normal method of acquisition involved in creating a literary work; if the aim is to

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24 See especially Goldthwaite’s The History of Make-Belief on this; Goldthwaite is highly critical of Lewis’s Christian didacticism.
re-produce a mystical “quality”, the implication is that this quality somehow transcends artistic creation. Lewis’s view of “Story” as having “no sequence” and does not involve “a process” recalls Harold Bloom’s description of “daemonization”, the fourth of the “revisionary movements” that a strong poet undergoes in his struggle with the predecessor’s influence over his own work. Bloom states that:

The later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent-poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor. He does this, in his poem, by so stationing its relation to the parent-poem as to generalize away the uniqueness of the earlier work. (15)

By claiming that stories of the marvellous do not involve a “process” of acquisition, but rather aim to mystically reproduce a “state or a quality” that somehow exists statically and is rather achieved than created, Lewis can position his own works of fantasy fiction within an a-temporal space untouched by influence. Instead of Lewis having to fear being compared with his literary predecessors, it appears as if they, too, reached for the same ethereal, mystical “quality” and thus their “uniqueness” is “generalized” away”.

To a Christian author like Lewis, fantasy stories are particularly well-suited to re-tell or at least engage with biblical myths. According to Lewis, since fantasy deals with imagined worlds and realities, an author or reader of such stories cannot merely draw on things already known to them, as “No merely physical strangeness or merely spatial distance will realise that idea of otherness which is what we are always trying to grasp in a story about voyaging through space: you must go into another dimension” (12). Following Tolkien’s concept of “sub-creation”, Lewis states that in order to create “plausible and moving ‘other worlds’ you must draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know, that of the spirit” (12). Here, Lewis puts forward another reason for the suitability of fantasy for a Christian writer: it forces both reader and author to focus on spiritual, rather than actual experiences. Lewis’s occupation with the fantasy and fairy-tale genre in a number of essays seems to suggest that he was comfortable in his role of “sub-creator”. In fact, the previous discussion has outlined the benefits of choosing fantasy as a genre in which to engage with biblical narratives such as the Fall myth; it allows for certain freedoms with the biblical text even for a writer keen on keeping his image as ‘Christian warrior’ fighting for the Christian cause. Furthermore, by claiming to deal with abstract, mystical sets of “experiences” rather than being part of a long chain of intertextually connected texts, Lewis can retain a sense of originality for his works. What is striking is that Lewis, more than
Tolkien, seemed to feel the urge to justify his preference of the fantasy genre. The question arises whether there might be a darker side to the act of “sub-creation”; there seems to be a part of Lewis which was not as comfortable with the dreaming up of new worlds as he might have liked his audiences to believe.

To Dream of Other Worlds or: the Dark Side of Perelandra

When the archangel Raphael is sent to Adam in order to warn him of what is to come, Adam is so enchanted by Raphael’s talent as a speaker that he asks him a question about the nature of the universe, primarily to hear the angel’s voice once more. Echoing a thought that Eve has voiced to him before (PL IV, 657-8), Adam muses about the vastness of the universe, and the multitudinous stars he sees at night. He speculates about the possibility of life on those stars, of other worlds besides the one that was given to him and his Eve. The archangel, despite being “benevolent and facile” (PL VIII, 65), nevertheless rather sternly reminds Adam that he should better concentrate on the here and now instead of speculating about what other places might exist in the universe:

Of other creatures, as him pleases best,  
Wherever placed, let him dispose: joy thou  
In what he gives to thee, this Paradise  
And thy fair Eve; heaven is for thee too high  
To know what passes there; be lowly wise:  
Think only of what concerns thee and thy being;  
Dream not of other worlds, what creatures there  
Live, in what state, condition or degree,  
Contended that thus far hath been revealed  
Not of earth only but of highest heaven. (VIII, 169-178)

Milton does not condemn scientific curiosity in itself; Raphael acknowledges Adam’s quest for knowledge as a way of understanding God’s divine power, yet cautions against arrogance and hubris.

It seems startling to a contemporary reader that a seventeenth century poet should ponder the possibility of inhabited planets, but as Alastair Fowler informs us about this passage: “Speculation about life on other planets was rife” (439). Indeed, Milton lived at a time when the Scientific Revolution was at its height, and he was

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25 Throughout this thesis, I will be using the annotated Paradise Lost edited by Alastair Fowler; when referring to the Miltonic text, I will use the format (book, verse), and when referring to Fowler’s commentary I will reference the appropriate page number.

26 “facile”, here, in the archaic sense of “easy of converse”, “kindly” (Fowler 432).
well-acquainted with the varying scientific theories that circulated around Europe. Adam is particularly puzzled about the correct movement of the stars, an allusion to the ongoing rivalry between the Copernican heliocentric system and the geocentric system the Church still supported in Milton’s time. Aware of the controversy, Milton does not necessarily favour one or the other: his cause is not a fight against any ‘heretics’, neither does his creation account in Book VII explicitly follow either system. As Fowler outlines in his introduction to Paradise Lost:

The old idea that Milton rejected the new astronomy of his day […], like the idea that he was a Copernican cynically using the Ptolemaic universe for poetic purposes, has been generally abandoned. The universe of PL is too subtly considered for it to have been constructed to persuade belief in the absolute truth of the Ptolemaic, Copernican, or Tychonic model. (34)

Milton instead creates a prelapsarian universe that blends different astronomical models to form a perfect balance and harmonious co-existence of both scientific theories: “With striking originality, Milton has constructed an entire fictive astronomy, based on a premise untrue for the present world” (35). Fowler outlines another crucial reason for Milton not trying to persuade his readers of one or the other system: “New and old systems are faulty, devised as they are to describe a fallen world” (35). Any scientific theory developed after the Fall can only insufficiently grasp the truth, since we as fallen, sinful creatures have lost the intellectual capacity that Adam in his prelapsarian state had access to.

Throughout the exchange between Raphael and the scientifically curious Adam, there seems to be a far more general problem underlying Adam’s question about the nature of the universe. The archangel’s stern warning is directed against any wild speculations, since they lead away from the real life, the everyday reality God created for Adam and his Eve. “Dream not of other worlds” – the stress, here, is on the verb; the “dreaming” of what might be or could be, or maybe even should be, is dangerously close to losing the humble acceptance of God’s omniscience that befits any created being. In an earlier passage from Raphael’s elaborate answer to Adam’s question, the archangel explains that:

God to remove his ways from human sense,
Placed heaven from earth so far, that earthly sight,
If it presume, might err in things too high,
And no advantage gain. […] (VIII, 119-122)

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27 On Milton and the scientific debates of his time see Svendsen (1956) and Poole (2004).
Here, as in ll.169-178, the vast distance between Heaven and Paradise is stressed (comp. “heaven is for thee too high” (172), “highest heaven” (178)). There is a reason why God has “removed his ways from human sense”, which is that Adam (in comparison to God or the angels) is unsuited to grasp “things too high” – things that only God can know and understand. Thus, Adam should be “lowly wise” (173), that is, focus on understanding that which has been given to him: “this Paradise, /And thy fair Eve” (171).

At first glance, this advice seems to refer primarily to speculations which can lead to arrogance towards the divine Creator; yet, Raphael’s reprimand “Dream not of other worlds” contains another, deeper layer of meaning and points towards another possible danger in “dream[ing]…of other worlds”. To ‘dream of’, to fantasise about other worlds and wonder what life on those distant worlds might be like, is generally what a gifted storyteller—or even just an imaginative day-dreamer—might do. Seen in this light, Raphael’s advice to Adam, “joy thou/ In what he gives to thee” (171), is a warning against obsessive fantasising, or indeed, any kind of fantasising. That dreams can be dangerous is already apparent from Eve’s dream-encounter with Satan, depicted at the beginning of book V, and it remains somewhat doubtful whether or not Eve is entirely without blame for this disturbing pre-temptation. Day-dreaming, however, is even more dubious, since it implies a certain dissatisfaction with what is given by God; “Think only of what concerns thee and thy being” is therefore Raphael’s stern reminder of the necessity to be content with what was given, and not wish for more.

Since Milton himself fictionalised the Genesis account in the most elaborate way, and enriched it with passages not directly taken from Scripture, such as the account of the war in Heaven, it is hardly plausible to believe this to be a warning against any kind of story-telling. Nevertheless, as the previous discussion has shown, there is a tendency in fiction inspired and informed by Christian thought, to be somewhat puzzled as to the possible subjects of any ‘Christian story-telling’. To indulge in stories that are not real, i.e. that exist outside of Scripture, can be seen as potentially sinful, since it challenges God’s authority. In the case of a re-telling of biblical stories, the potential danger is that it falsifies the truth of Scripture, which is a criticism Milton’s epic indeed faced.

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28 On Eve’s dream see Fowler (283), further Poole and his discussion of Augustinian dogma and the idea of a possible ‘pre-fall’ (21-30, 182-184).
Whether or not Milton felt a certain anxiety about his own role as Christian poet, the possible double-meaning of “dream not of other worlds” as a warning against scientific hubris and against fantasising/fictionalising becomes increasingly interesting when linking it to what C.S. Lewis attempted with *Perelandra*, or indeed, with all of his fantastic narratives. The previous discussion has illustrated Lewis’s conviction that stories of the fantastic, especially those set in a secondary world, are in fact most fitting for a Christian writer. Tolkien’s view of sub-creation as a higher, or even the highest, form of art since it mimics the act of creation for the glory of God, is often echoed by Lewis in his own scholarly writing on fantasy and fairy-tales.

Yet Lewis was also aware of the dilemma that a Christian fantasist in particular faced: to speculate about what may be, or – even more significant in the case of *Perelandra* – what might have been, can be subversive act, a questioning of God’s will. The cosmologies of Perelandra or Middle-Earth or Narnia represent worlds that are lovelier, more comfortably simplistic, and also (as is the case with Lewis’s worlds) less removed from God than our own. There is a deep longing, a yearning for a closer bond with God, and a less complex relationship between Good and Evil implicit in all of Lewis’s fantasies. This yearning is nowhere more apparent, and nowhere more delicately problematic, than in *Perelandra*. Lewis was swift to stress that *Perelandra* in fact does not re-tell the biblical Fall at all; instead, as he puts it in a letter to a Mrs. Hook, it “works out a supposition. (‘Suppose even now, in some other planet there were a first couple undergoing the same that Adam and Eve underwent here, but successfully.’)” (*Letters* III, 1004, brackets and highlights in the text). In *Perelandra*, the Fall can be prevented, the alien Eve can resist temptation, and Paradise is retained for the future inhabitants of Venus/Perelandra. None of this, according to Lewis’s statement in his letter, questions the goodness that came from the Fall in this world (which is the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ); it is simply a “supposition”, a playful re-arranging of the original myth without challenging the implications of that myth for the Christian faith.

However, in spite of Lewis’s insistence on *Perelandra* as merely a “supposition”, there is no doubt that the novel is directly inspired not only by the biblical Fall narrative, but also by *Paradise Lost* as a re-telling of that narrative. Lewis was deeply fascinated by the epic, and had read and re-read it countless times. Indeed, *Perelandra* can be seen as a direct response to that epic, with close ties to
Lewis’s *Preface to Paradise Lost*. This connection to *Paradise Lost* makes *Perelandra* a particularly strange ‘Christian fantasy’, since Lewis in fact does exactly what Raphael cautions against: to dream of what might have been, to yearn for a different outcome of the Fall, and thus for Paradise to be retained instead of lost. To claim that *Perelandra* is not a re-telling of the biblical Fall at all, since the temptation takes place on Venus and “supposes” a different outcome there and not on Earth, glosses over the clear ties between the Fall myth and Lewis’s story; to detach the Genesis myth from this world and re-enact it on another planet does not truly absolve Lewis from the fact that he re-shapes the biblical account of the Fall by changing its outcome for the First Couple on Venus. The longing for Paradise, and for that state of perfect innocence, is the chief mood that permeates the entire novel.

Furthermore, we find the problem of making up stories, of dreaming about what might be, directly addressed in *Perelandra*, and in a way that casts another doubtful light on Lewis’s insistence on *Perelandra* as merely a playful “supposition”. In an exchange with the Green Lady, the Un-man tries to tempt her into thinking about the possible Good that could come from breaking Maleldil’s prohibition. The Lady, however, recognises this as an act against Maleldil’s will: “That would be a strange thing—to think about what will never happen” (89). The Un-man tries to make her believe that this is what ‘storytelling’ means on Earth: the deliberate fantasising about what might be. Again, though, the Lady resists: “I can make myself stories about my children or the King. I can make it that the fish fly and the land beasts swim. But if I try to make the story about living on the Fixed Island I do not know how to make it about Maleldil” (97). This does not condemn storytelling altogether, for the Lady sees no problem in “mak[ing] myself stories about my children or the King”; Lewis rather implies that to muse about what God would want or not, or to wonder what the outcome might be if his commands were different, is a pointless, and even satanic exercise. Yet, this musing about what could have happened if the Fall had been prevented is precisely what we find in *Perelandra*. Ransom is sent to Venus in order to support the Lady in her resistance against temptation, a helpmeet that Eve did not have. This plot device gives the impression that Lewis imagined God/Maleldil capable of learning from the ‘mistakes’ that have been made on Earth, and this time

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29 I will analyse these intertextual ties more closely in chapter two of this thesis.
knows better than to leave the first woman alone with the tempter. It is a storyline the Un-man would gleefully approve of.

It seems as if Lewis was wrestling far more with the implications of his role as a humble and steadfastly faithful Christian writer than his own writings might suggest. As Margret L. Carter notices in “Sub-Creation and Lewis’s Theory of Literature”: “The concept of art [In Perelandra] is brought up by the Adversary and appears to be regarded as perilous, at best. […] And it is the Evil One who offers a justification for the existence of fiction” (129). Carter demonstrates how Lewis’s view on art in the life of Christians shifted throughout his life, and it was obviously a topic that occupied much of his thoughts. According to Carter, “[Lewis’s] earlier remarks on Christianity and literature assign art a permitted but limited place in the Christian life, while his later writings on the subject seem to allow art a function of greater importance” (130). In earlier stages of his conversion to Christianity, Lewis saw “the liberal arts” (Carter 133) as somewhat dangerously pleasurable, “which may be enjoyed only if they are not assigned exaggerated importance” (133). Likewise, academic scholarship contains the danger of placing too much importance on art, and a Christian should mainly “pursue the learned vocation in order to combat the enemy’s misuse of art and learning” (130). Thus, “the learned vocation” can lead to either “Glory” (130) or to self-glorification. Of course, we can see this contrast in the characters of Weston, whose megalomania lets him turn to the ultimate Evil, and Ransom, who represents the path from the mere thirst for knowledge to “Glory”.

Lewis’s struggle with the role of art in the life of a Christian expresses an anxiety about not paying enough attention to the truly important things in a Christian life, and a fear of finding an almost satanic pleasure in the enjoyment of stories, and of art in general. This anxiety is reminiscent of the exchange between Adam and Raphael, of Raphael’s reminder to concentrate on the here and now instead of fantasising about other realities. If one is to believe Lewis’s essays on the fantastic genre, though, the writing of fantastic stories seems less in danger to be the product of obsessive wishful thinking than ‘realist’ fiction. As he explains in Experiment in Criticism, there are different types of fantasising, and it is the one he terms “Egoistic Castle-Building” (53), which relies upon a ‘realist’ setting in a story and thus is the most critical and dubious type: “I have already said that one kind of story dear to the
unliterary is that which enables them to enjoy love or wealth or distinction vicariously through the characters. It is in fact guided or conducted egoistic castle-building” (53). Such stories, usually “success stories, certain love stories, and certain stories of high life” (54), can only be enjoyed if the reader is able to dream himself into the hero’s desirable situation.

Here, Lewis differentiates between dreaming oneself into a different life, and mere dreaming of other places. The egoistic castle-builder, to use Lewis’s term, relies on a realist setting: “He knows the day-dream is unrealised; he demands that it should be, in principle, realisable. That is why the slightest hint of the admittedly impossible ruins his pleasure” (56). To the dreamer engaged in “egoistic castle-building”, the pleasure in such day-dreaming or fantasising lies in being able to believe that these dreams could in fact come true. Thus, fantastic stories can give this type of reader no joy: “A story which introduces the marvellous, the fantastic, says to him by implication ‘I am merely a work of art. You must take me as such—must enjoy me for my suggestions, my beauty, my irony, my construction, and so forth. There is no question of anything like this happening to you in the real world’” (56). Lewis does not state that Christians should avoid realist novels, or that such “egoistic castle-building” is entirely despicable. Nevertheless, as Carter points out: “We might conclude […] (though Lewis does not explicitly say so) that the Christian reader ought to prefer fantastic over ‘realistic’ fiction, since the former invites self-forgetful contemplation and offers little opportunity for the indulgence of a depraved appetite” (135).

As has been discussed previously, Lewis’s scholarly writing on fantasy conveys the impression that he was quite comfortable with his role as Christian fantasist. Nevertheless, he saw the need to stress that his preferred stories of the marvellous, which are set on secondary worlds with no ties to ours, are a harmless, “disinterested” (Experiment 52) castle-building. The pleasure of such stories is supposed to lie in the novelty of the setting itself, the exploration of a purely imaginary, un-real universe. One look at the didacticism of Lewis’s Narnia books, however, is enough to contradict this comfortable and somewhat evasive insistence on fantasy as “merely a work of art” (Experiment 56). Likewise can Perelandra hardly be seen as a relaxing, harmless escapism when trying to grasp the multi-layered intricacies of Lewis’s portrayal of the “Great Dance” (Perelandra 183). For all his insistence on the detachedness of fantasy fiction from real life, Lewis nevertheless uses this genre to
convey his Christian message quite forcefully. Whether it is Aslan, Maleldil, or God, Lewis’s secondary worlds are always directly inspired by his very ‘earthly’ Christian faith.

Both Tolkien and Lewis believed that fantasy literature is especially suitable for a Christian writer; yet, this is not only the case because we as created beings are prone to mimic our creator, but also because a subtle, almost involuntary criticism of God’s dealings with man can best be placed in a world that seems to have no ties with ours. Thus, the Christian fantasist can feel safe in his subversive speculations about what might have been, if only God and his creatures had acted differently. In his letters, essays, and even prefaces to his own works (such as the short paragraph preceding *Perelandra* (7)), Lewis made it clear he was not writing “Christian allegory”, or directly retelling biblical myths. In his view, he did not allegorically retell the Fall as it happened on Earth in *Perelandra*, but rather imagined what might happen if another First Couple was likewise tempted on a different planet. Yet, the fact that he did stress his convictions so adamantly, and repeatedly, suggests an anxiety about his fantastic novels.

Only in the fantasy genre can Lewis dare to express his longing for a different reality. The genre enables him to feel safe within the realm of harmless daydreaming and innocent story-telling. This is not to say that Lewis was dishonestly concealing the Christian message he was trying to convey within his fiction; yet, he was always quick to emphasise that the pleasure of Story came long before the wish to moralise, and in that he is not quite honest with his readers. Whether or not this statement about his novels being just “Story” is the whole truth, it certainly shows Lewis’s desire to prevent his fiction from being seen as ‘Christian allegory’ not only by atheists, but by his Christian readers as well. The latter does suggest that he was not quite as comfortable with his own “disinterested castle-building” as he would have his readers and critics believe. He was aware of the fact that to dream of other worlds is often to dream of a better place than the one given to us, which in turn expresses dissatisfaction about the current state of the world and about its Creator.
C.S. Lewis’s “Supposals” and the Charge of Christian Allegory

C.S. Lewis’s *Narnia* books are either loved or criticised for their obvious links to Christian mythology. Many readers and critics see them as Christian allegory – as tales meant to allegorically present the story of Christ, and to teach children proper Christian values and behaviour via envisioned mythical quests. Depending on the reader’s or critic’s own views on Christianity, these didactic children’s novels enchant or appall. Similarly, Lewis’s science fiction trilogy, particularly the last volume *That Hideous Strength*, are often seen as allegorical narratives, with the hero of the novels, Ransom, representing Christ and his second coming. Lewis’s re-imagining of the Fall myth in *Perelandra* is also often read allegorically; Marius Buning, in his article “*Perelandra* Revisited in the Light of Modern Allegorical Theory”, even goes so far as to state that “allegory, both as a mode of thought and of figurative expression, is essential to this novel [*Perelandra*] and to the way we read and respond to it” (278).

Lewis himself, though, rejected the idea of his stories being allegories; he called the Narnia books “supposals” (*Letters III* 1004), and was adamant that these supposals are a literary form entirely different from allegory.\(^\text{31}\) He likewise rejected the idea of Ransom as an allegorical messiah-figure, or the Lion Aslan allegorically representing Jesus Christ in the world of Narnia. Since Lewis wrote a scholarly book on medieval allegory, *The Allegory of Love*, which is still seen as a standard work in medieval literary studies, it is unlikely that Lewis was confused or unsure about the definition of allegory. His scholarly knowledge about allegory surely sensitised him to the possibility of allegorical elements in his fiction.

It should be noted that definitions of allegory have always varied, and they often contradict each other, since, in medieval times, it was used as a literary mode and a mode of interpreting scripture. In addition, the Romantics in particular considered allegory a slightly dubious, almost corrupt mode, since hidden meanings underlie the entire narrative (Buning 282). These meanings need to be decoded, and might only be accessed by ‘a chosen few’. Thus, allegory can be perceived as a means to ‘smuggle’ hidden meanings into a text, which in turn manipulates the reader into unconsciously being subjected to these hidden meanings.

\(^{31}\) Lewis in fact ironically comments in a little Preface to *Perelandra* that: “All the human characters in this book are purely fictitious and none of them is allegorical” (7). This, of course, gives rise to speculations about his non-human characters.
This view of allegory as a dubious way of concealing meaning is still prevalent today; to critics of Lewis’s fiction, such as Philip Pullman, the Narnia books are a case of such dubious usage of allegory as a narrative tool to educate children (Pullman would say ‘indoctrinating’ them) about Christianity. Lewis readily admitted that he was aiming at educating children about Christianity in his essay “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said”. The wish to “steal past” children’s reserve against (or possibly, lack of interest in) biblical narratives is, however, not obvious from the overall storyline of the Narnia novels; it needs previous knowledge about Christian mythology to know that the lion Aslan represents Christ, or that Edmund represents the traitor Judas. That is why a critical reader like Pullman expresses such a heated disapproval of “the sheer dishonesty of [Lewis’s] storytelling” (DSN 10).

Since it is not easy to define the term ‘allegory’, it is difficult to determine whether or not Lewis’s novels are allegorical. According to Deborah L. Madsen, “the text of ‘allegory’ is a palimpsest overwritten with centuries of theoretical discourse” (29). Madsen states that “terminological confusion has surrounded allegorical debate since pagan antiquity” (29). Paul Piehler, who detects contradictory views of allegory in Lewis’s The Allegory of Love, notes how “in the Middle Ages we already find allegorical theory inadequate to account for what actually happens in allegorical texts. What follows in succeeding centuries, however, will add further complications and confusions” (86). Piehler remarks that “the concept of allegory has from the beginning suffered from its curious double origins, innocent if unexciting figure of speech and daringly controversial method of saving the moral integrity of the established religion” (84). Not only does the term allegory both apply to a literary mode as well as an interpretive one, there is also an ongoing debate about whether allegory is indeed a literary mode, or rather a genre in itself. Furthermore, few texts can be read as ‘pure’ allegory, as a narrative in which each place, each character, and each incident metaphorically ‘stands for’ something else. Pure allegories such as Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress are rare, and date back to a time in which allegory was seen in less judgemental terms, as an acceptable form of representing the supernatural and the mystical.

There appears to exist a curious contradiction in Lewis’s The Allegory of Love between Lewis’s judgement on specific allegories, and ‘allegory’ as a whole (Piehler 79-80). Whereas Lewis’s reading of The Romance of the Rose highlights the beauty
and mastery of this allegorical work, in general terms, “allegory is by no means to be considered a serious ‘mode of thought’ but merely a ‘mode of expression’ (Allegory 45,48)” (Piehler 79). Piehler notes that Lewis sees allegory as a minor, weaker literary form: “Explicitly, for Lewis, the scenes and personages of allegory appear to be no more than rather trivial fancies” (79). In Lewis’s letters, we find a equally unfavourable view of allegory. Especially in comparison to another literary form, myth, which also seeks to express the supernatural, the ungraspable, Lewis dismisses allegory as less significant. As Markus Buning remarks in “Perelandra Revisited in the Light of Modern Allegorical Theory”, Lewis seemed to follow the Romantics in their preference for symbolism over allegory; Buning states that Lewis’s “ambiguous attitude towards allegory and his innate preference for symbolism (and its cognates ‘sacramentalism’ and ‘myth’) are essentially Romantic, nineteenth-century views, in the tradition of Goethe and Coleridge” (277). The Romantics’ preference for symbolism, according to Buning, is echoed by modern criticism “which, in its search for certain recurrent archetypal patterns and symbols, tends to attribute evaluative force to mythopoeic fiction. It would seem that the term ‘myth’ when used in this way, is the heir of ‘symbol’ in the older controversy over allegory and symbolism” (283).

Indeed, Lewis had a strong fascination with and love for myth. As Carpenter describes in The Inklings, Lewis’s acceptance of Christ’s death and resurrection as a myth that became historic truth led to his conversion to Christianity (Carpenter 45). Lewis believed that pagan myths, although not expressing the full divine truth, nevertheless contain glimpses of the truth that finally became historicised fact with Christianity:

My present view—which is tentative and liable to any amount of correction—would be that just as, on the factual side, a long preparation culminates in God’s becoming incarnate as Man, so, on the documentary side, the truth first appears in mythical form and then by a long process of condensing or focussing finally becomes incarnate as History. (Miracles 139)

Thus, Lewis saw the ancient mythologies as something sacred, a view which is somewhat defensive since it excuses Lewis’s own enchantment with those ‘pagan’ stories. To Lewis, these myths represent “a real though unfocussed gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination” (139), so they contain a seed of the truth even though this truth will not come full term until Christ’s birth and resurrection. This is especially true for Old Testament myths since “as they were the chosen people so
their mythology was the chosen mythology—the mythology chosen by God to be the vehicle of the earliest sacred truths, the first step in that process which ends in the New Testament where truth has become completely historical” (139).

Not only is the supposedly divine content of those myths a reason why Lewis feels drawn to them, he also feels more comfortable with the a-historic, a-temporal feel those mythic stories have than he does with ‘realist’ fiction, as has previously been illustrated. In An Experiment in Criticism, Lewis stresses the immaterial, abstract quality not just of “Story”, which can be applied to most stories of the marvellous, but myth in particular: “The pleasure of myth depends hardly at all on such usual narrative attractions as suspense or surprise” (43). This is reminiscent of Lewis’s belief in the pleasure of “Story” being hardly consciously graspable and rather resulting from “an immaterial quality”; myth, however, does not even seem to need a clever use of language or descriptive quality to please the reader or listener:

And the first hearing is chiefly valuable in introducing us to a permanent object of contemplation—more like a thing than a narration—which works upon us by its peculiar flavour or quality, rather as a smell or a chord does. Sometimes, even from the first, there is hardly any narrative element” (43).

Again, this sets myth apart from allegory, since careful use of very specific language features is needed to encode meaning. Myth, on the other hand, contains “hardly any narrative element” and instead offers an almost transcendental experience to the listener: “It is as if something of great moment has been communicated to us” (44). If there was any doubt about Lewis’s belief in the literary inferiority of allegory, he continues to state that: “The recurrent efforts of the mind to grasp—we mean, chiefly, to conceptualise—this something, are seen in the persistent tendency of humanity to provide myths with allegorical explanations” (44). So in order to understand the divine truth mystically represented in ‘myth’, “humanity” seeks to simplify this ungraspable “something” by interpreting these mythical stories as allegories. With his remark that “after all allegories have been tried, the myth itself continues to feel more important than they” (44), Lewis implies that allegory is by far the weaker literary mode, and thus unsuited to transport divine truth. In fact, myth even transcends literature itself and is thus untouchable by criticism: “The value of myth is not a specifically literary value, nor the appreciation of myth a specifically literary experience” (46). In light of this view on myth and allegory, it is hardly surprising that Lewis would object to his stories being perceived as allegorical; it seems as if he was aiming far higher than this—he was aiming for them to express ‘myth’.
Apart from the fact that the author’s opinions on what his stories mean and what they do not mean should always be treated with caution by any literary critic, Lewis’s letters also give contradictory definitions of allegory, dependent on what aspect of it Lewis tries to deny in his fiction. Thus, in one letter, he denies the idea that the characters in his space trilogy can be seen as allegorical representations of characters from this world:

By an allegory I mean a composition (whether pictorial or literary) in which immaterial qualities are represented by feigned physical objects e.g. a pictured Cupid allegorically represents erotic love (which in reality is an experience, not an object occupying a given area of space) or, in Bunyan, a giant represents despair. (Letters III 1004)

So here, Lewis states that in an allegory, characters do not represent anyone specific, but rather stand for certain qualities; following this definition of allegory, his stories are not allegory since the characters do not represent such “immaterial qualities”.

This definition of allegory, however, is contradicted in another letter, this time to a school class. Lewis comments that “you are mistaken when you think that everything in the book ‘represents’ something in this world. Things do that in the Pilgrim’s Progress but I’m not writing in that way” (479-80). Answering the question whether certain characters in the Narnia books stand for someone, Lewis replies that, “[…] Reepicheep and Nick-a-brick don’t, in that sense, represent anyone. But of course anyone in our world who devotes his whole life to seeking Heaven will be like R. […]” (480). So Reepicheep and Nick-a-brick are rather representing something, a certain “immaterial quality” to borrow Lewis’s own words; however, that does not make them allegorical either, a fact that contradicts a statement made in the previous letter. Lewis’s reference to Bunyan is interesting in that context, since Bunyan’s main character, “Christian”, rather represents any Christian seeking the righteous path through life than representing a specific Christian. Many allegories rather seek to emphasise the universality of their allegorical characters, and they do not always represent qualities either (which specific “immaterial quality” is “Christian” supposed to represent?).

Since Lewis is interested in creating a type of literature that is marked by abstractly reaching for qualities and whole clusters of experiences that can never be fully grasped or consciously understood, he would naturally reject the idea of allegorical instances in his fiction; if myth supposedly stands in opposition to, and in fact ranks higher than allegory since it can express something mystically that cannot
consciously be encoded within literary language, for his fiction to be labelled allegory would make it ultimately an artistic failure. Interestingly enough, this rather hints towards a strong ambition on Lewis’s part, which somewhat belies the self-fashioned image as humble servant for the Christian cause only.

As has been noted above, Lewis termed his Christian fantasies “supposals”, partly to detach these stories from the biblical narratives they seek to re-interpret, but the term also helps to differentiate them from what Lewis perceives as allegory. For instance, he wrote in one letter: “The Narnian series is not exactly allegory. I’m not saying ‘Let us represent in terms of maerchen the actual story of this world.’ Rather ‘Supposing the Narnian world, let us guess what form the activities of the Second Person or Creator, Redeemer, and Judge might take there.’ This, you see, overlaps with allegory, but is not quite the same” (*Letters III* 1460). So Lewis states that he is not using “maerchen” (German for folk- or fairy-tales) as a means to represent this world, but supposes events that have happened on our world, might happen in another. To him, “Allegory and such supposals differ because they mix the real and the unreal in different ways” (1004-5).

Lewis’s definition of “supposals” – stories set on another planet, which do not represent anything from our own world, but suppose that something similar to what happened on our world can happen on another – seems to suggest that as long as a narrative is set on another world it cannot be perceived as allegorical. The secondary world the author creates is not an allegorical representation of our world, but a secondary creation, a sub-creation, with no links to ours. Yet, any secondary world in any fantasy text has such obvious ties to our world that the term “supposal” can hardly be so radically discriminated from allegory. Secondary worlds offer a way to poetically highlight problems – whether political, social, or moral – the author sees in our world without having to fear being considered too offensive or aggressive. Yet, authors of mythopoeic fantasy especially such as, for instance, Tolkien, defend their works against allegorical readings, denying the idea of a hidden meaning within their narratives. In many fantasy or science fiction stories, the various worlds or planets often do allegorically represent our planet, whether or not this is consciously meant to be so; the fact that Tolkien, for instance, rejected the reading of the “One Ring” as allegorically representing the fatal impact of industrial progress, does not make such a reading improbable. Judging from Lewis’s restrictive view on allegory especially, it
It is true that fantasy or science fiction texts can hardly be read as ‘full-blooded’ allegories in the Bunyan sense, but they still contain allegorical moments within the narrative frame; they ‘speak other’ in the sense that they represent themes central to human existence on an epic scale: life and death, the battle between light and darkness or good and evil, betrayal and redemption, to only name a few. This is nowhere more apparent as in Lewis’s fiction, in which the cosmic war between good and evil is the central theme – both in the Narnia stories as well as the space trilogy. Lewis, though, would probably argue that this makes them myth rather than allegory, yet this follows his own particular definition of these terms which sees allegory as ‘trivial’ compared to myth. In general, a story that is seen as pure fantasy, a story of the marvellous, seems to attract less criticism of ‘dishonesty’ than an allegorical one, and thus it is not surprising that fantasy authors fend off the idea of allegorical contents in their novels.

The Narnia stories might not be allegories in the strictest sense, but there certainly are allegorical elements in the story; whether Aslan represents Christ as he might appear on another planet, or whether he is a representation of Christ per se, his character does represent an embodiment of the divine. Lewis sought to teach and instruct via a symbolical narrative, just as the medieval allegorists did before him. Yet, Lewis thought of allegory as a very limited, minor form of literature, and he wanted to create something greater than ‘mere’ allegory – he wanted to create myth. Furthermore, he saw the Christian mythology he used as a background for his stories as ultimately true, which makes the figure of Christ something greater and more holy for him and his Christian readers than it might for, say, a twenty-first century literary critic or an atheist. In that sense, Lewis has to fear blasphemy if his Aslan ‘stands for’ Christ as he appears on our world, since the Bible tells us exactly how and in what form he came to Earth; by making Christ appear as a lion on a different planet, Lewis challenges the authority of the New Testament narratives. Similarly, the Adam and Eve of Perelandra cannot allegorically re-enact the biblical Fall, since the Fall is irreversible if one is to take the Bible as fact, as historicised account of divine truth. Thus, Lewis has to use secondary worlds to re-tell and reshape events depicted in the Bible and has to ensure that his stories will not be read allegorically. Understandably, Lewis must also have been afraid that his novels could be exclusively read as an
allegory, and that readers would forget the story over trying to ‘understand’ the allegory. However, any good allegory needs to convince on both levels – the symbolical meaning has to be spotless, but the narrative has to convince and delight as well.

To Lewis, the fact that allegory can be decoded and understood with the right interpretative ‘tools’ makes it inferior to myth, which seeks to mystically represent the supernatural, which can never be understood or grasped entirely. Following this view on allegory as an inferior literary mode, it is hardly surprising that Lewis sought to defend his novels against the label ‘allegory’. In a letter written in an attempt to defend Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings against the ‘charge’ of allegory, Lewis states that “a good myth (i.e. a story out of which ever varying meanings will grow for different readers and in different ages) is a higher thing than an allegory (into which one meaning has been put). Into an allegory a man can put only what he already knows: in a myth he puts what he does not yet know and could not come to know in any other way” (789-90). Thus, “myth” ranks higher than “allegory”, since allegory is limited to a specific aspect of human life – it has “one meaning”; moreover, allegory can only express something that is already known, whereas myth can speak of things unknown.

Lewis denied any allegorical elements in his fiction and termed his stories “supposals”, which do not allegorise the Bible but merely “suppose” that the passion and resurrection of Christ could also have taken place on another planet. It seems that Lewis was not as comfortable in his role as a Christian fantasist as he liked his readers to believe: the act of creating secondary worlds implies a dissatisfaction with the given reality, and Lewis struggled to explain this unease away by stressing the a-historical, non-didactic nature of his fantasy stories, which should be read primarily for the joy of “Story”. In “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said” he was quick to point out that “first there wasn’t even anything Christian” in the stories he conceived, and that the Christian content “pushed itself in of its own accord” (46); yet, Christian themes feature so prominently in all of his fiction that this statement is somewhat questionable. In fact, Lewis was quite comfortable with his image as ‘Christian warrior’ who primarily writes stories to educate and instruct others about Christianity in an increasingly atheistic society. His rejection of allegory in favour of myth hints towards the fact that Lewis actually showed stronger ambition with his writing beyond just serving the Christian cause: if he saw allegories as mere
“trivial fancies” (Piehler 79), then his anxious denial of allegorical instances in his own fiction shows that he sought to rise above those ‘trivialities’ and create something that carries divine truth and stands above critical censure or literary influence—myth.
C.S. Lewis and *Perelandra*: “Of the Devil’s Party without Knowing it”?

**Facing the Ghost of Milton**

The Christian science-fantasy novel *Perelandra* was written around the same time C.S. Lewis gave his lectures on *Paradise Lost* at Oxford University in 1941, which would later be published as *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. *Perelandra* is very much a parallel work to the *Preface*; it is a tale spun out of ideas won from Lewis’s understanding of *Paradise Lost* as an epic representing “the great central tradition” (*Preface* 92) of Christianity. As the previous chapter has shown, Lewis had a strong sense of his role of Christian writer, yet at the same time felt anxiety about his status as Christian fantasist. By setting his novel in a secondary world, Lewis can circumvent the risk of appearing blasphemous and is able to safely explore an idea that might be considered heretical by his Christian audience: in *Perelandra*, the temptation of the alien Eve, Tinidril, is prevented and the connection between the inhabitants of Perelandra/Venus and Maleldil (Lewis’s name for God in the trilogy) does not break. *Perelandra* retells the Fall myth in a—for a Christian writer—unusual way, ‘retaining’ Paradise for the humanoid inhabitants of Venus, which betrays Lewis’s yearning for a prelapsarian state of innocent bliss. While the original influence for *Perelandra* is the biblical account of the Fall, the novel also draws heavily on Miltonic imagery and themes. The parallels between *Perelandra* and *Paradise Lost* reflect both Lewis’s admiration for and criticism of the epic, as a scholar as well as a Christian reader and writer. In his *Preface*, he portrays Milton as a model Christian poet whose unwavering faith cannot be doubted.

This chapter seeks to analyse Lewis’s treatment of *Paradise Lost* both in his scholarly work, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, as well as in his Christian fantasy *Perelandra*, which in turn was heavily influenced by observations made in the *Preface*. I will use Harold Bloom’s discussion of poetic influence to examine Lewis’s unique approach to *Paradise Lost*. The use of Bloom’s theory of poetic influence will highlight how Lewis’s misreading of the epic as “overwhelmingly Christian” (*Preface* 92), and his tendency to downplay any subversive elements within the epic helps
Lewis to establish himself in his role of ‘Christian fantasist’. Instead of acknowledging certain subversive or even heretical elements in *Paradise Lost*, Lewis saw those elements as flaws in Milton’s poetry. With *Perelandra*, Lewis sought to remedy those flaws and strengthen the Christian message of the epic. Likewise, there are parts of the epic Lewis approved of and he sought to enhance those positively Christian moments of *Paradise Lost* in his novel. Lewis’s denial of subversive moments within the epic and the wish to ‘correct’ perceived poetical errors by taking the Christian core of the epic further than Milton himself did, is both a *clinamen* and a *tessera* in the Bloomian sense (Bloom 14), a misreading and a corrective revising of Milton’s epic.

In his study *The Scientifiction Novels of C.S. Lewis: Space and Time in the Ransom Stories*, Jared Lobdell remarks that “if one looks at Lewis’s *Preface to Paradise Lost* when looking for the origins of *Perelandra*, one will see Milton everywhere, but if one looks at Milton himself, one will not” (86). This observation is only partly true, as the following discussion will show, but it serves as a valuable illustration of the problematic nature of *Perelandra*: Lewis’s *Preface* was meant to save *Paradise Lost* from the, in Lewis’s opinion, damaging impact the Romantics as well as the Modernist movement had on our understanding of the epic. The *Preface* both sought to recover it from critics of Milton’s verse such as Eliot or Leavis, as well as the Romantics’ glorification of Satan as the true hero of the epic. In *Perelandra*, we can indeed primarily see the influence of the *Preface*, as Lobdell states, yet the *Preface* is a representation of Lewis’s (mis)reading of the epic. In fact, *Perelandra* can be understood as a parallel work to the *Preface*, which is supposed to do the same for *Paradise Lost* in fiction as the *Preface* is meant to do within a scholarly discourse: both works seek to recover and preserve the Christian core of Milton’s epic, which Lewis saw maimed by the over-emotional poetic interpretations of the Romantics. In *Perelandra*, Lewis aspired to rectify the supposed poetic mistakes Milton makes in *Paradise Lost*, such as the positive representation of Satan or the inclusion of prelapsarian sexuality. As Margret P. Hannay notes in *A Preface to Perelandra*: “It is a fascinating story to note that those things which disappointed Lewis in *Paradise Lost* have been altered in Lewis’s own Edenic myth, *Perelandra*; those elements which he most approved in Milton he has sought to emulate” (73). Not only does Lewis “emulate” the themes he admired in the epic, such as the depiction of celestial and earthly hierarchy, he tries to emphasize and strengthen them, to make them even
more decisively Christian than Milton, in Lewis’s opinion, did. To say that there is nothing of *Paradise Lost* in *Perelandra*, as Lobdell implies, is missing Lewis’s key motivation for conceiving *Perelandra*, which is to offer a correction and even an improvement of the Christian themes presented in the epic.

In order to grasp the intertextual relationship between *Paradise Lost* and *Perelandra*, as well as illuminating the primarily subconscious mechanisms at work in the process of Lewis’s adaptation of the epic, I will use Harold Bloom’s theory of poetic influence for my discussion of *Perelandra*. Two of the “six revisionary movements” described by Bloom are of particular interest for the discussion of C.S. Lewis’s struggle with Miltonic influence present in his own work: the *clinamen* and the *tessera*. By *clinamen*, Bloom means a “poetic misreading or misprision proper” (14) of one strong poet’s work by another. This misreading of the strong poet’s predecessor manifests itself as “a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves” (14). Thus, the strong poet can evade poetic influence by seemingly “swerving” towards a new direction, which, by implication, is a bolder direction than the one taken by the predecessor; this “swerve” implies that the strong poet still opens his own poem up to the basic ideas and themes expressed in the precursor’s poem, but at a certain point seemingly departs from the parent poem’s main idea. This is precisely what we can see at work in *Perelandra*: Lewis (arguably subconsciously) wishes to correct Milton’s divergence from the orthodox Christian, which Lewis sees as a result of wrong or imprudent poetical choices, and so he “swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor’s poem as to execute a *clinamen*” (Bloom 14).

Not only does Lewis seek to correct Milton’s poetic mistakes with *Perelandra*, he also highlights and stresses those instances in the epic that he approved of, giving them an even stronger impact than they had in the original poem. Bloom called this sort of poetic revisionism a *tessera*, describing it as a “completion and antithesis” (14) of the predecessor’s poem by the strong poet. Bloom’s definition of *tessera* is reminiscent of Lewis’s tendency to enhance and intensify those elements of *Paradise Lost* that he found befitting a Christian epic, such as Milton’s depiction of a hierarchical universe; Bloom describes how “A poet antithetically ‘completes’ his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough” (14).
The definitions of both clinamen and tessera will reappear throughout this chapter, and a close reading of Perelandra will show that Lewis did indeed struggle with Miltonic influence. In that, Lewis surely is not alone, and it is in no way a judgement or a critique in itself. As Bloom stresses: “The poet confronting his Great Original must find the fault that is not there, and at the heart of all but the highest imaginative virtue” (31). For the Christian Lewis, the struggle with poetic influence takes on an even more unsettling dimension, since it is God himself he is facing, as the assumed authority (although of course not the author or writer himself) behind any biblical text. In writing Perelandra and with that, rewriting a biblical myth already most successfully revised by John Milton, Lewis faces two dominant father-figures: Milton himself and the patriarchal God of the original biblical text. By choosing fantasy as a genre for this re-interpretation, and changing the overall storyline and setting enough to indeed seem to have little in common with the original, Lewis can – to a certain extent – escape the Bloomian “anxiety of influence”, since he has created a work that is intrinsically different from its original inspiration. Yet, the ghost of Milton is omnipresent throughout the novel. It is the intention of this chapter to highlight parallels between the two works, and to present an in-depth discussion of Lewis’s corrective and revisionist work in Perelandra. This discussion of Lewis’s misreading of Paradise Lost in the Bloomian sense aims to highlight Lewis’s motivation for moulding Milton’s work into a less subversive and more thoroughly Christian form, and questions why Lewis set out to erase all doubtful elements he saw within the epic. In revising Paradise Lost and thus, by implication, rewriting it the way Milton should have, Lewis can claim ownership of the epic and its Christian core myth, which in turn benefits his role as Christian writer, as author of Christian fantasies intended to convey Christian values and virtues.

Since Lewis is not only a writer and poet, but also a literary critic and Oxford scholar, his misreading of Paradise Lost can firstly be traced back to his Preface to Paradise Lost and although this study has already been discussed in the introduction to this thesis, a brief summary of those parts of the Preface of particular interest for this chapter will follow. In the first eight sections of the Preface, Lewis gives reasons for Milton’s poetic style and explains the nature of the epic form in an effort to restore its reputation, which had been damaged due to critical voices against Milton’s poetics, T.S. Eliot in particular. It is the remaining sections of the Preface which read almost like an outline for what Lewis planned to work on in Perelandra; Lewis decisively
rejects the idea that Milton might have strayed from the orthodox Christian path, and
claims that, “as far as doctrine goes, the poem is overwhelmingly Christian. Except
for a few isolated passages it is not even specifically Protestant or Puritan. It gives the
great central tradition” (92).

Although Lewis goes to great lengths to prove that the epic is “overwhelmingly
Christian”, his discussion of possible heresies within *Paradise Lost* reads almost like
an act of defiance. Lewis is so focused on proving his point that he glosses over
certain textual evidence he undoubtedly was familiar with. Thus, he denies that
Milton was a materialist and monist (*Preface* 89-90), who believed that matter was
(and still is) part of God, that the world was created out of God (*creatio ex deo*, as
opposed to *creatio ex nihilo*). 32 Although Milton himself describes his materialist
views in the *De Doctrina Christiana* – a fact Lewis acknowledges (*Preface* 89) – this
is explained away by insisting that Milton did not actually mean what he said:

> And this view must *in a certain sense* be accepted by all
> Theists: in the sense that the world was modelled on an idea
> existing in God’s mind, that God *invented* matter, that (*salva
> referentia*) He ‘thought of’ matter as Dickens ‘thought of’ Mr.
> Pickwick. From that point of view it could be said that God
> ‘contained’ matter as Shakespeare ‘contained’ Hamlet. In fact,
> if Milton had been content to say that God ‘virtually contains’
> matter, as the poet the poem or the feet swiftness, he would
> (I believe) have been orthodox. (89, highlights in the text)

This strangely convoluted explanation of what Milton might have actually meant
reads like a very weak excuse, in particular the last statement that Milton “would (I
believe) have been orthodox” very much implies that he in fact was not, and only
would have been orthodox if he had done what Lewis suggests he should have. Lewis
describes the idea that God took matter out of himself to create the world as the same
act by which a poet takes a plot element or a character “out of” his imagination; this is,
however, the way Lewis sees it, and cannot be truly applied to the act of creation in
the epic. None of what Lewis suggests here is a direct interpretation of Milton’s
thought; this is Lewis speaking about what he thinks Milton *should* have meant.
Lewis wishes to gloss over Milton’s materialism primarily because Lewis himself
disapproved of it. In fact, Milton’s materialist views form an essential part of
*Paradise Lost*, and are the chief reason why he, for instance, chose to depict
prelapsarian sexuality. To Milton, the material, physical world in its original state
must have been free of sin since it is born out of God and this is why physical

32 On Milton’s monism see especially Rumrich.
pleasure before the Fall is also sin-free; Milton stresses this fact vehemently in his depiction of Adam and Eve in their blissful “bower” (IV, 744-775). Lewis, however, disapproved of Milton’s depiction of prelapsarian sexuality (Preface 70) and thought that it would have been better to abstain from including any depictions of sexuality before the Fall (Preface 123-24); my discussion of gender and sexuality in Perelandra will show that the Green Lady is described as remarkably non-sexual, despite her beauty, an instance of ‘correcting’ Milton’s ‘mistake’.

So, Lewis denies heretical undercurrents in the epic, and urges his readers to forget even those heretical thoughts explicitly stated by Milton himself in his De Doctrina Christiana. 33 Those heretical elements Lewis does not quite manage to explain away are described as “a fugitive colour on the poem which we detect only with the aid of external evidence from the doctrina” (90), and Lewis advises not to use the Doctrina as a source for interpreting Paradise Lost: “The best of Milton is in his epic: why should we labour to drag back in that noble building all the rubble which the laws of its structure, the limitations of its purpose, and the perhaps half-conscious prudence of the author, have so happily excluded from it?” (92). This, at best, is a curious statement from a literary scholar, and it gives the impression of Lewis forcefully shutting his eyes against evidence from a secondary source so as not to endanger his own reading of the epic. His denial of any heresies in Paradise Lost is an example of Lewis’s zealous effort to mould the epic into a very specific form: that of the “overwhelmingly Christian” poem. Any subversive, or even possibly heretical themes in Paradise Lost are pushed into the background or explained away. Lewis is adamant that, “any criticism which forces them into the foreground is mistaken, and ignores the fact that this poem was accepted as orthodox by many generations of acute readers well grounded in theology” (82). That, however, is historically inaccurate, since even contemporary readers of the epic were never in unison about whether or not the poem expresses Christian orthodoxy. Neither can the claim that “[t]he heresies of Paradise Lost thus reduce themselves to something very small and rather ambiguous” (91), truly convince; true, the question of whether or not Paradise Lost does indeed contain heretical thought is still not fully answered, yet Lewis does

33 Of course, the term “heretical” is a tricky one at best when it comes to Milton; he certainly did not conceive of his views as heretical, but believed them to be the true Christian views (as most heretics do). On Milton and heretical thoughts see especially Milton and Heresy.
not even allow the possibility of certain heretical thoughts such as *creatio ex deo* despite evidence from Milton’s own writing in the *Doctrina*.

To Lewis, the only reason why readers might detect certain subversive tendencies throughout the epic is a failure of Milton’s poetry. Lewis severely criticises some of Milton’s poetic choices, and believes that those weak spots in Milton’s poetic style are the reason for any misunderstanding of the epic as subversive or containing heretical thought. The idea that Milton might have made those choices purposefully is not something that Lewis can allow, since he sees Milton as a Christian poet; at least in the *Preface*, he expresses the opinion that Milton “erred” (*Preface* 89) repeatedly. Thus, Lewis has set the stage for his own interpretation of the Fall myth, and created a possibility for himself to escape the most dominant father figure of poetry, John Milton. The following discussion of Lewis’s reworking of Milton’s Satan, Adam and Eve, and lastly the temptation scene, will shed light on how Lewis strives to rectify the supposed errors of Milton’s poetry. I will show how Lewis’s misreading of *Paradise Lost* led to the changes he makes with his own Fall narrative; what he liked about the epic, he sought to enhance and strengthen in *Perelandra*, such as his celebration of ‘natural hierarchy’ and the Lady’s happily accepted inferior status. What Lewis saw as dangerously subversive he tried to present in a more harmless and less explosively subversive way, such as his portrayal of the “Un-man” as utterly unattractive and de-humanised and the prevention of the devil succeeding with his temptation. However, by trying to escape from Miltonic influence by seemingly writing a better, more Christian version of *Paradise Lost*, Lewis in fact oversimplifies the theological complexity of the epic and ends up presenting the Christian God and the unfallen world he has created as more dubiously unjust than Milton ever could have been accused of.
The Un-man: A Portrayal of the Christian ‘Other’

It is certainly no overstatement to remark that the figure of Satan has always been the most fascinating aspect of *Paradise Lost*, and has stirred the wildest of possible reactions from readers of the epic. The Romantics, for instance, perceived Satan as a symbol of rebellion against an oppressive authority, and a freethinker with which they could identify.\(^\text{34}\) This, however, does not mean they glorified the Devil or endorsed his rebellion against God and the heavenly order; rather, they admired the poetic depiction of Satan as tragic hero and energetic leader (Wittreich 27). Just like Prometheus’ struggle with the Greek Gods, celebrated by Shelley in his *Prometheus Unbound*, Satan’s revolt in Heaven—doomed from the start—is an enterprise of such magnitude and insane boldness that it gives rise to admiration, despite the rebelling angels’ wrong motives.\(^\text{35}\) Suffice it to say that not all critics and readers approved of the portrayal of Satan as a tragic and heroic figure. In fact, critics have often struggled to reconcile Milton’s depiction of the Devil as tragic hero with his rigid Puritanism, and his declared aim to “justify the ways of God to men” in *Paradise Lost*.

C.S. Lewis was particularly troubled with the figure of Satan and the Romantics’ glorification of him, and he dedicated a long passage in his *Preface* to reminding his readers of the fact that Satan is the source of all evil and not to be admired, but ultimately laughed at (*Preface* 95). As A.D. Nuttall notes in *The Alternative Trinity*:

> C.S. Lewis was very sure that before the Romantics no one could have sympathized with Milton’s Satan because it was simply given, in the culture, that God was good and the Devil bad; the hierarchical system which placed God above and the Devil below was seen, quite simply, as right. (7)

In order to repair the damage the Romantics’ glorification of Milton’s Satan had done, Lewis sought to erase doubts about Milton’s intentions in presenting such a fascinating Satan (and, arguably, such an unappealing God), stating that it is always easier for an author to portray villains than it is to create purely good characters (100-101). As in most parts of the *Preface*, Lewis’s Christian perspective influences his choice of words when he remarks that: “It is therefore right to say that Milton has put much of himself into Satan; but it is unwarrantable to conclude that he was pleased with that part of himself or expected us to be pleased. Because he was, like the rest of

\(^{34}\) On the reception of *Paradise Lost* by the Romantics see especially Newlyn’s *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* and Wittreich’s *The Romantics on Milton*.

\(^{35}\) I will further discuss the Romantics’ interpretation of *Paradise Lost* in chapter three of this thesis.
us, damnable, it does not follow that he was […] damned” (101). To the Christian Lewis, it is naturally easier for us as fallen creatures to identify with the corrupted villain than with the flawlessly loyal angels. Yet, this should not lead readers to presume that Milton himself felt admiration for the Devil; rather, “[t]he Satan in Milton enables him to draw the character well just as the Satan in us enables us to receive him” (101). Lewis also distinguishes between admiring the portrayal of Satan with admiring Satan himself, and states that the latter is erroneous and not in the author’s intent (Preface 95).

While such statements suggest that Lewis’s main goal was to defend Milton’s epic against what he considers a misinterpretation, and to restore Milton’s reputation as orthodox Christian poet, we can also detect a subtle yet noticeable critique of Milton’s portrayal of Satan throughout the discussion. The idea that so many readers might, indeed, admire the character of Satan for his qualities was intolerable to Lewis, and in *Perelandra* he sets out to rectify the ‘error’ of presenting us with such a fascinating picture of God’s adversary. Lewis thought Milton should not have made Satan a charismatic character, and thus, his own version of the Devil, the Un-man, is appalling and utterly unappealing. In *A Preface to Perelandra*, Margret Hannay remarks: “Lewis believed that Milton erred by making Satan so attractive in the opening of the poem that he could be mistaken as the hero of the epic. If one would say that Lewis wrote most of his adult fiction to counteract the pernicious image of Milton’s Satan, one would not be far wrong” (74). Indeed, the Un-man can be read as a direct answer to Milton’s Satan, a rigorous effort at revising what Lewis saw as one of the greatest flaws in *Paradise Lost*; whatever fascinates and intrigues about Satan in *Paradise Lost* is turned into repulsive and ultimately dull characteristics in *Perelandra*.

Considering that the figure of Satan has always provoked such multi-faceted responses precisely because he represents the seductiveness and tempting eloquence often associated with evil, the question arises why Lewis chooses to minimise this aspect of Satan’s character in both the *Preface* and *Perelandra*. In his article “No ‘Sombre Satan’: C.S. Lewis, Milton, and Representations of the Diabolical”, Chad P. Stutz argues that: “By presenting his readers with a truly grotesque Devil figure, 

36 This thought is later echoed and significantly expanded upon by Stanley Fish in *Surprised By Sin*: the reader’s fascination with Satan is here interpreted as a narrative device consciously employed by Milton to make his readership ‘fall’ the same way Adam and Eve fell.
Lewis hoped to provide an antidote to the ‘great harm’ done by Milton’s Satan” (210). The “great harm” Stutz is referring to is the portrayal of Satan’s charismatic, brooding persona. Stutz, too, sees Lewis both defending Milton against the Romantics’ influence as well as reproaching him for provoking such a favourable view of Satan: “For Lewis, then, certain Romantics were indeed guilty of exalting Satan, but Milton was equally guilty of constructing a character that did little to prevent them” (209). So, Milton was “guilty”, which again implies a certain wrongdoing by the poet; his poetic choices caused “harm” in Lewis’s eyes, and he should have portrayed the Devil in the grotesque tradition instead—something that Lewis sets out to do in his fiction. Stutz seems to insinuate that Lewis’s portrayal of the Devil is somewhat more successful than Milton’s, at least from a theological viewpoint; yet, if we return to Bloom’s observations on poetic influence, the Un-man is the direct product of Lewis’s misreading of Paradise Lost. In favouring Lewis’s fictional representation of the Devil over Milton’s, Stutz overlooks the fact that Lewis’s Un-man owes everything to Milton’s Satan. This is not surprising, since it only shows how effectively C.S. Lewis criticism has often glossed over the existence of Milton’s ghost in Lewis’s fiction.  

I am arguing that the character of Weston/the Un-man in Perelandra is a prime example of a clinamen, a corrective movement away from the supposed ‘wrong’ poetics of the ancestral poem, which is an effective way of claiming artistic ownership over that poem and overcoming the stifling influence of the predecessor’s stronger work. With his re-interpretation of the devil, Lewis manages to eclipse his poetic forefather Milton; in the eyes of critics such as Stutz, his Devil is deemed a better and truer version of Satan than Milton’s was, which overlooks the fact that Lewis’s version of the Devil owes everything to Milton’s. The Christian fantasist corrects the Christian poet’s ‘mistake’ of making the Devil the most intriguing character in the story about the Fall of mankind and with that, manages to ‘save’ the great Christian epic with his own work.  

The most striking difference between Milton’s Satan and the Un-man is the fact that while Satan is doubtlessly in control of all his actions, the Un-man is a demonic entity that possesses the body of Weston, a megalomaniac, corrupted scientist.

37 Stutz reproaches Margaret Hannay for using Lewis’s Preface to support her interpretation of the Un-man, stating that “her own reading of Lewis’s Devil tends to see him as an extension of the logic of the Preface” (209); why this should be wrong, however, is never quite specified.
Ransom encountered in the first volume of the Space Trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*. Thus, Weston seems to represent the snake which Satan traditionally embodies in order to approach Eve. Yet, whereas an animal obviously has no means of resisting Satan, the case is strangely different if the Devil’s chosen vessel is a man. While Lewis leaves no doubt about Weston’s amorality, there is still a certain ambiguity left about whether or not Weston gives up his body willingly, whether he is victim or accomplice. The transformation from Weston to Un-man is described as a painful process, against which Weston struggles:

> Then horrible things began happening. A spasm like that preceding a deadly vomit twisted Weston’s face out of recognition. As it passed, for one second something like the old Weston reappeared—the old Weston staring with eyes of horror and howling, ‘Ransom Ransom! For Christ’s sake don’t let them—’ and instantly his whole body spun round as if he had been hit by a revolver-bullet [...]. (82-83)

This passage gives the impression of Weston trying to plead with Ransom to stop the demonic forces about to enter his body. His cry “For Christ’s sake, don’t let them” is doubly confusing, since he uses the name of Christ, although he renounced him just a few instances earlier. The fact that this cry for help comes from “the old Weston” implies that he was not truly a willing tool of the Devil, and that he is somehow taken over by this outside force. In the conversation preceding this passage, Weston is revealed as mistakenly believing in the esoteric concept of the “Life Force”, which Margaret Hannay rightly links to William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Hannay 75). Weston claims that “no real dualism in the universe is admissible”, and that good and evil are both originating from the same form of “spirit” (80). His—from a Christian point of view—distorted ideas about the nature of good and evil are renounced as “diabolical” by Ransom (81).

So Weston’s moral viewpoints are shown to be wrong, and he seems to allow evil a presence in his body/soul even before the Un-man fully enters his body. This does not present a moral dilemma if the possessed creature is merely instinctual, like the traditional snake, but since the Un-man is neither fully Weston nor fully the Devil, the reader is left wondering whether he should feel pity or revulsion towards the man Weston. Even during the conversation before Weston’s transformation the rhetoric used is that of the Un-man, not of Weston, so it is even possible that Weston already came to Perelandra at least partly overtaken by this outside force, which makes Weston even more of a plaything for the Devil instead of an active perpetrator. When
he is fully transformed into the Un-man, Ransom describes him in a way that makes it even harder to discern Weston’s part in all of this: “Something which was and was not Weston was talking: and the sense of this monstrosity, only a few feet away in the darkness, had sent thrills of exquisite horror tingling along his spine, and raised questions in his mind which he tried to dismiss as fantastic” (91-92). After Ransom makes this observation, the Un-man is referred to as “it” (92), not as “he” anymore, and so clearly ceases to be a person in Ransom’s eyes.

Lewis does show us Weston’s moral decline, yet it comes at such a late stage in the novel that we as readers feel rather bewildered by it. When Ransom and the Un-man are halfway through their physical battle, Weston suddenly reappears, and gives a long speech about his materialist views: “That’s why it’s so important to live as long as you can. All the good things are now—a thin little rind of what we call life, put on for show, and then—the real universe for ever and ever” (143). We as readers are inclined to feel pity for Weston, yet are left baffled as to what Weston’s motives for giving up his soul to this monstrosity are, since there is no payoff for him; on the contrary, since he is presented as a materialist, there is no gain from giving up his physical self to the Un-man. In contrast, Satan’s motives for rebellion in Paradise Lost, however ridiculous and vain they are, nevertheless are understandable to us, whereas Weston’s reasons for giving up his own body are not. As a conscious being, he clearly is more than a mere tool to the Un-man, and Lewis tries hard to portray him as a misguided believer in false doctrines. Yet, in his effort to render the Devil as uninteresting and appalling as possible, Lewis entangles himself among contradictions that point to a peculiar idea on the nature of evil. If evil is not a force inside the soul, which only moral vigilance can keep in check (something that Satan consciously renounces with his lines “evil be my good” (IV, 110)), but an outside force that can enter a person’s body, then it is difficult to determine whether or not the possessed person is to be blamed or not.

It is crucial to take a closer look at the way Lewis’s Un-man is characterised, and to what extent his character differs from or shares similar traits with Milton’s Satan. Thus, the motivation behind Lewis’s almost morally dubious revisionism will become clearer. Margaret Hannay correctly observes that Lewis was anxious to create a kind of anti-romantic Devil, and make him completely devoid of any appealing qualities, so that a “romantic glorification of the Un-man is inconceivable” (77). Lewis leaves no doubt that he wishes his Devil to be perceived as an anti-Miltonic
Satan figure. Ransom voices his thoughts on the Un-man, which can almost be read as a summary of the main argument of Lewis’s Preface:

He had full opportunity to learn the falsity of the maxim that the Prince of Darkness is a gentleman. Again and again he felt that a suave and subtle Mephistopheles with red cloak and rapier and a feather in his cap, or even a sombre tragic Satan out of Paradise Lost, would have been a welcome release from the thing he was actually doomed to watch. It was not like dealing with a wicked politician at all: it was much more like being set to guard an imbecile or a monkey or a very nasty child. (110)

The contrasts Lewis chooses to distinguish between the Miltonic Satan figure and his own are worth investigating further: First, the idea that the Devil is “a gentleman” reads strangely; not even the Romantics, despite their admiration for Satan, would have chosen to depict Satan as well-mannered or impeccably polite and certainly Milton’s Satan is no “gentleman”. Linked to the idea of a positive image of the Devil is the title “Prince of Darkness”, which suggests admiration, even reverence. Naturally, the Christian Ransom uses this title ironically, however, he admits that he would prefer the Satan of Paradise Lost or the Mephistopheles portrayed in Doctor Faustus over the actual Devil he is facing. This contrast between the literary Devil figures and the actual Devil implies that Lewis’s literary predecessors did not, in fact, go far enough in their depiction of ultimate evil. Lewis heightens the (supposed) idealization of Satan in previous literary works to such a great extent that his Un-man becomes even more appalling in comparison. Where the Mephistopheles of Faust and Milton’s Satan are “suave and subtle”, “sombre tragic” and reminiscent of “a wicked politician”, the Un-man is no more than a disgusting creature. Again, the idea of a ‘false’ or ‘wrong’ perception of the Devil as fascinating is expressed; the ‘real’ Devil is and should never be seen as anything but “an imbecile or a monkey or a very nasty child” (110), so neither mature, nor capable of any higher thinking or complex motivations.

The comparison between the Un-man and a young, misbehaved child is frequently drawn throughout the novel. Whereas Milton’s Satan is depicted as supremely focused on his quest to destroy God’s new creation, albeit given to moments of anguish and tormenting self-questioning, Lewis’s Un-man neither displays any true self-awareness or moments of conscious doubt, nor does he seem driven by any true motive except to do evil for evil’s sake. Lewis has rightly identified Satan’s reason for his revolt in heaven as injured pride (Preface 96), and Milton leaves no doubt about the sinfulness and wrongness of this, yet, to Lewis, even
such a negative incentive for action means giving the Devil too much credit, and allowing him to act far too independently and spiritedly. As Hannay mentions, “Lewis’s basic objection to Milton’s presentation is that in Milton evil is shown as having will and energy” (75). Hence, the Un-man resembles a small child or a witless animal, both of which act rather instinctually than consciously. The image of the Un-man as childlike, childish or silly is conveyed by depicting most of his actions as seemingly pointless and immature. For instance, he ‘plays’ with Weston’s body in front of Ransom’s eyes: “It had a whole repertory of obscenities to perform with its own—or rather with Weston’s—body: and the mere silliness of them was almost worse than the dirtiness” (110). These “obscenities”, supposedly of a sexual nature, do not seem to have any other function besides shocking Ransom, and because Lewis’s mentioning of those actions remains somewhat vague, it is not quite certain whether the Un-man performs them purposefully or whether he simply does not understand that they can be perceived as perverse. This is strangely reminiscent of a prepubescent child unaware of sexual shame, yet aware of the adults’ discomfort in connection to nakedness and masturbation, especially since the disgust Ransom feels arises from the “silliness” of those actions more so than the “dirtiness”.

Not only are the Un-man’s actions described as “silly”, he also displays a unmotivated, detached cruelty that lacks any focus, and often seems pointless and unrelated to the supposed aim of corrupting the Green Lady. Whenever the Lady decides to rest, the Un-man loses all interest in conversation, and resorts to torturing either Ransom or any creature in its vicinity. Thus, he tears apart a frog in front of Ransom’s eyes, “quietly and almost surgically inserting his forefinger, with its long sharp nail under the skin behind the creature’s head and ripping it open” (95). This recalls the image of a wicked schoolboy who torments animals simply because he can, or possibly because of some misguided curiosity. Yet, there is no point to the Un-man’s actions at all, neither does he seem to derive pleasure from what he is doing, since all of this is performed “quietly and almost surgically”, mechanically, and Lewis does not ever depict the Un-man as gleeful or happy or prone to any emotional display whatsoever. Ransom, too, becomes the victim of the Un-man’s mindless torturing; he hears his name being called repeatedly at night-time, until it begins to drive him half-mad. The likeness between the Un-man and a misbehaving child is even more apparent in this passage: “What chilled and almost cowed [Ransom] was the union of malice with something nearly childish. For temptation, for blasphemy,
for a whole battery of horrors, he was in some sort prepared: but hardly for this petty, indefatigable nagging as of a nasty little boy at a preparatory school” (106). Once again, Lewis establishes a contrast between the preconceived notion of the Devil as relying on more sophisticated intellectual weapons such as “temptation” or “blasphemy”, and the actual behaviour of the Un-man which is “childish” and “petty”. Relating the Un-man to a little child (“at a preparatory school”) serves the purpose of making him smaller both literally and figuratively: his pettiness and immature nastiness belittle his intellect, and his disinterest, possibly even incapacity to properly operate Weston’s borrowed body give him the awkwardness of a toddler.

This is a deliberate contrast to the depiction of Satan in the first two books of Paradise Lost, where Milton repeatedly mentions Satan’s tall, upright posture and superior, elevated position. In Book I, Milton describes how “he above the rest/In shape and gesture proudly eminent/Stood like a tower [...]” (I, 589-91), and in Book II he presents Satan as “high on a throne of royal state, […] Satan exalted sat, by merit raised” (II, 1-5). Adjectives such as “eminent”, “high”, “exalted”, “raised” and the simile “like a tower” emphasise Satan’s status as former archangel, whose glory has not yet fully diminished. Careful readers of the epic know that Milton uses this emphasis on Satan’s impressive “raised” status to ironically contrast it with the new reality, which is that he has literally fallen down from those previous heights, i.e. from heaven into hell. In his Preface, Lewis defended Milton against the claim that he made evil too charismatic, stating that: “We need not doubt that it was the poet’s intention to be fair to evil, to give it a run for its money—to show it first at the height […] and then to trace what actually becomes of such self-intoxication when it encounters reality” (100). Yet, his choice to present the Un-man as ‘lowly’ and ‘little’ suggests discomfort about Milton’s decision to “show [evil] first at the height” and then present its gradual decline into indifferent malice.

It is true that some of the Romantic poets overly focused on the more attractive qualities of Milton’s Satan—another case of a Bloomian misreading—but Milton himself was quite clear about Satan’s true self. Even though Satan displays great determination and pursues his goals with energy and intelligence, none of these qualities are ‘good’ or ‘evil’ in themselves, and were not necessarily meant to be perceived as such. Critics of Perelandra seem to misread Lewis’s representation of the Devil as a necessary re-working of the far too attractive Satan, but this relies on a misreading of Milton’s epic. For instance, Margaret Hannay observes that: “Lewis
and Milton differ in their portrayal of the nature of evil primarily in the fact that Satan loses his good qualities gradually, so gradually that it is imperceptible to many critics; the emergence of the Un-man in the body of Weston precludes any good qualities” (76). The perception of Satan possessing “good qualities” and losing them “gradually” is a case of misreading *Paradise Lost*; Satan is presented as a mere shadow of his former glorious self from Book I onwards, and his supposed “good” qualities such as his courage and leadership skills are overshadowed by his self-centredness and vanity. The one critic to whom Satan’s supposed gradual decline is “imperceptible” is Lewis himself.

Although he seems to be arguing against misreading Satan’s energetic drive as an attractive quality in parts of the Preface, he in fact produces the same misreading throughout his discussion; this reflects back on his portrayal of the Un-man, who is not given the same energy and ambitious focus on revenge that Satan possesses. Ransom describes the Un-man’s corruptness as a “state” when he remarks that: “The extremity of its evil had passed beyond all struggle into some state which bore a horrible similarity to innocence. It was beyond vice as the Lady was beyond virtue” (95). To be “beyond vice” implies that the Un-man’s behaviour somehow exists outside of moral qualification (as does the Lady’s), and thus is unable to actively move up or down the scale of moral behaviour. In *Perelandra*, Lewis presents evil as something static, that does not, or possibly cannot, change or evolve. There is no gradual change from half-evil to fully evil, yet, neither do we see a change of that sort in Satan; what Milton shows his readers are merely echoes of the former archangel’s glory, reminding us that even Satan was once good, since he was created from God’s own substance. Lewis seems to understand the vigour and energy Satan exhibits while pursuing his plan as a “good” quality, something not done by Milton, and he changes this supposed flaw of Milton’s epic in *Perelandra*. The difference that, for instance, Hannay sees between Satan’s and the Un-man’s gradual moral decline relies on Lewis’s misreading of Milton.

The idea of a static, changeless Devil is underlined by Lewis repeatedly likening Weston’s possessed body to a corpse. Ransom describes him as “unrecognisable”, and concludes that Weston does “not look like a sick man: but he looked very much like a dead one”; his features now appear inhumane and expressionless, “the face of a corpse” (all 95). Ransom realises “that Weston’s body was kept, walking and undecaying, in Perelandra by some wholly different kind of
life, and that Weston himself was gone” (95). Lewis does not give his Devil a striking persona or a distinctive character in any way; instead, he de-humanises him and makes him a monster that can only be feared, never admired: “And he was chilled with an inarticulate, night-nursery horror of the thing he had to deal with—the man-aged corpse, the bogey, the Un-man” (105).

Nothing drives the Un-man except a petty desire to be wicked, and the body he possesses is weak and devoid of any humanity or vitality. The “horror” Ransom feels when confronted with this version of the Devil is a much more straight-forward one than the unease felt when confronted with Milton’s Satan. In the Preface, Lewis rightly points out that Satan would surely make a very bad and very dull companion, since all he is interested in is himself, and “[t]he Hell he carries with him is, in one sense, a Hell of infinite boredom” (102); yet, the Un-man is so horrifying that one would not even want to converse with him, which is the main flaw of Lewis’s portrayal of ultimate evil. By shying away from depicting the fascination of evil that makes the temptation of Eve so credible in Paradise Lost, he throws a dubious light on the Green Lady and leaves the reader wondering how she can so readily fall for his arguments. If, as Lewis says, the Un-man has nothing of the “wicked politician” (110) in him, and is instead no more than a wandering corpse who is driven by “nothing but dark puerility, an aimless empty spitefulness content to sate itself with the tiniest cruelties” (106), it is hard to understand how he can have the same power of persuasion that we can see in Milton’s Satan.

While it is difficult to comprehend how the monstrous Un-man could ever tempt even the most naïve of creatures into doing anything, it is understandable why Lewis would have chosen to portray the Un-man in such a gory and especially dehumanising way. As Lewis points out in the Preface: ”A fallen man is very much like a fallen angel” (101). This, Lewis goes on to observe, is the reason why we as readers are in danger of empathising with the Devil; the evil we see at work in Satan is something that could reach us, too, at any given time. Evil and sin is part of us as fallen creatures, and thus constant vigilance is necessary for a Christian. However, in giving us the personification of evil in the form of the Un-man, who bears none of the fascinating traits embodied by the charismatic “Prince of Darkness”, evil is portrayed as an outside force that is easily recognizable because it is so alien to a virtuous and morally decent human. There is great comfort in such a monstrous Devil, since Lewis
establishes a binary opposition between him and Ransom, the character we as readers feel closest to and thus identify with.

Not only is it possible to name and point out evil, Ransom can even literally battle against it. When the Green Lady is about to give into temptation, Ransom is ordered by Maleldil to physically wrestle with the Un-man (*Perelandra* 129).

Whereas Ransom has so far felt a certain anxious pity towards the remains of Weston, he is now convinced that Weston has ceased to exist: “What was before him appeared no longer a creature of corrupted will. It was corruption itself to which will was attached only as an instrument. Ages ago it had been a Person: but the ruins of personality now survived in it only as weapons at the disposal of a furious self-exiled negation” (132). Weston the human is no more; in fact, the Un-man is bare of any personality, but rather represents a concept, “corruption itself”. This realisation fills Ransom not with “horror”, but with “a kind of joy” (132): “The joy came from finding at last what hatred was made for” (132). Whereas Milton’s Satan resembles us fallen creatures in an uncomfortable way, a fact that Lewis himself was painfully aware of, the Un-man is *the other*, not just an enemy but “the Enemy” (129), the epitome of all that is alien and wrong to Ransom and to Lewis. The “joy” Ransom feels originates from the relief of being able to reject this evil as an outside entity opposed to the self. In *Skeleton in the Wardrobe*, David Holbrook states that “the final annihilation of the Un-man” is described by Lewis “with almost blasphemous satisfaction” (236). Considering that Lewis wrote *Perelandra* during the dawn of World War II, it surely was a comfort to know who the source of true evil is, and that evil could be vanquished. However, this need to present evil as a creature that can be destroyed also hints towards Lewis’s unease about these darker sides within himself and a need to banish those darker qualities into a character that could then be defeated. As Holbrook remarks: “The failures of tone here seem to me to reveal that Lewis is cloaking an indulgence in sadistic fantasy in the coarsest way as a Christian fable. Yet by my perspectives the basis of the need to indulge the fantasy is the (schizoid) dread of being taken over or ‘imploded’ by evil forces” (237). In the depiction of Ransom as battling the Un-man we can furthermore see the beginnings of Lewis’s image as ‘Christian warrior’; Ransom himself is the prototype of such a Christian warrior, who literally wages war against evil and even manages to kill it.

Lewis’s uneasiness towards Milton’s portrayal of Satan, thus, seems to rather stem from the fact that it is so easy to see ourselves in Satan, because we are fallen
creatures like he and his followers. Stanley Fish wrote that Milton lets the reader fall alongside Adam and Eve by seemingly rendering the Devil more attractive and persuasive than God, and this surely is one of the reasons why the character of Satan has provoked such contradictory reactions from readers. To Lewis, the idea of identifying with the Devil is a horrifying one; as a Christian, this horror should arise from the mere fact that the Devil is the adversary of God. Yet, Lewis’s specific rejection of Milton’s Satan has a different reason: his desire for a simpler, less complex universe, in which good and evil exist in clear opposition to each other. In order to escape the horror of admitting that ‘there is a little bit of Satan in all of us’, he formed an image of personified evil which is as far removed from the human self as possible. As Lewis so wisely pointed out: “Where Paradise Lost is not loved, it is deeply hated. As Keats said more rightly than he knew, ‘there is death’ in Milton” (103). In Lewis’s reworking of Satan in Perelandra, we can see both his love and his hatred for the epic. He cannot possibly ‘kill’ Milton’s ghost that hovers over the novel; Satan is a part of the Un-man, no matter how much Lewis works towards rejecting the Miltonic Satan as a presence in Perelandra. Yet, that part of Satan with which Lewis felt the least comfortable is cast into a shape that is atrocious enough to be soothingly different from the decent Christian Ransom and, by implication, different from the ideal Christian Lewis sought to become in the eyes of his readership.
Misreading Gender Relations in *Paradise Lost*: C.S. Lewis’s Love Affair with ‘Natural’ Hierarchy

Just as the Un-man is an example of Lewis’s attempt to correct what he thought faulty in Milton’s epic, so is his “Green Lady” a celebration of what Lewis saw as part of the best that *Paradise Lost* has to offer: the glorification of a naturally given hierarchy and “creaturely dependence” (*Preface* 134). In the *Preface*, Lewis clearly approves of Milton’s treatment of Eve as intellectually inferior to Adam, and he acknowledged the necessity of separating her from her husband in order to make the temptation and Fall possible. His Eve, Tinidril, is likewise separated from the King of Perelandra, and even seems to need a male aide, Ransom, to have at least a chance to resist temptation. However, the idea that Maleldil would send the human Ransom to Perelandra to (both verbally and physically) fight against the Un-man turns the Green Lady into a far more passive plaything of the spiritual forces than Milton’s fall narrative does with his Eve figure. Since the Green Lady is meant to represent unspoilt, unfallen and perfect womanhood, every quality depicted as positive in her does in turn hint at those qualities Lewis disliked in women from our world. If the Green Lady is humble, obedient, and modest even in her nakedness, then the women from our fallen planet seem to be lascivious, dominating, and far too concerned with themselves instead of the wellbeing of their husbands and children.

What we can see at work in Lewis’s revised Eve figure is a *tessera*, described by Bloom as “completion and antithesis” (14). In *Perelandra*, Lewis displays the desire to retain certain elements of *Paradise Lost*, in particular the depiction of natural hierarchy and Eve’s subordination to her husband, and to stress their importance by placing a greater emphasis on them. Thus, the Green Lady meekly accepts her inferior status to the King, and can only be tempted because she is too innocent to understand the nature of evil and see through the Un-man’s rhetoric. Whereas Milton’s Eve separates from Adam out of her own free will, the Green Lady accidentally (or rather, by the will of God) gets swept away from her husband and immediately sets out to find the King again.

The idea of natural hierarchy in all living things is expanded upon throughout *Perelandra*, with the culmination of this ideal in the mystical “Great Dance” at the

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38 On the contradiction of an innocent creature being tempted to do evil in *Perelandra*, and Milton’s influence on Lewis’s view on this matter see Mary R. Bowman, “A Darker Ignorance. C.S. Lewis and the Nature of the Fall.”
end of the novel, reminiscent of Lewis’s depiction of hierarchy in *Paradise Lost* resembling “an intricate dance” (*Preface* 79). Lewis was convinced that: “The hierarchical idea is not merely stuck on to [Milton’s] poem at points where doctrine demands it: it is the indwelling life of the whole work, it foams or burgeons out of it at every moment” (79). It is true that Milton was immersed in Renaissance thinking and thus followed the image of the hierarchical chain of being throughout his poem; Lewis, however, focuses chiefly on the notion of hierarchy in his discussion of *Paradise Lost*, implying that this is in fact the main subject of the epic. A closer look at the structure and the presentation of hierarchical relationships in *Perelandra* reveals that the actual stress in this novel is not so much on hierarchy’s impact on nature, but rather on gender and gender relations. By taking a closer look at Lewis’s revisionism of Milton’s Eve, and his reworking of Milton’s angels, Lewis’s intertextual indebtedness to Milton and denial thereof will become clearer. I argue that Lewis uses his misreading of *Paradise Lost* as first and foremost a celebration of natural hierarchy in order to cushion his polemical views on gender relations and allow for them to obtain a solid grounding in supposed Christian dogma. Although I would not go as far as Kath Filmer in her article on gender in Lewis’s fiction, in which she claims that *Perelandra* “seems to have been designed to give all of Lewis’s misogynist views full reign” (96), since this is placing too much focus on what is only one of the themes of the novel, I agree with her observation that “it allows him the opportunity of demonstrating what, in his view, unfallen woman should be like” (96).

The first glimpse Ransom receives of the Lady already establishes her as both powerful, yet humble and submissive to the will of Maleldil and the King; furthermore, Ransom’s initial reaction to her establishes a distinct gender bias. Upon seeing Ransom, the Lady first shows disappointment over the fact that he is not the King, then bursts out laughing, which lets Ransom jump to a curious conclusion: “Had the eldila sent him to meet an idiot? Or an evil spirit that mocked men?” (48). Immediately, Ransom establishes a binary opposition between the alien female he is meeting, whose merriness suggests a demonic nature, and himself, who might fall victim to the ‘mockery’ of this female “evil spirit”. The only other possibility Ransom sees for the Lady’s amusement is that she is “an idiot”, and it takes some convincing on the Lady’s behalf to make him see that she is in fact the Queen of this planet.

39 The “eldila” are Lewis’s version of angels of a higher order, possibly connected to Milton’s good angels.
Whereas her intellectual abilities only slowly begin to impress Ransom (during their first conversation he “dance(s) with impatience”(50)), her outward appearance has an impact on him straight away. Ransom describes her as “a goddess carved apparently out of green stone, yet alive” (48), which gives the impression of a statue rather than a living being, and establishes a link between the Lady and the pagan goddesses of ancient myth. Furthermore, the idea of the Lady as a statue implies passivity, rendering her an object meant to be gazed at instead of an active subject allowed to gaze back at Ransom. Her reaction to Ransom’s naked body, after all, has been laughter, which led to Ransom’s assumption that she is either idiotic or demonic.

The impression of the Lady resembling a goddess is stressed when Ransom scrutinizes her more closely. He depicts her as:

Beautiful, naked, shameless, young—she was obviously a goddess: but then the face, the face so calm that it escaped insipidity by the very concentration of its mildness, the face that was like the sudden coldness and stillness of a church when we enter it from a hot street—that made her a Madonna. (56)

In this description of the Lady, Lewis juxtaposes two contrasting images of the female: that of the pagan goddess figure and that of the Christian “Madonna”, the chaste and virtuous maiden. The attributes “beautiful, naked, shameless, young” are related to the image of the Lady as “obviously a goddess”, giving the impression of sensuality, voluptuousness and brazen sexuality, all of which is directly linked to the Lady’s body. In contrast, the Lady’s “face” is where Ransom can see “a Madonna”, since it expresses “calm”, “mildness” and the “sudden coldness and stillness of a church”. So while the Lady’s body generates a picture of abundant female sensuality, her face serves as refuge from this frightening wantonness, just as a visit to a pleasantly cold church can save an overheated mind and body. The idea of the Lady as a “Madonna” evokes such Christian ideals as chastity, purity and submissiveness to the will of (the patriarchal, Christian) God. In the Catholic faith especially, the Virgin Mary is of course seen as the ideal female figure, whereas the pagan goddesses of ancient myth have either been domesticated as female saints or have inspired the very legends about female demons Ransom seems to recall when meeting the Lady for the first time. By describing the Lady as a desirable sexual partner for any man, while at the same time seeing her as a representation of submissive and passive chastity, she serves as an object for men’s pleasure, but she likewise represents a controlled, non-threatening form of sexuality.
The desire to blend out, or at least control and suppress sexual tensions is a constant theme in many of Lewis’s books, and Perelandra is no exception. Margaret Hannay states that with Perelandra, “Lewis neatly avoided the problem of sexuality in Paradise” (81) and that this is in answer to Milton’s decision to portray prelapsarian sexuality. In his Preface, Lewis criticises Milton, claiming that “he has made the unfallen [sexuality] already so voluptuous and kept the fallen still so poetical that the contrast is not so sharp as it ought to have been” (70). He does not like Milton’s description of Adam and Eve’s “nuptial bower” in book IV and is especially offended by the idea of a blushing Eve (Preface 123-124). Hence, Hannay concludes, there is no mention of sexual desire in Perelandra (Hannay 81). This is true to a certain degree, yet Lewis was very much aware of the fact that he created a beautiful, naked “goddess” and thus we can see him struggling to convince the reader that there is, indeed, no possibility of Ransom desiring the Lady. As is often the case with Lewis’s didactic narrative style, the sheer mentioning of what the reader is supposed to think, hints at what Lewis is most afraid of the reader could think. Thus, the narrator, named “Lewis”, hastens to explain to us that Ransom being “overwhelmed” upon meeting the Lady does not mean what we might think it means:

You must not misunderstand the story at this point. What overwhelmed him was not in the least the fact that she, like himself, was totally naked. Embarrassment and desire were both a thousand miles away from his experience: and if he was a little ashamed of his own body, that was a shame which had nothing to do with difference of sex and turned only on the fact that he knew his body to be a little ugly and a little ridiculous. (51-52)

Lewis’s unease at the thought of giving a wrong impression is evident in this passage; he makes doubly sure we read this scene exactly as he has intended it to be read. In a way, this is reminiscent of Milton’s epic narrator, who has to remind the reader that Satan is, indeed, the “arch-fiend” known from scripture.40

That sexual desire is seen as something negative that needs to be suppressed becomes obvious when Ransom faces the Lady dressed in a robe the Un-man coaxed her into wearing. Ransom is shocked, not just by seeing the Un-man’s influence on her, but rather in realising that: “For the first (and last) time she appeared to him at that moment as a woman whom an earth-born man might conceivably love”. The idea that “an earth-born man” such as Ransom himself could feel desire for the Lady is

40 Fish argues that the epic narrator is the true voice of reason, which the fallen reader will ignore due to Satan’s more attractively adorned speech.
presented as a warning sign that the Un-man is succeeding in his moral corruption of the Lady. The thought of the Lady being desirable is deemed “intolerable” by Ransom, and he feels as if: “The ghastly inappropriateness of the idea had, all in one moment, stolen something from the colours of the landscape and the scent of the flowers” (all 116). In this scene, sexual desire is linked to devilish thoughts, since the Un-man caused this “ghastly inappropriateness” by dressing the Lady. Whereas the paradisiacal Perelandra was free of any sexual tension, the arrival of the Un-man spoils the beauty of the planet by tainting the innocent purity of the Lady’s body and making her desirable to a man. Even if this might not have been Lewis’s intention, he nevertheless links sexuality with sinfulness, and upholds a very non-Miltonic binary opposition between body and soul. That the sin-free, naked and yet chaste Lady is held up as image of perfect womanhood is doubtless, since Ransom muses that, “I shall never again look on a female body in quite the same way as I look on this” (129) when he sees her for the last time before his fight with the Un-man. He wishes he could have seen the earthly Eve just once “in her innocence and splendour” (129), a remark that suggests an uncomfortable view of the women on Earth Ransom has met so far, who have apparently lost their innocence and thus also their physical perfection; this in turn implies that the bodies of women on Earth are all tainted by sin, somehow less perfect, since their beauty is spoilt through their fallenness.

The depiction of the Lady as upsettingly sensual, yet pure, is strongly indebted to Milton’s portrayal of Eve’s beauty and perfection, which makes Adam feel somewhat uneasy even before the Fall. As is the case for the intertextual links between the portrayal of Satan and the Un-man, few critics have commented on Lewis’s direct borrowings from *Paradise Lost* for the creation of his Green Lady. Kath Filmer has remarked that “[Lewis’s] image is not so much biblical as medieval: the Lady of the Courtly Love tradition”, and continues on to somewhat polemically state that “[w]hat Lewis serves up to us in the guise of theology is very clearly a matter of his own predilections legitimised by a smattering of lay theology” (94-95). Yet, even more apparent than the medieval tradition of courtly love and romance is the influence of Milton’s depiction of Eve as so confusingly beautiful as to trouble Adam’s view on hierarchy. The idea of the Lady being both a “goddess” and possessing the purity of “a Madonna” is strongly reminiscent of Milton likening Eve to mythological goddess figures, yet at the same time presenting her as humble and submissive. The first instance Satan sees Eve, her depiction already incorporates both
her striking beauty and perfection as well as her inferior status to her husband, which she meekly accepts:

She as a veil down to her slender waist
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevelled but in wanton ringlets waved
As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied
Subjection, but required with gentle sway,
And by her yielded, by him best received,
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
And sweet reluctant amorous delay. (IV, 304-11)

The word “yielded”, repeated twice, as well as the words “coy submission” and “modest pride” present the reader with a picture of a happily obedient Eve, yet the so often quoted description of her “wanton ringlets” hint towards a certain untamed element in Eve’s nature, stressed by the fact that her hair is “dishevelled” and likened to the wildly growing “vine”.41

That Eve was primarily created to please Adam is doubtless, since Satan witnesses how “he in delight/Both of her beauty and submissive charms/Smiled with superior love” (IV, 497-499); however, critics have mused over a possible flaw inherent in Eve’s character even before the fall and Milton has been accused of misogyny by feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar in Madwoman in the Attic. For instance, when Eve recalls the day of her first awakening, she relates to Adam how she gazed into a pool and, like Narcissus, almost became enamoured with her own reflection (IV, 460-65; 476-480). On first encountering Adam she feels that he is less beautiful and pleasing to look at than herself, and her first impulse is to return to the pool that showed her own face. Although she later learns that “beauty is excelled by manly grace/And wisdom, which alone is truly fair” (IV, 249), the fact that Milton chooses to compare Eve’s first moment of self-awareness with the self-infatuation of Narcissus has often been criticised or at least questioned as casting a dubious light on the unfallen Eve’s innocence.42 Furthermore, Milton includes some disconcerting comparisons between Eve and female figures of Greek and Roman mythology, such as his remark that she is “More lovely than Pandora” (IV 714), the woman who—according to Greek mythology—brought sin, death and disease into the world through

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41 On Milton’s representation of Eve see especially McColley’s Milton’s Eve; McColley argues strongly against the view that Milton portrays a misogynist version of Eve and suggests that he in fact worked to argue against the traditional idea of Eve as a “temptress” (6). See also Fowler’s comment on Milton’s erotic fascination with women’s hair in his poetry, which would mark this depiction of Eve as rather a compliment than a condemnation (PL 239).
42 See especially Poole’s reading of Milton’s Fall and Eve’s possible pre-fall (182-184), as well as Empson.
her curiosity. Again, this technique of foreshadowing Eve’s fall in a way that might lead to speculations about her tendency towards sin even before the temptation has caught the attention of critics such as Tillyard, Empson and McColley. During the temptation, Satan hails Eve as a “goddess among gods” (IX 547), and appeals to her through precisely those character traits which are already seen as possibly problematic before the Fall, such as her beauty and strong sense of self. However, other critics have seen this as Milton’s attempt at explaining the paradox of a sin-free Eve succumbing to evil (Fowler 508).

Adam himself is troubled by Eve’s beauty, since her outward perfection makes him doubt his superiority over his wife. During the conversation with Raphael in Books V to VIII, Adam admits how Eve’s alluring perfection confuses him:

[...] yet when I approach
Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
And in herself complete, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;
All higher knowledge in her presence falls,
Degraded, wisdom in discourse with her
Looses discount’anced, and like folly shows [.] (VIII, 546-558)

Adam’s bewilderment stems from the fact that although he knows she is hierarchically his inferior and his intellect surpasses hers by far (VIII, 540-544), he nevertheless feels “all higher knowledge” is void when confronted with Eve’s charms. Considering that wisdom and knowledge are supposedly the highest faculties and the reason why Adam is the superior ruler in Paradise, he is puzzled by the power that Eve’s outward beauty holds over his mind. Raphael sternly reminds him not to confuse passion with love, since love and desire need to be balanced out by reasoning; otherwise, Adam’s love for Eve might sink to “carnal pleasure, for which cause/Among the beasts no mate for thee was found” (VIII, 593-594). This remark is supposed to protect Eve; Raphael stresses Eve’s worth as Adam’s partner in everything, not just a sexual partner created for the sake of physically pleasing Adam. The relationship between Adam and Eve, albeit of a clearly defined hierarchical nature, is nevertheless one of mutual respect and partnership. Whereas feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gunbar have accused Milton of misogyny due to presenting Eve as a “Wanton” temptress, more recent critics such as Diana McColley or Kristin R. Pruitt in Gender and the Power of Relationship have pointed out Eve’s independence and intellectual abilities, as well as her ennobling offer to sacrifice herself after the Fall. William Empson even goes so far as to place the blame for her fall primarily on
Adam, who does not take her inquiry after the nature of stars seriously enough, treating her like a naïve child and thus awakening her desire to gain superior knowledge by eating the forbidden fruit.\(^{43}\)

In his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, C.S. Lewis discusses Milton’s Eve rather briefly, primarily to remind his readers of Milton’s love of hierarchy and to outline the nature of Adam and Eve’s relationship as based on that hierarchical principle (*Preface* 119-121). Lewis spends a long part of the section on “Adam and Eve” on highlighting the maturity of Milton’s first humans, and reminds us that: “They are people with whom modern critics would be well advised not to take liberties” (118). Both Adam and Eve were “created full-grown and perfect” (116), and possessed their full intellectual capacity the moment they opened their eyes. With this reminder, Lewis wishes to dispel the notion that ‘innocence’ is to be equated with naivety or childlike behaviour, and this view on Milton’s Adam and Eve finds its way into Lewis’s depiction of the Green Lady. He warns the reader not to mistake Eve’s meek submission as a sign of a weak intellect; rather, she “prostrate[s] herself in spirit before Adam—as an Emperor might kneel to a Pope or as a Queen curtsies to a King” (120). Nevertheless, she is any other human’s superior in her role as royal consort to Adam: “You must not think but that if you and I could enter Milton’s Eden and meet her we should very quickly be taught what it is to speak to the ‘universal dame’ ” (120). We see this notion of Eve as “the universal dame” reflected in *Perelandra* during the first meeting between Ransom and the Green Lady, where the Lady realises that “she was not addressing an equal” and thus “her manner to him was henceforward more gracious” (58).

The Lady, just like every other creature on the unfallen planet Venus, has an inherent understanding of her place within the natural hierarchy of the prelapsarian planet; while the creatures of Perelandra answer to her call, she in turn obeys the King without questioning. Once again, this unwavering obedience to her husband’s command echoes Lewis’s interpretation of the relation between Adam and Eve in the *Preface*: “[Adam’s] ‘lectures’ to his wife sometimes excite the smiles of their modern reader, but the joke is a shallow one. He is not merely her husband, he is the sum of all human knowledge and wisdom who answers her as Solomon answered the Queen

\(^{43}\) Empson reads this desire to gain knowledge as a result of God creating her inferior to Adam; she desires to please Adam and cannot fully do so since she lacks the intellectual capacity he possesses (159-163).
of Sheba […]” (118). Lewis lengthily discusses Adam’s merits before he states that: “This [i.e. Adam’s] royalty is less apparent in Eve, partly because she is in fact Adam’s inferior, in her double capacity of wife and subject, but partly, I believe, because her humility is often misunderstood” (120).

I am not suggesting that this assessment of Eve’s status in Paradise Lost is a wrong one on Lewis’s part; rather, I argue that Lewis’s approval of Adam and Eve’s hierarchically organised relationship led him to focus on the hierarchical principle as the central theme of the epic, a misreading of Paradise Lost that makes its way into Lewis’s reworking of Milton’s Eve. When Lewis discusses Eve’s submission towards Adam and emphasises that: “This is humility, and in Milton’s view, becoming humility” (120), we can safely add that this humility towards her husband is actually “becoming” in Lewis’s view, which he equates with, even turns into “Milton’s view”; whether or not it is indeed “becoming” to Milton is a claim that I do not wish to either refute or confirm, since this is not the point of this discussion.

What is of interest for this discussion is Lewis’s eagerness to approve of Milton’s supposed infatuation with the concept of natural hierarchy; not only does Lewis approve of it, he tries to convince the audience of his Preface that we, as readers, must be just as enamoured with it as Milton was. Whereas it was Milton who ‘erred’ in making Satan such an intriguing character, it is now the reader who is in the wrong when not endorsing the idea of natural hierarchy as “Milton’s central thought” (73). Lewis is quite strict with us here, claiming that: “Those to whom this conception is meaningless should not waste their time trying to enjoy Milton” (81). This statement implies that hierarchy is the very life of the epic, and that we need to accept this fact in order to derive any pleasure from reading Paradise Lost. Not only do we as readers need to take Milton’s love of hierarchy for granted, we ourselves must be convinced of the concept. Interestingly enough, Lewis’s personal dislike of Milton’s inclusion, even emphatic celebration of prelapsarian and angelic sexuality seems no obstacle to enjoying Paradise Lost, which stresses the idea that Lewis’s personal liking of a naturally given hierarchy is what truly causes him to interpret this as “Milton’s central thought”. The idea that readers can only enjoy Milton’s epic if they embrace the hierarchical principle echoes Lewis’s “doctrine of the unchanging human heart” (62), the insistence on the need to read the epic bearing Milton’s social and historical background in mind, as well as his intention to write a grand, Christian epic that seeks to reconcile the doubting human race with the Almighty. According to
Lewis, readers must approach the epic from a Christian point-of-view, since Milton so clearly stated his intention to “justify the ways of God to men” in his invocation at the beginning of the epic. There is no doubt about Milton’s firm belief in the necessity of hierarchical structures; however, it is Lewis who insists that Milton’s readers must be likewise convinced of and committed to this principle, thus somehow implying that this is the only way to belong to Milton’s “audience, fit…though few”.

This subtle shift in meaning, from ‘Milton was enchanted by the hierarchical principle’ to ‘Milton wrote his epic solely for an audience as enchanted by this principle as he was’, opens up the epic for Lewis’s reworking of the hierarchical principle in *Perelandra*: since today’s readership of the epic is not “fit” to read the epic the way it was meant to be read, Lewis presents the twentieth-century reader with a fresh approach, a new storyline, which re-creates Milton’s celebration of natural hierarchy as a basic Christian principle. With his discussion in the *Preface* of hierarchy as the key to unlock the ‘true’ meaning behind *Paradise Lost* and his assertion that most modern readers have lost this key, Lewis makes a modern retelling of the epic a necessity; *Perelandra* can recover what was lost, and recreate in fiction what the *Preface* attempted to recover on a scholarly level. Thus, Lewis can appear as Milton’s ‘saviour’, as preserver of the true, Christian meaning of the epic. By showing an Eve figure immersed in the hierarchical principle and focalising her through the eyes of a twentieth century man, Ransom, Lewis acts as a mediator between modern readers and the dead poet, recovering and preserving the lost meaning of *Paradise Lost*.

Whereas Lewis tried to almost ‘exorcise’ Milton’s ghost with his reworking of Satan, he is now attempting to ‘channel’ Milton’s ghost, acting as the voice of the dead poet. To return to the Bloomian principle of *tessera*: Lewis’s subtle, yet noticeable misreading of Milton’s epic makes it possible for him to write *Perelandra* as a modern version of *Paradise Lost*, which incorporates Milton’s basic ideas on hierarchy, yet changes them, modernises them, in order to make the reader fully appreciate Milton. As Bloom states: “In this sense of a completing link, the *tessera* represents any later poet’s attempt to persuade himself (and us) that the precursor’s Word would be worn out if not redeemed as a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word of the ephebe” (67). The phrase “a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word” is directly applicable to Lewis’s version of Milton’s Eve as a woman both part of the twentieth century, yet likewise re-enacting a Renaissance principle. With his Green Lady,
Lewis sets out to convince his readers of the beauty of knowing one’s place in the natural order.

The most obvious and straight-forward case of Lewis not just incorporating but in fact enforcing Milton’s glorification of hierarchy can be seen in the depiction of the Green Lady’s relationship with the King in *Perelandra*. Whereas the King himself is not tempted in *Perelandra* and mostly absent from the novel (Hannay 83), from the moment he appears beside Tinidril he becomes the focal point of the narrator’s (and Ransom’s) attention. Whereas the Lady shows a great capacity for intellectually challenging conversation, she becomes virtually silent when her husband returns to her. Critics like Margaret Hannay and Kath Filmer have condemned Lewis’s depiction of Tinidril and her husband, claiming that it is lacking true warmth and feeling (Hannay 83), and that the King is unbearably patronising towards his wife considering the ordeal she has just been through (Filmer 98-99). Indeed, the contrast between the Green Lady’s behaviour before and after her reunion with the King is striking: whereas she is directly conversing with Maleldil/God when Ransom meets her first (Perelandra 53; 65), she becomes dependent on what the King relates to her about his meeting with the deity (181). This, of course, is an echo of Milton’s famous lines on Eve being created for Adam, whereas Adam was created for God: ”He for God only, she for God in him” (IV 299); however, Milton later stresses that Eve is in fact just as fit to hear the words of greater beings as Adam is, but “Her husband the relater she preferred/ Before the angel, and of him to ask/ Chose rather […]” (VIII, 52-54). The stress here is on the fact that this is Eve’s free choice, expressed by the word “chose” at the beginning of line 54; her decision to leave is not related to a lesser intellect or her inferior status to Adam at all. Tinidril, on the other hand, loses her ability to hear Maleldil’s words after passing her test of obedience, and Lewis does not hint at whether or not she, too, merely prefers to hear them from her husband’s lips. This has led Kath Filmer to remark how Tindril’s only achievement gained from passing God’s test of obedience is “to allow her the status of a rather dense child” (Filmer 99). Instead of gaining higher wisdom and maturity, the Green Lady’s intellectual abilities seem to decrease as she takes on her prime role as future Mother of mankind on Perelandra.

One of the difficulties in discussing Lewis’s portrayal of the Green Lady and her relationship with the King is the fact that both characters are focalised through Ransom, a modern twentieth-century intellectual, who nevertheless seems to judge
their relationship with the mind of a Renaissance man; this creates a curious mix of modernity and old-fashioned misogyny, and is the prime reason why female critics especially have found little to like in the Green Lady. What can be accepted and understood as part of Milton’s socio-cultural background, is not as easily grasped when scrutinising Lewis’s views on gender relations, and his obvious preference of the masculine. On first meeting the Lady, Ransom is baffled, even disappointed, that he is dealing with a woman, and he presses her to bring him to the King. During their first conversation, Ransom quickly loses patience with her and she admits that they seem to have different ways of thinking: “‘Let us wait and ask the King,’ she said. ‘For I think, Piebald, you do not know much more about this than I do.’ ‘Yes, the King, by all means,’ said Ransom. ‘If only we can find him’ ” (65).

The idea that the woman needed to be separated from the man in order to get tempted is, of course, derived from *Paradise Lost* and qualifies as a misreading of Genesis on Milton’s part since there is no mentioning of their separation. Ransom immediately assumes that the Lady is in danger since she is without her husband, which illustrates how Lewis’s reading of the Fall narrative has been heavily influenced by Milton’s. To have Ransom presume that there would be no danger if only the King was with the Lady is taking for granted a weakness in her that lacks any evidence so far, especially since Ransom is faced with an alien creature. Curiously enough, Ransom is echoing Satan here in his belief that temptation is possible only with the King/Adam absent, since Tinidril/Eve is of a weaker mind (comp. IX, 483). As we have learned from previous episodes in the epic, though, Satan is very often wrong about things, a fact that Lewis himself so rightly points out in the *Preface* (97-98). A view expressed by “the arch-fiend” should not be taken at face value, yet this is precisely what Lewis does here. Milton does not fully resolve the question of Eve’s supposed weaker intellect; Lewis, however, takes it for granted that the epic delivers a clear answer, and that the Fall was indeed only possible because Eve was separated from her husband, an interpretation of the Fall myth that relies entirely on Milton’s version of it. Furthermore, as Kristin Pruitt points out, Satan’s presumption that Eve not as intelligent and rational as Adam is not founded on anything Milton shows the reader in his portrayal of the First Couple; thus, to take Satan’s view at face value is a clear misreading of gender relations in *Paradise Lost*:

To insist, then, on a dichotomy between an Eve full of feeling and severely limited in her rational capacity and an
Adam who is acting responsibly only when exercising powers of pure reason and command is to overlook their evolving capacity to participate in the other’s being as demonstrated by Adam’s increasing sensitivity and Eve’s developing interest in matters of the mind. (48)

Eve is very capable of grasping more complex issues, such as when she questions the movement of the stars—a question later asked by Adam himself when he meets the archangel. Likewise, she is quite able to hold her own in the argument with the snake, and it takes Satan considerably longer to convince her to eat the apple than he might have anticipated.

After the temptation and Ransom’s prevention of a Fall, the Lady is reunited with the King, and Ransom is awe-struck by him in a way he never quite was with the Lady. It has already been discussed how the Lady seems to step into the background the moment the King appears, and Ransom very quickly forgets about her presence when faced with her husband: “The eyes of the Queen looked upon [Ransom] with love and recognition, but it was not of the Queen that he thought most. It was hard to think of anything but the King” (176). The description of the King presents a striking contrast to the earlier image of the Lady as both a “goddess” and “a Madonna”, as having the body of a temptress and the face of a saint. Upon seeing the King’s face, Ransom is overcome with awe, stating that: “You might ask how it was possible to look upon it and not to commit idolatry, not to mistake it for that of which it was the likeness. For the resemblance was, in its own fashion, infinite, so that almost you could wonder at finding no sorrows in his brow and no wounds in his hands and feet” (176). On observing the King, Ransom immediately recognises God’s/Jesus’ “likeness” in him, which leads him to adore and worship him almost to the point of “idolatry”; idolatry, here, is of course also self-idolatry, presuming that all men were created in God’s likeness. So, spotting the King for the first time, Ransom is ready to worship him as the glorious image of God himself, whereas the first glimpse of the Lady lets him fear he is facing a demon, a dark temptress or an imbecile.

When we first encounter Milton’s First Couple, they are presented side by side, as a harmonious union. Seen through Satan’s eyes, Milton describes Adam and Eve as:

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native honour clad
In naked majesty seemed lords of all,
And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine
The image of their glorious maker shone,
Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure,
Severe, but true filial freedom placed [...] (IV, 288-294)

Two things immediately strike the eye, especially with Lewis’s depiction of Tinidril and the King in mind: Adam and Eve are described next to each other, both as “lords of all”, as one unit, and in both of them does Satan detect “the image of their glorious maker”. At first sight, there is no distinction between man and woman; it is only a few lines later that Milton explains their differences in sex and the different roles they are supposed to fulfill: “For contemplation he and valour formed./ For softness she and sweet attractive grace” (IV 297-98). These last lines find their way directly into Perelandra, when Lewis describes “the might of the man’s shoulders, the wonder of the women’s breasts, a splendour of virility and richness of womanhood unknown on earth” (178), yet what is absent is a sense of unity and shared glory in this picture of the royal couple. Whereas Milton places the couple side by side the first time they are introduced to the reader, and only later reflects on their differences, Lewis not only mentions these differences the very moment the King appears, he even emphasises them by reminding the reader that God created man in his likeness and not woman.

There is no doubt that Lewis had Milton’s Adam in mind when characterising the King, since much of his portrayal reads like a homage to Milton; however, Lewis’s portrayal of the Green Lady and the King relies on gender assumptions that are not as harshly expressed in the epic as Lewis leads his readers to believe. When an enamoured Eve tells Adam that she now understands “how beauty is excelled by manly grace/ And wisdom, which alone is truly fair” (IV 489-90), the reader can smile at her obvious fondness for her husband. Yet, when Ransom depicts the King as “His masterpiece of self-portraiture coming forth from His workshop to delight all worlds” (176), we are inclined to wonder why the Lady is not likewise carved to bring the “worlds” such delights. There are far too many direct borrowings from Milton’s epic to be overlooked as coincidences, so Milton’s influence on Lewis is indisputable. Lewis, however, misreads Milton’s portrayal of the First Couple by overlooking the carefully illustrated interdependence of the two; it is not just Eve who needs her Adam, but they both depend on each other equally. Although Adam is described as being superior to Eve, she herself possesses qualities lacking in Adam, which makes her equally superior. Pruitt notices how:

...while a hierarchy between Adam and Eve exists (just as there is an angelic hierarchy and just as the Son is subordinate to the Father), before the Fall Milton moves the couple, through reciprocity, toward the greater equality between the sexes that, ironically, Eve believes she is
achieving when she eats of the forbidden fruit to ‘render me more equal’ (9.823). Thus, the interplay of hierarchy and equality in the Father/Son relationship is mirrored in Adam and Eve’s prelapsarian relationship. (47)

Pruitt’s comparison to the hierarchical nature existing between the Father and the Son in *Paradise Lost* is a fitting one, since just as Eve was created out of Adam’s substance, so is the Son part of God’s substance; in fact, taking Milton’s materialist views into account, Eve herself is just as much part of the divine as Adam is. The somewhat paradoxical nature of the relationship between Adam and Eve, this ‘inequality between equals’, is misread by Lewis into a straight-forward hierarchy in which the woman is clearly inferior to the man; this is not what Milton meant to express, it is rather what Lewis likes to believe he expressed. In *Perelandra*, Lewis reduces what are rather complicated, often confusing moments in the epic to an easy, straightforward message: Milton’s love of the hierarchical principle lets him present an Eve who is happy in her inferior status to Adam; in fact, her happiness stems directly from her acceptance of her inferiority and meek submission to Adam.

Margaret Hannay remarks that “Lewis is less successful than Milton in imparting majesty to his Eve; she is innocent, serene, intelligent, loving, but hardly regal” (82); this lack of “majesty” in the Green Lady is the problematic result of establishing binary oppositions based on a hierarchical understanding which presumes a higher esteem of the King’s “virility” than the Lady’s ‘feminine’ passivity. As Alastair Fowler has noted on the relation between the First Couple in *Paradise Lost*: “Adam and Eve’s virtues are those attributed to God by authorities from Gregory the Great to Calvin. Neither *wisdom* nor any of the other virtues is gender-marked” (*PL* 238, highlights in the text). This is an important aspect of Milton’s view on hierarchy and the great chain of being that Lewis chooses to overlook; Adam’s and Eve’s virtues and positive qualities are equally important, since they both were created by and from God. By overlooking this, Lewis gives the hierarchical principle Milton supposedly celebrates a subtly different meaning in his fictional reworking of the epic.

Since Lewis already dismissed, or rather explained away, the fact that Adam and Eve are actually as much equals as they are “different” in his *Preface*, he has an academic ‘backing’ for his fictional interpretation of Milton’s Adam and Eve. After rescuing Milton’s epic from wrong interpretation with his scholarly work, he now seeks to save it by rewriting it. Bloom’s definition of *tessera* is precisely this act of
supposedly staying true to the ‘actual’ meaning of the poet, which has been clouded and thus far ‘misunderstood’, but can be expressed in a clearer and more direct way by the new writer and his work. This is another possibility for a writer to claim ownership of the precursor’s work: instead of correcting errors the precursor has made, the new writer seems to merely take the same ideas the precursor expressed and develop them further, and more radically, than the precursor dared to do.

Apart from Ransom’s obvious infatuation with the King and his sudden dismissal of the Green Lady as less intriguing, critics have also condemned the King’s behaviour towards his wife as patronising and condescending. Kath Filmer complains that: “Since Lewis is trying to make the point that it is only through Tinidril’s obedience and her resistance to temptation that the King has been able to gain his insights and revelations, it must be said that the point falls lamentably flat” (99). The King explains to the Lady and Ransom how he was removed from the Lady to reside with Maleldil himself and gain a new knowledge about the world. As Filmer rightly states, it is through Tinidril’s sacrifices that the King can learn of these things, and thus it is perplexing to see her being treated with such condescension. When the Lady inquires after the meaning of the word “images”, the King gives a jovial “great laugh” (181) and promises her to explain this another time, which suggests that Tinidril is not quite clever enough to understand the concept yet.44 This idea is stressed by the King’s decision to “speak of plainer matters” now, matters plain enough to be grasped even by his wife. Later in the conversation with Ransom, the King either confirms or chastises any statement the Lady utters (188-189). This patronising way of guiding the Lady’s speech is especially apparent when she asks him: “What is this we feel, Tor?” at Ransom’s departure; the King answers: “I don’t know. […] One day I will give it a name. This is not a day for making names” (189). In this exchange it appears as if the King is not willing to dwell on his own ignorance of the matter at hand, and thus brushes the Lady’s inquiry aside with a rather traditional ‘now is not the time’ excuse. Only when accepting Lewis’s view on the King’s absolute, superior status can we as readers not feel this scene to almost verge on a parody of a married couple, who in fact have little to say to each other.

44 I believe Filmer is too strict with Lewis when interpreting the King’s laughter as laughing at his wife (Filmer 98); the laughter merely serves as a ‘comic relief’ and an attempt to make the King a more approachable character. That Lewis fails to make his Adam figure more likable by having him laugh, however, is certainly true: Hannay deems the scene “completely gratuitous” for that very reason (Hannay 83).
The exchanges between Tor and Tinidril can almost be perceived as a parody of Adam’s and Eve’s carefully crafted dialogues in Books IV and IX of *Paradise Lost*; they echo Lewis’s reminder made in the *Preface* how befitting Adam’s “lectures” to his wife are and that we as modern readers should not dismiss them as ridiculous (*Preface* 119). Here, Margaret Hannay’s critique of the King as a weak representation of Milton’s Adam becomes fully prominent. Hannay states that “though [Lewis] showed his Adam choosing responsibility, the Adam of Milton is far more appealing”, and continues to remark that this might be due to Lewis’s failure in showing us real affection between King and Lady:

[…] Lewis has not convinced the reader that the King really loves his wife at all; he is quite cheerfully separated from her, sees her ordeal from a comfortable distance, quickly decides to repudiate her if she falls, offers no praise for her resistance to temptation, and corrects her ignorance on trivial matters when they are finally rejoined. (83)

In focusing on re-familiarising the modern reader with the hierarchical principle that is deemed the heart and soul of *Paradise Lost*, Lewis fails to present us with a loving and adoring husband. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam is the first to admit that his wife’s charms almost surpass his superiority, that she “seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best” of all of God’s creatures (including himself) and that “all higher knowledge in her presence fails” (VIII, 551). We find a balance in Milton’s portrayal of marital hierarchy that is lacking in Lewis’s, a sense of equality and respect for each other that we cannot feel when we see the King laugh at his wife. Instead of showing us how hierarchy is just one more expression of God’s love for his creatures and their love for each other, *Perelandra* seems to express the view that hierarchy is the very premise from which love grows. This is not ‘what Milton meant’; it is what Lewis thinks Milton means, or rather, what he desires Milton to have meant.

Not only does Lewis present us with a rather patronising Adam figure and suggests that the Green Lady is somehow less perfect than the King—a thought derived from Milton yet curiously re-interpreted—he also implies that gender, not sex, is a natural given, instead of a cultural construct. When Ransom meets the “eldila” who serve as guardians of the planets Mars and Venus respectively, Lewis describes them as “sexless” (172), which follows Milton’s description of the angels’

45 Again, this thesis will not venture to find out ‘what Milton truly meant’; on the contrary, I wish to rather discuss how much of the controversy around the epic directly stems from critics’ and writers’ tendency to claim that their various interpretations of the epic contain the ‘only truth’, and that other viewpoints are all ‘false’.
ability to “either sex assume, or both” (I, 423). However, he continues to outline how the angels still differ in gender: “But he of Malacandra was masculine (not male); she of Perelandra was feminine (not female)” (172). The difference, thus, is a difference in gender, not in sex; gender precedes the distinction made via the physiological differences.

That Lewis’s distinction between the two genders is a rather traditional one can be seen in his description of the two eldila. Malancandra, the angelic representative of the planet Mars, appears before Ransom like “one standing armed, at the ramparts of his own remote archaic world, in ceaseless vigilance, his eyes ever roaming the earthward horizon whence his danger came long ago” (172). We can see an echo of Milton’s more warrior-like archangels Michael and Gabriel in this depiction, as well as the classical symbolism usually associated with Mars, the Roman war deity. Malacandra is the active, extroverted guardian, the noble savage of an “archaic world” whose gaze is outward-bound, protecting the borders of the planet Malacandra/Mars. The ‘feminine’ angel Perelandra/Venus, on the other hand, is a classical mother figure who lacks the usual sexual attributes attached to the Roman goddess of sensual love: “But the eyes of Perelandra opened, as it were, inward, as if they were the curtained gateway to a world of waves and murmurings and wandering airs, of life that rocked in winds and splashed on mossy stones and descended as the dew and arose sunward in thin-spun delicacy of mist” (172). This depiction recalls that of the Green Lady herself, and yet again gives a glorified image of what unspoilt, ideal ‘femininity’ should be like. The ‘feminine’ angel represents passivity, since her gaze is directed “inward”, and her inner self is compared to a fertile garden of gentle, unobtrusive beauty, a “world of waves and murmurings” that is fragile and delicate.

Although Lewis does not mention a hierarchical relation between the ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ angel, the description of the two is strikingly reminiscent of the comparison between the Green Lady and the King; Malacandra, the ‘masculine’ angel, is the protecting warrior and guardian of the universe, whereas Perelandra is the ‘feminine’ representative of beauty and abundant fertility. The ‘feminine’ angel’s passivity and the ‘masculine’ angel’s active role as protector conveys the impression of a natural superiority of the ‘masculine’ angel over the ‘feminine’.

The idea that an angel is sexless, yet nevertheless represents a specific gender, is based upon Lewis’s view on Milton’s angels. In his Preface, he states that “an angel is, of course, always He (not She) in human language, because whether the male
is, or is not, the superior sex, the masculine is certainly the superior gender” (113).

This remark points towards Lewis’s belief in the superiority of the masculine in general, which is so openly expressed throughout *Perelandra*.\(^{46}\) This essentialist treatment of gender is tied to Lewis’s views on natural hierarchy, since to Lewis, the masculine is the dominant (and dominating) sex/gender. In order to prove his belief in the naturally given distinction between the feminine and masculine gender, the narrator of *Perelandra* (named “Lewis”) relates to the reader the ‘truth’ behind gender usage in our languages, the reason “why in nearly all tongues certain inanimate objects are masculine and others feminine” (171). Here, we can see the full extent of Lewis’s essentialist views on gender:

> Ransom has cured me of believing that this is a purely morphological phenomenon, depending on the form of the word. Still less is gender an imaginative extension of sex. Our ancestors did not make mountains masculine because they projected male characteristics into them. The real process is the reverse. (171-2)\(^{47}\)

This idea of a higher linguistic principle, an essential truth on which all languages base their usage of gender, echoes Plato’s principle of the ideal form from which all reality is but a copy. Lewis implies that ‘sex’ is merely a copy, or a branch, of the overall principle that is gender distinction. The above quoted passage continues with the astonishing revelation that: “Gender is a reality, and a more fundamental reality than sex. […] Female sex is simply one of the things that have feminine gender; there are many others, and Masculine and Feminine meet us on planes of reality where male and female would be simply meaningless” (172). So, gender is a given, fundamental principle, from which all else is derived, even the sexes.

This essentialist view on gender is problematic since it implies a strict binary opposition between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ that excludes other, more fluid expressions of ‘gender’ (i.e. transsexuality, crossdressing, homosexuality etc.). Furthermore, Lewis openly favours ‘the masculine’ over ‘the feminine’, and within his hierarchical universe, the masculine reigns supreme. In discussing Lewis’s view

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\(^{46}\) The fact that Lewis stresses the eldilas’ lack of sexual organs can also be traced back to his discussion of Milton’s angels, in particular his rejection of angelic sensuality as an actual sexual act: “The idea escapes the sensuality sometimes cast in Milton’s teeth because the desire for total unison, the impossible desire as it is for human lovers, is not the same thing as a desire for pleasure” (Preface 113).

\(^{47}\) This is, of course, linguistic nonsense; “mountain” might be ‘male’ in one language, yet ‘female’ in another. As a native speaker of German, I know for a fact that what is “masculine” in my language is by no means so in others. I might furthermore add that the German language also has a third, neutral gender, and so do both Latin and ancient Greek, languages in which Lewis was fluent.
on women, Kath Filmer states that: “What is disturbing in the Narnian Chronicles, as
well as in the whole range of Lewis’s literary corpus is the way in which ultimate
good is depicted as ultimate masculinity, while evil, the corruption of good, is
depicted as femininity” (Filmer 110). Although the latter is only marginally apparent
in Perelandra, where the only female character is supposed to represent unfallen and
thus uncorrupted womanhood, the first observation, that “ultimate good” equals
“ultimate masculinity” is certainly the case in this novel; Maleldil himself is the
embodiment of ultimate ‘masculine’ goodness, and he is the supreme ruler of the
universes. Likewise, the King of Perelandra, who was created in Maleldil’s likeness,
is the natural ruler of his wife, and Ransom—now that he has learned the ‘truth’
behind gender relations—can return to Earth with the knowledge that women would
be happier if they were ruled by men.48 Keeping Lewis’s view on gender in mind, his
discussion of Miltonic hierarchy in the Preface and Lewis’s approval of it wins a new,
troubling angle:

Everything except God has some natural superior; everything except unformed matter has some natural inferior. The
goodness, happiness, and dignity of every being consists in
obeying its natural superior and ruling its natural inferior.
The goodness, happiness, and dignity of every being consists
in obeying its natural superior and ruling its natural inferior.
(73)

With this view on hierarchy and the added idea of a natural distinction between the
two genders, Lewis insinuates that a woman’s “goodness, happiness, and dignity”
depends on her obedience to men.

By making his angels representing ‘the feminine’ and ‘the masculine’, a
distinction we do not find in Paradise Lost, and using stereotypical symbols for
‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’, Lewis expresses a much stronger sexist view than we find
in the epic. As Pruitt remarks: “Milton’s ‘imagination of the Life in Innocence’,
uninterrupted by the Fall, would appear to involve human beings becoming as angels,
with the capacity to ‘either sex assume, or both.’ Perhaps there is no stronger
suggestion that, for Milton, equality between the sexes was the ideal” (58). So, in
Paradise Lost, the ideal is a state where gender differences do not matter anymore,
since the angels can effortlessly cross between gender boundaries, which ultimately

48 Indeed, we can see Ransom’s ‘new knowledge’ being preached to the unhappy young wife Jane
Studdock in the third volume of Lewis’s science-fantasy trilogy, That Hideous Strength. Only after
accepting her role as mother and wife instead of pursuing a fruitless career as an academic, can Jane
find true happiness. Ransom’s unforgettable message to Jane is: “You will have no more dreams. Have
children instead” (THS 378).
dissolves any distinctions between genders. Lewis takes the Renaissance principle of the great chain of being, in which everything is hierarchically ordered by degrees, and places a strange gender bias on it: Milton’s ideas and ideals are placed into a twentieth-century context, where they appear old-fashioned instead of fresh. What Lewis liked in *Paradise Lost* is not actually there at all: a strict binary opposition between the sexes, and the firm belief that “ultimate masculinity” dominates ‘ultimate femininity’.

**Paradise Retained, yet Freedom Lost: Prohibition, Temptation and Obedience in *Perelandra***

When comparing Lewis’s and Milton’s treatment of the Edenic myth—of the Fall of mankind and loss of innocence—it seems that, at a first glance, Lewis’s novel does not have much in common with Milton’s epic: in *Perelandra*, there is no Fall. Whereas the story told (or rather, retold) in *Paradise Lost* closely follows the Genesis account of the Fall, albeit with some significant narrative changes, Lewis’s novel seems to deviate from this account and completely re-invent the story by changing the outcome. Thus, it is not surprising that Lewis criticism has often glossed over, or even flat out denied, the Miltonic influence on *Perelandra*. However, by taking a close look at Lewis’s revisionism and reworking of the Fall myth, in particular the nature of God’s prohibition and the peculiar inclusion of Ransom as aide to the Lady during her temptation, Milton’s influence on the conception of *Perelandra* becomes almost painfully obvious. The changes that Lewis makes to the Fall narrative are not arbitrary; they are supposed to demonstrate a theological point by the use of fresh imagery that is free of ‘biblical bias’; yet, they also reveal Lewis’s struggle to break free from Milton’s influence.

Whereas the influence of *Paradise Lost* on Lewis’s portrayal of both the Unman and the Green Lady is more readily accessible and understandable, Lewis’s treatment of the Fall motif itself in relation to Milton’s epic is a far more complex matter. The narrative ‘twist’ of preventing the Fall and instead focusing on the temptation itself as a long and exhausting argument between Good and Evil seems so different from Milton’s treatment of the Fall that it is hard to discuss those two versions in relation to each other. Yet, it is precisely in those radical deviations from
the Genesis account and Milton’s retelling of it, that Miltonic influence on Perelandra and Lewis’s struggle against it is most apparent. Lewis’s deviations from the original Fall narrative, namely the different prohibition for the Lady and King and the peculiar ‘non-Fall’ of the Lady, in fact do not and cannot convince, neither theologically nor in terms of narrative. When Lewis tries to eclipse the poetic ‘father’ of his work by attempting radical, new changes to the story, he denies the very reason this work exists in the first place; everything in the novel is indebted to and influenced by Milton’s version of the Fall and Lewis’s desire to fully restore the Christian message of the epic. His struggle is a twofold one: trying to find an ‘original’ way of retelling the Fall and thus escaping Milton’s dominant influence, but also enforcing his (mis)reading of the epic as “overwhelmingly Christian”. By having Maleldil/God send Ransom to prevent the Lady from falling, Lewis betrays a deep-seated unease about the idea of a felix culpa, a fortunate Fall.

That Lewis was successful in making his version of the Fall appear anything but Miltonic is obvious: even those critics who have quite readily admitted ‘similarities’ between Milton and Lewis, such as John S. Tanner in “The Psychology of Temptation in Perelandra and Paradise Lost: What Lewis Learned from Milton”, tend to place those two versions of the Edenic myth side by side, instead of seeing Lewis’s version as a direct result of (mis)reading Milton’s version. Tanner, for instance, is aware of Milton’s influence on Lewis: “Indeed, it was from Milton that Lewis learned how to think about unfallen motives for evil and indeterminate causes of sin” (133). However, he argues that with Perelandra Lewis managed to use Milton’s thoughts on the nature of the Fall and improve those basic theological principles. The notion of Perelandra as an ‘improved’ version of the biblical Fall suggests that Lewis, the Milton disciple or ephebe, to use Bloom’s term, has become the master. Lewis might have gained basic knowledge about the Fall from Milton’s epic, yet his novel surpasses Milton’s retelling since it “both adapts and refines what [Lewis] learned from Paradise Lost about the psychology of temptation in an innocent mind, and in the process addresses the very questions that would soon preoccupy Milton criticism” (133).

Again, employing Bloom’s “six revisionary ratios” (14) in order to understand the mechanism at work here proves fruitful: whereas the Un-man was an example of a clinamen, and his treatment of Milton’s Eve a tessera, Lewis’s reworking of the Fall motif exemplifies both kenosis and daemonization, two radical stages in the poet’s
“life-cycle” (Bloom 15). Bloom describes kenosis as “a breaking-device similar to the defense-mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions” and states that “kenosis then is a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor” (14). Kenosis depicts the poet’s attempt at humbling himself and his work, of “emptying himself out” (14) of an assumed divine originality. By doing this, however, the poet reduces the dominance of the precursor and the influence of his work as well. We can see moments of kenosis in Lewis’s treatment of the prohibition in relation to Milton’s; as Milton before him, Lewis follows Augustine’s view of the prohibition as a simple test of obedience, in which the forbidden fruit itself is entirely arbitrary. Whereas Milton has his Satan toy with the belief of a ‘magic apple’ in his temptation to Eve, Lewis envisions a different prohibition, which is nevertheless decisively Augustinian. Lewis reduces the influence of the original Edenic myth told in Genesis 2-3 and concentrates entirely on Augustine’s discussion of the Genesis account.

The other revisionary ratio of interest for this discussion is daemonization, the process whereby: “The later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent-poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor. He does this, in his poem, by so stationing its relation to the parent-poem as to generalise away the uniqueness of the earlier work” (15). The term daemonisation seems misleading here, since the “range of being just beyond that precursor” is, of course, the Christian tradition and religious dogma. Lewis presents himself as one of many Christian writers who have discussed the problems surrounding the Fall myth, which reduces Milton’s status as the most prominent of them. By placing himself in a long line of interpretations of the biblical Fall all originating from Genesis 2-3, instead of acknowledging the direct indebtedness to Milton’s specific interpretation, Lewis can situate his work as being parallel to Milton’s, whereas it in fact directly follows the epic’s premise. Perelandra does not retell or adapt the Edenic myth of the Fall and temptation; it adapts and revises Milton’s version of this myth.

That Lewis criticism has downplayed Miltonic influence on Perelandra, or rather overstated Lewis’s supposed ‘originality’, is largely due to Lewis’s self-styled image as a Christian fantasist who retells Christian myths in a secondary world scenario. Gregory Wolfe, in his article “Language and Myth in the Ransom Trilogy”,

49 On Augustinian thought in Paradise Lost see furthermore Poole (21-30) and Peter A. Fiore’s Milton and Augustine.
notes how Lewis’s “special imaginative gift, it can be argued, was an ability to breathe new life into ancient myths and religious dogmas by taking their symbolic patterns and placing them in a different context” (65-66). By choosing a different setting for his retelling of Milton’s epic, Lewis can present his work as fresh and original. However, he is not retelling a myth, nor is he presenting us with a fresh and new angle on the original account of myth; he is struggling to break free from the most dominant retelling of the Fall, while in fact failing to sever his ties with it since his aim seems to be to correct Milton’s ‘mistakes’.

*Perelandra* tries to be two opposite things at the same time, with Lewis truly aware of: on the one hand, it tries to ‘justify Milton’s ways to his readers’ and save the epic from wrong assumptions about Milton’s motives; thus, the novel is Miltonic to its core and cannot be otherwise. On the other hand, Lewis sets out to create a different, a new version of the Fall that should be seen and perceived as ‘original’. Originality, though, as Harold Bloom has taught us, is merely an illusion the poet/writer needs to cling to in order to create anything at all, to not be smothered by the weight of all those previous works that encapsulated his ideas so much better than he ever could. This is precisely what we see happening in *Perelandra*: Lewis tries to break free from Milton, while at the same time basing his interpretation of the Fall myth exclusively on Milton’s epic. Lewis’s changes to the Edenic myth merely prove that he cannot escape the influence of the original mythic pattern, and even less so its most dominant re-telling, *Paradise Lost*. Whenever Lewis seems to deviate from the mythic pattern of the original Genesis account by inventing some ‘original’ new plot device, he in fact merely betrays his indebtedness to Milton’s version of the Fall.

Since Lewis’s understanding of the Genesis myth is irrevocably tied to Milton’s understanding of it (so much so that Lewis himself was blinded as to the true extent of Miltonic influence on his theological understanding of the Fall) any deviation from Milton’s account of the Fall must end in contradiction. He is trying to push Milton’s ghost out of his story, yet evokes its presence with every word he writes. In trying to break free from Milton’s influence, Lewis becomes entangled in contradictions about the true significance of the Fall for us creatures that in turn throw an even more dubious light on God’s supposed benevolence than Milton’s epic did. It almost seems as if Lewis, as William Blake believed of Milton, is “of the devil’s party without knowing it”; by changing the premise of the original myth in order to achieve ‘originality’ where in fact there can be only imitation, Lewis insinuates that the test of
obedience cannot be passed and that Maleldil/God must be aware of this since he sends Ransom to help the Lady.\textsuperscript{50} Furthermore, Lewis draws a very uncomfortable picture of the fallen women from Earth and has the Un-man use feminist arguments during his temptation.

The problem with any retelling of the Fall myth is of course the uncomfortable truth that the biblical text these retellings take as their original source, Genesis 2-3, is already fraught with contradictions and troubling suggestions about the nature of God. Milton deals very openly and almost painfully frankly with those contradictions, having his various characters discuss them from all angles; after all, his declared statement was to “justify the ways of God to men” and thus he makes sure his readers understand the complex issue of an omniscient God foreseeing a Fall the moment he sets up his prohibition. In \textit{Paradise Lost}, Milton’s God explains his motivation to let the Fall happen by stressing the fact that he gave his creatures the gift of free will: “I made him just and right;/ Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (III, 98-99).

Satan has a free will, and so do Adam and Eve, and thus the fallen angel can tempt the humans into disobedience; God’s benevolence lies in allowing his creatures to make their wrong choices unhindered, even if this means trespassing divine law and corrupting creation. Since he is a Christian poet, Milton envisions the Fall as both the beginning and end of mankind’s happiness: without the Fall, there would have been no resurrection. Thus, the Fall is a \textit{felix culpa}, a ‘happy’ or ‘fortunate’ Fall for Milton. At the end of \textit{Paradise Lost}, “the world was all before” Adam and Eve; they can walk into their uncertain future with the certain knowledge that one day their progeny will be absolved from their sins through Jesus’s self-sacrifice. There is a strong nostalgic longing inherent in Milton’s description of Eden, yet at the same time a deep-felt joy stemming from the knowledge that the darkest hour of mankind led to the greatest miracle of Christendom.\textsuperscript{51}

Milton critics usually agree on the fact that Milton took his understanding of the Fall primarily from Augustine, and Lewis himself points this out in the \textit{Preface} in order to stress the dogmatic orthodoxy of the epic (\textit{Preface} 82). One of the main ideas Milton took from Augustine is the belief that the prohibition in itself is more significant than the thing prohibited. In other words: there is no magic apple, the fruit

\textsuperscript{50} In \textit{Paradise Lost}, God sends the archangel Raphael to warn Adam and Eve before the Fall takes place, whereas Ransom stays with the Lady during the temptation.

\textsuperscript{51} I will talk more about the idea of the Fall as a \textit{felix culpa} in the fourth section of chapter four of this thesis.
from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” does not provide the person eating it with any magical knowledge whatsoever. The reason why Adam and Eve learn about “good and evil” is because, for the first time, they commit an evil deed themselves. As Peter A. Fiore puts it in Milton and Augustine, “it is the act of turning, not the object to which one turns” (28) which is evil. The prohibition is merely meant to test man’s obedience to God, and it could have been any tree in paradise that God could have forbidden Adam to eat of. Milton relies on the Augustinian doctrine of the Fall as a test of obedience and Lewis follows him in that.

In 1940, two years preceding the publication of Perelandra and the Preface, Lewis voiced his opinion on the Fall in The Problem of Pain, stating that: “The story in Genesis is a story (full of the deepest suggestion) about a magic apple of knowledge; but in the developed doctrine the inherent magic of the apple has quite dropped out of sight, and the story is simply one of disobedience” (59). As mentioned earlier, Lewis humbly attests that the profundity of the original myth is too mystical for him to grasp, and thus Augustine’s doctrine derived from the myth will be the subject of his discussion (59-60). Following Augustine, Lewis believes that the sin of the Fall lies in a creature’s wish to exist independently from its maker, to be self-sufficient and accountable only to its own self (63-64). The example Lewis chooses to illustrate what he believes to be the true nature of the Fall is a telling one: “Thoughts undertaken for God’s sake—like that on which we are engaged at the moment—are continued as if they were an end in themselves, and then as if our pleasure in thinking were the end, and finally as if our pride or celebrity were the end” (64). This is a typical instance in which Lewis’s constant self-consciousness about his role as a Christian writer is revealed. He sees the danger of becoming too self-centred as a creature, and to perform tasks solely for one’s own sake instead of for God’s glory. Since he himself mentions that his own task at this very moment—the writing of an essay on Christian theology—could be turned into mere self-glorification, we can read a certain fear of Lewis’s own celebrity status as Christian apologetic into this statement. It shows his constant struggle with his role, his constant anxious checking whether what he is writing really consists of “thoughts undertaken for God’s sake”. To focus on the prohibition as primarily a test of obedience seems to be a safer option for a Christian writer; focusing on the original myth and toying with the idea of a magic apple might lead too much away from theological musings.
However, this is only one reason why Lewis might have chosen to change the prohibition in *Perelandra*; the other one is that he cannot in fact see the Fall without seeing Milton’s version of it, steeped in Augustinian thinking. The original Genesis account of the Fall contains a very mystifying statement by God which gives rise to the assumption that maybe the forbidden fruit contained magical properties after all. After their Fall, before Adam and Eve are driven out of paradise, God proclaims: “Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever” (Gen 3, 22). This passage never found its way into *Paradise Lost*, and Lewis, too, blends these lines out entirely in his discussion of the Fall in *The Problem of Pain* and likewise in his conception of the prohibition in *Perelandra*. To him the Fall is an “act of self-will on the part of the creature” (*PoP* 68), one of the central ideas explored in *Paradise Lost*. Lewis continues to assert that this self-centredness “is a sin possible even to Paradisal man, because the mere existence of a self—the mere fact that we call it ‘me’—includes, from the first, the danger of self-idolatry” (68-69). Immediately, Eve’s first moment of self-awareness in book IV of *Paradise Lost* springs to mind here (IV, 476-480), and this scene seems to be the origin of Lewis’s thought; Eve sees her own self in the mirror, admiring it, and thus is in danger of narcissistic “self-idolatry” at the same instant she realizes that she is “me”, that she is a self-conscious creature. So, Lewis’s discussion of the Fall here is primarily a discussion of *Paradise Lost*. That Lewis was already thinking about his own version of the Fall while writing *The Problem of Pain* is highly likely; almost as an afterthought, he contemplates that “the most significant way of stating the real freedom of man is to say that if there are other rational species than man, existing in some other part of the actual universe, then it is not necessary to suppose that they also have fallen” (72-73). This, of course, is the story he will set out to tell in *Perelandra*.

So, like Milton, Lewis follows Augustine’s doctrine of the Fall as a test of obedience. In order to stress the arbitrary nature of the prohibition, Lewis presents the reader with a different prohibition than the well-known forbidden fruit. Perelandra is envisioned as a planet with immense oceans and light-weight landmasses floating on the water; there is no stability except on the Fixed Land, the only stable landmass resembling our earthly continents. The prohibition set by Maleldil is to not sleep on the Fixed Land. The Lady explains this prohibition to Ransom: “We may land on them and walk on them, for the world is ours. But to stay there—to sleep and awake
there…’ she ended with a shudder” (64). Dwelling on the Fixed Land almost repulses the Lady, she is horrified by the idea, whereas in *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve are quite indifferent towards the forbidden tree, until Satan and Raphael turn their thoughts towards it. The Lady cannot believe that Ransom prefers stable landmasses: “‘How do you endure it?’ she burst out. ‘Almost half of your world empty and dead. Loads and loads of land, all tied down. Does not the very thought of it crush you?’ ” (64). This horrified revulsion against the very thing that is forbidden makes it hard to believe that the Lady could ever be tempted to trespass the prohibition. This is one instance where Lewis’s ‘innovations’ to the Fall narrative do not convince precisely because he tries to move away from Milton’s epic: the reason why Eve can so easily be talked into eating the apple is because she is used to eating fruits from all the other trees; she greatly enjoys eating and picking fruit, and Milton makes sure we know this when he depicts her choosing the right fruit for Raphael’s visit in book V (303-307). Furthermore, the forbidden fruit is described as “savoury” and pleasant-smelling (IX, 740-41), and thus Eve’s only reasoning for resisting would be to remember the fact that God forbade the eating of the fruit, however pleasant the experience might be.

Furthermore, although Lewis insisted on the notion of the Fall as merely a test of obedience, and the prohibition an entirely arbitrary one, his own invented prohibition is in fact not as arbitrary as it seems. Not sleeping on the Fixed Land effectively prevents the Lady and King from settling there, which is precisely the point the Un-man exploits in his temptation. The Fixed Land signifies stability, a firmness necessary to settle down, to built houses and obtain possessions—all terms the Lady in her innocent state has no concept of. When the temptation is ended and the Lady and King are reunited, the Lady lets Ransom know that the prohibition has been lifted, and that they now are free to dwell on the Fixed Land. She declares that: “The reason for not yet living on the Fixed Land is now so plain. […] It was to reject the wave—to draw my hands out of Maleldil’s, to say to Him, ‘Not thus, but thus’—to put in our own power what times should roll towards us...” (179). The floating islands of Perelandra symbolise the Lady’s complete yielding to the will of Maleldil, her readiness to give herself up to the unreliable movement of the water and submit her will to God’s guidance. As Hannay notes on the significance of the floating islands: “The Lady had no possessions and no control over her own life whatever; her island floated with her across the seas according to Maleldil’s will, not her own” (86). The Lady is separated from the King because her island was swept away from his
before she could cross over; thus, the fluid nature of the planet is the direct cause of her isolation. So, the prohibition connected to the Fixed Land does in fact seem anything but arbitrary: the Lady and King are not yet meant to settle down, but instead are meant to live in a state of immediacy without reflection until they have achieved a level of maturity high enough to make choices of their own.

The fact that the Lady is separated from the King and brought to her tempter by the will of Maleldil, however, belies the idea of free will; this is precisely why Milton depicted Eve as choosing to be separated from Adam herself. The Genesis account of the Fall does not in fact state whether or not Eve was alone, to separate Eve from her husband was Milton’s narrative choice, and Lewis adapted this idea. Yet, in order to move away from Milton’s account of Eve’s Fall, he changes the narrative in a way that leads to confusion about Maleldil’s gift of free will. In *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, Lenz and Hunt note how Lewis’s Narnia world is marked by an absence of free will, a concept so crucial to Christian thought:

A sticking point is the resemblance of Lewis’s Christian world to the pagan world it replaces, or overlays. The characters have no free will: the Christ-figure of Aslan is totally in control – and seems to play even more arbitrary games than the old Gods. But if this is acceptable in a thousand imaginary worlds, why should it be seen as debilitating here? It may be because the books seem to be about freedom and choice, but are actually about control. (34-5)

The same is true for *Perelandra*, in which the Lady seems to be a mere plaything of the (masculine, patriarchal) Maleldil. It is not so much about her choice in this test of obedience, but more about Ransom’s; in the end, he is the Christian hero who overcomes evil. The Lady herself has no choice and hardly a free will, since she seems very much controlled by Maleldil’s will.

In his desire to tread a narrative path decisively different from Milton’s, Lewis makes narrative choices that lead to theological dead-ends. It is helpful here to compare the three accounts of God’s prohibition, the Book of Genesis, *Paradise Lost* and *Perelandra*. What we know of Maleldil’s prohibition has already been quoted above: the Lady must not sleep on the Fixed Land. In Genesis, God’s command to Adam is: “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2, 16-17). Milton closely echoes the scriptural original; here, it is Adam who speaks though, repeating God’s words to Raphael:
But of the tree whose operation brings
Knowledge of good and ill, which I have set
The pledge of thy obedience and thy faith,
Amid the garden by the tree of life;
Remember what I warn thee, shun to taste,
And shun the bitter consequence: for know,
The day thou eatst thereof, my sole command
Transgressed, inevitably thou shalt die [...] (VIII, 323-330)

We can see at first glance how alike the two versions are; Milton was anxious to be as close to scripture as possible, yet, he stresses the idea of the prohibition as a “pledge of thy obedience and faith”, something we find in Lewis’s version of the Fall as well. Milton also introduces a slight but significant shift in meaning away from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” of Genesis to it being a tree “whose operation brings knowledge of good and ill”; here, the mark of Augustinian thinking on Paradise Lost is obvious, since it is the “operation” that “brings” the forbidden “knowledge” and not the tree itself magically granting this knowledge through eating its fruit. The changes Milton makes to the original biblical text have found its way directly into Perelandra, where obedience to God is the central theme.

Lewis turns the prohibition into an even stricter test of obedience, which raises a whole set of new questions about God’s benevolence. Unlike Milton, though, Lewis does not wrestle with those questions as openly. Just as he tried to ‘explain away’ possible heresies committed by Milton in the epic, he has Ransom ‘explain away’ Maleldil’s worryingly questionable attitude. Furthermore, Lewis’s version of the prohibition is missing a chief element so vital to both the Genesis text as well as Paradise Lost: the Lady does not know of any consequence that would follow the trespassing of God’s command. Milton’s God speaks of “the bitter consequence”, and although Adam does not understand what “death” means, he shudders at the mere thought of this ominous punishment: “The rigid interdiction, which resounds/ Yet dreadful in mine ear […]” (VIII, 334-335). Ransom and the Un-man, both fallen creatures who have knowledge about the Fall on Earth, presume that the consequence on Perelandra would likewise be death. Yet, with the prohibition so different, this must not necessarily be so; Maleldil does not specify a punishment, and thus the Lady cannot feel anxious about the consequence of breaking his command. This places an even greater stress on the idea of obedience to God as the key to a creature’s happiness than we find expressed in Paradise Lost. This shift in meaning would be less unsettling if Lewis had presented us with a loving God so often lamented to be absent from Milton’s epic. However, Lewis greatly disliked Milton’s choice to
present God as an actual character in the epic; thus, his Maleldil is a mysterious ‘presence’, a “voice” that is horrifyingly absolute in its love for Ransom (*Perelandra* 125-127). Again, Miltonic influence on *Perelandra*, not acknowledged by Lewis but constantly wrestled against, leads to ambiguous theological statements.

In *Perelandra*, Lewis tries to be ‘different’ from Milton by changing the prohibition and thus supposedly stressing its significance as a pure test of obedience to a greater extent than Milton did. In order to counter the Un-man’s verbal attacks, Ransom illustrates his view of the prohibition as a means to teach obedience to the Lady. Ransom wins some ground in his battle for the Lady’s soul in declaring that Maleldil only commands what is good, yet the Un-man immediately points out that there is nothing good to be had from not sleeping on the Fixed Land. Ransom’s answer to that is a startling one: “I think He made one law of that kind in order that there might be obedience. In all these other matters what you call obeying Him is but doing what seems good in your own eyes also. […] Where can you taste the joy of obeying unless he bids you do something for which His bidding is the only reason?” (101, emphasis in the text). So, the goodness in this case lies in the obeying itself.

It would not be quite as problematic of Lewis to believe in the joy of obeying for obedience’s sake, if he had not let Ransom argue for God’s unfailing good intent with all his commands. Now, suddenly, a contradiction arises that raises uncomfortable questions about God’s reasons for setting his creatures such a test: if the prohibition signifies “something for which His bidding is the only reason” precisely because a creature’s joy in obeying to something that is beneficial to the creature is far too easily had, the test reads like a cruel experiment meant to brainwash a creature into mindless obedience. In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis expressed his belief that: “The content of our obedience—the thing we are commanded to do—will always be something intrinsically good, something we ought to do even if (by an impossible supposition) God had not commanded it” (88). In *Perelandra*, this firm belief is suddenly turned upside down; the point of the prohibition is precisely that there is nothing “intrinsically good” about it, which makes it so hard to obey. Thus, Ransom’s rejoicing in knowing that the Lady will learn “an obedience freer, more reasoned, more conscious than any she had known before” (113) by passing the test reads like dramatic irony: is this truly a desirable form of obedience if we cannot be sure anymore whether God’s commands are merely there to prove a point? Lewis changes the content of God’s prohibition in order to present a ‘fresh’ and ‘original’
version of the Fall, free of any literary influence. Yet, in his wish to be different, he ends up contradicting his own theological beliefs.

That the theological thought behind Lewis’s version of the temptation is morally questionable becomes apparent when analysing the Un-man’s way of arguing as compared to Satan’s temptation of Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Again, Lewis makes sure that the Un-man’s arguments differ from Satan’s, yet he is at the same time indebted to Milton’s version of the temptation and derives most of the Un-man’s thought-pattern from Satan’s. Thus, we find a contradictory blending of Miltonic symbolism and stylistic devices with new innovations to the story that lead to a shift in the theological meaning of the Fall. During the course of the temptation scene, the Un-man shifts from arguing for the Lady’s need to disobey God’s command to a startling mix of feminist argument against men’s dominance—which is not Miltonic in origin—and an attempt at increasing the Lady’s sense of self, a Miltonic twist to the original Genesis account. Since there is no Fall, the temptation scene is far more lengthy than Milton’s version of it; Lewis’s temptation is a didactic back-and-forth argumentation between the Un-man and the Lady about the nature of Maleldil’s prohibition. When the Lady becomes increasingly bewildered, Ransom takes over and argues her case. That the prohibition in itself has no significant value is never questioned; instead, the Un-man plunges straight into an argument that questions the necessity to actually obey Maleldil’s command.

Although the prohibition is meant to be different from the original command given by God in Genesis 2, Lewis nevertheless uses imagery that evokes Eden’s forbidden trees, having Ransom compare the forbidden and unwanted knowledge with a tasteless fruit (90). The Un-man, too, speaks of the Lady “as a tree without fruit” (99) and accuses Ransom of withholding new wisdom with the words: “He does not want you to go on to the new fruits that you have never tasted before” (98). This is an echo of Milton’s Satan, who uses the idea of the forbidden fruit as actually containing higher knowledge in order to tempt Eve into eating it. When Satan approaches Eve in book IX of the epic in the guise of the serpent, she is amazed at hearing the animal speak to her. Satan pretends that he learned speech after eating the apple, which does indeed have magical properties and can change Eve for the better, too. So, the serpent’s story ‘makes sense’ in a way that dissolves Eve’s mistrust and opens up a possibility for Satan to talk her into disobedience. In his *Preface*, Lewis remarks that “Eve’s arguments in favour of eating the Apple are, in themselves, reasonable
enough; the answer to them consists simply in the reminder ‘You mustn’t. You were
told not to.’” (71). This unrelenting view of Eve’s struggle to make sense of Satan’s
story finds its way into Perelandra; Ransom despairs over gradually losing the Lady
to the Un-man’s arguments: “It became harder to recall her mind to the data—a
command from Maleldil, a complete uncertainty about the results of breaking it, and a
present happiness so great that hardly any change could be for the better” (114,
highlights in the text). True, in both Paradise Lost and Perelandra, the central
command is straight-forward and only complicated by the satanic tempter in order to
lure Eve into breaking this command. However, Milton tried to make his readers
understand how Eve could have fallen in her state of innocence by making Satan so
convincing in his arguments.\footnote{On Satan’s convincing arguments see Fish.}

The “data” might be simple enough to grasp, yet this is precisely where Lewis’s
deviations from Milton’s epic lead to theological complications. As stated before,
Satan chooses a disguise that allows him to come close to Eve without frightening
her; the Edenic serpent, as Milton stresses, is very pleasant to look at: “pleasing was
his shape, /And lovely” (IX, 503-504). The Un-man, hideous and deformed as he is,
lacks this advantage; neither can he toy with the literal meaning of the prohibition
quite as masterfully as Satan can. This is why Lewis needs to return to the well-
known biblical imagery of fruits and trees, although his prohibition is connected to
fixed lands versus floating islands; the fruit imagery ‘works’ just too well to not refer
to it. Furthermore, Lewis is too dependent on Milton’s narrative, and thus cannot
break away from it completely.

Not only can Milton’s Satan tell a story that is convincing to a certain point, he
also draws a very lush, almost erotic picture of eating the forbidden apple. He is a
very good story-teller and evokes a sensual image of the apple, appealing to all the
senses:

To satisfy the sharp desire I had
Of tasting those fair apples, I resolved
Not to defer; hunger and thirst at once,
Powerful persuaders, quickened at the scent
Of that alluring fruit, urged me so keen. (IX, 584-587)
The fruit is “alluring” and pleasant to sight, smell, taste and has “a savoury odour”
(579) which is “grateful to appetite” (580). Furthermore, the apple seems to have been
designed for Adam and Eve’s hand alone: “For high from ground the branches would
require/ Thy utmost reach or Adam’s” (IX, 590-591). Milton relies strongly on scripture here, since the Genesis account of the Fall also highlights the pleasantness of the forbidden fruit: “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat” (Gen 3,6). What is different in Milton’s temptation scene is the fact that Satan talks Eve into believing the tree “was to be desired to make one wise”, whereas it in fact has no magical properties. This is a thought derived from Augustine’s doctrine of the Fall, so Milton here blends mythical imagery from Genesis with doctrinal belief.

The Un-man, who, according to Ransom, “regarded intelligence simply and solely as a weapon” (110) has to take a different path of arguing that nevertheless shows quite a few similarities with Satan’s arguments. He first explains to the Lady the concept of stories and fantasising about what ‘might be’ (89-90), sowing the seed of doubt and focusing her mind on the prohibition.\(^{53}\) Since there is nothing pleasant about sleeping on the Fixed Land, the Un-man tries to make breaking the prohibition a harsh task that will have the Lady sacrifice herself for the greater good: “The ideas of the Great Deed, of the Great Risk, of a kind of martyrdom, were presented to her every day, varied in a thousand forms” (112).

The Un-man’s rhetoric relies on two things: firstly—and Lewis derived this way of arguing from Milton’s Satan—he distorts facts and presents twisted half-truths as well as blending out the universal truth which is God’s prohibition. Like Satan, the Un-man makes a straight-forward issue more complicated, questioning whether God really meant what he said. Secondly, he repeats his argument long enough for even Ransom to begin to believe in it. Here, he differs from Satan, and the petty repetitiveness that leads Ransom to think “This can’t go” (119) conveys the idea of a worn-out Lady on the brink of falling at any time if Ransom had not stopped the temptation by violence.

The Un-man, like Satan, tries to increase the Lady’s sense of self, to make her self-centred and convince her that she does not need either the King’s or Maleldil’s advice: “You thought you would always learn all things from the King; but now

\(^{53}\) Gregory Wolfe offers an intriguing reading of the temptation in Perelandra as “the deadly conflict between mythopoeia and materialism” (68).
Maleldil has sent you other men whom it had never entered your mind to think of and they have told you things the King himself could not know” (90). Milton’s Satan leads Eve to believe that God might not have meant his command after all: “Or will God incense his ire/ For such a petty trespass, and not praise/ Rather your dauntless virtue, whom the pain/ Of death denounced” (IX, 692-695) and likewise does the Unman urge the Lady to see the command as meant to be broken (e.g. Perelandra 112-113). In his Preface, Lewis notes that Satan tempts Eve by “urging her selfhood to direct revolt against the fact of being subject to God at all” (69) and this is of course a device first used by Milton, not to be found in the original Genesis narrative. Again, we can see that Lewis was influenced by Milton’s version of the Fall rather than the original Edenic myth.

The idea of the Lady taking on a tragic role is derived from Milton, yet he uses the metaphor to convey Eve’s new fallen self directly after eating the apple, letting her appear like a bad stage actress reciting a “prologue” (Paradise Lost IX, 853-54). In Perelandra, it is one device the Un-man uses to make the Lady give in, pressing her to take on the grand role of rescuing her husband from her state of ignorance. Ransom begins to suspect changes in the Lady’s perception of the self: “The fatal touch of invited grandeur, of enjoyed pathos—the assumption, however slight, of a rôle—seemed a hateful vulgarity” (109). This reads exactly like a depiction of Milton’s Eve after her Fall, when she contemplates whether to share the fruit with Adam or keep the newfound knowledge to herself to “render” her “more equal” to him (IX, 816-833). Lewis insists that the Lady has not yet fallen, but this mingling of images from both the pre- and postlapsarian Eve here almost gives the impression of a half-fallen Lady. Ransom sees a change in her face, noticing that “there was the faintest touch of theatricality, the first hint of a self-admiring inclination to seize a grand role in the drama of her world” (113). If the Lady, at that precise moment, already perceives herself as the grand, tragic lead role in a play that the Un-man has conceived for her, then this is already a moment of falleness. Milton’s Eve is lost the moment she believes the serpent tells the truth, when she ceases to question the nature of the prohibition and imagines herself as a goddess. The soliloquy right before she plucks the apple is rather a confirmation than an inner conflict; the decision is formed in Eve’s mind long before she actually takes the apple. Lewis evokes the image of the freshly fallen Eve in his depiction of the Lady, but instead of focusing on this perplexing case of a half-fall, Lewis has Ransom simply stop the temptation by
battling the Un-man. It is almost as if Lewis has not even realised that Milton’s version of the temptation has crept into his own account of it. Possibly, the reason why he has to end the temptation with a deus ex machina moment is because there is no way out of the dilemma of a half-fallen Lady even before her committing a sin.

The Un-man’s attempts at increasing the Lady’s sense of self are strongly reliant on his tactic to decrease the status of the King and make her feel superior or at least independent from his guidance. This recalls Lewis’s firm belief in the hierarchical principle he misreads as the central theme of Paradise Lost. Again, the Miltonic depiction of natural hierarchy is misinterpreted in a way that creates a gender bias in Perelandra not that strictly present in Milton’s epic. Wherever the Un-man’s arguments move away from those of Milton’s Satan, whenever Lewis moves away from Milton’s version of the temptation, the Un-man slips into feminist jargon meant to teach the Lady a wrong view of women. Like Satan, the Un-man flatters the Lady’s beauty and intelligence, yet tied to this is his campaign to demean the men from Earth while increasing the worth of the (fallen) earthly women in the Lady’s mind:

And all the time, as a sort of background to these goddess shapes, the speaker was building up a picture of the other sex. No word was directly spoken on the subject: but one felt them as a huge, dim multitude of creatures pitifully childish and complacently arrogant; timid, meticulous, unoriginating; sluggish and ox-like, rooted to the earth almost in their indolence, prepared to try nothing, to make no exertion, and capable of being raised into full life only by the unthanked and rebellious virtue of their females.

(108)

So, the men from Earth are presented from the women’s viewpoint as useless and “sluggish”, and entirely dependent on “their females”; this—presumably—is supposed to be amusing for the male readership of Perelandra in its irony. The Un-man is meant to have turned the true state of the Earth upside down, giving a reverse picture of what a healthy male-female relationship should look like. In Paradise Lost, Satan navigates Eve’s thoughts away from Adam as well; yet, Satan’s main argument is still his own experience as a serpent who learned human speech from eating the apple. The Un-man’s argument increasingly becomes one that relies exclusively on teaching the Lady a disregard for the other sex: “The notion to ask the King before a decision was made had been unobtrusively shuffled aside. […] And also, the Tempter hinted, it would be no use asking the King, for he would certainly not approve the action: men were like that” (112, highlights in the text). Whereas men are depicted as
backward and weak by the Un-man, women are raised to a superior status as near-goddesses, echoing Satan’s flattery of Eve and her beauty.

Only the male protagonist Ransom is able to see through the Un-man’s corrupt version of women. In a particularly revealing statement, Ransom remarks that he “had more than a suspicion that many of these noble pioneers had been what in ordinary terrestrial speech we call witches or perverts” (108). This gives rise to all sorts of uncomfortable ideas about Lewis’s views on women from Earth, and likewise on the Christian religion. History after all teaches that “witches” were in fact usually innocent women burned on the stakes because of a twisted concept of Christianity. That Lewis uses this term so freely and in an unbiased way in order to condemn the more free-spirited and independent women the Un-men is trying to evoke here is disturbing; after all, the reader is supposed to root for Ransom and his arguments, not the Un-man’s. Yet, this is made difficult since Ransom seems to think it quite alright to persecute “witches and perverts”. The term “pervert” furthermore gives rise to all sorts of uncomfortable ideas, and is especially disquieting in its vagueness, since Lewis does not specify here what he sees as ‘perverted’.

All of this would perhaps not be so problematic if Lewis did not drive home his point about the Un-man’s corrupt feminism quite so vehemently. Again, I will quote the whole passage to give a sense of the full impact of the Un-man’s rhetoric here:

A moment later it was explaining that men like Ransom in his own world—men of that intensely male and backward-looking type who always shrank away from the new good—had continuously laboured to keep women down to mere childbearing and to ignore the high destiny for which Maleldil had actually created her. It told her that such men had already done incalculable harm. (112-13)

It is strikingly obvious how closely the Un-man’s words resemble those of feminist theorists and suffragettes; the Un-man’s remark on men who “continuously laboured to keep women down to mere childbearing” implies that bearing children should be the main task unfallen women are supposed to perform. “Childbearing”, it seems, is not only the chief, but in fact the only duty for unfallen women. Once more, this is expressed by the Un-man’s corrupt views on what the Lady should really aim for: “with that ‘Now or never’ [the Un-man] began to play on a fear which the Lady apparently shared with the women of earth—the fear that life might be wasted, some great opportunity let slip” (112). The fact that it is the Un-man who urges the Lady on
to wish for more than merely being a mother expresses Lewis’s essentialist view of women, who in their ‘natural’ and unfallen state would not dream of desiring more from their lives than motherhood.

The Un-man’s persistent pressure on the Lady’s conscience is shown by her gradually giving in to this anxiety of ‘missing out’ normally only felt by unfallen women. In case one might not catch this view on unfallen women and their place in the world, Lewis has Ransom remind the Lady of it when she anxiously exclaims: “How if I were as a tree that could have born gourds and yet bore none” (112) as an answer to the Un-man’s suggestions of a greater task. In order to protect her from such a wrong assumption “Ransom tried to convince her that children were fruit enough” (112). Here, Lewis re-introduces the fruit and tree imagery used earlier on to by the Un-man; the Lady now adopts this imagery, which signifies her precarious state of mind. Thus, Ransom tries to steer her back to the right view by reminding her of the joy she will inadvertently feel once she takes on her natural role as mother. However, just as the Lady cannot have a concept of “death”, “possessions” or “beauty”, since none of those words have any meaning to her in her inexperience, she cannot possibly know about “children” either, since she and the King are still alone. Lewis thus implies that unfallen women are born with a natural understanding of their role as mothers. Furthermore, he also suggests that motherhood is the sole reason for their existence, and thus the sole way to gain happiness and fulfillment.

What remains an open question is whether only women have this fear of missing out in life, and if so, why this might be. It is not too far-fetched to assume that Lewis was convinced that men were predestined for those higher things women might yearn for, which is why men are not as susceptible to the Un-man’s tempting arguments. Lewis thus makes the temptation less about man’s obedience, but rather about women’s need to accept men’s superior status, a direct result from his misreading of *Paradise Lost* as a celebration of natural hierarchy. He is trying to do this in order to be different from Milton’s account of the Fall, yet in doing this he presents his readers with a worrying view on women that makes it hard to feel partial towards the Christian religion or the Christian God, at least to a female reader. In fact, one might even go so far as to say that with *Perelandra* Lewis rather argues for the Devil’s side and can just as much be suspected to have been “of the devil’s party without knowing it” than his literary predecessor Milton.
Lewis’s most striking departure from the original account of the Fall is, of course, the lack of a Fall in *Perelandra*. The novel is indeed often called “Paradise Retained” by critics such as James Lobdell, Sanford Schwarz or John S. Tanner, as both emphasising the chief difference between Milton’s epic and Lewis’s novel, as well as pointing towards Lewis’s yearning for an unfallen world that led to the conception of *Perelandra*. Yet, no critical work on *Perelandra* has yet pointed out the problem surrounding the way the Fall is prevented in Lewis’s novel: the Lady does not, in fact, pass the test of obedience. Instead, Ransom—who was sent to Perelandra by Maleldil/God himself—steps in after deciding that “this can’t go on” (119). He battles and finally kills the Un-man while the Lady is put to sleep by Maleldil himself. Ransom is driven to interfere because the Lady is on the brink of giving in (Tanner 139), and she is left sleeping peacefully while the two men battle it out by themselves.

The fact that Maleldil himself interrupts the test conveys the impression that it was not actually meant to be passed in the first place. Since Maleldil also sends Ransom to Venus as an aide to the Lady, the Lady—albeit being tempted—is never truly tested. Ransom is the one who argues with the Un-man for her soul, and when even this verbal support does not stop her from slowly giving in, the test of obedience is abruptly ended through divine intervention; after all, it is Maleldil who gives the command to fight the Un-man (*Perelandra* 121-27). The omniscient Maleldil must have known that the Lady would fall without Ransom’s help and this is why he sends Ransom. At first glance, this seems to make Lewis’s God more magnanimous than Milton’s, who watches passively from Heaven while Satan enters Paradise. Yet, as has been noted above, Milton stresses the importance of free will as the greatest gift God has given his creatures, which is why God does not and cannot stop any of them from falling. Furthermore, Milton’s Christian outlook emphasises the ultimate result of the Fall, Jesus’ birth and self-sacrifice, presenting the Fall as *felix culpa*. In contrast, Lewis’s vision of God in *Perelandra* is rather a frightening one: taking away the Lady’s free will, he prefers his subjects to obey him blindly, whether or not what he commands is good. Since it looks likely that his creatures fail his test, he prevents them from making this choice by sending help from another world, both of which effectively crushes their free will; the Lady especially is a mere puppet in the great cosmological game, with its exclusively male players.

While evoking the same basic principle and similar themes of Milton’s account of the Fall, Lewis tries to reach out to a higher truth which is the Christian religion
and its teachings on the Fall. His Fall version seems an attempt at focusing on the doctrine of the Fall by blending out or re-inventing God’s prohibition and man’s pledge to obey in an entirely new setting, a secondary world. Yet, the theological background of Lewis’s understanding of the Fall is in fact won primarily from Milton’s epic. The lens through which Lewis reads the biblical Fall is neither Augustinian, nor based on scripture, but Miltonic through and through. This is problematic since Lewis misreads the epic as “overwhelmingly Christian”, without any moments of doubt or heretical notions about God. When Lewis assumes to re-interpret the Fall myth, he in fact re-interprets Paradise Lost, trying to tease out the Christian message he sees so clearly expressed in the epic. In the same instance, though, Lewis tries hard to imagine a story entirely different from Milton’s, and thus he makes changes to the original story. Those drastic changes, however, end up distorting the delicate theological framework of Milton’s epic. Paradise Lost can be read both as subversive and heretical or “overwhelmingly Christian” precisely because Milton wrestled so openly with God’s choices. By ignoring one aspect of the epic and exclusively concentrating on the other, Lewis gets entangled in contradictions. Furthermore, he tries to stifle Milton’s influence by making narrative choices that are consciously different from Milton’s. Yet, in this more than anything else can we see Lewis’s indebtedness to Milton’s epic version of the Fall.

* It is easy to comprehend why C.S. Lewis would have felt drawn to Paradise Lost and its subject matter; Milton can be seen as a prototype of the sort of Christian writer Lewis himself strove to become, and his epic is certainly one of the best-known biblical retellings in English literature. By aligning himself with such a well-known writer and supposedly re-imagining his greatest epic Lewis can benefit from Milton’s image as Christian poet and thus strengthen his own authorial profile. This is only possible if Lewis proves the epic’s orthodoxy and establishes Milton as steadfastly Christian, which is what Lewis sets out to do in A Preface to Paradise Lost. We find a curious paradox in Lewis’s dealings with Paradise Lost: on the one hand, he wishes to portray Milton as a fellow Christian writer, a model poet who presents us with the beauty of the prelapsarian world order, one who never doubts God’s justice; on the other hand, Lewis betrays anxiety over Milton’s ‘wrong’ poetic choices, in particular the appeal of Satan, and seeks to wipe these ‘mistakes’ out with his re-writing of the Fall myth in Perelandra. This paradoxical celebration, yet at the same time dismissal
of theologically complex issues presented in *Paradise Lost* leads to disquieting theological statements in Lewis’s novel. Milton’s ghost haunts *Perelandra* in the most unexpected places; by trying to evade the influence of Milton, the Bloomian “great Inhibitor” of poetry, Lewis in fact invites in those subversive elements of the epic that he denies in his *Preface* and casts a dubious light on God’s inherent goodness. Especially women must feel that the Christian God is bestowing few gifts on them if they accept the theology presented in *Perelandra* and the idea that their inferior status is a natural given. Lewis tries to establish *Perelandra* as a more straight-forwardly Christian re-telling of the Fall than the poetically flawed *Paradise Lost*; in presenting himself as saving the epic from previous misreadings, which resulted from Milton’s wrong poetical choices, Lewis seeks to claim authority over Milton and his epic. However, Miltonic influence is so strongly present throughout *Perelandra* that the novel ends up a rather simplified and somewhat ‘blunter’ version of *Paradise Lost*. 
“The Most Dangerous Author in Britain”: Philip Pullman’s Self-Fashioned Image

“Apparently, I Have My Own Sinister Agenda”: Philip Pullman and the Media

It does not happen very often that the author of a fantasy trilogy written for children is called “the most dangerous author in Britain” (Hitchens), nor that the works of this children’s books author are labelled “truly the stuff of nightmares” and “worthy of the bonfire” (Caldecott). Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials has caused a stir in the literary world unrivalled by any other children’s book, with the possible exception of J.K. Rowling’s “Harry Potter” books. Not even Rowling, though, despite certain outcries from fundamentalist Christian groups in the United States, has enraged quite as many people—primarily those of Christian faith—as Philip Pullman has with his trilogy.

Despite strong opposition to Pullman, though, the His Dark Materials trilogy has been both commercially successful as well as critically acclaimed. In 2001, Pullman received the Whitbread Book of the Year award for The Amber Spyglass, the third volume of the trilogy. It was the first time a children’s book won this award in both the general and the children’s book category (Squires 168-169); he was also awarded the “Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award” by the Swedish government, a prestigious children’s literature prize, and The Amber Spyglass was longlisted for the “Man Booker Prize”—again, a first for a children’s book (Squires 146). In 2004, his trilogy was adapted for the stage at the National Theatre in London, and in 2007, the first volume of the trilogy, Northern Lights, was made into a movie and released under its American title The Golden Compass. The movie did not do as well at the box office as expected, yet the media attention triggered by its release nevertheless put the trilogy in the spotlight once more, eleven years after Northern Lights was published. The media interest was mainly sparked by protests from members of the

54 Although Rowling’s books seem to adopt a completely neutral stance towards any type of religious view, the ‘occult’ themes of magic and witchcraft are nevertheless seen as problematic by fundamentalist Christian groups.
55 The edition used for this thesis is the British paperback edition; hence I refer to volume one of the trilogy as Northern Lights.
Roman Catholic Church who were worried that the screen version of the trilogy would be even more openly anti-Christian than the trilogy had supposedly been, and might attract an even greater audience than the books had already done. The American group “Catholic League”, for instance, printed a pamphlet for worried parents, advising them on how to react to possible questions from their children about Pullman’s depiction of the Church and God.56

What is surprising about all this is that Philip Pullman does not in the least shy away from confrontation with his critics; on the contrary, he has relished verbal sword-crossing with church members, critics and journalists alike. Pullman is very much aware of his media profile as controversial author, and the sort of labels he attracts. In an online interview with the online journal Third Way, he remarked that: “According to Peter Hitchens in the Mail on Sunday, I’m the most dangerous author in Britain. Apparently, I have my own sinister agenda” (par. 33). Pullman seems quite at ease with the sort of censure that mostly stems from far-right, conservative critics, and cheerfully quotes the most outrageous comments made about him and his work.57

In fact, he himself has actively shaped and polished his media profile as potentially “dangerous”, and written a couple of articles promoting his views on religion, politics and the British school curriculum, a topic very dear to the former high school teacher.58 Scholarly discourse about the trilogy, which has been thriving in the past five years, has embraced Pullman’s intellectual dexterity, and academic articles about his works often rely on statements made by himself in interviews and pieces of writing about what sort of ‘message’ His Dark Materials is trying to convey. It is a phenomenon of more recent times that authors now have a chance to fashion a certain image of themselves, and to interpret their own works, with the help of multimedia and media platforms (blogs, home pages, forums, internet chats etc.). Stephen Brown, in his article “Rattles from the Swill Bucket” on consumerist culture in the book trade, notes the “authors’ increased willingness to interact with ultimate consumers. Book tours, readings, festivals, webcasts, chatrooms, workshops, residencies, retreats, infomercials et al. are part and parcel of today’s publishing game” (11). In today’s

56 The pamphlet can be accessed online under www.catholicleague.com.
57 Pullman likes to point out that he himself insisted on including the infamous “worthy of the bonfire” comment made in The Catholic Herald in the edition of The Amber Spyglass; see his online interview with Surefish (surefish.co.uk).
58 A list of his articles is available on Pullman’s homepage; see especially his articles in The Guardian, such as “All around You Is Silence” (2003), on the need for the development of creativity as part of the school curriculum.
globalised multi-media culture, an author cannot rely on word of mouth alone anymore, and in order to survive in the highly-competitive publishing world, other means to draw attention to the author and his works are becoming increasingly important. Of course, the fact that ‘scandal sells’ is probably as old the celebrity cult itself.

Not only is Pullman unafraid of conflict, he actually embraces his image as a controversial public figure, since it helps him to fashion a very sharp, clear-cut authorial profile in the public eye. This chapter aims to illustrate Pullman’s method of self-fashioning a very particular authorial image by toying with, even purposefully fuelling the controversy around him and his works. By making use of literary predecessors such as Milton and William Blake as intertextual references for his trilogy he attracts the attention of scholars and critics, and his atheist, liberal principles, reiterated with much force in most of his interviews, have given him a distinct profile within the literary world. Likewise, Pullman’s feud with C.S. Lewis, stirred up mostly by his own initiative through his article “The Darkside of Narnia”, has established Pullman as an ‘honest’ story-teller who takes his young readers seriously, and his trilogy as “the anti-Narnia” (Hatlen 82)—as an alternative to the thinly veiled Christian allegory of Lewis’s novels. Furthermore, Pullman is widely seen as an authority on how his trilogy is to be interpreted; scholarly articles often quote his opinion on what the trilogy ‘means’, and this self-interpretation is rarely questioned. We can see the same phenomenon in Lewis criticism, where his scholarly articles on myth, “Story”, Christianity, and writing for children often serve as a critical framework to analyse and evaluate his fictional writing.

In 1999, Leonie Caldecott, a journalist for the Catholic Herald, wrote a short review of Philip Pullman’s Northern Lights and The Subtle Knife titled “The Stuff of Nightmares”, which has since been numerous quoted as a representation of how Christians, especially Catholics, have reacted to the trilogy’s church-critical content. Caldecott indeed chose rather imprudent language when stating that “if one was to start banning books, there are numerous candidates that seem to me far more worthy of the bonfire than Harry [Potter]. The children’s market is glutted with tomes a million times more sinister” (par. 1). Her main goal was in fact to argue against a ban of Rowling’s “Harry Potter” books from school libraries in the United States which was apparently discussed at that time, yet this original aim gets lost in Caldecott’s mission to uncover the “sinister” undertones of Pullman’s trilogy. Catholic parents,
she concludes, should be careful about the books, since: “By co-opting Catholic terminology and playing with Judaeo-Christian theological concepts, Pullman is effectively removing, among a mass audience of a highly impressionable age, some of the building blocks for future evangelisation” (8). This over-zealous condemnation of the trilogy by a newspaper aimed primarily at a Catholic audience is not surprising, mainly because Pullman does indeed use church terminology like “Magisterium” (e.g. AS 72) and invents such crude methods as “pre-emptive absolution” (AS 69) that are sure to provoke outrage.

What is striking, however, is how widely this short review has circulated, in particular Caldecott’s alleged recommendation to burn Pullman’s books, which is often slightly misquoted and taken out of context. Caldecott, despite her strong language, is not calling on her fellow Catholics to erect piles of burning His Dark Materials books; even if she was, then this would only be one extremist reaction out of countless others. However, somehow, Caldecott’s review has come to represent ‘the Catholics’ and their alleged reaction to the trilogy and its anti-religious content. I am not trying to downplay the frightening fundamentalist reactions that the trilogy has indeed sparked, especially in the United States; it is a worrying trend, and the banning of books from libraries should not be taken lightly. Yet, the way Caldecott’s article was seized upon by other journalists and also Pullman himself, is representative of how well Pullman has managed to use both positive and negative critique of His Dark Materials to his advantage, and how he tends to stir up conflict with religious, primarily Christian interest groups, since it benefits his authorial profile and public image as “dangerous”.

In interviews, Pullman is quick to reiterate his negative stance on organised religion, and he does not hold back when it comes to his choice of words. In an interview for the Christian online journal “Third Way”, which Pullman himself called “the best I’ve ever read” (par. 1), he declared that: “Every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don’t accept him. Wherever you look into history, you find that. It’s still going on” (15). Due to the heavily polemical nature of his statement, Pullman seems to imply two rather startling things about monotheistic religions: firstly, that every

59 Quite a number of newspaper articles use the quote in their introduction of Pullman’s trilogy, and interviews with Pullman usually ask at least one question regarding Caldecott’s article; for instance, see the Question and Answer” section on Pullman’s homepage (http://www.philip-pullman.com), “Paradise Lost and Freedom Won” (Tucker 2000), “A Wizard with Words” (Kellaway 2000).
monotheistic religion can only lead to hatred, murder, and persecution; secondly, that this is a problem exclusive to a religious faith “that has a monotheistic god”, which would imply that the same is not true, for instance, for polytheistic or pantheistic religions. Indeed, Pullman’s quarrel seems to be primarily with monotheism, since he repeats his conviction that “there is another consequence of any belief in a single god, and that is that it is a very good excuse for people to behave badly” (41) throughout the interview. Again, Pullman’s word choice seems to imply that followers of a monotheistic faith rather look for excuses to “behave badly” than try to do good.

Although Pullman claims that he is against any sort of organised religion, since the sort of behaviour he condemns “comes not only from the Christian church but also from the Taliban” (14), his critique primarily centres on Christianity, both in his trilogy as well as in comments made in interviews and articles. Except for the short remark about “the Taliban”, he rarely speaks out as openly about his thoughts on Islam, another monotheistic religion, which is often seen critically by the Western world, as he does about Christianity. In the trilogy, the only “Church” that is mentioned is the one in Lyra’s world, which is described using Christian, primarily Catholic, terminology; there is a “Magisterium”, the “General Oblation Board” (NL 91), there is even a “Pope” (NL 31), though he is no longer in power, and we find “priests” (AS 74) carrying the title “Father” (AS 72) who are, without any exceptions, characterised as brutal and ruthless. Likewise, the names which the impostor God of Pullman’s multiple universes has adopted all originate solely from the Judeo-Christian tradition: “The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty—those are all names he gave himself” (AS 33); all of these names stem from Old and New Testament sources, and ‘Allah’ is notably absent from the list. Although claiming to have a quarrel with all organised, monotheistic religions, Pullman is careful not to pick a fight with the Muslim communities; it is the Christian church he chooses as his target. Of course, the choice of terminology is also partly due to Pullman’s familiarity with the Christian faith (his

60 On Pullman’s use of religious terms see Gooderham. I do not agree with Gooderham’s claim that children’s literature should not be so outspoken about religion as to harm “the young reader”, yet the introductory part of his article offers a good starting point for explorations into Pullman’s construction of the “Church” in the trilogy.
grandfather was a clergyman), but it is astonishing that he models the Church of Lyra’s world on the Catholic, and not the Anglican Church he himself grew up with.61

To attack and criticise the Catholic Church has two benefits for an author like Pullman, who does not shy away from, but in fact delights in controversy: on the one hand, as has indeed happened, the outrage of Catholic groups keeps Pullman’s books in the news, on the other hand, there is a certain sensationalist allure to reading about power-hungry priests, a corrupted religious system, and ancient conspiracies (in the trilogy, the whole Church is based on the lie that “the Authority” is God), both for believers and non-believers. In 2003, three years after the publication of The Amber Spyglass, Dan Brown achieved even greater financial success with his bestselling The Da Vinci Code, which centres around a conspiracy involving the Vatican and a Catholic organisation called “Opus Dei”. Although it would be imprudent to compare the sensationalist nature of Brown’s thriller with Pullman’s writing, both authors certainly profited from choosing the (Catholic) church as the main culprit for misery, crime and deceit in their respective works.

The fact that anti-Christian sentiments are especially prominent in The Amber Spyglass, and Pullman’s rhetoric less subdued than in the other two volumes of the trilogy, is an indicator that Pullman is by then more conscious of what his readership expects from him. Just as Lewis caters for his Christian audience, so is Pullman keen to establish himself as atheist rebel in the public eye. Of course, just like C.S. Lewis, Pullman is quick to point out that “I’m not making an argument, or preaching a sermon, or setting out a political tract: I’m telling a story” (19), so the way the plot and characters evolve merely serves the overall story. Yet, as is the case for Lewis’s “supposals”, this insistence on mere story-telling instead of “preaching” cannot gloss over the strong anti-religious polemic in the third volume of the trilogy. It is not true that the trilogy is solely a vehicle for anti-Christian thought, as some religious groups claim, and it would be wrong to call the books atheist propaganda. Nevertheless, Pullman himself stated that his intention in writing the trilogy was to “undermine the basis of Christian belief” (quoted in Wartofsky). His story-telling clearly serves a purpose that goes beyond a mere adventure plot, but the crucial point here is that it is mainly due to Pullman’s constant reiteration of his anti-religious stance in the media that the sense of a ‘message’ within the trilogy cannot easily be overlooked. It seems

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61 Pullman talks about his childhood attachment to his grandfather, a clergyman, and his fondness for the old church hymns in his online interview with Third Way.
that Pullman has begun to see that this ‘atheist message’ profits his self-fashioned image of ‘rebel author’ much better than the idea of merely writing an adventure story.

Despite strong opposition from certain church groups, Pullman has in fact managed to gain the respect of the most prominent religious figure of the Anglican Church. During a Dowling Street seminar hosted by Tony Blair in 2004, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, recommended that *His Dark Materials* should be included in the British Religious Education syllabus as a text that asks the right questions about the Christian religion, and can serve as a tool to point out possible flaws within the church. In 2004, the trilogy was adapted for the stage at the National Theatre in London, and in an article that appeared in *The Guardian* Williams recommended the play to children and teachers alike. With sharp accuracy, Williams points out the fact that it is not God who is being killed, but an image of a god that is far from the idea of an omniscient, immortal entity: “What the story makes you see is that if you believe in a mortal God, who can win and lose his power, your religion will be saturated with anxiety – and so with violence” (par. 3). Williams sees the merit of Pullman’s trilogy for both “believer” and “non-believing spectator” (12) in its rigorous exposure of the flaws within institutionalised religion (10), and concludes that: “A modern French Christian writer spoke about the ‘purification by atheism’ – meaning faith needed to be reminded regularly of the gods in which it should not believe. I think Pullman and [playwright] Wright do this very effectively for the believer” (12).

In Williams’ view, Pullman is not attempting to ‘kill’ the Christian God; the trilogy is rather pointing out the problem of creating an image of a deity that needs protection from its church. The fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury, the leader of the Anglican Church, recommends the *His Dark Materials* trilogy as a positive tool to question one’s faith, is an indication of just how controversially Pullman’s works are viewed even within the churches, and how divergent opinions over the ‘danger’ of *His Dark Materials* for impressionable children truly are. Yet, while the supposed condemnation of *The Catholic Herald* from 10 years ago still features prominently in the media, Williams’ praise of the trilogy was far less discussed and commented upon outside of Great Britain. The archbishop himself is somewhat of a controversial figure in so far as that he is seen as too ‘mainstream’ and soft by the more conservative members of the Anglican Church; this makes him the ideal spokesperson for Pullman
and his trilogy, since he serves as a middle-man between the more moderate members of the Anglican Church and Pullman, while Pullman’s dialogue with him will not challenge his image of a rebellious atheist.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, who has both read the books and seen the play, states that he regards them “as a sort of thought experiment” (4), stressing the fact that Pullman places his Church in an alternative universe, which is why it cannot be seen as a direct attack on the Christian churches of our world. As has been discussed above, Pullman himself likes to point out the fictional nature of his story, yet at the same time he repeatedly reiterates the supposed anti-Christian ‘message’ of his books in interviews and articles. What is significant about this contradictory insistence on his trilogy as mere ‘story’ and the simultaneous emphasis of its anti-religious content in the media, is that Pullman tends to consciously vary the force of his polemic depending on the type of audience he is addressing. In his interview with Third Way, Pullman is outspoken about his hostile position towards Christianity and how this is reflected in the trilogy. For instance, when asked whether or not he is an atheist, he answered: “Of course I don’t say, ‘There is no God.’ I say: ‘There is a God and here he is dying’ – and this is what I was particularly pleased with, as a result of an act of charity” (75). This, of course, is meant as a conscious provocation of the Christian audience presumably reading the interview; attentive readers of the trilogy know that the Authority is not God, and thus, there is no ‘dying God’, merely a dying angel who pretended to be God.

So, in this particular interview, which featured in a Christian journal, Pullman uses provocatively anti-Christian language. However, in a very different public situation, with a very different sort of audience, the question of whether or not God ‘dies’ in the trilogy is answered very differently by Pullman. In 2004, sparked by Rowan Williams’s support of His Dark Materials, the National Theatre invited the Archbishop and Philip Pullman to publicly discuss the trilogy and its possible merit for the Religious Education syllabus in the United Kingdom. During the debate, excerpts of which were later published as “The Dark Materials Debate” in The Telegraph, Pullman discusses the meaning of the death of the Authority in the trilogy. Yet, this time he describes this event as “one of the metaphors I use. In the passage I wrote about his description, he was as light as paper – in other words he has a reality which is only symbolic. It’s not real, and the last expression on his face is that of profound and exhausted relief” (par. 10). It is easy to see that Pullman is contradicting
himself here; whereas he stresses the fact that God (presumably the Judeo-Christian God) is indeed dying in *His Dark Materials*, he emphasises the “symbolic” nature of the death of the Authority in the debate, incidentally an interpretation favoured by the Archbishop himself (6). Presumably, the debate is witnessed by a different audience than the readership of *Third Way*, and the presence of the Archbishop might also contribute to Pullman’s toned-down rhetoric: Pullman knows when to provoke and when to argue intellectually. This shifting self-interpretation of his work demonstrates why it can be dangerous to put too much trust in Pullman’s own remarks about the meaning of his trilogy; apparently, the interpretation tends to vary according to which audience Pullman is addressing.

Not only is Pullman aware of the need to present a slightly varied self-image depending on which audience he is facing, he is also keenly aware of when to choose strong language and when best to avoid it. Whereas the debate with the archbishop remained exceptionally polite and free of any outrageous comments on the cruelty of organised religion, an article written in *The Guardian* in 2008—the year *The Golden Compass* movie was released—features another attack on organised religion by Pullman. In the article, titled “The Censor’s Dark Materials”, Pullman uses heavy rhetoric to convey his viewpoint not just on censorship, but also on the connection he sees between the banning of books and the tendency of religious institutions to oppress opinions that differ from or challenge their own. Pullman states that “when it comes to banning books, religion is the worst reason of the lot. Religion, uncontaminated by power, can be the source of a great deal of private solace, artistic inspiration, and moral wisdom. But when it gets its hands on the levers of political or social authority, it goes rotten very quickly indeed” (6). Few would argue with the latter sentence, yet the first statement that the banning of books becomes somehow more sinister when instigated by religion reads uncomfortably to anyone acquainted with censorship tactics in Nazi Germany or Communist Russia—both systems which were decidedly atheistic.

Very swiftly in the article, Pullman shifts his concern from censorship as something detestable to institutionalized religion as something odious in itself. Again, his choice of words is astonishingly straight-forward:

> The rank stench of oppression wafts from every authoritarian church, chapel, temple, mosque, or synagogue – from every place of worship where the priests have the power to meddle in the social and intellectual lives of their flocks, from every place...
Again, it can easily be argued that there is truth to what Pullman writes, and indeed this is not the issue here; the language Pullman uses is so polemical, that it is hard even for the most tolerant religious person to not feel offended. If “the rank stench of oppression wafts from every authoritarian church, chapel, temple, mosque, or synagogue”, the question arises what exactly an “authoritarian church” is supposed to mean, and where one can find a ‘non-authoritarian’ house of worship. Pullman seems to imply that all houses of worship, be it church, mosque, temple or synagogue, reek of “oppression”. Indeed, Pullman moves from this already strong generalisation to an even stronger one: “My basic objection to religion is not that it isn't true; I like plenty of things that aren't true. It's that religion grants its adherents malign, intoxicating and morally corrosive sensations. Destroying intellectual freedom is always evil, but only religion makes doing evil feel quite so good” (7). The explosiveness of this statement is sure to attract a new wave of outrage from religious groups, which in turn will help keep the newly released movie in the news. At the same time, it is hard to argue against the main theme of the article: of course, restricting the freedom of the word is detestable. On the surface, Pullman is doing something admirable, since he is defending the freedom of expression so crucial for any democratic system. Added to this is the stated reason for writing the article, which is the news that Northern Lights appeared in the top five of the American Library Association's list of 2007’s most challenged books” (1). Pullman plays with this title of “most challenged book” and connects the view of his novel as ‘challenging’ (a rather open term, which does not imply it is viewed as dangerous or subversive) with his attack on censorship. Linking his novel to censorship creates the impression that Pullman’s status as freely published author in the United States is at stake, which gives rise to sympathy for Pullman. With this short article, Pullman has managed to both provoke the religious right and spark interest in his novels by insinuating that they might indeed be dangerous enough to disquiet the American public.

Although outspoken about his beliefs from the start, the increasing popularity of His Dark Materials by the time The Amber Spyglass went into print seems to have made Pullman more aware of his media image as intellectual promoter of ‘atheistic morals’. Readers and critics alike have often noticed a distinct change of tone in this last volume of His Dark Materials. Not only is this book far longer than the previous
two, we are also confronted with a narrator who suddenly pushes the author’s political and ideological agenda forward far more noticeably. In *The Amber Spyglass*, we find a morally distorted priest assassin and other such corrupt members of Pullman’s Church; we are being taught that the churches of all the multiple worlds have only ever promoted tyranny and injustice, and there is not one member of the church—whether in this world or any other, which is presented in a positive light. Whereas Pullman was careful to present shades of grey instead of oversimplified black and white in the first two volumes of his trilogy, by the time he is writing *The Amber Spyglass* he has become a prominent media figure, and this seems to have affected his writing. Now a public figure of acute interest for the media, Pullman has established himself as an author with clear political and ideological views, an intellectual atheist promoting the need for a “republic of Heaven” to replace the Christian ideal of an eschatological Kingdom of Heaven.

The concept of the “republic of Heaven” is first introduced in *The Amber Spyglass*, and represents the ideal society Lord Asriel and his allied forces are fighting for; once the tyrannical celestial king, the Authority, is overthrown, the inhabitants of the multiple universes will be free to live in harmony and without oppression. The republic of Heaven is also the reason for Will’s and Lyra’s sacrifice at the end of the trilogy; the two children have to separate so that they can build the republic of Heaven in their respective worlds, and staying together would take precious years off their lifespans (AS 519-20). After the publication of *The Amber Spyglass*, the construct “republic of Heaven” became far more than a plot device for Pullman and his authorial image: in 2001, Pullman wrote an article for *The Horn Book* called “The Republic of Heaven”, in which he illustrates his belief in the need for this republic to be actively shaped by us in the here and now, in particular by educating children in a way that promotes the ideals of this new republic. Pullman depicts these ideals needed to build the republic of Heaven both in this article as well as in *The Amber Spyglass*. Yet again, he links the need for a “republic of Heaven” back to his belief in a ‘dead’ God in his article: “And one of the most deadly and oppressive consequences of the death of God is this sense of meaningless or alienation that so many of us have felt in the past century or so” (par. 6). So, God is dead, not just for Pullman, but for “many of us”, and thus the yearning for Heaven needs to be replaced with something in this world worth believing in and fighting for.
The article reads almost like a call to arms; Pullman is not just writing about something that is significant for the story of *His Dark Materials*, but is depicting an ideological viewpoint that he firmly believes in: “Finally, we must find a way of believing that we are not subservient creatures dependent on the whim of some celestial monarch, but free citizens of the republic of Heaven” (14). However, Pullman creates a strong binary opposition between his ‘republic’ and the Christian ‘kingdom’, which is theologically incorrect; the Kingdom of Heaven, as Christians understand it, is something very different from the oppressive kingdom portrayed in Pullman’s fiction. Freedom lies at the centre of the Kingdom of Heaven as well, as God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28), which means ever-present in every creature. This does not mean the creatures will be “dependent on the whim of some celestial monarch”. In illustrating what the “republic of Heaven” should contain, Pullman creates a rather frightening picture of what we would find in the Kingdom of Heaven: “In the republic, we’re connected in a moral way to one another, to other human beings. We have responsibilities to them, and they to us. We’re not isolated units of self-interest in a world where there is no such thing as society; we cannot live so” (37). The word “moral” is used provocatively here, since it implies that the “Kingdom of Heaven” would be a place (or rather, a state-of-being) without any morals, where selfishness and self-centredness predominate. It is of course possible that Pullman simply sets the “republic of Heaven” apart from the current state of the world, yet he leaves his words open enough to presume he is contrasting his republic with the Kingdom of Heaven.

Pullman is once more trying to be provocative and simultaneously raise interest in his trilogy. Indeed, the article concludes with a call for a “myth” that can promote the republic’s ideals to the world, just as the Bible so captivatingly conveys the Judeo-Christian origin: “We need a story, a myth that does what the traditional religious stories did: it must explain. It must satisfy our hunger for a why” (43; highlights in the text). This myth is meant to “explain what our true purpose is”, which is “to understand and to help others to understand, to explore, to speculate, to imagine. And that purpose has a moral force” (47). Again, the morality of this republic of Heaven is at the centre of Pullman’s ideal, and this new myth is to replace the old religious myths, which used to teach (amongst other things) morality. We are also reminded here of C.S. Lewis’s interest in myth as a way to re-vitalise the biblical narratives,
which suits his image as ‘Christian fantasist’; by contrast, Pullman’s mission is to create a counter-myth that can replace the religiously inspired mythologies of old.

As a writer of children’s books, Pullman is aware of the persuasive force of storytelling. He recognises the value of biblical stories as a teaching tool, and this is why he wishes for the same sort of stories to teach about his republic of Heaven:

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. (51)

It becomes clear from this passionate plea for a ‘myth’ that promotes the republic of Heaven and its values, that such a myth does of course already exist: His Dark Materials contains this myth about the origin of the republic of Heaven, the death of the Kingdom of Heaven and its “celestial monarch”. Thus, this myth, which Pullman deems so necessary for today’s secular society, has been provided by himself. Somehow, the trilogy has become something more than ‘just story’; it has become an atheist myth for the twenty-first century. By a clever use of rhetoric, Pullman has turned his children’s books into dangerously subversive, moral manifestos. Whether or not they truly are this dangerous and subversive almost becomes an afterthought; clearly, if the author promotes them to be subversive, they must be.

Pullman’s more recent novella Once Upon a Time in the North, which focuses on the aeronaut Lee Scoresby, a character from the trilogy, has a new critical target. According to an article by Rosa Silverman in The Times, “this time the reins of power are clutched not by the high priests of organised religion but by big, brutal private companies” (par. 2). Since the story takes place before the events of the trilogy (Lee Scoresby dies in The Subtle Knife), the Authority and his tyrannical Church are at this point still in power, and it seems unusual that Pullman steps away from criticising his arch-enemy. Yet, in the face of the recent economical crisis and the fear of globalised capitalism seizing power, choosing “big, brutal private companies” as a new target is another smart move made by Pullman. Not only does the story focus on the exploitative capitalism of “multinational corporations” (par. 1), it also expresses “environmental concerns” (2), and links the exploitation of capitalism with the destruction of the environment, again a topic that has dominated the media since Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth.
In March 2010, right around Easter time, Pullman caused yet another public outrage with the publication of his retelling of the life and death of Jesus Christ, provocatively titled *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (*GMJSC*).\(^6^2\) The novella, which has the—provocatively ironic—disclaimer “this is a story” printed on its back, tells the story of Jesus and his dark twin brother, “Christ”, who turns out to be none other than Judas, the apostle whom traditional scripture sees as the one who betrayed Jesus (*GMJSC* 203-204). The invention of a twin brother to Jesus in itself is highly provocative, and despite Pullman’s insistence that he is merely retelling a story like any other, it is easy to see how his portrayal of Jesus as a split personality with both a ‘dark’ and a ‘light’ side can be offensive to Christians, who after all believe the ‘story’ to be the foundation of their faith. Especially Pullman’s depiction of the Resurrection as a cover-up of Jesus’s death (223-228) is a deliberate challenge to fundamentalist Christian beliefs, and more than mere innocent story-telling. Furthermore, Pullman’s story presents Jesus as doubting not just God’s goodness, but his actual existence; in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus renounces God and declares that: “You’re not there. You’ve never heard me. I’d do better to talk to a tree, to talk to a dog, an owl, a little grasshopper. They’ll always be there” (200); since it is Jesus himself who says these things, this has a doubly strong polemical impact.

Yet, if that alone was not enough, Pullman’s novella turns out to be not ‘just’ a story about Jesus, but also contains somewhat rhetorically clumsy verbal assaults against organised religion and the priesthood. The “scoundrel Christ”, disillusioned by his twin brother’s pacifist attitude, is charmed into trusting a dark, mysterious figure who enlists him as a scribe to record Jesus’s sermons, amongst them the Sermon on the Mount (69-85). The dark figure, a nameless adversary to the ‘true’ essence of Jesus’s words, seems to symbolically stand for the future of Christianity and the churches, since he apparently plans to censor and re-write Jesus’s teachings to his own advantage.\(^6^3\) In a couple of thinly-veiled attacks against organised religion and their (supposed) power-hungry nature, Pullman lets the dark man explain to “Christ” the nature of this new church: “The church will not be the Kingdom, because the Kingdom is not of this world; but it will be a foreshadowing of the Kingdom, and

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\(^6^2\) Unfortunately, the novella was published only shortly before the submission of this thesis and thus my analysis remains rather shorter than I would have liked.

\(^6^3\) Sally Vickers has identified this dark figure as St. Paul in her review of the book, but this is not certain; I am more inclined to believe that this dark, nameless figure symbolically represents organised religion and corruption as a whole.
the one sure way to reach it” (172). The Christian faith is presented as the result of a well-organised plan by the stranger and his unnamed, secret allies to seize global control. By tampering with historic truth and re-writing history to make it the new ‘truth’ of the church, the stranger plans to manipulate millions of faithful followers: “There is time, and there is what is beyond time. History belongs to time, but truth belongs to what is beyond time. In writing of things as they should have been, you are letting truth into history. You are the word of God” (99).

Pullman is not subtle here at all, he openly attacks the Christian church with polemicist speeches such as Jesus’s description of the future church as an institution that would make Satan himself “rub his hands with glee” (196). No cliché about the evils of organised religion is left out in Pullman’s verbal attack against the church; thus, for instance, Jesus foresees the priests “keeping the very scriptures secret, saying there are some truths too holy to be revealed to the ordinary people, so that only the priests’s interpretation will be allowed, and they’ll torture and kill anyone who wants to make the word of God clear and plain to all” (197). Pullman also includes the most recent scandal in the Catholic Church which dominated the media in the past year with his mentioning of a priest so easily being able to “indulge his secret appetites”; again, Pullman chooses a highly emotive rhetoric to drive his point home when he describes how “his little victims will cry to heaven for pity, and their tears will wet his hands, and he’ll wipe them on his robe and press them together piously” (198).

Pullman’s polemical over-generalisations about “the church” in The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ are a clear provocation meant to stir up controversy. There is little subtlety shown in Pullman’s latest work, and the polemical nature of the novella is in fact only toned down and softened whenever Pullman stays close to the original biblical account of Jesus’s sermons and parables, such as the barely edited or changed “re-write” of the Sermon on the Mount. This, however, will hardly appease those Christians who were already defensive about Pullman’s attacks against their religions in his previous works. It seems that Pullman knows how to continue being a controversial figure in the public eye; in fact, he seems intent on becoming even more outspoken about his anti-religious stance, and to further polish his image as rebellious atheist fantasist who re-writes biblical myths in a boldly subversive way. That this is primarily a marketing ploy to attract media attention through scandal becomes increasingly obvious.
Escaping the Anxiety of Influence: William Blake, the Gnostic Heresy and His Dark Materials

When C. S. Lewis wrote in his *Preface to Paradise Lost* that “[a]fter Blake, criticism is lost in misunderstanding” (133), he was criticising not only William Blake, but the Romantics in general, their obsession with Milton’s Satan to the point of worship. Lewis, the Christian writer, sought to prove that the Romantics’ understanding of the epic as a celebration of passionate resistance and condemnation of oppression, as well as their glorification of Satan as rebel against tyranny, was erroneous. The fact that Lewis mentions William Blake in particular to mark a key moment in this development towards a wrong understanding of *Paradise Lost* shows the strong impact that Blake’s passionate poetry, such as his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or *Milton*, had on post-Romantic readers of *Paradise Lost*; after all, it is hard not to be persuaded, or at least intrigued, by Blake’s famous statement that: “The reason why Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of angels and God, and at liberty when of devils and Hell, is because he was a true poet, and of the Devil’s party without knowing it” (“MHH” ll.52-55). Lewis, who is arguing for the orthodoxy of *Paradise Lost* naturally sees this statement as dangerously subversive, because it leads readers of the epic on the wrong path and giving rise to misconceptions; hence, his claim that “after Blake”, criticism became “lost”. As Knoppers and Semenza note, Lewis “placed the blame for the view of Satan as hero, worthy of admiration or sympathy, firmly on Blake and Shelley” (9).

Yet, critics of Lewis’s *Preface* have in turn pointed out that not even Blake, and certainly not the other Romantic poets who were inspired by the epic, such as both Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley, Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth, were quite as ‘fooled’ as Lewis implies about the figure of Satan. Joseph Anthony Wittreich, in *The Romantics on Milton*, directly referring to Lewis and his dismissal of Romantic readings of the epic, states that the Romantics’ reception of *Paradise Lost* was far more refined than twentieth-century criticism conveys it to be. Whereas “Milton’s twentieth-century critics tell us that instead of commencing with Milton and his poetry, the Romantics ‘start with Satan’ and never get beyond him” (Wittreich 5), most Romantic poets in fact understood the figure of Satan as exhibiting both admirable and condemnable character traits. For instance, according to Wittreich, “Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Shelley in *On the Devil, and Devils*
(again in *A Defence of Poetry*) say one thing; Blake in *Milton* and Shelley in his ‘Preface to *Prometheus*’ say something quite different. Each is forced to make an ethical distinction, and in doing so each judges Satan to be unheroic” (27). Knoppers and Semenza note that in Blake’s illustrations to Milton’s works:

Satan’s postures and expressions reveal the narcissism that he in turn evokes in Eve, transforming the original unity between Adam and Eve into disintegration and disunion; in Blake’s illustrations to *Paradise Lost* and especially *Paradise Regained*, Christ (rather than Satan) becomes the true hero, undergoing the self-sacrifice that for Blake marked the ‘human lineaments divine.” (7)

Shelley and Blake might be attracted to the idea of Satan as a tragically heroic figure in their own artistic works, yet they nevertheless can also see his less attractive sides and state them clearly in other parts of their writing. Thus, the Romantics’ hero-worship of Satan is not a purely blinded one; those Romantics who wrote about and poetically responded to Milton’s epic ultimately “repudiate Satan as the spirit of selfhood, as one who cannot love. Satan is guilty of committing crimes against humanity, of inverting the ethical scheme of the universe; therein lies the point of distinction between Satan and Prometheus for these critics” (27). Satan ends up being an unlikely hero for the Romantics, primarily because he inflicts unrivalled harm on “humanity” itself, whereas Prometheus’s defiance against the gods ultimately benefits humanity (since, according to the Greek legend, he teaches them the secret of fire-making). Both are tragic figures, both act out of a sense of hurt pride, yet Satan never rises above this “spirit of selfhood”, the self-centredness which leads him to the path of destruction for destruction’s sake.

There is no doubt that the Romantics, and William Blake in particular, were fascinated with *Paradise Lost*, finding much to admire in the epic. Lucy Newlyn, in *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, even speaks of a “Milton Cult” (19) and describes how interest in the epic peaked during the Romantic period:

In literary salons, as in rural retreats, Milton’s name was pre-eminent throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From the publication of Addison’s *Spectator* essays onwards, *Paradise Lost* became a byword for the sublime, providing a fashionable topic of conversation in educated circles and an interesting new subject for essayists and critics (21).

*Paradise Lost* was seen as a model and an inspiration for other writers, and artistically invigorated works such as Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, or William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and his
poem Milton. Yet, as Newlyn’s remark illustrates, the epic was not just a source of inspiration for the Romantic poets; it was also thought to be “a fashionable topic of conversation” for those trying to sound clever, a way to present oneself as well-educated and witty. Newlyn remarks how “Novelists, male and female alike, turned to it as a model for the structure of their narratives and for the delineation of their characters. They knew they could rely on the immediacy and effectiveness of its popular appeal to bring home any moral point they themselves wished to convey” (19). So, referring to this popular, well-respected and admired literary work was a way for these novelists to strengthen the impact of their own works.

At the end of The Amber Spyglass, Philip Pullman—with cheerful frankness—admits to having drawn on his literary precursors by stating that: “I have stolen ideas from every book I have ever read” (549); he names three authors in particular that have influenced his work: the eighteenth-century German author Heinrich von Kleist with his essay On the Marionette Theatre—a philosophical musing on the origin of grace, and the incompatibility of innocence with experience (though without deeming either of the two more desirable)—John Milton’s Paradise Lost, and “the works of William Blake” (AS 549). Whereas it is one particular text of both Kleist’s and Milton’s quite extensive lists of publications which Pullman acknowledges as important to the themes and the storyline of his trilogy, he quotes Blake’s works in their entirety as a source of inspiration, thus revealing a strong reliance on Blake’s general themes and his vast mythological framework, but also hinting at a fascination with the enigmatic and contradictory artist himself that almost transcends interest in his visionary poetry and artwork. It is this appeal of the figure William Blake and his image as both mystically obscure, yet mysteriously enlightened ‘visionary poet’ which informs and enriches Pullman’s own self-image as a positively materialist, anti-religious author of children’s fantasy. Furthermore, just as novelists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century made use of John Milton’s Paradise Lost to intellectually enrich their own works and attract a particular readership, so does Pullman turn to William Blake’s unique interpretation of the epic for the very same reasons. Not only are Blake’s re-workings of Miltonic material important for Pullman’s trilogy; he also uses imagery from Blake’s unique mythology for his own cosmology.

The most obvious textual references to Blake’s visionary poetry are Pullman’s “Spectres” (SK 61), mysterious ghost-like beings which can only be seen by and
become dangerous to adults. In Blake complex mythology, the “spectres” are comparable to the Jungian “shadow”, representing suppressed darker sides of the human psyche and the risk of being guided solely by one’s intellect. In the poem *Jerusalem*, an inscription to one of the illustrations reads: “Each man is in his spectre’s power/ until the arrival of that hour/ When his humanity awake? And cast his spectre into the lake” (705). In *The Subtle Knife*, Pullman refers to these verses in a scene in which spectres attack a witch at the shore of a lake, but the witch is unable to fight these soul-devourers off (320-23). In the trilogy, spectres feed off a person’s daemon (their souls in animal shape), leaving them numb and unfeeling.

Furthermore, the depiction of Pullman’s false God, the Authority, as a frail, senile and pitiable creature bereft of its former glory is reminiscent of a number of negative poetical representations of the Judeo-Christian in Blake’s poetry. For instance, the idea of the Authority as removed from, yet jealously watchful of, the many universes he claims to have created, echoes the depiction of Blake’s frightening nonsense-figure “Nobodaddy”, which appears in his poem “To Nobodaddy”. Nobodaddy is described as “silent and invisible” (1), but nevertheless suppressing humanity with “words and laws” that merely convey “darkness and obscurity” (5). Pullman’s Authority also recalls the withering “Ancient of Days” depicted in one of Blake’s most striking illustrations and the dark anti-creator “Urizen”, mentioned in a number of Blake’s poems, most prominently in his “Book of Urizen”. All of these negatively charged figures represent Blake’s bleak view of the Judeo-Christian, Old Testament God Jehovah or Yahweh.

Some critics have also suggested that the heroine of Pullman’s trilogy is modelled after the “little girl lost” (and found) in Blake’s “Songs of Innocence and Experience”, whose name, Lyca, does indeed strongly resemble Pullman’s Lyra (Matthews 125-26). Not only does Pullman refer directly to some of Blake’s mythical creations, there is also a strong similarity between the life-affirming, materialist view that informs the moral framework of the trilogy and key themes of Blake’s poetry. Pullman’s depiction of the transition from childhood innocence to experienced maturity as an important and natural process, his celebration of sensory delights and bodily pleasures, and even his vision of a republic of Heaven supposed to

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64 I have discussed Blake’s influence on Pullman’s trilogy in my research essay “‘Invading’ the Bible: Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials, Paradise Lost* and the Genesis Creation Myth”.
65 On Blake’s vision of God see especially Northrop Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry*.
66 On further parallels between Blake’s Lyca and Pullman’s Lyra, see Matthews.
replace the Christian Kingdom of Heaven all have their origin in Blakean ideas and images, most noticeably those in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” and “Songs of Innocence and Experience”. As a number of critics have pointed out before, Pullman’s almost defiantly satanic interpretation of Paradise Lost is heavily influenced by Blake’s reading of the epic and its author being “of the devil’s party without knowing it” (“MHH” 52-55). In the British edition of The Amber Spyglass, we can also find direct quotes from Blake’s poetry in the form of little epigraphs at the beginning of some of the chapters.

Indeed, Pullman’s personal ties with the figure of William Blake and his works are strong ones: in 2004, Pullman became president of the “William Blake Society”, and in 2006 he gave a lecture to members of the society titled “Blake’s Dark Materials”; the lecture took place at London’s St. James’s Church, where Blake was baptized in 1757, and was a very personal, intimate reading of Blake’s works and their subversive quality. Pullman also contributed an article to the New Statesman in 2007, the 250th anniversary of Blake’s birth, in which he describes his personal relationship with Blakean poetry. The article, aptly titled “An English Visionary”, reiterates a picture of Blake that has become prominent with both Blake amateur enthusiasts and scholars alike: the intensely passionate, often misunderstood genius whose obscure yet powerful poetry masks a higher truth not readily accessible to the broader masses, one whose poetry has “a quality that (to use [Blake’s] own term) I have to call prophetic” (10, parenthesis in the text). In the article, Pullman illustrates what he sees as the recurring, major themes in Blake’s works, which neatly correlate with the themes Pullman himself promotes in His Dark Materials. Pullman is primarily attracted to Blake’s seeming materialism and glorification of especially physical experiences, the idea that “this world, this extra ordinary universe in which we live and of which we are made, is material; and it is amorous by nature. Matter rejoices in matter, and each atom of it falls in love with other atoms and delights to join up with them to form complex and even more delightful structures” (12). This is

67 See, for instance, Karen D. Robinson’s “His Dark Materials: A Look into Pullman’s Interpretation of Milton’s Paradise Lost”, also Carole Scott’s “Revamping Old Traditions in His Dark Materials” and Burton Hatlen’s “His Dark Materials, a Challenge to Tolkien and Lewis”.
68 See, for instance, chapter 13 (168), chapter 15 (196), chapter 19 (267), chapter 26 (370) of The Amber Spyglass.
69 Unfortunately, this lecture is not available in print or online as of this date, so I was unable to use it for this thesis. Information about the lecture can be found on the webpage of the “William Blake Society”. 
in fact more a summary of the meaning of Pullman’s “Dust”, the elementary particles which feature prominently in his trilogy, than anything else. In a way, Pullman seems to read his own work into Blake’s here, profiting from the former poet’s status as visionary prophet.

Pullman is quick to point out his own ‘amateur’ status in terms of Blake criticism by claiming that “it was not scholarship that lured me on: it was intoxication” (par. 6) and that he “can’t be objective about Blake” (28); at the same time, however, he underscores his knowledge of Blake’s major poems with the help of quotations and references to scholarly works such as A.D. Nuttall’s *The Alternative Trinity*, a study of Gnostic elements in Marlowe, Milton and Blake. With his lectures, articles, and interviews, Pullman fashions an image of himself as both the well-informed intellectual who can hold his own amongst academic peers, but also as the engaged amateur who primarily reads out of joy and is driven by his love of literature more than an interest in literary criticism. To a certain extent, this mirrors C.S. Lewis’s peculiar double role as a literary scholar who also happens to write about religion, yet primarily because his Christianity is a matter of the heart for him, not out of any ambition to fame. With Lewis, a certain anxiety about appearing too ambitious can be detected throughout his writing, a fear to appear too self-centred, and thus exhibiting a very ‘un-Christian’ characteristic. In turn, Pullman presents himself as amateur literary scholar who does not take this role too seriously, but merely enjoys discussing his favourite authors on a public stage, displaying the same tendency to appear ‘humble’, while at the same time showing strong literary and scholarly ambitions.

Regarding Pullman’s self-promoted image as ‘well-educated reader’, Susan Mathews might not be altogether wrong in musing on whether Pullman’s use of literary epigraphs from highly canonical authors such as Milton, Shakespeare, Dickinson and of course Blake, betrays a certain unease about his role as author of children’s literature. Mathews argues for the possibility that “the epigraphs also suggest a lack of confidence in the status of his text, functioning like the epigraphs from Shakespeare in Anne Radcliffe’s novels” (133). Children’s literature, after all, still has a certain ambiguous status in academia, and this is doubly true for fantasy
literature for children. Mathematics draws a compelling parallel to Radcliffe’s unstable status as a female eighteenth-century writer, and proposes that maybe “children’s literature shares the concerns about authority and the emergent ambition and confidence that marked writing for women at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (133).

In naming such a charismatic, controversial literary figure as William Blake as one of the main influences for his trilogy, Pullman can be sure to stir up interest in his own work, but also interest in his well-informed opinion on one of the most widely misunderstood poets in English literary history. Thus, the literary figure ‘William Blake’, who represents a very distinct and unique authorial image, serves as a vehicle for Pullman to promote his own image as sharp-witted, opinionated and passionately atheist writer. This is not to say that Pullman’s love of Blakean poetry is disingenuous, or merely a publicity stunt; however, there is no doubt that it helps to keep Pullman and his trilogy in the spotlight, and that his ties with the figure of William Blake sustain his high-profile status as an intellectual writer of children’s books.

As mentioned above, Blakean thought plays another crucial role throughout *His Dark Materials*: Pullman’s reading of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the chief text to inform the trilogy’s storyline, is Blakean to the core (Scott 95). Indeed, there is little doubt that Pullman is reading *Paradise Lost* through a ‘post-Romantic lens’, that his re-interpretation of the epic with his trilogy is heavily influenced by the Romantics’ misreading (in the Bloomian sense) of *Paradise Lost* as a celebration of rebellion against oppressive tyranny and unrestrained desires. It is William Blake’s passionate struggle against and aggressive portrayal of Milton’s God, the “Nobodaddy”, “Urizen”, or “Ancient of Days” of his poems, that has a particularly strong impact on Pullman’s reading of Milton’s epic. Pullman obviously reads the epic with a post-Romantic bias, but it is his reading, or rather mis-reading, of especially Blake’s poetry

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70 A number of more recent scholarly works have tried to argue against the general notion that all fantasy literature is likewise children’s literature, or that either of the two genres are ‘simplistic’ merely because they feature ‘simple’, fairy-tale style settings; see especially Hunt’s and Lenz’s introduction to *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, which makes a strong case against oversimplifying fantasy literature as being ‘just for children’ (2-3).

71 On a very prominent (mis)conception of Blake and his works see Shirley Dent’s “Esoteric Blakeists and the ‘Weak Brethren’: How Blake Lovers Kept the Popular out”, which traces the origin of the image of Blake as a gifted visionary whose works are only eligible to the chosen few back to the “Victorian Blake revival” (57) triggered by Gilchrist’s *Life of William Blake*. 
that influences his understanding of *Paradise Lost* the most. If we return to Harold Bloom’s statement that “Poetic Influence [...] always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation” (30), then we can see a curious process at play in the case of Pullman’s re-interpretation of *Paradise Lost* via Blake’s misreading of the epic; Pullman’s interpretation of *Paradise Lost* as a subversive work is a double misreading: he is misreading Blake’s misreading of Milton’s epic as secretly arguing the Devil’s case. In fact, since the original text these three poets/authors interpret is, after all, the Genesis account of the Fall, Pullman’s reading of this traditional text—since thrice removed—is a threefold misreading of the Fall myth.72

To use Bloom’s theory on poetic influence here might give a wrong impression, and its terminology needs to be clarified; Bloom concedes that poetic misreading is a necessary step in the development of the strong poet, since it allows him to escape the paralysing anxiety of being influenced, even artistically eclipsed, by his predecessors. Since Pullman so freely admits to ‘stealing’ from other influential literary works, the Bloomian framework, which relies on the idea of influence as an unconsciously acted out Freudian “anxiety principle” (7), seems to be suspended for Pullman’s works. Bloom’s argument, based on Freudian theories on the subconscious and the family romance, relies on the assumption that the (futile) struggle against poetic influence happens unconsciously; the strong poet is not aware that he is struggling with and against his dominating predecessors, his ‘poetic father(s)’. In fact, denial of poetic influence is a vital stage in the development of the strong poet (Bloom 30). Pullman, however, seems to be embracing his literary predecessors and their superior literary influence as highly canonical authors, among them the poet deemed most dominating of all by Bloom, “the great Inhibitor, the Sphinx who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles” (32): John Milton. In a way, Pullman escapes the anxiety of influence by absorbing his predecessors into his work, by consciously naming them as influences for his trilogy. Furthermore, by reading *Paradise Lost* through a ‘Romantic lens’, in particular through Blake’s highly individual interpretation of the epic, Pullman manages to remove himself from the stifling influence of Milton’s work; he whole-heartedly embraces Blake’s misreading of

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72 Chapter IV of this thesis will focus in more detail on how this threefold misreading affects the *His Dark Materials* trilogy and Pullman’s reworking of *Paradise Lost.*
Paradise Lost most prominent in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”, and thus can bypass the Christian core of the epic, even subvert the original Genesis text.

This, however, is precisely the instance where Pullman misreads all three of his predecessors. It is true that whereas Milton’s aim with his fall version was to make sense of God’s judgement, Blake’s focus—at least in his “The Book of Urizen” and “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”—was primarily to expose the Old Testament God as a cruel oppressor. Yet, Blake was not an atheist, nor was he consistent in his celebration of the flesh, unrestrained passion, and matter over mind. Just as C. S. Lewis misreads Paradise Lost by overemphasising its orthodoxy to the point of denying the occurrence of any subversive elements at all, Pullman focuses so strongly on Blake’s claim that “Milton […] was of the devil’s party without knowing it” that he blends out the Christian core of the epic almost entirely, and in a way that Blake never did. Blake might have struggled with the Judeo-Christian patriarch, God the Father (Nuttall 5), but he nevertheless believed in his existence; he might have struggled with Milton’s portrayal of God in his epic, and sought to expose a too anthropomorphic picture of the divine with his own poetry, yet that does not necessarily mean that he saw this repressively authoritative figure as the only imaginable face of the Christian God.

Pullman’s reworking of the Genesis account of the Fall is also a misreading proper, since it is influenced by previous misreadings, Blake’s the most influential one. Undoubtedly, Pullman is very much aware of what he is doing with the Fall myth; he is flirting with Gnosticism, and toying with those elements of the original myth that, even in its earliest form, seem to raise questions about God’s benevolence and goodness. In The Alternative Trinity, A.D. Nuttall argues that Gnostic thought plays a role not only in Blake’s visionary poetry, but that there is also evidence of Gnostic themes in Marlowe’s Dr Faustus and Milton’s Paradise Lost. Whereas, according to Nuttall, “Blake carries his opposition to the ultimate, theological extreme; he is the declared antagonist of the Original Patriarch” (5), Gnostic thinking in Milton and Marlowe is less apparent, but nevertheless present; a large portion of The Alternative Trinity is dedicated to teasing out those Gnostic elements. Nuttall even extends his argument so far as to state that the original Genesis account of the Fall already contains key Gnostic ideas:

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73 I whole-heartedly recommend Harold Bloom’s study Blake’s Apocalypse for a thorough analysis of Blake and his poetry.
It is a strange experience to reread Genesis after immersing oneself in Gnostic material. [...] Could Genesis itself have been, at one stage in its formation, a Gnostic or ‘proto-Gnostic’ text? It is a little like asking whether Paradise Lost itself might really have been, at some stage in its formation, the Satanist work Blake made of it—a proposition which is self-evidently absurd, absurd to many, but not to me (16).

Neither, one might add, does this proposition seem to be absurd to Pullman. In fact, it is easy to see how Nuttall’s argument has influenced Pullman’s reading of the Fall myth. Although Pullman departs from Gnostic thought in his strong affirmation of physicality as the most precious of all human experiences, he nevertheless views the Fall as a moment of liberation, a step towards maturity and wisdom. In his trilogy, the angel Xaphania, the witch queen Serafina Pekkala, and the scientist/ex-nun Mary Malone are all representations of Sophia, the personified female “wisdom” figure so important to Gnosticism (Nuttall 10); each of them helps Will and Lyra on their path to knowledge and towards their ultimate ‘fall’ into maturity and away from innocence.

The portrayal of Mary Malone in particular, as “the serpent” (SK 261) whose story about her first sensual experience triggers Lyra’s ‘fall’, seems to be directly influenced by Nuttall’s discussion of a Gnostic cult called the Ophites (from Greek ophis, serpent (10)). Nuttall describes this “sub-heresy” (10) as worshipping the serpent instead of the Creator, who is considered the origin of evil, whereas the serpent brings freedom:

> The Gnostics revere knowledge. In Genesis Jehovah forbids Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge; therefore Jehovah, often called Ialdabaoth in Gnostic writings, is already wicked, in any case, as the creator of this world. The serpent, on the other hand, who in defiance of the tyrant conducts Adam and Eve to gnosis, is clearly good. (10-11)

Not only does Nuttall claim that the Ophites’ interpretation of the Genesis myth is a convincing one, he goes even further in arguing that “the serpent himself, it would seem, is already, in Genesis, a Gnostic” (17). This reading of the Genesis text as “pro-Gnostic” (10), with the serpent playing the role of true liberator and God the “wicked” tyrant (10), found its way directly into Pullman’s trilogy. Mary Malone, as the

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74 Pullman mentions that he has read the book on his home page; On the role of Gnostic thought in His Dark Materials see Mary Harris Russel’s “‘Eve Again! Mother Eve!’: Pullman’s Eve Variations”; of further interest here is also Hugh Raymond-Pickart’s The Devil’s Account: Philip Pullman and Christianity.

75 On Gnostic thought see especially Pagels and King; King especially stresses the fact that “Gnosticism” is almost impossible to define, and has always been used, or rather misused, for various purposes, such as separating certain sectarian groups from orthodox Christianity (22-54).
serpent, leads Will and Lyra towards a deeper understanding of their love for each other, and thus towards maturity. Through her ‘temptation’, Mary eventually saves the universe(s), since Dust is drawn to the now adolescent couple and their sensual joy (AS 497). Here, Pullman’s understanding of Blake’s poetry intermingles with his re-interpretation of Paradise Lost, and ultimately influences his subversive reading of the Fall myth to the point of a complete departure from Milton’s version of the biblical Fall. Sensual pleasure—the two children experiencing their first kiss (and possibly more, though this is never made clear in the novel)—is what saves the worlds from deteriorating back into a state of ‘innocence’; Dust is the physical manifestation of consciousness, and without Dust, humans will cease to develop consciousness, thus returning to their original animalistic, instinctual state.

This idea of sensuality and desire as liberating experiences that should be cherished, not repressed, lies at the heart of Blake’s “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”; desire and passion, to Blake, are the highest imaginable energetic states, and it is rational thinking which destroys those desirable energies. This is why the ‘hero’ of “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” is the Miltonic Satan figure and Milton’s God the true villain, since he tries to repress Satan’s explosively energetic spirit (“MHH” 30-55). In His Dark Materials, Pullman links this Blakean idea of passion representing creative as well as spiritual energy to his portrayal of the Fall as a gaining of knowledge, of gnosis. This blending of Blakean thinking with Gnostic mythology, which was inspired by Nuttall’s argument, gives Pullman a powerful tool to subvert the biblical text, and to bypass the Christian perspective of Milton’s version of the Fall.

In The Alternative Trinity, Nuttall argues that Blake was a Gnostic, or at least influenced by Gnostic thinking; Pullman adapts this idea of Blake, the Gnostic poet, who picked up on the “proto-Gnostic” (Nuttall 16) quality of the Genesis text, to create his own subversive reading of the Fall myth in His Dark Materials as a gaining of higher knowledge. This is a very imaginative misreading of both Milton’s Paradise Lost and the Old Testament, and it furthermore strengthens Philip Pullman’s self-image as intellectual writer who is well-immersed in current academic discourse. In addition, linking not only his trilogy, but also his personal career as a writer to such a multi-faceted personality as William Blake has helped Pullman to fashion his self-image as controversial, yet highly moral author.
Eclipsing the Forefathers of Fantasy Literature: *His Dark Materials* as “Anti-Narnia”

It is fair to say that the birth of the literary genre variously called modern, epic, or ‘high’ fantasy took place at Oxford University in the early twentieth century, with J.R.R. Tolkien’s creation of Middle-Earth as a secondary world more fully conceived than any fantastic setting ever had been before. Tolkien’s love of Nordic myths, ancient languages, and a longing for an idyllic, pre-industrial environment are all reflected in his *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; his love for myths, fairy-tales and languages also lead him to establish a long-lasting friendship with C.S. Lewis, and their common interests in turn lead to the founding of the now legendary group, the “Inklings”. The Inklings, an all-male group of primarily Oxford dons, is often seen as the main influence on Tolkien’s decision to follow *The Hobbit* with a far more epic, thorough account of the history behind the One Ring only marginally alluded to in *The Hobbit* (Carpenter 32; 65). According to Carpenter’s *The Inklings*, Tolkien read extensively from his work during Inklings meetings, and feedback and criticism from the group became invaluable (Carpenter 67; 136-140). C.S. Lewis, too, read out parts of his works to the group, excluding the Narnia books, however, such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, a story that Tolkien disliked due to Lewis’s carefree usage of various mythologies (Carpenter 227-228). Oxford, thus, can be seen as the birthplace of high fantasy as we know it today, and it would be hard to ignore the strong predecessors of the genre, namely Tolkien and Lewis, if taking a stroll through Oxford’s inner city.

Philip Pullman and *His Dark Materials*, too, are both very closely linked with the city of Oxford; allegedly, Lyra’s home, Jordan College, was modelled after Exeter College, Pullman’s college during his undergraduate years. One of the most famous alumni of Exeter College happens to be J.R.R. Tolkien, and it seems unlikely that Pullman would not have felt the presence of his predecessor while reading English at Oxford University. Just like Tolkien and Lewis before him, the name Philip Pullman is now intricately linked with the myth that is Oxford, and it is especially the *His Dark Materials* trilogy with its multiple Oxfords which feeds into the idea of Oxford as somehow a ‘magical’ place. Nevertheless, Pullman has to share the label ‘Oxford writer of fantastic children’s literature’ with both Lewis and Tolkien, though it is in fact C.S. Lewis whose own image as ‘Christian fantasist’ directly correlates to the
authorial self-image of ‘atheist fantasist’ Pullman is trying to establish. We can see resistance to the generic conventions Tolkien established for high fantasy present throughout *His Dark Materials*, but Pullman is rather subdued in his criticism of Tolkien, at least when compared to that of another member of the Inklings, C.S. Lewis. As William Gray states in “Pullman, Lewis, MacDonald and the Anxiety of Influence”, the *Narnia* books and *His Dark Materials* share very similar basic themes since “both Pullman and Lewis have written fantasy with a religious (or quasi-religious) angle about growing up, with lots of intertextual allusions” (119). Pullman does criticise the nostalgia and conservatism expressed in *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* repeatedly, yet this never results in an attack as personal as the one that he launched against C.S. Lewis and his Narnia books.

In interviews and articles, most notably his “The Darkside of Narnia”, Pullman has vehemently attacked Lewis for “the supernaturalism, the reactionary sneering, the misogyny, the racism, and the sheer dishonesty of his narrative method” (“DSN” 13). The previous section of this chapter has illustrated how Pullman uses strong literary predecessors to strengthen his own authorial self-image; by intertextually linking their works, but also their authorial personas to his own, he adds a level of sophistication to his work and simultaneously enriches his status as intellectual writer. Blake and Milton serve as positive role models, and Pullman very consciously aligns himself with these two strong poets; by misreading them and their poetry as ‘rebellious’, he can present himself as a direct descendant of this rebellious, subversive streak of religion-critical literature. The case, however, is very different when it comes to Pullman’s relationship with yet another strong literary predecessor, C.S. Lewis. As Gray states: “Lewis figures, firstly, as a bad father to Pullman, a seemingly inevitable precursor whose writing seems to fascinate as well as repel Pullman” (117). What tends to primarily “repel” Pullman is the Christian content of Lewis’s writing; yet, what I am arguing is that this publicly staged outrage at Lewis’s supposed Christian propaganda is in part merely another way for Pullman to use his predecessor’s authorial persona to polish his own self-image.

It is true that Lewis’s fiction, especially his *Narnia* books and the “space trilogy”, is driven by Lewis’s desire to retell Christian myth within a secondary world setting so that readers can be reacquainted with Christianity freed from negative connotations. Although Lewis calls these stories ‘supposals’, they do in fact contain instances of allegory, as in the case in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which
allegorises Christ’s passion and resurrection. Christianity lies at the heart of all of Lewis’s fantasy stories, and thus it is nearly impossible to read (or misread) those stories as anything but pro-Christian. One could argue that the same is true for Milton and *Paradise Lost*, yet there is a long tradition of reading the epic as subversive and in fact highly critical of the Judeo-Christian God, and thus Pullman can easily place himself within that tradition. Pullman can subvert the orthodox Christian content of the epic just as the Romantics did before him, to create his own interpretation of the biblical Fall.

Yet, this is clearly not a possibility when facing another strong literary precursor, the other Oxford fantasist, C.S. Lewis, who also has created his own version of the Fall in *Perelandra*, and to a lesser extent in *The Magician’s Nephew*. As Gray notices, “Pullman clearly feels the need to distinguish his own work from what seems to the innocent eye to be the rather similar work of Lewis” (119). Indeed, the most striking similarity between Pullman’s and Lewis’s works is their focus on the transition from childhood innocence to ‘grown-up’ experience, and the very moment when this transition takes place. Furthermore, both their narrative styles tend towards the didactic, perhaps more openly displayed in Lewis’s *Narnia* books than in *His Dark Materials*. Though Gray’s examples of similarities between Lewis’s and Pullman’s novels are not always accurate, he certainly is right in pointing out the parallels in focusing on the transition from childhood to adolescence in both *Narnia* and *His Dark Materials*.

So, if Lewis serves as a “bad father” to Pullman, the question is how Pullman deals with Lewis’s stifling influence on his own writing. The obvious parallels both between their lives and their works, which are so much stronger than those between Pullman and Tolkien, make it almost impossible for Pullman to ignore Lewis and his work. Since Lewis’s *Narnia* or *Perelandra* cannot be absorbed and adapted the same way Blake’s or Milton’s works were absorbed and adapted into the trilogy, Pullman needs to approach the influence of Lewis and his Narnia books in a very different

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76 We can see this occur throughout the Narnia books, first for Peter and Susan in *Prince Caspian*, then again for Susan in *The Last Battle*; in *Perelandra*, Lewis’s focus is more on the very nature of innocence and falleness and the moment of transition between those two states.

77 Gray sees one striking similarity in the fact that in the trilogy, just as in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, “the heroine makes a momentous discovery in a wardrobe” (119), but of course this is a parallel deliberately drawn by Pullman. As Gregory Maguire, the author of *Wicked*, remarked in an interview: “In Pullman’s Oxford, you go into the front of the wardrobe, stay in it, and you come out wiser” (quoted in Freitas and King).
way, and one that reflects well on Pullman’s self-fashioned image as subversive, critical author. It thus comes as no surprise that Pullman so aggressively and above all publicly attacks Lewis for his Christian ideals: after all, Pullman’s trilogy is meant to represent the new, atheist myth for the republic of Heaven; Lewis’s Platonist worldview and Christian morals, coupled with his somewhat outdated conservative opinions, present an ideal target for criticism and make Lewis the perfect antagonist to Pullman. Of all the things that could be criticised and attacked as “vile” (“DSN” 9) in the Narnia books, such as the latent sexism and a tendency towards racism, Pullman focuses primarily on those thematic issues which play a crucial role in His Dark Materials as well. Thus, Pullman (mis)reads Lewis’s Narnia books as, above all, life-denying and expressing a hatred of the material world. In doing this, Pullman places his own work in diametric opposition to Lewis’s; the trilogy becomes the “anti-Narnia”, the other spiritual children’s fantasy story, which promotes healthy, life-affirming ideals and a materialist worldview that the pessimistic Christian fundamentalist Lewis stands against.

If those words sound a bit harsh, there is no doubt that Pullman’s rhetoric expresses this view of Lewis, and in even harsher tones. In his “The Darkside of Narnia”, Pullman discusses the reasons why he considers the Narnia series to be “one of the most ugly and poisonous things I’ve ever read” (7). While acknowledging that Lewis’s “literary work is, at the very least, effortlessly readable” (6) and that “[i]n a superficial and bustling way, Lewis could tell a story” (8)—a rather strange half-compliment—he claims that Narnia is utterly detestable for a variety of reasons. Firstly, he accuses Lewis of being a ‘dishonest’ story-teller on the grounds that he ‘murders’ the Pevensie children at the end of The Last Battle, instead of allowing them to grow up in the real world. Although Pullman admits the need to sometimes ‘killing off’ a character for the sake of story development (something that repeatedly occurs in His Dark Materials), he asserts that: “To slaughter the lot of them, and then claim they’re better off, is not honest story-telling” (9).

It is not just the fact that the children are ‘slaughtered’ that appalls Pullman, as he explains in later interviews, but that they are denied the chance to make this world a better place. This, of course, is precisely what Pullman lets Lyra and Will do at the end of The Amber Spyglass; their separation is necessary in order to build the republic

78 See especially Goldthwaite for an extensive criticism of Lewis’s Narnia books.
of Heaven in their respective worlds. For that greater goal, they must live long, healthy lives since “for us, there is no elsewhere” (AS 382). In Lewis’s Narnia, according to Pullman, “there are these children who have gone through great adventures and learned wonderful things and would therefore be in a position to do great things to help other people. But they’re taken away. He doesn’t let them” (surefish.co.uk). Yet, the point is more one of differing opinions on religious matters than a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ choice in story-telling: to Lewis, there is an elsewhere, a place just as essential, if not even more important than the here and now. Whether or not Lewis is right in his belief in an afterlife is a very different discussion to whether the way he tells his story is ‘dishonest’. To Lewis, Heaven is indeed like a perfect, eternal school holiday and thus, choosing this type of ‘happy ending’—however appalling it might be to an atheist—is hardly ‘dishonest’. Furthermore, Pullman displays an uncomfortable smugness in judging Lewis’s story-telling as dishonest, since it seems to imply that his own way of telling a story is very different, and thus the ‘honest’ way; as mentioned above, Will and Lyra both survive.79 His critique of Lewis thus primarily serves to present Pullman and his trilogy as an antidote to the “ugly and poisonous” Narnia series.

Most of the narrative crimes that Pullman reproaches Lewis for committing in fact rely on a steady misreading of the Narnia series as life-denying and anti-materialist. This misreading primarily rests on the fact that Susan is excluded from entering the ‘real’ Narnia at the end of The Last Battle due to her being “interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipsticks and invitations” (LB 128). Pullman reads this as a sign that Lewis was “frightened and appalled at the notion of wanting to grow up” (“DSN” 11); Susan, according to Pullman, is denied salvation because she is beginning to discover her own sexuality, and “like Cinderella, is undergoing a transition from one phase of her life to another” (11). However, as critics such as Mary Bowman have noted, Lewis leaves it open whether or not Susan will one day have access to the real Narnia, to Heaven, since it is never mentioned that she is killed in the train crash with her siblings. Since Pullman presumes a hatred for the material world by Lewis, he concludes that Susan’s interest in “nylons and lipsticks and invitations” makes her too attached to the world and thus disqualifies her from

79 Conversely, the ending of His Dark Materials can also be seen as ‘dishonest’ in Pullman’s sense of the term, in that it seems to on the one hand celebrate the beauty of erotic love, yet has the two young protagonists separated directly after their first sexual experience; see chapter IV of this thesis.
entering Heaven. As Pullman describes it in his “The Republic of Heaven” article: “Lewis’s nylons were not real stockings; they were Platonic stockings, if you like, and their function was simply to carry a symbolic charge. What they mean is that if you give them too much of your attention, you’re shut out from the Kingdom of Heaven” (19). However, as William Gray stresses about Lewis’s Platonist views: “The point is that Christian Platonism, far from being world-hating, wants the world and the body to be used in the right way, that is, as images of the divine life” (121). It is true that Lewis saw this world merely as a copy of the ‘real’ world, which is God’s Kingdom, yet this does not imply a hatred or rejection of this world. Neither does Lewis’s Platonist view mean that he sees life as something meaningless, it merely leads him to caution his readers about getting too attached to worldly things (Gray 121). Although this viewpoint does of course rely upon the expectation of an afterlife, it does not equal a desire to shorten life or deny oneself any worldly pleasures. Thus, Pullman’s claim that Lewis’s decision to ‘kill off’ the Pevensie children (and he seems to imply that Susan, too, is killed) is “propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology” (“DSN” 10) is a definite misreading of The Last Battle.

Certainly, Susan is not excluded from the real Narnia because she is growing up, since her older brother Peter does enter the stables (which represent salvation). Neither is it her interest in worldly things per se that leads to her (presumed) condemnation. As both William Gray and Mary Bowman in her article “A Darker Ignorance: C.S. Lewis and the Nature of the Fall” point out, Susan’s interest in material things is not at all the reason for her exclusion from the stables. William Gray states that “[t]he problem with Susan is not so much her adolescent sexuality as such but the fact that she allows the construction of that sexuality to be so all-absorbing that she doesn’t want anything else” (120). Gray further remarks that while Lyra and Will, at the moment of their first sexual experience, still have an obligation towards their greater quest, this is precisely what Susan does not have or want anymore (120-21). It is Susan’s sole interest in “nylons and lipsticks and invitations” that Lewis criticises. As Mary Bowman notes, these things “have not been added to her other interests and tastes, but have replaced them” (73). Hence, Pullman’s accusation that in The Last Battle, Lewis “proclaimed that an interest in lipstick and nylons was not an addition to the pleasures of life, but an absolute disqualification for the joys of Heaven” (“RoH” 21) is a deliberate misreading of the text.
I use the word ‘deliberate’ because, as Mary Bowman illustrates, Lewis’s view of adolescence and growing-up as a healthy and necessary transition phase is made plain in his “On Three Ways of Writing for Children”, an essay that Pullman has claimed to have read and very much liked (“DSN”, also “RoH”). In this essay, Lewis argues against the view that reading and enjoying fairy-tales is escapist and childish, noticing how: “When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up” (34). Bowman, by drawing on what Lewis has written in “On Three Ways of Writing for Children”, concludes that Lewis viewed growing up “as a process of accretion rather than replacement” (73); ideally, Susan should keep her love for Narnia and the adventures she had there as a child in addition to her newly found love of ‘grown-up’ things (Bowman 70-71). However, Susan now rejects her past as ‘childish’, primarily because she seems over-anxious to be seen as an adult. This, as Bowman rightly states, is why “the sentence that for Pullman marks her as the most grown-up of the group would, from Lewis’s perspective, marks her rather as the most immature” (73).

To Lewis, being dismissive of ‘childish’ things is the sort of behaviour to be expected from adolescents, not adults. Thus, according to Bowman:

The implication is that Susan is not in point of fact grown up, nor is she growing up in what we might call the optimal way. She has fixated at a stage along the way, a stage characterised not only by her interest in adult things, but also by her rejection of, even disbelief in, what she regards as childish things. (71)

Thus, we can see Lewis’s view about growing up which he expresses in “On Three Ways of Writing for Children” being reflected in his portrayal of Susan. Since Pullman is well-acquainted with Lewis’s writing on literature, it seems like a deliberate misreading to claim that Lewis “was frightened and appalled at the notion of growing up” (“DSN” 11). As Bowman has illustrated, and Lewis’s own writing quite clearly promotes, Lewis’s views on growing up are in fact consistently positive. Furthermore, it is Susan’s own choice to not return to Narnia and take part in the last battle, thus, she is not forced out of Heaven but, by her own free will, decides against salvation (at this point in time). It is peculiar that Pullman, so enraged at the worthless death of the Pevensie children, at the same time condemns Susan’s survival. After all, Susan will now have the chance to live a long and productive life. The reason for this deliberate misreading of the Narnia series as anti-materialist is a desire to set his own work apart from Lewis’s, and establish *His Dark Materials* as the healthy antidote to
the life-hating Christian philosophy Lewis’s fiction stands for. By attacking C.S. Lewis, one of the most widely read authors of children’s fantasy fiction in Britain and the United States, Pullman carves out his own niche as ‘atheist fantasist’.

That he is successful in his endeavour is obvious from the way critics and journalists have picked up the supposed ‘feud’ between the two authors’ theological positions. For instance, Peter Hitchens, who claimed that Pullman is “the most dangerous author in Britain” in an article in *The Mail on Sunday*, further describes Pullman as “the anti-Lewis, the one the atheists would have been praying for, if atheists prayed”. Likewise, Burton Hatlen, in “His Dark Materials, a Challenge to Tolkien and Lewis”, argues that “rather than simply rejecting Lewis as a model, Pullman has, in *His Dark Materials*, offered a kind of inverted homage to his predecessor, deliberately composing a kind of ‘anti-Narnia’, a secular humanist alternative to Lewis’s Christian fantasy” (82). While recognising the parallels between Lewis’s fantasy fiction and Pullman’s, Hatlen leaves no doubt as to which version he considers the better “alternative”; to describe *His Dark Materials* as the “secular humanist” answer to Lewis’s Narnia implies that the trilogy is a far more liberal, less fundamentalist and propaganda-free fantasy story than Lewis’s (or Tolkien’s) fantasies. Hatlen overlooks the fact that Pullman’s story has clear intertextual ties with Lewis’s, which shows that Pullman is successful in eclipsing his literary predecessor, offering the “secular humanist alternative” that is free of old-fashioned, dusty conservatism.

Similarly, critics like Naomi Wood in “Paradise Lost and Found: Obedience and Disobedience, and Storytelling in C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman”, or David Gooderham in “Fantasising It as It Is: Religious Language in Philip Pullman’s Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*” tend to contrast the authors, favouring one of them while criticising the other for their respective views on moral matters. The fact that Lewis serves as direct precursor to Pullman and that Lewis’s fantasy fiction and reading of *Paradise Lost* has influenced Pullman in his interpretation of the Fall as an instance of ‘coming of age’, thus escapes most critics. An even more striking indication that Pullman has managed to escape the influence of his precursor Lewis is the fact that, while his trilogy is often compared to the Narnia series, few critics have

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80 William Gray’s *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffmann* seems to be the only discussion on Lewis’s literary influence on Pullman’s trilogy existing at this point.
mentioned the obvious intertextual links between *Perelandra* and *His Dark Materials*. Despite the fact that both authors have re-written the myth of the biblical Fall, and both have been heavily influenced by their reading of *Paradise Lost*, Pullman’s trilogy is rarely if ever described as ‘anti-Perelandra’. Since, as Pullman himself has stated, “there is no doubt in the public mind that what matters is the Narnia cycle” (“DSN” 7), it seems that he has picked his target well.

At first glance, it seems rather strange that Pullman’s fight seems to be primarily with Lewis, not with the even greater father figure in fantasy fiction—J.R.R. Tolkien. However, it is not surprising since, whether justifiably or not, Lewis stands for a certain type of fantasy story, the Christian fantasy story, from which Pullman is keen to distance himself; furthermore, Lewis’s own tendency to polemics in his writing makes him an ideal target for critique by a fellow writer. In fact, though, Pullman resists the label ‘fantasy writer’ altogether, and in this rejection is embedded a criticism of the great forefather of the genre, Tolkien. Gray remarks how “another move typical of Pullman” is “that of claiming merely to use the techniques of fantasy fiction [...] for other ends than those of writers who in Pullman’s view are merely ‘preoccupied with one adventure after another and improbable sorts of magic and weird creatures’ that don’t have any connection with the sort of human reality he recognises” (153). Indeed, it is particularly the sort of fantasy that supposedly exists solely for the pleasure of fantasising.

As Pullman argues in “The Republic of Heaven”, high fantasy that stands in Tolkien’s tradition should not be part of the “republic” since it seeks to escape the world instead of making it a better place. Claiming to follow John Goldthwaite’s *The Natural History of Make-Believe* here, Pullman argues that:

> such fantasy is both escapist and solipsistic: seeking to flee the complexities and compromises of the real world for somewhere nobler altogether, lit by a light that never was on sea or land, it inevitably finds itself enclosed in a mental space that is smaller, barer, and poorer than reality, because it’s sustained by an imagination that strains against the world instead of working with it, refusing and not accepting. (par. 25)

It is rather surprising that Pullman evokes Goldthwaite here, since his study on children’s fairy-tale stories has in fact a strong Christian background; for instance, Goldthwaite dismisses Tolkien’s stories not so much because they are escapist, but rather because the escapism implies dissatisfaction with God’s creation, stating that “in preferring his own imaginary, pre-Christian, antediluvian, pre-Edenic world to the
one in which he lived Tolkien does seem to have been committing a classic act of bad faith. Creating a Secondary World, after all, is in effect a declaration that God’s creation is deficient (219). Similarly, he rejects Tolkien’s “On Fairy-Stories” and the theory of “sub-creation”, which he calls a “heretical notion” (219), remarking that “it would be instructive to find in it some explanation of why renouncing the world for places lost in an abyss of time should be thought anything but a rejection of God’s plan for the world […]” (219). Goldthwaite rejects “sub-creation” because Tolkien pretends it contains “grace”, when in fact it led to “millions of children [being] initiated into the pleasures of this literary paganism” (219). Goldthwaite, with his Christian polemics, seems a rather strange ally here for Pullman’s cause, and they reject Tolkien’s fantasy for very different reasons. However, they both are deeply suspicious of the escapist nature of epic fantasy and share the belief that successful fairy-tale type stories should always have some sort of didactic function.

Pullman’s rejection of secondary world fantasy due to the fact that it has no connection to the real world echoes Rosemary Jackson’s claim that stories of the marvellous are conservative and passively nostalgic, “representing events which are in the long distant past, contained and fixed by a long temporal perspective and carrying the implication that their effects have long since ceased to disturb” (33). Since Pullman’s idealist republic of Heaven is supposed to make the here and now a better place, as this is the only reality we have, Pullman rejects escapism as damaging for the good of the republic. Apparently, for Pullman, fantasy stories must contain an element of ‘realism’ in order to be deemed a part of the ideals represented by the republic of Heaven. Pullman seems to insist that stories, at least good ones, need to have a didactic function as well and cannot ever be mere storytelling or make-belief, a claim that negates statements he made elsewhere about His Dark Materials as “just a story”.  

The reason why The Hobbit or The Lord of the Rings are excluded from the republic of Heaven is, according to Pullman, the fact that “Tolkien’s Shire, his idealized modest English landscape full of comfortable hobbits who know their social places, is no more real than the plastic oak panelling and the reproduction horse-brasses in an Olde English theme-pub” (25). Ironically enough, Pullman here almost sounds like a stern Platonist himself, condemning the fictional copy of the ‘real’.

81 See especially his interviews with Third Way and surefish.co.uk.
Again, the implication is that *His Dark Materials* is the sort of ‘realist fantasy’ that should be at the heart of storytelling for the idealist republic of Heaven. Whereas mythopoeic or secondary world fantasy like Tolkien’s or Lewis’s is to be excluded, this does not mean that fantasy has no place in Pullman’s republic of Heaven: “If the republic doesn’t include fantasy, it won’t be worth living in. It won’t be Heaven of any sort. But *inclusiveness* is the whole point: the fantasy and the realism must connect” (26). This overlapping of the fantastic with reality of course occurs in the trilogy, where Lyra’s Oxford and Will’s—which represents our own reality—overlap and intermingle.

Once more, Pullman’s concept of the republic of Heaven serves as a platform to promote his own fiction. His critique of Tolkien’s fantasy fiction, however, is by no means as harsh as his attack on Lewis’s Narnia series; it seems as if there is less need for Pullman to set himself apart from Tolkien’s authorial image, except by stressing that his fantasy is not a stereotypical copy of *The Lord of the Rings*. The similarities between Lewis and Pullman, on the other hand, are so numerous that a misreading of Lewis’s fiction is almost compulsory for Pullman; he needs to misread *The Chronicles of Narnia* as expressing views that are completely opposed to the ones conveyed in *His Dark Materials* precisely because both authors have the same tendency to embed morals into their stories.

*With his tendency to publicly promote himself as highly controversial author, and his confrontational manner towards organised religion, Pullman has established himself as the “Oxford rebel”, the secular fantasist whose works celebrate a positive materialism that embraces life instead of denying it. In order to support this self-fashioned image, Pullman aligns himself with other ‘rebellious’ and ‘controversial’ literary figures such as Blake and Milton; in doing so, Pullman misreads these authors and their works in a way that benefits his own authorial profile; he stresses the subversive elements and possible anti-religious sentiments in these authors’ works and links his own writing to them, thus placing himself and his works within a literary tradition of dissenters and outspoken rebels. In order to distinguish himself from another literary predecessor, C.S. Lewis, whose role of Christian fantasist is dangerously similar to Pullman’s own image, Pullman focuses on the more doubtful instances in Lewis’s fiction, misreading these as evidence for anti-materialism. By presenting Lewis and his fiction as life-hating, and Tolkien’s epic fantasy stories as
blatantly escapist, Pullman can offer the type of stories he invents as the perfect, secular antidote to the “poisonous” fantasy fiction of his literary predecessors.
Miltonic Influence in *His Dark Materials*: Underestimating the “Great Inhibitor”

“More Truly Miltonic”: Philip Pullman and *Paradise Lost*

According to an interview Philip Pullman gave for James Carter’s *Talking Books: Children’s Authors Talk about the Craft, Creativity and Process of Writing*, *His Dark Materials* was first conceived as “*Paradise Lost* for children” (187-188), and much scholarly work on the trilogy has focused on drawing out parallels between Pullman’s work and Milton’s epic. This chapter will offer a close reading of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy through a Bloomian lens and highlight the way Pullman misreads *Paradise Lost* as primarily subversive; with this misreading, he supports his self-fashioned image as an author who challenges traditional religious narratives. It is quite striking to observe how two works of fantasy fiction, *Perelandra* and *His Dark Materials*, both of which offer a retelling of the Fall myth presented by Milton, arrive at such disparate readings of Milton’s account of the Fall: whereas C.S. Lewis reads *Paradise Lost* as “overwhelmingly Christian”, and sought to ‘correct’ apparently ‘wrong’ narrative choices Milton made in his epic, Pullman offers a thoroughly ‘satanic’ reading and re-telling of *Paradise Lost*. As the previous chapter has shown, Pullman reads, or rather misreads, the epic with a Romantic bias, and relies particularly on William Blake’s (mis)reading of Milton’s works. Furthermore, Pullman is aware of Lewis’s fictional reworking of the epic and very consciously responds to this Christian fantasy author. However, just as Lewis misreads the epic by blending out any subversive elements present, so does Pullman tend to overstate the ‘satanic’ elements of the epic in order to suit his own image of ‘atheist fantasist’. Not only does Pullman overemphasise the subversive nature of *Paradise Lost*, he also attempts to strip the epic of its Christian core by turning its theology on its head. Pullman’s misreading of *Paradise Lost* is a highly productive one, and it neatly benefits both his narrative as well as his moral didacticism, his attempt at stripping one of the core Judeo-Christian myths of its religious impact and turn it into a myth befitting the religion-free “republic of Heaven”. By misreading *Paradise Lost* as
ultimately satanic, Pullman uses the epic as a narrative tool to challenge the original account of the Fall presented in Genesis.

Articles such as Karen D. Robinson’s “His Dark Materials: a Look into Pullman’s Interpretation of Milton’s Paradise Lost”, Stephen Burt’s “‘Fighting Since Time Began’: Milton and Satan in Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials”, and Burton Hatlen’s “Pullman’s His Dark Materials, a Challenge to the Fantasies of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, with an Epilogue on Pullman’s Neo-Romantic Reading of Paradise Lost”, all acknowledge Pullman’s indebtedness to the epic, yet remain rather vague when it comes to analysing the underlying reasons for Pullman’s unique re-working of the epic. Furthermore, there is a tendency in the articles mentioned to support Pullman’s reading of the epic as subversive, which obscures the fact that this Romantic bias is in fact a misreading proper in the Bloomian sense: subversive elements do exist in Paradise Lost, yet it is by no means theologically subversive to its core, neither can we so easily believe Milton to have unconsciously rooted for the devil as Blake claimed he had done.

For instance, Hatlen’s article discusses Pullman’s portrayal of ‘God’ in the trilogy, comparing it to Milton’s depiction of God in the epic. However, Hatlen glosses over the crucial fact that Pullman’s supposed ‘God’ is in fact an impostor, not the Almighty Creator of the universes, and thus his comparison is already problematic from its outset. Strangely enough, Hatlen’s view of Milton’s God seems to result rather from his reading of Pullman and the critical and poetical tradition he follows than from reading Paradise Lost. Thus, Hatlen states that: “Milton’s God is not dead yet, but some competent observers, including William Empson, have felt that he is at least moribund and deserves to die. While Satan is an active, energetic force moving about the cosmos, Milton’s God remains immobile and invisible atop his mountain in heaven” (88). Without wanting to digress too much, it is vital here to mention the figure of the Son as the active part of God; it is the Son who engages in active combat with Satan, and the Son also steps forward to atone for the sins the first couple is about to commit. Thus, Milton’s God can hardly be condemned as “immobile and invisible” (88), at least not without risking the distortion of Milton’s theological concepts presented in the epic. Of course, such a misreading of Milton’s theology is precisely what lies at the heart of His Dark Materials, driven by Pullman’s intent to challenge the original Fall myth narrated in Genesis 3. Indeed, Paradise Lost, with its theologically ambiguous moments, serves as an ideal stepping-stone for Pullman to
reach his real objective, the biblical text itself. Whereas Milton wavers between favouring the idea of the Fall as *felix culpa*, a ‘fortunate fall’, and at the same time lamenting the loss of innocence and the “blissful seat” (I, 5) that is Paradise, Pullman rejects the notion of ‘sin’ being equated with misery, and instead turns the Fall into a Blakean moment of joyful liberation.

Karen Robinson’s article, a close reading of Pullman’s trilogy as a re-telling of *Paradise Lost*, offers an intriguing suggestion in its last paragraph, by briefly drawing on Stanley Fish’s *Surprised by Sin*. Robinson remarks that: “Stanley Fish feels that Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* in order to lead readers to a correct response, to test their faith and relationship with God. Fish calls these readers the ‘fit’ readers. Pullman is definitely not a fit reader; Fish would say that he fell under the trap laid by Satan” (15). This statement implies that Pullman somehow reads the epic ‘wrongly’, that he was not in control of his narrative, and failed to understand the underlying theology of the epic. True, it seems as if Pullman overlooks the Christian basis of the epic which C.S. Lewis found so “overwhelmingly” noticeable. However, I would argue that Pullman is very much aware that his reading of the epic is a misreading proper; he manages to exploit the ambiguity of Milton’s Fall narrative that has intrigued other writers long before him, by making use of the Romantics’ view of the epic as seemingly throwing a dubious light on God’s benevolence.

As Lauren Shohet has argued in “*His Dark Materials, Paradise Lost, and the Common Reader*”, Pullman favours the concept of multiple, flexible readings both of his own as well as his source texts, instead of presenting one, dogmatically strict reading. Shohet remarks that: “By emphasising reading as a practice, *His Dark Materials* revisits *Paradise Lost*—that most canonical of high-culture texts—in a way that is neither nostalgic nor recuperative, but rather keeps dissenting reading alive” (60). This method of “dissenting reading” can be seen not only in Pullman’s re-working of *Paradise Lost*, but also in his toying with themes from the biblical Fall myth, and indeed, with the Bible as story. Shohet highlights Lyra’s reading of Gen 3 as an instance where our world and Lyra’s overlap: “But when the consequences of the Fall are told in the exact language of our own Bible […], ‘dust’ has acquired such a different resonance over the course of the novel that we experience this sameness with a shock of profound difference” (65). The “different resonance” Shohet mentions stems from our and Lyra’s knowledge about “Dust”, the particles of consciousness that only settle on adult humans and thus are seen as manifestation of “Original Sin”
by the Church. The meaning of the well-known lines from Genesis 3, “Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return” (3,19), which Pullman quotes to the letter in Lyra’s version of the Bible, have thus been inverted by our new-found knowledge of what “Dust” is, which sheds an entirely new light on the canonical Old Testament text, giving it a heretical edge without seemingly challenging the authority of the original text. Shohet states that “rereading those superficially unchanged words is an experience utterly transformed: a consequence of a readerly Fall” (65). Just as Lyra, under the guidance of her father, the Byronic hero Lord Asriel, loses some of her ignorance (and thus also her innocence) about the meaning of the biblical allusion to “dust”, so does the reader experience a falling into an entirely new view of the ancient biblical Fall narrative. To return to Karen Robinson’s remark: Pullman wants to fall into the “trap laid by Satan”, but more importantly, he wants his readers to fall for that “trap” as well.

This, however, does not mean Pullman can fully escape the dominating influence of John Milton, “the great Inhibitor, the Sphinx who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles” (Bloom 32). One of the reasons why The Amber Spyglass reads so differently from the other two volumes of His Dark Materials is that Pullman, by now conscious of his profile as ‘atheist fantasist’, tries much harder to move away from the stout Christianity that informs the trilogy’s primary source, Paradise Lost, a fact that will be discussed in section four of this chapter (207-222). Despite seemingly embracing poetic influence by willingly admitting to ‘stealing’ from other texts, Pullman finds his trilogy haunted by Milton’s ghost in those very moments in which he tries hardest to push away the Christian heart of the epic.

Milton’s epic, despite its many ambiguous and subversive theological suggestions, nevertheless closely follows scriptural traditions; Milton, in working his way through various scriptural exegeses, aims at presenting the dilemma so central to the idea of a ‘fortunate fall’: the complex paradox of an omnipotent Creator who allows its creatures the gift (or, arguably the curse) of free will. In allowing them to fall, God seems to commit the greatest imaginable crime against his creatures, since the Fall results in misery and pain for them. Here, the Gnostic movement and its idea of a malevolent Creator, which, to a certain extent, also informs Pullman’s trilogy, comes to mind.82 However, in Paradise Lost, Milton decisively argues for God’s

82 On the creator in various Gnostic traditions see Pearson, especially 13-16.
benevolence in giving his creatures free will: “Not free, what proof could they have given sincere/ Of true allegiance, constant faith or love?” (III, 103-104); these lines express Milton’s belief that only a free creature can genuinely worship its Creator. Of course, this statement by Milton’s God can likewise be read as uncomfortably sanctimonious, almost cynical, an interpretation that Pullman would probably favour. Especially the claim made by Milton’s God that “I made him just and right,/Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (III, 99-100), has often been seen as a weak excuse, as an attempt to shift the blame to the creature, and away from the Creator (comp. Empson 175-177). However, Milton understands free will as a gift, and thus it would be inexcusable if God would choose to take this gift away again by interfering with Adam’s and Eve’s choice. Freedom once given cannot be withdrawn, or else God would indeed be an arbitrary tyrant: “I else must change/ Their nature, and revoke the high decree/ Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained/ Their freedom” (125-127). God has to obey his own divine law or else he would indeed be an unjust, arbitrary tyrant.

The ambiguity of passages such as God’s speech in book III, where Milton is careful to present all sides of a theologically complex argument, is precisely the strength of the epic, and possibly the very reason why Bloom considered the literary influence of Milton so inescapable; in Paradise Lost, both angels and devils speak, and this is its most compelling feature. We have seen that in Perelandra, C.S. Lewis tries hard to escape the influence of his predecessor Milton by denying the devil a tragic or possibly heroic persona, diminishing him/it to a ‘Christian other’, and instead emphasising the Christian heroics present in the figure of Adam, the Son, and the loyal angels through his portrayal of Ransom, the King and the eldila. However, this attempt to enhance the Christian message of Milton’s Fall narrative within an entirely ‘new’ setting and with a ‘new’ outcome, leads to an actual weakening of the complex theological questions connected to the biblical Fall. Perelandra ends up being a weaker version of Paradise Lost precisely because Lewis tries so hard to distinguish his novel from the epic. In His Dark Materials, it is not Satan but God who is silenced. Pullman turns Milton’s God into “The Authority”, a senile, withering creature worth pitying, and it is ‘satanic’ figures such as Lord Asriel or Mrs. Coulter
who save the universes with their heroic sacrifices. As Stephen Burt argues: “To follow opposition to Christian ideas and authorities through Pullman’s story is to find types of Satan in Pullman’s characters” (49).

Indeed, we find a variety of figures in the trilogy whose actions are reminiscent of Satan’s active strife for some sort of change, whether for good or for bad. Those “types of Satan”, in particular the compelling Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel, but also Lyra (whom Burt names as “the character most resembling Satan” (50)) and Will, are depicted in a way that makes the reader understand the reasons behind both their selfless as well as self-centred choices; thus, we can almost forgive Mrs. Coulter her horrible experiments on children since she redeems herself in *The Amber Spyglass* by sacrificing not only her life, but even a possible afterlife for the sake of her own child. The same careful balancing out of selflessness with self-interest, however, cannot be found in such characters as the angel Metatron, who is the true tyrant in Heaven, the priest assassin Father Gomez, or the ruthless politician Father MacPhail. Thus, with his claim that “Pullman’s novels use their apparent Satanism to describe a more complicated (perhaps more truly Miltonic) ethics focused on experience and individual choice” (48), Burt overlooks that Pullman does not apply this “more complicated…ethics” to all of his characters. Without wanting to argue against the statement that experience and choice are core issues of the trilogy, this choice to even turn around the most corrupted self is only given to those characters not in the service of the Church. Thus, to call Pullman’s morals “perhaps more truly Miltonic” relies on wrong assumptions both about Milton’s sense of justice as well as Pullman’s. Pullman’s strong bias against organised religion distorts the ethical impact of the trilogy.

The perception of *His Dark Materials* being “more truly Miltonic” than, it seems, Milton’s own work, echoes C.S. Lewis’s changing of Miltonic characters in a way that implies he somehow understood what Milton meant to say even better than Milton himself did. Burt conveys this idea of Pullman seemingly writing a ‘better’ version of *Paradise Lost* when asserting that: “*His Dark Materials* builds events,

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83 Of course, I am aware that Pullman’s ‘God’ is in fact no God at all; however, as later discussions will show, it is a representation of Milton’s God, seen through a Blakean lens.

84 Compare Mrs. Coulter’s statement to Lord Asriel: “I can’t bear the thought of oblivion, Asriel”, and her claim that “to be tortured for ever” would be preferable to “just going into the dark” (all AS 400); yet, by throwing herself at Metatron and into the abyss that rips the worlds apart, she fully realizes that: “We won’t live, will we? We won’t survive like the ghosts?” (426), thus risking the very “going into the dark” she was most terrified of.
phrases, and arguments from *Paradise Lost* into a narrative that takes antihierarchical notions of freedom where more responsible (or intentionalist) readings of Milton may not go” (48). This statement, combined with the idea of *His Dark Materials* as “more truly Miltonic”, is reminiscent of Bloom’s depiction of *tessera*: “A poet antithetically ‘completes’ his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough” (14). Lewis exercised a *tessera* in trying to write a ‘more Christian’ version of the Fall that strictly followed this “great central [Christian] tradition” Milton supposedly followed as well. Pullman, on the other hand, embraces Blake’s conviction that Milton “was of the Devil’s party without knowing it”, and seeks to consciously rewrite the Fall from the Devil’s point-of-view. Both Lewis’s and Pullman’s ‘original’ versions of the Fall presuppose that Milton did not quite know what he was truly aiming for with his version, so another writer needs to take over and shape the Fall myth to its full potential. Again, Burt’s depiction of Pullman’s reworking of Miltonic themes hints towards this notion: “Pullman opposes institutional religion, takes the side of rebels in cosmic war against divine and civil authority, endorses the temptation of his new Eve, and rewrites the creation story so that Satan’s version becomes more credible than Abdiel’s or the Father’s” (51). Pullman is portrayed as the rebel author who teases out the dormant subversive ideas of *Paradise Lost* and takes them to a new level.

Burt goes on to argue that Pullman nevertheless does not simply create a Blakean version of the Fall; desire and passion, in the end, do not win against reason, since Lyra and Will decide to separate forever and close the windows between their worlds (Burt 53), and he is right in warning against a too simplistic reading of *His Dark Materials* as merely a satanic rewriting of the epic. The following discussions will reveal the complexity of the links between the trilogy and Milton’s epic; however, the crucial point here is that even when Pullman seemingly departs from Milton’s views on morally complex issues to create his own, supposedly “more truly Miltonic […] ethics”, as Burt describes it, he actually still follows Miltonic thought to the letter. The notion that reason needs to govern desire is central to *Paradise Lost* and it does not need much skilful digging to uncover Milton’s belief in the importance of prudence and reason to keep desire and passion in check. The moment Adam goes against reason, and chooses Eve over God, is precisely the moment he falls. Thus, what Burt describes as a more complex version of the traditional Fall narrative is
rather a reworking than a re-imagining of Miltonic thought; even in moments when Pullman seems to depart from the epic’s theological and moral framework, he still heavily relies on its core themes. Pullman’s system of ‘atheist morality’ is at its weakest when moving away from the epic’s finely balanced-out aim to “justify God’s ways to men”, to attempt to truly understand even the most contradictory facets of the divine. Whereas Lord Asriel, for instance, is vivid and graspable in all his strengths and weaknesses, the Regent Metatron and the Authority are merely one-dimensional stereotypes. On the other hand, Pullman’s narrative is at its strongest and his concept of morality the most convincing when relying on his predecessor’s ideas. The moral core of the trilogy, the idea that choice is key and that a well-balanced and mature choice is the lesson to be learned for his adolescent (and grown-up) readers, is based on Milton’s thoughts on these matters expressed in *Paradise Lost*, as further discussions in this chapter will illustrate.

Even if Pullman readily admits that he takes Milton’s epic as one of his main sources, it becomes apparent that he still struggles with this dominant literary influence, and not always successfully. In truth, the title of the trilogy, a quote taken from book II of *Paradise Lost* (II, 916) already reveals that Pullman cannot escape Miltonic influence the way he wants to: despite trying to deny a Creator, the trilogy is still called “*His Dark Materials*”. One could argue that Pullman may have ironically referred to himself as the originator of a story, that the “dark materials” are his own fluctuating thoughts that have been turned into a solid storyline; however, in closely analysing Pullman’s method of subverting the biblical myth via re-working central themes of *Paradise Lost*, it will become apparent that despite trying to erase the Judeo-Christian core of the Fall myth, Pullman cannot break away from the primary source that informs his subversive reading of the Fall as a fall into grace and freedom. Whether or not the material world portrayed in the trilogy was indeed created out of itself, Pullman’s universe is vibrant with divine spirituality, primarily represented by the (thoroughly Miltonic) “Dust” particles, which manifest themselves into luminous, conscious beings that Pullman (again, indebted to Milton’s portrayal of them) calls “angels”.

Furthermore, by utilising Gnostic mythology as another narrative tool to drive his story as well as support his view of the Fall as a liberation from suppression and tyranny, Pullman also allows for the possibility of an unknown Creator/God outside of the material world the characters experience. If the Authority is a lying impostor,
just as the Gnostic figures Yahweh or Yaldabaoth are (Pearson 57-58), and the
malevolent Regent Metatron is his usurper, why should we believe their own
propaganda which states that there is no other God besides the Authority? Gnostic
myth, after all, tells of another, unknown and removed deity, the true omnipotent
God, called the “demiurge” (Pearson 16). Since there is still a “he” present in the title
of the trilogy, it appears as if Pullman is not quite as sure about his self-created
universes as it seems; someone, obviously, is master of the “dark matter” that is the
living proof of consciousness in Pullman’s worlds. Although Pullman has so willingly
fallen into the “trap” Milton’s Satan has set and whole-heartedly embraced the notion
of a “self-begot” (V, 860) universe, Milton’s own cautious and careful scepticism of
such a concept, his steadfast belief in an omnipotent Creator whom even William
Blake in his flirting with Gnosticism never denied, creeps into the trilogy’s deity-free
creation myth almost unconsciously. The “his dark materials” of Paradise Lost, the
ever-pregnant “womb of nature” (II, 911) out of which God can “create more worlds”
(916) serve as the basic metaphor for creative, spiritual and energetic potential in the
universes of Pullman’s His Dark Materials; thus, Milton’s most vibrant celebration of
divine potentiality, of God as the “almighty maker” (915) and sole ruler even of
Chaos, lies at the very core of Pullman’s supposedly fresh and religion-free creation
myth meant to provide the “republic of Heaven” with its own set of origin stories
(“RoH” 51-52).

The fact that Pullman cannot discard the concept of a creative and creating deity
altogether is doubly intriguing when drawing on Harold Bloom’s reading of Paradise
Lost “as an allegory of the dilemma of the modern poet, at his strongest”, with Satan
representing “that modern poet” who struggles against the stifling influence of God,
whom Bloom sees as “his dead but still embarrassingly potent and present ancestor,
or rather, ancestral poet” (20). Milton’s God thus symbolically stands for the
dominating predecessor of the strong poet, the ultimate dead poet whose stifling
influence can never be fully overcome, only (creatively) battled against. Bloom
remarks that, “God has no Muse, and needs none, since he is dead, his creativity being
manifested only in the past time of the poem” (20), mainly in Raphael’s account of
the Creation and the War in Heaven against Satan during his meeting with Adam
(Books VI-VIII). Yet, even if God seems more withdrawn and, arguably, more
passive in the present time of the epic, Satan is by no means free from his influence;
everything he seemingly creates is merely a shallow copy of what he knew in his
former life. Thus, *Pandemonium* appears as a twisted version of Heaven. God, the Creator, is present even in Hell, and his influence/dominance cannot be pushed away. Likewise, Pullman cannot escape the original text his Fall narrative is based on: the Genesis account of the myth, which places Jahweh at the centre of Creation.

Especially since Pullman reinterprets the Fall myth through Blake, who in turn reinterprets it through Milton, he, like Satan, tries to belittle and ultimately deny the influence of the Creator, the influence of the original Creation story Pullman’s own story is based on. Even more intriguing in this context is Bloom’s remark that:

> The Protestant God, insofar as He was a Person, yielded His paternal role for poets to the blocking figure of the Precursor. God, the Father, for Collins, is John Milton, and Blake’s early rebellion against Nobodaddy is made complete by the satiric attack upon *Paradise Lost* that is at the centre of *The Book of Urizen* and that hovers, much more uneasily, all through the cosmology of *The Four Zoas*. (152)

In light of this observation, the “He” in *His Dark Materials* might very well be referring to Milton himself; it is his narrative Pullman is indebted to, in more ways than Pullman is actually willing to admit or even aware of. Thus, the title reads almost like an unconscious nod to his predecessor, the true “almighty maker” of the story.

There is another crucial influence on the trilogy that needs to be mentioned, which is connected to Pullman’s subversive reading of the epic, and in particular his portrayal of Milton’s God and the Christian religion. In a foreword and commentary to a 2005 edition of *Paradise Lost*, Pullman describes his understanding of the epic as “a story about devils. It’s not a story about God. The fallen angels and their leader are our protagonists, and the unfallen angels, and God the Father and the Son, and Adam and Eve, are all supporting players” (5). To Pullman, it is clear that Satan is the “hero” of the epic, since “Milton is careful to remind us that it was Satan himself who first thought of this plan [to corrupt Creation], and it is Satan who sets out across the wastes of Hell to find his way to the new world. The hero is firmly in charge” (6). Apart from echoing the Romantics’ sentiments to a great extent here, his statement that the epic is “not about God” is reminiscent of William Empson critical work *Milton’s God*. Empson does not hold back in his contempt for and hatred of the Christian religion, which is why his critique of God’s role in the epic quickly turns into a critique rather of the Judeo-Christian deity in general, and Christianity in particular. Empson, too, sees Satan as the hero of the epic, and God as the villain: “On the other hand, before we began to worry about Milton’s God being wicked, we had a
long period of suspecting that his Satan was in some romantic way good” (17). That Milton’s, or, more to the point, Christianity’s God is “wicked” is reiterated repeatedly throughout *Milton’s God*. Empson argues that Milton failed to portray God as just because he could not argue against the image of God given in the Bible, which is an irrevocably “wicked” one. Thus, as Empson declares right at the start of his work, “I think the traditional God of Christianity very wicked, and have done since I was at school, where nearly all my little playmates thought the same” (10).

The adjective “wicked” is repeatedly used to describe Milton’s God (i.e. 10; 11; 17; 24), a curious word choice especially in conjunction with the mentioning of “little playmates”. This creates a peculiarly childish tone throughout the book, as if Empson never quite managed to detach himself from this infant dislike of the Christian God, something which greatly weakens his otherwise sophisticated reading of the epic. The notion of God as “wicked”, however, also serves as a means to somewhat mockingly dethrone the godhead: the terror and splendour of Milton’s God is reduced to a ‘wickedness’ that little children fear. This idea of mockingly referring to this “wicked” God is echoed by Pullman in his summary of book III of *Paradise Lost*:

> In this book we meet God, the Father, and begin to see what Blake meant when he wrote of Milton being ‘of the Devil’s party without knowing it’: for almost the first thing God does is to forecast the fall of man, and immediately go on to say ‘Whose fault?/ Whose but his own?’ in that unattractive whine we hear from children who, caught at a scene of mischief, seek at once to put the blame on someone else. (77)

Intriguingly, Pullman connects God to a whining child in a way that immediately brings Empson’s “wicked God” whom he and his “little playmates” feared to mind. Empson, too, reproaches Milton’s God for being whiney and self-righteous, a tyrant who is indifferent to the pain his creatures will endure:85 “His method of impressing the loyalist angels will doom almost all mankind to misery, but he takes no pleasure in that; it simply does not bother him. The hypocrisy which the jovial old ruffian feels to be required of him in public has not poisoned his own mind, as we realize when he permits himself his leering jokes” (124).

With his strong rhetoric, Empson paints a picture of Milton’s God that is utterly unforgiving, and it is clearly one that Pullman must find fascinating. Although Pullman claims to have never read *Milton’s God*, this is hard to believe when reading

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85 It is hard to merely pick one quote here, since Empson’s attack is best read in its totality; thus, I recommend referring to Empson’s chapter on “Heaven” (91-146) in its totality to grasp the full force of Empson’s rhetoric.
his summary of book VI of *Paradise Lost*: “Once again, for this reader at least, it’s difficult to warm to a God who watches complacently while his forces suffer terrible punishment, deliberately waiting before letting his Son rout the enemy so as to make his triumph seem more splendid” (167). Not only do Pullman’s and Empson’s views on Milton’s God as cruel and self-righteous seem strikingly similar, the heavy, polemical rhetoric they both use also bears a significant resemblance. Pullman accuses Milton’s God of dishonest propaganda when telling the Son to end the war so “that the glory may be thine/Of ending this great war” (VI, 701-702), and he concludes that this behaviour is “not divinity: it’s public relations” (167). This mentioning of God being merely interested in “public relations” is reminiscent of Empson’s interpretation of God’s speech in book III as God’s “method of impressing the loyalist angels” resulting from his “hypocrisy” (124).

Both Empson and Pullman also see the root of the problem with Milton’s God in the main literary source that Milton had to work with, the Bible. As Empson remarks about his criticism of the Judeo-Christian deity: “Most Christians are so imprisoned by their own propaganda that they can scarcely imagine this reaction; though a missionary would have to agree that to worship a wicked God is morally bad for a man, so that he ought to be free to question whether his God is wicked” (10-11). Milton, though trying to “make his God appear less wicked”, does not succeed since “owing to his loyalty to the sacred text and the penetration with which he makes its story real to us his modern critics still feel, in a puzzled way, that there is something badly wrong about it all” (11). In other words, the source material Milton had to use was already so corrupted that Milton, in trying to stay true to the source, was unable to make God anything other than “wicked”. Pullman also sees Milton as simply powerless against the already flawed image of the Christian God, and unable to foresee the reactions both Satan and God would trigger in the readers. Thus, Pullman concludes that “it’s not uncommon for writers to be unaware of exactly what effect their portrayal of this character or that is having on the reader” (167). Both Empson and Pullman hold the view that Milton was not quite aware of what he was doing, and in fact had no choice in his portrayal of God. It seems that William Empson and his interpretation of *Paradise Lost* as a prime example of the corruption and wickedness

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86 This view of the Bible as a “corrupt” text is echoed in *Northern Lights* by Lord Asriel (373), the character most obviously modeled after Milton’s Satan.
of the Christian God, has had a great impact on Pullman’s trilogy, and is the one influence that Pullman, possibly unconsciously, suppresses.

In his foreword to *Paradise Lost* in a new 2005 edition, Pullman readily admits that his own work was greatly influenced by Milton’s epic (8). However, he also states that: “I wasn’t worried about that, because I was well aware that there are many ways of telling the same story, and that this story was a very good one in the first place, and could take a great deal of re-telling” (9). Yet, despite his seeming nonchalance about being so greatly influenced by one of the most crucial canonical texts in English literature, Pullman in fact struggles with Miltonic influence just as much as Lewis does. The following discussions will reveal how Pullman attempts to rework themes from *Paradise Lost* in order to strip them of their Christian content, yet ends up reiterating the same (Christian) principles that inform Milton’s epic. Furthermore, certain assumptions that have been established by scholarly discourse will be closely scrutinised and questioned. Thus, the third section of this chapter seeks to critically re-visit the widely consented notion that Pullman’s trilogy can almost be read as ‘feminist’, and a breakthrough representation of gender relations. The last section of this chapter will focus on Pullman’s views on choice versus fate (Miltonic through and through). But first, I will discuss Pullman’s materialism, symbolically represented by the “Dust” particles, and its relation to Milton’s materialist views.

“*Unless the Almighty Maker them Ordain*”: Pullman’s Materialism and Milton’s God

The book of Genesis tells us that Adam, the first human, was “formed [...] out of the dust of the ground” (27), and that his Fall leads to God’s punishment, which is exile from Paradise, and the loss of immortality: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (3.19). The words “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” are spoken during Christian Ash Wednesday services, when members of the congregation are marked with a little cross that is drawn with an ash and oil paste on their foreheads. This ashen cross is meant to remind Christians of their mortality, of the fact that their physical bodies, after all, are merely “dust”, and will decay and “return to dust”, to the earth. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam echoes Genesis
3.19 when he hears God’s judgement, and realises that he and Eve have brought sin not only on themselves, but also over their offspring:

        Be it so, for I submit, his doom is fair,
        That dust I am, and shal return:
        Oh welcome hour whenever! Why delays
        His hand to execute what his decree
        Fixed on this day? (X, 769-773)

Adam, despairing over what he has done, wishes for God to end his life, and thus his suffering. “Dust”, here as in the original biblical source, is unrefined matter, basically ‘dead’ earth, which only came to life once God “breathed into [Adam’s] nostril’s the breath of life”, which allows the first human to “bec[o]me a living soul” (Gen 2.7). It is God’s breath which turns Adam into a conscious being, and bestows an immortal soul upon him.

As Hugh Rayment-Pickard notes in *The Devil’s Account: Philip Pullman and Christianity*: “To think of ourselves as ‘dust’ places us in a cosmic perspective. We are in the end – and in the beginning – just particles of matter” (62). That is, from a Christian perspective, we creatures are dependent on our Creator in order to become more than dead earth; God is the sole giver and taker of life beyond mere material existence. For the Christian (as for most other world religions), the physical body will simply “return to dust”, and it is only the spirit or “living soul” (Gen 2.7) which will live on eternally. Thus, according to Rayment-Pickard, “the word ‘dust’ has become a metaphor for the frailty and transience of the human body. But not just the human body: all things become dust. [...] Dust is an emblem of the inevitable corruptibility of matter” (62).

In *His Dark Materials*, the word “Dust” is given an entirely different connotation, although it takes the reader (and Lyra) quite some time to realise the importance of “Dust” to its full extent. “Dust” is what the scientists in Lyra’s world call a special type of elementary particles, which seem to be attracted primarily to adults, clustering around them and their dæmons (*NL* 21-23). The Church of Lyra’s world deems those particles the physical evidence of original sin (*NL* 371), since they are only attracted to humans after they reach puberty and thus by implication only once they reach sexual maturity. Lyra, however, soon discovers that “Dust” is in fact the ultimate creative and creating force in the universe(s) – conscious particles born
out of matter’s awareness of and love for itself. Without “Dust”, the worlds would be devoid of consciousness, and humans would be mere brutes, without self-awareness or the ability of rational, abstract thought as opposed to acting purely by instinct. As the reader learns through the angel Balthamos, the impostor God himself is also a product of Dust:

He was an angel like ourselves – the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed out of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed. The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. \( AS \ 33 \)

This is one of many instances in which Pullman ironically toys with the biblical connotations surrounding the word “dust”. The remark that the Authority is “formed out of Dust as we [angels] are” is reminiscent of the lines from Genesis (in turn echoed in Paradise Lost) which depict Adam being created “out of the dust of the ground”. If we humans are mere “Dust”, then so is the impostor deity, who turns out to be just another Dust-being/angel. As Freitas and King note in Killing the Impostor God: Philip Pullman’s Spiritual Imagination in His Dark Materials, “the line from Genesis that tells us we are made from dust” can be taken as “an indication of our nothingness in comparison with God. We are, essentially, dirt” and thus, “by calling the most precious stuff in His Dark Materials Dust, Pullman turns on its head this typical interpretation of human nature” (23). Indeed, Pullman reverses the Christian idea that we ‘dust-beings’ become animated with life only by the goodwill of our Creator, giving matter the spiritual power to animate itself with consciousness and self-awareness, through its love for its own self. There is no—or at least there does not seem to be any—need for a life-giving Creator in Pullman’s universes.

As Freitas and King, as well as Rayment-Pickard before them, remark, the existence of Dust is vulnerable (Freitas and King 29) in that Dust is dependent on its constant renewal through conscious beings, via their thoughts and emotions. Unlike the Judeo-Christian deity, Dust is not a steady, unchangeable force in the universe, but a highly fragile entity that depends on humans’ goodwill just as much as humans

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87 Rayment-Pickard points out that “dust” also features in C.S. Lewis’s The Magician’s Nephew, as a mysterious substance that can move between Narnia and our world (Rayment-Pickard 63-64); it seems as if, yet again, Pullman’s fantasy story has closer intertextual ties with Lewis’s than he might be aware of.

88 Pullman’s angels are not to be equated with Dust; they are intellectually more complex, self-conscious manifestations of Dust, yet have their own unique personality and sense of self, and exist apart from the stream of Dust particles surrounding conscious beings.
depend on it clinging to them and thus enriching their lives. It is this interdependence that Pullman stresses: without Dust, there can be no consciousness, no self-awareness and likewise, without the existence of self-aware beings, Dust would cease to exist as well. This concept of interconnectedness and interdependence leads Freitas and King to propose that Pullman is in fact not totally opposed to the idea of a ‘Creator’, but that he has merely replaced the old-fashioned idea of a patriarchal, authoritative Godhead with the theological concept of panentheism (30), the idea “that the universe itself is God in the process of becoming” (30) or “God evolving” (31). This theory is one of a number of attempts by some critics to read Pullman’s text as not just deeply spiritual, but deeply theological, even supporting a renewal of Christian spirituality.89

The idea of Pullman favouring a panentheistic view rather misses the point he is trying to make here: a materialist through and through, Pullman uses Dust as the over-arching metaphor for his belief in the material world as the true home of human beings. Dust, after all, is essentially matter (elementary particles of spirit-matter, to be precise). ‘Spirit’, thus, is a graspable, scientifically provable reality, it can be measured, seen and felt, even communicated with by the trilogy’s characters with the help of scientific instruments such as Mary Malone’s amber spyglass or Lyra’s alethiometer. There is no need for a God or any other, theological concept such as panentheism, in order to ‘explain’ the spiritual experiences Pullman’s characters have. As Rayment-Pickard sums it up: “Dust is not the raw material of life, but processed life, life that has gone through the wringer of human trial and error. God has nothing to do with Dust because Dust is what we make by living the human life” (65). And, important to add here, Dust is likewise what made human life and modern civilisation what it is in the first place.

Pullman firmly embeds spiritual experiences into the material world; Dust is not opposed to matter, neither removed from it – it is one with matter. When Dust threatens to seep out of the world(s), nature tries to stop the flood of particles streaming away from matter. Mary Malone witnesses this desperate attempt at remaining linked to and interconnected with Dust (AS 476). Pullman describes how matter actively tries to maintain its unity with Dust, “in a combined effort”, as one great materialist unit. Dust and matter strive for a unity, they “enrich” each other – a clear statement against a dualist view on existence: “Matter loved Dust” (all 476), as

89 The Archbishop of Canterbury would be another prominent reader/critic who claims that Pullman is in fact writing a pro-Christian text; see chapter three of this thesis.
Mary Malone realizes, witnessing matter’s effort to remain united with Dust. Likewise, Dust, too, seeks harmony and interconnection with matter, as the imprisoned ghosts’ eagerness to return to the material world shows: “‘What would you do, if you could?’ said Lyra. ‘Go up to the world again!’ ‘Even if it meant you could only see it once, would you still want to do that?’ ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’” (AS 317).

This view on spirit and spiritual reality as part of the material world, as opposed to a Manichean view that creates a dualistic contrast between matter and spirit is an intertextual echo of Milton’s concept of *prima materia* or “first matter”, which he extensively discusses in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. *Prima materia* also features in *Paradise Lost*, in the very scene Pullman quotes at the beginning of his trilogy. When Satan approaches Chaos on his way to Paradise, he catches a frightening yet fascinating glimpse of the “dark materials” boiling within the realm of Chaos. This passage, which serves as the basis for the title of Pullman’s trilogy, has been quoted before in Pullman criticism, yet I deem it useful to quote it once again:

[...]

Into this wild abyss,
The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed,
Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight,
Unless the almighty maker them ordain
His dark materials to create more worlds,
Into this wild abyss the wary fiend
Stood on the brink of hell and looked awhile,
Pondering his voyage[.]

(*PL* II, 910-919)

This is a powerful depiction of Chaos as containing the seed for future divine creation, the birthplace of matter itself. The “dark materials” contained within Chaos’s “womb” are still “mixed,/ Confusedly”, doomed to “fight” for unattainable supremacy until God decides to form them into “more worlds”. The phrase “this wild abyss”, repeated twice, emphasizes the confusion and disordered state of the scene stretching out before Satan. Only God can bring order into this chaotic place, otherwise everything exists in a paradoxical state of anti-being, a highly fertile state, “pregnant” with explosive creative potential.

It would be a mistake to see Chaos as a realm where God has no power (Chaos himself errs about this in PL III, 999-1005 when he boasts about his “realm”, prompted by Satan’s flattery). As Sewell stresses:

There are no twin rulers in the universe. There is one Almighty, from whom ‘all things proceed’, both agent and patient, who fills infinitude, but who may withdraw himself so that action shall have where-withal to act upon. He may
withdraw his goodness— but he may also communicate it, ‘proportioned to each kind’. This communication, this diffusion of his good, is the work of creation. (133)

So, God has “withdrawn his goodness” from Chaos, yet this does not mean that Chaos is ‘free of God’; it is God, after all, who decides to “bid the deep/ Within appointed bounds be heaven and earth” (VII, 166-167) on the first day of Creation—to fill the endless chaotic void with order and life. Sewell remarks that “God is in Chaos potentially, but not actively; and so, as yet, the Deep is undigested and unadorned” (126) and God can choose to take the unrefined substance of Chaos to create new worlds. So, even in the realm of Chaos, this seemingly disorganised, explosively fertile anti-space, God rules supreme.⁹⁰

The endless potentiality of Chaos and its “dark materials” is echoed in Pullman’s trilogy when Lyra marvels at the disturbing beauty of the Aurora, and notices a strange atmosphere around her: “In the gloom though, Lyra sensed the presence of the Dust, for the air seemed to be full of dark intentions, like the forms of thoughts not yet born” (NL 390). The “Dark intentions” swirling around Lyra can easily be linked to Milton’s “dark materials”. In this passage, just as in Milton’s description of Chaos, the almost overcharged creative potential lies in Dust’s/first matter’s as yet dormant ability to create (or be formed into) higher forms of life. Lyra cannot see them yet, but the “dark intentions” she senses refer to the presence of the angels serving Lord Asriel, as well as his attempt to destroy the Authority’s tyrannical rule, a plan not yet put into action, but already present in Asriel’s Mephistophelian mind. Of course, Pullman turns Milton’s materialism on its head by making the material world the sole basis for any future human (or other sentient beings’) evolvement. It is through the trilogy’s characters themselves that Dust can yet again enrich the worlds, and thus enrich them with more and more human potential, which in turn brings more Dust into the worlds, and so on. This spiritualist perpetuum mobile does not seem to need an “almighty maker” – it is in a constant state of hyperpotentiality; the “dark materials” of Pullman’s universes are being formed into “new worlds” by their own desire and evolutionary drive.

As we can see both in De Doctrina Christiana as well as Paradise Lost, Milton was a firm believer in creatio ex deo, creation out of God, as opposed to creatio ex nihilo, which rests on the assumption that God created the world out of nothing (Hart

⁹⁰ See Juliet Lucy Cummins’s “Milton’s God and the Matter of Creation” for a further discussion of Chaos and Milton’s materialism.
17). The “dark materials” contained within Chaos’s “womb” are *prima materia*, original or first matter, which is part of and directly derives from God’s own substance. This first matter is the basis of *all* creation, be it animal, angel or man (Sewell 130), and thus, all material creation is essentially good, since derived directly from God’s own matter. Milton firmly stresses his positive materialism in *De Doctrina Christiana*: “For the original matter of which we speak is not looked upon as an evil or trivial thing, but as intrinsically good and the chief productive stock of every subsequent good” (quoted in Sewell 127).

This idea of the inherent goodness in all of creation poses a troubling question about the nature of evil, and indeed, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton grapples with the problem of how the fallen angels could have turned to evil, since they were created good like the rest of the celestial hosts. One of the reasons Satan is such a fascinating character is that Milton reminds us frequently that he used to be the noblest and most resplendent of all the angels, a fact that makes his fall even more spectacular. Likewise, the calamity befalling Adam and Eve with their decision to disobey God seems even more tragic, since it was their free choice to act against their inherently good nature. In both cases, Milton reasons that the gift of free will can lead creatures to turn away from goodness, yet that does not imply that there is something evil dormant within creation. Thus, Milton also opposes dualism and argues for the good that lies even in Satan’s evil; God, who is infinite goodness, cannot but turn even the great evil of the human fall into something good, which is the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ.

In *His Dark Materials*, Pullman seeks to adapt Milton’s conviction that the material world is to be cherished to suit his own beliefs and tries to sever this conviction from its Christian foundation. Milton’s materialism is a direct result of his monist beliefs; the material world cannot be bad, since it was made from God himself, who is ultimate goodness. Pullman’s materialism, however, results from his atheist views, which naturally lead him to promote the beauty of materialist reality “because for us, there is no elsewhere” (*AS* 382). This is why Pullman stresses the necessity to relish our physicality; in *His Dark Materials*, even spirit and spiritual experiences, symbolised by the manifestation of Dust particles, are ultimately matter, and thus, firmly tied to materialist reality.

To Milton, Creation exists in a delicate “scale of being”, with the original, unrefined matter contained within Chaos at the lowest end, and God positioned at the
top. Sewell notes that: “This self-differentiation of God results in a scale of being, reaching down from him, through the angels, through man, through animals and plants, through the beneficent order of winds and hills and pleasant waters, through the ordering of the elements, to Chaos itself, where nothing is ordered, nothing as yet adorned” (134). The angels, as spirit-beings, represent a more sophisticated form of matter than humans, and Raphael hints to Adam that it is humanity’s ultimate goal to one day possess bodies as refined as the angels’ (PL V, 497-500). Hence, we can see that Milton, although a firm believer in the goodness of all of Creation, saw even the prelapsarian humans as somewhat less refined than the angels.

Pullman, who opposes the Christian eschatology, tries to affirm the beauty and power of the material reality. Thus, the angels of His Dark Materials are weaker than humans, who possess “true flesh” (AS 12), i.e. are formed out of matter and Dust. The angels, mere Dust-beings, are at a disadvantage against humans, since their ‘bodies’ are illusions, hardly discernible to the human eye and difficult to hold together. When the angel Baruch’s strength fails after being wounded, he rapidly disintegrates: “A draught from the door sent an eddy of air across the bed, and the particles of the angel’s form, loosened by the waning of his strength, swirled upwards into randomness, and vanished” (AS 66). All it takes is “a draught” to obliterate the angel’s body, and let it vanish “into randomness”. This is a clear ironic reversal of the powerful celestial beings Milton created, who can only be wounded, but never die, and who – even fallen from grace as Satan has – can still inspire awe and even admiration. When Will fights one of Metatron’s minions, he is surprised at how easily he can battle him and he learns that humans are “stronger than angels” (AS 30). Hence, Pullman’s angels covet humans their bodies, longing “to have our flesh and our senses” because “it would be sort of ecstasy for them” (AS 463).

Indeed, when Mary Malone tries to follow the stream of Dust that flows through the world of the mulefa, she has an out-of-body experience that terrifies her; afraid that she might be carried away from her body, she uses “sense-memories” such as “[t]he taste of bacon and egg” as a “mental lifeline” (all AS 385) in order to escape the Dust-flow. When she manages to return to her body, she is “suffused with a deep slow ecstasy at being one with her body and the earth and everything that was matter” (AS 386). This is the type of “ecstasy” the angels long for, the experience of tasting,

91 For a more lengthy discussion of Pullman’s ironic reversal of the Miltonic scale of being, see my research essay.
smelling, touching, seeing, all of which Pullman describes as “the sensations that made up being alive” (AS 385). In that sense, the angels seem to be somehow ‘less alive’ than the humans and also, despite their vast intellectual properties (a trait they share with Milton’s angels), they are ultimately powerless when confronted with human “flesh”, since they lack the solid materiality human bodies possess. Lord Asriel realises that Metatron’s vast army can still be defeated since: “Few as we are, [...] and short-lived as we are, and weak-sighted as we are – in comparison with them, we’re still stronger. They envy us, Ogunwe! That’s what fuels their hatred, I’m sure of it. They long to have our precious bodies, so solid and powerful, so well adapted to the good earth!” (AS 394).

In His Dark Materials, even the angel Metatron, the archenemy of Pullman’s story and also the most powerful of all the angels, is easily defeated by Mrs. Coulter’s female charms, her sensual physicality. Furthermore, Metatron was once human, and thus his extraordinary strength seems to stem primarily from his former physicality. Since he still remembers what it was like to have a body, Metatron is also especially vulnerable towards Mrs. Coulter’s seduction skills; again, it is her “flesh” that lures and wins over the angel: “But she trusted to her flesh, and to the strange truth she’d learned about angels, perhaps especially those angels who had once been human: lacking flesh, they coveted it and longed for contact with it” (AS 420). Even though the angel is depicted as “a being whose profound intellect had had thousands of years to deepen and strengthen itself, and whose knowledge extended over a million universes” (AS 425), he is reduced to a ravenous dog, and falls victim to his instincts through his hunger for Mrs. Coulter’s “flesh”: “She leaned towards the shadow, as if she couldn’t control the impulses of her own body, and the shadow hungrily sniffed and seemed to gulp at the scent of her flesh” (425). The word “flesh”, repeated so many times throughout The Amber Spyglass in particular, turns the fragile nature of human existence, the fact that we are mere “flesh”, into something awe-inspiring and tremendously powerful. It is not the vast rebel army that Asriel gathers together which defeats Metatron, but the “flesh” of a woman.

Hugh Rayment-Pickard notes that Pullman’s view of sexuality and sensuality as something positive, even spiritual, is strongly influenced by Milton’s portrayal of

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92 Pullman links Metatron to the Gnostic figure of Enoch and the story told in the Book of Enoch 2 or Secrets of Enoch, in which the “sons of God”, the angels, fall in love with the women from Earth; this forbidden liaison leads to the angels’ banishment from heaven, and to the beginning of sin on Earth; see Russell (213).
angelic sex, which Raphael describes to Adam as a complete, boundary-free mixing of body and soul, a more refined and more pleasurable experience than human sexuality, since:

Easier than air with air, if spirits embrace,
Total they mix, union of pure with pure
Desiring; nor restrained conveyance need
As flesh to mix with flesh, or soul with soul. (VIII, 626-629)

We have indeed a clear echo of this instantaneous mixing of lovers’ bodies and souls in Pullman’s depiction of Lyra’s and Will’s touching of each other’s daemons; here, their acute pleasure stems from achieving an intimacy that encompasses both the physical and spiritual realm. The connection between Will and Lyra thus is something that goes beyond the mere physical, however, it is specifically through the sense of touch that this union between daemons and bodies is achieved, a sensation that Pullman’s angels lack. Thus, in His Dark Materials, human sexuality is portrayed as an altogether more intimate and fulfilling experience than angelic one, if angels can indeed experience such sensual intimacy at all. Rayment-Pickard seems to think that they can, for he sees the (rather chaste) love between the angels Balthamos and Baruch as a direct intertextual product of Pullman’s fascination with Milton’s depiction of angelic sex:

We can see why this passage would appeal to Pullman, because Milton suggests that true sexuality involves the ‘virtual’ body more than the ‘immediate’ body of flesh. Pullman never says that he is exploring the ‘spirituality’ of sexuality, but this surely is what he is doing. Pullman’s angels represent the spirituality of sex [...]. (69)

It is true that Milton’s idealised version of prelapsarian sexuality firmly rests upon the idea of reason as the guiding force even when it comes to sensual enjoyment. Hence, Adam is warned by Raphael not to be overcome with Eve’s charms, but to exercise restraint, since “love refines/ The thoughts, and heart enlarges, hath his seat/ In reason” (VIII, 589-591). Milton’s ideal of prelapsarian sexuality allows sensuality and passion, yet Milton stressed the need to have reason keep passion in check.

Certainly, Milton’s angels do indeed “represent the spirituality of sex” (69) that Rayment-Pickard attributes to Pullman’s angels; however, Pullman’s angels lack the sophisticated physicality that Milton’s angels possess, which is precisely the point and the key to understanding Pullman’s take on Milton’s view of ‘true’ sexuality. When Rayment-Pickard notices that Balthamos considers “talking” to be “best” of all he can share with his lover Baruch (AS 27), and sees that as proof of Pullman glorifying the
'spiritual' dimension of sexuality (69), the fact that talking is all the angels can do (except to feebly embrace) seems to escape him. Since Pullman so carefully builds up the angels’ physical inferiority and their longing for “true flesh”, it is hard to see how Rayment-Pickard reaches the conclusion that: “Pullman leaves the angels’ physical status deliberately ambiguous” (68). Metatron’s hunger for Mrs. Coulter actually very much suggests that the angels are unable to satisfy their sexual appetites, which links them directly to Milton’s fallen angels, impotent since their exclusion from the natural “scale of being” through their rebellion against God. Pullman’s angels rely on “talking”, because they cannot experience the same sensual pleasures humans can. So what follows for the angels, does not need to be true for humans; indeed, when Lyra and Will ‘fall’, Will is “too joyful to speak” and “[a]round them there was nothing but silence” (AS 492).

I agree with Rayment-Pickard that Pullman is “exploring the ‘spirituality’ of sexuality” (69), and in that is directly influenced by Milton’s firm belief in sexuality as something pure, yet Pullman seeks to present bodily sensations in themselves as something holy and spiritual. Since it is Will’s and Lyra’s first sensual experience that stops the flood of Dust, it is through their physicality and solidity that the universe continues to be spiritually enriched. We can see Pullman in fact departing from Milton’s concept of ‘ideal’ or ‘true’ sexuality resting on reason and spiritual refinement; the spiritual dimension of Lyra’s and Will’s moment of intimacy is a direct result of their complete sensual abandon as “they lay in a trance of happiness murmuring words whose sound was as confused as their sense, and they felt they were melting with love” (AS 509). Thus, it is not true, as Rayment-Pickard claims, that Baruch’s and Balthamos’s “love, and their sexuality” to Pullman is “the purest kind of interpersonal relationship” (68), because it is Lyra and Will who represent the true ideal of a loving and also passionately physical relationship, as it is their physical intimacy which saves the universes.

In comparing Pullman’s and Milton’s view on angelic and human sexuality, Rayment-Pickard misses a crucial difference in their materialist views: to Milton, all of Creation derives from God and thus, everything ultimately is spirit. Even the most base, crude form of matter, the “dark materials” we find in Chaos, can one day be

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93 This is why Satan is so consumed with jealousy and envy when he spies on Adam and Eve and laments his own state in Hell, “where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire” consume the fallen angels (IV, 505-511).
refined and shaped into “new worlds” (II, 916), and then, eventually, “at last turn all to spirit” (V, 497) and be reunited with God on the day of the Last Judgement. Hence, to Milton, spirit is the ideal form of all Creation. For Pullman, despite being so obviously intrigued by Milton’s materialism, this view cannot do, since his goal is to present a materialist universe that does not need a Creator. So, in *His Dark Materials*, everything, even spirit, is part of the material world and thus, physical pleasure is (or at least ideally can be) likewise a spiritual experience. Rayment-Pickard criticises Pullman’s seeming need for a ‘spiritual’ dimension to his materialist universe:

Pullman may dismiss God, but he still wants the world to be a spiritually enchanted place. The material world is not enough for [Pullman], it has to be showered with Dust. The material body is not enough: it has to have a daemon. And the sexual interaction of bodies is not enough: it must have a spiritual meaning. (70)

The fact that the world is “showered with Dust” does not go against Pullman’s materialism at all. The daemon, formed out of Dust, is the very symbol of Pullman’s ideal materialist spirituality, and so is the “spiritual meaning” of Lyra’s and Will’s sexual encounter: spirituality, represented by the Dust particles, stems from matter’s love for itself; spirit is not one of two dualist powers in the universe, it is not to be differentiated from matter, but it is a part of the material world. In that, of course, Pullman is again close to Milton’s monist views.

Another aspect central to Pullman’s insistence that the material world is our ‘true home’ is the repeated assertion of the necessity to live in the here and now, since there is no afterlife, no Heaven. No blissful salvation awaits Pullman’s “ghosts” after their death; in order to escape the prison-like “world of the dead”, the ghosts have to tell their life-story to the monstrous harpies, and only fully enjoyed lives result in a compelling enough story. “There is now!” exclaims Mary Malone at the end of *The Amber Spyglass* (AS 476), realising that without a God or the promise of a better afterlife, there is an even greater urgency to savour each moment of materialist reality, to relish everything the material word has to offer. Although seemingly departing from Milton’s Christian beliefs here, Pullman is in fact still strictly following Milton’s moral ideals with his persistent reminder that life needs to be lived ‘in the moment’. Although Lyra and Will have to navigate their way through countless parallel worlds, they ultimately learn the need to live in their own respective worlds. As the ghost of Will’s father tells them:
[Y]our daemon can only live its full life in the world it was born in. Elsewhere it will eventually sicken and die. We can travel, if there are openings into other worlds, but we can only live in our own. Lord Asriel’s great enterprise will fail in the end for the same reason: we have to build the republic of heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere (AS 382).

Millicent Lenz interprets the openings between the worlds as “the product of technology run amok” since these windows “cause the seeping away of consciousness to other universes”; Lenz further notes how “Pullman is showing us that escapism is fatal to consciousness, for it means neglecting to deal with the world at hand, the ‘here and now’ of everyday life, and it also means missing out on the joys of being in the present moment” (9).

As previously discussed, Milton, too, expresses the necessity to live in the here and now in Paradise Lost, when Raphael sternly reminds Adam to “dream not of other worlds”, but be content with what God has given him. Unnecessary scientific speculations and day-dreaming about what might be can lead away from being grateful for what is, and this in turn can lead away from worshipping God for having created the here and now exactly perfect and suitable for its creatures. In His Dark Materials, it is Lord Asriel who, despite being the great faustian (and, of course, ‘satanic’) mastermind behind the rebellion against the authority, “will fail in the end” (AS 382) since he overlooks the need for small, yet immediate changes in his zealous quest to change the fabric of reality itself. Pullman seems to encourage his adolescent readers to effect change on a smaller scale rather than thinking ‘too big’. Lyra considers her father’s efforts “all wasted” (AS 482), because he did not see the need to remain firmly rooted in the given reality. However, just as Raphael does not chide Adam for his speculative mind and scientific curiosity as such, so does Lyra acknowledge “all that bravery and skill” (AS 482) of her father’s grand enterprise.

What is striking about Pullman’s insistence on the need to live in the here and now is that it forces him to make a plot-choice that oddly clashes with his positive materialism and his representation of physicality and sensuality as something almost holy. Many readers, and also critics such as Susan Matthews, Rayment-Pickard, and very forcefully John Gooderham, have lamented the fact that Will and Lyra, after all their trials and hardships, have to go their separate ways. As Gooderham somewhat polemically expresses it in Fantasising as It Is: “After their finding each other and the

94 See section three of chapter one of this thesis.
momentary consummation of their love, with the immediacy of an extreme moral interdict, they are wrenched apart and consigned, irretrievably, to separate homes and separate futures” (171). Although I do not always agree with Gooderham’s critique of His Dark Materials as employing “religious terminology” (156) in a way that Gooderham sees unfitting for young adult fantasy, I agree that Lyra’s and Will’s separation leaves the reader slightly puzzled, precisely because their awakened sexual and romantic awareness is what saves the universes. Susan Matthews, who analyses Pullman’s use of Blakean imagery, critiques Pullman for simplifying and restructuring “Blake’s multiple, worrying, and often contradictory narratives into a single linear narrative, which in its ending asserts the inevitable need for the openings between worlds to be closed and for lovers to part” (134).

Pullman, who tries to separate the Miltonic version of the biblical Fall from its Christian roots and to turn it into a Blakean celebration of experience and unrestrained desire, ultimately cannot escape the stern moral framework of Milton’s epic, which is Christian to its core. Thus, Will and Lyra have to pay a price for their romantic awakening, a fact that appears to be strangely at odds with Pullman’s decisive materialism. Despite the seeming departure from Milton’s ideal of sexuality governed by reason and restraint, Pullman in fact ends up following this ideal in the end. Will and Lyra have to go against their passions and sacrifice their physical connection for a more important cause; they freely choose to do so, yet at the same time are bound to make this choice since it is the only morally sound one they can make (AS 520-22).

As mentioned earlier, Burt sees the two young heroes’ choice to separate for the greater good as proof of Pullman’s departure from Blakean thought and notes that “Pullman is decidedly not ‘Satanist’ in that he sometimes insists on self-restraint and self-sacrifice: he does not always take the side of desire” (53). It is true that, when Lyra and Will talk their way through the pros and cons of the choice they are facing, and end up despairing over the realisation that they must go against their deepest desires, they behave in the exact way that Blake criticises in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”:

Those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak
Enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason
Usurps its place and governs the unwilling.
And being restrained it by degrees becomes passive,
Till it is only the shadow of desire. (“MHH” 30-34)

Reason, to Blake, is a dangerous force since it stifles passion and thus also restricts creativity. Burt is right: Pullman seems to depart from Blake’s ideal here, and it seems
strange that he decides to do so directly after depicting Lyra’s and Will’s ‘fall’ as one of the most Blakean moments in the trilogy, as a victory of unrestrained desire over restricting boundaries. Immediately after their “blissful discovery” of the joy of interconnecting bodies and demons/souls (*AS* 528), Lyra and Will have to part forever, guided by their reason and going against their own desires and inner wishes.

What Burt misses here, and what I believe to be the missing puzzle piece in understanding Pullman’s swerve away from supporting unrestrained desire towards ultimately favouring a choice guided by reason, is that Pullman is simply unable to go against his greatest literary influence here, John Milton and *Paradise Lost*. The need for “self-restraint and self-sacrifice” that Burt sees expressed in the trilogy is distinctly Miltonic, and in that, also deeply Christian. Burt’s observation that “Lyra and Will make (and choose to make) the one sacrifice Adam and Eve never do” (54), which implies that Pullman’s trilogy follows even stricter moral guidelines than Milton’s epic did, leaves out the crucial fact that the “one sacrifice” Adam and Eve do not make is made by the Son, who sacrifices himself in order to liberate all future human generations. In *His Dark Materials*, Lyra simultaneously acts as Eve and Christ (in her role as liberator of the dead) and thus, following the logic of the Christian myth Pullman is simultaneously rejecting yet intertextually tied to, she has to make the sacrifice that will save the future of the universes. So strongly is Pullman’s trilogy informed by Milton’s Christian epic that it leaves Pullman with only one possible outcome for his story: the fall must lead to a painful self-sacrifice, and there has to be a separation in the end.⁹⁵ Carole Scott remarks that “Blake leads Pullman from the Miltonic structured universe into a realm where creativity knows no bounds, where heresy is laughable, where emotions and intuition rise above reason, and where all that is emotional, sensuous, and joyful is an aspect of the ‘body divine’” (102), yet Pullman returns to the very “Miltonic structured universe” he tries to depart from at the end of his story. As Will discovers: “there was no arguing with fate” (*AS* 422); there is no escaping the Christian myth of self-sacrifice for a greater good that lies at the centre of *Paradise Lost* and thus, ends up at the centre of *His Dark Materials* as well.

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⁹⁵ For Adam and Eve, it is the separation from Paradise and their direct and unmitigated relationship with God: “They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, /Through Eden took their solitary way” (*PL* XII, 649-650); they are together, yet “solitary” due to the loss of their direct connectedness with God. Note that Lyra and Will promise to ‘meet’ once every year in their respective Botanic Gardens, a symbol of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve are allowed to stay together, yet remain separated from Eden, while Will and Lyra still have access to Paradise, yet can never be truly together again.
The need for Lyra’s and Will’s self-sacrifice does in no way follow as a necessity from the inner logic of the plot or storyline, as a peculiar exchange between Will and the angel Xaphania reveals. Pullman is primarily interested in making a didactic point here, and one that is steeped in Miltonic reasoning. In a last attempt to prevent the absolute separation from Lyra, Will remarks that there is no need to close all openings between the worlds as “surely Dust only escapes through the openings the knife made” (AS 524). Xaphania’s answer is strikingly reminiscent of Raphael’s words to Adam and his advice to “dream not of other worlds”; she informs Will that the angels “shall close them all”, not denying that Will is right in his observation. She explains that “if you thought that any still remained, you would spend your life searching for one, and that would be a waste of the time you have. You have other work than that to do, much more important and valuable, in your own world” (AS 524). One is tempted to ask why the angel cannot simply inform Will where such an opening might be, and indeed the whole scene only makes sense in light of Pullman’s didactic message – the need “to build the republic of heaven where we are” (AS 382). Yet, this idea that one can only be a valuable citizen of this republic in his or her own reality, and that searching for openings into “other worlds” only leads away from a productive life, is not really Pullman’s at all, it is Milton’s – rewritten, yet surprisingly unchanged in His Dark Materials. However Blakean Pullman wants to see the Fall myth, he cannot but end up seeing and presenting it as Miltonic. Carole Scott has noticed that “we find a religious, even puritanical streak in [Pullman’s] sense of every person’s ultimate responsibility to humankind, even at the expense of their own happiness” (quoted in Squires 2006, 121). This “puritanical streak”, which runs especially through the last volume of His Dark Materials, is due to the presence of Milton’s ghost, hovering over Pullman’s materialist concept. However Pullman might try to sever the ties between the epic and its biblical source by reading Paradise Lost through a Romantic lens, the ghost of Milton, the “great Inhibitor” (Bloom 32) of English poetry, will not be pushed to the margins that easily; in the end, Milton’s ghost haunts Pullman’s text in the most surprising ways.

The fact that Pullman’s didactic ‘message’, supposedly atheist and in no need of a divine Creator, still relies on the Christian ethos and Miltonic thought, becomes even more apparent when scrutinizing the numerous faces of divinity we find throughout the trilogy. Not only are Pullman’s universes overflowing with spiritual creativity, symbolized by the Dust particles, there are other representations of the
divine as well, such the witch-goddess “Yambe Akka”, the angel Xaphania – a figure reminiscent of the Gnostic ‘Sophia’, who symbolizes divine wisdom, and even to an extent Will’s father and his shamanic knowledge; all of these figures represent a form of supernaturalism whose origin is never quite fully explained in the trilogy. The witches, too, practice ‘magic’, and the angels seem to have mysterious “ways of travel” between worlds and even realities, using “the faculty of what you call imagination” (AS 523). Then there is Mary Malone’s curious out-of-body experience, and Pullman’s insistence on the tripartite nature of humans, without quite revealing what the third part that complements soul and body truly is. One might even go so far as to play devil’s advocate here, and point out that if the Authority lied about having been the Creator, he might also have lied about having been “the first angel, […] the most powerful” (AS 33). In Paradise Lost, Satan uses this argument to prove his (wrong) point about his “self-begot” nature, claiming that “We know no time where we were not as now;/ Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised/ By our own quickening power” (V, 859-861), yet the point is that it is no point at all, precisely because no one was around when the first conscious being was created.

It is obvious that the Authority is an impostor, yet since Pullman so often toys with Gnostic myth, the question arises if there might not be an unknown, remote source for Dust, just as Gnosticism depicts a ‘true’, unknown and remote God, who is the true master of the universes. As I pointed out earlier, the inclusion of the pronoun “his” in the title of the trilogy almost begs for these questions to be raised, which seems strange considering that Pullman’s proclaimed goal is to rule out the presence of a divine Creator. Thus, it is not surprising that Freitas and King are so certain that Pullman’s trilogy is in fact deeply religious, promoting panentheism as a new view on divinity. As Freitas and King note in their introduction: “Pullman has by no means killed off God in general. He has killed off only one understanding of God—God-as-tyrant—and an oddly antiquated and unimaginative one at that” (19). Yet, the point that this discussion sought to press forward is that Pullman was simply unable to ‘kill off’ God completely and create a “self-begot” universe, due to the dominating influence of Milton’s epic on the trilogy. Although Pullman focuses primarily on the epic’s ‘satanic’ narrative elements, the belief that there is a God, and that he is just and good, lies at the core of Paradise Lost and thus it ends up seeping into the trilogy as well.
“Feminist Milton” versus “Milton’s Bogey”: Gender in His Dark Materials

There has long been a heated critical debate over the question of gender representation in Milton’s Paradise Lost. Opinions among critics range from condemning Milton as misogynist and his Eve as a shallow temptress, to more recent debates which acknowledge Milton’s depiction of Adam’s and Eve’s companionate marriage, as well as Milton’s attempt to present an Eve who is not just a pretty ornament in the Garden of Eden. Feminist critics dating as far back as Mary Wollstonecraft have censured Milton for his portrayal of Eve as merely re-establishing men’s God-given superiority over women and reiterating patriarchal conventions without questioning them. Statements such as “He for God only, she for God in him” (IV, 299) can be read as proof of Milton’s misogynistic attitude, and Eve’s unquestioning obedience to her husband (that is, until she falls), as well as Adam judging her to be “in outward show/ Elaborate, of inward less exact” than he is (VIII, 538-540) is all hard to swallow for a modern female reader. Critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic have rejected Milton’s depiction of Eve, arguing that: “The story that Milton, ‘the first of the masculinists,’ most notably tells to women is of course the story of woman’s secondness, her otherness, and how that otherness leads inexorably to her demonic anger, her sin, her fall, her exclusion from that garden of the gods which is also, for her, the garden of poetry” (191). To Gilbert and Gubar, Milton’s Eve symbolizes all those female writers who have been silenced by patriarchy over the centuries; the overpowering influence of Milton’s epic, “Milton’s bogey” (190), has supposedly done its part in stifling women’s creativity and given men a powerful tool with which to defend their own superior status. Thus, in Gilbert’s and Gubar’s opinion, “just as Satan is humbled and enslaved by his desire for the bitter fruit, so Eve is humbled by becoming a slave not only to Adam the individual man but to Adam the archetypal man, a slave not only to her husband but, as de Beauvoir notes, to the species” (197). However, as Karen L. Edwards notes: “An interpretive strategy that finds Milton to be a modern feminist is as inadequate as a strategy that finds him to be a misogynist” (145); both extremist views misread Milton’s balanced portrayal of gender relations that nevertheless implements the patriarchal structures of Milton’s contemporary world.
Chapter two of this thesis outlined how C.S. Lewis favours a view of Paradise Lost as celebrating the natural, God-given hierarchy that renders women inferior to men. My discussion of Lewis’s peculiar re-interpretation of gender relations in Milton’s epic illustrated that Lewis, like many critics and readers before him, (mis)read Milton’s Eve as representing unfallen woman as submissive and unquestioningly obedient to her male superior. However, Milton in fact places great emphasis on Eve’s self-sufficiency, intellectual capacity and her status as companion to, not subject of, Adam. When Adam accuses her of having tempted him into disobeying God and calls her “all but a rib/ Crooked by nature, bent, as now appears,/ More to the part sinister from me drawn” (X, 884-886) he himself has already fallen from grace and thus his words are no longer those of an even-tempered, rational man; it is Adam who accuses Eve of bringing doom upon mankind, not Milton. Thus, Milton cannot be reproached for repeating the mistake of the early church fathers and a string of medieval theologians, who placed the blame of the Fall almost exclusively on Eve’s shoulders.96

As Diane Kelsey McColley remarks in Milton’s Eve, Milton’s “crucial task was, in the face of an overwhelmingly antifeminine tradition, to create an Eve who is imaginative and rational, sensuous and intelligent, passionate and chaste, and free and responsible [...]” (3). McColley argues against a too simplistic feminist reading of Eve as a one-dimensional stereotype born out of Milton’s deep-seated misogyny, and highlights Eve’s role as Adam’s “fit help”, his “other self” (VIII, 450). The marriage between Adam and Eve is an ideal relationship, in which the two sexes complement each other, and their union goes far beyond mere physical compatibility and the biological instinct to procreate (Edwards 146-147).

Milton the monist could not have favoured a view of women as intrinsically corrupt; as McColley observes:

The idea of Eve that Milton’s age inherited resulted from a dualistic habit of mind that he strove in all his works to reform: the supposition that nature and spirit, body and soul, passion and reason, and art and truth are inherently antithetical and that woman, the primordial temptress, represents the dark and dangerous (or rebellious and thrilling) side of each antithesis. (3) Indeed, Milton was opposed to that “dualistic habit of mind” which saw the body, and in particular the female body, as “dark and dangerous”. If Eve is corrupted, then so

96 On the traditional view on Eve as temptress see McColley.
must be Adam, and thus the whole of creation would be foul from its onset, since Eve is formed out of Adam’s rib. When Adam first sees her, he calls her “Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh” (VIII, 495), and Milton incorporates and expands upon the biblical lines from Genesis 2.24, “They shall be one flesh”, reminding his readers that the heavenly couple “shall be one flesh, one heart, one soul” (VIII, 499). Furthermore, as McColley points out, the idea that Eve was not quite as innocent and perfect as Adam was, even before her Fall, would cast a rather dubious light on God, who supposedly gives Eve to Adam as a companion and helpmeet: “To incline man, through woman, to sin and thence to pain and death would be unjust; to create for Adam’s meet help a mate unmeet and helpless would be improvident” (3). This is why Milton portrays the prelapsarian Eve in all her innocence and majesty, and explains her Fall in a way that does not compromise the idea of her having been created free of sin or malice.

With such a diverse range of critical opinions on Milton’s Eve, it comes as no surprise that the two authors discussed in this thesis also differ greatly in their view of both the biblical Eve and Milton’s depiction of her. Whereas C.S. Lewis saw Milton’s Eve as becomingly submissive and humble, and thus emphasised this aspect of her character in his depiction of the Green Lady, Philip Pullman’s view of the biblical Eve, which is strongly influenced by his reading of Milton’s Eve, is a different one. In an interview with Wendy Parsons and Catriona Nicholson, Pullman claims that Eve is the true hero of the story of the Fall, since she brought new and crucial knowledge to mankind. As has been observed by a number of critics (i.e. Russel 212; Lenz 161; Bird 114-115), Pullman’s interpretation of the Fall as a gaining of knowledge and a necessary transition from innocence to maturity is informed by certain Gnostic re-readings of the Genesis myth, which celebrate Eve and the serpent as bringers of wisdom. Indeed, Pullman has stated that “if we had our heads straight on this issue, we would have churches dedicated to Eve instead of the Virgin Mary” (Parsons and Nicholson 119), thus indicating his belief that the Fall myth describes a quintessential step in human evolution.

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97 See Edwards reading of VIII, 494-499 (146).
98 On Gnostic readings of Genesis 3, see especially Pagels’ *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* and *The Gnostic Gospels*.
99 Of course, this statement is also meant to provoke members of the Christian faith, by contrasting the Virgin Mary, the ‘second Eve’ who brought salvation to mankind, with Eve, who supposedly condemned humans with her Fall.
Interestingly enough, although he is always swift to voice his opinion on such Miltonic figures as Satan, God, or Adam, Pullman seems to have made few to no comments about Milton’s portrayal of Eve. Considering Pullman’s readiness to provide his readers (and critics) with additional interpretative assistance through his interviews and articles, it is indeed striking to see that while Milton’s Satan is discussed rather extensively by Pullman, he rarely mentions Milton’s Eve; whenever Pullman talks about Eve, he is primarily talking about the biblical figure that Milton changed and expanded upon so dramatically. Since Lyra, the heroine of *His Dark Materials*, is hailed as the second Eve, who will free humanity through her ‘fall’, and since Pullman’s trilogy has been so heavily influenced by *Paradise Lost*, it is safe to assume that Lyra – as second Eve – has close intertextual ties to Milton’s Eve. Indeed, critics such as Burton Hatlen have automatically connected Lyra not just to the biblical Eve, but seen her as a kind of redeemed version of Milton’s Eve, an Eve figure that is allowed to come into her own power. Hatlen, in his discussion of the intertextual links between *His Dark Materials* and *Paradise Lost*, states that “Pullman’s hero is Lyra, not her father, with Will in an important ancillary role” and adds that “Pullman probably shares my belief that the ‘true hero’ of Milton’s poem is Eve, with Adam in an important ancillary role” (88). This comment implies that Pullman has teased out the ‘true’ meaning of Milton’s epic by revealing its “true hero”, that he has somehow rescued Milton’s Eve from wrong critical judgement.

Yet, the question arises whether Pullman does actually see Eve as the true hero of the epic, and whether in turn Lyra is the ‘true hero’ of the trilogy. In his introduction to the 2006 edition of *Paradise Lost*, Pullman expresses his belief that: “This is a story about devils. It’s not a story about God. The fallen angels and their leader are our protagonists, and the unfallen angels, and God the Father and the Son, and Adam and Eve, are all supporting players” (5). The story of *Paradise Lost* thus, according to Pullman, revolves around Satan, he is the “protagonist” of the epic (6). Likewise, in his introduction to book 5 of the epic, Pullman reminds the reader that: “Satan himself is absent from this book in a direct way, as he is from the next three, although his actions have set everything in motion, and the talk is of no one but him; there is no doubt who is dominating the narrative” (137). In the trilogy, it is primarily Lyra’s father Lord Asriel who is “dominating the narrative” even when he is absent from the story, as is the case in *The Subtle Knife*, and his actions are certainly pivotal to moving the plot forward. Once Lord Asriel steps into the background, a new male
hero arrives at the beginning of *The Subtle Knife*; it is the boy Will who earns the mystical knife and learns to accept his ‘warrior nature’.

Although Lyra surely is no passive damsel in distress, Will does need to rescue her on numerous occasions since he is the more ‘subtle’, more level-headed of the two. Thus, Hatlen’s conviction that Pullman sees Eve as the ‘true hero’ of *Paradise Lost*, and so his Lyra is likewise he ‘true hero’ of his trilogy, does not ring quite true; Will’s subtle knife is the weapon that can decide the fate of the worlds, whereas Lyra’s alethiometer rather serves as a helpful, yet not crucially important tool in the war against the Authority. Lord Asriel, after all, rejects the alethiometer at the end of *Northern Lights* and returns it to Lyra, yet frantically searches for Will’s knife. Surely Will, the ‘Adam’ of the trilogy, cannot be seen as merely playing “an ancillary role” (Hatlen 88) next to Lyra. When Fiona McCullouch, in “‘Refugees Returning to Their Homeland’: Regaining Paradise in *His Dark Materials*” highlights Pullman’s feminist subversion of the Creation account and states that “biblical authority is contravened as Lyra, the next Eve, comes before Will as Adam, because he does not feature until *The Subtle Knife*” (160), she glosses over the fact that once Will appears, narrative focus subtly but noticeably shifts from Lyra to him.

Just as critics (such as Gilbert and Gubar) have tended to either overstate Milton’s misogyny or overtly praise Eve’s humble submissiveness (as Lewis does in his Preface), so does critical work on gender in *His Dark Materials* tend to exaggerate the supposed ‘feminism’ expressed in the trilogy. I am arguing that just as Pullman does not in fact read Eve as the ‘true hero’ of *Paradise Lost*, since the true hero for him is Satan, so does Lyra’s supposed role as “second Eve” play a far smaller part in the overall plot than Pullman makes it out to be. Furthermore, Pullman’s ‘feminism’ and his celebration of female empowerment are not quite as assertive as critical readings have made it out to be, as my discussion of the relationship between Lyra and Will, and the characterisation of Mrs. Coulter will show. I do not wish to present Pullman as sneakily hiding misogynistic views, neither do I seek to question Pullman’s desire to present strong female characters. The point I am making here is rather that what Pullman says he does, and what critics have somewhat taken for granted as his stated ‘mission’, is not always what can be found in the text. To a great extent, this is a result of Pullman’s unconscious struggle with Miltonic influence: as the previous section of this chapter illustrated, Pullman’s materialist cosmology is at its weakest when he moves away from the theological convictions that underlie
Milton’s materialism. The main reason for this is the fact that Pullman, although seemingly unperturbed by the influence of the “Great Inhibitor” John Milton on the trilogy, is actually struggling to escape his influence (as, according to Bloom, all “strong poets” do), yet is unable to do so. Just as it is impossible for Pullman to fully move away from the religious convictions that inform Milton’s view of the world, so does his representation of gender dynamics rely far more on the portrayal of gender relations in *Paradise Lost* than Pullman acknowledges. Even though Pullman is at pains to present us with strong, fiercely independent female characters who work together with – and not under the guidance of – the male characters in the trilogy, they are nevertheless strongly implicated in the patriarchal structures which Pullman has unconsciously inherited from his predecessor Milton. Thus, characters like Mrs. Coulter, Will, and to a certain extent Lyra, revert back to stereotypical gender models during the course of the trilogy.

In general, critics have praised Pullman’s representation of gender in *His Dark Materials*, particularly the portrayal of Lyra as a positive female role model for girls (Hunt and Lenz 152-156). Lyra’s tomboyish character and untamed nature make her an attractively different type of heroine, especially in light of the overall rather clichéd female characters to be found in modern fantasy fiction. As Mary Harris Russell states at the beginning of her article “‘Eve Again, Mother Eve!’: Pullman’s Eve Variations”: “What seemed attractively preeminent to many readers of Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, especially in the first two volumes, was that Lyra Belacqua was a vibrant young girl-becoming-woman who apparently avoided the fate of far too many women in high fantasy, of being drafted into subaltern service to the patriarchy” (212). Pullman not only presents us with Lyra, but a number of other strong and fiercely independent female characters: the witch Serafina Pekkala, a very positive representation of female empowerment, the scientist Mary Malone who describes herself as “solitary but happy” (*AS* 470), and the angel Xaphania, a representation of the Gnostic Sophia figure who, according to Millicent Lenz “represents the contemporary need to balance ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ archetypes” (158). Critics such as Justin Leiber in “Mrs. Coulter vs. C.S.Lewis” or the writer Jean

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100 A discussion of gender representation in modern, and in particular epic, fantasy fiction is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis. For a critical look at female characters in J.R.R. Tolkien’s and C.S. Lewis’s fiction see Fredrick’s and McBride’s “Battling the Woman Warrior: Females and Combat in Tolkien and Lewis”; see also Fendler and Horstmann on the representation of masculinity in fantasy fiction.
Rabe in “Letter to the Editor: In Praise of Mrs. Coulter” have also applauded Pullman’s portrayal of Mrs. Coulter as a complex and multi-faceted female character, and as a woman who is not just beautiful, but also well-educated and intelligent.

It seems that Milton is not the only literary influence Pullman is battling with when it comes to representing gender dynamics; with Mrs. Coulter as a more sophisticated version of the White Witch, and Lyra a more forceful and far less docile version of Lewis’s Lucy (both girls begin their quest by hiding in a wardrobe), Pullman’s trilogy is clearly haunted by more than one intertextual ghost. Not just Lyra and Mrs. Coulter, but in fact a number of female characters in His Dark Materials seem to be a direct answer to Lewis’s depiction of women in his fiction: for instance, Mary Malone, the self-assertive and happily single female scholar, is reminiscent of Jane Studdock from That Hideous Strength, who desperately tries to find fulfilment as a female scholar at the beginning of the novel, but achieves happiness only through her role as wife and future mother in the end. Likewise, Pullman’s witches defy the usual cliché of the evil witch of fairy-tales propagated in the Narnia books, and their participation in the great battle against the Authority, described as a courageous act, seems a direct response to the famous statement of Father Christmas in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe that: “Battles are ugly when women fight” (119).

Seen in this light, Pullman’s ‘feminism’ seems to result primarily from a mildly provocative revisionism of Lewis’s female characters; in order to be different from his direct predecessor Lewis, and in accordance with his media image as ‘anti-Lewis’, Pullman creates female characters that serve as subversive versions of the women in Lewis’s fiction. However, as I have pointed out earlier, Pullman’s intention to present strong and independent female characters threatens to clash with the patriarchal world of Milton’s Paradise Lost, which has a far greater influence on His Dark Materials than Pullman himself is aware of. In a way, Pullman’s desire to re-write a work of literature that he deeply admires (Paradise Lost), and at the same time critically comment on a series of books he abhors (the Narnia books), creates a conflict of interests in his own work that leads to mixed messages about gender relations.

Although consciously trying to appear ‘feminist’ and thus more ‘contemporary’ than Lewis, Pullman is unconsciously tied to the patriarchal structures Milton’s epic is

101 The parallel is particularly noticeable since Pullman’s witches use bows and arrows, thus linking them to Susan and her magic bow, which she never gets to use in The Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe, possibly due to Father Christmas’s statement.
embedded in, and thus his supposed break with gender conventions is not fully convincing. This is particularly significant in the portrayal of Mrs. Coulter, Lyra’s mother; the main villain throughout most of the trilogy, she gets redeemed in the end by sacrificing herself for the sake of her daughter. Whereas her main driving force throughout the first and most of the second volume of the trilogy is her ruthless ambition and hunger for power, her mothering instincts even overrule her need for self-preservation instincts by the end of *The Amber Spyglass*. There is no doubt that Mrs. Coulter is a very compelling female character, who is presented as actively pursuing her own agenda without the need for a male ‘hero’ (or villain) by her side; yet, her transition from hyper-sexual *femme fatale* to self-sacrificing mother is problematic from a feminist viewpoint, and in fact does little to dispel gender clichés. Although Mary Harris Russell sees her as one of a number of ‘Eve’ figures in the trilogy, her first appearance in *Northern Lights* clearly connects her with Lewis’s White Witch, which makes her rather a Lilith-figure than a type of Eve. Just as the White Witch, Mrs. Coulter is depicted as an enchanting, beautiful woman who lures a boy into a trap with the promise of sweets (comp. *LWW* 37-38; *NL* 43). Both women wear furs (*LWW* 33; *NL* 42), and their pale beauty is reminiscent of Hans Christian Andersen’s Snow Queen. So, Pullman clearly evokes an image of the White Witch with his portrayal of Mrs. Coulter.

Marisa Coulter does not only physically resemble Lewis’s White Witch, but also displays the same detached cruelty and ruthlessness, as well as clear sadistic tendencies; her pleasure in hurting others becomes evident in Marisa’s insistence on witnessing the ‘cutting’ of the children at Bolvangar (*NL* 275), which is an intertextual echo of the White Witch’s mindless destruction of the Christmas party in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (106-107). Despite the fact that Pullman is at pains to break with the one-dimensional nature of the ‘evil witch’ stereotype, Mrs. Coulter – for most of the trilogy – falls precisely into that category; although a far more sophisticated villain than the rather childish and not too clever Jadis, she is nevertheless driven only by a desire to dominate others and to obtain power. Whereas Lord Asriel’s cruelties and his murdering of Lyra’s friend is presented as serving a higher aim, Mrs. Coulter’s motives seem far more petty, since she is only interested in rising within the ranks of the powerful Church for personal gain. Her monkey-daemon loves to torture other daemons or little animals when he is bored (*AS* 55), another hint
at Mrs. Coulter’s sadism and a sign that cruelty is a core part of her character, since the daemon represents her ‘true’ personality.\textsuperscript{102}

In many respects, Mrs. Coulter is presented with the same patriarchal bias as the White Witch is: as corrupted femininity, as “one with dangerous powers and qualities such as elegance, charm, and grace” \textit{(NL 82)}. Whereas Mrs. Coulter is depicted as beautiful and young, it is clear that this beauty hides a corrupted soul, hinted at by the repeated mentioning of “the slight perplexing smell of Mrs. Coulter’s flesh: scented, but somehow metallic” (88), which turns into “a hot smell, like heated metal” (93) when she gets furious at Lyra. The metallic smell seems to suggest an alien, inhuman quality in Mrs. Coulter, and the fact that she is trying to hide her true smell (her skin is “scented”) shows that her dazzling and ‘glamorous’ exterior hides a dangerous interior. Thus, Pullman is principally recreating the same stereotype that he is supposedly trying to reform: the dangerously alluring \textit{femme fatale}, the beautiful woman who uses her charm and good looks to lead others (especially men) into a trap. When Mrs. Coulter lures the boy Tony away to turn him into one of the test subjects at Bolvangar, she is very much the dark temptress that Milton’s fallen Adam claims Eve to be (X 884-895); in fact, she far more resembles the tempter Satan than the tempted woman, Eve (comp. Burt 50).

The one redeeming quality that saves Mrs. Coulter, and also sets her apart from the White Witch, is the acceptance of her role as mother and the love that leads to her self-sacrifice in order to protect Lyra. This sudden awakening of her motherly feelings by the end of \textit{The Amber Spyglass} is somewhat startling, since Pullman presents her as a monstrous anti-mother for most of the trilogy. When the little girl Ama watches Mrs. Coulter drugging Lyra into sleep at the beginning of \textit{The Amber Spyglass}, she is appaled to witness the violent and abusive way in which this is done: “Mrs. Coulter snarled and with her free hand slapped Lyra hard across the face, a vicious backhand crack that threw her flat; and before Lyra could gather her wits, the beaker was at her mouth and she had to swallow or choke” \textit{(AS 54)}. Even Mrs. Coulter’s attempts at tenderness towards her daughter are described as a parody of motherhood, and do not convey the idea of a true change of heart; once Lyra is asleep, her mother combs her hair, caresses her, and sings a lullaby, but “Ama could tell she didn’t know the words”

\textsuperscript{102} Interestingly enough, this links Mrs. Coulter’s demon to Lewis’s Un-man, who also takes pleasure in inflicting cruelties on helpless creatures. Compare the depiction of the Un-man torturing of a beetle \textit{(Perelandra 110)} with the golden monkey’s tearing apart of a bat \textit{(AS 55)}.
and thus “all she could sing was a string of nonsense-syllables, [...] her sweet voice mouthing gibberish” (AS 54). This depiction conveys the idea that Mrs. Coulter is only acting the part of ‘mother’, and very unconvincingly so, since she does not even “know the words” she is supposed to say/sing. Her sudden tenderness towards Lyra horrifies the girl Ama because it takes place immediately after the physical abuse. It seems as if this display of ‘motherly love’ is rather a self-serving act, a role that Mrs. Coulter enjoys playing once in a while in-between her quest for power; this, indeed, would be in accordance with her character so far.

In the final scene with Lord Asriel and the angel Metatron, however, Mrs. Coulter declares that her love for Lyra has overruled even her self-preserving instincts, and she is willing to sacrifice herself for her child. When she confesses her love for Lyra to Lord Asriel, Mrs. Coulter herself seems puzzled by the tender feelings she has developed for her child: “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” (AS 426-27). So, this love for Lyra ‘stole’ itself into Marisa’s heart, without her even fully realising it. She likens it to a “mustard-seed” (AS 427), a powerful biblical image taken from Jesus’s parables. In the New Testament, Jesus uses the mustard-seed as a symbol for the Kingdom of God; seen as smallest of the seeds, it can nevertheless grow into “the greatest among herbs” and become the tallest of the trees if it finds fertile ground (Matthew 13:31-2). Likewise, Marisa feels that “the little green shoot was splitting my heart open” (AS 427), growing so steadily and with such force that it could betray her to the angel Metatron, despite the “[p]ure, poisonous, toxic malice” in her heart (AS 419). In referring to the mustard-seed parable, Pullman implies that Marisa’s motherly instinct has awakened so fiercely and potently that it leads even this woman, whom Metatron describes as “a cess-pit of moral filth” (AS 419), into self-sacrifice. Yet, this idea of a Mrs. Coulter being overwhelmed by maternal instincts clashes uneasily with the earlier portrayal of her as interested solely in personal gain. Mary Harris Russell comments that: “Significantly, when Coulter is seducing Metatron, so as to lead him to his demise, it is her motherhood she lies about, because she knows she must lie about the most important part of her life in order to be believed” (216); yet, it is somewhat baffling to the reader why all of a sudden this should be “the most important part” in the life of such a self-centred woman as Mrs. Coulter.
The problem with this shift from alluring and dangerous *femme fatale* to a woman overcome with love for her child is that Mrs. Coulter’s motherly feelings are presented as an essentialist trait, thus reiterating the cliché of mothering instincts as a ‘natural’ part of every woman’s personality. Her motherly feelings seem to have grown in spite of herself, as she herself states, and she feels protective of Lyra almost against her will. Mary Harris Russell sees Mrs. Coulter’s sudden awakening into motherhood as something positive, noting that the realisation that Lyra is the “second Eve” by the end of *The Subtle Knife* marks a turning point for her: “Pullman signals the significance of this episode by reminding us—through Will’s eyes—that Coulter does not take the alethiometer. She is thus renouncing the quest for knowledge, and, slowly, the quest for maternal identity emerges as the centre of her actions” (216). Apart from the fact that the choice to drug her daughter in order to prevent her ‘Fall’ can hardly be seen as a “quest for maternal identity”, the idea that she has to choose between knowledge and motherhood is in itself problematic, since it implies that women cannot have both simultaneously.

This is precisely the reason why the character of Mrs. Coulter does not actually represent a breaking with gender stereotypes; Pullman does not manage to truly dissolve the binary opposition of traditional gender roles: the power-hungry Mrs. Coulter who cares for nothing but her own personal gain can only redeem herself once she accepts her ‘natural’ role as mother. As we learn from Mary Harris Russell, Mrs. Coulter’s acceptance of this role leads to the dissolution of her former self: “Pullman’s last specific reference to Mrs. Coulter is, however, not expressed in dialogue addressed to her personal, sexual self, but in a phrase descriptive of her mothering function that now dominates all she does: she is only and essentially ‘Lyra’s mother’ ([*AS* 409])” (216-17). In this we find an echo of Lewis’s Green Lady, who learns that children are the only “fruit” worth having (*Perelandra* 112), yet Pullman offers no ironic reversal of this essentialist view on motherhood. So Mrs. Coulter reforms from *femme fatale* to ‘earth mother’, from Lillith to Eve, and thus moves from one stereotypical female archetype to another, without Pullman truly questioning or reversing any of them. If we indeed see Marisa as a variation of the biblical Eve, as Mary Harris Russell claims, then Pullman does little to reform the traditional view of Eve as both temptress and Mother of All. In a way, the portrayal of Mrs. Coulter seems to be overshadowed by the many versions of the biblical Eve Pullman is confronted with in his attempt to re-narrate the Fall myth; Pullman is
unable to move away from the patriarchal structures the myth is so firmly embedded into, due to its long history of retellings.

Not only do we find a far more clichéd representation of femininity than expected in *His Dark Materials*, but the portrayal of male characters also follows traditional models of masculinity, and this is especially apparent in the character of Will, the ‘Adam’ of this Fall narrative. Although Lyra is the unquestionable heroine throughout *Northern Lights*, the appearance of Will in *The Subtle Knife* results in a shift of narrative focus from Lyra to Will, and this shift seems to happen almost against what Pullman intended at the beginning of the trilogy. Since Will so closely resembles the classical hero of the archetypal quest story, comparable to such mythical heroes as Siegfried of the *Nibelungenlied* or King Arthur, he automatically draws attention to him and his search for his father, and away from Lyra and her quest to figure out the true nature of Dust.103 This drawing away of the readers’ interest from the female to the male protagonist is intriguingly reminiscent of Ransom’s rapture at meeting the King in Lewis’s *Perelandra*, and his immediate dismissal of the Green Lady as far less resplendent; considering Pullman’s mission to reform and revise Lewis’s outdated view on gender relations, he himself is in danger of being entrapped by traditional gender models.104

Overall, Will fits the role of ‘legendary hero’ far more neatly than Lyra does; for instance, whereas Lyra, albeit fierce and independent, has a multitude of friends to help her along her way, Will has been on his own for most of his life. Furthermore, while Lyra receives the mystical alethiometer as a gift from the Master of Jordan College, Will has to earn his powerful weapon, the subtle knife, by fighting against the previous knife-bearer and sacrificing two of his fingers in that battle. Just like King Arthur or Siegfried, Will has to be initiated by fighting a mighty opponent to prove his chosen status, and the transition from boy to warrior is marked by his ritual bleeding, reminiscent of a girl’s first menstrual flow, traditionally seen as her rite of passage into adulthood.105 The reward for Will’s blood-sacrifice is the subtle knife, a weapon that can cut through time and space, destroy even angels, and will end up destroying the Authority himself. Millicent Lenz, in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy*...
*Fiction*, states that: “The alethiometer is Lyra’s metaphorical sword, arming her with magical power” (154); yet, it is the boy Will who receives an actual, not a metaphorical sword, and thus he is able to take part in the great battle against Metatron far more actively and straight-forwardly than Lyra. Lyra’s ability to read the alethiometer is essentially a passive power; indeed, she has to passively ‘give in’ to the half-conscious, trance-like state necessary to read the alethiometer. One could argue that Will, too, has to achieve that same state of passive allowing when using the knife to cut through worlds, yet, unlike Lyra, who is a ‘natural’ at reading the alethiometer without truly knowing how and why she has that ability *(NL 174-175)*, he has to actively learn and master how to relax into that state of non-thinking *(SK 192-195)*. With this, Pullman evokes the traditional binary opposition between passive ‘female intuition’ and active male ‘willpower’.

The relationship between Lyra and Will is in many respects reminiscent of Adam and Eve’s relationship in *Paradise Lost*, and there is no doubt that Will is supposed to be the ‘Adam’ of the trilogy. In fact, he resembles Milton’s Adam far more closely than Lyra resembles Milton’s Eve: he is the physically and mentally stronger, more level-headed of the two, and in general seems to be the one to think up plans and develop ideas. When they meet for the first time, Will orders her to help him with the cooking, remarking that “she seemed quite willing to take orders if she saw the sense of them, so he told her to go and clear a table in front of the café” *(SK 25)*. Just like Adam and Eve, Lyra and Will work together as a team, yet since it is Will who is the more capable of the two, Lyra ‘naturally’ accepts his leadership, just as Eve happily allows Adam to guide her, an echo of Milton’s depiction of the ideal, companionate marriage. When Lyra learns through the alethiometer that Will is “a murderer” *(SK 29)*, she decides to trust him, comparing him to the fighting bear Iorek, another strong masculine figure whom she felt “safe” with *(SK 29)*. Her acceptance of his leadership is strongly dependent on his physical strength and fierceness, two very stereotypical masculine traits.

In general, Will’s masculinity represents very traditional models of ‘ideal’ masculine behaviour: he is portrayed as a warrior by nature, and he himself reluctantly accepts this role by the end of *The Subtle Knife* (338). Although abhorring killing in general, he nevertheless considers killing a man in order to protect his helpless mother to be acceptable, stating that: “If I killed him I don’t care. He deserved it” *(SK 275)*, thus reiterating the stereotype of the son having to become the
‘male protector’ for his frail mother. He often shows a fierce pleasure while fighting, for example when he is fighting off the children of Cittagazze (SK 242), and most of the adult characters in the trilogy are either wary or truly afraid of Will. While characters such as Serafina Pekkala or Mary Malone feel protective of Lyra, the girl, they treat Will, the boy, much more like an adult. When the witch Juta Kamainen faces Will after murdering his father, she shrinks away from him despite being far older and more experienced in battle than he is: “This young wounded figure held more force and danger than she’d ever met in a human before, and she quailed” (SK 337). Serafina Pekkala, too, reacts with fear when seeing Will’s daemon for the first time: “This little brown bird was radiating an implacable ferocity as palpable as heat, and Serafina was afraid of it” (AS 502).

So, while Lyra usually arouses feelings of protectiveness in adults, Will is seen as mature and independent, capable of taking care of himself. Lyra’s appearance rarely causes the same over-awed reactions that Will’s does, and she is perceived as much more of a child than Will. When Mary Malone meets Will for the first time, she feels she cannot embrace him like she embraces Lyra since “that kind of response would have made a child of him, because while she might have embraced a child, she would never have done that to a man she didn’t know” (AS 450), thus indicating that Will has matured into adulthood already, whereas Lyra is still very much a little girl. In accordance with stereotypical masculine behaviour, Will is also far more rational and even-tempered than the over-emotional Lyra, and endures the pain of his wounded hand with very ‘masculine’ stoicism.

Whereas his mentally ill mother is unable to care for him, Will has the steadfast belief that his missing father would turn their lives around and be able to protect them, which hints at the idea that a strong male figure is necessary to hold a family together. Revealingly enough, during the first and final meeting between Will and his father, they fight each other, and the depiction of this battle between father and son has an oddly Freudian ring to it: “[...] and Will, rolling around violently on the stony ground, felt heavy fear tighten round his heart: this man would never let him go, and even if he killed him, his corpse would still be holding fast” (SK 332). Will is literally fighting against the oppressive presence of his over-powerful, dominating father, and in that fight finds the only way to bond with him. Throughout his life, Will felt a yearning for his absent father, yet also considers it his duty to “take up my father’s mantle” (SK 275), so he feels the pressure of growing up to be a ‘real’ man. As
Michael Buchbinder notes in _Masculinities and Identities_, emotional bonding between a father and his son is difficult in a culture that requires men to keep their emotions suppressed; adult men often “want revenge on their fathers” for their emotional absence, “something against which the culture imposes severe sanctions but which, through the dynamic of male rivalry, it also subtly encourages” (39). After their fight, Will significantly puts on his father’s cloak and promises to grow into his role as a warrior (SK 338), thus he literally ‘takes up his father’s mantle’, now that he has proven his worth as a fighter and thus – according to the rules of patriarchy – also as a man.

Will’s relationship with his mother also has an uneasy Freudian, Oedipal undertone, hinted at right before Will breaks the subtle knife due to Mrs. Coulter’s manipulations. When Will sees Mrs. Coulter for the first time, he feels sexually attracted to her, while at the same time being reminded of his mother. He admits to being “captivated by Mrs. Coulter”, and feels that “it is tempting to think about those beautiful eyes and the sweetness of that voice” (AS 151), but mixed with those sexualised images of Mrs. Coulter are thoughts of his mother (AS 149; 151), and the confusion over this finally leads to the breaking of the knife. It is the instance Will thinks about his mother while looking at the sexually attractive Mrs. Coulter that leads to Will’s (phallic) weapon to break: “[...] and for a moment it wasn’t [Mrs. Coulter’s] face at all; it was his own mother’s face, reproaching him, and his heart quailed from sorrow; and then as he thrust with the knife, his mind left the point, and with a wrench and a crack, the knife fell into pieces to the ground” (AS 162). Apart from the fact that we yet again see Mrs. Coulter in a highly stereotypical role of the _femme fatale_ who takes away men’s potency and powers (right at the moment when Will “thrust[s] with the knife”), Pullman also portrays Will’s relationship with his mother as causing sexual anxieties; this is a very Freudian, and in fact quite outdated, view of male adolescent sexuality. Considering that Pullman presents himself as a promoter of guilt-free sexuality and sensual pleasure, this scene reads particularly uncomfortably.

Although Lyra, the second Eve of the story, is supposedly the ‘true hero’ of the trilogy, just as Pullman supposedly sees Eve as the ‘true hero’ of _Paradise Lost_, it is the Adam of the story, Will, who draws most attention to him and earns the highest admiration out of all the characters in _His Dark Materials_. The reason why Will is so admired is the fact that he is a ‘warrior’, a highly stereotypical role for a young man
in patriarchal society. As soon as Will appears, Lyra’s radiant and fierce spirit seems to fade, and her role as second Eve, although hinted at continuously, is never truly expanded upon. Apart from Will, it is primarily satanic characters such as Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter who receive the most narrative attention, which supports the idea that Pullman in fact sees Satan as the ‘true hero’ of *Paradise Lost*. Yet, whereas Lord Asriel, just as Milton’s Satan, is simultaneously feared and admired for his ambitions, Mrs. Coulter only ceases to be a villain when she accepts her role as “Lyra’s mother” and gives up her quest for power.

It almost seems as if Pullman tries to portray Mrs. Coulter as a hybrid of Milton’s Eve and his Satan, since he combines Eve’s darker nature as temptress with her ‘purer’ role as Mother of All. However, he fails to detach this characterisation from the patriarchal gender conventions that underlie Milton’s portrayal of Eve; Marisa Coulter ends up merely shifting from one stereotypical role for women to another, yet dissolving or subverting neither of them. Despite his attempt to subvert C.S. Lewis’s representation of gender, which is strongly attached to patriarchal gender conventions, Pullman ends up retaining the same patriarchal bias, so much so that Mrs. Coulter can only be ‘saved’ by ceasing to be a modernised, more empowered version of the White Witch. In spite of himself, Pullman seems unable to break away from the gender dynamics portrayed in *Paradise Lost*.

**“Full of doubt I stand”: Fate, Choice and Free Will in *His Dark Materials***

The doctrine of the Fall states that the first humans brought sin and death into the world through their disobedience to God; thus, the Fall is seen as a calamity since it expelled mankind from Paradise and acquainted them with pain and misery. However, the result of the Fall presents Christians with a perplexing paradox: without the Fall, Jesus Christ would not have come into the world to atone for the sins of humanity. Since Jesus’ coming into the world, his death and subsequent resurrection, is seen as the greatest blessing and ultimate proof of God’s love for his creatures, it cannot be denied—from a Christian perspective—that the Fall has ultimately resulted in a great blessing for humankind. This is why Adam and Eve’s Fall is called *felix culpa*—‘happy’ or ‘blessed sin’—in the *Exultet* sung during Easter Vigil. While the Fall on the one hand removed humans from God’s direct presence, it on the other hand
brought them closer to God since he was born into a human form. Furthermore, fallen
Adam and Eve, now that they know the difference between good and evil and have
lost their state of perpetual innocence, are to a certain extent more ‘grown-up’ and
have earned a new knowledge about the cosmic forces at work. This view of the Fall
as a gaining of wisdom and knowledge is of course particularly promoted by the
Gnostics, but less so by early Christian theologians such as Augustine, who mainly
stressed the disastrous effects of the Fall.\textsuperscript{106} There is, however, a general consensus
among most Christians that no matter how disastrous its direct outcome the Fall gave
the human race a chance to evolve in a way that brought as much pain as it brought
cause for jubilation, which makes the Fall a rather delicate and complicated matter.
The question arises whether God might not have actually ‘wanted’ to let his creatures
fall; yet, this is a distressing idea considering the suffering that arose from the Fall.

In \textit{Paradise Lost}, the Christian poet Milton is fully aware of the paradoxical
nature of the Fall narrative right from the onset of the epic, and he surely has the
conundrum of the \textit{felix culpa} in mind when he has his epic narrator declare that he
will “justify the ways of God to men” (I, 26). The entire epic is an attempt to dissolve,
or at least thoroughly work through, the puzzling cause and effect of the Fall, and to
highlight God’s ultimate goodness in bestowing grace upon mankind even after man’s
disobedience. In general, Milton’s epic narrator places great emphasis on the loss of
paradise and the catastrophic outcome of the Fall and thus he hardly celebrates the
Fall as a ‘happy sin’. There is only one direct mention of the Fall as ultimately a
blessing, uttered by Adam after Michael gives him a vision of future events, namely
Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection. Adam, deeply moved by what he has just
heard, exclaims:

\begin{quote}
Oh goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; more wonderful
Than that which by creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness! Full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By me done and occasioned, or rejoice
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring (XII, 470-476).
\end{quote}

These words almost sound like heresy, considering that Adam seems to congratulate
himself for his sin, wondering whether to “repent me now of sin” or rather “rejoice”
in it; yet, the main sentiment here surely is one of profound relief: all is not lost for

\textsuperscript{106} On the doctrine of the Fall in pre-Augustinian Christian writings see F.R. Tennant’s \textit{The Sources of
the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin}. 
the human race. From these few lines alone, presented entirely from Adam’s point of view, it cannot be assumed that Milton endorsed the idea of the Fall as a felix culpa, as ultimately a blessing for the human race. Whereas Burton Hatlen states that “Milton edges nervously around the heretical idea that the Fall might have been a good thing” (89), Alastair Fowler stresses that Milton’s epic narrator repeatedly draws attention to all that mankind lost due to his Fall: “Milton the realist never loses sight of the unmitigated misery brought by the Fall; he rejoices in God’s grace, not that mankind gave occasion for it” (668). Milton, although aware of the idea of Adam and Eve’s sin as felix culpa, does not truly sway towards viewing the Fall as a fortunate event and a blessing in disguise; to him, mankind’s disobedience was a great catastrophe and only brought forth greater goodness because of God’s love and compassion for his creatures. The epic’s first and foremost function is to stress the glory of God, and not to excuse Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience.

Furthermore, Milton the monist also faces the theologically delicate question of how Adam and Eve, created “in his own image” (Gen 1:27) and from his own substance by a benevolent God, could have been tempted into evildoing at all. For Milton, free will and choice are the decisive factors for both the immediate and the subsequent outcome of the Fall, and for any future wrongdoings of humankind. Evil is not a part of God and thus not a part of nature in its perfect, prelapsarian state; yet, evil can come into the world because God’s creatures were given the gift of free will, since with free will comes the freedom to choose to go against God’s will. By repenting their sin, Adam and Eve choose to return to the path of goodness, and are given a second chance through the Son’s self-sacrifice. Even Satan, with his plan to corrupt Creation, is unwittingly fulfilling God’s grander scheme of salvation for humankind. God, who is the source of all goodness and justice to Milton, will always lead his creation towards goodness, no matter how severe the digressions of his creatures from the righteous path. The final lines of the epic, describing how Adam and Eve leave Paradise “hand in hand” (XII, 649), with “the world […] all before them” (647), imply a positive outcome of the Fall insofar as that the couple can now claim their place in the world anew; they have won new insights into the workings of the world through their hardships and transgressions, and are moving towards maturity and experience that is different from their innocent state. This, to Milton, is the only way in which the Fall can be seen as a felix culpa: something good can come
even out of the greatest evil. However, this goodness results from the grace of God and is not a direct consequence of the sin itself.

The idea that goodness can come out of evil is one of many themes from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that is also a key theme in *His Dark Materials*; Pullman shares Milton’s belief in the importance of free will and choice for the individual. Indeed, *His Dark Materials* places a similarly strong emphasis on the ability to choose as either a blessing or a curse, depending on the outcome of that choice. Although there is no omniscient, omnipotent God overseeing Pullman’s universes, the trilogy nevertheless sets up the same tension between predetermined ‘fate’ and the freedom to choose one’s path in life. Lyra, for instance, has been foretold as “second Eve” by an ancient prophesy and thus seems to be predestined to ‘fall’; however, it is vital that she chooses her fate freely and without an awareness of her role, “as if it were her nature, and not her destiny” (*NL* 310). The “as if”, here, is the crucial phrase, since it mediates between the paradox of Lyra needing to make a choice freely that she was predestined to make; only leaving her unaware about her destiny can ensure that she will fulfill it.

This paradoxical tension between predestination and free will is reminiscent of God’s decision to send the angel Raphael to warn Adam of Satan’s plan in *Paradise Lost*, yet avoid telling him of his imminent fall, already foreseen by God (V, 229-245). In order to “render man inexcusable” (V, argument) God informs Adam about Satan and his plan, yet leaves the choice to fall or obey to Adam, although he already knows that he and Eve will indeed disobey him. Since Pullman is so keen to present the cosmology of his universe as free of divine intervention, free of a creating and governing force (since Dust is a by-product of matter, and cannot master or manipulate matter), the reader is left puzzled over the origin of this knowledge of future events in the universes of *His Dark Materials*. If there is no divine maker who foresees and foretells the fate of the worlds, the idea of a predestined path for Lyra seems a strangely hollow one.

A part of this problem is the fact that the moral framework of *His Dark Materials* is so closely linked to the theology that underlies Milton’s epic; Pullman’s views on choice, freedom, and fate are Miltonic to the core, and thus Pullman the atheist ends up relying on the same pretext as Milton the Christian does: the belief in a divine force that somehow knows more than we humans do, and which predetermines our path in life. Just like Adam and Eve, Lyra is given the choice to go
against her nature and to do the ‘wrong’ thing, yet she ends up choosing exactly what
the witches’ prophesy foretold she would. Similarly, Adam and Eve are given a
chance to obey, despite the fact that God already knows they will disobey. The
problem with Pullman’s attempt to tackle the question of ‘fate’ versus ‘freedom to
choose’ is that without the concept of divine guidance—so crucial to Milton’s epic—
his universes seem a rather fatalistic pla
c. When Serafina Pekkala explains to Lee
Scoresby that: “We are all subjects to the fates. But we must all act as if we are not
[...] or die of despair” (NL 310), this sounds just as cold and bleak as any of the
statements made by Milton’s God which are so abhorrent to Pullman and are his
prime motivation to present a universe without a Creator. Trying to explain away a
Creator, yet nevertheless still relying on the Miltonic concept of predestination versus
free will opens up questions that cannot be answered in the trilogy.

There exists a curious tension in His Dark Materials between Pullman’s
insistence on being allowed to make your own, well-informed choice and the idea that
humans have to obey their ‘nature’, a term used frequently in the trilogy and
especially exemplified by Pullman’s invention of the demon. The daemon, roughly
speaking a human’s soul in animal-form, will always settle into a form that represents
the essence or true nature of its human: for instance, most servants have dog-shaped
dæmons, which according to Lyra “means you like doing what you’re told, and
knowing who’s boss, and following orders, and pleasing people who are in charge”
(AS 483). Whereas children’s dæmons can change their form indefinitely, an adult’s
dæmon remains permanently settled. Since this ‘settling down’ of the demon occurs
during adolescence, Pullman seems to imply that essential personality traits do not
change anymore after that time. Millicent Lenz sees this idea of the ‘settled’ dæmon
representing one’s true nature and core personality as something positive, stating that:
“Being an adult entails accepting the narrowing of one’s potential possible ‘shapes’,
learning to live with a diminishment of the protean possibilities inherent in the child.
[...] [T]here may be some comfort to an adult in having a former basis for self-trust
and a clearer awareness of limits” (140). It is true that learning to feel comfortable
with who you are is a valid lesson to be taught to an adolescent. The question arises
however, if this is not rather a restrictive, almost essentialist view on human
personality: if a person possesses a dog-dæmon, his or her only option seems to be to
become a servant, simply because that will best suit his or her ‘true nature’, or, in
turn, the essentialist ‘nature’ determines the settled form of the dæmon.
Lyra, upon seeing her dæmon briefly change into the form of a dolphin, becomes fearful that he might settle into this form and thus force her to remain at sea forever. An old seaman tells her the story of a man whose demon settled into dolphin-form, and who remained unhappy with his fate for the rest of his life. This story is supposed to teach Lyra that it is a good thing to learn “what kind of person you are” (NL 167), but Lyra asks the valid question about what happens if “your dæmon settles in a shape you don’t like” (167). The seaman answers her that “till they learn to be satisfied with what they are, they’re going to be fretful about it” (167), suggesting that it is no good trying to change or in any way diverge from your preset personality. This becomes particularly problematic if the dæmon suggest a darker, more negative personality. Lenz is positive that in His Dark Materials: “Individual moral responsibilities remain, regardless of the form in which the dæmon may settle” (141). However, the villains of the trilogy, such as Lord Boreal or the priest-assassin Father Gomez, all have ‘evil’ dæmons such as a snake or a dung-beetle, which implies that they are ‘evil by nature’ and thus unable to change. If, according to the seaman and his story, it only brings misery and unhappiness to argue against your own nature, then the sly and scheming Lord Boreal would have to be applauded for embracing his.

Not only are humans supposed to accept their ‘fate’ or else become anxious and unhappy, but the same is true for all creatures. Iofur Raknison, the false bear-king of Svalbard, is seen as a negative example of a creature which wants to break free from its naturally given role. Iofur’s greatest wish is to have a dæmon and thus to possess a soul like humans do. However, this wish plunges the bear-kingdom into chaos since the bears “weren’t sure what they were. They weren’t like Iorek Byrnison, pure and certain and absolute; there was a constant pall of uncertainty hanging over them, as they watched one another and watched Iofur” (NL 345). Iorek, the ‘natural’ leader of the bears, is the better bear because he behaves according to his nature, thus he is “pure and certain and absolute”, a phrase which reads uncomfortably essentialist since it implies that there is a perfect form of ‘bearness’ which Iorek is closer to than Iofur. Although Iofur’s armour is more resplendent than Iorek’s, Iorek nevertheless will win the fight because “his armour was his soul. He has made it and it fitted him.

107 The idea of a ‘perfect’ form of bearness also recalls Plato’s concept of the ideal shape that the world is a mere copy of, a thought concept very dear to C.S. Lewis and featured prominently in Perelandra. It seems that Pullman is often closer to Lewis’s philosophical convictions than previously suspected.
They were one. Iofur was not content with his armour; he wanted another soul as well. He was restless while Iorek was still” \((NL\, 349)\). Iorek and his armour form one entity, whereas Iofur rejects his nature and wants “another soul”, he wants to be something else than just being an armoured bear.

Again, Pullman presents a creature’s discontent with its predetermined ‘nature’ as something un-natural and thus harmfully disruptive: Iofur led an entire species into confusion and political upheaval by wanting to be something he was not meant to be, which recalls the story of the seaman who could never be happy in his life lived at sea. Only after Iorek is restored as king can the bears be ‘real’ bears again: “They were Iorek’s bears now, and true bears, not uncertain semi-humans, conscious only of a torturing inferiority” \((NL\, 354)\). The old order is restored and the bears are “true bears” again, tearing down the palace Iofur has built \((NL\, 354)\), a very conservative, even stereotypical ending for this episode in the trilogy, which recalls other classic modern fantasy stories in which the rightful king is reinstated (such as Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*).

If Pullman supposedly places great emphasis on free will and the right to choose, then the question arises to which extent humans (and bears) actually are free in their choices and actions, considering that living against their ‘nature’ is seen as perverse and un-natural. In *Northern Lights*, Serafina Pekkala explains to Lee Scoresby that “you cannot change what you are, only what you do” \((NL\, 315)\), and this idea that a person can only influence fate or destiny to a small extent by his or her actions is one of the key themes in the trilogy. This is also the reason why Pullman tries, on a conscious level, to write against the clichéd binary opposition between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ characters so often found in modern fantasy novels, especially epic fantasy.

Again, Pullman is closer to his literary predecessor than first meets the eye here; in a way, Milton does not present purely ‘evil’ or ‘good’ characters either, since to him, all of creation is ultimately good, and thus even Satan and his fallen angels serve the greater good. Satan is not merely presented as twisted, corrupted antagonist of God, Milton also constantly reminds us that he was once the most resplendent and beloved angel in Heaven, and the reader is often roused to pity for, more than fear of him. As with the trilogy’s morally twisted characters such as Mrs. Coulter or Lord Asriel, who are presented as more than just two-dimensional ‘villains’, so does *Paradise Lost* portray Satan as a character whom we as readers can empathize with.
despite condemning his actions. Satan was not born evil, since all creation is inherently good, but he chose to do evil and turn away from God; just as Adam and Eve repent their sin, so could Satan – in theory – repent and thus redeem himself, and it is his own choice not to do so. In the trilogy, Mrs. Coulter, who has been the primary villain so far, redeems herself through her sacrifice, which is an unexpectedly ‘good’ deed from an otherwise ‘evil’ character. Millicent Lenz, in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, notes that: “The simplistic categories of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ do not fit” into Pullman’s universes and concludes that, “[r]ather, the children display the capacity for both good and evil acts” (134). The idea that people are not born evil, but are capable of being or doing evil, is precisely the view that Milton supports in *Paradise Lost*. In the epic, this is part of Milton’s argument for a creation that was originally free of sin and not tainted from the start; thus, it is an argument for the goodness of God and in support of a creature’s free will. Pullman deliberately misreads Milton’s theology here, which relies entirely on the presupposition of a benevolent creator, since he tries to present God as the villain of the epic. At the same instance, however, Pullman’s well-balanced concept of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ is indebted to Milton’s moral conception of those terms.

In *His Dark Materials*, the children and Mary Malone discuss the notion of ‘good and evil’ at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, and it is the former nun Mary who explains that: “good and evil are names for what people do, not for what they are. All we can say is that this is a good deed, because it helps someone, or that’s an evil one, because it hurts them” (471). This rather didactic and thus oversimplified statement is almost naïve in that it presumes that the outcome of any “good deed” is helpful and the outcome of any “evil one” is hurtful. If it is “what people do” that makes them good or evil, instead of something innate within their nature, and if Pullman tries to stress that the only possibility to distinguish between good and evil is by the effect our deeds have on others, then surely all “evil” or morally wrong choices made by the characters should have a hurtful or tragic outcome, and vice versa for any good deeds. This, however, is not the case in the trilogy and it is not what Pullman is actually trying to convey. For instance, Lord Asriel’s condemnable sacrifice of Lyra’s friend Roger leads to a chain of events which ultimately result in the liberation of the enslaved ghosts in the prison-like world of the dead. Pullman does not present Roger’s death as “a good deed”; however, he does present a moral dilemma that is never truly resolved and stands in stark contrast to Mary’s words: in the trilogy, evil,
condemnable deeds can help someone. Indeed, some of them can even help humankind and serve the greater good. Similarly, Lyra’s rescue of Roger from Bolvangar in *Northern Lights* – a “good deed” – is what causes his death. So good deeds might very well end up hurting someone, while bad deeds can be unexpectedly helpful. As discussed earlier, this idea that good can come out of bad is strongly reminiscent of the concept of the fortunate fall, especially since Lyra’s freeing of the ghosts through her ‘sacrifice’ (leaving her daemon behind) echoes Jesus’ liberation of the dead through his death and resurrection.

It seems that Pullman places great emphasis not only on the significance of making choices, but promoting an awareness of the implications an individual’s choice might have for others. This need to be aware of the consequences of our actions is symbolically represented by Will’s “subtle knife” – a weapon so sharp it can kill angels and cut windows into the very fabric of time and space. The tool does as much harm as it provides helps the two adolescent heroes throughout their quest: During the fight for the knife, Will loses two of his fingers and nearly dies from the wound, and his attitude towards the knife is far more tormented and subtly complex than Lyra’s relationship with her truth-reader, the alethiometer. The subtle knife is, quite literally, a ‘double-edged sword’: Its blade consists of two layers made out of two different fabrics, one made of “steel of an incomparable sharpness” which can “cut through any material in the world”, the other “more subtle still” since it can “cut an opening out of this world” (*SK* 190). While the knife represents the only chance of winning the war against the impostor God, it simultaneously destroys the worlds by producing the dreaded spectres who devour a person’s soul/daemon. With each cut, a spectre is born. Yet, without cutting windows into other worlds, the children cannot pursue their quest to save the universe(s).

When the knife breaks, the children ask Iorek to re-forge it but he refuses, claiming that: “I have never known anything so dangerous. The most deadly fighting machines are little toys compared to that knife; the harm it can do is unlimited. It would have been infinitely better if it had never been made” (*AS* 190).108 The reader knows of course that it is also “infinitely better” that this knife exists, so Pullman offers two paradoxical views on a moral dilemma, suggesting that both views are true:

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108 Interestingly enough, this quote suggests a parallel between the subtle knife and Tolkien’s One Ring, since both magical artefacts seem to have a life of their own; Tolkien, however, is mainly concerned with the fascination of absolute power, and concludes that it can never be yielded by creatures without corrupting them.
yes, it would have been better if the knife did not exist, but using it is the only way toward freedom from tyranny. Once again, this recalls the paradox resulting from the biblical Fall: without the Fall, humanity would have remained untainted and close to God, free of sin and death, yet through the Fall, humanity was given an even greater chance to grow and find salvation. It is almost blasphemous, from a Christian standpoint, to say that it would have been “infinitely better” if the Fall had never taken place despite its miserable outcome, since the Fall brought God’s Son into the world.\(^{109}\) Likewise, the benefits of using the subtle knife cannot be denied, despite the harm it can inflict.

In the same way as it is impossible to predict what would have happened if Adam and Eve had not sinned, so is it impossible to predict whether or not the usage of the knife can bring about a ‘good’ or ‘evil’ outcome. Indeed, Iorek contradicts his own advice to destroy the knife later, when he does agree to mend it. However, this does not resolve Iorek’s unease; on the contrary, he feels even more troubled, trying yet again to voice his anxieties – a very “un-bearlike” behaviour: “With [the knife] you can do strange things. What you don’t know is what the knife does on its own. Your intentions may be good. The knife has intentions too” (190). Iorek does not try to talk Will out of using the knife, just as Raphael does not directly influence Adam’s choice in *Paradise Lost*; instead, Iorek wants to heighten Will’s awareness as to what the consequences might be of exercising such an unpredictable force, just as Raphael’s task is to make sure that Adam is informed about Satan’s plan to then make a prudent choice towards obedience.

Pullman is not a pacifist, this is no petition against weapons of mass destruction, but a caution against using a device without fully understanding it. That the stress is still placed on the individual’s choice, no matter what horrors this choice might trigger, becomes obvious in the exchange between Iorek and Will:

> But sometimes a tool may have other uses that you don’t know. Sometimes in doing what you intend, you also do what the knife intends, without knowing. Can you see the sharpest edge of that knife?”
> ‘No,’ said Will, for it was true: the edge diminished to a thinness so fine that the eye could not reach it.
> ‘Then how can you know everything that it does?’
> ‘I can’t. But I must still use it, and do what I can to help good things come about. (190-1)

\(^{109}\) This is why Lewis has to choose a fantasy setting for his version of a non-fall; see chapter I of this thesis.
Iorek urges Will to truly understand the ramifications of his choice to use the subtle knife, to be aware of the fact that not all well-meant deeds will lead to a positive outcome. It does not seem an interpretative strain to link the “intentions” of the subtle knife to the terribly underestimated strength of the atomic bomb: the invisible radiation that can still be detected in parts of Hiroshima today is something that the US dreadfully underestimated. Indeed, Millicent Lenz remarks that: “The parallel with nuclear research that resulted in splitting the atom is unmistakable” (141) in Pullman’s description of the process of cutting windows into worlds with the strange two blades. I do not wish to imply that this is the direct “meaning” of the subtle knife (others have made that mistake about Tolkien’s One Ring, and I will not follow in their footsteps); the invisible “edge” of the subtle knife could just as well be interpreted as the—yet unknown—consequences of gene manipulation, stem cell research, cloning, or any scientific or military invention that has brought or might still bring unwanted side effects. Pullman is not morally condemning human intervention into the natural order here (as Tolkien undoubtedly did), he is merely cautioning against underestimating the effect and the cost such an intervention might bring.

With that, Pullman seems, to a certain extent, to move away from Milton’s ordered and morally balanced universe and lean towards Chaos’s realm, so to speak, since he favours and stresses the unpredictability of a person’s choice. In that unpredictability lies the only freedom humans have to shape their destiny in Pullman’s universes; it is a freedom that is simultaneously bleaker than the freedom given to Milton’s first humans, since no omniscient God is there to forgive them any wrong choices or guide them towards the right ones, yet it also presents a chance to mature and grow. For the Christian Milton, guidance comes from God, whereas the atheist Pullman promotes the notion that guidance can only be found within. Will admits that he does not fully understand the workings of the knife, and yet he chooses to use it to cut an opening into the world of the dead. By doing so, he liberates the ghosts—undoubtedly a “good deed”; he also frees the Authority from his crystal prison and with that causes his death and consequent victory over the tyrannical Church. However, Will’s choice to use the knife comes with a heavy price: he and Lyra must separate. This, surely, is a consequence none of them could have foreseen, and it is Pullman’s intention to show his readers that, in order to “help good things come about” (AS 191), one has to be aware of the possible costs.
Although it appears that Pullman has evaded Miltonic influence here and manages to detach himself from the Christian context of the epic by focusing on moral self-responsibility, his basic premise about the need to make informed choices is still in line with what is expressed in *Paradise Lost*. It is an often repeated accusation of Milton’s God that he willingly lets Adam and Eve run into the trap set by Satan, and Empson even goes so far as to assume that Milton presents God as consciously bringing about the Fall, that “God was determined to make man fall, and had supplied a guard [to the gates of Heaven] only for show” (112), giving Satan easy access to Paradise. However, God’s speech at the beginning of Book III is not merely one of self-justification (wrongly assumed by both Empson and Pullman), but is mainly concerned with conveying Milton’s belief in the importance of free will.

The reason that God does not stop Adam and Eve from falling is that he wants his creatures to make their own choices, without being restricted in that freedom by letting them know what will happen in the future. God’s words express Milton’s view that choosing to do the right thing only holds value if that choice is made freely:

> Where only what they needs must do, appeared,<br>Not what they would, what praise could they receive?<br>What pleasure I from such obedience paid,<br>When will and reason ( reason also is choice)<br>Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,<br>Made passive both, had served necessity,<br>Not me. [...] (III, 105-111)

If “will and reason” are “made passive”, then there is no value to Adam and Eve’s choice, since they only act based on what they were told to do by God. In *His Dark Materials*, Will’s decision not to hear what the angel Xaphania knows about his future path in life, sounds like a summary of the lines just quoted from *Paradise Lost*:

> If you say my work is fighting, or healing, or exploring, or whatever you might say, I’ll always be thinking about it, and if I do end up doing that I’ll be resentful because it’ll feel as if I didn’t have a choice, and if I don’t do it, I’ll feel guilty because I should. Whatever I do, I will choose it, no one else. (AS 525)

Pullman has his hero Will, his modern Adam figure, repeat the exact same sentiment that Milton’s God expresses as his divine will: only a choice made freely and without being pressured into it, can be truly liberating and worth making in the first place. Just like Milton’s God can receive no “pleasure” if “only what they needs must do”, so does Will fear he might become “resentful because it’ll feel as if I didn’t have a choice”. Pullman has not truly moved away from Milton’s Christian universe, but in fact stays far closer to Milton and his beliefs than might be expected at first glance.
The ghost of Milton haunts Pullman’s text in the most unexpected places, so much so that even the words of Milton’s God find their way into the trilogy.

Considering the multi-layered approach to questions of morality and correct ethical behaviour in *His Dark Materials*, it would be almost desirable to have some guidance provided by the narrative voice of the trilogy, such as Milton’s epic narrator gives to the readers of *Paradise Lost*. The omniscient and highly didactic narrator of the Narnia series would probably not leave us in such confusion over what to believe; the reason that we as readers know Aslan to be goodness and righteousness personified is, after all, primarily because the narrator tells us so. The same is true about the narrator “Lewis” in *Perelandra*, who for instance never leaves the readers in doubt about the Un-man’s gruesomeness and corrupt character. Lewis, of course, has an entirely different mindset than Pullman: for the Christian Lewis, right and wrong, good and evil, are nameable forces, and thus, it is in the omniscient narrator’s power to distinguish between them. Pullman’s narrator, on the other hand, does not and cannot offer the same guidance; instead, he presents his readers with a multitude of different views on the same issue. Often, these views and opinions contradict each other, and just as Lyra and Will struggle to figure out who and what to believe, the reader is challenged to do the same. Again, Pullman’s main goal is to encourage his readers to make their own, informed choice as to what to believe. For instance, we hear various accounts about Lyra’s father, Lord Asriel; from freedom fighter to merciless demagogue, we are offered a broad spectrum of contradictory opinions. Even Lyra herself is unsure what to think of him: “She was afraid of her father, and she admired him profoundly, and she thought he was stark mad; but who was she to judge?” (*NL* 377). Indeed, Lyra is often wrong about people – most noticeably about her own mother. Whereas she at first naively adores Mrs. Coulter and almost fails to pick up on her deceit, Lyra later so fiercely resents her that she overlooks the possibility of a change in her. So, readers cannot even necessarily trust the protagonist’s views; Lyra herself has yet to learn how to manoeuvre her way through the adult world.

In her quest for the true nature of Dust, Lyra also makes mistakes, mainly because she seeks guidance from adult authority figures: the Oxford scholars, her mother, and her father. However, at the end of *Northern Lights*, Lyra realizes

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110 On the epic narrator in *Paradise Lost* see Anne Ferry’s *Milton’s Epic Voice*, also Fish.
something crucial about adults’ opinions: “We believed them, even though we could see that what they were doing was wicked and evil and wrong… We thought Dust must be bad, too, because they were grown-up and they said so. But what if it isn’t?” (398). This questioning of authorities, of doubting something to be true merely because “they said so”, is what Pullman encourages his adolescent readers to do, and that is why he offers little guidance, moral or otherwise. Pullman’s narrator seems to rather walk alongside the protagonists, instead of hovering over them, never revealing too much, and always cautious to give ‘both sides of the story’. It is the reader’s job to detangle the mix of viewpoints, and he cannot fully trust any of the characters’ judgements, neither can he rely on the narrator.

In spite of Pullman’s seemingly ‘democratic’ narrative style, which invites the reader to be at level with the narrator, he nevertheless displays a didacticism not unlike C.S. Lewis’s, especially in the third volume of the trilogy, The Amber Spyglass, in which a distinct change of tone is noticeable. Not only is this book far more lengthy than the other two, we are also confronted with a narrator who suddenly pushes the author’s political and theological views forward far more noticeably. In The Amber Spyglass, we find a morally-distorted priest-assassin and other such corrupt members of Pullman’s Church. Whereas Mrs. Coulter gets a chance to redeem herself once she turns her back on the Church, and Mary Malone (who is from our own world) is portrayed as a highly positive role-model precisely because she has left the Catholic Church and declares Christianity “a powerful and convincing mistake” (AS 464), members of Pullman’s Church do not seem to get a chance for redemption or even change. The priest-assassin Father Gomez in particular is a highly stereotypical representation of a religious fanatic. Upon seeing the mulefa, he immediately considers destroying their wheels, since “their habit of riding on wheels was abominable and satanic, and contrary to the will of God” (AS 490). This is of course meant to show how erratic and unreasonable this fanatic’s views are, and his behaviour stands in stark contrast to Mary Malone’s, which is why her criticism about the Christian faith sounds rational whereas Father Gomez and his superiors seem irrational and are not to be trusted.

Although the narrator of the trilogy is still careful not to preach or lecture to his readers too bluntly, we hear critical comments about the Church and organised religion usually from the most respected characters in the novel: Mary Malone, Serafina Pekkala, the angel Xaphania, and Will’s father. All of them agree that the
churches of all the multiple worlds have only ever promoted tyranny and injustice; Serafina Pekkala, for instance, tells Mary Malone that “[...] the rebel angels, the followers of wisdom, have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed. [Xaphania] gave me many examples from my world”, to which Mary answers: “I can think of many from mine” (AS 506). Since Mary is from our own world, the criticism of Christianity is no longer subtle, but quite openly displayed. Pullman, now aware of the image of atheist spokesperson he has created for himself, is writing the last volume of the trilogy with a very specific agenda in mind, and thus the criticism of religion has become the primary focus for *The Amber Spyglass*.

Particularly in the last chapters of *The Amber Spyglass*, Pullman’s mild didacticism revolves into stern, moralising preaching. Thus, Xaphania tells Will that if he wants to find a different way to communicate with Lyra after their separation, it will be a hard path towards that goal: “You have to work. Did you think you could snap your fingers, and have it as a gift? What is worth having is worth working for” (AS 523). Pullman’s universes seem to still follow a strict moral code of conduct, which seems to evoke the so-called “Protestant work ethic” in its emphasis on the necessity to work hard in order to achieve true personal growth, and the need for personal sacrifice for the greater good. In fact, Xaphania sounds very much like Milton’s God when she informs Will and Lyra that they will have to separate: “This is no comfort, but believe me, every single being who knows of your dilemma wishes things could be otherwise: but there are fates that even the most powerful have to submit to. There is nothing I can do to help you change the way things are” (AS 518). Milton’s God, too, explains that Adam’s and Eve’s Fall cannot be prevented since: “I else must change/ Their nature, and revoke the high decree/ Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained/ Their freedom, they themselves ordained their fall.”(III, 125-128). In both instances, there are higher laws which are “unchangeable, eternal”, or as Xaphania calls it: “fates that even the most powerful have to submit to”, which we have to obey even if it means pain and personal sacrifice. Even in Pullman’s supposedly God-free universe do angels, humans, and animals have to obey ‘fate’ and live according to their ‘nature’, so personal freedom is just as, or maybe even more restricted, than it is in Milton’s universe, which has to obey the laws of the Creator.
In his effort to re-write *Paradise Lost* in a way that leaves no doubt about Milton secretly belonging to “the Devil’s party”, Pullman tries hard to strip the epic of its Christian core and expose the tyrannical nature of Milton’s God once and for all. The divine, however, sneaks back into *His Dark Materials* and Pullman is never quite able to convince us of his “self-begot” universes. To a great extent, this is due to the presence of Milton’s ghost hovering over Pullman’s trilogy, and turning up in the most surprising places. By simultaneously inviting Miltonic influence in, yet fighting the very theological framework that is the foundation of the epic, Pullman gets mixed up in the paradox of sermonising against the evils of the Christian Church, yet at the same time evoking distinctly Christian moral concepts. Whereas Pullman can still consider Milton as his ally in his battle against church oppression in the first two volumes of the trilogy, we can see a stronger contrast between Pullman’s now openly declared mission to discredit the Christian faith especially and Milton’s well-balanced argument that considers both the devil’s and God’s side in the story of the Fall. The more Pullman tries to push against Milton’s core belief in a just and benevolent creator, however, the more evident Milton’s influence on the trilogy becomes. In the end, the trilogy is only at its strongest when it remains true to the complex moral structure we find in *Paradise Lost*, and at its weakest when it tries to break away from it.
Conclusion

Milton’s epic retelling of the Fall has appealed to a diverse range of readers throughout the years; whether or not Milton was indeed “of the Devil’s party without knowing it,” as Blake claims, it is a fact that both religious and anti-religious sentiments can be read into *Paradise Lost*, depending very much on the reader’s focus. Thus, it is not surprising that both C.S. Lewis, the Christian fantasist, and Philip Pullman, the controversial atheist ‘rebel’, can find their own beliefs reflected in Milton’s epic. What is remarkable about *Paradise Lost* and its author is that critics, readers and writers have always tended to ‘own’ a certain ‘type’ of Milton, and have promoted an exclusive reading of *Paradise Lost* as either subversive or orthodox, yet rarely as *both*. Two different ‘Miltons’ are pitted against each other, two versions of the man, just as we find two diametrically opposed readings of his epic. Considering that Harold Bloom portrays Milton as the greatest inhibiting influence on other poets, this radical either/or reading offers writers the only way to escape this stifling influence; by misreading Milton’s great epic as either radical or orthodox, they free up artistic space for their own works, which can re-write the epic the way it was meant to be written. The idea that the ‘true’ meaning of *Paradise Lost* needs to be uncovered and that the epic is often misinterpreted, implies that Milton’s poetry was not precise enough, and that Milton was inconsistent with his narrative, a misreading that can deflate Milton’s dominating place in the literary canon to a certain extent.

Even if Milton’s works might negatively affect the ‘originality’ of a poet, and no matter how over-powerful Miltonic influence is, the appeal of the paradoxical nature of *Paradise Lost* leads authors back to it again and again. By evoking the great poet in their own works authors can give their writing a stronger artistic impact and place it closer to another canonical work—the Bible. For Lewis, the ‘Christian fantasist’, choosing the fantastic genre provides him with the possibility of challenging the authority of the biblical text while still claiming that he is merely interested in “Story”, in creating a secondary world that has no ties with our own. Here, Milton’s epic provides the perfect stepping stone towards a more subversive reading of the Bible, a possibility that Philip Pullman whole-heartedly embraces. *Paradise Lost* can function as a mediator between authors and the biblical text, offering them the possibility to question and critique it, and re-tell the Fall myth.
without challenging the source itself. However, since Milton himself is so indebted to the biblical text, to re-tell *Paradise Lost* always also means to invite the biblical text in, and the influence of this archetypal patriarchal narrative that relies on a creating Father is something that Pullman underestimates.

Both Pullman and Lewis see an aspect of their own authorial persona represented in Milton, who was indeed *both* a faithful Christian and a highly political ‘rebel’; just as these authors try to push towards a very specific reading of *Paradise Lost*, so do they try to ‘read’ Milton’s authorial persona as either that of orthodox Christian or subversive rebel. Lewis, the Christian warrior, must naturally feel a kindred spirit in Milton, the Christian poet; however, Lewis’s anxiety about his role of Christian fantasist, a writer who creates worlds different from the one created by God, leads him to overstate not only the orthodoxy of *Paradise Lost*, but also the role of Milton as Christian poet. Just as Lewis blends out the subversive elements of the epic, so does he gloss over Milton’s role as political pamphleteer and radical dissenter; the idea of a radically political Milton does not sit well with Lewis’s own image and thus we can see Lewis not only misreading *Paradise Lost* in his Preface, but also misreading Milton himself, casting him into the role of steadfast Christian, who writes for the glory of God only. To Pullman, Milton is a rebel author who secretly questions God’s divine justice. Both authors, however, must discover that Milton cannot be so easily cast into a rigid mould, and their works are haunted by Milton’s ghost in so far as that they reveal precisely those aspects of Milton’s life and work that they are aiming to suppress. Lewis shows us how merciless and tyrannical Milton’s God truly is, whereas Pullman, who misreads the epic through a Romantic lens, evokes Milton’s Puritanism and rigid patriarchal structures that allow only for a male hero.

It seems as if influence cannot only be seen in the way a predecessor’s work inhibits the strong poets’ future works, but also in the way the predecessor’s authorial profile overtakes and dominates the self-image an author seeks to create. This is especially noticeable in Philip Pullman’s almost desperate attempt to escape comparisons with C.S. Lewis, by publicly attacking him and presenting himself and his works as the better alternative to this author’s “poisonous” writing. To a great extent, this is a conscious marketing ploy: whereas Lewis sought to positively benefit from Milton’s image as Christian poet, Pullman uses Lewis’s ambiguous status as Christian apologetic to strengthen and polish his own authorial profile as the “anti-Lewis”, profiting both from church protests as well as support from secular
intellectuals. However, Pullman, is the—up to this point—last in the long line of authors who evoke Milton as their literary forefather; thus, he faces an almost overpowering number of authors who long before him discovered the appeal of Milton and his epic, and it is the last in this chain of authors who Pullman battles with most openly, yet also most unsuccessfully. Pullman tries to set himself apart from Lewis, yet supports the same ideals in his works and there are many instances where their beliefs and attitudes actually overlap; both authors are highly didactic and very consciously try to steer their readers towards a certain ‘message’, attempting to teach them the need to ‘grow up’ and be ‘good’. Though Pullman rejects the Neo-Platonic ideal that he accuses Lewis of supporting with his works, his concept of the ‘true’ nature of a person (or a bear) represents an essentialist ideal that is very close to the platonic ideal form. All these instances in which Lewis’s and Pullman’s fiction shows surprising similarities are moments in which both of them are close to Miltonic ideals.

This thesis sought to illustrate that escaping Miltonic influence is indeed impossible, as Bloom has stated; even Philip Pullman, who so readily admits to borrowing from Milton’s epic, and who consciously aligns himself with Milton’s image as radically political polemicist, cannot evade the Christian moral framework that he is so intent on subverting with his Fall version, purely because it lies at the heart of Paradise Lost. Whether an author wants to present the biblical Fall as a felix culpa or the greatest disaster that ever befell mankind, Paradise Lost has left its mark on the Fall myth, and it is now impossible for authors to re-imagine the story told in Genesis without also inviting Miltonic imagery into their narratives. Thus, Lewis’s ‘supposal’ Perelandra, which seems to have only superficial intertextual ties with Paradise Lost, is in fact entirely indebted to Milton’s version of the Fall. Lewis’s unconscious aim with Perelandra is an attempt at revising Paradise Lost, minimising its subversive impact; yet, the result of trying to create a better, more Christian version of Paradise Lost is a far more questionable portrayal of divine justice and benevolence. Lewis and Pullman take a very different reading of the epic as their starting point for their own Fall version, and yet they both end up conveying the same ideals and the same stern morals in their respective works; even Pullman, with his supposedly God-free universes, presents his adolescent readers with such high ideals as the need for sacrifice and hard work, that sound suspiciously Puritan for an atheist fantasist. The ghost of Milton is ever-present in both re-imagining of the Fall myth, and is at its strongest whenever the authors try to wrestle with its presence in their
texts. The artistic strength of these authors, however, lies in their attempt to struggle with this dominant father figure of English literature, to invite the ghost in and allow it to haunt their texts, and in the most productive ways.

Attempts to oversimplify the delicately balanced moral framework of Milton’s epic result in far weaker storytelling; this is a mark of Milton’s genius, or, if one is to step away from this charged term, at the very least evidence for Milton’s courage in following through with his decision to truly argue both sides of the case. In giving the Devil a tragic role alongside God, Milton has given us readers the chance to discover for ourselves ‘what it all means’. Just as it is up to the fallen Adam and Eve to redeem their own race and to become masters of their own destiny, so are we readers challenged to find our own truth and grow into our role as part of Milton’s “audience fit…though few”. The intrigue of the epic lies in its paradoxical nature, and any retelling of the epic that seeks to prove a specific reading as the ‘correct’ one will end up a less rich, shallower version of *Paradise Lost*. Whenever critics, readers and writers have tried to uncover the ‘true’ meaning of Milton’s epic they have all failed precisely because they overlook the intricate levels of complexity that are the very reason why the epic has been so exceptionally influential and inspiring to so many artists over the centuries. The truth may be that Milton knew that “to justify the ways of God to men” was in fact an impossible task, since one can always argue both sides of a case, and so he chose to offer his “fit” readers the tools needed to make their own informed choice.

The fact that *Paradise Lost* can be read in such varied ways points towards the diversity of the text itself, the multi-layered approach of Milton’s argument; the appeal of Milton’s epic lies in this very diversity, and to narrow its narrative down to one ‘correct’ reading is counterproductive, and a sure way towards being overpowered by the Bloomian “Covering Cherub” that is “blocking a new voice of entering the Poet’s Paradise” (35). Both *Perelandra* and *His Dark Materials* can be seen as a celebration of the diversity inherent in Milton’s epic precisely because they fail at presenting a better, stronger, more radical or more Christian version of *Paradise Lost*. This does not diminish the artistry of the writers following in Milton’s footsteps; it does, however, show that neither Milton nor his epic can that easily be employed as a means to boost an author’s fashioned self-image—at least not without a price: evoking the ghost of Milton means being placed alongside one of the greatest
English poets, and it is sheerly impossible to come out as the stronger competitor in such a comparison.
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