

ABSTRACT

MCKINNEY, SARAH KATHERINE. Irreducibly Ever After: Metafantasy as Postmodern Folklore. (Under the direction of Dr. Mary Helen Thuente.)

Literary scholarship has largely ignored the genre of medieval fantasy, dismissing its library as derivative, formulaic and repetitive. In this thesis, I argue that medieval fantasy is more productively framed as myth and folklore, and that what some call “repetition” would be better named “iteration.” By functioning via the folkloric process of incremental repetition, various fantastic tale-types adapt to individual novels’ purposes in the way that the ancient oral tale once adapted to audience. The advent of the literary fairy tale, which has culminated in the work of Walt Disney, has halted the natural storytelling process and “frozen” many traditional tales in place. Medieval fantasy actively fights such narrative distillation—which inevitably leads to dogmatic didacticism—by rejecting master narrative and regenerating the active, meaning-making relationship between author and reader. A particular type of fantasy, called “metafantasy,” makes calling attention to the process of story its primary aim. In so doing, metafantasy fights the tendency to Disneyfication and the appropriation of myth by dominant ideologies. I explicate the folkloric processes of three metafantasy novels here: *The Last Unicorn*, by Peter Beagle; *The Princess Bride*, by William Goldman; and Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series.

Irreducibly Ever After: Metafantasy as Postmodern Folklore

by

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BIOGRAPHY

Kate McKinney was born and raised by two teachers here in Raleigh, North Carolina. Except for summers in Michigan (one summer she rode a bicycle 1,200 miles, from Michigan to New Hampshire), a short stint in Greensboro and another in France, she has read and written here always. She came to NCSU from four years of service as an elementary school teacher's assistant, and she thinks these university people take themselves a bit too seriously (she tries not to take *herself* too seriously). Kate's literary interests tend to the strange; she maintains that we learn the most from being forced to imagine. Her favorite writer is Albert Camus.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Critical Frameworks.	1
Chapter 2: Peter Beagle's Truth as Magic.	16
Chapter 3: William Goldman's True Love	24
Chapter 4: Philip Pullman's Truth-Reader.	32
Conclusions.	42
Works Cited.	45

CHAPTER 1: Critical Frameworks

Labeling literary genres is often problematic, and the sort of story that should be called “fantasy” is one of the hardest to define—especially when considering the literature of the last century. Aspects of the “fantastic” appear in the works of authors as aesthetically diverse as Mark Twain, Marion Zimmer Bradley and Jorge Luis Borges. Most critics agree, however, that contemporary fantasy is rooted in fairy tale, folklore and myth. Farah Mendlesohn, whose recent work treats the fantasy novels of British author Diana Wynne Jones, calls fantastic writing “remixing myths,” and cites Brian Attebery’s claim that “the materials of fantasy are partly individual invention and partly communal property”(XXV). The most easily discernible vein of the genre is medieval fantasy—which includes (some vastly popular) novels marked (and often stigmatized) by their setting in some version of Old Europe populated with princesses, heroes, and magical creatures. The ancestors of such books are Western culture’s oldest and most seminal stories—tales which date back to a time before “story” could be properly labeled “literature.” Medieval fantasy traces its more recent pedigree (on the fairy-tale side) to Marie-Catherine D’Aulnoy and Charles Perrault, writer-anthropologists like the brothers Grimm, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and their eccentric countryman Lord Dunsany, and American Robert Howard, who made the jump from myth to action-hero. On the other (more often canonized) side of the lineage come *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Spenser’s *Fairie Queen*, and Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest* (Zipes, *Spells* xviii-xix). Milton and Dante could even be seen as forefathers of fantasy; C.S. Lewis and, more recently, Philip Pullman and Neil Gaiman have successively taken up the Judeo-Christian myth in their work.

C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, colleagues at Oxford during the first half of the Twentieth Century, gave fantasy the series novel, which is now a fantastic convention in itself. Both grandiose, mythically-intoned epics that described the struggle between good and evil in an earthlike otherworld: *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis) and the *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien). As they created a new genre of literature, Tolkien and Lewis also began a body of criticism to accompany—and justify—it.¹ Their discourse is almost as compelling as their fiction, as it epitomizes and exaggerates scholarly conversation: both were scholars in the same milieu, friendly foes who argued different views on the purpose of fantasy. Lewis valued straight allegory, which Tolkien loudly and publicly disdained. Tolkien valued the meticulous invention of what he termed, in his essay entitled “Fantasy”, a “Secondary World” complete with its own cultures, customs, and “Secondary Belief[s]” that the author should likewise invent for the creatures that dwell in that space (80). Lewis’ Secondary World did not require Secondary Belief; on the contrary, Lewis would argue that the Secondary World serves mainly to distance and distill our own, Primary World belief systems, thus allowing us to examine them dispassionately. “Fairy Tale,” Lewis writes, “seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say” (“Sometimes Fairy Stories...” 117). Tolkien argued that “interpretation...of simple allegory” is an overly reductive and even epistemologically dangerous approach to meaning-making² (“To W.H. Auden” 87).

Because much popular trade fantasy produced since Narnia and Middle Earth is of poor artistic quality, scholars have been quick to label fantasy lesser fiction: “children’s

¹ Tzvetan Todorov, Ursula K. LeGuin, Peter Beagle, Jack Zipes, and George Aichele are only a few of those who continue to add to the body of criticism.

² Here I risk being overly reductive, myself—CS Lewis’ descriptions of his own creative process, not to mention the power of his novels themselves, prove his stories much more than “simple allegory.” Moreover, it can be argued that the Secondary Belief systems in Tolkien’s novels were obviously intended to comment upon our own Primary World. But Lewis’ critical lens does rely on concepts that resemble Sidney’s (Renaissance) “Author as conduit for the Ideal” paradigm, which the fantasies I intend to examine categorically reject.

literature” and “escapism.” Neither label helps the anti-fantasy argument. The former label, though sometimes true, is not (certainly not any longer) grounds for canonic rejection. The latter misunderstands fantasy, which is able to treat difficult philosophical and moral questions as easily as (at times more easily than) any other genre precisely because it can “escape” modern reality and adapt to abstraction. J.R.R. Tolkien argues this point eloquently in one of the fundamental essays of fantastic theory, “On Fairy Stories”: “Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison...he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison walls?...[Moreover, critics are] confusing the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter”(20).

By far the best case that skeptical scholars bring against fantasy, however, is that the genre relies upon established devices and themes that seem to limit texts to certain formulaic frameworks—namely the hero’s quest and the fight between good and evil—that, in turn, lend themselves to allegory and didacticism. Indeed, one might argue that the quintessential fantasies mentioned above represent the only two possibilities for the genre: grandiose, historicized, otherworldly epic (Tolkien), and painstaking point-for-point allegory (Lewis). Allegory has been out of style since the advent of the novel, and didactic narrative is never an advisable subject for scholarly attention, as it makes for boring papers. It is easy to see why critics who know little of the genre’s scope find no need to delve very deeply into fantasy. The past decade’s resurgence of critical interest in popular medieval fantasy, thanks to J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series, has proven that Tolkien and Lewis’ legacy is not forgotten, nor is its potential exhausted. But skepticism remains: though the new stories are praised for their artistry, they are also criticized as formulaic quest narratives.

But the discussion of product often ignores process; this distinction is key to understanding those fantasies criticized for repetition and mimicry. “Imitation”, in the realm of the fantastic, is better viewed as “iteration”: variations on a theme. Contemporary medieval fantasy is best framed as folklore. Elliot Oring’s conceptualization of folklore (which I will stretch, as Oring does, to include myth) is particularly helpful here:

(1) Folk narratives tend to exist in multiple versions. No single text can claim to be the authoritative or “correct” one....A folk narrative, in other words, must be re-created with each telling. (2) As a result of this process of re-creation, the folk narrative reflects both the past as well as the present. Narrators must draw upon past language, symbols, events, and formsYet because each narration is a creation of the moment, it crystallizes around contemporary situations and concerns...A folk narrative is something of a renovation...(3) A folk narrative reflects both the individual and the community....The narrator’s individuality must find outlet in a narrative acceptable to the community...(123)

This process of narrative evolution by re-telling—a sort of pre-textual intertextuality—is what folklorists call “incremental repetition” (Brunvald 253). Within the community of medieval fantasy writers, intertextuality takes the form of generic convention. Plots (what folklorists call “tale-types”) and characters and symbols (“motifs”) recur in fantasy just as they do in folklore. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series, for instance, fits into the fantastic “tale-type” defined by J.R.R. Tolkien. Le Guin’s story is a quest—Tolkien’s tale-type—and contains several Tolkien motifs: the call to adventure, the match of wits with a dragon, the evil burden that must be destroyed, the friend that refuses to abandon the protagonist, and even the

discovery of a long-lost and much coveted ring of power. The ring motif operates in Le Guin's plot exactly as it does in Tolkien's: it is merely a side-note in the first volume and comes to figure prominently later in the series. Few would argue that Le Guin's *Earthsea* fails as art, but it does "imitate," and brilliantly succeeds as incremental repetition of Tolkien's quest tale. In this way, fantasy resembles fairy tale at levels more fundamental than a borrowed aesthetic.

The State of the Postmodern "Fairy Tale": The Problem of Disneyfication

Because fairy tale is readily recognized by cultural theorists as serving a cultural function (lesson-teaching, acculturation, inculcating gender roles, and the like), it is often accused of perpetuating oppressive cultural norms. The cultural effect of myth and fairy tale—good or ill—is a subject much debated, originally in feminist discourse and more recently from post-colonial perspectives. In the 1970s, feminist scholars such as Marcia Lieberman and Jennifer Waelti-Walters attacked the fairy tales popularized by Andrew Lang's *Blue Fairy Book*, compiled with Victorian values in mind. *The Blue Fairy Book* fits the genre of literary fairy tale that Charles Perrault and Mme. D'Aulnoy first made famous in France at the end of the Seventeenth Century—tales which, according to Jack Zipes, "addressed the concerns, tastes, and functions of court society...[and were] a social means through which questions and issues of *civilité*, proper behavior and demeanor in all types of situations, were mapped out..." ("Breaking the Disney Spell" 23). Walt Disney and his legacy have continued this same process. In essence, Disney was an anthologist himself, and chose to animate versions of tales that fit his moral compass. Like his colleagues in the literary realm, his choices committed only one iteration of a given tale to text; each Disney version

has therefore become more fixed in our collective awareness. Take the tale “Cinderella,” for example: Disney chose the Perrault version over Wilhelm Grimm’s “Cinderella,” probably because it was so much less “messy.” Had Disney drawn Grimm’s version, he would have had to cover three long sessions sorting lentils, seeds, and peas and a step-sister cutting off a slice of her own heel with a knife (“blood in the shoe” indicates that the sister is not the mysterious stranger who danced with the prince). Grimm’s version also depicts Cinderella’s relationship to her dead mother—we meet her as she dies at the very beginning of the story. She tells Cinderella to “remain pious and good,” and Cinderella tends a tree on her grave throughout the tale. It is the tree—her real mother, not a fairy godmother—who provides her with beautiful clothes for the ball. Though more unwieldy than Perrault’s tale, Grimm’s Cinderella embodies a vital connection to mother (tearfully tending the tree), an active rather than passive heroine whose work and behavior merit the help she receives.³ The deciding factor, however, could easily have been the heel-chopping—Disney chose a tamer tale, with a less assertive female prototype.

In addition to losing all of the details in alternative versions of folkloric narrative, choosing tales inevitably narrows their meaning. Fewer versions mean fewer interpretations, and the “chosen” narrative risks oppressive didacticism. Again, Disney is a prime example of this phenomenon. Lieberman indicts the tame, Victorian-toned Disney movies as manifestly damaging to young girls’ self-perceptions and resultant cultural identities. Lieberman correctly observes that the heroines of such tales are dominated and defined by marriage, desirous of material wealth, and judged first by their physical appearance; moral virtue,

³ On the other hand, were Disney to have chosen Grimm, we would be bereft of the glass slipper—a delightful detail that Perrault added—and the more pointedly sinister stepsisters. The mice, who become horses for Cinderella’s coach, may have had more potential as characters than Grimm’s pigeons. In choosing one version over another, something is always lost.

“good-temper and meekness” is “regularly associated with beauty”(385). She goes on to hypothesize that such models “probably [act] to promote jealousy and divisiveness among girls” and negatively affect their psycho-sexual identity.⁴ “Why then,” asks Waelti-Walters, “are these stories told so assiduously to little girls?” (180). The tales she calls to task are “‘Cinderella’, ‘Snow White’, ‘Sleeping Beauty’ and ‘Beauty and the Beast’ in particular, being the ones which are best known today” (Waelti-Walters 185).

The distinction between fairy tale as an enormous body of cultural and literary history and a few popular versions of stories hand-picked by anthologists (“the ones best known today”) is an important one. Those who have taken tales to make texts have not only contaminated the tales in transmission but ossified their interpretations in print and film. The anthologies fairy tales addressed by debates such as the one described above have been forced to occupy a new place in contemporary culture—a place far from folklore. The definition of “fairy tale,” in the average North American mind (a “mind” which has proven to be contagious enough to extend well beyond the U.S.) has been diminished to a few Disneyfied examples.

The limited scope of popularized fairy tale narrative—particularly the Disney brand—is at the center of a lively academic conversation today; the recurrent theme is stagnancy, redundancy, and imaginative fallowness—the complete opposite of the changeable possibility inherent to the folkloric tradition of incremental repetition. Patrick D. Murphy attacks Disney from an ecofeminist standpoint, arguing that the films “[display]

⁴More recently, feminist inquiry has noted the contemporary phenomena of the Disney princess. Today’s “princess” has gone beyond the tradition of European fairy tale examined here to include Native American, Chinese, and Middle-Eastern young women who fall in love and get married at the end of the story. Alexander Bruce notes that she has also added material objects to her list of acquisitive goals (on which “husband” used to be the only item) (14).

static, absolute depictions of both nature and women”⁵(126). Deborah Ross, in her essay “Escape from Wonderland: Disney and the Female Imagination,” observes that “Disney the man and the corporation are known for a belief in control. The top-down management Disney epitomizes...thrives on homogeneity and rigid adherence to rules”(53). Jack Zipes, whose scholarly career has been dedicated to the history of fairy tale, observes, in Disney, “‘the eternal return of the same’...that makes for enjoyable viewing...but nothing new in the exploration of narration, animation, and signification” and a tendency to cause viewers to “long nostalgically for neatly ordered patriarchal realms”(“Breaking the Disney Spell” 40).⁶ Such predictable stories, sifted down through tellers like Perrault, then Lang, and now Walt Disney, have grown to completely overshadow their less tidy (sometimes gory), irreducible (sometimes ridiculous), and subversive (sometimes seditious) relatives.

The most lamentable result of the distillation of ancient oral folklore into “literary” fairy tale (and similar appropriation of myth by those who push reductive ideologies) is that readers, writers and scholars lose sight of the dynamic process of storytelling and retelling. The process is a sign of living culture. Psychologist turned folklorist Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, discusses the importance of fairy tales to the psychological development of children, describing the tension between the need for archetypal magic and the realization that such magic exists in imagination: “Eventually the child recognizes that what he has taken as literally true...is only a symbol”(50). A similar tension is manifest in the metanarrative of every fairy tale: the tension between variation and stability that the relationships among tale, motif, interpretive teller, and interpretive reader comprise. Max

⁵ Not to mention the promotion of “a capitalist work ethic among dwarves, princes, mice, servants, and heavily anthropomorphized animals”(Murphy 126)

⁶ Zipes blames this tendency, at least in the early films, more on Disney’s need to write autobiography than a desire to press upon any certain message, but one follows the other.

Luthi writes about magic (the “miraculous”) in literary fairy tale: “the miracle is not a cause of wonderment in the fairy tale....Rather, it is an essential element permeating all things....Everything can enter into relationship with everything else: that is the actual miracle and the simple foregone conclusion.... [The fairy tale] can isolate all things, and then, just as easily, establish new relationships” (76-7). Story is required to live, as Bettelheim⁷ says we must, “in true consciousness of our existence...[because] our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives” (i). Luthi’s and Bettelheim’s claims imply, as many fantasists would agree, that fantastic stories, particularly fairy tale and myth, fill the function of acculturating metaphor. Part of such acculturation must be learning to read well—to identify and reject reductive ideologies, to be always open to context, to be aware of the reader’s ability to choose interpretive lenses, to be aware of the effect that the reader has (and should be able to have) upon the meaning of the text. Victorian (and later Disney) versions of tales which originated in more dynamic oral traditions have forced those stories into more and more predictable and prescriptive roles, to the point that we usually know the “lessons” we “should” learn when we read them.⁸ Fairy tale, as defined by popular culture, no longer grows in the dark, fecund and creative soil that it once did. It has been plucked and put in a vase.

Well-written fantasy, however, is fairy tale, myth and folklore’s still-growing, un-stunted relative⁹. Fantasy is able to actively respond to, and even attempt to remedy, the tendency of living myth to solidify into one, reductive master narrative. Many fantasy

⁷ Ironically, Bettelheim is one of the theorists that feminists attacked, and is cited in Lieberman’s article. His work focuses on many darker, less popular stories, and applied a historic/social/psychological (not feminist!) lens.

⁸ Indeed, in the case of Disney, we *watch* them—our role is literally more passive.

⁹ I specify “good” fantasy here because much writing in the genre is just as mindlessly formulaic as any Disney film—most novels of this sort seek to imitate Tolkien and do not succeed at employing his motifs and tale types in any new way.

authors, notably Robin McKinley, have revisited fairy tales in their work, thus continuing the evolution that used to define the genre. McKinley has retold the above-mentioned, feminist-offending “Beauty and the Beast” in two separate books. Betsy Hearne, author of *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale* notes that McKinley wrote her first novel for precisely the reasons I describe above: “in the throes of a negative reaction to the television adaptation starring George C. Scott, in which McKinley felt that the point had been missed and the aesthetic thinned. The story, she maintains, is about honor”(104). To submit her interpretive protest, McKinley chose the still-malleable genre of the fantasy novel as a mouthpiece.

In the second of McKinley’s fantastic versions of “Beauty and the Beast”, *Rose Daughter*, Beauty ultimately chooses to leave the Beast in the animal form she has come to love. Such a drastic change in the familiar story is completely in keeping with the true nature of fairy-tale; each tale has multiple versions—multiple interpretations—that explore a magically inexhaustible potential for meaning. Betsy Hearne astutely observes:

In one century [the Beast] can be saved by the offer of a hand in marriage; in another, by a book of love. The Beast offers didactic French governesses, moralistic Victorian storytellers, and worried post-Freudian artists a metaphor for sexuality adapting to society. They have all, in turn, adapted the metaphor to their differing cultures or ideals. (139)

Adaptation and (re)interpretation are the most important mechanisms of magical storytelling. The ubiquitous Zipes, using the term “contamination,” calls the brothers Grimm “the greatest contaminators of fairy tales in the 19th century,” and goes on to say that “[t]o contaminate an oral folk tale or a literary fairy tale is thus to enrich it by artfully introducing extra-ordinary

motifs, themes, words, expressions, proverbs, metaphors, and characters into its corporate body so that it will be transformed and form a new essence” (“Contamination” 79). Fantasies, particularly fantasies which utilize metanarrative, seem to intentionally and self-consciously oppose didacticism by reminding readers of the transmission process of myth and fairy tale.

Defining Metafantasy

The meaning of story and the importance of the cultural process of narrative are almost always, at least implicitly, called into question in fantasy novels. Sam Gamgee, a character in J.R.R. Tolkien’s trilogy who imagines himself a character in a heroic ballad, thus projecting his experience into its future as story, is an example of such metanarrative. Writers of contemporary fantasy like Peter Beagle, Patricia McKillip, John Myers Myers, Robin McKinley, and Phillip Pullman have chosen to allow metanarrative to become more explicitly part of their novels’ artifice, possibly the whole point of the story. In McKinley’s *Rose Daughter*, for instance, Beauty herself acts as metanarrative voice and rails with frustration against the decisions the “story”—a prescriptive narrative until she takes the reins—tries to force her into. “This is a story like any nursery tale of magic?” she asks angrily, “Where any maiden will do, any—any—monster, any hero, so long as they meet the right mysterious old women and discover the right enchanted doors during the right haunted midnights...?”(192). Critics R.E. Foust and, subsequently, George Aichele have dubbed the special sort of fantasy that focuses on metanarrative—fairy stories about fairy stories—“metafantasy.”¹⁰ As Bugs Bunny might seize the pencil to erase and redraw parts of himself, characters in metafantasies often become aware of their roles as characters inside a story that

¹⁰ I first heard the term from a professor at NCSU, Dr. Chris Cobb, and found it later in the criticism cited here.

“means” something. What they do, then, has something to do with what their tale will mean.

Metafantasies, as defined by Aichele, typically function in one of two ways. In the first form, characters are self-aware, commenting on their role in the tale and its meaning. The second form uses a frame story to draw reader attention to the text as artifice. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on Peter Beagle’s *The Last Unicorn*, published in 1968, as an example of the first type and William Goldman’s *The Princess Bride*, published in 1973, as an example of the frame story.¹¹ I will also argue that Philip Pullman’s acclaimed *His Dark Materials* is metafantasy: though its metanarrative device is subtly folded in to a more conventional structure, the work is a “story about story.”

Goldman, Beagle, and Pullman’s representative metafantasies, by both implicitly and explicitly calling the purpose of narrative into question, function as “anti-fairy tales”, “postmodern myths”, “new true stories” in which both symbols and story are freed from culturally (and literarily) determined interpretive restraints. The idea of essential meaning is undermined; the idea (and the importance) of meaning-making is emphasized. These self-conscious fantasy novels focus on the storytelling processes of fairy tale, folk tale, and myth. By re-involving readers in dynamic and ongoing interpretation, they strive to reclaim story from other externally imposed ideological interpretations of text. Metafantasy strives to counteract the culturally prescribed readings that contemporary critics might assume when confronted with unicorns, princes, and the perennial battle between Good and Evil.

¹¹ Both stories have been made into successful screenplays, but I will focus on the novels here.

Fantasy as Postmodern Genre

The active rejection of what postmodern theorists call “master narratives” is one feature that recommends a postmodern lens for consideration of popular fantasy.

Fantastic narrative in general—because (most obviously) of the subversive decentering of “realities” as diverse as geography, politics, and the principles of physics—may belong most to the postmodern paradigm. At the ninth annual International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts, critic Kathryn Hume admitted that her own definition of fantasy—“departure from consensus reality”—“already includes postmodernist literature”(174). George Aichele, in his essay “Postmodern Fantasy, Ideology, and the Uncanny,” asserts that aspects of the fantastic define what he calls the “parasitic relationship” between the modern and postmodern.

“Fantasy,” he explains, “replaces the coherent space of modernist reality with a paradoxical, non-referential space, a fragmented, multiple space, a bottomless abyss, that resists through infinite regression the modern human habitation” (498). Each of these arguments would seem to elicit criticism that applies postmodern lenses to fantasists’ experimentation with narrative.

In addition to decentering and the rejection of master narrative, a third (related) entry from postmodern lexicon, “irreducibility”, will be useful here. One could argue that Tolkien modeled Middle Earth’s most salient Secondary Belief on (a pre-postmodern) example of irreducibility: the One Ring. Though it seems a symbol, the Ring escapes analogy; it means nothing but itself, though it behaves like many things.¹² Irreducibility also functions at the metanarrative level; Roberta Hoffman Markman champions fantasy and fairy tale as an introduction to literary analysis and theory because of its irreducible metanarrative elements. “Understanding the process of fairy tale as a metaphor of the creative process,” she claims,

¹² Well-meaning interpreters have come up with “signifieds” for the Ring as diverse as political power, atomic energy, and narcotic drugs.

yields “an understanding of the dynamics in metaphorical structure” (31). Markman is not just talking about one thing standing for another—the “dynamics” she refers to are Barthesian. Reading is “dependent on imaginative perception,” but “once we enter the world of the work, truth is defined from within it and not from something we bring into it from the outside” (33). Such a meaning system relies upon neither “intended” truth (external to the reader) nor truth as pure perception, but rather the dynamic relationship between the two, which is irreducible. Just such an irreducible text-reader relationship is represented in the fantasy novels I will examine here. The irreducible is also present in the form of magic and truth, one being a focus of fairy story and the other the (slippery) center of any story, ostensibly.

One final concept that those examining the fantastic can borrow from postmodern theory is liminality—the idea of “in-between.” Aichele’s use of “space” as a tool for envisioning Fantasy’s function is not new. Perhaps the most-loved question that critics of the fantastic strive to answer is “where are we?” and the response is always “somewhere *in between*.” All agree that fantasy is a liminal literature; it inhabits borders. Tolkien’s “On Fairy Stories” describes a “realm” that is the setting for all fantasy that is “wide and deep and high and filled with many things...beauty that is an enchantment, and an everpresent peril” and, most importantly, within reach of imaginative “explorers” like himself (2). Ursula K. Le Guin also insists that she is explorer rather than inventor: “The true laws—ethical and aesthetic, as surely as scientific—are not imposed from above by any authority, but exist in things and are to be found—discovered...This anti-ideological, pragmatic technique applies to places, as well as people. I did not invent Earthsea...I discovered Earthsea” (187). Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi compiled their *Dictionary of Imaginary Places* as a

Baedeker to places in the literary imagination “that a traveler could expect to visit, leaving out heavens and hells and places of the future”(Foreword). But how did Le Guin get to Earthsea? Jane Langton, author of children’s fantasy, uses an image from E. Nesbit’s novel *The Enchanted Castle* to make her own analogy. There is a curtain between our world and the world that contains Middle Earth and Earthsea, Langton claims, and “once people have found the little weak spots in the curtain marked by magic rings, amulets, and the like, almost anything can happen”(166). Some fantasies, like those of Tolkien and Le Guin, occur entirely on the other side of the curtain. Others, including the ones I will examine here, occur in the liminal space between—where characters and readers can peek through the curtain—send ideas back and forth. Lewis’ Narnia and its famous wardrobe-portal is, like *The Enchanted Castle*, a trope of this tale-type. Aichele observes that such overlaps between our world and the fantastic realm are key to postmodern interpretations of metafantasy: “[the overlap] establishes an endless oscillation between worlds, a reciprocal interference with one another which becomes more and more violent until a blurring of every self-identical entity occurs”(“Two Forms” 2). Metafantasy, exists, like fairy tale, in the liminal space of tension between mythical and literal.

CHAPTER 2: Peter Beagle's Truth as Magic

Aichele's first example of such oscillation is *The Last Unicorn*, by Peter S. Beagle. The novel is a hero's quest at heart—an incremental repetition of the fantasy tale-type made famous by Tolkien and Le Guin—but its tone is humorous and less grandiose than that of its relatives. Here the hero is a unicorn, guardian of her own Eden-like forest, who discovers that all others like her have disappeared from their respective territories, and that the wilderness has been subject to (and victim of) the will of man as a result. She decides to go find her kin and return them to their forests if she can. After journeying across the countryside and gaining two fellow travelers—a wizard and a woman—she finds that her fellow unicorns have been corralled into the ocean by a greedy King. To avoid being perceived by him and trapped as well, she becomes (with the help of the aforementioned wizard) the Lady Amalthea, an otherworldly woman. In this form, she enters the castle, falls in love, and ultimately has to forsake that love in order to fulfill her quest and return to her true form.

At a metanarrative level, the book is about the semiotically slippery construction of Truth. The novel's world is situated somewhere—in space, but more importantly in time—between our own world and the one on the other side of the curtain. The era of magic, of unicorns, is slipping away, and realism, cynicism, and irony are moving in. The story, Aichele argues, thus rejects modernist interpretations and becomes postmodern, because the two worlds (in Beagle's novel the “real”: scientific, cynical, time-bound; and the fantastic: magical, capable of wonder, timeless) constantly undermine each other. We never know, for sure, through which lens to read. I would add that in *The Last Unicorn* the connotations of the encroaching “real” world are mostly negative. As the Unicorn returns after her successful

quest, the original, fantastic magic is restored to the land, so is its vegetation and life.¹³

Beagle would seem to be arguing for the preservation of fable and wonder. His “argument” isn’t explicit or concrete, however, since the “oscillation” and “reciprocal interference” provides such a singularly fun (and funny) perspective.

Consider a conversation between a blue jay and his spouse after he has glimpsed the Unicorn traveling with Schmendrick the Magician:

“Saw a unicorn today,” the blue jay said as he lit.

“You didn’t see any supper, I notice,” his wife replied coldly. “I hate a man who talks with his mouth empty.”

“Baby, a unicorn!” The jay abandoned his casual air and hopped up and down on the branch. “I haven’t seen one of those since the time—“

“You’ve never seen one,” she said, “this is me, remember? I know what you’ve seen in your life, and what you haven’t...I suppose the two of you didn’t spend the whole day watching unicorns...at least, I understand that she used to be considered quite imaginative in matters of spare time.” She advanced on him, her neck feathers ruffling.

“Honey, I haven’t even seen her—“ the blue jay began, and his wife knew that he hadn’t, and wouldn’t dare, but she batted him one anyway. She was one woman who knew what to do with a slight moral edge. (45-6)

¹³ The Unicorn’s relationship to the land is much like Aslan’s relationship to Narnia (Lewis)—a motif that arguably introduces allegory into this purportedly anti-allegorical tale.

The fantastic fact of a pair of birds conversant in English is superimposed with a mundane argument between husband and wife (a contemporary couple, no less, as the jay's use of "Baby" implies) that seems to belong more in an episode of *Married With Children* than in fantasy's magical forest. Do we read with fantastic wonder or contemporary cynicism? The answer, Beagle would seem to imply, lies in the tension between the two, and is infuriatingly, delightfully, perpetually shifting.

Aichele's postmodern semiotic shift also informs the subplots of the novel, which are carried by secondary characters and are inversions of "old"—now overdetermined and Disneyfied—fairy stories. The Unicorn meets the first, Schmendrick the Magician, at Mommy Fortuna's Travelling Circus. Schmendrick is a neurotic and bumbling Woody Allen-esque wizard who means to provide the Unicorn magical aid in the proud tradition of Merlin and Gandalf, but falls miserably short. Though he is no Disney wizard, he is a "true" wizard—magic moves through him. Schmendrick serves as the tale's foremost metanarrative device, as he constantly refers to his fellow characters as the personages of a fairy tale, and expresses disappointment when they do not behave as such. The narrative he seeks to impose is a romantic fantasy, not far from Disney romance. "Haven't you ever been in a fairy tale before?" he asks his fellow travelers, "The hero has to make a prophecy come true, and the villain is the one who has to stop him..."(91).

The inversion of "proper" fairy tale continues when the Unicorn and Schmendrick meet up with a band of "merry men," complete with leader Jack Jingly and Captain Cully, who fancy themselves Robin Hood and Little John. In fact they are simply hungry thieves who see themselves as more "real" than their ideal counterparts from the fairy realm. Indeed, Captain Cully feels almost threatened by the myth. Schmendrick uses his magic (or, more

precisely, the magic uses Schmendrick, for he is never able to command it—a detail that becomes important in this novel’s semiotic system) to call up Robin Hood’s band. As the shades of such legends as Allan-a-Dale, Will Scarlett, Little John, Robin, and Marian walk through the circle of ragamuffins, Cully scoffs, “Robin Hood is a myth...a classic example of the heroic folk figures synthesized out of need...Men have to have heroes, but no man can ever be as big as the need, and so a legend grows around a grain of truth, like a pearl.” Later, Cully admits that Schmendrick’s entertainment was successful, but ultimately deems it “a lie, like all magic” (Beagle 64). Cully (who is apparently a reader as well as a thief) effectively articulates the reductivist answer to Aichele’s paradigm and offers a definition of the term “real.” The postmodern response would be what critic Sue Matheson calls “an inverted Platonic scheme”(417) in which the magic, the legend, is the “truth” that precedes reality. Aichele cites theorist Tzvetan Todorov’s similar idea: “fantasy [exists] prior to any belief...it is...a near-belief or pre-belief, and it disrupts every metaphysical identity or reality” (qtd. in Aichele, “Two Forms” 1). Molly Grue, fallen Marian to Cully’s failed Robin, argues this reading. “[T]here is no such person as you, or me, or any of us,” she tells Cully, “Robin and Marian are real, and we are the legend [lie]”(76). Beagle’s text effectively asks if the world (our world and Cully’s) becoming more and more “real” makes it less and less “true.”

Molly Grue, another inversion of fairy tale symbolism, also acts as postmodern foil to Schmendrick’s modern metanarrative. She meets Schmendrick and the Unicorn when they stay the night with Cully’s gang. She can, like Schmendrick, see the Unicorn as she really is; however she is not the young maiden that medieval tradition would imply the beast is “supposed” to visit, as both she and Schmendrick observe. “Unicorns are for beginnings,”

says he, “for innocence and purity, for newness. Unicorns are for young girls”(70). Says she (to the unicorn):

“Where were you twenty years ago, ten years ago? How dare
you come to me now, when I am *this*?” With a flap of her hand
she summed herself up: barren face, desert eyes, and yellowing
heart. “I wish you had never come. Why do you come now?”

The tears began to slide down the sides of her nose. (70)

Molly knows that she doesn’t fit the story, but continues on, a pragmatist. And a postmodernist—she is leery of the overdetermined meanings that Schmendrick imposes on their quest. “You’re handy with fairy tales,” she tells him, “but you can’t turn cream into butter” (71).

Prince Lîr,¹⁴ who the reductive reader says must be a hero (Schmendrick dubs him the “leading man”), makes himself into a perfect fairy tale prince: a slayer of dragons. The parody comes when his efforts are in vain. As he heroically peels potatoes in the scullery of Haggard’s castle, he lists for Molly all of his exploits—seven mountains, fifteen black knights, five dragons, and the list goes on—“and all for nothing...[when] she looked at me, I was sorry I had killed [the last dragon]...What should I do, Molly?” “I don’t know,” the postmodern pragmatist responds, “Kindness, courtesy, good works, that sort of thing. A good sense of humor”(129). Lîr’s fairy tale is ineffectual; he does not fit this story’s frame. He

¹⁴ The spelling of Lîr’s name is the same as that of a Celtic god of the sea, his son, Manannan mac Lîr, and an ancient King often conflated, in tales, with these deities. He becomes “King Lîr” at the end of the book, when Haggard dies, an allusion to Shakespeare’s most harrowing tragedy. The Prince’s future, then, may be no happy ending. Or, perhaps Beagle pitied Shakespeare’s abandoned King and wanted to evoke him happier, younger—before daughters.

finally wins Almathea's heart, of course, when he offers to interpret her bad dreams and sings her songs.

The King in this story is, likewise, not what he should be, and he, too, serves a metanarrative function. He fits the formula neither for "king" nor "villain." King Haggard is as his name implies: joyless and lifeless—a sort of spiritual/emotional black hole; his realm, which should benefit from the protection and wisdom of a King, is equally cold and fallow. He is not altogether evil, however—nothing is, in the world of this novel, which is one of the ways the book avoids the didacticism of some of its Fantastic literary relatives. Evil, here, is neither essentialized nor overdetermined. Evil isn't even the point. The point, it would seem, is greed and corruption and the sources of spiritual sickness that perpetuates them. Haggard's creepy depression is closer to the irreducible "evil" that exists in the real world in all positions of power, in people who can have whatever they want but are never satisfied.

In metafantasy, the "question" is also story. King Haggard's character describes a relationship to art and story much like his relationship to the world: "Molly Grue...suspected that it was impossible to speak the truth to King Haggard. Something in his winter presence blighted all words, tangled meanings, and bent honest intentions into shapes as tormented as the towers of his castle"(123). Haggard himself wants nothing to do with the symbolic, causal and social relationships that make "story." "What she wears, what may have befallen you, what you all are to one another—these things are fortunately no concern of mine," he says. "In such matters you may lie to me as much as you dare. I want to know who [the Lady Amalthea (the Unicorn)] is. I want to know why there are green leaves and fox cubs in her eyes"(123). Haggard's question is, in fact, the crux of the novel.

The Unicorn herself does not know the answer. She is not a parody or inversion of what she should be, like the other characters. She is at once character and symbol. More specifically, she is a character aware of and perplexed by her role as a symbol. Matheson labels the mythological creatures in this novel (she also cites the Harpy that the Unicorn meets in Mommy Fortuna's circus) "autonomous" symbols: "a manifestation of the Ideal visiting the world of shadows." I would argue that magic, which "[does] what it [will]" with Schemdrick's wand, is one of these as well. Autonomous symbols—what folklorists call motifs—have power beyond the story; they have belonged to other stories. They belong to Todorov's pre-belief, and disrupt the stories they find themselves injected into. "Haggard and Lír and Drinn and you and I," says Schmendrick to Molly Grue, "we are in a fairy tale, and must go where it goes. But she is real. She is real"(92). The Unicorn's realness is constantly tested by the expectations—cultural expectations that masquerade, Disneylike, as generic conventions—of fairy tale. At one clearing in the woods, a maiden, equipped with the requisite golden bridle, calls for her. Molly asks the Unicorn why she does not respond, and the Unicorn answers:

If I had shown myself, and [the king's daughter] had known me, she would have been more frightened than if she had seen a dragon, for no one makes promises to a dragon. I remember that once it never mattered to me whether or not princesses meant what they sang. I went to them all and laid my head in their laps...but I have no time for them now, princesses or kitchen maids. I have no time. (74)

Though the old fairy tale, the “form” of a now-formulaic narrative, has lost its relationship to meaning, the Unicorn, the motif, the pre-belief, has not lost her power. She becomes a character in a new kind of tale.

CHAPTER 3: William Goldman's True Love

In his forward to *The Princess Bride*, William Goldman laments the death of formulaic Romantic narrative: “[T]rue love and high adventure”—I *believed* in that once. I thought my life was going to follow that path...but I don’t think there’s high adventure left anymore”(30). *The Princess Bride: S. Morgenstern’s Classic Tale of True Love and High Adventure (the “Good Parts Version”, abridged by William Goldman)* (whose full title I include here to further illustrate my point) extends my second example of meta-narrative device, frame story, to the point of near absurdity. The tale itself, once the reader moves past the frame, is simple; a young farm girl (Buttercup) falls in love with a young farm boy (Westley), he leaves to seek his fortune, she thinks he is dead and becomes engaged to a prince (Humperdinck), Westley returns (as a pirate) and steals (after much travail) his love away from her betrothed, who sends henchmen (Fezzik the Turk, Inigo Montoya the Spaniard, and Vizzini the Sicilian, who each deserve a book of their own, I must add) to foil his rescue.

One purpose of Goldman’s metafantasy is to undermine the chivalric romance that later infected Disney fairy tale. Goldman returns to the roots of romance to do so; *The Princess Bride* is highly intertextual, and part of Goldman’s approach to Aichele’s semiotic oscillation is to jump from genre to genre. Take Inigo Montoya, in whom Goldman blends two romantic motifs, for example. By making Inigo’s personal quest to avenge his father’s death, Goldman evokes Renaissance revenge tragedy. Inigo is, in one way, a perfect inversion of his (fellow Spaniard) Hieronimo, the quintessential revenger of Thomas Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, a father trying to avenge his son. Inigo also comes from the European chivalric tradition—he is a master swordsman alert to art and honor. But he is a failed master

swordsman; he has become a drunk and a mercenary. In this respect, Inigo fits our interpretive system: the chivalrous swordsman may be a fairy tale hero, his code the pre-belief, and Inigo's drunkenness a failure to meet the conventions of his narrative¹⁵.

Others of Goldman's brilliant and/or bumbling characters contradict and undermine their prescribed "fairy tale romance" roles, as well. The "princess" in *The Princess Bride* is not a Princess at all, but merely a buxom blonde whom the Prince wants to marry (a marriage of convenience for both of them—at least until Westley returns—that fits no romantic frame). The villainous hired thugs are actually sensitive, friendly poets. Though the corresponding characters in fairy tales often turn out to be soft-hearted, as the woodcutter in Snow White who brings back a beast's heart instead of that of the young maiden he was told to kill, none have their own heroic story lines, as do Fezzik and Inigo. Westley, the hero, is neither of noble blood (he is born a poor farm boy) nor of noble profession (he becomes a pirate). Prince Humperdinck, much like King Haggard, is not benevolent and righteous, as royalty should be, but psychotically masochistic.

But unlike Beagle, Goldman does not let the characters move his metanarrative. In *The Princess Bride*, we find metanarrative in the purest sense—a story outside of and "above" the story. Goldman recounts first the story of his father reading (the fictitious) Morgenstern's fairy tale romance to him, Goldman, as a child. Goldman's narrative, which ostensibly comprises footnotes to his own abridgement of the tale, periodically refers to the

¹⁵ I should mention two other apparent influences here. First, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*—Inigo certainly owes much to him. Cervantes' failed knight-errant is a perfect example of metanarrative working in much the same way as it does here—against chivalric romance. If we allow the chivalric poem to count as fantasy, *Don Quixote* may well be metafantasy. Secondly, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, which is metafantasy as well, and created by the same impulse to (heroically!) fight the dangers of romance and didacticism. The connections among these three books could produce another substantial paper.

father's telling as a sort of master narrative (the "good parts") with more authority than the manuscript itself. The following passage is from Goldman's "notes":

I didn't even know [chapter 4] existed until I began the "good parts" version. All my father used to say at this point was, "What with one thing and another, three years passed"...Would you believe that in the original Morgenstern this is the longest single chapter in the book?...But from a narrative point of view, in 105 pages *nothing happens*. Except this: "What with one thing and another, three years passed." (81)

To whom does the story "belong"? What purpose does it serve? Goldman's own son's reading (and rejection) of Morgenstern's "primary" text serves as yet another frame, and effectively poses the same questions:

This passage is where my son Jason stopped reading, and there is simply no way of blaming him. For what Morgenstern has done is...sixty-six pages on Florinese history...Why would a master of narrative stop his narrative dead before it has much chance to begin generating?...All I can guess is that for Morgenstern, the real narrative was not Buttercup and the remarkable things she endures, but, rather, the history of the monarchy and other such stuff." (63)

Here Goldman comments upon very real changes that occur over time within the interest and focus of creative texts.¹⁶ This last passage is most certainly a (witty and successful) stab at the pre-modern novel. It could easily refer to Victor Hugo or James Fennimore Cooper, but

¹⁶ He also implies that the interpretation of a story by someone like his grandfather might make it *better*—an idea akin to Zipes' "contamination."

applies directly to Tolkien, and that reference is much more likely, given the context. Tolkien has been much criticized for the pages he requires to establish the (entirely invented) historical context for his tales. In the Foreword to the *Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien discusses how he prefers history to all other narrative genres, as it provides readers with “applicable” material. (By “applicable,” Tolkien means “not allegorical, unable to be essentialized,” and I read such applicability to approach what Beagle means by “true”: Todorov’s “pre-belief” and Matheson’s “inverted Platonic scheme,” the postmodern “irreducible signified”).

Goldman’s enactment of incremental repetition—his retelling of a tale thereby contaminating it with his own (here artistic) values—retrieves the process of folklore from the seemingly permanent pages of literature. What Goldman presents is the extended life of a text in the reader—much like the various versions that give fairy tales similarly long life. I use the term “text” à la Roland Barthes, for Goldman’s editorial persona enacts Barthes’ death of the Author. His invented, inventive text is no concrete, hardbound “work,” no master narrative, but rather an interactive event that requires a reader, who contributes at least as much to meaning as the (absent) Author’s intention. The meaning of the text, then, is perpetually shifting.

A different kind of shift marks a point of comparison between Beagle’s postmodern fairy tale and Goldman’s. The latter’s invented land of Florin intersects geographically and socially with our own; it peeks through the liminal curtain. Goldman adds more layers to the frame around his story by consulting invented scholars of Florinese literature and history at Columbia University. He can boast meticulous verisimilitude here, himself—his experts in “Florinese” lore defend their subject and their respective approaches to it as ferociously as

any Medievalist, Modernist, or Renaissance scholar. The location of Florin in our own world provides the same semiotic slippage, “oscillation,” or “reciprocal interference” that Aichele observes in Beagle’s novel: we are asked to imagine a fantastic place and time somehow related to and located within our own (though far away and in the past).

The slippage seeps into the tone of the novel, as well. Just as we cannot point to Florin on a map of Eastern Europe, we do not know “where” we are emotionally or morally. We cannot tell whether we are reading a Disney fairy tale romance, through a (sappy) lens of childlike wonder and romance: says Buttercup to Westley, “There is no room in my body for anything but you. My arms love you, my ears adore you, my knees shake with blind affection. My mind begs you to ask it something so it can obey. Do you want me to follow you for the rest of your days? I will do that”(50) or a realistic narrative, with a degree of cynicism: “Buttercup’s parents did not have exactly what you might call a happy marriage. All they ever dreamed of was leaving each other”(40). The Princess Bride is full of such cynicism (or, as some members of bitter marriages may argue, realism). Even the book’s “fairy tale ending” is a false one; Morgenstern’s story ends in the deaths of the most lovable secondary characters. Goldman warns us of such shocks throughout the novel, and goes so far as to venture a guess at Morgenstern’s Authorial¹⁷ intention:

...that’s what I think this book is about...This book says “life isn’t fair,” and I’m telling you, one and all, you better believe it...There’s death coming up, and you better understand this: *some of the wrong people die*. Be ready for it. This isn’t *Curious George Uses the Potty*.
(208)

¹⁷ I capitalize the “A” to remind us of Barthes. Morgenstern is an Author who “owns” his work.

Such a conclusion is shocking to readers expecting a Disney finish, but, like Beagle's, Goldman's harsh tone is closer to that of a traditional fairy tale.

Where Beagle's tale "argues" for wonder, Goldman's champions realism. But, like Beagle, he never really settles on one lens or the other—we are caught in another of Aichele's oscillations. Each author uses the opposite lens as a foil, a filter, a source of meaningful tension and humor. Humor may well be the most important result of both Beagle and Goldman's narrative experiments. If the postmodern fairy tale has any "moral" inscribed in gold on its final page, it may be "don't take yourself too seriously." Humorous tone is a break from the Tolkien/Lewis/Le Guin fantastic tradition, whose generic conventions dictate the British-accented grandiosity of mythological diction. Postmodern narrative is rarely grandiose, as irony deflates myth and towers of truth are hard to build with "de-construction crews". A "true" aesthetic for postmodern fairy tale is certainly found here, however. Beagle captures the essence of it in his image of the princess stopping in the woods to eat a box lunch: when the ideal, the fantastic, the pre-belief, "speaks" with a postmodern human voice, the magic is translated to laughter.

Romantic love (a decidedly Disney fairy tale feature, a contaminant from chivalric romance) becomes the butt of jokes in both stories. As Lir comes to understand that he will not win Lady Amalthea's love by killing her fellow magical creatures, he turns to Petrarchan poetry. His rhymes are terrible, and as overdetermined as the role he played before, as hero—"Gazelle, demoiselle, citadel, asphodel, parallel...The lift of longing, and the crash of loss/The bitterness of tummy-umpty-oss. Cross, boss, moss. Damn"—but still sweet. The parody seems to capture a "truer" love than True Love, in fact. In an article entitled "*The Princess Bride* and the parodic impulse: The seduction of Cinderella," Richard Henry and

Deborah F. Rossen-Knill claim that the film version of *The Princess Bride*¹⁸ “uses parody to simultaneously reject the values of fairy tale True Love and to reaffirm those same values”—the oscillation again (47). Consider the moment that Buttercup confesses her love to Westley and they pledge their lives to one another, only for him to depart to seek his fortune over the sea:

“If you’re teasing me, Westley, I’m just going to kill you.”

“How can you even dream that I might be teasing?”

“Well, you haven’t once said you loved me.”

“That’s all you need? Easy. I love you. Okay? Want it louder? I love you. Spell it out, should I? I Ell-oh-vee-ee-why-oh-you. Want it backward? You love I.”

“You are teasing now, aren’t you?”

“Maybe a little...”

Goldman is teasing us, too, and making fun of them—but it is still Buttercup and Westley’s love that drives the plot of the novel. It would seem that true love (with lowercase letters) conquers even humor. Umberto Eco’s articulation of postmodern irony applies here:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, “I love you madly,” because he knows that she knows (and she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland...He can say “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.” At this

¹⁸ I feel it appropriate to include criticism that treats the film because a) Goldman wrote the screenplay and b) although little of Goldman’s narrative frame survives in the movie, the novel’s humor most certainly comes through on screen.

point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently...Neither of the two [parties] will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony...But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love. (623)

The only way to “tell” storybook love—to tell a story at all, since most stories belong to the category of things “already said”—is to recognize the tension between creativity (newness, pre-belief, magic, irreducibility) and overdeterminedness (formula, genre, ideology); Folklore’s regenerative processes operate within this precise tension.

CHAPTER 4: Philip Pullman's Truth-Reader

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series lacks the sarcasm of the metafantasies described here so far. His heroine, Lyra, travels between alternate worlds through a hole in the liminal cloth (here a border between parallel worlds, one of which is our own) cut with a knife that puts Ginsu™ to shame. The series has been called an atheist answer to *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In terms of fantasy as folklore, Pullman uses Lewis' motifs: the portal to another world, sacrifice of the innocent, and the repair of (though not atonement for) human transgression, and tale-type: the use of Biblical metanarrative frame. Though Pullman's tale "oscillates" between fantasy and reality much as Beagle's and Goldman's do, and also plays with the borders between childhood and adulthood and metaphysics and physics, the product of the oscillation is not irony. Of the three works considered here, Pullman's story is the most conventional in terms of metanarrative—there is no frame or overt self-referentiality (thus the lack of humor and resultant mythic grandiosity). Pullman inserts metanarrative symbolically, and succeeds in commenting on the act of meaning-making by creating a symbol that deconstructs the very idea of any reducible "symbol."¹⁹

Pullman's subject matter is also somewhat different; the reductive reading that he seeks to overturn is not an appropriation of fairy tale, but rather the imposition of ideology through the appropriation of Judeo-Christian myth. Laura Miller, of *The New Yorker*, summarizes Pullman's ideas about literary fantasy's relationship to master narrative:

[T]he literary School of Morals is inherently ambiguous, dynamic, and democratic: a 'conversation.' Opposed to this ideal is 'theocracy,' which [Pullman] define[s] as encompassing everything from Khomeini's Iran to

¹⁹ One could also argue that the intertextuality of Pullman's work serves as metanarrative. Literary allusion is so dense and pervasive here that all of World Literature seems to be "metatext".

explicitly atheistic states such as Stalin's Soviet Union. He list[s] some characteristics of such states, among them , 'a scripture whose word is inerrant,' a priesthood whose authority 'tends to concentrate in the hands of elderly men,' and 'a secret police force with the powers of an Inquisition.' Theocracies, he say[s], demonstrate 'the tendency of human beings to gather power to themselves in the name of something that may not be questioned.

(54)

The history of the Bible's commitment to the printed page, Pullman might argue, has been similar to that of fairy tale and folk lore. Story is reduced to externally intended meaning; when we take it up, it has already been read for us. Both Lyra and her author ostensibly strive (one unknowingly, the other intentionally) to overthrow a dogmatic Church insistent upon externally located Authority and only one "right" reading.

Lyra Belaqua, or Lyra "Silvertongue"—aptly named for Orpheus' instrument—is a street urchin, a master storyteller, and the prophesied savior of her own fantastic-Medieval world (a world, we discover later, that exists parallel to and interdependent upon our own). Her story comprises the supremely important task of stopping a leak of Dust—"the physical proof that something happen[s] when innocence change[s] into experience" (Pullman 373), the stuff souls are made of²⁰, the metaphysical link between humans and the universe—through a man-made hole between parallel worlds, thus restoring the balance between the worlds' and humanity's free will. Pullman equips Lyra with a magical instrument that effectively allows her to "read" her own story: the alethiometer. The "golden compass" that gives the first book its name is a tool to be envied by any literary intellect intent upon making

²⁰ Later in the series, we learn that daemons—spirit animals or externally manifested souls—become dust when their humans die (*The Amber Spyglass*).

meaning. As Pullman perfunctorily describes it, the alethiometer consists of thirty-six symbols in a circle around which four watch-like hands swing. The user (the “reader”) simply holds a question in his or her mind, arranges three hands to triangulate the essence of that question (with the meaning of the symbols) and watches as a single, Dust-driven hand swings from image to image in answer. One of the most intriguing aspects of Pullman’s imagined object of power is that no one symbol means one thing. Instead, each design has many meanings, and by counting the times the hand comes to rest on a given symbol, the reader can determine what level of meaning the alethiometer detects.

The alethiometer influences the action in *The Golden Compass* in two ways: Lyra seeks out Lord Asriel to give it to him, unwittingly bringing him Roger, who will be sacrificed for Lord Asriel’s entry into the other world; Lyra also asks questions of the instrument throughout the novel, and the answers determine her (as well as other characters’) actions. The alethiometer may be read as an ingenious sign denoting interrelatedness and multiplicity; it also works to make Lyra both actor in and architect of her own story, a markedly postmodern unification of two roles that are traditionally—logically—separate. The alethiometer, then, may be a meta-narrative device that seeks to describe how meaning is constructed, both in Pullman’s novel and in all texts that use signs.

The technical term for the Golden Compass provides a clue to its nature. Before Lyra can read the alethiometer, she shows it to Gyptian sage Farder Coram, and he observes that “[the name is] a Greek word...from ‘alethia,’ which means truth. It’s a truth measure” (Pullman 125). “Alethic” philosophy examines binary modalities and their relationship to truth²¹. “Alethiology,” then, may refer to a classical, arborescent²² logical system which

²¹ The Oxford English Dictionary gives this example: “the possibility or impossibility of something being true.”

strives to assess truth value at the first bifurcations: true/false, possible/impossible. It is this second modality that Pullman seems to press upon most, with his concentration on adolescence and coming-of-age. From the perspective of alethic philosophy, as a child travels further out onto the limbs of life's (and truth's) tree—where each branch represents a choice or a stage of becoming—the further they are from the original trunk—the unity, the all-possible. Pre-pubescent children embody the binary; they contain both possible and impossible (another oscillation). Adolescence, in the world of this novel, begins the journey through truth modalities as “possibles” solidify and “impossibles” are rejected, as innocence becomes experience. The change is also marked as the child's daemon becomes fixed (implying a fixed “nature” or identity) and Dust begins to collect (implying the child's life and story becoming truly, metaphysically, a part of the universe²³). These changes are final and irrevocable, as are any properly alethic truth modalities. Such black-and-white binaries are of prime concern to the Church and its servants, the Oblation Board, in Lyra's world.²⁴

But the alethiometer is not purely alethic. The questions Lyra asks it grow more and more complex, and it is able to qualify its answers. It does so by recognizing shades (or levels) of symbolic meaning, as Farder Coram goes on to observe in the same scene:

...each [symbol] stands for a whole series of things. Take the anchor, there. The first meaning of that is hope, because hope holds you fast like an anchor so you don't give way. The second meaning is

²² A term coined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to describe the widely accepted, binary (alethic) approach to logic and philosophy. They go on to propose a “rhizomatic” model, where concepts are connected, but not to one root—this allows for modalities that are multiple as opposed to binary.

²³ Beppie Keane, in “Of the Postmodernists' Party Without Knowing It: Philip Pullman, Hypermorality, and Metanarratives,” argues that dust “embodies a metadialogue” between humanity and the unifying forces of the universe. Pullman draws much from theoretical physics, and dust may be his version of unified field theory.

²⁴ It is interesting to note that the Oblation Board's obsession with preserving childhood purity is very similar to that of Walt Disney, whose work “consistently attempts to reflect a sense of ‘virginal’ innocence, promoting the ‘magic’ of childhood,” according to Patrick D. Murphy (126).

steadfastness. The third meaning is snag, or prevention. The fourth meaning is the sea. And so on, down to ten, twelve, maybe a never-ending series of meanings... You got to know all the meanings....Then you got to be able to hold ‘em in your mind without fretting at it or pushing for an answer...(126)

Coram’s description sounds—at least to scholars of literature—exactly like reading a book with a mind to interpretation. Coram might be called a folklorist, and the phenomena he describes are motifs.

Later, when Lyra has become skilled at reading the instrument, she and Coram find the witch consul Martin Lanselius and ask him for assistance. He extends Lyra’s understanding of the alethiometer’s function:

[the alethiometer was invented] in the seventeenth century. Symbols and emblems were everywhere. Buildings and pictures were designed to be read like books. Everything stood for something else; if you had the right dictionary, you could read Nature itself. It was hardly surprising to find philosophers using the symbolism of their time to interpret knowledge that came from a mysterious source. (173)

Lanselius’ explanation of seventeenth century semiotics (which sounds quite similar to that of our own world) is similarly literary. The alethiometer’s makers (seventeenth century scholars) would refer to the motif as “emblem.”²⁵ Ironically, the very images in question—the symbols/motifs/emblems—have their own “levels of meaning” that change with

²⁵ I assume that the creators of the device in Lyra’s world are akin to “seventeenth century scholars” in our own dimension where, by the seventeenth century, emblem books were a prominent part of the interpretive repertoire.

literary/historical context. Oxford Headmaster's quick explanation as he gives the compass to Lyra may be best: "[the alethiometer] tells you the truth. As for how to read it, you'll have to learn by yourself" (73).

Which raises the question of our own context: this story's relationship to the postmodern paradigm. Were Farder Coram a postmodern theorist, he would be talking about the relationship between signifier and signified. Direct references to books and text in connection with the alethiometer's readability—since the symbols and their layers of meaning have evolved through use in other texts—produces what postmodern theorists might call "intertextuality."²⁶ The alethiometer's allowance for infinite possibility of meaning, with the "true" meaning affected both by context and the mental state of the reader, is what those same theorists call a "multiplicity," a truth modality that is at once various and unified—never diminished by black-and-white binaries. The alethiometer is not truly alethic²⁷. Layers of meaning have complicated "truth" beyond such simple reading.

A factor—a variable, a participant—in the alethiometer's (and indeed, with meta-narrative in mind, in any text's) irreducible multiplicity is the reader herself. As Lyra formulates questions, she is integral to the meaning-making assemblage²⁸ of the symbolic relationships she reads. Pullman very pointedly makes Lyra's interactions with the alethiometer every bit as interpretive as Farder Coram and Dr. Martin Lanselius' descriptions imply. Consider the way she explains her reading to Lanselius after she has used the compass to answer his question:

²⁶ Though the more overtly manifested intertextuality of Pullman's text lies in its countless allusions to and epigraphs/borrowings from other works

²⁷ Dr. Lanselius goes on to explain that the tool does not function in the way that its' makers intended.

²⁸ I borrow from Deleuze and Guattari again with this term. An "assemblage" is what engineers might call a complex machine: two or more agents combining to form one for some purpose.

The dolphin, one of its deep-down meanings is playing, sort of like being playful...And the helmet means war, and both together they mean pretend to go to war but not be serious. And the baby means—it means difficult—it'd be too hard for them to attack it, and the anchor says why, because they'd be stretched out as tight as an anchor rope. I just see it all like that, you see. (175)

Lyra, then, is a good reader; she is (almost unbelievably) skilled at interpretation. Perhaps because she is still pre-pubescent, the Dust that powers the alethiometer is not yet affected by her own metaphysical magnetism (later, when Lyra comes of age, this changes, and she must re-learn to read the instrument with the aid of a book). Or it may be that her ability results from the fact that her actions are still being determined by an “Authority” outside of herself, since she has not yet fulfilled her destiny and restored (her own and humanity's) free will. This scenario would imply that, when Lyra succeeds, the world of signs will become infinitely slippery—signifier and signified will be a matter of pure perception, and “meaning” will be entirely relative.

Either way, Lyra surprises even herself when she is able to “sit...in terrible danger and yet sink into the calm she need[s] to read the alethiometer”(327). The calm brings to mind reading a book yet again—the action evokes meta-narrative. Here, Lyra unifies a binary in that she is at once reader and character. What Lyra “reads”—that is, what meaning she ascribes to the alethiometer's symbolic “text”—has a direct effect upon the decisions she makes and the real events of her adventure. The argument that we should see Lyra's reading of the alethiometer as interpretive is also supported by the prophecy that Serafina Pekkala describes to Lee Scoresby as Lyra sleeps. “[S]he is destined to bring about the end of

destiny,” she explains, “but she must do so without knowing what she is doing...if she is told what she must do, it will all fail”(310).

The prescriptive interpretation of a text directly influencing the course of history is not as fantastic as it may sound. The “reading” Pullman most obviously alludes to with his metafantasy is that of Christian theological doctrine. Scholarly (not to mention everyday) argument over the interpretation of the Bible has been going on for as long as the text has been available for more than one isolated sect to read. The cause of controversy, of course, is that each subdivision of culture (right down to each individual) brings its own experiences and perspective to the text, and reads such “into” the meaning (isegesis). Since the Bible in particular has long been believed to mean something—something specific and intended, something moral, something that prescribes and proscribes behavior—many argue that intended meaning should take precedence over interpretation; they ask that the words on the page be taken at face value (exegesis). Such readings imply an alethic, binary conception of truth: one thing is right, the other wrong.

“But,” Lyra—the interpreter, the literary scholar—argues “it en’t *true*, is it? Not true like chemistry or engineering, not that kind of true? There wasn’t really an Adam and Eve?...it was just a kind of fairy tale”(372). The problem is, as Lyra wisely notes, that complex symbolic texts have no “face value” that may be assumed. They are multiplicities. Moreover, such texts have become detached from any authorial intention (Pullman’s choice of the Authority as the Church’s name for God is certainly no mistake); the Bible is an anthology of translations—the most Barthesian of all Texts, perhaps, since it, like fairy tale, has certainly left its creators far behind. The alethiometer is similar. The meanings of the symbols themselves, in both cases, may be seen as “contributions” from various “authors,”

and each instrument's current function is not what its creator originally intended. "The Scholar who invented the first alethiometer was apparently trying to discover a way of measuring the influences of the planets, according to the ideas of astrology," Dr. Lanselius tells us; "in that he failed, but the mechanism he invented was clearly responding to something, even if no one knew what it was" (173). "It" was dust—the metaphysical manifestation of human consciousness. Symbols (and symbolic stories) do not operate by some set force outside of us, Pullman seems to assert. The planets do not make meaning; we do.

Of course, the Bible is not the only text that is read and interpreted, and Pullman, like most lovers of literature, asserts that all symbolic texts are potentially—perhaps even essentially—moral ones. "I don't profess any religion," he says, "...but I think I can say something about moral education, and I think it has something to do with the way we understand stories" (Miller 52). Both Walt Disney and his feminist enemies would likely agree. The exegesis/isegesis question is pressed upon all the more urgently by this assertion. If we assume, as we read, that meaning is located externally and created solely by authorial intention, our interpretations are dictated by what characters in Lyra's world call "destiny." Pullman seems to think such dogged dedication to exegesis a tragedy. "It will be the triumph of despair, forever," if Lyra fails to liberate the text from its Author (if Morgenstern is not re-written and re-read for the "good parts," if the unicorns remain trapped in Haggard's dungeon/narrative frame). Serafina Pekkala goes on to tell Scoresby, "The universes will all become nothing more than interlocking machines, blind and empty of thought, feeling, life..." (310). Texts, Pullman implies, must invite the opposite: perceptiveness, thoughtful

insight, and the heightened emotion and vivacity that our own perspectives—our own meaning-makings—bring to the page.

CONCLUSIONS

If the fantastic universe is irreducible, it is also inconclusive. Endings are problematic, and rather than ending each of these novels simply closes as its narration “stops in an interesting place” (a cliché used to describe good art that is certainly applicable here). Goldman, for one, *can’t* stop—the most recent copyright associated with *The Princess Bride* is 1998, a 25th Anniversary Edition, includes a new introduction and a “newly discovered” Morgenstern manuscript called “Buttercup’s Baby.” This latest layer of metacommentary discusses the immensely popular film version of the story and intimates that the novel was “*killed* by all Florinese experts back in ’73—the reviews in the learned journals brutalized me”(“Introduction” vii). As well as refreshing a joke the addition re-emphasizes the necessarily ongoing life of text lest it be “killed” definitively. I hope that I have done the book less damage than my imaginary colleagues in Goldman’s realistically imagined Academy.

Pullman and Beagle finish their tales with anti-endings, as well; both novels end in beginnings. Pullman provides rather heavy-handed commentary about the role of story—the rhetoric of his literary School of Morals—in establishing the new “Republic of Heaven”(The *Amber Spyglass* 518). Lyra, a grown woman at the end of the final book, has lost the natural intuition for reading the alethiometer and must begin study to do so again. That is not her only task—she must also tell the stories of the inhabitants of the Land of the Dead, as well as reconciling herself with her own story:

“You have to promise to believe me,” Lyra said seriously. “I know I haven’t always told the truth, and I could only survive in some places by telling lies and making up stories. So I know that’s what I’ve been like, and I know you

know it, but my true story's too important to tell if you're only going to believe half of it. So I promise to tell the truth, if you promise to believe it."

(512-3)

The trade-off, it would seem, for the liberation of meaning from mechanism, is a lot of rhetorical work—a lot of storytelling.

Beagle's characters are not finished, either. They have to go on to other stories²⁹: Molly and Schmendrick are setting out together on a plotline, and as they hit the road they send a Princess to Lìr, ("He is a good man, and a hero greater than any cause is worth," says Schmendrick, "I send all of my Princesses to him") who may finally get to apply his more conventional heroic skills to a tangible reward (210). Lìr is King Lìr, now, and so Beagle connects his own story with a larger world of text whose endings are not so happy. As in Goldman and Pullman's world, the making of meaning continues; conclusions may change. Inconclusive opening as ending, with focus on potential rather than determinacy, points back to fantasy's beginnings—folk tale and myth, whose oral history produced multiple versions for multiple purposes.

More conclusive evidence that fantasy works to reclaim story from overdetermined master narratives is its entry into Disney's domain: both *The Princess Bride* and *The Last Unicorn* have been made into major motion pictures (from Disney competitors New Line Cinema and Rankin and Bass, respectively), and both continue to find new audiences, particularly among children and parents looking for material that reaches beyond Disney's moral compass. New Line Cinema are also the producers of Peter Jackson's film version of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the forthcoming film version of Philip Pullman's *His Dark*

²⁹ Beagle has actually promised a sequel.

Materials series.³⁰ But Disney's most overt challenger is Dreamworks Animation, who produced *Shrek*, a metafantasy anti-Disney fairy tale par excellence based on William Steig's children's book. Were *Shrek* a novel, it would have to be included in the explications above.

Other aspiring literary scholars might view a tendency of their primary sources to become feature-length films as a bad sign—more evidence that fantasy, because it is popular, is somehow “lesser” art and unworthy of critical attention. I see the films as more evidence that fantasy is folklore: films are one more incremental repetition, one more iteration of these multiplicitous tales, and present ideas to a larger public in a more accessible—arguably more “folkloric”—fashion. The films in fact increase the need for critical review of the original novels, which serve as earlier sources of now-popularized (and possibly altered, contaminated for good or ill, or, heaven forbid, “Disneyfied”) versions. Fantasy will continue to be widely read and adapted. Examination of fantasy keeps the importance of the process—the metanarrative—in mind.

³⁰ In answer to NLC's release of LOR, Disney produced a film version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which (ironically) placed Tolkien and Lewis' ideas about allegory and morality on opposing sides yet again. Tolkien had the more articulate spokesman—Jackson took time to reproduce almost every detail of Tolkien's trilogy, while the Disney version was...a Disney version.

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