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The Search for Human Godhood: Challenging Traditional Religious Hierarchies with Philip
Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

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Abstract

The depiction of religion in Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* [*HDM*]¹ is a central issue for Pullman scholars, particularly the unique depiction of religious hierarchies in the text. This thesis enters this debate to argue that central to the issue of religious hierarchies in *HDM* is the possibility for the everyday human to achieve a sense of "human godhood". Engaging with the arguments of Pullman scholars who focus on the issue of religious hierarchies, such as Alan Jacobs who presents *HDM* as anti-theistic in nature, or indeed Chantal Oliver and Naomi Wood who argue that the religious and hierarchical criticism in *HDM* is justified, I will introduce the concept of the carnivalesque to critically analyze the concept of the "disobedient pursuit of knowledge" (Wood 3) in relation to the religious hierarchies in the text. Focusing on the crucial character of Mary Malone before explicating a selection of key scenes will not only illustrate that a sense of "human godhood" is achievable, but we can also argue that *HDM* actually attempts to establish a new hierarchy in which humans can be considered as superior to God.

¹ I am going to use the initials "HDM" to reference "His Dark Materials" throughout my thesis.

The search for Human Godhood: Challenging Traditional Religious Hierarchies with Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

Tyrannical hierarchies are bound to receive backlash when the oppressed populace reaches a critical breaking point. The aim of this thesis is to focus on the deconstruction of traditional religious hierarchies in Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000). The main ideas and arguments that are typically made about *HDM* regarding religion usually find themselves in one of two camps: either a camp that views *HDM* as a text which presents a purely negative depiction and unjust criticism of religion – especially Christianity – or a camp that views *HDM* as a more nuanced work which justly critiques outdated traditional hierarchies and religious doctrines and practices. An example of a critique belonging to the first camp is that of Alan Jacobs who presents *HDM* in a negative light because of its heretical depiction of God, while for example Chantal Oliver and Naomi Wood presents arguments which consider a more nuanced reading of *HDM* in which the critique of theological hierarchies is completely justified and even needed. It is essential to engage with these interpretations of *HDM* to argue that the concept of the carnivalesque and the “disobedient pursuit of knowledge” (Wood 3) enable a reading of *HDM* as a text suggesting the possibilities of establishing a new hierarchy in which humans can achieve a sense of “human godhood” by challenging and subverting the expected theological hierarchy in which God is the supreme authority.

In order to engage with this question of “human godhood” and the subversion of expected theological hierarchies, the first issue that we need to consider is Alan Jacobs' depiction of *HDM* as heretical in “The Devil's party” (2000) because of *HDM*'s role-reversals and portrayal of God. Jacobs depicts these role-reversals negatively, but this still helps my argument because he

presents the reversal of God's role and possibility of God being a mere concept of human creation in addition to explaining how the role-reversals might make humans achieve a position of hierarchical superiority to God. Jacobs argues that *HDM* is filled with an anti-theistic polemic "disguised as explanation" (par. 21) which interrupts the actual storytelling. The way Jacobs substantiates his claim is by presenting how Pullman depicts God – usually called "The Authority" throughout *HDM* – as the first angel. Angels in *HDM* are described as being created through a process in which *Dust*² begins understanding itself. *Dust* is a key concept in the text as it is portrayed as an elementary particle which is crucial for the creation of consciousness and the process of fostering spirituality. Notably Jacobs presents *Dust* as either the incarnation of Original Sin or alternatively the "creative energy of humankind" (par. 19). The depiction of God being condensed and formed from *Dust* rather than being the one forming the dust, or "dark materials" as is the narrative in *Paradise Lost*, is crucial to Jacobs' interpretation as it clearly reverses God's role from being the *creator* to instead become the *created*. Jacobs claims that this way of presenting God is the essence of Pullman's polemic, though Pullman never claims that this is how he actually views God or God's (il)legitimacy. Presenting God as *created* by *Dust* however, in other words, by the "creative energy of humankind" (Jacobs pars. 19-20), allegorically presents God as a concept created by humans rather than humans being created by God. If we take this further, we might argue that this therefore makes humans into the "gods" who created God through our imagination and creativity, which in turn presents the human ability to be creative and imaginative as innately divine. Quite simply, God as nothing but a fantasy of human creation. This way of presenting humans as superior to God completely

² I italicize *Dust* and capitalize the "D" throughout my thesis to stay true to how the word is written in *HDM* as a way to differentiate between the concept of *Dust* and regular dust.

reverses the expected traditional theological hierarchy in which humans are innately inferior to God.

To continue his critique of *HDM* as being markedly anti-theologian, Jacobs explains that the title of the trilogy - "His Dark Materials" - originates from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and that the overall narrative of *HDM* acts as a retelling of Milton's story, a new creation story, but, as Jacobs argues again, with the "familiar roles reversed" (par. 7, 22). In this case the reversal of roles that Jacobs is referring to are the roles of the figure of God being presented as the villainous and false creator and the human allegorical satanic figure being presented as the hero. The main thrust of Jacobs' argument revolves around the character Lord Asriel, who Jacobs claims suits the role of the "Satanic hero" with Asriel "repeatedly announcing his determination to 'break free' of the Authority's tyranny" (Jacobs par. 24). The phrasing here is key to Jacobs argument: Asriel suits this role of Satanic hero as any desire to be free from Big Brother's continuous oversight and power is in itself satanic.

The view of Lord Asriel as a Satanic hero being presented as maleficent by Jacobs can be argued further if we look at how Jacobs formulates one particularly striking sentence: "The *human* leader of the *rebels*, Lord Asriel, marshals a vast army [...] to *assault* the forces of the Authority and his Regent" (par. 24) [my italics]. The emphasis I have put on this sentence is to elaborate on Jacobs' subtle framing of Lord Asriel in comparison to the Authority and his Regent. The first key word "human" is connected to Asriel, who is presented in opposition to the divine Authority. This language seems to indicate the contrast between the human and the divine, thus the word might suggest an expected sense of inferiority through Asriel being human and not a god. The second emphasized word, "rebels," frames Asriel and his companions as rebels rather than for example freedom fighters or revolutionaries. It can be argued that this word carries a

heavier negative connotation compared to the alternatives and thus that Jacobs is actively disagreeing with Asriel's actions through purposefully choosing to use inflammatory language. Furthermore, it could be argued that Jacobs conflates the genuine criticism of organized religion and traditional hierarchies with the fantastical exaggeration and storytelling of the trilogy through his insistence on using this type of language. The final emphasized word, "assault," indicates an attack by Lord Asriel's army on the Authority's army, thus placing Asriel on the offensive and the Authority on the defensive. This word frames the narrative such that Asriel is the aggressor and the Authority the victim of said aggression. Such a depiction either accidentally or purposefully presents the "aggressor" in a negative light, while redeeming the "victim" as innocent, while the actual situation in *HDM* could be viewed alternatively as a narrative in which a slave is rebelling against his slave-master which in turn makes the aggression fully justified because in this case the "aggressor" was the one initially aggressed upon. As can be seen through this depiction and the rest of Jacobs' argument is not only that Jacobs views *His Dark Materials* as marred with anti-theistic polemic, but also that Jacobs seems to argue for the perpetuation of a hierarchy in which humans are innately and justifiably inferior to God. Jacobs does this by presenting the human revolutionaries negatively as aggressors while attempting to redeem God and his "right" to remain at the top of the hierarchy by presenting God as the innocent victim. This kind of perpetuation of traditional religious hierarchies, however, is challenged in readings by the likes of Chantal Oliver and Naomi Wood.

To get a sense of the second camp which reads *HDM* as a more nuanced work that is justified in its criticism of religious and traditional hierarchies it is crucial to examine a counterargument to Jacobs' view of *HDM* as anti-theistic. A great argument to present this second camp is Chantal Oliver's argument in her paper "Mocking God and Celebrating Satan:

Parodies and Profanities in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*" (2012). Oliver argues that even though critics like Jacobs frame Pullman's work as heretical or atheistic propaganda, it might be more fruitful to draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque literary mode to read *HDM* as a text challenging the idea of God and authoritarian hierarchies while simultaneously lifting humanity up. As Oliver argues, *HDM* subverts "official culture through laughter and role reversals" (1) and that "far from indoctrinating the reader or promoting uncontested understandings, the heretical disruptions and inversions in Pullman's religious theme encourage an altogether more positive and plural response" (1). This is important for Oliver's argument because these claims present how Pullman is able to critique stringent religious doctrines and beliefs in a way in which even those who adhere to said beliefs could see the critique in a more constructive and objective manner than they would see a direct attack on their beliefs.

Similarly to Jacobs, central to Oliver's argument is the issue of the roles of certain characters in the text. However, in contrast to Jacobs, Oliver's reading focuses on the main characters of the trilogy and the issue of their roles being reversed contrarily to God's role. This is especially significant because Jacobs' argument fails to closely consider the significance of this important role-reversal in the text. Oliver explicates the main characters - Lyra and Will - as the new Adam and Eve, and, in doing so, presents their challenges to overcome the corrupt authoritarian religious forces as leading to the establishment of a new honest and democratic order (2). The key examples here are their human pursuit of self-understanding and self-improvement as well as accepting their human nature by embracing material pleasures. While it could be argued that throughout this journey Lyra and Will reenact Original Sin through their pursuit of knowledge, Oliver argues that Pullman depicts this as a blissful and positive experience which saves the universe rather than damning humankind as in Genesis (2).

Further to the issue of role reversals in *HDM*, key to Oliver's argument is the introduction of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. Oliver contradicts critics of *HDM*, like David Gooderham and Burton Hatlen, by claiming that *HDM* fits Bakhtin's criteria for the carnivalesque by being an example of "texts that are characterised by 'parodies, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings'" (3). In other words, Oliver claims that Pullman's text shouldn't be read exclusively as "atheistic" (3) or "secular humanist" (qtd. in Oliver 3) as some critics suggest but instead that the carnivalesque disruptions and subversions in the text allows for a multiplicity of readings in regard to the depiction God, organized religion, and criticism of traditional hierarchies (3).

The episode which Oliver points out as especially carnivalesque is that of God's humiliating depiction and subsequent destruction. The scene in question is an episode in which Lyra and Will find a decrepit old being inside a crystal litter lying in the mud, and, unaware of his identity, they pity him and release the being now crying like a baby from his cell (Oliver 4). This is a reversal of the roles to the utmost degree, as the previously almighty Authority – the being inside the crystal litter – is now at the complete mercy of the children Will and Lyra, the "victims" of the hierarchy and system he put in place. Simply put, God has turned into a poor thing "cowering away into the lowest corner" (qtd. in Oliver 4). This is a significant part of Oliver's argument as she recognizes how the depiction of God as a being which has a body and is subject to "illness, degeneration, and ultimately death" (Oliver 5) makes the "powerful central signified 'God' of monotheistic religions" (Oliver 5) physically deconstructed. This physical deconstruction in addition to the textual deconstruction of God through being referred to as "The Authority", a title which can be interpreted in multiple different ways, effectively destabilizes God's true status in a carnivalesque fashion. This destabilization in addition to God giving

himself names like “The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty” (Pullman 671), the meanings of which are perpetuated by the hierarchy and systems he put in place, refutes the claim of “God” being a transcendental signified (Oliver 5). This refutation also suggests that the power to decide and perpetuate the meaning of the signified lies with the hierarchies, systems, and individuals who choose to propagate them, which suggests that “meanings might be socially and linguistically constructed” (Oliver 4) rather than unchangeable facts. Instead of viewing *HDM* as diminishing its narrative through its anti-theistic polemic because of this deconstruction, Oliver invokes a “Bakhtinian perspective” (5) to make the point that killing God in such a degrading fashion – by simply releasing him from the crystal cell – was absolutely necessary for the subsequent positive re-enactment of the Fall, and therefore making the scene much weightier in the narrative of establishing new hierarchical structures in which humans have the supreme power.

To broaden the argument of *HDM* as attempting to establish a new hierarchy, another critical idea is Naomi Wood’s argument in her article “Paradise Lost and Found: Obedience, Disobedience, and Storytelling in C. S. Lewis and Philip Pullman” (2001). Wood argues that through the “disobedient pursuit of knowledge” (3) one can achieve redemption. Wood’s main argument is similar to Oliver’s presentation of the carnivalesque in the sense that it pulls the “lowly” up and the “high” divinity of God down for the two to be equalized or even for the “lowly” humans to become superior to God. Wood’s argument, however, relates to how *HDM* is presented as advocating for a new hierarchical order that can be established through achieving enlightenment by way of the “disobedient pursuit of knowledge” (3). Crucially, this pursuit is essential not only to maturing, but also as the way to attain redemption. The example which Wood presents is that of Lyra being called “Eve again” (Wood 3) which signifies her role to play

the “disobedient liberator of humanity” (Wood 3). To utilize this example, Wood describes Pullman as agreeing with gnostic theology which entails emphasizing that personal spiritual knowledge is divine. In other words, Pullman’s depiction of The Fall makes Eve and Lyra’s search for knowledge and truth divine. This portrayal is opposed to the biblical depiction of the desire for knowledge as sinful because it represents an aspiration to become equal to God in his omniscience (*New International Version*, Gen. 3.22-23).

To strengthen the claim of *HDM* as a work that attempts to establish a new human hierarchy which is opposed to traditional religious hierarchies, we can look critically at how Wood clarifies that even though Pullman rejects C.S. Lewis’ work *Narnia*, he still bases hierarchies on external features – similarly to Lewis – through the *dæmons* in *HDM* which acts like a manifestation of that person’s soul or consciousness in animal form (Wood 14). We can see the way in which this establishes hierarchies by how every servant in the literary world of *HDM* has a dog as their *dæmon*, presenting the servants as unchangeably obedient and subordinate in nature, while Lord Asriel’s snow leopard *dæmon* expresses Asriel’s own nature as powerful and superior (Wood 14). If we invoke the carnivalesque parody and mockery of traditional social structures to consider the depiction of such hierarchies rather than view them as an attempt at perpetuating traditional hierarchies, we could possibly argue that the reason for the existence of such hierarchies in *HDM* is to critique this manner of establishing hierarchies rather than to support it. This is a particularly significant possibility because Pullman explicitly condemns similar unchangeable hierarchies in *Narnia*. Wood explains that *Narnia* gives the reader instructions for whom to obey in the hierarchies presented, but that this right to be obeyed rests on their birth as well as on the characters’ stereotypes (13-14). In *Narnia*, certain groups, like women, minorities, and people without human blood, are depicted in a stereotypically

negative light (Wood 14). These groups, or individuals, are also presented as inferior and unworthy compared to, for example, the first-born rightful human king Peter, and their unequal treatment is justified by their innate qualities (Wood 14). Wood presents a statement from Pullman's "The Dark Side of Narnia" which asserts that the *Narnia* series is too infested with "misogyny ... racism, [and] sado-masochistic relish for violence" (qtd. in Wood 2) to be suitable for children. If we view Pullman's hierarchical structures in light of this statement, we could argue that they fall in line with John Stephens description of the carnivalesque in children's literature as an intertextual literary mode which "proceeds by parodying and mocking recognizable social forms and structures and literary genres and texts" (qtd. in Oliver 3). In other words, contrary to Wood's argument, Pullman's hierarchies could be viewed as making a parodical mockery of traditional hierarchical structures rather than attempting to perpetuate them.

Engaging with these arguments put forward by Jacobs, Oliver, and Wood, which revolve around whether or not *HDM* is anti-theistic, the concept of the carnivalesque which is invoked to explain the critical role-reversals and mockery of traditional hierarchies, as well as the pursuit of knowledge as crucial for redemption, I would argue that *HDM* suggests that achieving a sense of "human godhood" is possible through the efforts of the everyday individual in their "disobedient" search for knowledge despite traditional and authoritarian opposition. Moreover, the suggestion that "human godhood" is achievable in our material lives presents the human worldly experience of the material as more valuable rather than completely devaluing the spiritual or religious experience as some critics – like Jacobs – suggest. Not only does the concept of "human godhood" present the worldly experience as more valuable, but it also suggests the creation of a new hierarchy in which humans have the supreme power. To argue

this, I will focus on the character of Mary Malone as she encapsulates the way in which the spiritual and material are united in the human body. Following this I will turn to a selection of scenes and concepts in an attempt to eliminate the dichotomy between the material and the spiritual to further my argument concerning the concept of “human godhood” and the creation of a new human hierarchy, in addition to utilizing the presentation of the “disobedient pursuit of knowledge” as a way in which humans can achieve not only redemption, but divinity. These scenes and concepts consist of: first, a scene in which Angels are presented as desiring their material counterpart; second, a scene which presents our present material life as what is truly essential; third, the concept of “adult automata”; fourth, the presentation of how purely spiritual beings like angels are weaker than humans; and finally, the power of the human potential and the fruits of the “disobedient pursuit of knowledge” (Wood 3). My central concept throughout this entire reading is “human godhood”, and the way that *HDM* presents that we can achieve said godhood is also of great significance.

The first key element to understanding this crucial concept of “human godhood” involves understanding the character Mary Malone, as she encapsulates the understanding of the critical balance of the spiritual and material which is necessary to achieve “human godhood”. Mary is one of the main characters in *HDM*, and she acts as a voice of reason and logic. She comes from the closest thing to “our world” in the literary world of *HDM* and has cast aside her spiritual side, as well as her previous lifestyle as a nun, to fully focus on her career as an astrophysicist and neuropsychologist. Throughout her journey, however, she must rely on the guidance of angels and the divination technique “I Ching”, which diverts from her supposed purely scientifically oriented mind and instead makes her a more nuanced character in which the logical and scientific is intertwined with the spiritual. This intermingling of the two supposedly opposing parts is best

presented through Mary's realization that "Matter *loved* dust" (Pullman 1029) [italics in original text]. The realization came about through an incident in which the material is desperately trying to keep the spiritual – *Dust* – inside our universe. The incident in question is an apocalyptic natural catastrophe where *Dust*, which can be viewed as the essence and nourishment of everything spiritual, begins leaving our universe through certain human-made "windows" – or portals – between worlds. As a response to this, a myriad of material objects started "crying out and hurling themselves into the struggle to keep the Shadow-particles [*Dust*] in this universe, which they so enriched" (Pullman 1029). This event presents *Dust*, and by extension the spiritual, as crucial to the enrichment of the lives and experience of everything material. The incident alleviates Mary's doubts and confusions and restores to her a sense of meaning in life she had previously only gotten through her faith in God. Chantal Oliver explains that Mary has been identified by some critics as Pullman's mouthpiece which spews his anti-theistic rhetoric, but Oliver argues that Mary actually helps strengthen the position of the text having a multiplicity of contested readings which reminds Oliver of Bakhtin's "concept of the 'dialogic' text, which opposes 'notions of single meaning and unquestionable authority'" (Oliver 6). In other words, Mary is an ambivalent character which cannot be read in a simplistic manner due to her internal struggles and the way in which she eventually comes to turn with embracing both the material and spiritual through her aforementioned realization. Oliver argues that this ambivalence "undermines the notion of any singular or uncomplicated reading, atheistic or otherwise" (6-7) because her being a nuanced character by extension opposes simplistic readings of *HDM* as purely anti-theistic. Mary's enlightenment of the importance of the coexistence of both the material and the spiritual (*Dust*) makes her perspective less antagonistic to religion and

faith compared to right after she initially left Catholicism and instead presents her character as more relatable to Catholics struggling with their faith.

To further our understanding of the idea of “human godhood” it is necessary to more closely consider the relationship between the spiritual and the material, as well as their positioning in a value-based hierarchy. In the final book, Will explains how angels (representing the spiritual) envy humans (representing the material) in our mortal coils:

the best part is the body [. . .] Angels wish they had bodies [. . .] They can’t understand why we don’t enjoy the world more. It would be sort of ecstasy for them to have our flesh and our senses (Pullman 1017).

Angels in *HDM* are formed from the purely spiritual *Dust*, and their desire for bodies and the worldly gives the reader insight into an overarching theme of *HDM*, namely that the spiritual longs for the material. If we invoke the carnivalesque to interpret this quote, we could argue that the quote fits the profane aspect of the carnivalesque in the sense that it celebrates the earthly as ecstasy-inducing, and that it tears down the “high” by presenting beings we could consider as heavenly as desiring to be in our human flesh. This completely reverses the expected theistical interpretation of the worldly as sinful and the spiritual as virtuous, as well as placing the “heavenly” angels in a position beneath humans as they desire to become us. The reversed positions inevitably lift humanity up to the position of “human godhood” as even the Authority – God – in *HDM* also is an angel. This change of positions creates a new hierarchy in which humanity is elevated to the peak, while the supposed “high” angels and deity are lowered to an inferior position, making this new hierarchy value humans far more than a Christian divine hierarchy does.

The shifting hierarchical positions of the spiritual and material – which can be extrapolated by the hierarchical change in the relationship between humans and angels – is especially crucial because this represents a worldview in which the traditional religious notion of the worldly contemporary life as insignificant is completely overturned. It could be argued that presenting the “lowly” material life as crucial and delightful rather than sinful utilizes Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque in the sense that it presents heretical disruptions and inversions to present an alternative worldview to the traditional Christian divine hierarchy. The spiritual and material equalization makes the worldly equal to or higher than the supposed divine spiritual plane, which makes the human body and mind as divine as any purely spiritual being like God, in addition to giving great importance to our current material lives. We might argue therefore that *HDM*’s narrative attempts to promote a view of the spiritual as a part of the worldly rather than as an illusory heavenly kingdom which we may or may not be able to enter after death.

The idea of the spiritual as part of the worldly is concretized in the conclusion of *HDM* in which Lyra and Will both have to return to their own worlds rather than being able to stay in the allegorical Eden of *HDM*. Lyra sees that she matters in the present life in her own world and that she doesn’t need to wait for some immaterial future to enjoy life or make an impact to change society:

He said there wasn’t any elsewhere. [...] But there was something else.’ ‘I remember. He meant the Kingdom was over, the Kingdom of Heaven, it was all finished. We shouldn’t live as if it mattered more than this life in this world, because where we are is always the most important place (Pullman 1087).

This short exchange between Lyra and her dæmon Pantalaimon presents our material lives as that which truly matters while also functioning to demonstrate an essential part of my

argument: that it is a waste of our current valuable and ecstatic worldly experience to solely long for the afterlife. The text points to the idea that we should instead take advantage of our present life to make a positive change to our own society to make the vision of the “Republic of Heaven” – the idea of a new humanmade hierarchy in which humans all rule a democratic “Heaven” together rather than answering to God – transformed into reality. Not only does this idea depict the present as crucial, but it also gives voice to a point of view in which it doesn’t even matter if there is an afterlife because the idea of the afterlife – the “Kingdom of Heaven” – is irrelevant as long as you exist in the present material world. Instead, it would be fruitful to make the most out of our current material circumstances while we still have the chance.

The importance of having the spiritual and material cooperate rather than valuing one over the other can be argued for through the negative depictions of beings which are solely material or spiritual throughout Pullman’s *HDM*. A great example which shows how purely material beings are inferior or weaker than a *complete* human are the people Anne-Marie Bird terms as “adult automata” (8). These “automata” in *HDM* are adult humans who are severed from their dæmons – which can be considered their soul or spiritual side – and thus they are lacking consciousness, becoming tools akin to robots or slaves. Bird explains that they are alienated from their humanity because of this severance. In *HDM* these “automata” are described by Lyra as looking similar in their white uniforms and their “strange bland calm manner” (Pullman 217), and their dæmons are described as “just as neat and incurious” (Pullman 219) as them. In other words, these *people-no-longer-people* are described as having lost their individuality and creativity. They mindlessly obey all orders and through this we can see the product of the purely material, namely a lack of distinguishing features and personality. On the opposite end of the spectrum, we find angels. Angels are purely spiritual beings in the literary

world of *HDM*, which Bird explains conforms to the Roman Catholic doctrine (10). Lord Asriel presents the reason for why angels are weaker than humans to be because they “haven’t got *flesh!*” (Pullman 962) and then he goes on to explain that even though humans have a lot of weaknesses, compared to angels

we’re still *stronger*. They *envy* us [...] They long to have our precious bodies, so solid and powerful, so well adapted to the good earth. And if we *drive* at them with force and determination, we can sweep aside those infinite numbers as you can sweep your hand through mist. They have no more power than that! (Pullman 962-963) [italics in original text].

This presentation of angels makes them out to be weaker than humans not merely because we have bodies and they don’t, but instead that humans have the potential to use our bodies in addition to our willpower which can be considered a product of the human soul or spirit. The reason I present these scenes which describe beings who are either completely material or completely spiritual is to present how these beings who solely belong to either concept are presented as weaker or inferior compared to complete humans who combine the two concepts. Humans have a vessel – our bodies – in which the part of us which is spiritual is concentrated, while angels only consist of the spiritual and thus cannot concentrate their power. In other words, humans are able to combine our spiritual and physical aspects to form one unified being which is stronger than its parts, while beings who are solely physical or spiritual have no such option and thus they are bound to be inferior as long as humans utilize the potential to combine these aspects. To understand how to combine these two aspects, a “disobedient pursuit of knowledge” (Wood 3) is required to become enlightened and subsequently achieve “human godhood”.

The final key scene that is particularly important to the centrality of the idea of the “disobedient pursuit of knowledge” (Wood 3) leading to a sense of “human godhood” is the scene in which Lyra and Will are spotted returning hand in hand after their sexual awakening and subsequent enlightenment. Mary Malone observes them and instinctively knows that they would “seem to be made of living gold” (Pullman 1046) if she viewed them through the amber spyglass – a tool which lets humans observe *Dust* – meaning that they would have an immense amount of *Dust* surrounding them. Furthermore, as Mary observes: “They would seem the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance” (Pullman 1046). This observation confirms that in this scene Lyra and Will have unlocked the human potential and came into the true power that humans are capable of by relishing in the material and accepting their nature rather than fighting against it. The nature being accepted in this scene is that of their sexual desire which is described by Marisa Coulter, Lyra’s mother and leader of a branch of the church called the General Oblation Board, as “troublesome thoughts and feelings” (Pullman 241) which appear during puberty and that let *Dust* into their body, with *Dust* here carrying the meaning of *sin*. Thus, such a depiction of Lyra and Will accepting their sexual nature goes against the Church’s doctrine and view of expressing sexuality as sinful. We might also argue that such a concentration of *Dust* upon Lyra and Will signifies that the part of them which is spiritual is on a higher level compared to an angel, and maybe even on the same level as, or superior to, a deity, as this “living gold” exceeds the glow of a halo through suffusing their entire being in this golden light rather than simply their head. Traditionally, a catholic interpretation of the halo is that it represents a divine grace, and the halo is often connected to innocence, but such a depiction is reversed through Lyra and Will gaining these “halos” through them leaving innocence and entering the realm of experience. This transition to adolescence is

depicted outright as Lyra and Will are referred to as “these children-no-longer-children” (Pullman 1046) directly after the description of how they came into their inheritance. In other words, Lyra and Will’s supposed sinful sexual feelings have been expressed and instead of the two being condemned they are elevated to the level of a deity. Their ascent shows that humans have an immense potential which can be unlocked as long as we accept our nature and worldly experience rather than fight it.

This reading of *HDM* presents a new way in which to interpret the text as a trilogy which suggests that humans can achieve a sense of “human godhood” through the “disobedient pursuit of knowledge” (Wood 3). This pursuit of knowledge can lead to the realization of the way to achieve said godhood, namely by combining the spiritual and material aspects humans share in the material world and accept our nature rather than submitting to a traditional Christian doctrine which requires us to suppress said nature and first suffer in the purely material for then to attempt to find joy in the purely spiritual after death. The establishment of the concept of “human godhood” and the carnivalesque reversal of the roles of humans and God in the text qualifies as an attempt at establishing a new human hierarchy in the material world, which is a complete reversal of a traditional theological divine hierarchy. By engaging with an interpretation of the character of Mary Malone in *HDM*, we can understand how the spiritual and material are united in the human body. Moreover, the first two key scenes identified above present the mutual attraction between the spiritual and the material for the two concepts to become equalized in a new hierarchy rather than one being placed above the other. The two subsequent scenes add to this by giving substance to the claim of purely spiritual beings and purely material beings as weaker than complete humans who have access to both the spiritual and material aspects. It is clear that angels and God belongs to the camp of the purely spiritual, thus making humans

superior even to God. Finally, we can see the outcome of the “disobedient pursuit of knowledge” when Lyra and Will achieve a sense of human godhood with their enlightenment at the end of their journey in the final key scene presented above. Their knowledge and experience is achieved in such a manner that can be described quite simply as “disobedient” because the experience they sought was gained through pure ecstasy and pleasure of the flesh, that is to say, the material, an experience which evidently doesn’t fit with a religious narrative that is fundamentally based on the idea of material pleasure as sinful.

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