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Terry Pratchett's Witches Novels and the Consensus Fantasy Universe: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Abstract

Between 1987 and 2015, Terry Pratchett published eleven novels and one short story within his Discworld universe that came to be known as his “Witches” sub-series. In these texts he engaged with the narrative imperatives, preoccupations, and tropes which together make up the consensus fantasy universe, and those deeper mythologies and legendarium with which the author necessarily has an intertextual relationship. This paper focuses upon one aspect of that consensus universe, which is the difference between male and female magical practitioners—witches and wizards—in the fantasy canon, and how Pratchett sought to challenge and subvert the stereotypes of the genre in his own work. The primary means by which Pratchett achieved this, I have argued, is by exposing the fictionality of these stereotypes through parody and satire, whilst at the same time embedding these same tropes within his own universe as the building blocks of his secondary world.

The period during which the “Witches” novels were produced is roughly commensurate with a timeframe in which the range of academic and activist positions which are broadly regarded as constituting second-wave feminism were giving rise to, being overtaken by (or in some cases were in direct conflict with) a

multiplicity of newer scholarly approaches which have been described as comprising a third wave. Whilst it would be wrong-footed to attempt to position Pratchett's 'Witches" novels as a direct engagement with any of these theories, we can see in his writing an awareness of the shifting landscape of feminist thought, with themes in the earliest novels that take up ideas of equality of access similar to those that dominated first-wave discourse, as well as a growing cast of characters and range of thematic concerns that come to reflect the divergence of second and third-wave debates about biological sex and gender identity.

Although Pratchett's work does not itself constitute feminist scholarship, I have argued that through his engagement with some of the evolving ideas about women and their relative position in society, his "Witches" novels can be read as an attempt to change the way that women are portrayed in fantasy literature by intersecting with ideas that are external to it. In this respect, and by interpreting his work in terms of de Beauvoir's archetypal stereotypes and her theory of Other, as well as Grosz's work on feminine corporeality and Butler's ideas of gender performativity, I have sought to illuminate how Pratchett's fiction not only sits within a wider body of feminist discourse but can also bear the weight of such critical analysis.

Additional Keywords

Pratchett, Terry. Discworld series; Pratchett, Terry—Characters—Witches; Feminist criticism; Feminism; Witches and witchcraft; Wizards

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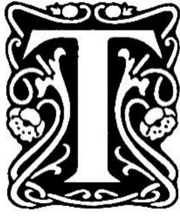

Terry Pratchett's Witches Novels and the Consensus Fantasy Universe: A Feminist Perspective

Clair Hutchings-Budd

In a speech given at a fantasy convention in 1985, Terry Pratchett told his audience that:

> The consensus fantasy universe […] has been formed by folklore and Victorian romantics and Walt Disney, and E.R. Eddison and Jack Vance and Ursula Le Guin and Fritz Leiber […]. There are now, to the delight of parasitical writers like me, what I might almost call "public domain" plot items. […] Of course, the consensus fantasy universe is full of clichés, almost by definition. Elves are tall and fair and use bows, dwarfs are small and dark and vote Labour. And magic works. ("Why Gandalf Never Married" ["Why Gandalf"] 86-87)

Pratchett gave this talk whilst his third Discworld novel *Equal Rites* (1987) was still being written. This was the first book in what was to become a major sub-series of eleven novels and one short story that were released over a 28-year period.[1] My focus here is on that group of works, known collectively as his "Witches" novels, in which Pratchett challenged the gender stereotyping of the fantasy genre, which he described as being "overdue for a visit from the Equal Opportunities people because, in the fantasy world, magic done by women is usually of poor quality, third-rate, negative stuff, while the wizards are usually cerebral, clever, powerful, and wise" ("Why Gandalf" 88).

Pratchett's "Witches" sub-series spans the period from 1987–2015, during which the range of academic and activist positions which are broadly regarded as constituting second-wave feminism were giving rise to, being overtaken by (or in some cases were in direct conflict with) a multiplicity of newer scholarly approaches which have been described as comprising a third wave. This is a trajectory that reflects, as Lise Shapiro Sanders puts it: "Feminism's transformation—from a political struggle emphasizing women's shared oppression to an anti-essentialist discourse focusing on the construction of female identity and on the material and cultural differences among women" (4). Whilst it would be wrong-footed to attempt to position Pratchett's

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[1] His final book *The Shepherd's Crown* was published posthumously in 2015.

"Witches" novels as a direct engagement with any of these theories, we can see in his writing an awareness of the shifting landscape of feminist thought, with themes in the earliest novels that take up ideas of equality of access similar to those that dominated first-wave discourse, as well as a growing cast of characters and range of thematic concerns that come to reflect the divergence of second and third-wave debates about biological sex and gender identity. In this sense then, Pratchett's work should be considered as intersecting, rather than engaging directly with feminist theory, and I will argue that an examination of these points of intersection enhances our understanding of how he draws upon the well-established gender stereotypes of the fantasy genre as a core aspect of his world-building, whilst simultaneously subverting these same tropes in order to expose them to challenge.

Pratchett's use of the term "parasitical" is telling therefore, because if his Discworld universe is a parasitical domain, it is also one that changes its host over time. Lian Sinclair writes: "instead of creating a significantly new world, Discworld consciously engages with and intervenes into this consensus fantasy universe" (6-7). It is my contention however, that although Pratchett's early "Witches" books are heavily reliant on parody and give homage to canonical authors like J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula K. Le Guin, as well as iconic re-workings of traditional folklore by the brothers Grimm and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, we ought to pay more attention to the author's subversion of the norms of the genre as a de facto attribute of his own fantasy world-building. In this sense, and notwithstanding its parodic relationship to its canonical intertexts, Discworld *has* become a "significantly new world" whose popular success and impact has been such that it has in part helped to redefine how we approach the genre.[2]

In the introduction to Pratchett's collaboration with Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen, *The Science of Discworld*, the authors discuss a key concept that appears throughout Pratchett's fiction, and which is variously termed "narrativium," "narrative causality," or "*narrative imperative*, the power of story" (10). Taking as a fundamental precept that "We have always had a desire to paint stories on to the Universe" (11), Pratchett contends that "witches and

[2] Pratchett's witches are not the only departure from these sexual stereotypes in speculative fiction. Robert Jordan's depiction of the Aes Sedai in his *Wheel of Time* series (1990–2017), for instance, inverts the gendered magical hierarchy with his female channelers being distant and rational, whilst J.K. Rowling's witches receive the same education as their male counterparts and have comparable opportunities in her *Harry Potter* novels (1997–2007). With *Equal Rites* predating Jordan's series by three years, and J.K. Rowling's by a decade, we might approach Pratchett therefore as a founding member of a new generation of writers who showed an increasing propensity to tackle the fantasy canon in this way.

wizards get their ideas from their reading matter or, before that, from folklore. Fiction invents reality" ("Why Gandalf" 90). In the first part of my discussion, I will explore how Pratchett's "Witches" novels draw upon the sexual stereotypes that exist within the genre to provide familiar reference points and textual cohesion, whilst subverting these same tropes to disrupt the complicity between reader and narrative expectation. I will argue for a point of intersection between Pratchett's fiction and Simone de Beauvoir's work on myth and archetypes in *The Second Sex*, providing examples of how Pratchett deploys comparable archetypal models in his own work. By examining the mechanics of how Pratchett disrupts the narrative imperative that drives the transference of magical capital from wizard to (male) apprentice in the consensus fantasy universe and demands that witches are excluded from the academy, I will argue that his witch characters are defined against the dominant magical discourse of wizardry, highlighting how and where Pratchett's fictional depictions intersect with de Beauvoir's theory of Other, as well as the relevance to his work of Elizabeth Grosz's work on feminine corporeality. This will involve a consideration of how the repeated performance of gendered roles by Pratchett's witches provides the basis for a social contract that in turn legitimises their practice of magic, drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to present Pratchett's witches as occupying a precarious social position which requires constant renegotiation through the repetition of normative behaviours. Finally, I will examine the influence of third wave feminism on Pratchett's late-career young adult "Witches" novels,[3] considering how and where these books intersect with the diversity of later feminist and queer scholarship, particularly in their raising of the possibility of a male witch in the character of Geoffrey Squires.

Deconstructing the Consensus Fantasy Universe

Pratchett's assertion "and magic works" recalls J.R.R. Tolkien's "rules" for the fantasy genre as set out in his 1939 essay "On Fairy-Stories." In that essay, Tolkien wrote: "if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away" (33). Tolkien's argument—that any attempt to satirise the magical conventions of a fantasy work breaks the internal cohesion of what he terms the author's "secondary worlds"— is anathema to Pratchett's approach. In *Wyrd Sisters* for instance, when Esmerelda "Granny" Weatherwax and Gytha "Nanny" Ogg summon a demon, they do not, as Magrat Garlick anticipates (and we, as readers familiar with the consensus universe have come to expect), use "a cauldron, and a magic sword. And an octogram" (93), rather,

[3] The Tiffany Aching series.

they deploy nothing but the ordinary contents of Gytha Ogg's washhouse. Here we are being invited to laugh at the incongruity of the mundane surroundings of the spell casting, whilst remaining true to the principle that "magic works"; the summoning itself is highly effective, *despite* its being entirely devoid of occult paraphernalia.

This is an important point, because Pratchett's exposure of magical convention to satire presents a direct challenge to one of Tolkien's fundamental principles. Although on the face of it Pratchett's comedic disruption appears to break genre convention, what he accomplishes is a more complex harnessing of familiar tropes that locate his work firmly within the fantasy genre, whilst simultaneously subverting them through satire. The means by which Pratchett does this, Daniel Lüthi posits, is through his use of "meta-commentaries" which reveal "the very fictionality of his world, seemingly destroying the literary belief which is necessary for reader immersion" (125). For Lüthi, Pratchett's deployment of humour transforms his Discworld novels from "mere parody into a fully-fledged secondary world" (126), which not only counters Tolkien's argument that magic should never be a target for comic intervention, but foregrounds humour as a *necessary* agent for Pratchett's construction of that world. Prema Arasu in turn draws our attention to the building blocks that Pratchett uses, which disrupt the total immersion upon which Tolkien was so insistent, by calling upon "metafictional strategies" (most commonly footnotes, but also other extra-textual references like special effects and script instructions), which act as "frame breaking techniques" that "continually draw attention to the existence of the Disc and the characters who inhabit it as products of imagination which exist as words on a page" (7). It is this self-reflexive fictionality, through which Pratchett exploits the narrative imperative of stories and cultural myths, that supplies the basis for his engagement with and subversion of the consensus fantasy universe, and these two aspects of Pratchett's writing—the referencing of genre tropes and their subsequent comedic disruption— that provide a unique intertextual "space" within which his engagement with gender discourse takes place.

In the two novels that preceded *Equal Rites,*[4] Pratchett established Discworld's magical framework solely through the depiction of wizardry, including its associated iconography, the occult significance of the number eight, and the requirement for wizards to receive a formal education at Unseen University (echoing the magical university of Roke in Le Guin's *Earthsea* universe). Pratchett's and Le Guin's wizards share a common root with two canonical fictional sources; Tolkien's Gandalf, "an old man with a staff [,] a tall pointed blue hat, a long grey cloak, [and] a silver scarf over which his long white

[4] *The Colour of Magic* and *The Light Fantastic.*

beard hung down below his waist" (*The Hobbit* 1.5), and T.H. White's Merlyn, "dressed in a flowing gown with fur tippets which had the signs of the zodiac embroidered over it, with various cabalistic signs [...]. He had a pointed hat […]. He also had a wand of lignum vitae" (I.25). The intertextual relationship in *Equal Rites* between Gandalf, Merlyn and Pratchett's dying wizard Drum Billet is made explicit by Pratchett's inviting us to recall the canonical archetype in Billet's character description: "He came walking through the thunderstorm and *you could tell* he was a wizard, partly because of the long cloak and carven staff" (*Equal Rites* 10, emphasis added). Thus, as we are introduced to Billet, we are complicit with the consensus fantasy universe because we have already been schooled in wizardry's narrative conventions: our "knowledge" of the genre tells us that magical power is concentrated in the hands of wizards, and that wizards can only be male. Billet's catastrophic assumption upon which the subsequent events of the novel turn—that the anticipated eighth child of the blacksmith, himself an eighth son, will be born male and so become a powerful wizard—is carefully constructed by Pratchett's deployment of the tropes of the consensus universe as a means of orientating the reader, prior to their deliberate subversion by the subsequent revelation that the child has actually been born a girl.

The chronology of Pratchett's world building is therefore germane; in being presented with the supposed impossibility of a female wizard ("Female wizards aren't right […]. Whoever heard of a female wizard?" [*Equal Rites* 19]) and encountering witchcraft *after* wizardry in the narrative sequence, the reader is obliged to consider the magical feminine in terms of that which has already been defined. Redolent of Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the female as Other ("She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her" [6]), Pratchett draws upon a tradition that portrays witches as wielders of a form of magic that is a lesser or even transgressive warping of the wizardly "norm," such as Le Guin describes in her early *Earthsea* novels, where witches are set against wizards as deviant practitioners of a malicious and untrustworthy form of enchantment:

> [B]eing an ignorant woman [...] she often used her crafts to foolish and dubious ends. She knew nothing of the Balance and the Pattern which the true wizard knows and serves [...]. Much of her lore was mere rubbish and humbug, nor did she know the true spells from the false. She knew many curses, and was better at causing sickness, perhaps, than at curing it. (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 16)

Jessica Tiffin writes that Pratchett's books "simultaneously comment self-consciously on the popular genre of fantasy from a position *within* the generic ghetto […]. Thus, an awareness of the working of classic fantasy continually and

ironically weaves through Discworld, but as a facet of the author's *awareness of the far older traditions of the marvelous*" (160, emphasis added). When Pratchett introduces his chief witch character, Esme Weatherwax, we are told that "no-one had a bad word to say about witches. At least, not if he wanted to wake up in the morning the same shape as he went to bed" (*Equal Rites* 19). This presentation of the witch as an object of fear echoes literary antecedents like C.S. Lewis's Jadis, whose portrayal directly references the biblical othering of woman's creation out of man, as well as the Midrashic tradition of the demonic Lilith who demanded equality with her husband and was consequently cast aside ("she comes of […] Adam's first wife, her they called Lilith. […] No, no, there isn't a drop of real Human blood in the Witch" Lewis 35) and T.H. White's version of Morgan le Fay, which represents her in similarly "unfeminine" or unnatural terms. In contrast to these negative portrayals of witchcraft in the fantasy canon, in both White's and Tolkien's epic series Gandalf and Merlyn are shown as constant guides and mentors to their protégés, providing wise advice and an ethical compass. This distinction between wizardry as intellectual and powerful, and witchcraft as evil, manipulative and limited in efficacy, is the main aspect of the consensus fantasy universe that Pratchett begins to deconstruct[5] in *Equal Rites.*

It is also the critical point at which Pratchett's ideas about myth and fantasy stereotypes intersect with wider feminist theory, particularly when considered in the context of de Beauvoir's synthesis of Lévi-Strauss's study of cultural myths and Jung's work on archetypes, which led her to propose the thesis that "women are constrained to operate as man's other" and "myth is seen as having a very particular part to play in persuading women of the *naturalness* of their fate" (Fallaize 88-9). In *The Second Sex,* de Beauvoir developed her own theory of myth, based on a series of pervasive and persistent cultural categories to which women have been historically assigned. Some of these myths (for example the Pygmalion myth and the Marian myths associated with the Holy Mother) are less relevant to my discussion, but there are four groupings which, when considering how Pratchett's work seeks to deconstruct gender norms in the consensus fantasy universe, dovetail with the material in his fiction. These

[5] At the same time as Pratchett deconstructs what it means to be a witch in the consensus fantasy universe, we can also see him expanding the parameters of wizardry to include within its scope the stereotypically unmanly Rincewind (who, despite his desperate efforts to avoid magic at all costs, ends up being appointed to the position of Egregious Professor of Cruel and Unusual Geography), Ponder Stibbons (who in his embracing of technology aspires to redefine what it means to practice magic) and even the magically transformed orangutan Librarian. Taken against this backdrop, where even an ape can be absorbed into the Faculty of Unseen University, it is therefore even more startling that UU resists so strongly the concept of a female wizard.

are those myths classified by de Beauvoir that are associated with feminine mystery and the idea of the femme fatale, which when taken together present women both as temptress and sinful whilst permitting men to disregard their voices and ignore their needs, and the triple category of myths which deal, respectively, with virginity, fecundity and the Evil Mother. Taking the myth of feminine mystery first, de Beauvoir frames this in terms that would be readily recognisable to anyone familiar with the common tropes of fantasy literature:

> The hackneyed vocabulary of serialised novels where the woman is described as an enchantress or mermaid who fascinates man and bewitches him reflects the oldest and most universal of myths. Woman is devoted to magic. […] [W]hen he struggles to make society triumph over nature, reason over life, will over inert fact, woman is regarded as a sorceress. [...] [T]he magician operates outside society, against the gods and laws, according to his own passions. But woman is not fully integrated into the world of men; as other, she counters them; it is natural for her to use the strengths she possesses [...] being separate and opposed. (de Beauvoir 187-8)

This is an essentialist argument which turns upon the othering of women by men. When applied to the consensus fantasy universe, magic as practised by women is presented as a deviancy which stands against male "reason" and "will" and operates within a "separate" space which is both "natural" and exclusive, whilst simultaneously being a domain that is created by virtue of its being "opposite" to that of men and thereby deriving from a position of exclusion.

Although not presented in *The Second Sex* as a tripartite structure, de Beauvoir's next set of mythical categories, virginity, fecundity and Evil Mother, are resonant of the maiden/mother/crone trichotomy, famously espoused in Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* and which drew upon the comparative mythology (now discredited by modern anthropologists) in Frazer's *Golden Bough*.[6] Writing of modern Wiccanism and its use of *The White Goddess* as a central text for its organising principles, Sibylle Ihm observes that "his works became an inspiration for the women's liberation movement, especially during the so-called 'second-wave feminism', a period of feminist activity in the 1960s and 1970s. […] Graves's ideas about myth are not only cited in more-or-less scientific books—they have also inspired a kind of new religion" (178-80). There is no doubt that, despite its dubious scholarship, Graves's work has cast a long

[6] "Frazer is far more savage than most of his savages […]. His explanations of primitive practices are much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves" (Wittgenstein 44).

shadow, both in terms of its literary legacy as well as its impact upon feminism. Diane Purkiss writes that "Some women are still so attached to the story that they resist efforts to disprove it. The myth has become important, not because of its historical truth, but because of its mythic significance" (8). Returning to the point that Pratchett made about witches and wizards getting their ideas from reading matter or folklore, and examining the young witch Magrat Garlick,[7] Arasu writes that "Magrat's beliefs about witches […] come largely from representation and not her experience or association with Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg" (11), giving rise to a dissonance between expectations and reality:

> She'd had great hopes of the coven. […] She'd dreamed of wise discussions of natural energies while a huge moon hung in the sky […]. What she hadn't expected was a couple of crochety old women who were barely civil at the best of times and simply didn't enter into the spirit of things. (*Wyrd Sisters* 128)

However, despite Pratchett's gently poking fun at Magrat's New Age belief system, he reminds us how she also invokes the spirit of the entirely fictitious Queen Ynci of Lancre in order to find the courage to fight the invasion of the Elves in *Lords and Ladies* and again in *The Shepherd's Crown*, demonstrating that a history does not necessarily need to have any basis in fact for it to still be important to the people who believe in it. Pratchett therefore makes use of the pervasiveness of Graves's myth in two ways: it propels the narrative of his "Witches" novels by providing a cultural reference point for his magical world-building, including making the coven of three a necessary prerequisite for functioning witchcraft (it is this imperative that drives Nanny Ogg to recruit Agnes Nitt as a replacement for Magrat Garlick when the latter becomes Queen of Lancre), whilst at the same time acknowledging that the myth has a fictive power that is independent of any existence in reality:

> But there were one or two truths down below the bedrock of the soul which had to be faced, and right in among them was this business of, well, of the maiden, the mother and the . . . other one. […] [B]eliefs like that were heavy weights on the rubber sheet of human experience, tending to pull people into their orbit. (*Maskerade* 10)

Again, we see how Pratchett harnesses one mythical trope for plot purposes whilst simultaneously exposing it as problematic. This is a point observed by

[7] First introduced in *Wyrd Sisters* and with pivotal roles in *Witches Abroad* (1991), *Lords and Ladies* (1992), *Carpe Jugulum* (1998) and *The Shepherd's Crown* (2015).

Janet Brennan Croft, who writes: "Pratchett again comments on narrative causality and the way people often find themselves acting out parts dictated by stories. […] In the dissonance between the archetypal roles and the real people filling them, Pratchett again reinforces his message that stories cannot be allowed to dictate roles to people" ("Nice, Good or Right" 154). In the same way that de Beauvoir argued that the categories of myth, when presented as being "natural," cause the suppression of feminine agency, Pratchett shows us that although narratively speaking a coven of three is a necessary requirement of his secondary world, a fully rounded female character like Esme Weatherwax cannot be seen as any single aspect of the trichotomy, and rather "combined all three in one" (*Maskerade* 15). Similarly, none of the other witches neatly 'fit' into any of the three prescribed archetypal roles:

> "She's been telling us there's three of us," said Nanny.
> "What? Magrat? But she's—" Agnes stopped herself. "She's no Nanny Ogg," she said.
> "Well, I sure as hell ain't an Esme Weatherwax, if it comes to that," said Nanny. (*Carpe Jugulum* 87)

Setting his writing apart therefore from what Gabrielle Lissauer defines as "bad" fantasy novels which use "a certain lexicon common to fantasy stories, but […] as shorthand instead of actual character, plot or world development" (6), Pratchett, as a self-defined parasitical writer engages the public domain tropes of the consensus fantasy universe in two critical ways. He does this through deploying key conventions such as "magic works" and the three witches archetype from within what Tiffin calls the "generic ghetto," but at the same time he also opens up these stereotypes for satirical deconstruction, deploying them as necessary agents of his world building.

ACCESSING THE ACADEMY: ESSENTIALISM AND THE TRANSFERENCE OF MAGICAL CAPITAL

Once established in *Equal Rites* that Drum Billet's unintended magical successor is a girl, the momentum of the novel is driven by another fantasy staple; that of the hero (or, in this instance, heroine) fulfilling their destiny. This narrative setup, taken forward by a plot which describes Esk's ambition to be admitted to the male-only Unseen University, whilst once more being immediately familiar, allows Pratchett further opportunities for tropic subversion. The thematic concerns of *Equal Rites* are therefore resonant of first wave feminist discourse around access to male-dominated institutions. Just as Goldman observes that Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* "is not so much about retreating into a private feminine space as about interruptions, trespassing and the breaching of boundaries" (71) we see Esk excluded by the

patriarchal structures of wizardry, obliging her, under Esme Weatherwax's tutelage, to find ways in which to circumvent the lore that seeks to deny her access. Arguing that "It's the wrong kind of magic for women, is wizard magic; it's all books and stars and jommetry" (*Equal Rites* 19-20) Esme's stance is central to Pratchett's referencing of those strands of feminism (like de Beauvoir) that emphasised essentialism and separateness, with the character's voice joining wizardry's refusal to accept women into their enclave, maintaining that biological sex determines magical abilities as fixed and immutable: "you must know that a body is—like a jelly mould. It sets a shape on its contents, d'you see?" (*Equal Rites* 79). Here, Elizabeth Grosz's work on female corporeality provides a useful model for interpretation, allowing us to consider Esme's essentialism as a fictional example of how patriarchal narratives come to be internalised and how this results in women participating in their own oppression: "Patriarchal oppression justifies itself through the presumption that women, more than men, are tied to their fixed corporeality. […] [M]isogynistic thought confines women by tying them to a biologically and logically necessary dependence on men, ensuring its own continuity through the ascription of a biologically determined female 'nature'" (5-6).

Initially Esme considers the "wrongness" of Esk's designation as a female wizard, and the sheer impossibility of this definition, both because it is socially disruptive but also that it is transgressive. By juxtaposing knowledge acquired through study with "natural" intuition, it is tempting therefore to impose an implicit value judgement about relative "High" and "Low" magical forms, much as we see in Le Guin's first *Earthsea* novel and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, and this is the system that wizardry ascribes to in *Equal Rites*. If we express this in terms of Grosz's theory, the institution of UU ensures "its own continuity" by insisting that it is *biologically impossible* for a woman to become a wizard. Esme, in aligning herself with this narrative, points out that the essentialist argument also works when inverted, declaring that men "could never get the hang of" being witches, and "there's not male witches, only silly men […] If men were witches, they'd be wizards" (*Equal Rites* 82). This provides an example of what Grosz describes as a "reverse essentialism, in which a determinate form of femininity is universalised" (2) and we see this played out in Pratchett's novels through depictions of the type of magic that can only be performed by women, a quintessential form of which is the act of "Borrowing." This difference in magical practice more than any other positions Pratchett's witches (at least, in the earlier novels) as biological essentialists, even when at the same time he seeks in *Equal Rites* to challenge the social rules that insist on a strict separation between the two types of practitioner.

In this respect then, Sinclair's advice is pertinent: "Note how similar the construction of gender is to Pratchett's theory of narrative causality: both

claim that the repetition of stories are foundational to identity and can give the appearance of truth, while having no original or essential truth" (14). Held also picks up on this notion of narrative "truth" by emphasising that, despite their fictionality, dominant narratives can *act* as a very real constraint: "just because gender is a construct, doesn't mean it isn't real. Constructs are real insofar as expectations are imposed and asserted, often through punitive measures on members of a particular group" (5). We see therefore how Esme grapples with this concept in her chiding of Esk for failing to realise that access to UU would not be achievable by adherence to the normative expectations of wizardry: "Well, what did you expect? […] At least they only laughed at you. Laughter don't hurt. You walked up to the chief wizard and showed off in front of everyone and only got laughed at" (*Equal Rites* 193). Esme's navigating Esk around, rather than through the barriers that inhibit her entry by negotiating a role for her on UU's domestic staff is akin to the work that Helen Carr describes of the 1970s second wave feminist scholars and activists like Sheila Rowbotham, Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor who "taught in Extra-Mural classes […] putting on courses far more radical than anything happening within the universities" (124-5). In this sense then, it is Esme's separatist position, based on an acceptance of the "reality" of Esk's dilemma, coupled with her *rejection* of the conventional practices of wizardry in which her feminism could be said to be located.

HEADOLOGY, PERFORMANCE AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Purkiss, in examining the influence of radical feminists from the late 1960's onwards who provided the impetus for attempts to uncover the hidden histories of women, highlights "the extraordinary flexibility of the term 'witch' as a signifier within feminist discourse" (9) and how it functions as a focus for ideas about female rebellion, emancipation and empowerment. This can be aligned to Pratchett's formulation of the concept of "Headology," which is how his characters exploit the gendered signifiers of witchcraft to create a protective space for themselves through which they negotiate social status and exercise self-empowerment. Headology is introduced very early on in Pratchett's "Witches" novels. It is described as a form of psychological manipulation which relies on an emotionally intelligent witch who derives her power and status from the exploitation of shared social narratives. Capturing an issue that is exclusive to women magical practitioners in Pratchett's secondary world, headology becomes a focus for social unease about the legitimacy of witchcraft in a manner that wizardry is never required to justify. This is predicated on two related factors: the first being that in the consensus fantasy universe witchcraft is regarded as a transgressive form of wizardry, and therefore requires social negotiation in a way that wizardry does not. The second flows from the first: by

framing witchcraft as a deviancy, it therefore engenders fear, and this leads to a type of self-policing amongst Pratchett's witches that ensures they can continue to practice with social consent, whilst simultaneously exploiting the narrative that defines them as fearful. Although in his secondary world there is an expectation that witches can and *should* use magic, Pratchett's witches prefer wherever possible to use Headology, which gives the appearance of magic even when none has been used. Magic, as Granny Weatherwax puts it, therefore implies insight and knowledge that can be used as social capital:

> "But it's not magic!"
> Granny sat down at the kitchen table.
> "Most magic isn't", she said. "It's just knowing the right herbs, and learning to watch the weather, and finding out the ways of animals. And the ways of people too."
> "That's all it is!" said Esk, horrified.
> "*All? It's a pretty big all,*" said Granny. (*Equal Rites* 56)

Janet Brennan Croft writes: "relying too much on magic can scour away one's ethical sense. On Discworld, the truly great witches pride themselves on rarely actually using magic" ("The Education of a Witch" 130). This link between witchcraft and ethics is a key dimension of how Pratchett challenges the fantasy trope of the morally bankrupt wicked witch, for example T.H. White's Queen Morgause who boils a cat alive "to amuse herself, or at any rate to pass the time" (II.240). Pratchett's witches, conversely—and most graphically in the case of Esme Weatherwax—are portrayed as existing in a state of constant moral angst; their casting as liminal creatures of indeterminate social status means that they are constantly on their guard against "Cackling" or going to the bad. If we compare the social positioning of wizards, which is ratified by one single event—graduating from UU—with that of witches, who in Discworld have no formal rite of passage,[8] we can see how their ambivalent, marginal status requires a precarious balancing of power with what is deemed to be socially acceptable. This then, contextualises Pratchett's witches' reluctance to use magic, their preoccupation with the avoidance of Cackling, and the model by which apprentice witches are taught and guided by an assigned mentor; an approach that underlines the vulnerability of witches and their ambiguous

[8] Although the wearing of the pointy hat is an important signifier of witchcraft, there is no ceremonial moment at which it is officially bestowed, until we reach the Tiffany Aching series where Granny Weatherwax takes it upon herself to give the girl an "invisible" hat to wear. Unlike wizards, the legitimacy of Pratchett's witches is an ongoing process of social negotiation; Magrat Garlick's reluctance to wear her witch's hat is mirrored by ambiguities about her social role (see *Lords and Ladies*).

social status. The character of Miss Tick the witch finder, first introduced in *The Wee Free Men* is therefore particularly illuminating. Writing that "The witch body is […] the outcome of an intersection of visual spectacle and discursive process," Belinda Johnston argues that: "Not only is the figure of the female witch a cultural fantasy in the public space of the courtroom, scaffold, or theatre, it is also a figure in which the subject invests, and against which the subject defines itself" (134). In this respect, by "finding" witches in order to nurture and protect them, Miss Tick exploits the "visual spectacle and discursive process" of the archetypal witch by repeatedly effecting dramatic escapes from witch duckings, thus subverting both the historical truth of witch persecutions, as well as the fictional cultural narratives upon which they depend.

Earlier I applied Esk's desire to become a wizard to Pratchett's use of the fantasy trope of the hero fulfilling their destiny; Pratchett also uses the idea of heroism in his depiction of gender roles in his secondary world. M. Isabel Santaulàna i Capdevila writes that Discworld's witches are pragmatists who "stand out because of the nature of their job, which mostly involves chores traditionally associated with women […][.] Pratchett subverts the existing parameters that define gender roles themselves and presents 'female jobs' as tough, necessary and, above all, heroic" (64). This is a critical point; the witches' marginal status is both defined through their shouldering of responsibilities that other people shun, as well as acting as a means of empowerment by proving their social value. That there is a gendered dimension to these roles is even more significant, as Pratchett presents the normative female activities of presiding over births and laying out the dead as liminal spaces in which witches (and specifically Esme Weatherwax) make ethical choices that Discworld society tacitly approves of whilst never openly acknowledging.

Returning to the maiden/mother/crone trichotomy, Nanny Ogg also navigates gendered expectations of witchcraft. In his depiction of Esme Weatherwax's best friend, Pratchett has given the character a whimsical twist. She is portrayed as eschewing the traditional witch's cottage for a modern detached home, presiding over a sprawling matriarchal empire in which she delegates her housekeeping responsibilities to a succession of nameless daughters-in-law and ruling her sons with an iron fist. In this we see how, just as with Esme Weatherwax who Pratchett depicts as being maiden, mother and crone all in one, Gytha Ogg whilst epitomising "motherliness" also takes in the trope of femme fatale and seductress (albeit in middle-age her seduction techniques are mostly reserved for giving unsolicited marital advice to horrified younger couples, and in *Lords and Ladies* an unlikely assignation with Casanunda the dwarf). As well as acting as midwife, Gytha also provides the socially necessary yet also marginal role of provider of contraceptive advice and, possibly, abortions. In this sense she fits very comfortably into consensus

narratives about witches, both in the real world as well as the fantasy universe. Whilst Gytha Ogg and Esme Weatherwax are therefore almost diametrically opposite in character, what they both share is a pivotal social position that is legitimised through the repeated performance of gendered activities, coupled with an exploitation of cultural narratives about witchcraft, as well as infrequent but spectacular demonstrations of *actual* magical set pieces.

If we approach this as a two-stepped process, the performance of these roles and activities can be mapped onto Butler's theory of gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble* Butler distinguishes between two types of performance, the first being elective theatrical performance (Butler specifically uses the drag act as an example, but in the context of Pratchett's work we might also consider the magical contests in *Lords and Ladies*, *The Wee Free Men* and the short story "The Sea and the Little Fishes"), with the second consisting of performance as a compulsory repetition of norms:

> [T]he action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is a public action. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 191)

Taking Butler's second point first, we have already seen how Pratchett's witches are socially defined in terms of the value they have for their communities through carrying out the gendered roles of birth and death rituals, visiting the sick and elderly, and dispensing remedies and care—societal consent, then, forms the basis for the trust that Discworld communities have in their witches to shoulder the traditionally female burden of social care, whilst behaving ethically and for the common good. Practically all the public magical performances by Pratchett's witches have a gendered dimension, relating either to the care of an individual, the protection of a community or a performative demonstration of their moral "good." In this sense then, magical performativity is inextricably linked with the performance of "right," gendered behaviour. Croft classifies the three main dimensions of the morality of Discworld witchcraft, and writes: "A mature witch has to respect the rights of the individual and be willing to take complete responsibility for her own actions. But she must also do for those who can't do, and speak for those who can't speak" ("Nice, Good and Right" 162). It is telling that there is no comparable examination of the ethics of wizardry anywhere in Pratchett's Discworld, although throughout Pratchett's oeuvre we see his wizards putting Discworld at risk through reckless acts of magic that open up portals into the Dungeon Dimensions, and, in the vignettes that Pratchett wrote (with Ian Stewart and

Jack Cohen) for the collaborative series *The Science of Discworld*, running magical experiments that are akin to uncontrolled nuclear reactions. Although such acts occasionally incur the approbation of Ankh-Morpork's ruler, Lord Vetinari, Pratchett's wizards are never required to justify their own existence in the way his witches do.

As we saw in my earlier consideration of the witches' use of Headology, there is also a social expectation that witches perform magic, and this brings us back to Butler's first point about theatrical performativity. I believe that in the context of Pratchett's witches, Butler's work on gender performativity can be plausibly extended to illuminate how, for characters whose status is so tied up in both their biological essentialism as well as their repeated performance of gendered activities, it is the stylised repetition of magical performances that reinforces their social capital. Diamanda Tockley who, in *Lords and Ladies*, loses a magical contest because she puts winning the competition over attending to a crying child, is cast out of Lancre society because her perceived unnaturalness loses her crucial social capital. This navigation and negotiation of social "norms" is therefore central to the process of legitimising and empowering Discworld's witches.

THE GENERATION GAP AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE THIRD WAVE

In the introduction I referred to how the publication time span of Pratchett's "Witches" novels covers the period when second-wave feminist critique was giving rise to a variety of often disparate third-wave perspectives. Given this diversity of thought, how then should we be engaging with the third wave when approaching Pratchett's fiction? Commentators such as Gillis et al emphasise the importance of difference, contending that "third wave feminists tend to consider second wave feminism as triangulated in essentialism, universalism and naturalism and as having reaped the political consequences. Having learnt the lessons of history, they prefer contradiction, multiplicity and difference" (xxiv). Sanders's more cautious assessment—that the third wave constitutes "work as founded on second wave principles yet distinguished by certain cultural and political differences" (5)— acknowledges the divergence between second and third wave thought, whilst maintaining that there remain important elements of continuity that should not be disregarded. Here I will argue that Discworld's contextual engagement with the conventions of the consensus fantasy universe means that the narrative imperative of his "Witches" novels tends to emphasise continuity over difference, even whilst Pratchett simultaneously contrives to challenge its tropes and stereotypes in his own secondary world.

If we consider the relationship that Pratchett's younger witches have with the older generation, the qualitative differences in his characterisations of

the junior witch Magrat Garlick, to whom we were first introduced in *Wyrd Sisters* in 1988, and Tiffany Aching (2003 onwards), are illuminating. Magrat, although at an unspecified age in *Wyrd Sisters*, is living independently and is clearly much older than the nine-year-old Tiffany of *The Wee Free Men*, yet is presented as comparatively uncertain of her role in a coven dominated by the older witches Esme Weatherwax and Gytha Ogg. This narrative conflict in Pratchett's writing between the old and younger generation of witches over the "correct" way to "do" witchcraft is analogous to the tensions between second and third wave feminism. Alison Stone, for instance, writes that "the descriptive falsity of essentialism renders it politically oppressive as well. The (false) universalisation of claims about women in effect casts particular forms of feminine experience as the norm, and, typically, it is historically and culturally privileged forms of feminism that become normalised in this way" (19). We see then, how Esme argues with Magrat over her decision to marry King Verence, and once Magrat leaves the coven, the couple embark on a project to establish Agnes Nitt as her replacement in the role of "maiden." Agnes (marking a point of transition between the coven of three and the later Tiffany Aching[9] novels which represent a more wide-ranging cohort of witches) spends a great deal of time reflecting on the nature of witchcraft and her prospective role within it, and particularly upon the dominant narrative that is represented by Esme Weatherwax and Gytha Ogg:

> [W]hile they never actually articulated the thought it hung in the air over their heads in flashing mental colours: *Magrat had settled for second prize*.
>
> Agnes had almost burst out laughing when she first realised this, but you wouldn't be able to argue with them. They wouldn't even see that there c*ould* be an argument. (*Carpe Jugulum* 9)

Agnes of course, whilst recognising the potential for new debates within witchcraft, is simultaneously engaged in a constant inner argument with her alter-ego Perdita. As her foray into the world of opera in *Maskerade* shows, Agnes is a performer, and her imaginative creation of Perdita, who at times takes control of her body, provides us with another point of intersection in

[9] The Tiffany Aching novels merit further exploration, both in terms of contemporary feminist analysis, as well as their positioning in the subgenre of young adult fiction that deals with the education of young witches and wizards. Janet Brennan Croft's "Education of a Witch" compares Tiffany Aching with her Potterworld contemporaries, but there is scope for an examination of the character in the wider context of the apprenticeship of other young magical practitioners, including Jill Murphy's Mildred Hubble (*The Worst Witch)*, T.H. White's Wart (*The Once and Future King)* and Will Stanton in Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* series. I plan to address this theme of magical apprenticeships in a future paper.

Pratchett's fiction with queer theory, through characters who display a growing awareness of the alternative possibilities for ways of living and expressing themselves, and with the tensions that exist between them. It is not however just through a changing and growing cast of female characters that Pratchett's fiction keeps pace with the evolving strands of feminist thought; if we also attend to his male witch and witch-adjacent characters we can see how his writing begins to explore the boundaries both of sex essentialism and how he begins to decouple witchcraft from its biological underpinnings.

Along with Agnes Nitt, in his middle period of "Witches" novels[10] Pratchett introduces a new category of male characters who are explicitly witch-like in their nature. Unlike his female witches, whose power and legitimacy are associated with ideas of biological essentialism and gendered performances, Pratchett's male witch-adjacent characters are defined by their liminal status. Mr. Brooks, Royal Beekeeper to the castle at Lancre, for example, is described by Pratchett as being "as near to being a witch as you can be while wearing trousers" (qtd. in Croft, "Education of a Witch" 132) because:

> Mr Brooks had secret powers. He knew all about honey flows and the mating of queens. He knew about swarms, and how to destroy wasps' nests. He got the general respect shown to those, like witches and blacksmiths, whose responsibilities are not entirely to the world of the humdrum and everyday—people who, in fact know things that others don't about things that others can't fathom. (*Lords and Ladies* 90)

Similarly, Gytha Ogg's eldest son, the blacksmith Jason Ogg, shares an attribute with witches, wizards and only one or two other similarly liminal Discworld characters by being privileged with the ability to perceive and converse with Death; again, this is not a status that he seeks out or acquires—rather, it is something that he is endowed *with* due to the mystical nature of his role. However, whilst this middle period of Pratchett's writing about witches may posit the possibility of other types of witchcraft through its male witch-adjacent characters, it is not until we are introduced to the character of Geoffrey Squires in Pratchett's final novel *The Shepherd's Crown*, that we see for the first time a magical character who makes the explicit decision to become a practitioner of what has been normatively assigned to the opposite sex. Despite the apparent symmetries with *Equal Rites*, Eskarina Smith only decides to become a wizard *after* Drum Billet unintentionally bequeaths her his power; for all intents and purposes, she has been mistakenly assigned to wizardry, rather than Geoffrey Squires who, conversely, recognises his innate magical skills and makes a

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[10] I take this middle period to be the three novels *Lords and Ladies*, *Maskerade* and *Carpe Jugulum.*

personal choice to become a witch. This critical distinction marks a point of intersection in Pratchett's fiction with later feminist developments of queer theory, and it is possible to see, by comparing the reactions to Esk's desire to be a wizard and Geoffrey's apprenticeship to Tiffany Aching, how Pratchett's writing reflects an awareness of changing social attitudes about gender norms and fluidities. Unlike *Equal Rites*, which mainly concerns itself with challenging the dominant narrative that women's biology makes them unsuitable for wizardry, *The Shepherd's Crown* explicitly addresses the difference between gender and biological sex, and how (through the metaphor of gendered magical practice) the former can be a conscious choice. Geoffrey's statement "I've never thought of myself as a man [...]. I don't think I'm anything. I'm just me" (153) introduces a new perspective into Pratchett's writing about gender. Once the idea of a fixed masculine identity is removed from the equation, Geoffrey has a freedom that Pratchett's earlier female witches, constrained as they were by the dominant patriarchal narrative, did not. And yet, despite the relative ease with which Geoffrey settles into the community of the witches of the Chalk—certainly facing very little of the resistance presented to Esk in *Equal Rites*—ultimately his destiny is not to become a witch. First Tiffany indentures him, not as an apprentice, but as a "backhouse boy" and later, when taking him to be fitted for his first broomstick, she informs the dwarves that he is a "calm weaver." Finally, at the conclusion of the novel, Geoffrey returns to the home that had rejected him because of his desire to become a witch, this time however in the guise of diplomat and ambassador. The potential symmetries between Pratchett's final "Witches" novel and his first are therefore not absolute.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction I discussed Pratchett's concept of "narrativium," which constitutes the preoccupations, ideas and tropes which together make up the consensus fantasy universe, and those deeper mythologies and legendarium with which the author necessarily has an intertextual relationship. Here, I have focused upon one aspect of that consensus universe and its narrative imperative, which is the difference between male and female magical practitioners—witches and wizards—in the fantasy canon, and how Pratchett sought to challenge and subvert the stereotypes of the genre in his own work. The primary means by which he achieved this, I have argued, is by exposing the fictionality of these stereotypes through parody and satire, whilst at the same time embedding these same tropes within his own universe as the building blocks of his secondary world. In the same way that Virginia Woolf "did not so much come up with one approach or theory as frame and ask several important questions for feminist criticism, not all of which she answered or even attempted to answer definitively" (Goldman 69), Pratchett's "Witches" novels did not seek

to engage any particular feminist theory rather than intersect with a range of commentaries during a period that saw a major shift in feminist thought from the second to the third wave. Commenting himself that shortly after he had begun writing *Equal Rites* "similar ideas about women seemed to turn up in the zeitgeist" ("Why Gandalf" 85), this begs the question as to where Pratchett might be said to have contributed to this zeitgeist within the specific context of the genre of fantasy fiction. Helen Carr writes that during the 1980's feminist critics began to engage "with more popular and until then despised forms of literature, such as the romance, fantasy, family sagas, detective fiction and the 'middlebrow' domestic novel" (134). Pratchett, I have argued, approaches this from the other direction, by changing the form of the fantasy novel to reflect the changing zeitgeist of feminism. Although his work does not itself constitute feminist scholarship, it is through his engagement with some of the evolving ideas about women and their relative position in society that his "Witches" novels can be read as an attempt to change the way that women are portrayed in fantasy literature by intersecting with ideas that are external to it. In this respect, approaching his work through the critical literature, such as I have done by interpreting it in terms of de Beauvoir's archetypal stereotypes and her theory of Other, as well as Grosz's work on feminine corporeality and Butler's ideas of gender performativity, illuminates how Pratchett's fiction not only works within a wider body of feminist discourse but can also bear the weight of such critical analysis.

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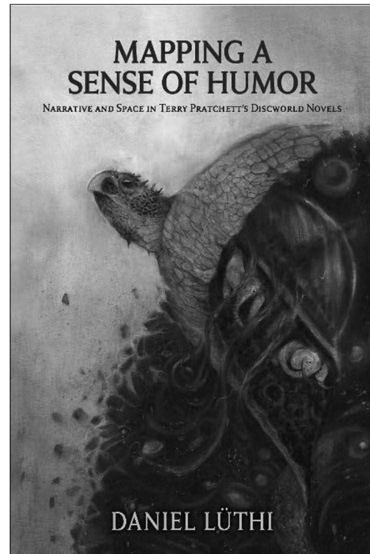

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