

Becoming Familiar: Witches and Companion Animals in Harry Potter and His Dark Materials

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It is notable that two of the most popular YA series of the last twenty-five years depict significant relationships between witches, or female sorcerers, and their companion animals. In both the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling (1997-2007) and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000), witches are marked out as different from other characters largely by virtue of their totemic association with a particular animal—in Rowling's series, the cat, and in the Pullman trilogy, the bird. Through their portrayal of witches and the animals associated with them, *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* not only reveal the links between two marginalized groups—animals and women—but they also allegorize different ways of negotiating differences between oneself and others. The most prominent witches in *Harry Potter*, Hermione Granger and Minerva McGonagall, exist in proximity with and are even shown (to varying degrees) transforming into cats, suggesting a model of social relations based on fluidity and identification; whereas in *His Dark Materials*, witches display an unusual capacity to be separated from their bird daemons, evoking an ethics of alterity based on distance or differentiation. Examining these series in tandem makes legible these alternatives, highlighting the liminal status of both women and animals while at the same time providing a sense of some characters' alliances with—or against—oppressive hierarchical structures. This essay will explore each model of social relations in turn (depicted in *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*, respectively) in order, finally, to propose a third ethical model that draws on aspects of each and that may be extended beyond the fictional worlds of these works.

While there are a number of studies devoted to religion in *Harry Potter* and especially in

His Dark Materials,¹ few others have examined the ethical dimension of these works outside a religious context, and those that have done so have taken a different approach to the one I adopt here.² Similarly, a number of scholars have focused on gender in *Harry Potter* or in *His Dark Materials*,³ but none of the studies has examined the representation of witches and their companion animals as a potential allegory of the negotiation of difference among human beings. Although this essay focuses on different types of relationships between witches and their companion animals, the allegorical force of these connections extends beyond the specific contours of each relationship, suggesting different ethical frameworks of social relations based on identification and alterity, respectively. This essay will explore the limits and possibilities of each framework within the works studied, ultimately proposing an ethical model that recognizes both the differences between individual subjects (whether human or nonhuman) and the importance of minimizing those differences.

The word “familiar” is a cognate of “family,” and familiars certainly exhibit a closeness and companionship with their witches, with whom they share certain attributes—e.g., a perceived aloofness, as with cats, or the ability to fly, in the case of birds. Witches and familiars are also linked by magic, which in some cases gives the former the ability to transform into the latter. I will use the term “familiar” to refer to any animal that acts as a companion to a witch, although the term will be applied here specifically to cats in *Harry Potter* and birds in *His Dark Materials*. This use of “familiar” diverges from Rowling’s use of the term in her epitextual comments on *Pottermore*, the official website devoted to promoting the *Harry Potter* series, where she contends that the animals in these books are not technically familiars:

Familiars, in the strictest sense, do not exist within the world of *Harry Potter*. Although Hogwarts students are permitted to bring animals to school with them, the cats and rats

we see there are, broadly speaking, pets. (Rowling, “Familiars”)

Despite the author’s own rejection of the term “familiar” to describe some of the animals in *Harry Potter*, two of the animal companions of the three central characters do in fact fulfill at least some of the functions of familiars as Rowling describes them:

The concept of “familiars” has existed in British folklore for many hundreds of years. Familiars are animals (some say animal-shaped spirits) that serve a witch in various ways, whether as servants, messengers or even spies. Historical accounts of witchcraft make mention of familiars; such animals have been credited with supernatural gifts, and even believed to be demons (or the devil himself) in disguise. (“Familiars”)

Hermione’s cat, Crookshanks, performs the roles of the servant and the spy that Rowling identifies as functions of familiars (evoking the word’s more distant origin, prior to its association with family, in the Latin *famulus*, or servant). Crookshanks loyally protects Hermione when he attacks Ron’s rat, Scabbers, who turns out to be the traitor Peter Pettigrew. As Sirius Black explains to Harry and his friends in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, “This cat isn’t mad. . . . He’s the most intelligent of his kind I’ve ever met. He recognized Peter for what he was right away. And when he met me, he knew I was no dog. It was a while before he trusted me” (364). The powers of intuition and recognition that Sirius attributes to Crookshanks make the cat one of the “spies” Rowling refers to above. To espionage, Black adds the function of helpmeet or servant to Crookshanks’s job description: “Finally, I managed to communicate to him what I was after, and he’s been helping me” (364).

Not only cats, but owls, too, serve their humans in the wizard world. As Rowling points out on the *Pottermore* site, “owls are sent as messengers,” and though this service is performed “in the context of a highly organised postal service” (“Familiars”), it nonetheless fulfills one of

the functions of the familiar as she describes them. All three of the animals that Rowling calls “pets” belonging to the central characters—Harry, Hermione, and Ron—possess capabilities that exceed those of animals outside the books’ fictional universe, the “supernatural gifts” that she attributes to familiars. Thus, according to Rowling’s own definition of a familiar, her contention that there are no familiars in *Harry Potter* must be revisited. However, my definition of a familiar goes beyond Rowling’s. My use of the term “familiar” describes a relationship that is more (though not entirely) reciprocal, and that can be contrasted with the prosthetic functions that Rowling attributes to familiars, functions that can more accurately be ascribed to pets.

The capabilities of familiars exceed those of pets, but the two types of creature share certain attributes. Pets occupy a liminal zone between humans and the animal kingdom. As Erica Fudge notes, the pet

is different from other—non-tame or wild—animals, because it lives with us in our homes. On this basis, it is possible to see pets as making up a different class of creature. They are both human and animal; they live with us, but are not us; they have names like us, but cannot call us by our names. (28)

As we have seen, Rowling considers the domestic animals in *Harry Potter* to be pets, but they are clearly something *more* than pets. The animals in Pullman’s trilogy, too, are more than pets. In fact, the term “pet” is a pejorative one in *His Dark Materials*—at least to the characters with whom readers are encouraged to sympathize. In *Northern Lights*, for example, Lyra’s mother, the evil Mrs. Coulter, uses it in bad faith when describing what happens to daemons after they have been separated from a human: “And your daemon stays with you, only . . . just not connected. Like a . . . like a wonderful pet, if you like. The best pet in the world! Wouldn’t you like that?” (Pullman, *Northern Lights* 285; ellipses in original). Lyra reacts with horror to this

suggestion: “Oh, the wicked liar, oh, the shameless untruths she was telling! . . . Her dear soul, the darling companion of her heart, to be cut away and reduced to a little trotting *pet*?” (285; emphasis in original). Not only does Lyra recoil at this thought, but her daemon also reacts with hostility to the notion that a daemon could be considered a pet: “Lyra nearly blazed with hatred, and Pantalaimon in her arms became a polecat, the most ugly and vicious of all his forms, and snarled” (285). Similarly, in the second volume of the trilogy, *The Subtle Knife*, Lyra sets Will straight when he marvels at the fact that her daemon can talk:

“He—but he spoke—do all daemons talk?” Will said.

“Course they do!” said Lyra. “Did you think he was just a *pet*?” (63; emphasis in original)

Finally, Lyra refers to herself disparagingly in *Northern Lights* as “a pretty pet” when she feels useless and ineffectual: “Pantalaimon was right: she wasn’t really doing any work there, she was just a pretty pet” (111). The distinction between pets and daemons is further emphasized by the fact that it is Pantalaimon whose observation elicits this comparison.

To be sure, daemons in *His Dark Materials* are not pets, but they might be the kind of “animal-shaped spirit” that Rowling would class as a “familiar.” Pullman himself, however, does not use the term “familiar” to describe daemons, and as we have seen, Rowling rejects the term for the animals that accompany Harry, Hermione, and Ron to Hogwarts—whereas I am recuperating the term to describe animals that accompany witches in their exploits. However, despite these differences in nomenclature, there is no doubt that all of these creatures can be considered companion animals of one kind or another. For Donna Haraway, companion species engage in a reciprocal relationship with humans in which both parties develop in tandem with each other. She gives the example of dogs, but makes it clear that her comments about

reciprocity apply to relationships between human beings and other companion species as well:

There cannot be just one companion species; there have to be at least two to make one. It is in the syntax; it is in the flesh. [They] are about the inescapable, contradictory story of relationships—co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all. (Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto* 12)

Witches and the subclass of companion animals that I am calling familiars engage in relationships in both series that are in many ways reciprocal, in that they seem to rely on one another and offer each other mutual support.

The *Harry Potter* series proper—to say nothing of the spin-off books, such as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (Rowling, 2001)—comprises a veritable bestiary of real and imagined animals, including, notably, the Patronus, or spirit-animal that can be conjured up by an experienced witch or wizard; the animagus, or animal into which some witches and wizards can transform (e.g., Ron's rat, Scabbers, turns out to be the animal form of an animagus, Peter Pettigrew, and Professor McGonagall is an animagus who can turn into a cat); and various magical non-anthropomorphic creatures such as a three-headed dog, talking snakes, a phoenix, a winged horse, and a hippogriff, or horse-eagle hybrid. There seems to be no pattern to the link between animals and wizards, apart from the occasional suggestion of shared personality traits, or familial or affective resemblance (e.g., both Harry and his father have a stag Patronus; and some characters who end up marrying one another have identical or similar Patronuses, such as James and Lily Potter, a stag and doe, respectively, or Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks, both wolves). This affective connection is not consistent and does not occur frequently throughout the series. The most stable link seems to be that between cats and witches, i.e.,

female sorcerers (Hermione and Professor McGonagall, the main witch characters, as well as Dolores Umbridge, reviled Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher and, for a brief time, Headmistress of Hogwarts). Zoe Jaques refers to “Rowling’s deployment of feline-female relations” in the series as an example of the “[p]layful allusions to stereotypes which link women and cats” (107n20), and there is no doubt that the books exploit these associations. While it is true that not all of the witches in *Harry Potter* are associated with cats, it is significant that the three most important ones are. Moreover, their affinity with cats is more pronounced than the association of any witch with any other animal, including reporter Reeta Skeeter, who uses her capacity to turn into a beetle—through her status as an “unregistered” animagus (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 631)—in order to eavesdrop on Harry and his friends. Readers only learn of Skeeter’s secret ability in the seventh volume, so this association is not one that follows her through the series, unlike the repeated association between cats and Hermione, McGonagall, and Umbridge—although, as will soon become clear, this association is not quite the same for all three of these characters.

Cat People

An affinity between witches and cats is established at the very beginning of the *Harry Potter* series when, on the second page of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, we learn that Mr. Dursley “noticed the first sign of something peculiar—a cat reading a map” (8). The cat turns out to be the witch Minerva McGonagall, a professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry who has transformed into a feline version of her human self. She is described as “a rather severe-looking woman who was wearing square glasses exactly the shape of the markings

the cat had had around its eyes” (13). This transformation, coming so early in the first volume and as the first sign that magic has entered the Muggle world, sets the stage for the entire series. We later learn that Professor McGonagall is an animagus, a status that endows her with the ability to turn into a particular animal. After Hermione Granger, McGonagall is arguably the second most prominent female character in the series, and it is no coincidence that both are associated with cats. When all of her friends have acquired animal companions (Harry has his owl, Hedwig, and Ron has Scabbers the rat), Hermione buys a cat, Crookshanks, at The Magical Menagerie pet shop in Diagon Alley (Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban* 60). Crookshanks lives with her throughout the rest of the series. Despite the fevered speculation by *Harry Potter* fans that Crookshanks is part Kneazle (a rumor reinforced by the *Pottermore* website), this provenance is not exposed in the books, where, for all intents and purposes, Crookshanks behaves like a cat, albeit an especially perceptive one who expresses hostility toward Scabbers before the rat’s identity as Peter Pettigrew is revealed to the other characters in *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban* (348).

In the second volume of the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Hermione temporarily adopts feline features after ingesting some Polyjuice Potion to which she has inadvertently added a cat hair: “Her face was covered in black fur. Her eyes had gone yellow and there were long pointed ears poking through her hair” (168). The affinity between Hermione and cats is further reinforced when Hermione is quite literally petrified by the creature known as a basilisk (190) in an attack foreshadowed earlier in the volume by a parallel attack on the caretaker’s cat, Mrs. Norris (106). In *Order of the Phoenix*, Hermione and Crookshanks are virtually indistinguishable from one another as Hermione offers Harry a salve for the wounds inflicted by Professor Umbridge:

“Here,” she said anxiously, pushing a small bowl of yellow liquid towards him, “soak your hand in that, it’s a solution of strained and pickled Murtlap tentacles, it should help.”

Harry placed his bleeding, aching hand into the bowl and experienced a wonderful feeling of relief. Crookshanks curled around his legs, purring loudly, then leapt into his lap and settled down.

“Thanks,” he said gratefully, scratching behind Crookshanks’s ears with his left hand. (300)

In this passage, while the implication is that Harry is thanking Hermione for the remedy, his expression of gratitude comes directly after the cat’s movement toward him, and is accompanied by his scratching of Crookshanks’s ears, as if in recompense for a service rendered. For the duration of this brief exchange, Hermione and Crookshanks have all but merged. It is no accident that this fusion occurs at a moment of tender solicitude that suggests a feeling of empathy on the part of Hermione, directed toward Harry. The metonymic substitution of the cat for Hermione as the object of Harry’s gratitude reflects the interchangeability between Hermione and cats, and associates this interchangeability with a capacity for empathy. The fact that this display of empathy occurs in reaction to physical damage that Professor Umbridge has callously—indeed, sadistically—inflicted emphasizes the contrast between Hermione and Umbridge.

Dolores Umbridge is associated with cats through her Patronus, a silver feline (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 210), and, most memorably, through her fondness for kitten-bedecked knick-knacks. The first description of the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher’s office at Hogwarts specifies that “on each of the walls was a collection of ornamental plates, each decorated with a large technicolour kitten wearing a different bow around its neck. These were so foul that Harry

stared at them, transfixed, until Professor Umbridge spoke again” (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 245). Moreover, Umbridge’s office at the Ministry of Magic is later described in *Deathly Hallows* as being “exactly like” her office at Hogwarts: “The walls bore the same ornamental plates, each featuring a highly coloured, beribboned kitten, gambolling and frisking with sickening cuteness” (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 203). Even Umbridge’s Post-It notes have kittens on them (204). The fact that her association with cats is cast in a negative light is in keeping with the evil role she plays in the series, and the words “foul” and “sickening,” used above to describe the kitten plates, could easily be applied to Umbridge herself. Crucially, unlike Hermione and McGonagall, Umbridge never transforms into a cat. As a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Magic, she represents the increasingly oppressive bureaucracy that ultimately threatens to bring down Hogwarts, and the fact that she cannot become a cat symbolically reinforces the lack of empathy that she displays at every turn. Although she is duly linked to cats, Umbridge is a corrupt representative of the class of beings identified as witches.

The long-held association between cats and witches in the public imagination, far beyond the diegetic worlds of YA fantasy books, sometimes resulted in shared (and very real) punishments for perceived crimes. As Matilda Joslyn Gage, the nineteenth-century journalist and women’s rights advocate, noted:

Black cats were frequently burned with a witch at the stake; during the reign of Louis XV of France, sacks of condemned cats were burned upon the public square devoted to witch torture. . . . The proverbial “nine lives” of a cat were associated in the minds of people with the universally believed possible metamorphosis of a witch into a cat. (Gage 218)

The supposedly aloof nature of cats, too, conjures up the self-sufficiency of witches, who, in the traditional stereotype, tend to live alone, beyond the confines of metropolitan centers. Katharine

Rogers has observed that, at least as early as the nineteenth century,

[t]he many people who found witchcraft titillating and also liked cats saw feline detachment, private nocturnal ways and unpredictability as intriguing rather than hostile. . . . Thus Walter Scott, who loved all his pets and particularly pampered his cats, remarked: “Ah! Cats are a mysterious kind of folk. There is more passing in their minds than we are aware of. It comes no doubt from their being too familiar with warlocks and witches.” Edgar Allan Poe praised his clever black cat as “one of the most remarkable black cats in the world—and this is saying much; for it will be remembered that black cats are all of them witches.” (qtd. in Rogers 62-63)

The association between cats and witches (or, at least, Hermione and McGonagall) in *Harry Potter* suggests at first glance a dynamic of transformation and identification that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called “becoming-animal,” a term they use to describe the fluidity of identity, the porousness of the boundaries between the human and the non-human animal. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari link “becoming-animal,” in its emphasis on minoritarian or marginalized groups, explicitly to what they call a “politics of sorcery,” which privileges “groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions” (45). However, Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the term “sorcery” raises at least two questions. When they speak of the “sorcerer,” are they actually referring to sorcerers? And is there any link between Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “becoming” and the magical transformations performed by and enacted on both witches and their familiars?

It is certainly true that Deleuze and Guattari’s characterization of groups “on the fringe of recognized institutions” evokes the historical position of women designated as witches. For example, Carole Silver notes that “witches were boundary figures . . . capable of passing beyond

the border between civilization and wilderness. Described as primarily female, they both lived apart from the direct control of husbands and fathers and the indirect control of organized, patriarchal society” (175). In this context, Deleuze and Guattari’s depiction of the sorcerer is fitting: “Sorcerers have always held the anomalous position, at the edge of the fields or woods. They haunt the fringes. They are at the borderline of the village, or *between* villages.” (44), In this last quotation, Deleuze and Guattari are referring to the male sorcerer (*sorcier*) rather than the female witch (*sorcière*) (*Mille plateaux* 301). It would be tempting to argue that the sorcery Deleuze and Guattari have in mind is metaphorical, or at least gender neutral, and that it has nothing to do with witches—were it not for the fact that they refer explicitly to (female) witches a few sentences later:

(Becoming-woman, more than any other becoming, possesses a special introductory power; it is not so much that women are witches, but that sorcery proceeds by way of this becoming-woman.) On the far side, we find becomings-elementary, -cellular, -molecular, and even becomings-imperceptible. Toward what void does the witch’s broom lead?

(Deleuze and Guattari 46)

Becoming-animal is thus strongly associated with both sorcery and becoming-woman (to say nothing of transformations into particulars so minute as to be “imperceptible”), suggesting that the image of a witch with her familiar might be a kind of synchronic snapshot of the dynamic of becoming. According to Deleuze and Guattari’s logic, in order to be a sorcerer, one must both become “woman” and become “animal.” The association between witches and animals reinforces the alterity of both categories in relation to “man.” As Judith Still asks: “Is woman always a little *bête*? . . . When man, above all the philosopher (Aristotle or Heidegger), *insists* on the difference between man and animal then it seems to me that it is also woman who silently

enters into play as the non-man, the other to man” (306; emphasis in original). The witch-animal relationship is thus triply opposed to “man,” on the basis of gender, species, and supernatural power. This shared opposition links witches and animals, emphasizing their status as marginalized “others.”

The metamorphoses effected by witches and animals evoke the fluidity of identity more generally. Writing of the figure of the witch in literary history, David Punter argues that the witch comes to remind us of much of what post-structuralist criticism claims, namely that we are frequently in the presence not of firmly maintained binaries but rather of the undecidable. We might even go so far as to say that the “question of the witch” is not one of those questions susceptible to a permanent answer (if indeed there are any such questions) but has rather to do with transient, becoming, halting, temporary, liminal states” (68)

Such liminal states suggest the transformations with which animals have been associated at least since the time of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. For Rosi Braidotti, becoming-animal opens one up to “transversal, transspecies structural connections. Animals . . . express literal forms of immanence and becoming” (530). Such literal forms of becoming are evoked in the association, and the shape-shifting back and forth, between cats and witches in *Harry Potter*.

However, Deleuze and Guattari’s model of becoming, though partly applicable in this context, does not map entirely onto the witch-cat dyad in *Harry Potter*. This gap may be explained in part by the problematic nature of the model’s underlying anthropocentric assumptions about the primacy of male humans, in relation to whom women and animals are “others.” There is a predetermined trajectory for becoming in Deleuze and Guattari’s schema, which has attracted criticism for its assumption of a subject who traverses a series of

minoritarian identities from a starting point of human masculinity that ignores the possibility of female and/or nonhuman agency. Joanna Bednarek, for example, has argued that Deleuze and Guattari's "[a]nimal' in becoming is entirely a human product, a means to human ends" (65).⁴ Moreover, even if the usefulness of Deleuze and Guattari's model were not limited by its anthropocentrism, the dynamic of transformation in *Harry Potter* is not rhizomatic, i.e., moving in all directions, but is instead limited to an exchange between two end points: witches and cats, which form a dyad (or what Peter Sloterdijk calls a bubble, or "biune").

When Minerva McGonagall or Hermione Granger transforms into a cat, she is identifying completely with the animal, eradicating the distance between them. This suspension of alterity can be read as an allegory of the kind of social relation criticized by Emmanuel Levinas in his essay "The Other in Proust," which the philosopher condemns as "the idea that duality should be transformed into unity—that the social relation should end in communion" (104). Instead, Levinas advocates "a pluralism that does not merge into unity" (*Time and the Other* 42), in other words, the recognition of a separation between self and other. In *His Dark Materials*, although witches share the attribute of flight with their daemons, the literal distance between them symbolizes a difference that collapses in those instances when Hermione and McGonagall become indistinguishable from their totemic animals. This distance and this difference are key to understanding the witch-familiar relation in *His Dark Materials*.

Distant Daemons

The very first words of the first volume of Philip Pullman's trilogy, *Northern Lights* (titled *The Golden Compass* in the U.S.), establish a link between the main character Lyra and her animal

(or animal-like) companion Pantalaimon, as well as the importance of this relationship within the work: “Lyra and her daemon moved through the darkening Hall” (Pullman, *Northern Lights* 3). All beings in *His Dark Materials* have a daemon, an animal-shaped companion that Marina Warner describes as “a kind of external soul” (206). Sally Munt characterizes the relationship in terms of “the elastic tendon binding self and daemon” (200). As we shall see, however, this tendon is more flexible for witches than for other beings.

It is interesting to note that Lyra’s daemon, here taking the form of a moth, performs in a single action all three of the functions that Rowling mentions in her description of the role(s) of familiars—as servants, messengers, and spies—as he serves Lyra by spying on people from whom she wishes to remain hidden, and reports back on their movements: “Pantalaimon fluttered swiftly to the Hall door, and swiftly back. ‘The Steward’s there already,’ he said” (Pullman, *Northern Lights* 6). Yet Lyra is not a witch—at least, not until the end of the trilogy, when she becomes an honorary witch—as defined by her temporary ability to be separated from her daemon. The witches in Pullman’s fictional universe have daemons, but witches’ daemons are unique in that they are all birds, and in that they can be separated from their companions. In what follows, the significance of these attributes will be considered, especially in terms of what they might tell us about the ethics of alterity.

In the second volume of the trilogy, *The Subtle Knife*, Pullman suggests that daemons are not in fact animals, but merely entities that resemble animals, described variously as “hare-formed” (268), “moth-formed” (177), and “cat-formed” (115). In the latter instance, when Will rescues an actual cat, the creature, upon encountering Lyra’s daemon, Pantalaimon, who has assumed the form of a cat, “soon realized that whatever Pantalaimon was, he was neither a true cat, nor a threat” (115). However, despite these rare caveats, and despite the fact that they can

talk, daemons in *His Dark Materials* otherwise look and act like the animals whose forms they inhabit. They are, for all intents and purposes, animal companions, albeit companions with capabilities that exceed those of the animals they resemble.

Humans in *His Dark Materials* have a strong affinity with their daemons, who play a crucial role in establishing their identity. As Maude Hines observes, “daemons make people legible to others as well as themselves” (38). The idea of unstable identities in constant flux is particularly resonant in relation to the children in *His Dark Materials*, whose daemons change their animal forms often until the children have reached puberty, when they “settle.” Warner, referring to the role of daemons in Pullman’s work, argues that “the trilogy generally converts the negative uncanny of doppelgängers, and the stain on pagan metamorphosis, into a paeon to the pure virtuality of transformation as energy itself” (207). The virtuality of transformation that Warner describes applies particularly to children’s daemons; this continuous metamorphosis reflects the rapid change of childhood, when the transformation that characterizes life is at its most visible and pronounced. The bond between people and their daemons is so strong that when they are separated, neither party can go on living. Such separation (termed “intercision”), effected by the Uber-villain of the trilogy, Mrs. Coulter, is framed as the most harrowing act imaginable, causing unspeakable pain and suffering. Intercision is explicitly compared with castration in the following exchange between Lyra and her father, Lord Asriel:

“But they were *cutting*—” Lyra couldn’t bring herself to say it; the words choked in her mouth. “You know what they were doing! . . .”

“There was a precedent. Something like it had happened before. Do you know what the word *castration* means? It means removing the sexual organs of a boy so that he never develops the characteristics of a man.” (Pullman, *Northern Lights* 374)

It is perhaps no accident that the idea of castration, which suggests an emasculation, is associated with the separation of a daemon from its person. The one type of being who can live apart from her daemon is the witch, who is coded as female. This unusual capacity to exist without close physical proximity to their daemons marks witches out from all the other creatures in Lyra's world (Pullman, *Northern Lights* 164). A scene set at the children's home in Bolvangar illustrates how unusual this ability is: "The two boys were staring in fear at the goose-daemon and at Lyra's familiar manner with him, because of course they'd never seen a daemon without his human before, and they knew little about witches" (260). This capacity to exist apart from their companions evokes Levinas's ethics of alterity in that "[t]he same and the other at the same time maintain themselves in relationship and *absolve* themselves from this relation, remain[ing] absolutely separated" (*Totality and Infinity* 102; emphasis in original). The distance between witches and their daemons in *His Dark Materials* serves as a metaphor for this separation, pointing toward an ethics of alterity that does not seek to eradicate the difference between self and other.

It must be said, however, that invoking Levinas in the context of animal companionship is not unproblematic, considering that Levinas himself dismissed the possibility of an ethical dimension to animal existence. In a 1986 interview, Levinas asserted a categorical distinction between humans and nonhuman animals:

The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle of life without ethics. . . . However, with the appearance of the human—and this is my entire philosophy—there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. ("Name of a Dog" 50)

Peter Atterton has argued that, despite recognizing the moral obligation that people have toward animals, Levinas nonetheless "persistently pulled on the reins of his discussion as soon as it

appeared to him that the animal question was threatening to take priority away from the human” (Atterton, “Ethical Cynicism” 61). However, although Levinas limited the scope of his ethical model to human beings, Atterton contends that Levinas’s own ethics of alterity can be used to extend moral consideration to the nonhuman (“Levinas and our Moral Responsibility”). In Pullman’s trilogy, this ethical model, which recognizes the other’s difference from oneself, comes full circle: it is emblemized in the relationship between witches and their daemons, with the implication that it can be extended to relations between and among human beings. The potential for a broader application of this ethical model is flagged up, somewhat paradoxically, by the totemic properties of the witch-daemon dyad.

Totem

The fact that witches in *His Dark Materials* all have the same type of daemon, birds, further identifies them as categorically different from the other creatures in Pullman’s fictional universe. A daemon usually reflects the *individual* character traits of its corresponding person, so if all members of a group have the same daemon, the suggestion is that differences among members of that group are less important than the collective identity of the group.⁵ Only one other category of people tends to have the same type of daemon, and that is the servant class, most of whom have a dog daemon. (The first time we see a servant’s daemon in *Northern Lights*, she is referred to as “a dog, like almost all servants’ daemons” [5].) However, the qualification “*almost all*” is significant, suggesting that there are some exceptions to this tendency, whereas *all* witches in *His Dark Materials* have a bird daemon. Unlike the link between servants and dogs, the witch-bird link is not merely a tendency, but a rule without exception. Sarah Bruton argues that the bird-

form of witches' daemons in Pullman's trilogy "represents, most literally, the witches' freedom from the constraints of society and conventional understanding." Witches and birds share an obvious characteristic, that of flight; as Warner notes, witches are thought to descend from mythological birds and bird-goddesses, suggesting a strong affinity and indeed a certain interchangeability between the two types of creature (65).⁶ A similarly atavistic association between witches and birds, which appears to predate that between witches and cats, is suggested in *His Dark Materials* by the witch-clan's daemons (and, in particular, clan-queen Serafina Pekkala's daemon, a grey goose), which can be read as a symbol of sexuality. Warner has noted the rich literary and folkloric history of the bird symbol:

Emblematic signs of the goose and the stork, like the webbed foot or the long beak, recur in synecdoche to denote female sexual knowledge and power, as well as the implied deviancy which accompanies them; the sirens who lured men on to the reefs with their song were also bird-bodied and web-footed, in the classical tradition. (65)

The fact that witches in *His Dark Materials* all have the same kind of daemon unites them in their isolation from other beings in the trilogy. This unity—the association with the same type of animal—confers a totemic quality on witches; in other words, this very unity paradoxically isolates them from other beings. In one of the earliest published studies of totemism, J. G. Frazer noted that "[a]s distinguished from a fetich, a totem is never an isolated individual, but always a class of objects, generally a species of animals or of plants" (4). In *His Dark Materials*, only the relationship between witches and their daemons fits this description, because, as we saw above, although the servant class *almost* always has a dog daemon, the association is not categorical. In *Harry Potter*, the fact that both Minerva McGonagall and Hermione Granger are identified with cats suggests a similar totemic relationship. Frazer further

writes that

the relation in which a man stands to his totem appears to be one of friendship and kinship. . . . He considers them as essentially his peers, as beings of the same sort as himself and his human kinsmen. In short, so far as it is possible to do so, he identifies himself and his fellow-clansmen with his totem. (4)

The relationship of friendship and kinship that Frazer describes certainly applies to people and their daemons throughout *His Dark Materials*, but the identification of fellow “clansmen” is most obviously relevant to witches, who keep to themselves in a group literally called a “clan.” Fiona McCulloch notes that “the witches (marginalized and demonized in Western cultural history) fluidly straddle the threshold” of worlds in Pullman’s trilogy (127), and this mobility is one of the things that distinguishes them from other beings. Similarly, though to a lesser extent, Hermione and McGonagall display a clear bond with one another and share certain traits, and are, at the very least, what might be called “kindred spirits.”⁷ The traditional association between witches and cats and the connection between McGonagall and Hermione are mutually reinforcing.⁸

The theory of totemism articulated by Frazer is famously criticized by Claude Lévi-Strauss for exoticizing the groups to which it is applied. Lévi-Strauss calls this exoticizing function the “totemic illusion,” which, as he puts it, “allowed the savage, within culture itself, to be isolated from civilised man” (2). Frazer’s theory of totemism, by virtue of its Eurocentrism, promotes the illusion of radical difference between cultures, and, by extension, between humans and other animals, and between witches and other beings. This totemic identification reinforces the impression of witches as marginal figures within the societies portrayed in these works (as a class, “they” are deemed to be different from “us”). In this, despite their depiction of worlds

routinely inhabited by witches, *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* represent witches as liminal beings residing outside of organized institutions either geographically (as in *His Dark Materials*, where the witches live in clans apart from other beings) or socially (as in *Harry Potter*, where Hermione and Professors McGonagall and Umbridge are singled out as officious know-it-alls and regarded with varying degrees of suspicion). In keeping with Lévi-Strauss's assertion of the exoticizing function of totemism, the animal familiar reinforces the isolation of unusual women who, because of their specialist knowledge, possess more power than many are comfortable with. Carole Silver explains that

[c]reations of the Stone Age, both witches and fairies were derived from folk memories of the priestesses and medicine women who had once universally existed and still survived in savage and barbaric societies. Both were adept at herbal curing or killing; both knew the secret workings of nature. (175)

In *Harry Potter*, Hermione is often made fun of for her studiousness and condescending demeanor. In fact, her superior knowledge of the subjects studied at Hogwarts Academy is presented as a running joke throughout the series. Similarly, in *His Dark Materials*, witches possess a skill—the capacity to be separated from their daemons—that is not available to anyone else in the trilogy, until Lyra and Will manage to leave their daemons behind while they search the land of the dead for Lyra's friend Roger, at the successful outcome of which they are deemed to have transformed, at least in this particular sense, into witches. As Serafina Pekkala explains to Lyra's daemon and to the creature who eventually becomes Will's daemon:

In leaving you both on the shores of the world of the dead, Lyra and Will did something, without knowing it, that witches have done since the first time there were witches.

There's a region of our north-land, a desolate abominable place. . . . To become a witch, a

girl must cross it alone and leave her daemon behind. (Pullman, *Amber Spyglass* 499-500)

Will is the sole exception to the gendered process of “becoming witch,” evoking the idea of castration that was raised in the first volume of the trilogy (Pullman, *Northern Lights* 374).

The attribution to witches of a long-held cultural knowledge suggests a power to work with and manipulate nature that has been lost in the industrial era. Similarly, the witch-familiar relationship is itself a vestigial residue of the relationship between humans and other animals whose demise John Berger has described. In his 1977 essay, “Why Look at Animals?,” Berger notes the change that occurred about a century ago, as urbanization meant that human beings and animals, for the most part, no longer lived in close proximity to each other, as they had in agrarian communities:

Zoos, realistic animal toys and the widespread commercial diffusion of animal imagery, all began as animals started to be withdrawn from daily life. One could suppose that such innovations were compensatory. Yet in reality the innovations themselves belonged to the same remorseless movement as was dispersing the animals. The zoos, with their theatrical décor for display, were in fact demonstrations of how animals had been rendered absolutely marginal. (26)

The modern iteration of the companion animal is a form of compensation for the segregation and exoticization of animals in the industrial age, a shift the effects of which still resonate in the era in which both *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* were written and are, at least partially, set. (In *The Subtle Knife*, the world from which Will Parry comes is indistinguishable from that of late twentieth-century Britain, as is *Harry Potter*’s Muggle world, which, though somewhat sanitized, is nonetheless recognizable as a modern, human realm.) The image of the witch’s familiar in the (post)industrial era thus links two marginalized groups: animals, who have

become segregated conceptually from humans; and women pushed to the margins of society. Despite their ostensible integration into the worlds depicted in *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*, witches evoke the not-too-distant exclusion from everyday life of women deemed too knowledgeable, too out-of-the-ordinary.

Witches and their familiars are surrounded by non-witches and their companion animals in both series, suggesting that a mode of being with animals that was once distinctive to witches has been broadened to encompass not only relations between non-witches and animals, but also relations between and among people. Witches in both series engage in a totemic relationship with their familiars, which bears the hallmark of their vestigial, marginalized status, but which has become generalized as an allegory of two ethical alternatives: unity or plurality, the elision of alterity or the preservation of difference. In *Harry Potter*, the witch-familiar relationship is characterized by fusion, whereas in *His Dark Materials* it is characterized by separation. It has been argued here that the witch-familiar relationships in these works allegorize, respectively, an ethics of identification and an ethics of alterity. In *Harry Potter*, the witch can become her companion animal, effacing the boundaries between them as she literally takes the animal's place. In *His Dark Materials*, by contrast, the witch-familiar relationship recognizes and preserves the non-identical nature of the other.

In both *His Dark Materials* and *Harry Potter*, the main characters resist against the stifling overreach of hierarchal structures corrupted by power, suggesting instead ways of relating to one another that reject or bypass these structures. In *Harry Potter*, the Ministry of Magic begins as a bureaucratic organization that becomes increasingly intrusive and controlling; in *His Dark Materials*, the Magisterium is an institution that bears a striking resemblance to an Inquisition-era Church. As Amelia A. Rutledge puts it, in a somewhat understated manner:

“Neither the Authority nor the Magisterium exemplifies the pastoral functions that are the ecclesiastical equivalents of nurturing” (121). Certainly far from nurturing, the institutional hierarchy in *His Dark Materials* is brutally repressive. The witch-familiar dyad, though not a depiction of resistance against or even direct engagement with the hierarchies represented in these works, nonetheless offers a glimpse of what social relations could look like in their absence (or in their shadow)—relations based on reciprocity and mutual support. Reciprocity, however, is not synonymous with empathy, which is bilateral in theory, but often one-sided in practice: witches transform into cats, not the other way around, and Deleuze and Guattari’s model of becoming presupposes an anthropocentric starting point. Empathy is not something the less-powerful are urged to feel toward the more-powerful; it is not the same thing as aspiration. Conversely, models of social relations that place too much emphasis on difference risk falling into the trap of exoticism, which fetishizes difference in the service of maintaining social and cultural boundaries and, ultimately, hierarchies. A third model, which recognizes differences while striving not to ignore or eradicate them, but to minimize their importance, can allow us to avoid the pitfalls outlined above. Such a model could help us to interpret in a new light the witch-familiar dyad represented throughout these books, not only within the specific bounds of their own fictional worlds, but also in combination, as allegories of potentially non-hierarchical social dynamics.

Both types of relationships between witches and their familiars—characterized by fusion on the one hand, and separation on the other—gesture toward an ethical model of social relations, but neither is complete in itself. These book series might seem worlds apart in their treatment of witches’ animal companions, but even these worlds can be, if not unified, then connected, in both thematic and ethical terms. Indeed, it is possible to envision an ethical model

that encompasses features of both these alternatives. Such a model would acknowledge the separation between individuals, but would privilege efforts to bridge this gap without completely eradicating it—efforts that would be dynamic, continuously renewed in the wake of the endless change or “becoming” of both individuals. This constant motion would constitute a dynamic of rapport, of rapprochement, that recognizes both the existence of boundaries and their potential porousness. In this dynamic, the other is different, but is someone with whom one has found common ground over the course of time. The constant becoming that characterizes this model of social relations involves not becoming another, but becoming familiar with another’s difference, while at the same time recognizing that this difference gradually becomes smaller. There is no occupying the space of the other, no standing in the other’s place, but instead standing *with* the other. The diminution of difference is an undertaking without end, decreasing the distance between oneself and the other without negating it. The distance grows smaller, but it does not disappear. Similar, but not identical; near, but not in (the) place of: this way of being with another might be called an ethics of familiarity.

Note

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¹ For *Harry Potter*, see, for example, Gurevitch and Jacobsen; and for *His Dark Materials*, see Gooderham, Russell, and Feldt.

² Nikolajeva, for example, interprets the Pullman series using cognitive criticism; Rutledge examines the image of the surrogate parent in the same series; while Guanio-Uluru takes a narratological approach to *Harry Potter*, exploring the series' depiction of good and evil.

³ For *Harry Potter*, see, for example, Wolosky, Cummins, and Dresang; and in *His Dark Materials*, see Bruton, Russell, and Burcar.

⁴ See also Haraway, *When Species Meet* 30.

⁵ For a discussion of this dynamic, see Ezra.

⁶ A popular iteration of the association between witches and birds is Mother Goose, who, as recently as the eve of World War I, was often depicted as a witch complete with pointy black hat, prominent nose, and protruding chin. See, for example, Arthur Rackham's drawing of Mother Goose in *Mother Goose: The Old Nursery Rhymes*.

⁷ Hermione and McGonagall are both exceptionally studious and capable, and strive to outshine the males who surround them; moreover, it is McGonagall who gives Hermione the Time-Turner that enables her to defy the laws of physics and take well over the normal course load at Hogwarts Academy (Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban* 395).

⁸ Dolores Umbridge is something of an outlier in this respect, though her fondness for rules links these characters, quite apart from the shared association with cats, and her brief stint as Headmistress of Hogwarts links Umbridge to McGonagall, who herself becomes Headmistress upon Dumbledore's death.

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