

# The Cannibal Mother: Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* and the Sexual Anxieties of Bluebeard Folktales

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Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy is renowned for its condemnation of Christian fundamentalism and positive portrayal of sexual maturation; yet these themes supposedly do not come into prominence until after the first book, *The Golden Compass*. However, here I will argue that *The Golden Compass* contains subtle retellings of "Bluebeard" (ATU 312) and "The Robber Bridegroom" (ATU 955), folktales wherein a young woman finds a room full of the corpses of her husband's previous wives. Through repurposing elements of these folktales – and recasting the villain as the protagonist's mother – *The Golden Compass* presents a strong condemnation of what feminist Elizabeth Spelman calls "somatophobia," Western philosophy's hostility to the body that is used to rationalize the subjugation of women. While Pullman's use of the Bluebeard cycle ultimately reinforces his publicly-stated goals for the series, judging *The Golden Compass* as a Bluebeard retelling allows for reevaluations of both feminist and Freudian interpretations of the folktales, revealing an alternate interpretive paradigm that re-centers narrative importance on the family and thus exposes the manufactured nature of sexual anxieties in Judeo-Christian society.

As English authoress Angela Carter once wrote: "I am all for putting new wine in old bottles; especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" (37). Carter's fairy tale retellings challenge the ideological paradigms of some of the Western world's oldest and most-beloved stories—but perhaps she could have gone back further. Fellow Englishmen Philip Pullman has made no secret that the *His Dark Materials* trilogy is "a retelling of Miltonian temptation and fall," meant to "represent the fall as entirely good," intending for his new wine to destroy the old bottle entirely (Waldman). By returning to the beginning of human life, – and its stories – Pullman seeks to challenge fundamental notions of maturation and sexuality. By his own admission, however, most of the books' Miltonian intertextuality happens "after *The Golden Compass* ends"—an ending so open that analyzing the novel independently feels

akin to analyzing it by its prologue (Waldman).

What is left for the first book, then?

Although the connection between Pullman's plucky heroine Lyra Belacqua and the Biblical Eve is not codified until the second novel, Pullman utilizes retellings of the Bluebeard cycle, fairy tales in which "Eve is allowed to get away with it," to question the proposed destructiveness of female curiosity and sexual maturation (Warner 244). It is not merely the exciting prologue to a series that *eventually* tackles themes of sexual maturity and the dangers of religious fundamentalism. Instead, the folkloric context reveals *The Golden Compass* as itself a thematic heavyweight, albeit more subtly so, and the fruition of hundreds of linked attempts to express and ease somatophobic anxieties.

*The Golden Compass* is the quest of 11-year-old orphan Lyra Belacqua to find her friend, Roger, who has been kidnapped by a group known colloquially as the "Gobblers";

over the course of the novel, this journey becomes centered around "Dust," a mysterious element that her father Lord Asriel wants to study and that the theocratic Magisterium wants to suppress.

"The Gobblers" are the Oblation Board, a government program spearheaded by the manipulative but gorgeous Mrs. Coulter, Lyra's biological mother. Based on research that Dust begins to accumulate in a person once their daemon – a physical manifestation of the soul able to shapeshift during prepubescence – finds its permanent form, the Magisterium has concluded that Dust is remnants of Original Sin. Thus, the Oblation Board have been tasked to sever, or "intercise," the metaphysical tie between child and daemon, ultimately at the cost of the child's life.

Next, for simplicity's sake, the phrase 'Bluebeard cycle' will refer to stories of ATU tale types 311, 312, and 955; as much folkloric scholarship refers to tale types by their most famous variants, 311 and 955 shall here be referred to as Fitcher's Birds and Robber Bridegrooms respectively, while 312 shall be called Maiden-Killers to avoid confusion with Bluebeard the character. The heroine of this cycle shall be here Fatima, as bestowed upon her by the Victorian stage (Kiesel 26).

Bluebeard is a hideous man who woos a young girl with his immense wealth, and a month after their wedding day hands her the keys to his castle – demanding before he departs, however, that she not enter one closet door. She does, whereupon she finds all the bodies of his previous wives hanging along the walls. Her husband immediately returns and vows to behead her for her transgression, but just as he is raising his sword, her brothers arrive to cut him down with their own.

Vastly more shocking than the violence of the tale is how many authors and scholars cite curiosity as the true villain. A short

poem at the end of Charles Perrault's "La Barbe Bleue," identified as the first literary variant, defined this attitude:

*Curiosity despite its attractions,  
Comes with the cost of many regrets;  
...And always at too high a cost*  
(Heiner, "Moral" 17).

This comes despite Perrault's own flippant tone, and the additional moral that

*Anyone with a sensible mind  
...Will easily see that this story  
Is a tale from past times* (Heiner, "Another Moral" 17).

Perrault also calls Bluebeard's test "impossible," implying that Fatima's disobedience was an inevitability (Heiner, "Another Moral" 17). This second moral also concludes by stating that the traditional power dynamics within marriage have shifted so that "it is hard to judge which of [the man and woman] is the master," which too conflicts with the denouncement of female curiosity that most seem to have taken away (Heiner, "Another Moral" 17). Still, much of the scholarship and art around the Bluebeard cycle is entrenched in misogyny – sometimes even rationalizing the first wife's murder as the result of an unrelated and equally-imaginary crime.

Yet even to other feminist scholars, Warner's earlier praise that the Bluebeard cycle allows Eve to escape blameless is one more often heaped upon The Maiden Killer's sister-tales, Fitcher's Bird and The Robber Bridegroom. As professor Cristina Bacchilega posits, however, focusing on the forbidden chamber rather than Fatima's disobedience reframes the Maiden-Killer narrative as "a process of initiation which *requires* entering the forbidden chamber," an acquisition of life-affirming knowledge and a first assertion of autonomy, which is a paradigm that *The Golden Compass* falls into within its opening pages (197).

Lyra's snooping in the Retiring Room of Jordan College reveals her caregivers'

attempt to poison her father. Rather than Fatima's illusions of her marriage destroyed – or, in many cases, her repressed uneasiness validated – Lyra's childish, unquestioning trust in the goodwill of adults is struck a blow. Like Walter Crane's illustrations of Fatima, key-in-hand, framed against a tapestry of the Temptation in Eden, this scene mirrors what Marina Warner claims is the "inner structure" of the Bluebeard cycle (244). Lyra is destined to be "tempted, as Eve was," and thus, following Warner's line of reasoning, the Jordan Scholars, beholden to the Magisterium, are God's agents— strict older men trying to stamp out those who will arouse Eve's dangerous intellectual curiosity (Pullman, *Amber Spyglass* 67).

This "inner structure" can perhaps explain why so many echoes of the Bluebeard cycle have arisen with seemingly little intention on Pullman's part. To Warner, Fatima is Eve, Bluebeard is God, the key the apple, and his dead wives' bodies the knowledge of both good and evil (Warner 244). The Freudian symbolism of a key going into a lock is also blatant, and this imagery of opening doors representing female sexuality will resurface later in Lyra's story. While listening to former-nun Mary Malone (the second serpent) describe her own sexual awakening, Lyra feels "as if she had been handed the key to a great house she hadn't known was there...and as she turned the key, she felt other doors opening deep in the darkness, and lights coming on" (Pullman, *Amber* 376).

That Lyra feels a "great house" inside her opening up is a positive retelling of Fatima's own exploration of her husband's castle, the doors "opening deep in the darkness" mirroring the position of the chamber as not only spatially but psychologically separate from the rest of the house, a trap door into the hidden bowels of both Bluebeard's estate and mind (Pullman,

*Amber* 376). While Freud characterizes the basement as the area of the house where inappropriate feelings are kept hidden, Lyra feels these room not as threatening but "quiet, expectant," awaiting her exploration (Tartar 50; Pullman, *Amber* 376). Further cementing the sexual overtones of this scene – and its connection to the biblical story – is the fact that Malone's sexual awakening is symbolized by her first kiss in a garden, a kiss which feels like "paradise" and whose memory later leads Malone to renouncing her covenant (Pullman, *Amber* 376).

Before one can explore the newly-alighted rooms of the house, however, one must question why one has been told not to. The acquisition of this mistrust of adult authority in the novel's opening scene is unquestionably presented as a necessary act; without Lord Asriel, the trilogy would not exist. Through these cues, regardless of whether one hears the folkloric echoes, Pullman primes both protagonist and patron to not only question the motives of seemingly-benign authority figures, but to dare to enter their forbidden chambers.

Although the first chapter echoes *The Maiden-Killer*, the most salient influence is that of *The Robber Bridegroom* upon chapter fifteen to the ending of part two. In many ways, Pullman's use of the Robber framework regresses the novel into conventional fairy tale tropes. The juxtaposition of such tropes against their Maiden-Killer counterparts, however, strips the folktales down to their marrow. I am going to first briefly outline "The Robber Bridegroom" and discuss key variances, before summarizing the retelling within *The Golden Compass* and analyzing the myriad consequences of its own divergences, both for its place within the Bluebeard corpus and for the text, itself.

In a standard Robber Bridegroom, a woman is invited to visit her fiancé at his home, but by some happenstance arrives

while he is absent, door unlocked. Inside, she finds room after room filled with treasures. When she enters a room a talking bird has warned her not to, however, she finds the floor coated in blood. Her beau then arrives home with his henchmen, dragging another maiden behind him. The woman watches as the other is killed and consumed, concealing a severed finger that rolls under the bed where she is hiding. Once they have fallen asleep, the woman slips away. She invites her fiancé to a dinner party the next day, presents the finger, and has her brothers slay him where he stands.

The most important psychosexual divergence is that Fatima's husband is now her suitor; Pullman, however, diverges further by turning the Robber Bridegroom into the protagonist's mother. On the surface, Mrs. Coulter is even more archetypal than the wicked stepmother, calling back to the evil biological mothers the Brothers Grimms edited out of their folktales to uphold their romanization of the housewife. While some have praised the stories as critiques of the institution of heterosexual marriage, Mrs. Coulter as the Bluebeard seems a regression to a standard tale of female competition, in contrast with those of female solidarity in many Fitcher's Birds and Robber Bridegrooms.

"The only relationships between female and male characters are based on cannibalism, murder, domestic service, or some combination of them," as Pauline Greenhill writes, "yet in 'Fitcher's Bird' and 'The Robber Bridegroom,' the main female characters get together, conspire, and overthrow their oppressors" (156). In Maiden-Killer tales, the only "good" men are the brothers who save Fatima – despite sometimes also pushing her to marry Bluebeard in the first place. The heroines of Fitcher's Birds and Robber Bridegrooms, however, do not wait around for male rescuers. Indeed, in Hans-Jörg Uther's edits

of Aarne and Thompson's folktale classification system, The Maiden-Killer's subtypes are entitled "The Rescued Girl," "The Rescued Bride," and "Rescue by the Brother," whereas Fitcher's Bird is simply renamed "Rescue by the Sister" (191-194). Thus, while I posit that *The Golden Compass* is more insightful into the patriarchal institutions that propagate sexual somatophobia, I would not necessarily call it any more *feminist* than the best folktales.

But before digressing further into theoretical feminist bloviating, let us return to the text. If we begin when Lyra is kidnapped after Lee Scoresby's balloon crashes, then the text draws closer comparison to Fitcher's Bird, wherein three sisters are kidnapped sequentially by a wizard, than The Robber Bridegroom. Aside from this, however, Lyra's early stay with The Gobblers has been excluded for irrelevance; we begin instead when she enters the novel's most gruesome chamber. Rather than Bluebeard departing, Lyra herself sneaks away from the Oblation Board to investigate a "squat, square building a little apart from the rest," her daemon Pantalaimon filling the role of the warning parrot (Pullman, *Golden* 267). Ironically, his efforts are undercut by another bird, Serafina Pekkala's goose daemon, who opens the chamber doors at Lyra's behest.



Figure 1. Anonymous, *Bluebeard, or the Fatal Effects of Curiosity and Disobedience*, 1808 (Tartar 17).

“In a series of glass cases on shelves around the walls were all the daemons of the severed children: ghostlike forms of cats, or birds, or rats, or other creatures, each bewildered and frightened and as pale as smoke” (Pullman, *Golden* 269). The zoo-like display of cages recalls the theatrics and even pride with which Bluebeard seems to exhibit his crimes, hanging his wives’ bodies along the wall or, as figure one depicts, arranging their heads into a neatly-labeled line.

Were this the Fitcher’s Bird Lyra’s kidnapping had implied, after discovering her sister’s bodies, Fatima would then have reconnected their limbs and miraculously revived them. Pullman, however, sadly subverts this trope, for the intercision is permanent. Although freed, neither the severed daemons nor their children will ever be whole again.

From subversion, Pullman transitions to mere borrowing. While Lyra does not yet witness an intercision, she secretly observes the Oblation Board explaining the procedure shortly after her discovery, an allomotif borrowed from Mr. Fox tales, wherein Fatima spies her lover digging her a grave. Next, Mrs. Bluebeard herself appears and immediately arranges the dinner. Instead of presenting the severed finger to a scandalized crowd, Lyra and Mrs. Coulter fight over ownership of the Alethiometer, an equivalence to the severed finger because each reveals truths that the maiden must translate for her listeners. Finally, the Oblation Board’s headquarters reaches the end so many Robber Bridegrooms and their castles do: engulfed in flames.

How can *The Golden Compass* reconcile its Bluebeard cycle elements with its desire to revise the Miltonian fall? *Paradise Lost* is extremely pellucid in its condemnation of sexuality—not only do Adam and Eve “burn” with lust after consuming the apple, but their first

postlapsarian encounter is a “dalliance,” the same word used in book two to describe Satan raping his own daughter, Sin, in a union which begot Death (9.1015-1016). If the Temptation in Eden is the inner structure of the Bluebeard cycle, then the horrors inside the bloody chamber would serve to reinforce such dire connotations. For “Bluebeard,” as child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim asserts, “is a story about the dangerous propensities of sex, about its strange secrets and close connection with violent and destructive emotions” from which a retreat to the childhood home is the only reprieve (305). Furthermore, Mrs. Coulter’s metamorphosis from cannibal suitor to murderous mother again regresses the story back to a tired play of female competition. From what has been described thus far, the Bluebeard cycle elements seemingly run counter to Pullman’s stated goals, his divergences self-defeating. While the Bluebeard cycle challenges “happily ever after,” Mrs. Coulter is yet another validation of *cherchez la femme* – right?

Well, she is – until she explains her motivations which, unlike the evil mother/stepmother archetype, are born not from envy but from a fear of and desire to suppress blooming sexualities. As she explains to Lyra: “at the age we call puberty...daemons bring out all sort of troublesome thoughts and feelings, and that’s what lets Dust in” (Pullman, *Golden* 294). While Pullman himself claims Dust is a metaphor for consciousness, the text itself suggest a thoroughly sexual connection betwixt Dust and daemons (Kean). Aside from the association of Dust and puberty’s “troublesome feelings,” Lord Asriel outright compares the severing of a daemon to castration – “Something like [intercision] had happened before. Do you know what the word castration means?” (Pullman, *Golden* 294; 384). As critics like Maude Hines have also pointed out, the taboo against touching

another's daemon suggests them not only as a manifestation of the soul, but the sexual organ (Tso 98). The first strong textual clue of the latent sexuality of daemons comes, however, through Mrs. Coulter's attempts to gender Lyra. Bettelheim's assertion that "since our mothers—or nurses—were our earliest educators, it is likely that they first tabooed sex in some fashion" is proven true when Mrs. Coulter forces Pan to avert his eyes from a bathing Lyra for the first time, enforcing dichotomous gender between a girl and her own soul (282).

While less overtly sexual, the Jordan scholars also heavily shape Lyra's early conception of gender. The male exclusivity of the Retiring Room extends down to the maid staff, and Lyra's initial attitude towards Mrs. Coulter confirms that the male-dominated Jordan degrades female academia. "Poor things," Lyra thinks of the female Scholars. "They could never be taken more seriously than animals dressed up and acting a play" (Pullman, *Golden* 76). The passing of stewardship from the college to Mrs. Coulter is justified as Lyra needing "female guidance" through the transition from young to young woman (Pullman, *Golden* 79). Thus, the Bluebeards of *The Golden Compass* are not those who commit the most violence, but those who invest the most effort into gendering Lyra as *female* – a construct centered on what she is forbidden to do, where is she forbidden to go.

The concept of somatophobia is best illustrated by the words of French writer Annie Ernaux in her 1993 *Journal du dehors*: "Go on, go back home! The man said that to the dog, head down, grazing the ground, guilty. The thousand-year-old phrase for children, women and dogs" [translation mine] (69). Somatophobia, as coined by Elizabeth Spelman, denotes Western philosophy's equation of adult women not just with children but, more

importantly animals, the 'natural' paired with the "despised body" to support men's intellectual and/or moral superiority (Adams and Donovan 2). Women are closer to and thus subjects of nature with its 'baser' and 'sinful' drives, while men can overcome nature through either holiness or rationality. Although cultural consensus on how keenly women feel sexual desire has been extremely fluid over the course of Western history, the need to control and suppress female sexuality has remained a constant. From Biblical times, when Jewish women were forced to cover all but their eyes on the rare occasions they were allowed out of the house, to contemporary debates over the legal right of European Muslim women to don full-face veils, female sexuality and agency have been politicized ever since Eve bit into the apple (Yalom 14). What is a girl meant to think, then, when she reads a story that seems to confirm the destructiveness of marriage and sex— and, moreover, when she then sees echoes of this theme within Pullman's text?

First, regardless of whatever criticism one may have of *His Dark Materials*, the principal character of *The Golden Compass* is clearly Lyra. This is important because, by contrast, Fatima's narrative prominence in *Maiden-Killers* is a mere façade. "While the wife may seem to be the "moral center" of Bluebeard tales," admits Maria Tartar, "she is in some ways the protagonist only by default," something which is underscored by the namelessness of wives across most variants (48). Tartar, in fact, claims that the wife did not receive a name in print until 1910, 213 years after Perrault (40). The ATU system's central motif for *The Maiden Killer* defines Fatima by her dependence on others, a passive subject to be rescued rather than an active subject in the story. At best, she is the vehicle through which the audience gets to indulge the story's Gothic attractions, and at worst, she is simply a

surrogate princess, the brother-hero's reward at the end of his journey. A nameless simulacrum of Eve and Pandora, it is little surprise then that if given the chance, "most readers would elect to enter the taboo regions of Bluebeard's thoughts" (Tartar 50).

"Just whose story, then, is it?" Tartar asks (53). To which I would reply, the family's. Even in Maiden-Killers told through Fatima's eyes, her family will often play major roles, from her parents' negotiation of the marriage, the brothers' rescue, to her sisters' accompaniment to the new martial home. These roles are not always positive, for as Corrie Kiesel notes, some retellings "mock the notion that marital blame could be confined to husband and wife, exploding the circle...to the couple's extended family and beyond" (iii). Fatima's courtship is often subject to familial pressures, dramatized in one Victorian play by Fatima's mother concealing letters from her daughter's lover in order to facilitate the more financially-advantageous marriage to Bluebeard (Kiesel 32). Fatima is still rarely characterized positively, however: many tales greatly emphasize her beauty, while her curious and rebellious spirit is vilified. Although Lyra is beholden to many different adult authority figures, she exerts an incredible amount of will throughout the novel, and is recognized far more for her skill with the Alethiometer and her storytelling abilities than her physical appearance and alignment with traditional femininity.

The salient roles of the family have massive ramifications for Freudian readings of the Bluebeard cycle—which, in turn, highlights the genius of their inclusion within *The Golden Compass*. While Fatima's ordeal confirms a child's suspicions that "adults have terrible sexual secrets," Bettelheim misses the larger picture in his rush to paint her as an

adulteress, even ludicrously proposing that the chamber is simply a hallucination based on a few minor narrative inconsistencies (302). Many different facets of relational anxiety can be expressed through the Bluebeard cycle: the anxiety of passing over legal guardianship of a daughter; the natural mistrust of a sibling's suitor; the fear of sex; the unease of a shifting family dynamic. Thusly, different elements of the Bluebeard cycle dramatize not only the child listener's anxieties about relationships and sex, but the entire family's. After all, as the Librarian of Jordan College says, "The duty of the old is to be anxious on behalf of the young" (Pullman, *Golden* 42). As with blame, the anxieties that the folktales articulate need not be confined to the married couple.

Overall, the Bluebeard cycle endorses "a regressive move back to the household of the heroine's childhood" (Tartar 58). Not only is the new martial home rife with danger, but the instrument with which Fatima calls for help often comes from her childhood home, be it a silver whistle from her brothers, a trio of doves from her mother, or the snake with which Fatima shared her mother's womb. Although the *His Dark Materials* trilogy has been accused of promoting an overall "conservative view of adult authority" that "does not deny the need for nurture grounded in a mature wisdom," said wisdom is found within a host of surrogate parents for, in a bold subversion of the Freudian family romance, Lyra's biological parents match their high social standings only with their body counts (Rutledge 119-120). Still, a retelling of Miltonian temptation requires a break from the god-parent, and the transfer of trust and reliance from said god-parent to the self and the spouse, so how does Pullman reconcile these diametrically-opposed themes?

He does so, paradoxically, by regressing further. Even remaining within Fatima's perspective, the kind of anxiety her story

latently expresses changes or contradicts itself from tale type to tale type. In many variants, including Perrault's, the obedience test takes place a month after the wedding, long after the couple would have consummated their relationship. Robber Bridegrooms and Fitcher's Birds, by comparison, generally place the monstrous discovery before or on the wedding night itself – in the latter type, Bluebeard often will not declare his intent to marry Fatima until *after* she has discovered her dead sisters. *The Golden Compass* winds this clock even further back by following its heroine before the onset of sexuality entirely.

As Warner asserts, the specification of one month after the wedding suggests Fatima's fear is not of the loss of her virginity, but of the consequences of said loss (260-265). The elapsed time may represent the wife's discovery of her missed period, the chamber a vision not of her fate for infidelity but for being with child, as delivery was one of the principal causes of death for both children and women before the nineteenth century (Warner 263).

Another, more modern model for Maiden-Killers exists too, that of "a particularly potent kind of marriage counseling" for dealing with an unbalance of sexual experience between partners (Tartar 6). This model was self-administered by artist Françoise Gilot in her memoir *Life with Picasso*; upon entering one of her old lover's houses, Gilot envisions "that if I looked into a closet, I would find half a dozen ex-wives hanging by their necks" (152-153). As Tartar writes, with the Bluebeard cycle Gilot "found a tool for thinking through and understanding the powerful emotions evoked by her husband's past," plainly demonstrating the emotional truth of this alternative paradigm (66).

Pullman himself has declared that the *His Dark Materials* trilogy is "stark

realism...in psychological terms" ('Achuka Interview'); like a true folkloric text, Pullman utilizes fantasy to "embody" psychological phenomena. While Pullman pulls apart Milton's *chef-d'œuvre*, however, every facet of the Bluebeard cycle grounds itself in the emotional truth of what Greenhill calls "the false payoff" of marriage – that the transfer from the father's control to the husband's does not yield any more autonomy within a patriarchal system (150). As recently as 1997, wives were falling behind their husbands in surveys of marital satisfaction and all measures of mental health, proving that even today, "happily ever after" is anything but guaranteed (Yalom 394).

Dramatically, however, not all tales are equal in this regard. If I had to create a spectrum of sexual somatophobia within the Bluebeard cycle, Maiden-Killers would stand on one far end, while on the other stands Robber Bridegrooms and, further along, Fitcher's Birds. In Maiden-Killers, the inclusion of the deflowered girl is diluted by a long *dramatis personae* that forces the audience to step away from Fatima's subjectivity. Fitcher's Birds and Robber Bridegroom, on the other hand, present the nerves at their most-taxed and through those eyes most subject to sex's first irreversible damage, that loss of virginity.

The latter type is rated higher because its tales better narratively justify Fatima's anxiety, not only by the discovery of the chamber *before* the wedding, but by having the Bluebeard often kidnap her outright. As Pauline Greenhill writes, Fitcher's Birds paint heterosexual relationships as "clearly fraught with danger and evil *from their onset*" which grounds the emotional truths by recalling the centuries in which women lacked choice in whom they were to marry, and strengthens the Freudian reading by presenting the consummation of marriage as closer to rape (150). If not a kidnapper,

however, her husband's bluebeard still denotes a "priapic mode", as sexual as it is hideous (Warner 242).

Where does this leave *The Golden Compass*?

By transforming the Bluebeard from a spouse to a parent, the latent fears are transformed from one of sexuality to one of another's sexual development, and transferred from the child audience to the parent storyteller – from the victim Lyra to perpetrator Mrs. Coulter. The horrific consequences of the intercision, however, fall solely upon the affected child. While Lord Asriel describes interceded adults as "corpse"-like, corpses are precisely what become of interceded children (Pullman, *Golden* 385). Although classing interceded persons as zombies may seem a hyperbole, in truth sexual somatophobia— and, by extension, fear of female self-knowledge – has had deadly consequences for both sexes, yet primarily for women.

Sheltered from sexual self-knowledge and barred from legal recourse, many women throughout history were taught to simply accept any of their husband's orders, in and out of the bedchamber, and regardless of how abusive. Christian moral philosophy and the masculinization of midwifery in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain demanded that during delivery, the infant's life be prioritized over the mother's so that it could be baptized – it could still be saved, unlike the mother, who was so tainted with the sin of Eve that she was relatively not worth the effort (Thomas 130; Warner 263). This principle did not simply apply to strained vaginal births; in an era without antiseptics or antibiotics, cesarean sections were still performed to a 100% mortality rate (Warner 263). As the Bible stipulated the pain of childbirth as punishment for the Fall, midwives, whose duties included not only medical but emotional relief in the bedchamber faced legal limitations and, most famously,

persecution for suspicions of witchcraft. Deuteronomy also commanded that women who were determined to not be virgins upon their wedding nights should be stoned by the men in their villages (Yalom 4).

Mrs. Coulter's seductive beauty, multiple affairs, and bastard children are not simply tired dressings of a misogynistic trope, but an exaggeration of the hypocrisy of parents who try to shove fear and shame down the throats of children about the selfsame feelings that created them. While most children's anxieties, admittedly, do not overtly manifest as fear their spouses may kill them, or of themselves becoming enervated zombies, the effects of leaving children to wonder about adults' dark sexual secrets are still felt in the modern era—most obviously, the phenomena of abstinence-only or no formal sexual education resulting in higher teenage pregnancy rates than a comprehensive one (Kohler et al.). Sexual shame can not only create problems later in life, but inhibit the inflicted individual from seeking treatment. The reason Bluebeard has a closet full of murdered women is not because they failed an obedience test, but because their parents put them there.

Mrs. Coulter is herself, however, hamstrung by the limitations of her gender within a patriarchal society, pressured to use her sexuality to achieve any sort of power. If Lyra is Pullman's Eve, her mother— her past littered with extramarital affairs, one in which her own murderous husband was killed— is strikingly close to Bettelheim's Fatima. She is as much an active agent as she is a victim of the Magisterium, without which there would be no somatophobic rhetoric for her to espouse. The Magisterium is a "Big Bluebeard" Adorno and Horkheimer warn of in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (282). Unsatisfied with simply lording over the private home, the Magisterium's thirst for control culminates in the kidnapping and murder of dozens of

children, the colloquial suspicion of cannibalism echoing the real cannibalism of many villains in the Bluebeard cycle. As Adorno and Horkheimer write, "A Big Bluebeard...will start a war against an entire nation, against the world," the "world" in this context being the natural one (282).

Bluebeard is himself a "man against nature," both for his unnatural appearance and for his destruction of life (Warner 242). That the physical manifestation of the Magisterium's sexual somatophobia, the intercision, is not simply an abhorrent crime but a perversion of nature is made explicit in the text: "A human being with no daemon was like someone without a face...something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of night-ghosts, not the waking world of sense" (Pullman, *Golden* 224). Were it not for the room of severed daemons, it would be startlingly easy, then, to construe Mrs. Coulter's motivations as sympathetic to Lyra, especially when she, seemingly paradoxically, saves Lyra from the intercision.

While Bluebeard cycle stories present sexual somatophobia as an external force

acting upon the protagonist, the common focus on the wife's transgression posits her curiosity and acquisition of sexual knowledge as the true villains. Even in Robber Bridegroom stories, the one who foreshadows the destructive potential of sex is often a bird, if not an entire forest of them, suggesting that a fear of sex is innate and natural. Through utilizing Bluebeard paradigms, however, Pullman raises the stakes of the *failure* to gain such knowledge, condemning not partners but parents and larger authoritative power structures as the sole manufactures of sexual anxieties.

Lyra's grand destiny – to be tempted and fall – cannot be guided by any elder, but by her own inquisitiveness and agency. As the witch Serafina Pekkala says, "If she's told what she must do, it will all fail; death will sweep through all the worlds; it will be the triumph of despair, forever" (Pullman, *Golden* 320). Instead of being asked to repress both her sexuality and her curiosity, the fate of fate itself rests on Lyra and Pantalaimon facing the forbidden door and asking, "What if growing up is good?"

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