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Desperate Not to "Forget the Gods": Mormon Fantasy and the Epic Poem

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The people needed something to believe in, and this was the only way to give it to them. (Sanderson, Mistborn 490)

Because of humanity's fixation on death, religion and the afterlife have played a part in human culture throughout history. As a result, belief, religion, and theology have been central to the main action of stories since the earliest forms of literature. One of the greatest ancient literary genres, the epic, is no exception.

Epics have many universal characteristics, such as elevated language in poetic form, vast settings, and strong protagonists who demonstrate feats of great strength and genius. They also commonly contain "supernatural forces—gods, angels, and demons—[who] interest themselves in the action" (Harmon and Holman 185). After the Renaissance, the epic lost two of its most fundamental qualities. First, it was typically no longer written in verse, as the novel became the preferred form with which to tell a long tale. Second, the "gods, angels, and demons" who engage directly in the action of the story disappeared. The first claim is typically accepted by critics, although with some exceptions. Herbert F. Tucker is one such skeptic. Tucker
fights an uphill battle to demonstrate that the epic did not die out but flourished from the Romantic to the Edwardian ages. Despite his honorable task, Tucker is forced to acknowledge that most critics “depict prose fiction as the genre in which modernity stands forth over epic’s dead body” (4). The second claim, that the epic lost its gods and demons, caused a trifurcation of the epic poem into separate subgenres: the social epic, the sacred epic, and the supernatural epic. When the gods, angels, and demons of the epic were split from the tradition, the social epic was created, while the sacred epic retained ancient epic religiosity. In the twentieth century, as religion became more ambiguous in society, even those authors who wished to write about the supernatural and otherworldly distanced themselves from theology, creating the supernatural epic.

I.

The nineteenth century saw the rise of the social epic in works such as Charles Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities (1859), Victor Hugo’s The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1831), George Eliot’s Middlemarch (1872), and Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick (1851). To be sure, these works are highly religious, but there is no overt deity or devil personified. In other words, the gods, angels, and demons of these epics do not take an interest in the action of the story. Indeed, theology is no necessarily essential to the main action of the story in these cases; the primary focus is instead on reality, society, and social ills (one of which is Christian hypocrisy) rather than spirituality.

Today, most critically acclaimed novels could be categorized in this broad designation of social epics, including works that are heavily allusive to an ancient epic but do not contain the same level of religiosity, that of gods, angels, and demons. Perhaps the best example of this type of allusive social epic is Derek Walcott’s Omeros (1990). With his protagonist, Achille, who struggles to accept the relationship between his lover, Helen, and her other suitor, Hector, Walcott is without question situating his work among ancient epics—he even writes in terza rima, Dante’s preferred meter and rhyme scheme. Walcott’s work, just like nineteenth-century social epics, is deeply spiritual in nature. However
in a self-aware dialectic between the narrator and the poet, Omeros, who is understood to be Homer, the narrator confesses to Omeros that he never finished the great blind poet’s works, the Iliad and the Odyssey. When asked why, the narrator shrugs and responds, “‘Those gods with hyphens, like Hollywood produces,’ . . . ‘The gods and the demi-gods aren’t much use to us.’ . . . ‘Forget the gods,’” Omeros growls, “‘and read the rest’” (283). Walcott’s social epic has little use for gods, and even Omeros seems to think that today’s readers can get just as much out of ancient epics if they skip the sections that involve Olympians. Like Omeros, other contemporary social epics avoid any spiritual assertion about gods, “and read the rest.”

Ursula K. Le Guin’s Lavinia (2008) is a feminist retelling of the second half of the Aeneid from the perspective of Lavinia, Aeneas’s future bride and the ancestral mother of the Roman nation. While the work portrays some spirituality represented by ancient mysticism, it does not include any supernatural powers in the form of gods or demons who take an interest in its action. Apologizing for omitting Greco-Roman gods and goddesses by stating that they “[don’t] work well in a novel” (275), Le Guin concentrates more on contemporary social issues of gender equality and marriage studies.

Another allusive social epic is Zachary Mason’s The Lost Books of the Odyssey (2010). Mason delivers an anthology of sorts of marginally connected short stories that center either on Odysseus or the aftermath of the Trojan War. In some of these stories Olympians are present, while in others they are conspicuously absent, as is religion in general. In one such instance, which could be considered the pivotal story in the entire collection, Odysseus observes, “there are, as far as I have seen, and I have seen much, no gods, no spirits and no such thing as witches, but I seem to be the only one who knows it—the best I can say for the powers of the night is that they make good stories” (Mason 102). Without the gods of ancient epics, Mason’s work, like Le Guin’s, becomes a social epic focused more on contemporary societal issues, somewhat supporting Walcott’s injunction to “forget the gods, and read the rest.”

Perhaps the most recent popular example of the social epic is Suzanne Collins’s The Hunger Games (2008) with its two sequels.
Superficially, Collins attempts to place her trilogy within the epic tradition. She presents an extensive list of secondary characters with classical names such as Seneca, Caesar, and Octavia. Her central theme and setting surround a brutal dystopian gladiatorial game. Collins even borrows Juvenal's famous phrase *panem et circenses*, "bread and games," as the name of her corrupt nation (Juvenal 198–99). Certainly, the amount of violence in her works aligns them closely with ancient epics. However, with the relatively astronomical death counts found in the series, there is a distinct lack of religion, the faith that humanity has needed for centuries to project meaning on death. Collins avoids the tragedy of loss, the psychological emptiness of death that demands at least a cursory contemplation. She likewise omits any gods, demons, or angels who take interest in the lives of her characters.

II.

The second modern subgenre that descends from ancient epics is the sacred epic. These are works in which gods, angels, and demons are still a part of the heroic journey, just as they were for Homer and Virgil. For a nineteenth-century example, no work could be more instructive than Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which still has a strong connection to the epic tradition in content, theme, and religiosity. In this case, the personified deity is Frankenstein himself—one must remember that Shelley gave her work an alternate title, one too often overlooked, *The Modern Prometheus*. In this duality, Shelley acknowledges the connection of the epic tradition to theology and "gods, angels, and demons" by identifying Frankenstein with the ancient Titan Prometheus, who defied Zeus and gave fire to humanity, for which he was punished for eternity. In Shelley’s masterpiece the monster learns to read after finding three books, one of which is Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), further reinforcing Shelley’s novel as a sacred epic. Shelley even takes her epigraph from the epic (907). After the monster reads the books, he relates his condition to that of the Christian Adam (979). When he finally locates Dr. Frankenstein, the monster says, “You must create a female for me, with
whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. This you alone can do; and I demand it of you as a right which you must not refuse” (987). The creature plays the part of Adam, who makes a similar request of his Creator. In Shelley’s approach to the nineteenth century’s anxiety over the place of faith in an environment of scientific discovery,¹ Frankenstein plays the part of God, and the theology is twisted to become a mockery of the belief found in Milton’s work, just as the monster becomes a mockery of humanity, or, perhaps more sympathetically, humanity becomes a mockery of the monster.

A great sacred epic in the twentieth century is J. R. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy. Tolkien’s works are filled with supernatural beings, such as the wizards Gandalf, Sauron, and Saruman, as well as elves and dwarves, who take an interest in the action of the story. Theologically, it is Tolkien who coined the term eucatastrophe to demonstrate that the happy endings of fairy stories are types of the great happy ending of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection (72). Here is the historical intersection of true epic tradition and fantasy literature, since in fantasy personified deities are still accepted. The realistic fiction of social epics rejects these deities—to most writers they either do not exist or they at least are unseen in the natural world and therefore are excluded from their works.

III.

This leads to the third subgenre spawned from ancient epics, the supernatural epic. Some fantasy works, while claiming a place in the epic tradition, seem not to fall within the categories of either the social or the sacred epic. Some contain many allusions to Homer, Milton, or Virgil but omit religion. They sacrifice theology for wonder. They concentrate on the “otherness” of supernatural creatures and powers without the added morality and complexities of cosmos and

¹For a discussion of Shelley, nineteenth-century science, and theology, see David Poston and Fred Botting; for Shelley’s relationship to twentieth-century science, see Jasia Reichardt.
religion inherent in Shelley and Tolkien. In this regard, Tolkien's work is a direct ancestor of the supernatural epic, except that its imitators in this third type omit the sacred in their worlds.

For example, J. K. Rowling's works are ideal examples of the supernatural epic. Her novels have become so much a part of modern culture that they are being studied as artifacts by scholars, despite their regrettable status as fantasy literature, a genre that has not received much critical respect. They draw heavily upon a cultural understanding of classical mythology, but they leave out an essential element of that mythology: religion. Instead, Rowling’s books are filled with supernatural animals and humans: the most powerful beings in Rowling's world are Harry Potter, Voldemort, and Dumbledore, all mortals.

Another Tolkien imitator, the Percy Jackson series by Rick Riordan, may seem to contradict this thesis. Percy, the protagonist, learns that he is the son of Poseidon and must solve the mystery of who stole Zeus’s lightning in The Lightning Thief (2005), the first novel in the series. Although the Olympians are present in name, the book includes very little theology. Riordan expends more energy exploring twenty-first-century social issues like ecology and animal rights than demonstrating characters' actual belief in the powers of the universe, as Dean Schneider notices (17). Riordan’s works are very close to the social epic in this regard, but their overwhelming supernatural content places them in the supernatural category, for his gods more closely resemble Superman and Wolverine since their religious identity is sacrificed to sensationalize supernatural abilities—the “Olympians” of Riordan’s world are excellent superheros and supervillains but make rather mediocre gods.

Phillip Pullman’s antireligious Dark Materials trilogy must be examined in any discussion on faith, the epic poem, and fantasy literature. Pullman makes it clear from the very beginning that he is tapping into the epic tradition with his series title, which is taken directly from Paradise Lost (253) as well as The Golden Compass (1996), the first book in the series (Milton 351). Yet the god of Pullman's alternate universe, the Authority, is nothing more than a fraud: a powerful alien who subjugates humanity and forces people to worship him by keeping them in ignorance. Pullman’s universe has neither gods
nor goddesses; its angels are simply glowing mortal extradimensionals, otherwise similar to humans. Most contradictory to the epic tradition of the past, the afterlife is a myth in Pullman's universe. Pullman does include a descent into hell, a common characteristic of epics. However, in Pullman's universe the afterlife, "land of the dead," isn't a place of reward or a place of punishment. It is a place of nothing: "The good come here as well as the wicked, and all of us languish in this gloom forever, with no hope of freedom, or joy, or sleep, or rest, or peace" (320). The dead are trapped in a limbo, not truly able to die by ceasing to exist. True peace comes when Lyra and Will, the protagonists, cut an exit for ghosts to take out of the world of the dead. Upon exiting, ghosts exhibit pure joy at "turning into the night, the starlight, the air... and then [they are] gone, leaving behind such a vivid little burst of happiness that Will was reminded of the bubbles in a glass of champagne" (354). The spirits of the dead dissolve into the air and are gone, presumably without memory or further existence.

A slight detour into cinema may be of value here. Even the recent remake of the 1981 film Clash of the Titans attests to this cultural shift toward unbelief—toward "forgetting the gods." There is a noticeable theme, almost absent in the original of thirty years ago, of defiance and even revolt against the gods, of seeking their destruction, similar to Pullman's works. In the 2010 remake, the new Olympians are more dependent on humanity than humanity is on them. Similarly, Troy, although not a fantasy epic film, demonstrates this same defiance of the gods. Homer's Iliad, upon which the film is based, begins in medias res when the Greeks are trying to figure out why a plague has been sweeping through their ranks. They discover that Apollo cursed them because Agamemnon claimed the daughter of Chryses, the priest of Apollo, as a prize of war. When Chryses begs Agamemnon to return her to him, offering him a significant ransom, Agamemnon refuses. When the army calls for Agamemnon to relent and return the girl, the king concedes in order to appease Apollo, but with a price: he wants another woman to take her place and chooses Achilles's Briseis for no other reason than to demonstrate his superiority over the greatest warrior in the Argive army. In the
film adaptation, however, when Achilles claims Briseis, she is actually a priestess of Apollo. When warned by one of his men that taking her will bring down Apollo’s wrath, Achilles draws his sword and beheads the gigantic golden statue of Apollo. Later, in a dialogue with Briseis about war, Achilles tells her that “the gods envy [humanity].” Clearly, the film’s director, Wolfgang Peterson, feels that the twenty-first century has no use for gods, depicting them largely as impotent.2

IV.

Where, then, among these three subgenres do works of Mormon fantasy fall? The most popular appear to be sacred epics, that is, the subgenre which most closely relates to ancient epics. In these Mormon fantasies readers find both theology and the gods, angels, and demons of the epic alive again and taking interest in the affairs of humanity. This is not to say that Apollo and Athena are evoked in Mormon fantasy. They are not found in Shelley or Tolkien either. Rather, like Shelley and Tolkien, Mormon fantasy writers are more comfortable personifying deities and supernatural powers that are indigenous to the secondary cosmos they create. Three Mormon writers of fantasy are Stephenie Meyer, Brandon Mull, and Brandon Sanderson.

Aside from the well-documented sexual morality found in Meyer’s Twilight saga, her vampires evoke the “angels and demons” of the epic tradition.3 The “good” vampires, under the benevolent Carlisle’s tutelage, have used their agency to choose not to kill humans. Part of this stems from a religious belief that there is a life after death. In New Moon (2006), Carlisle tells Bella, “‘never, in the nearly four hundred years now since I was born, have I ever seen anything to make me doubt whether God exists in some form or the other’”

2Similarly, Priam and Agamemnon, those who seem most interested in pleasing the gods, are either foolish, as when Hector is stunned that Priam would follow “bird signs” instead of simple wisdom and observation, or they are hypocrites, like Agamemnon who constantly lies to wage this war against Troy and yet pledges to Zeus that he will raze it.

3For more on Meyer’s religion and Mormonism in her books, see interpretations by Marc E. Shaw, Joyce Ann Mercer, and Sarah Schwartzman.
(36). Both Edward and Carlisle agree that “God and heaven exist . . . and so does hell” (37). But Edward’s primary reason for not turning Bella into a vampire is his belief that vampires are evil creatures whose vampirism robs them of their souls; he refuses to deprive Bella of a life after death. Now a belief in God and an afterlife is not unique to Mormonism, but the doctrine that one may live with a spouse and children for eternity has a much smaller list of believers. As Bella thinks to herself, “the only heaven I could appreciate would have to include Edward” (37). By the end of the series, Bella is an undying vampire. She and Edward likewise have a vampiric child, Renesmee, and all enjoy an immortal, if not an eternal, family, a principle fundamental to Mormon theology.

In Mull’s Fablehaven series, belief in a cosmos or powers in the universe—the gods, angels, and demons of the classical epic—is essential to its premise, for the main action is an ancient war between the fairies (and creatures of light) and demons (and creatures of darkness). Ultimately, the heroes of the series are able to defeat the demons and powers of darkness only through the advantage gained from the modern world’s current state of religious skepticism and doubt. Readers learn that demons “probably are bewildered by the increased atmosphere of unbelief in the world. When many of these demons departed this world, they were universally feared. Now, most of humanity considers their existence a joke” (559). It is interesting to note this recurring subject in contemporary popular Mormon fantasy. A pervasive topic found throughout the Book of Mormon centers on the Mormon anxiety of belief. Nephites, proto-Christian ancient inhabitants of the American continents, were in a constant state of revolution between faithfulness and apostasy, and eventually repetitive prophecies that foresee a day in which the Nephite nation would “dwindle in unbelief” are fulfilled (1 Ne. 4:13). Where writers like Le Guin, Pullman, and Walcott say, “forget the gods and read the rest,” many contemporary Mormon writers feel that a lack of belief in cosmic power is fundamentally disabling and a valuable theme worth exploring on its own terms in literature.

This concept is no more powerfully felt than in Sanderson’s Mistborn trilogy. Sazed, one of the main characters in The Hero of Ages
Literature and Belief (2008), is a relic, a monk hiding from a religious extermination order, whose people store and protect knowledge and culture, anything from heraldry to astronomy. Sazed’s particular task is, of course, to preserve religious knowledge. He stores the theological tenets of all ancient religions of his world. As if that is not clear enough to make Sanderson’s point, after a second apocalyptic event through Sazed’s subsequent religious knowledge the world is reborn and renewed, as the various theologies he saved help re-create the earth, animals, plants, and humanity in a prime example of Tolkien’s eucatastrophe.

V.

The sacred epic is the modern subgenre most closely aligned with the epics of Homer and Virgil, and some Mormon writers of fantasy seem to excel in a form in which overt religion is acceptable. These writers reject the social epic of Walcott or the supernatural epic of Pullman. For them gods drive plot and provide meaning.

Orson F. Whitney may not have been thinking of the fantasy literature of the twenty-first century when he predicted that Mormonism “will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of [its] own” (300), but some Mormon writers seem to be defying the global dwindling in unbelief that created social and supernatural epics. Meyer’s works, for example, demand a return to a culture of the afterlife; Mull desires his readers to remember belief in the gods, angels, and demons of the epic tradition; Sanderson hopes readers will not forget the importance of faith and belief in human and divine interaction. Collectively, these and other Mormon writers use the sacred epic as a vehicle to combat a growing unbelief present in the world. As Kelsier in Sanderson’s Mistborn (2006) puts it in a brilliant stroke of metatextuality, “The people needed something to believe in and this was the only way to give it to them” (490).
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