

Vera Cuntz-Leng (Ed.)

HEAVEN, HELL, AND EVERYTHING IN-BETWEEN

Critical Perspectives on *Good Omens*



BÜCHNER

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An Introduction to *Good Omens*, Producerly Texts, and to this Book

Vera Cuntz-Leng

When the second season of the Amazon Prime series *Good Omens* (2019–) aired in the summer of 2023, the tragic parting of the beloved main characters Aziraphale and Crowley was a “jaw-dropping” (Griffin 2024) experience for the audience. Preventing the apocalypse from happening in season 1—a rather faithful adaptation of the original novel written by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman in 1990—this angel and demon had become the focal point of the narration, supported by the exceptional performance by Michael Sheen and David Tennant, respectively. During the so-called ‘final fifteen’—the last fifteen minutes of the second season’s sixth episode, “Every Day,” the demon Crowley declares his love for Aziraphale, who in turn invites Crowley to join him in Heaven, whereas Crowley disappointedly refuses the offer and gives the angel one desperate kiss. The two part ways with Aziraphale leaving Earth behind. The final fifteen sparked many discussions, speculations, and fannish creativity (cf. Cuntz-Leng 2025). It really hit a nerve. Ineffable in its extent, if you will. And as this profound turn of events transformed *Good Omens* from a sound comedy with sociocritical relevance and homoerotic undertones into an even more challenging, more profound narrative that may be perceived as a game-changer in the construction of non-normative gender displays and in the telling of queer love stories in the media (cf. Asher-Perrin 2023; Gittelman 2023), it ignited the spark for this book project as well. Although insightful academic research has been done on the first season of the series in particular (cf. King 2021; Carroll 2023; Giannini/Taylor 2023; Wight 2023; Kennedy 2024; Shah 2024; Stobbart 2024; Venzmer 2024; Xanthoudakis/Donabedian 2024; Cuntz-Leng 2025)—but not as

much on the novel (cf. Meyer 2009; Walker 2012; Clemons 2017; Scott 2018)—it is less than one might expect. Watching the second season and witnessing its enormous reception online made it obvious to me that the second season had to go hand in hand with an extrapolation of previous academic considerations regarding *Good Omens*. This was all new and exciting—and this had to be addressed.

The end of season 2 may be perceived as an emotional challenge in a good way—people came together to talk about *Good Omens*, they wrote large amounts of fan fiction aiming at ‘fixing’ the final fifteen, a queer-friendly community of fans built online that was strongly invested with the story and its stars. However, this changed dramatically in the summer of 2024 when Tortoise Media published a series of podcasts (cf. Caruana Galizia/Gunning/Johnson 2024). Several women came forward with accounts of unwanted or coerced sexual behavior by co-author and showrunner Gaiman—some alleging violent or non-consensual acts, others describing intimidatory dynamics and disturbing power imbalances. A *Vulture*/New York Magazine investigation in January 2025 added more testimonies (cf. Shapiro 2025)—with a total of eight women publicly speaking out against Gaiman. The authors of this book would like to express their profound dismay and offer their sincere and unrestrained solidarity with the victims. Of course, these revelations came with vast consequences to Gaiman’s private life, his reputation as an author and public figure, for the *Good Omens* fan community and admirers of Gaiman as a celebrity, and for the continuing *Good Omens* production and other projects with Gaiman involved (e.g., the production of *Dead Boy Detectives* [2024] got cancelled by Netflix after one season despite its success, Dark Horse Comics will no longer publish Gaiman’s works, Disney paused the production of an adaptation of *The Graveyard Book*). Contrary to the initial plans, *Good Omens* will not continue with a third season of six episodes, but a concluding 90-minute film is currently in post-production (cf. Griffin 2024). And even this would not have happened if Gaiman had not resigned from the production and if the late Terry Pratchett’s daughter Rhianna and his long-time personal assistant Rob Wilkins had not been so committed to the project.

Although feeling betrayed and confused, the queer-friendly community of fans who love and celebrate the story itself still exists, in spite of Gaiman. “It’s been a roller-coaster of emotions for *Good Omens* fans since that heartbreaking season two finale” (Eddy 2025). And to assert that these developments did not also influence this book project would be a downright lie. The authors of this anthology went through the same strong feelings as any fan of *Good Omens*—confusion, anger, disappointment, even denial and disbelief. It must be acknowledged that some essays of this book make reference to Gaiman in one way or another—after all, we are not here to ‘cancel’ Gaiman. Worshipped and idolized by the fan community, Gaiman was one of those authors who fans (and academics) actively sought frequent contact with and affirmation from via social media regarding their theories on *Good Omens*. Ashumi Shah goes so far as to call him the prophetic extradigetic ‘revealer’ (cf. Shah 2024, 187–189) concerning *Good Omens*. The audience’s loss of this (God-like) auteur figure—Gaiman has refrained abruptly from all social media activity since the summer of 2024—has been a challenge for the fan community but may also be seen as an opportunity to free the *Good Omens* story from an overpowering author persona. Therefore, in the end, this is a book about *Good Omens* and not about Gaiman. After all, the *Author* (with a capital A) has been declared dead long ago by Roland Barthes, has he not?

“[A] text consists of multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogue, into parody, into contestation; but there is a site where this multiplicity is collected, and this site is not the author, as has hitherto been claimed, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any of them being lost, all the citations out of which a writing is made; the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination [...]. Classical criticism has never been concerned with the reader; for that criticism, there is no other man in literature than the one who writes. We are no longer so willing to be the dupes of such antiphrases, by which a society proudly recriminates in favor of precisely what it discards, ignores, muffies, or destroys; we know that in order to

restore writing to its future, we must reverse the myth: the birth of the reader must be required by the death of the Author.” (Barthes 1986, 54f.)

In this Barthesian spirit, *Good Omens* may not be perceived as the work of a singular authorial genius but as a complex rhizomatic work of art—a “multi-dimensional space” (Barthes 1986, 53)—that generates its meaning through various different voices and readings: the writers of the novel and the TV show, actors, cinematographers, and other cast members, various other texts/intertextual relations, critical reception by journalists, academics, and—of course—the viewers and fans.

Good Omens is a timeless material that speaks to today’s viewers just as much as it did to readers in the early 1990s, which may show us that narratives have the ability to transcend their creators and that the communities they inspire are often far more significant than the original work alone. As a result, the contributors to this book will articulate their readings of *Good Omens* not from the stand-point of the author (or from the perspective of an ‘ideal reader’ or ‘intended reading’) but they will try to argue from the perspective of the text and its possible readings and orientations (the ‘implicit reader’ [cf. Iser 1994]). In doing so, they aim at “*distancing*” (Barthes 1986, 51) *Good Omens* from Gaiman’s author persona in order to understand and value it as a pop-cultural artefact in its own right—a work of art that belongs to its readers rather than its author(s). In doing so, conflicted relations with Gaiman shall not tamper with the validation and analysis of *Good Omens*, which makes all the more sense when we underline *Good Omens*’ qualities as a producerly text.

In his book *Television Culture*, John Fiske draws on Barthes’ (1975) distinction between ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts and Umberto Eco’s (1979) understanding of texts as ‘open’ and ‘closed,’ respectively (cf. Fiske 1987, 94f.). Readerly texts tend to attract a larger audience because they offer a straightforward interpretation; in contrast, writerly texts are more challenging, as they avoid providing a clear conclusion or coherent narrative. Yet, Fiske argues convincingly that some texts are both readerly and writerly—something that he sees realized especially

in television. These producerly texts blend the accessible qualities of a readerly text with the openness of a writerly text. In contrast to the readerly text, the producerly text replaces “the pleasures of identification and familiarity with more cognitive pleasures of participation and production” (Fiske 1987, 95). The audience is being treated as “a semiotic democracy, already equipped with the discursive competencies to make meanings and motivated by pleasure to want to participate in the process” (Fiske 1987, 95). “The pleasure and the power of making meanings, of participating in the mode of representation, of playing with the semiotic process—these are some of the most significant and empowering pleasures that television has to offer” (Fiske 1987, 239).

As the producerly text shares the quality of openness with the writerly text, it offers various points of entry into the narrative as invitations for the audience to make their own meaning. This coincides with Wolfgang Iser’s observation that fictional texts are constructed in such an ambiguous way that they do not completely confirm any of the meanings we attribute to them, even though their structure constantly tempts us to engage in such acts of interpretation (cf. Iser 1979, 250f.). The ‘gaps’ (*Leerstellen*) in a text must be regarded as the elementary condition for co-creation (cf. Iser 1979, 236) and may be achieved through interruptions in the production process, sudden changes of location, cliffhangers, the introduction of new characters, loose storylines, intertextual references, among others. In addition, television viewers may develop profound emotional connections with characters (parasocial relationships), perceiving their existence as continuing even when the screen is dark (cf. Fiske 1987, 149–151).

Producerly texts may offer some mysteries as elements of their narrative ambiguity that the audience wants to solve and discuss endlessly online. Who killed Laura Palmer? Does Buffy love Angel or Spike? Is Sherlock alive? What do the numbers 4, 8, 15, 16, 23, and 42 mean? What is the Upside Down’s true nature? Whereas the first season of *Good Omens*—due to its faithfulness to the novel—was a rather closed narrative despite its many intertextual references, the second season opened up ample new and different ways to engage with the story-

world. Instead of asking how the angel and demon would prevent Armageddon from happening, the second season extended the mysteries and the questions that the audience might have. Why did Gabriel come to the bookshop? What is the meaning of the immense power of the joint miracle performed by Aziraphale and Crowley? What is the Metatron's agenda? Was there something in Aziraphale's coffee? Who are Maggie and Nina really? And most of all: Will Aziraphale and Crowley ever realize that they have been in love for ages? The central mystery of Aziraphale and Crowley's relationship is repeated and alluded to many times over the course of the season, but since its resolution is always postponed, the audience is invited to gather evidence for the nature of their feelings—in small gifts, gestures, looks, declarations of friendship, in their quarrels, fights, and lies. They may not know that they love each other—these ineffable idiots—but the audience knows. “Whilst *Good Omens* has been accused of queerbaiting (enticing queer viewers with an empty promise of queer content), it rather exists in a liminal space between queer denial and queer representation” (Stobbart 2024, 129). Eventually, *Good Omens* takes a leap as its queerbaiting strategies are in season 2 “slowly evolving into queer representation” (Venzmer 2024, 150). However, that Crowley in the final fifteen minutes of season 2 eventually rather bluntly declares his feelings for Aziraphale comes as a shocking surprise not just to the angel but to the audience as well. We are finally getting the “traditional’ physical manifestation” (Stobbart 2024, 135) of their love that we may have never expected to see explicitly outside of paratextual materials and the world of fan fiction (cf. Wight 2023; Stobbart 2024; Venzmer 2024; Xanthoudakis/Donabedian 2024). We are so used to loose ends and to reading between the lines (and there are so many queer readings of *Good Omens* out there, even long before the TV series came into being) that we may not have expected the subtext becoming the actual text. Although we may now have a testament of Crowley's love, it does not come as a solution. At least we know that there will be no going back from that. It really happened. But Aziraphale's reaction to the kiss and the last minutes of the season come with a whole new set of questions and new mysteries to solve.

And as if this was not bad enough, these new questions hang like unfinished sentences mid-air because we have to deal with the gap in the production process that all the more invites speculation. It functions as a catalyst for creativity while waiting for the ‘official’ narrative to go on. This producerly quality of *Good Omens* manifests for example in the enormous increase in fan fiction during the first year after the release of season 2 (cf. Cuntz-Leng 2025, 186–188). However, the allegations against Gaiman, causing great uncertainty among fans, influenced the amount of fan fiction written. The magical time of not-knowing, guessing, and waiting—initiated by the gap in the production process—passed ahead of its time. And the fandom was bereft of its innocence as much as Gaiman ruined his legacy. In a way, the fans were forced to understand the bitter essence of *Good Omens*: That what looks good and just on the outside may not be on the inside.

The essays of this book

As the contributors to this book are united by their love and dedication for *Good Omens*, some may understand themselves both as scholars and as fans—or aca/fans, if you will (cf. Hills 2002, xvii ff.; Jenkins 2006, 1). In this sense, the boundaries between these two roles may be permeable at times, blend into each other, and fannish perspectives on *Good Omens* are also part of the book’s scope. In this way, this book is aimed equally at academics and fans and at those who are at home in both worlds. Although the main focus of the book is the *Good Omens* TV adaptation, many contributions refer to the novel as well or address the process of adaptation and emphasize on differences between both media texts.

This anthology is divided into four sections, but some chapters touch aspects that make them an easy fit for another section as well. The first section is dedicated to non-conforming performances of gender and identity, to the transgression of norms, and to queer desires. **Veronika Rudolf** interlinks the ambivalence of the characters Crowley

and Beelzebub with mythological trickster figures, in particular regarding their disruptive and subversive potential in terms of gender display and binarism. Although both characters engage in playful manipulations of gender norms and power structures, thereby reflecting that trickery challenges authority, Rudolf accentuates the limitations of their subversions when their actions are ultimately contained within the regularities dictated by Heaven and Hell.

Also looking at subversion and otherness in *Good Omens* and embedded in post-colonial thought, **Paushali Bhattacharya Acuña and Elias Acuña** discuss the relationship of Beelzebub and Gabriel in the second season, as well as the love story of Anathema Device and Newt Pulsifer in the first season, to trace the trails of coloniality embedded in the narrative to argue that love functions as a mode of decolonization and resistance from within an imperial center.

In my own essay (**Vera Cuntz-Leng**), I focus on the gaze politics that are at work between the two main characters, Aziraphale and Crowley, using a film-analytical framework for the analysis. The poetics and politics of their looking (at each other and in the same direction), emphasized by cinematography and visual storytelling strategies, not only show the queer potentiality and quality of their relationship but also tell us a lot about power, longing, and their possible future.

The richness of intertextual references is one of the key joys of *Good Omens* as reflected by the book's second section. Like a detective (or as what Jason Mittell [2009] described as the 'forensic fan'), one sets off in search for clues and is rewarded with intertextual findings and pop-cultural references at every turn: from John of Patmos' *Apokalypse* (also known as *The Book of Revelation*) to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) to Iain Banks' *The Crow Road* (1992) and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599–1601) to Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), from *The Sound of Music* (1965) to *The Omen* (1976) and to *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), from Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to Vincent Price in *Witchfinder General* (1968), from Buddy Holly to Queen and The Velvet Underground.

That the music of Queen is of great significance to both the *Good Omens* novel and the TV series alike is not the conclusion but the starting-point of **Bojana Vujin**'s in-depth analysis of music and musical themes in *Good Omens*. She succeeds in showing that *Good Omens* is an outstanding piece of humorous, postmodern pastiche by means of a close reading of the musical pieces, elegantly woven into the storyworld.

Hannah Mitchell follows the color yellow through the narrative like a thread. In doing so, it becomes possible to decipher the color's relevance for the plot and its changing meaning when comparing the novel to the TV adaptation. Further, by exploring the complex bond of yellow in the *Good Omens* adaptation with art history, music, literature, and film history, the broader cultural significance of color symbolism allows for understanding the TV series as a multifaceted and rich intertext, shedding light on the process of adaptation.

By comparing *Shadow Moon* of *American Gods* (2001) with *Aziraphale* and *Crowley*, **Kate Doak-Keszler** and **Gloria Blumano** discuss how both stories—sharing a lot of similarities beyond the fact that they were (co-)penned by the same author—explore the liminal space between the supernatural and the human realm, between divine miracles and parlor tricks. The authors emphasize that the dichotomy of miracles and trickery is mirrored by the protagonist's inner turmoil, between what they are told to be and what they want to be.

This chapter makes a good transition to the third topic area, which focuses on the aspects of free will, self-determination, identity, and moral concepts. Not only *Shadow Moon*, *Aziraphale*, and *Crowley* operate as focal points to discuss free will in the literary works of Gaiman and Pratchett. For example, Death appears as an anthropomorphic personification in Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989–1996), in Pratchett's *Discworld* series as well as in the *Good Omens* novel and the first season of the TV series. **Valerie Estelle Frankel** analyzes the similarities and differences between these different interpretations of the same character with a particular focus on the recurring themes of compassion, empathy, becoming human, and free will.

Following Austin (1962) and Searle's (1975) arguments on the theory of speech acts and the powerful performative quality of language, also bearing in mind Judith Butler's (1990; 1997) continuation of these considerations for the field of gender studies, *Good Omens* becomes an exciting object of research. **Stacy Kessler** is interested in the question how realities are constituted in the show, particularly through the speech act of attributing a name to someone and how questions of identity are formulated, using Adam, Dog, Crowley, and Gabriel as prime examples for the analysis.

By putting the minisode "The Resurrectionists" (S2E3) into historical context and reflecting upon it regarding its function within the narrative, **Kate Doak-Keszler** discusses the flashback as a morality tale and emphasizes on its greater significance within the *Good Omens* storyworld, reading Aziraphale as a 'child' that is challenged to review its understanding of the world.

The book's last section is dedicated to its diverse and productive fandom but will also discuss aspects of stardom and celebrity culture. Many of the authors in this book explored the rich intertextuality of *Good Omens* to a certain degree—when moving ahead to creative works by *Good Omens* fans, this tradition lives on.

Kara Cremonese uses the small references to William Shakespeare, his play *Hamlet*, and the Globe Theater as points of entry into the process of exploring intertextual elements in *Good Omens* fan fiction. In doing so, Cremonese exemplarily shows how both *Good Omens* and its related fan fiction add to the textual universe surrounding Shakespeare and how they draw on and fuel Shakespeare's status as pop-cultural icon.

Rooted in celebrity studies, **Celia Lam** discusses the 'bromance capital' of the relationship between the actors Michael Sheen and David Tennant. By applying her and Jackie Raphael-Luu's earlier research on celebrity bromances (2022) to the Sheen/Tennant case study, Lam exemplarily shows the mechanisms at work in today's media practices, the value of bromance as a concept in contemporary celebrity culture, and how different versions of the actors (as a person, as a fictionalized

version of themselves, and as the fictional character they play) are interdependent and intertwined with each other.

The last chapter, written by **Ariane Manutscheri**, places *Good Omens* into the wider context of celebrity (fan) activism, with a particular focus on the influence of the four key players Pratchett, Gaiman, Sheen, and Tennant. With various connecting points to Lam, Manutscheri discusses celebrity fandom activism but is also interested in civic engagement as a fan-cultural practice and the role of Gaiman. Through diverse projects, practices, and by creating community-driven content, the fandom illustrates how fan practices extend beyond appreciation and creativity into meaningful social action.

The book concludes with an interview between **David Höwelkröger** and video-essayist **Sendarya** whose *Good Omens* analytical fan videos became popular on YouTube. Their conversation bridges the realms of academia and fandom that touch and intertwine in regards of *Good Omens* as a pop-cultural milestone.

In one of her last videos released prior to the publication of this book, Sendarya discusses several reasons why fans should be optimistic that the concluding 90-minute episode of *Good Omens* will eventually be released. She gives hopeful advice to a distressed and somewhat alienated fandom (Fig. 1): (a) constant engagement of the TV series' cast members with *Good Omens* on social media, (b) ongoing interactions of Rhianna Pratchett and the series' producer and manager of the Pratchett literary estate, Rob Wilkins, with the fan community online, (c) Netflix' promotion of the second season of *The Sandman* (2022–2025) despite its discontinuation afterwards due to the Gaiman controversy, (d) no official news that something may impede the release, (e) continuous updates on IMDb, (f) addition of a new animation department on IMDb during the post-production process, and (g) Cheryl Eddy's *Gizmodo* article of June 16, saying that "sources say Prime Video is still planning on releasing the special in the wake of the allegations against Neil Gaiman" (Eddy 2025).



Fig. 1: Sendarya (2025) gives seven reasons why fans should be positive that the concluding episode of *Good Omens* will be released

We are all impatiently waiting for a release date for the final instalment to be announced. Until that happens, the fan community will continue holding its breath. It has been a long and challenging journey for all the people involved or invested in the project. As the Head of Comedy at BBC Studios, Josh Cole, recently said, “I’m proud of everyone who worked hard on Season 3 in incredibly difficult circumstances. Knowing what *Good Omens* means to the fandom really drove us forward and the finale is very much for them” (Goldbart 2025). Incredibly difficult circumstances indeed. Personally, I would say this fandom suffered enough. It needs some sort of closure, it should be allowed to heal and to experience the unabashed excitement about *Good Omens* once more. At the same time, such healing requires the integrity to listen to survivors, to center their voices, and to insist that their suffering never be minimized. And then, the fans should own *Good Omens*. Or, as Louise Griffin puts it, “From its very conception, *Good Omens* has always been bigger than one person and this final chapter will be a lasting reminder of that. The show has, does and always will belong to its fans and, after this finale episode, it’ll be in their hands” (Griffin 2024). With this in mind, one may reprise the finale of season 3 of

Staged (2020–2023)—a scripted reality show with Sheen and Tennant, filmed during the COVID-19 pandemic, whose themes of friendship, isolation, belonging, and transformation resonate with *Good Omens* on many levels. In its final moments, Michael Sheen eloquently reassures us that regardless of the circumstances, “We’ll be okay.”

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**GENDER /
QUEERNESS /
TRANSGRESSIONS**

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And Everything In-Between

Tricksterism, Gender Play, and Celestial Authority in *Good Omens*

Veronika Rudolf

This chapter explores the role of trickster figures in *Good Omens*, focusing on the characters Crowley and Beelzebub as agents of subversion within a Christian cosmological framework. These characters engage in playful acts of rebellion, particularly through the manipulation of gender norms and authority, which aligns them with the archetypal trickster's ability to destabilize societal and cosmic structures. However, despite their potential to disrupt the established order, their subversive actions are contained within the moral ambiguity of Hell, a space that nullifies their rebellion and maintains the overarching cosmic balance. *Good Omens* highlights the limitations of tricksterism within controlled boundaries of power, where acts of defiance, though playful and provocative, are absorbed into the broader system they seek to challenge. Concluding that while *Good Omens* presents a lighthearted exploration of gender fluidity and resistance to authority, it eventually reinforces the binary structures, revealing the constraints on subversive potential within narratives governed by cosmic determinism. By engaging with themes of fluidity and rebellion within a fixed moral and cosmic order, *Good Omens* offers a critique of both Christian eschatology and the limits of resistance in the face of established systems of power.

Introduction

Good Omens, a television adaptation of the novel by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett, is a whimsical exploration of different agents of Heaven and Hell in their goal to start the apocalypse. The story centers around the unlikely alliance between the demon Crowley and the angel Aziraphale, who team up to prevent the end of the world which would lead to the long-awaited battle between Heaven and Hell. With its take on Christian mythology, *Good Omens* offers a perspective on the themes of good and evil, destiny, and free will in a witty contrast to other productions that engage with these topics, like the rather obvious inspiration *The Omen* (1979).

The concept of the trickster is interesting when examining Christian mythological concepts like Heaven, Hell, and the apocalypse which traditionally frame the universe in terms of stark oppositions: good versus evil, Heaven versus Hell, and order versus chaos. Trickster figures, known for their boundary-crossing and subversive behavior, complicate these binaries by occupying liminal spaces and disrupting established norms. In *Good Omens*, Crowley and Beelzebub can be read as embodying traits of this archetype, using their tricksterism to blur the lines between divine and demonic, masculine and feminine, and even order and disorder. Their playful defiance of authority and the way they engage with the roles assigned to them by cosmic order introduces a sense of ambiguity and resistance that challenges the deterministic narrative of the apocalypse. By incorporating tricksterism into its retelling of the apocalypse, *Good Omens* invites the audience to reconsider the rigid moral dichotomies of Christian eschatology. The trickster's ability to destabilize and reconfigure boundaries serves as a tool for questioning the inevitability and immutability of the Christian world order. By doing so, the show not only challenges the theological constructs that govern the apocalypse but also opens up space for a more fluid and nuanced understanding of morality, identity, and resistance in the face of cosmic determinism.

The trickster's role in challenging binaries

Trickster figures appear across a wide range of cultural traditions and are often associated with transgression, cunningness, and a refusal to conform to established rules. Paul Radin describes the trickster as a figure who occupies a liminal space between sacred and profane, order and chaos (cf. Radin 1956, 199). This boundary-crossing nature is central to understanding how characters like Crowley and Beelzebub in *Good Omens* operate, whose roles as tricksters allow them to navigate and destabilize the rigid moral and cosmic binaries underpinning Christian eschatology, particularly in relation to gender and authority.

If tricksters serve as a “camera obscura” (Hynes 1997, 208) to the prevailing norms and power structures of society, the trickster in a heteronormative and cisnormative context may always be queer (in both a broad and a narrow understanding of the term). Victor Turner notes that many tricksters possess “an uncertain sexual status” (Turner 1968, 580) and their marginality often aligns with queer experiences of the world. Doty and Hynes assert that the defining features of a trickster are their marginal status and their ability to introduce new possibilities for action and self-understanding within social institutions (cf. Doty/Hynes 1997, 20). Similarly, the term ‘queer’ evokes images of deconstruction and liminality, challenging the stability of existing social structures (cf. Harper/Blythe Adams/Taylor 2018, 1). As David M. Halperin famously states: “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative” (Halperin 1995, 62).

As liminal figures, tricksters are considered ‘*other*’ and ‘deviant’ by normative powers, yet they embrace this position as a site of transformation. Mythological tricksters, such as Loki in Norse mythology or Coyote in Native American traditions, exemplify this, frequently shifting between or transcending gender identities. This fluidity allows them to challenge social norms, including those concerning gender. However,

despite the evident potential for queerness in trickster figures, the notion of a gender-fluid or non-binary trickster has been under-theorized. Historically, trickster studies have focused predominantly on male tricksters, with Hyde (1998) arguing that most established tricksters are male due to their origins in patriarchal mythologies. While recent scholarship has aimed to recognize female tricksters or those with fluid gender identities, these figures have often been marginalized or misrepresented. For example, McNeely (2011) describes the trickster as inherently androgynous, and Dulemba (2021) critiques the gender bias in earlier studies, noting that women with trickster-like qualities were frequently (mis)labeled as witches. Lock (2002) further argues that tricksterism itself is not inherently gendered; instead, cultural perceptions have gendered tricksters, thereby limiting their full exploration, despite gender ambiguity being a fundamental trait of many trickster figures. Mills (2001) emphasizes the trickster's role in destabilizing gender categories through shapeshifting and disguise, as observed in African and Native American traditions. In these myths, tricksters like Anansi and Coyote challenge binary gender expectations, sometimes adopting different gender roles or performing transgender acts. Such performances, as Ballinger (2000) argues, reveal the constructed nature of gender categories and point toward a more fluid understanding of identity, as demonstrated in Native American Two Spirit traditions.

By disrupting binaries—whether good versus evil, order versus chaos, or male versus female—tricksters expose the artificiality of such distinctions. Hyde (1998) states that their mischief is not merely chaos but a strategic revelation of the fragility of social norms, including those governing morality, law, and identity (cf. Hyde 1998, 45). In *Good Omens*, Crowley and Beelzebub's tricksterism similarly exposes these norms, particularly in their resistance to the binary systems that characterize Christian theology. As agents of Hell, they occupy the space of the *other*, but as tricksters, they blur the line that establishes such an *Other*.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides a critical framework for understanding how tricksters use gender as a tool for

subversion. Butler argues that gender is not innate but a set of repeated performances aligned with societal expectations. Gender, therefore, is performative, it is something we do, rather than something we are. This performativity exposes gender as constructed rather than natural. For Butler, the potential for subversion lies in the way these performances can be repeated differently, allowing individuals to disrupt the gender binary by performing gender in ways that deviate from normative expectations (cf. Butler 1999, 140). Butler challenges the categorization of people into male and female, suggesting that these are discursive constructs. This discursive process is never complete but can be understood as a “series of performative acts and stylizations of the body” (Butler 1999, 43), with bodies and gender always being perceived as cultural products.

While Butler emphasizes the potential for subversive gender performances to disrupt societal norms, trickster figures take this disruption further by deliberately manipulating gender roles as part of their broader destabilization of authority. Tricksters engage in what might be termed ‘gender play,’ a form of performance that not only reveals the constructedness of gender categories but also mocks or subverts the power structures, such as patriarchy or religious authority, that rely on these categories. For instance, Loki’s shifting between male and female gendered bodies in Norse mythology demonstrates how gender play can be used to unsettle not just social norms but also the cosmic order (cf. Lindow 2001, 30). Similarly, Puck’s gender ambiguity in William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595–1596) allows the character to evade societal expectations and manipulate both mortal and supernatural authority figures (cf. Garber 1992, 70). In *Good Omens*, Crowley and Beelzebub engage in a form of gender play that, while perhaps more subtle than Loki’s transformations or Puck’s gender ambivalence, still challenges traditional binary structures. Crowley, for instance, blurs the lines between masculine and feminine aesthetics, though, as discussed later in this chapter, their gender performances are often framed within the boundaries of subcultural rebellion rather than fluidity. Beelzebub, with their androgynous appearance, similarly

defies the strict categorization of gender that is often associated with authority, particularly within Christian theology, where leadership is typically portrayed as male.

As nanny and rebel: Crowley's gender play

Crowley's character in *Good Omens* exemplifies the trickster archetype, engaging in acts of transgression, subversion, and playful disruption. One significant aspect of their subversive behavior is their manipulation of gender norms, particularly evident in the scene where they assume the role of a nanny to influence the upbringing of the Antichrist. While Crowley's performances offer a challenge to patriarchal and Christian authority, they often remain within the confines of flamboyant masculinity rather than fully embracing gender fluidity. In addition to exploring Crowley's gender performances as acts of playful subversion, one must also critically assess the limitations of this gender play, arguing that while Crowley disrupts certain norms, their performance reinforces existing binaries, limiting its transformative potential.

One of the most striking examples of Crowley's gender play occurs in the first season, when they take on the guise of a female-presenting nanny to influence the young Antichrist. Dressed in a traditional British black nanny outfit, complete with bonnet and apron, Crowley embodies the stern maternal figure typically associated with 19th century childcare. This moment is not merely about adopting a role for the sake of a mission, it speaks to the deeper ways in which Crowley, as a trickster figure, plays with gender expectations to subvert authority. Butler argues that gender is a set of repeated acts that create the illusion of a stable identity through which individuals come to embody the cultural expectations associated with their assigned gender (cf. Butler 1999, 33). However, Butler also highlights the potential for subversion within these performances. When gender is enacted in ways that deviate from normative expectations, it exposes the constructed nature of gender categories and opens up the possibility of challenging those norms.

Crowley's performance as the nanny aligns with Butler's argumentation. By adopting a traditionally feminine-coded role, Crowley disrupts the artificiality of the gender binary and the societal expectations that accompany it. As a demon, Crowley's gender is not fixed, they are free to adopt whatever form or appearance is necessary to achieve their goals. This fluidity allows them to play with human conceptions of gender, revealing these categories as malleable and subject to manipulation. In this sense, Crowley's performance as the nanny serves as an act of gender play that challenges the patriarchal association of childcare and domesticity with femininity.

Crowley's portrayal of the nanny also operates within the realm of parody. Their exaggerated, almost campy depiction of the nanny, complete with a stern, authoritarian demeanor, adds a layer of comedic subversion to the scene. Halberstam notes that camp and parody can disrupt normative systems of power (cf. Halberstam 1998, 239). By exaggerating the role of the nanny figure, Crowley both adopts and mocks the expectations placed on women in domestic spaces. This performance aligns Crowley with other trickster figures in literature and mythology, such as Shakespeare's Puck, who use humor and absurdity to expose the contradictions in societal rules (cf. Garber 1992, 83). While such a humorous approach can be subversive, Crowley's portrayal as the nanny also raises questions about the use of humor and parody when male-presenting characters adopt female roles. The humor in Crowley's exaggerated nanny persona, with its draconic, almost caricatured depiction of maternal authority, can be seen as part of a broader tradition in which male characters dress as women to mock, rather than genuinely engage with the complexities of female experience. Such performances often rely on the exaggeration of traits associated with femininity, not to threaten the gender binary but to reassure audiences of its rigidity through parody. Butler views drag as having the power to disrupt essentialist beliefs in gender, stating that "the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (Butler 1999, 174). But Butler addition-

ally notes that “parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (Butler 1999, 176f.). This comedic trope risks reinforcing rather than challenging gender stereotypes by reducing the complexity of gender roles to a series of visual and behavioral clichés. Consequently, instead of truly queering gender, these performances can trivialize not only the lived experiences of women but also those who inhabit non-normative gender identities. In this context, Crowley’s nanny act, while revealing the performative nature of gender, engages with this problematic territory. The comedic value derived from their portrayal is closely tied to the incongruity of a male-presenting character adopting a feminine role, thus situating the humor in the discomfort of transgressing traditional gender norms rather than in genuine subversion. As a result, while Crowley’s tricksterism offers a critique of societal expectations, it also participates in a comedic tradition that has historically used gender non-conformity as a source of ridicule, rather than as a space for transformative dialogue about gender fluidity.

Beyond the nanny episode, it is important to consider the broader context of Crowley’s appearance and behavior throughout *Good Omens*. Crowley’s aesthetic primarily aligns with a cis-male form of subcultural masculinity, drawing on styles associated with glam rock, punk, and goth. Their dark suits, sunglasses, and slicked-back hair evoke the rebellious masculinity of rock stars like David Bowie or Lou Reed, performers who, while playing with the boundaries of masculinity, remained firmly situated within a male-coded aesthetic. Jack Halberstam’s work on subcultural masculinities provides a useful lens for understanding the limits of Crowley’s gender play. In *Female Masculinity* (1998), Halberstam explores how theatrical subcultures allow for alternative expressions and explorations of masculinity that challenge mainstream gender norms but often stop short of disrupting the binary structure of gender itself (cf. Halberstam 1998, 156, 215, and 250). Crowley’s appearance, particularly their reliance on dark, tai-

lored clothing and sunglasses, fits within this tradition of subcultural, such as punk and goth, rebellion, where masculinity is reimaged as flamboyant and performative but not necessarily fluid. Crowley's sartorial choices suggest that while they engage in playful subversion, they do so within the boundaries of a perceived cis-male identity. Their appearance as the nanny is an exception rather than the rule, functioning as a temporary disguise rather than a sustained exploration of gender fluidity. According to Hyde (1998), tricksters who engage in gender-shifting behaviors, such as Loki in Norse mythology, often return to their original gender identity, reaffirming the binary structure rather than dismantling it (cf. Hyde 1998, 336). This pattern is evident in Crowley's character, who, despite momentarily adopting a female disguise, reverts to a male-coded aesthetic. As Halberstam (2005) notes, certain forms of gender play, especially when performed by cisgender men, often reinforce rather than challenge traditional gender binaries. In this sense, Crowley's appearance throughout *Good Omens*, while subversive in its rejection of mainstream masculinity, remains grounded in a male-coded aesthetic that does not fully disrupt the gender binary.

David Tennant's portrayal of Crowley further complicates the reading of the character as engaging in genuine gender play. As a cisgender male actor, Tennant brings a particular gendered embodiment to the role, reinforcing the association of Crowley with a cis-male identity. While Tennant's performance includes moments of flamboyance and fluidity, his star persona as a male actor limits the extent to which Crowley can be seen as truly gender-fluid. As Butler (1999) argues, the repeated performance of gender by individuals associated with a particular gender identity reinforces societal expectations around that identity (cf. Butler 1999, 139). Tennant's portrayal of Crowley, while subversive in some respects, ultimately reinforces the character's position as a male-coded trickster figure, further limiting the potential for genuine gender fluidity.

Crowley's manipulation of gender norms in *Good Omens* is not only a form of personal rebellion but also a broader challenge to Christian

authority, particularly the patriarchal structures that govern Heaven. Marilyn Jurich (1998) argues that androgynous appearances aid tricksters often to evade categorization and control, making them unpredictable and difficult for authority figures to manage (cf. Jurich 1998, 58). In the *Good Omens* TV series, Heaven is portrayed as a rigid, hierarchical system, with figures like the Archangel Gabriel embodying a form of hyper-masculine, bureaucratic authority. This portrayal of divine power aligns with what Rosemary Radford Ruether describes in *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983) as the patriarchal structure of Christian theology, where leadership is male and authority is grounded in rigid moral binaries (cf. Radford Ruether 1983, 12). Crowley's gender play serves as a subversive act that undermines this patriarchal authority. By adopting a maternal role, Crowley mocks the association of femininity with domesticity and caregiving, an association long reinforced by Christian theology. In taking on the role of the nanny, Crowley both inhabits and parodies the expectations placed on women within the patriarchal order, revealing these expectations as artificial constructs rather than inherent qualities. Furthermore, Crowley's playful manipulation of gender serves as a critique of Heaven's rigid moral system. As Michel Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), systems of authority are maintained through the regulation of bodies and the enforcement of norms (cf. Foucault 1977, 136), particularly around gender and sexuality. Crowley's refusal to conform to these norms, whether through their androgynous fashion choices or their adoption of a female-presenting role, disrupts the mechanisms through which Heaven's authority is reproduced. By playing with gender, Crowley reveals the instability of the moral binaries that underpin Heaven's power, offering a trickster's critique of the rigidity and inflexibility of divine authority. In summary, while Crowley's gender performances in *Good Omens* serve as acts of playful subversion, they also reveal the limitations of this subversive potential. Crowley's engagement with gender is often confined to temporary performances that reinforce the binary structures they seek to challenge. Despite this, their tricksterism still offers a valuable critique of societal and cosmic authority.

Mediating between Heaven and Hell: Beelzebub's tricksterism

In *Good Omens*, the depiction of authority and gender within a Christian cosmological framework is layered, particularly through the portrayal of God and the Metatron. God, voiced by a female actress (Frances McDormand), introduces an element of gender fluidity to the highest divine authority. As Julia Vanessa Paus argues, this female voice of God not only subverts patriarchal religious traditions but also reclaims narrative power, positioning a woman as the 'maker of meaning' and guiding force within the series' narrative structure (cf. Pauss 2023, 44). This choice complicates traditional Christian notions of God as a patriarchal, male figure. By casting a female voice actor for God, the show subtly subverts established expectations, suggesting a more fluid and inclusive interpretation of divine authority. However, this subversion is counterbalanced by the portrayal of the Metatron, the intradiegetic 'Voice of God,' embodied by an older male character (Derek Jacobi). The Metatron's presence reinforces patriarchal structures of power, creating a sharp contrast with the more fluid depiction of God. This dynamic highlights ongoing tensions within Christian theology, where God may transcend human gender categories, yet intermediary figures like the Metatron (or the Pope) remain firmly anchored in male-coded hierarchies.

This portrayal of gender and authority within Heaven sets the stage for examining how these themes play out in Hell. Beelzebub's character embodies the complexity of the trickster archetype, blending traits of androgynous gender performance with demonic authority, while also engaging in the playful subversion of established norms. Beelzebub's role as the leader of Hell positions them as a character who questions the traditional association between leadership and masculinity, particularly in Christian cosmology. Played by a female-identifying actress in a non-gender-specific costume and hairstyle, Beelzebub's androgynous presentation challenges the notion that authority must be tied to masculinity. Jurich's analysis (1998) of tricksters offers a useful lens for un-

derstanding Beelzebub's gender ambiguity. Jurich argues that androgyny as disguise is a key characteristic of many tricksters, allowing them to transcend gender norms and disrupt traditional power structures (cf. Jurich 1998, 33 ff.). Beelzebub's androgyny operates similarly, complicating expectations that demonic leadership must be associated with masculinity, opening the possibility for divine power to be understood as fluid, not inherently tied to human biological or social categories.

Beelzebub's tricksterism, like Lucifer's in Christian belief, is not confined to gender performance alone. Michael P. Carroll (1984) explains that tricksters often inhabit dual roles, both as "selfish buffoons" and "culture heroes" (Carroll 1984, 105), operating chaotically while also introducing significant advancements. Beelzebub's leadership of Hell mirrors this duality. On the one hand, they embody the chaos and disruption typically associated with devils and demons. On the other hand, their leadership demonstrates adherence to structured power, albeit within the confines of Hell. Beelzebub in their quest for the apocalypse as catalyst for the war between Heaven and Hell, like Lucifer, simultaneously subverts and reinforces the cosmic order, positioning them within the broader tradition of tricksters who straddle the line between creation and destruction. As Hyde (1998) notes, tricksters are boundary-crossers, often blurring the distinctions between good and evil, order and chaos. Beelzebub's position as leader of Hell, their goal of the apocalypse firmly set in the 'Great Plan,' the cosmic order, mirrors this trickster dynamic, revealing their capacity to navigate complex power structures. However, despite their subversive potential, Beelzebub's actions, like Lucifer's rebellion in Christian belief, remain contained within the moral ambiguity of Hell. Radford Ruether (1983) argues that in Christian theology, leadership is traditionally male and hierarchical (cf. Radford Ruether 1983, 12 f.), which is disrupted by Beelzebub's character. Yet, their role as the leader of Hell, an *othered* space, limits their ability to fully disrupt the cosmic order. Similar to Lucifer, Beelzebub is essential to maintaining the balance between Heaven and Hell, even though they challenge the patriarchal structures that govern these realms. Tim Callahan's (1991) analysis of the in-

tersection between tricksters, devils, and fools illuminates how figures like Beelzebub often embody both divine and infernal traits, operating as agents of disruption while also reinforcing cosmic order. Lucifer's rebellion exemplifies this duality: challenging divine authority while remaining integral to the theological framework. Similarly, Beelzebub's leadership ensures the continuation of the binary opposition between Heaven and Hell, positioning them as both rebel and upholder of cosmic balance. Blurring the lines between the divine and the demonic, Beelzebub, much like Lucifer, who defies divine authority but remains crucial to the theological framework, operates within the boundaries of the cosmic order they seek to subvert. As a trickster figure, Beelzebub embodies the tensions between rebellion and containment, chaos and structure, a hallmark of both Lucifer and mythical trickster figures. The introduction of Beelzebub and Gabriel's romance in season 2 adds another layer to Beelzebub's status as a trickster. Their relationship transcends the boundaries of Heaven and Hell, complicating the rigid structures that define their realms. Beelzebub's androgynous presentation and Gabriel's hyper-masculine portrayal initially reinforce the binary associations of their respective realms, Hell's chaos and Heaven's rigid order. However, their romance humanizes both characters, revealing vulnerabilities that undermine their authoritative personas. Their connection creates a liminal space where traditional power dynamics are suspended, much like the space occupied by tricksters. In this sense, their romance becomes a radical act of defiance, subverting the cosmic order by challenging the binary structures of Heaven and Hell, even acting as a precedence for other characters like Crowley and Aziraphale. However, like Beelzebub's tricksterism, the subversive potential of their romance is constrained by the narrative's return to order, offering only a momentary disruption.

This containment of subversion within Hell is a broader theme in *Good Omens*, where trickster figures like Crowley and Beelzebub challenge authority but remain within the boundaries of moral and gendered otherness. Beelzebub's character, while fluid and subversive, is ultimately made part of the divine order by the narrative's reliance

on the binary opposition of Heaven and Hell, good and evil, order and chaos—an opposition integral to the supposed cosmic order.

Subversion contained: The infernal realm as Other

The characters of Crowley and Beelzebub engage in playful manipulation of gender norms and power structures, reflecting trickery that challenges authority. However, despite their subversive potential, their actions are contained within the boundaries of Hell, a space of moral ambiguity that neutralizes their possible rebellion. In *Good Omens*, Hell is portrayed as a chaotic and morally ambiguous space, existing in opposition to the rigid, hierarchical structure of Heaven. While Heaven is governed by strict moral codes and clear distinctions between good and evil, Hell mirrors Heaven's bureaucratic order in a more dysfunctional and chaotic form. This portrayal aligns with historical depictions of Hell as a place where societal taboos and transgressions can be explored, yet always within a controlled and *othered* framework.

Jeffrey B. Russell, in his study *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (1986), argues that Hell has long served as a containment space for moral and social transgressions. According to Russell, Hell provides a place where society's fears and taboos can be projected and confronted, but these fears are safely distanced from the social order by being located in a space of moral ambiguity and otherness (cf. Russell 1986, 27f.). In *Good Omens*, Hell functions accordingly, offering a space where characters like Crowley and Beelzebub can engage in acts of gender play and manipulation of authority—but without threatening the broader cosmic order. Crowley and Beelzebub's association with Hell frames their subversive acts as part of the natural (dis-)order of the infernal realm. While they challenge the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of Heaven, their rebellion is always situated within the moral ambiguity of Hell, preventing it from fully destabilizing their binary opposition. Hell, as Russell suggests, provides a safe space for the exploration of subversive ideas, but these ideas are

ultimately contained within a framework that reinforces the broader social order. The status of Crowley and Beelzebub as demons further reduces their subversive potential. While their acts of gender play and manipulation challenge the authority of Heaven, their association with Hell ensures that these acts are framed as part of a chaotic, morally ambiguous realm, rather than as genuine threats to the established order. This dynamic reflects Foucault's (1977) assertion that systems of power often allow for a certain amount of resistance or subversion but contain it within controlled boundaries to prevent systemic disruption (cf. Foucault 1977, 282). The subversive behavior is absorbed into the chaotic framework of Hell, limiting the impact of their rebellion. Crowley, for instance, frequently challenges the authority of Heaven through acts of tricksterism, such as manipulating the Antichrist's upbringing or resisting the apocalypse. Beelzebub's character operates in a comparable way. As the leader of Hell's forces, Beelzebub engages in manipulation and cunning that challenge the rigid, patriarchal authority of Heaven. Since their actions are framed as part of Hell's inherent disorder, they do not destabilize the binary structures that govern the universe. Instead, Beelzebub works explicitly towards the same goals as Gabriel. This containment of subversion through association with Hell reflects what Foucault describes as the disciplinary power of systems of authority, which allow for acts of resistance but contain them within controlled spaces to prevent genuine disruption.

The containment of Crowley and Beelzebub's subversion within Hell raises important questions about the limits of tricksterism in *Good Omens*. While both characters embody aspects of the trickster archetype, their subversion is framed within a space of moral ambiguity, limiting its impact on the broader social and cosmic order. This dynamic reflects a broader trend in literature and popular culture, where trickster figures are often allowed to engage in acts of rebellion, but only within spaces of otherness or marginality. Hyde (1988) notes that tricksters are frequently associated with spaces of liminality or otherness, which contain their subversive potential and prevent them from fully destabilizing the systems they challenge (cf. Hyde 1988, 81). In

Good Omens, Hell functions as this space of containment, allowing Crowley and Beelzebub to engage in acts of tricksterism that challenge the authority of Heaven, but without posing a genuine threat to the binary structure of good and evil. This dynamic is particularly evident in Crowley's character arc. Throughout the series, Crowley resists the authority of both Heaven and Hell, using their tricksterism to subvert the divine plan and manipulate the course of events. However, Crowley's subversive acts are always framed as part of their role as a demon, and as such, they are absorbed into the chaotic framework of Hell, a space of moral ambiguity, preventing them from fully disrupting the cosmic order.

Conclusion

In *Good Omens*, the exploration of tricksterism, gender fluidity, and resistance to authority is embedded into the broader themes of cosmic order, morality, and the binaries of Heaven and Hell. Crowley and Beelzebub serve as embodiments of the trickster archetype, using their subversive behaviors to challenge established norms, be it through the playful manipulation of gender or the undermining of patriarchal structures. Their acts of rebellion reflect the trickster's role in destabilizing binaries. However, their subversive potential is constrained by the narrative's containment of these characters within Hell, a space of moral ambiguity that neutralizes their challenges to authority. The TV series offers a nuanced exploration of tricksterism, wherein Crowley and Beelzebub's defiance, while impactful on a personal level, is framed within the confines of Hell's chaos. By aligning their rebellion with Hell's inherent disorder, *Good Omens* highlights how systems of power allow for controlled acts of resistance but prevent these acts from fully destabilizing the systems at work. This resonates with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, which ensures that subversive behavior, though permitted, remains contained within set boundaries to safeguard the overarching structure of authority. Moreover, *Good Omens*

complicates traditional Christian cosmology by introducing gender fluidity and ambiguity through characters like Crowley, Beelzebub, and even God. The tricksters in *Good Omens*, much like their mythological counterparts, offer temporary disruptions that question the stability of moral and social structures, but they are ultimately absorbed into the system they seek to subvert. Through this lens, the show offers a reflection on the limits of resistance in a world governed by binaries, suggesting that while subversion can offer valuable critiques, it is often contained within the very structures it seeks to challenge.

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Omnia Vincit Amor

Decolonizing Love in *Good Omens*

Paushali Bhattacharya Acuña & Elias Acuña

This chapter takes a decolonial approach to the television series *Good Omens*, based on the eponymous book by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. In this chapter, we read the trace of coloniality in the series to argue that love functions as a mode of decolonization from within the imperial center. We analyze the relationship between Anathema and Newton in the first season, followed by Beelzebub and Gabriel in the second season of the show to delineate how love empowers these couples to overcome the limits of colonial thought. To this end, first, we locate the signifiers of coloniality in the text that are elided, only to be read as a trace through the prohibition in loving the *other*. Secondly, we examine the decolonial praxis of loving the *other* in the aforementioned couples, highlighting how their choice to love transgresses both political and theological boundaries that are affirmed and enforced through the project of colonization. Finally, through an exploration of the setting, cast, and production choices, we conclude that the show also posits a decolonized perspective on the colonial center of England and the decolonizing agency of love.

Introduction

This is an essay about unconventional love. About romance that thrives across differences and dares to speak its name. It is also about transgression. About forbidden love and rebellious lovers. Unabashed in their transgressive love, these couples decolonize spaces, places, and minds, advocating for a passionate love that does not relent to authority. Their

advocacy was well-received, in particular, by a Mexican-American and an Indian researcher in the summer of 2023—when they watched this show together. This essay is also about their love, across languages, customs, cuisines, and continents. This is an essay about love in strange places.

The TV series *Good Omens* portrays love in its different forms through the millennia-long partnership between Aziraphale, a sophisticated angel, and Crowley, a rakish demon, as they navigate modern-day England to prevent the impending apocalypse. The series unfolds at a quick pace, where quirky characters, eccentric settings, and surreal, humorous encounters bring ancient prophecies into a contemporary landscape. Through two seasons of six episodes each, *Good Omens* reimagines eschatological epistemes as it lays bare the enduring influence of colonial power structures, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of how love emerges as a form of resistance from within the heart of the empire.

In this chapter, we read the traces of coloniality in *Good Omens* to argue that love functions as a mode of decolonization from within the imperial center. First, we analyze the relationship between Anathema and Newton in the first season, then between Beelzebub and Gabriel in the second season of the show to delineate how love empowers these couples to overcome the limits of colonial thought. To this end, first, we locate the signifiers of coloniality in the text that are elided, only to be read as a trace through the prohibition in loving the *other*. Secondly, we examine the decolonial act of loving the *other* in the aforementioned couples, highlighting how their choice to love transgresses both political and theological boundaries that are affirmed and enforced through the project of colonization. Finally, through an exploration of the setting, cast, and production choices, we contend that the show also posits a decolonized perspective on the colonial center of England and the decolonizing agency of love.

Our study of decolonial love in *Good Omens* deliberately omits an analysis of the relationship between the protagonists of the show, Aziraphale and Crowley, in an attempt to highlight the obfuscated love

stories from the margin. The pairings that we address in this chapter exist at the interstices of the text but are no less crucial to the movement of the plot. These couples function as the lens through which the trace of coloniality is presented in this show. In this chapter, we seek to elucidate our decolonial framework in *praxis* (in an Aristotelian understanding of the term) by directing our inquiry towards these markers of coloniality that subtly pervade the text. In other words, we seek to re-direct our focus to love at the margins of the text: towards the occluded omnipresence of colonial thought, the vital, dynamic couplings, and their quotidian subversions of colonialist ideologies that inform their *praxis* of loving and being loved. These relationships reflect a range of politics that challenge dominant power structures and reimagine intimacy through vulnerability, fluidity, and rebellion. This approach decentralizes the intricate binary of Heaven and Hell, embodied by Aziraphale and Crowley, and emphasizes more on localized acts of decolonization within the personal and communal spaces inhabited by these couples.

Decolonized Love

In this paper, ‘decolonization’ is understood as a project that not only concerns the fragmented subjects of colonization, but also the implicit, complicit, and collateral subjects. Altered, through different paradigms, by the forces of an imperialist ideological apparatus that spanned continents and centuries, these individuals emerge as subjects that imagine and populate the spaces touched by coloniality. The iterations of decoloniality in *Good Omens*, as discussed in the following sections, are also strongly rooted in praxis, anchored in expressions of love that demand a dissolution of colonialist ideologies and assumptions. In their essay “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang argue that the metaphorical use of the term ‘decolonization’ softens its political edge: “[T]he easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. [...] [It] prob-

lematically attempt[s] to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (Tuck/Yang 2012, 3). However, they also state that the discipline of postcolonial studies can yield to different paradigms of decolonization for their distinct socio-historical loci of epistemic origin (cf. Tuck/Yang 2012, 4f.). Following Yang and Tuck, this essay proposes two axes in the vast discourses of decolonial practices apparent in the *Good Omens* narrative, by a reading of the signifiers of colonialism occluded in the text. The first axis analyzes decoloniality as portrayed through the uncanny coupling of Anathema Device and Newton Pulsifer—witch and witchfinder, respectively, through the love for the *other*. The second axis reads the colonial prohibition of love for the political *other*, as depicted through the unexpected relationship of the demon Beelzebub and the angel Gabriel. These axes of decolonization directly stem from a locus of enunciation within the metropolitan space of the colonial center of England, where “imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (Spivak 1985, 235). Thus, beyond its historical significance as the center of a bygone empire, in *Good Omens*, England is also presented as a cosmopolitan space, replete with characters across the spectrum of race, class, and gender, where an encounter with the trace of the postcolonial *other* is inevitable, presenting hybrid loci for projects of decolonization.

Central to our theoretical framework is also the *other* and the Derridean ‘trace’ of the coloniality that continues to haunt the text as a present absence, defying the possibilities of representation as well as erasure. Mark Fisher’s article “What is Hauntology?” (2012) presents a succinct interpretation of the concept of the ‘trace’ as elaborated in Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1976), which Fisher describes as a particular narrative of history that can only be read through its disappearance, the empty space it leaves behind, signaling something that once was, but is now erased. It exists as a *haunting*: meaning, in the presence of an absence, in the proximity of relationality between articulation and inarticulation, between Heaven and Hell, or war and peace.

Reading the presence of the postcolonial in the text through its absence, we read the decoloniality of the love discussed in this chapter through a deconstructivist lens. This contention is best illustrated in *Of Grammatology*, where Derrida describes how the signifier of language is inflated: “This inflation of [now] the sign ‘language’ is the inflation of the sign itself, absolute inflation, inflation itself” (Derrida 1976, 6). Again, the trace is manifested:

“Yet, by one of its aspects or shadows, it is itself still a sign: this crisis is also a symptom. It indicates, as if in spite of itself, that a historico-metaphysical epoch must finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon. It must do so not only because all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play but also because, for the same reason, language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear, when it ceases to be self-assured, contained, and guaranteed by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it.” (Derrida 1976, 6)

This ‘vulnerability of life’ mentioned by Derrida serves as the threshold for our decolonial framework that is informed by articulations of that inflated ‘rationality’ which is no longer informed by a ‘logos’—centric or otherwise (cf. Derrida 1976, 10). Thus, in the show, the trace of colonization exceeds its actual presence, wherein it must contend with a greater force — that of decolonial love.

Situated within a decidedly theological universe, the *other* in the text appears as a movement *beyond* the idea of the *self* as delineated in liberal humanist traditions, wherein ‘to be’ is contained in inflexible ontological and epistemological categories that are built on the systematic exclusion of racial, gender, or sexual difference. In *Orientalism* (1987), Edward Said delineates the postcolonial subject as the “source of [Europe]’s civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (Said

1987, 1). In *Good Omens*, the *other* becomes a recurring trope, “[f]or few otherings in Western culture can rival the Christian-based dichotomy of Heaven and Hell” (King 2021, 33). Reified in moral hierarchies of good and evil, aided by the Christian evangelism that accompanied imperial projects in the colonies, it is not hard to discern how the colonized *other* manifests as dark, debased, and downright hellish in the Western cultural imagination. However, in *Good Omens*, the *other* becomes a site of potential transformation, embodying a movement toward fluid and relational forms different from the ‘heavenly’ ideal of humanity constructed in the West as the cisgendered heterosexual male, replete with an empirical rationality that sets him apart from his more ‘savage’ postcolonial counterparts. In *Good Omens*, although this ‘difference’ can be easily located in the characters and their choice of romantic partners, the markers of colonial thought that severely qualify the exclusive categories of the *self* and the *other* appear less conspicuous. Thus, this chapter is a study of the romance between the oppositional figures of a witch and a witch-hunter as well as an Archangel and a Prince of Hell, through the binaries of the *self/other*, vis-à-vis the trace of coloniality that informs these compartmentalized identities.

Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh’s book, *On Decoloniality* (2018), places the idea of decoloniality as a methodology that seeks to “interrupt the idea of dislocated, disembodied, and disengaged abstraction, and to disobey the universal signifier that is the rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality, and the West’s global model” (Mignolo/Walsh 2018, 3). In this sense, our essay ties the cosmological structure of the Judeo-Christian universe in the show with the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality developed by Mignolo and Walsh. Identifying the trace of coloniality in the show allows us to posit Earth in a colonial situation under Heaven and Hell. Posited between the warring forces of Heaven and Hell, Earth in *Good Omens* is an apt example of the colonial matrix of power that situates the continued existence of its selfsame structure.

On a clandestine meeting in the episode “Every Day,” Gabriel and Beelzebub agree that they see the benefit of maintaining “the status quo:

staticky, and... quoeey” (S2E6): a function they have been achieving so far through the continued presence of Aziraphale and Crowley on Earth since its inception. Controlling, orchestrating, and interfering in the happenings on Earth since the Great War, Heaven and Hell—in the form of their respective delegates Aziraphale and Crowley—, broker an agreement among themselves to collaborate to ensure this continuation of a colonial presence. On Earth, Aziraphale and Crowley collaborate to “stay out of each other’s way, lend a hand when needed” (S1E3): an agreement not unlike those of apocryphal narratives espionage among colonial officials in colonial United States (cf. Daigler 2014, 1 ff.). Ironically, their decision to ease the processes of perpetuation also marks a departure from the friction innate to their binary identities as emissaries of Heaven and Hell, enacting a disruption of the same status quo that they aspire to.

The reassurance of continuation of a ‘heavenly’ order on Earth, following the defeat of Satan, is predicated in the show on the ineffability of a divine plan. “It’s all part of the Great Plan. It’s not for us to speculate. It’s ineffable” (S1E1), says Aziraphale as he watches Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden, echoing the open-ended iterations of providential will in “inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell” (2 Corinthians 12:4, NIV). In *Good Omens*, the ineffability of providential will is contrasted with the strictly vertical hierarchies of Heaven and Hell: their innate oppositionalities foreclosing any possibility for a reimagination of these relationalities, through modes both effable and ineffable. Forging relationships across the colonial divide, the romantic couples of Anathema Device and Newton Pulsifer as well as Beelzebub and Gabriel both pose a challenge to colonial biases and assumptions, both political and theological, through romance that thrives in difference. In other words, the dominion of Heaven, Hell, Earth, and all of their ‘ineffable’ ideologies fall flat in the face of the triumphant articulations of love that transcends the limit of colonial thought.

Moreover, looking at the trace of coloniality and imperialist thought in *Good Omens* is prompted by its English setting and Christian framework, replete with the tentacular network of benefits and privileges

that inform these ideations. As the colonial center of an empire that spanned nearly four centuries across the globe, the space of England is imbricated with explicit and implicit ideologies of coloniality; conjunctively, Christianity has followed the imperialist project of the West to the previously colonized nations of the world, often working in tandem with colonial settlers towards common ends. In the TV show, situated within the Judeo-Christian cosmological universe of Heaven, Hell, and Earth, the quaint charms of the idyllic village of Tadfield and Aziraphale's cozy bookstore on a colonial-style street in Soho in London emerge as centers of narrated action. In the show, colonial influences present themselves as inscribed into the social text—ranging from the neocolonial structural columns on the city streets to the romanticized pastoral representations of country life. In addition, beyond the historical connotations of coloniality, the show also situates Earth as a Third Space in Homi K. Bhabha's terminology that exists in a colonial relationship under the twin empires of Heaven and Hell. This, in turn, creatively complicates the theological structure of Heaven and Hell within a hierarchical paradigm: Earth becomes the site from which both colonizers grapple with each other, it also serves as the ontological and epistemological space for decolonizing practices like love.

Our claim to Earth as a site of decolonial praxis is informed by its relationality to the binary powers of Heaven, Hell and everything in-between: not as an 'end *nor* a beginning of an epoch' but as the site of cyclicity, multiplicity, plurality—hybridity. Reading Bhabha's "Third Space" in *The Location of Culture* (1994) in relation to Derrida's 'trace,' Bhabha presents Derrida's formulation through postcolonialism as "the structure of symbolization itself" (Bhabha 1994, 36). In other words, Bhabha alludes to the selfsame phenomenon of inflation mentioned in *Of Grammatology*: it is the cause of a 'linguistic difference' informed by and of difference in relation to a "present time" and "a specific place" (Bhabha 1994, 36) that creates meaning.¹ Whither, then, do the acts

1 Derrida informs Bhabha in his iteration of the construction of cultural knowledge through a postcolonial 'turn' similar to Derrida's contention with modernity and postmodernity in *Of Grammatology* during that disjuncture of time that made up

and actants of the Third Space enact their differences in *Good Omens* if not on Earth, our own signified Third Space—the sign and site of ambivalence. Emerging through their mutual feelings of sympathy, understanding, and love, Earth becomes the site of rebellion against theological narratives of Heaven and Hell, destabilizing the power dynamics and creating a site for resistance, ambiguity, and the rearticulation of decolonial love through difference. According to Bhabha, these differences are not static binaries of “the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition,” but “a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (Bhabha 1994, 2).

In this sense, the Third Space allows the meeting and blurring of cultural demarcations, resulting in the allowance of new hybrid identities and knowledge:

“The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence *in the act of interpretation.*” (Bhabha 1994, 36, our emphasis)

Ambivalence as a defining attribution of the Third Space becomes the hauntology of both the trace of coloniality and that which in *Good*

the second half of the last century. “The linguistic difference that informs any cultural performance,” writes Bhabha, “is dramatized in the common semiotic account of the disjuncture between the subject of a proposition (*enonce*) and the subject of enunciation, which is not represented in the statement but which is the acknowledgement of its discursive embeddedness and address, its cultural positionality, its reference to a present time and a specific place” (Bhabha 1994, 36). We do not intend to follow the intricacies of the relationality of epochs such as modernity and postmodernity proper but instead take up this space to delineate the additional complexities surrounding the deconstruction of the trace afforded by Bhabha’s insight into its temporal dimension that “destroys the logics of synchronicity and evolution which traditionally authorize the subject of cultural knowledge” (Bhabha 1994, 36) and thus informs our decolonial praxis in *Good Omens*.

Omens is the ‘sign’ of the ‘end’ or ‘the end of the sign.’ Since the meaning of the utterance is neither ‘one nor the other,’ it renders the logos ‘incomprehensible’ and therefore the Third Space “destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as [...] the narrative of the Western nation which Benedict Anderson so perceptively describes as being written in homogeneous, serial time” (Bhabha 1994, 37). Thus, as a destructive force that simultaneously ‘creates’ ambivalence through its act of destruction, the Third Space is the site from which decolonial love affords to create, delineate, and explore its very own ambivalence in relation to this space.

Anathema & Newton

Enmeshed within the colonial chain of signification that governs the relationality of ‘Heaven, Hell, and everything in-between,’ Anathema Device and Newton Pulsifer’s romance is heralded by the fateful encounter between their ancestors. In the first season (S1E2), Anathema’s foremother, Agnes Nutter, self-styled as ‘Agnes Nutter, witch,’ confronts Witchfinder Major ‘Thou-Shalt-Not-Commit-Adultery’ Pulsifer in mid-seventeenth century Lancashire during a witch-hunt. Brief descriptions of Agnes and her sorcerous practices are available through the conversation between Adultery Pulsifer before his ill-fated rendezvous with the ‘witch.’ Various accounts from her neighbors cited morning walks, fortune-telling, eating fiber, and curing infectious diseases as proof of witchcraft; additionally, Agnes also responded to the pricking of her skin with a “regulation-issue Witchfinder’s pin” by claiming that it “cured her arthritis” (S1E2). In the following sequence, Agnes presents an unlikely depiction of the burning of the witch: neither the stoic martyr, nor the pleading victim, Agnes leads the way to her own pyre, detonating large quantities of gunpowder and nails concealed in her petticoats as soon as she is set aflame. The burning of the “last true witch of England” (S1E2) triggers the events that culminate in the apocalypse that runs central to the plot of *Good Omens*.

It also introduces the text of *The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*—a compilation of Agnes’s predictions bequeathed to her daughter, which resonate throughout the show through a series of narrative frameworks. Serialized, documented, and finite, these prophecies become a sustained leitmotif in the text, delineating the end of the world and beyond. For Agnes and her descendants, the book becomes a testament to her skill in sorcery, prompting her generations-removed granddaughter in Sacramento to also identify as a witch: “You could say that we are professional descendants” (S1E4), quips Anathema.

Not unlike her foremother, Anathema also becomes the focus of a witch-hunt in the show—located in present-day England, the modern-day setting of the show does not prevent her from being cast out as the *other* in the quaint village of Tadfield. The stigma of witchcraft follows her arrival at the village, as Pepper reports how, “Mrs. Henderson told my mother that the lady there gets a witches’ newspaper” (S1E2). Though centuries apart, through the persecution of Agnes Nutter and Anathema Device, one can hear the resonances of the Pendle Witch Trials of 1612 and their alleged associations with the gunpowder plot of 1605: in spite of the inconsistencies in the date, *Good Omens* leaves no room for doubt as to the historical source of inspiration since the last names ‘Nutter’ and ‘Device’ are borrowed directly from those who stood accused in those trials (cf. Sharpe 2003, 3). Four hundred years later, the persistent echoes of the fear of sorcery continue to haunt the imagination of rural England, reinforced by the colonial undertones brought forth by the encounters with the postcolonial *other* on colonizing missions in Early Modern England and its colonies overseas.

Witch-hunting in England does not have its roots in the postcolonial, but in the texts of Judeo-Christian religion: “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead” (Deuteronomy 18:10–11, NIV), states the Bible. However, not unlike other aspects of life in Early Modern England, the notion of witchcraft is also severely qualified by the colonial projects undertaken in both

public and private sectors overseas. As a device of oppression that derived its authority from Early Modern church and state, hundreds of documented cases of witches' executions in England reinforced vigorous theological and legal scrutiny in civil, social, and interpersonal relationships, as countless acts of lynching and extrajudicial killings were brandished as community-led social justice (cf. Thurston 2013, 1ff.). Likewise, in colonial America, Puritanism found itself exterminating witches throughout New England. However, as Peter Elmer notes, Early Modern understandings of witchcraft were largely predicated on broader political ideologies among the elite judges and illiterate masses alike (cf. Elmer 2016, 3).

Although to the present-day audience of *Good Omens*, Agnes's partiality towards cardiovascular exercise, a fibrous diet, and healing abilities do not seem alien, it appears as "monstrous" (S1E2) to Adultery Pulsifer who arrives at Lancashire with the sole purpose of presiding over her trial and execution. Agnes's death also simultaneously kills her persecutor with the makeshift bomb, as Adultery realizes his predicament mere seconds before his demise. Firm in his convictions about an inherent superiority between the masculine, puritan *self* and the feminine, heretic *other*—a conviction reified in the quotidian benefits and services procured through colonialism, Adultery becomes a figure of patriarchal authority in the show, replete with colonialist assumptions that characterized his desire to subjugate, terrify, prosecute, and exterminate women at the margins of rural life. Centuries later, a similar attitude towards witchcraft is presented to the audience through a game of the 'British Inquisition,' where Adam and his friends stage a highly abridged version of a witch-hunt. In the episode "The Book," Adam explains to Anathema that he is the chief inquisitor and Brian is the torturer, as they proceed to 'arrest' an awkward Wensleydale in a cardboard-box-made witch's hat, as Pepper shouts reminders for him to deny the charges. In this regard, Shadwell's twenty-first century Witchfinder Army also echoes the persistent undertones of colonially-driven patriarchy, loaded with the symbolic weight of the military titles, weapons, reports, and a chain of command.

Descending from a witch, Anathema's approach to witchcraft significantly differs from those around her. Guided through centuries of prophecies, Anathema's life is largely structured by Agnes's predictions, insofar as during her introduction sequence in the series, Anathema is depicted as doodling on the first page of Agnes's book. For Anathema, her book not only functions as a vehicle of prophetic determinism, but also a living document of irrefutable ancestral knowledge. In this regard, Anathema's progressive outlook towards the complexities of human knowledge and lived experience contrasts sharply with Shadwell's absurd crusade against imagined witches, mirroring the colonial impulse to label and demonize non-traditional knowledge systems as 'witchcraft' in order to justify their elimination. Generationally circulated through a line of inheritance, Agnes's prophecies function as "an expansive forest of symbols" (Clark 1999, 82), allowing for a decolonized reading of practices of 'witchcraft' as alternative epistemologies that inform the intellectual history of the world. The showmakers also seem to allude to this alternative approach to esoteric knowledge, as Agnes's dying declaration also decries the fate of the ignorant masses who persecute those ahead of their times.

Anathema's ancestors being accused of witchcraft is not the wildest part of her relationship with Newton—it is the fact that she affirms her identity as a witch when Newton denies himself as a witch-hunter. In *Good Omens*, these star-crossed lovers come together to prevent the end of the world through a prophecy. In their relationship, Agnes's witchcraft, replete with all the associations of the racial/feminine *other*, plays a cardinal role: neither of them faces the tragic death customary for ill-fated love; but instead consummate their passions through yet another prophecy—this time, one about them. In the episode titled "Saturday Morning Funtime" (StE4), after his car accident, Newton wakes up in her bedroom, and Anathema greets him with a mysterious smile: her previously faltering faith in her quest to halt the apocalypse is restored when she closely regards the guest Agnes had foretold. Through their rushed introduction, Anathema breezes through a playful exchange; doe-eyed and cheeks flush, she already appears to be in love with her betokened beau

(Fig. 1). Guided by Agnes's prophecies, she chooses to entrust a stranger with her ancestral mission: "Let the wheel of fate turn. Let hearts enjoin. There are other fires than mine. When the whirlwind whirls, reach out to one another" (S1E4). Uncoupling theologically politicized ideologies through ancestral knowledge, Anathema's choice to love Newton emerges as an act of decolonization, firmly refuting the negative connotations of witchcraft, as well as the ramifications of coloniality.



Fig. 1: "Your family obviously has a tendency to burn mine, so I ... I took your matches."
Anathema & Newt (S1E4)

Newton, on the other hand, quits his career as a failed computer engineer and finds himself in the midst of an impending nuclear war with the capability of annihilating life on earth. The whirlwind of events that brought him to Anathema are nothing short of spectacular, from joining the Witchfinder's Army to encountering aliens. In the final episode of the first season, "The Very Last Day of the Rest of Their Lives," he saves the world from nuclear Armageddon through a confession: "I'm really the opposite" (S1E6), he says, admitting that he has always had terrible luck with fixing computers. Newton's confession, though seemingly insignificant in the wider context of the Christian cosmology, depicts an affirmative action to decolonize his purely rational frame of reference: thwarted by computers his whole life, he relents to the

possibilities of alternate ontologies, an almost Keatsian negative capability that enables him to depart from his ancestral patriarchal position amongst the men that condoned, sanctioned, and practiced the public execution of witches. Empowered by his love for Anathema, he also discards the second volume of prophecies, surrendering himself to the ineffability of love and life.

It is no coincidence that in the discourses of the end of the world, England serves as the epicenter in *Good Omens*. England has also been a home to Aziraphale and Crowley, long before the arrival of the Antichrist. Throughout the show, with its colorful streets, quaint villages, and eclectic cafés, England also provides a charming backdrop to the unlikely couples in the show, infusing it with its own local flavor. It is not only its status as the center of a former empire that gives England its colonial color: ritualized into local English practices, the presence of the postcolonial is manifest in the material culture of spices, textiles, sugar, and even coffee and tea. Thus, throughout the show, colonial encounters leave a readable Derridean “trace” through the tangible and intangible products that have been acquired through a gruesome history of violence and appropriation. Marked by coloniality, these material objects, although co-opted within the everyday English life, become insistent signifiers of the ideologies of the empire— especially those that have been internalized and normalized over centuries as “culture.”

The hypervisible legacy of England’s prolonged, sustained culture of imperialism is most apparent in the large immigrant presence in the country, especially from the Commonwealth nations. This distribution of population across racial and ethnic lines disrupts the myth of a monolithic Anglo-Saxon national identity, revealing instead a demographic shaped by centuries of forced and voluntary migrations from previously colonized countries over several centuries. This diversity is also reflected in the cast of the series, with Puerto-Rican actress Adria Arjona playing Anathema in the first season and Anglo-Indian Shelley Conn starring as Beelzebub in the second. However, in spite of its significant and diverse immigrant population, England has not been historically friendly to immigrants—anti-immigrant riots spanning 27

towns and cities as recently as 2024 (cf. Downs 2024). Against this backdrop of historical injustices and systemic exclusions, *Good Omens* offers a unique perspective of the cosmopolitan spirit of the nation. This color-conscious casting presents opportunities for transgressive alliances that challenge the innate racist and xenophobic assumptions that characterize colonial violence. Inscribing the geographical space of England with the possibility of love across the lines of colonization, these couples articulate radical possibilities that transcend colonial imaginations. This love, in turn, becomes its own praxis of locality-building: newer, more inclusive to the ontological philosophies of diverse cultures, beyond the ambit of purely imitational performativity.

Beelzebub & Gabriel

Besides the references to a divine will, a discerning audience can also perhaps locate allusions to the biblical battles for land between the Philistines and other Canaanite tribes, as well as the hierarchical positions of Heaven and Hell in the Christian cosmological universe in *Good Omens*, underscoring further iterations of colonialism. The intertestamental period between the events of the Old Testament and those in the New Testament created hierarchies of angels and demons among other texts and apocrypha that expand the understanding of the Judeo-Christian religion. Gabriel, on the one hand, plays a major role in the coming of the Messiah, telling Mary Magdalene that she is blessed among all women (cf. Luke 1:26–28, NIV). Likewise, hierarchies of demons and their contributions to Hell have been illustrated in occult literature across the centuries (cf. *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, *Greek Magical Papyri*, and *The Magical Treatise of Solomon*). The figure of Beelzebub, on the other hand, though not mentioned in the Bible because of intertestamental origins, is sometimes interchangeable with Satan, its identitarian roots situated in the pagan deity of the Philistines (cf. Otten 2023). In the show, Gabriel and Beelzebub are introduced as power-hungry generals who just wish to end the world to bring forth

another ‘Great War.’ However, at the end of the first season, after the failed execution of the end of the world, an unlikely camaraderie develops between the two as they consider a future without an apocalypse, unbeknownst to the audience and the other characters.

Through a short montage of Gabriel’s memories, *Good Omens* presents his brief and wondrous romance with Beelzebub through a series of ‘dates’ at the Resurrectionist pub in Edinburgh (Fig. 2). Connecting over the challenges and affordances of their respective roles, Gabriel and Beelzebub find common ground in their shared frustrations over their thwarted plans of Armageddon. Their first meeting scarcely seems accidental, as Gabriel refuses to let Beelzebub sit at his table when he fails to recognize their new face, the communist hammer and sickle glowing bright in the wintry night outside of the pub window suggesting Cold War tropes of espionage and unionization. In their first clandestine meeting, the couple appears as heads of armies meeting in a neutral space for “background talks” (S2E6), reluctant to consider a compromise, yet reluctantly admitting to their grievances against their own. Cautious conversation between the duo ends in a mutual understanding: neither archangels nor princes of Hell can avoid succumbing to the expectations of their ideological axes of domination and conquest.

Seated across a table, grumbling about their recent defeat at the hands of Aziraphale and Crowley, it is easy to discern the parallels between Beelzebub and Gabriel. Brought together by a general disillusionment towards their roles and a repressed disgruntlement towards their respective colleagues, the duo seems to be foils to each other—with a crucial difference: Beelzebub, unlike Gabriel, has already fallen from Grace. As an archangel discharging an ineffable yet indisputable divine will, Gabriel’s positionality in this conversation is much more politically fraught, as he feels the full weight of the ideological apparatuses of Heaven. Eons away from the cocky soldier that he was in the first season, Gabriel is left visibly uncomfortable after his conversation with Beelzebub, shaken in his convictions about his role in Heaven and Earth. Discomfited by the familiarity he feels towards the *other*, Gabriel embodies “the uneasy, doubt-ridden, yet dutiful British bu-

reacrat overwhelmed by his sense of isolation from the people he rules in empire's name [...] an empire that is oppressive, exploitative, and evil" (Guha 1997, 490). Thus, it is no surprise when Gabriel turns up at another meeting with Beelzebub, this time replete with American paraphernalia, even though he declares that they would not meet again.



Fig. 2: "No need to ever meet again, is there?" "None whatsoever."
Beelzebub & Gabriel (S2E6)

The spatial politics of Earth as a Third Space between Heaven and Hell play a prominent role in the decolonizing praxis of Gabriel and Beelzebub. As heads of the supernatural armed forces battling for the control of this space, both have derived their *raison d'être* from the process of this conquest. Not unlike Aziraphale and Crowley, their secretly shared experiences on Earth also hinge on the advantages of no Armageddon. In their second meeting, as the angel and the demon gingerly discuss the possibilities of "no Armageddon" (S2E6), the duo seems softer, more open: "No one could ever know of course" (S2E6), states Beelzebub. "Of course" (S2E6), affirms Gabriel in a curt agreement, as Buddy Holly croons in the background about quotidian hopes, joys, and love. In this context, Earth emerges as what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls a Third Space: a dynamic, hybridized space where cultures interact, negotiate, and transform, disrupting fixed identities and binary oppositions.

In *Good Omens*, Earth provides the star-crossed lovers Gabriel and Beelzebub with a Third Space to enact their praxis of decoloniality, both within and outside of the colonial matrix of power between Heaven and Hell. Beelzebub and Gabriel's rebellious love exists as a representation of decolonializing institutions of power through love by going beyond its own self-prescribed limits—beyond institutional love. That is, Gabriel and Beelzebub become a representation of what an *other* love is—transgressive, new, decolonial, sublime.

In *Good Omens*, Beelzebub and Gabriel disappear into the ether, lost in each other's eyes, singing Buddy Holly's "Everyday," as the electric chandeliers light up, one by one, illuminating the couple's final moments on Earth. Both celestial and infernal, the couple's journey is terminated on Earth in a Shakespearian ending, only to find new beginnings beyond the discourses of Heaven and Hell—their radical departure opening up endless potential for futurities. This rejection of the social and theological order, embodied in the leaders of the opposite centers of power, is a revolutionary act, as it leaves the colonial matrix of power vulnerable to criticism from its subjects. In other words, their choice to leave their respective positions of power, as the Metatron succinctly states, "makes it look like there is some kind of institutional problem [...] which, needless to say, there isn't" (S2E6). Immersed in the warmth of the amber lights, the sequence entices the audience to seek resonances with the Book of Genesis to find some degree of the ineffability of divine will at work, beyond the theologically-informed attitudes towards Heaven and Hell. As the couple vanishes into the unknown, in search of new adventures, the viewer is invited to ponder on these abstractions, empowered to consider serious theological questions through lighthearted optimism. Through the triumphant love between an angel and a demon, they are also presented with politically fraught questions of loving the *other*, and are enabled to understand love as a "motivation for refusing the violence that is the colonial conquest" (Secomb 2013, 194).

In their wake, Beelzebub and Gabriel leave the other squabbling characters momentarily silenced: in the stark, electric glare of Aziraphale's

bookstore, the disruption caused by their departure becomes all the more evident. As Heaven and Hell both stand thwarted in their bloodlust, they are also faced with a tender, self-effacing love that yearns to blur the boundaries of the *self* and the *other*: it is only fitting that this ‘modern’ love is celebrated in *Good Omens* with electric chandeliers. Instead of the romance of shimmering candles or the magic of a blinding halo, knowledge and innovation light the way for their romance. Throughout *Good Omens*, this progressive outlook is irradiated through the unlikely couples who stop the apocalypse in its tracks: saving the world, effectively, through their affirmation of decolonized love. All-pervasive love, among unlikely subjects in unexpected quarters, thus appears as a bulwark of decolonizing acts on earth, embedded in the local love stories of England.

Conclusion

This chapter has taken a decolonial approach to analyze the television series *Good Omens*, arguing that love acts as a mode of resistance and decolonization within the heart of the British imperial center. Rather than focusing on the central duo, Aziraphale and Crowley, we shifted our attention to other romantic relationships—Anathema and Newton in season 1, Beelzebub and Gabriel in season 2—to explore how these couples embody love that transgresses political, theological, and colonial boundaries. We identified how coloniality lingers in the show’s narratives as a trace, especially through prohibitions against “loving the other.” By examining how these relationships resist those prohibitions, we framed love as an everyday praxis of decolonial agency.

Decolonized love does not come easy, as exemplified through the leading pair of the series. Throughout the series, Aziraphale and Crowley find themselves inhabiting the loci of decolonized love, but only at the margins. Positing Aziraphale and Crowley against the backdrop of Beelzebub and Gabriel’s relationship allows for a comparative analysis to the overarching coloniality exemplified by institutional progress and modernity. Tenderly watching happy couples at a distance, the leading

pair seems to recognize (and perhaps admire) the radical traits of decolonial love—their own story, however, remains incomplete at the end of season 2. Convinced by the Metatron, Aziraphale opts for reintegration into the established order, effectively capitulating to the normative imperatives of his institutional identity.

Aziraphale's affirmation of the entrenched hierarchies of Heaven and Hell is reflected in his offer to Crowley. "He said I could appoint you to be an angel," he says, beaming, breathless with joy, "You could come back to Heaven and . . . and everything, like the old times. Only, even nicer" (S2E6). On the one hand, Aziraphale's readiness to accept the Metatron's offer reinforces the enduring colonial and religious imperatives that have historically circumscribed acceptable modes of love and duty—mostly neglected by the upper echelons of angels. Aziraphale feels vindicated through the Metatron's offer to take charge of Heaven, as he feels justly rewarded for his unerring faith in the ineffable divine will. In the moment of his success, he looks to Crowley to partake in his accomplishment, overjoyed at the prospects of ruling Heaven side-by-side with his beloved, restored to his previous angelic glory. However, on the other hand, his easy erasure of Crowley's ontological identity, that is, his choice to *be* a demon, reflects an innate belief in the binary distinctions between the angel and the demon: to Aziraphale, both must be one or the other, to love and be loved. As Aziraphale fails to entertain the possibility of an angel-demon romance of his own, Crowley's blatant refusal to be returned to "full angelic status" (S2E6) also doubles as a rejection of his love—the most desired prize of a happily ever after in Heaven.

Entrenched in their ideologies, both Aziraphale and Crowley reject the *other*, returning to the safety of homogenized institutionality, celebrated and reinforced in Heaven, Hell, and everything in-between.

Aziraphale's narrow perspective of everything "nicer" eschews the often-overlooked fact that angels and demons are ontologically the same: fashioned by one divine creator to be foils to each other. The hierarchies of Heaven and Hell thus occlude his vision—a hierarchy that Crowley rejects, refusing to give up his *otherness*, even if it means

giving up on love. As characters like Beelzebub, Gabriel, Anathema, and Newton resoundingly celebrate the fulfilment of their love, their celebrations do not prompt the main duo to take their own step towards love, towards decoloniality, beyond the binarisms of good and evil. To this end, the Third Space of Earth is once again left at the whims of the empires, both Heaven and Hell only to be existing as a battleground for further decolonial praxis in the future. In the end, the leading pair leaves the audience with a pit in their stomach with their tortured expressions as they go their separate ways. However, it does not leave us without hope of reconciliation, perhaps fueled by all-conquering love—smoldering, slow burning, inextinguishable.

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Look at You, You're Gorgeous

Gaze Politics and Queer Longing in *Good Omens*

Vera Cuntz-Leng

Since Laura Mulvey's influential (and controversially discussed) essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), the exploration of gaze politics (and gaze poetics) and the voyeuristic pleasures of audio-visual media have become ongoing staples in film analysis. Whereas Mulvey identified the gaze as male and hegemonic, with the man being perceived as the active and powerful maker of meaning and the woman on screen being the passive object of desire, many scholars have explored the complex ways in which queer gazes and queer perspectives have challenged heteronormativity, heterosexual desire, and hegemonic masculinity on screen.

The two male leads of *Good Omens*, Aziraphale and Crowley, alternate possessor or object of the camera's look. This signifies a constant power struggle on the visual level that mirrors the power dynamics between the forces of Heaven and Hell in general and the relationship of Aziraphale and Crowley in particular. However, as the gaze in cinema is as much about power as it is about desire, the gaze politics of *Good Omens* are queer-coded and depict a profound longing that the characters experience and that is shown to us but not told (not until the last 15 minutes of the second season, that is). The aim of this chapter is to analyze the complex gaze politics of *Good Omens* in order to understand how queer longing and desire is visually conceptualized and expressed and with what consequences for the queer quality of the (romance) narrative.

Introduction

Meet Crowley and Aziraphale. A demon and an angel. Two sides of the same coin. And although they are not the *narrators* of their story (we are prominently guided by the—unreliable, ineffable—voice-over of God herself in the first season), Crowley and Aziraphale are the *focalizers* and the identification figures for the audience. The TV series *Good Omens* may have an omniscient narrative instance on the auditive level, but the story is in fact told on the visual level via its two main characters. The camera follows their movements, their gazes, and lingers on their looks as well as on their “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 1975, 11). As Aziraphale and Crowley frequently change their positions between being the focalizer of the camera’s view and the object of the gaze, they continually challenge the presumed dichotomy between being the active beholder and the passively observed. This visual dynamic reflects the broader power struggles between Heaven and Hell, as well as the specific power dynamics within Aziraphale and Crowley’s relationship. Furthermore, considering that the cinematic gaze intertwines power and desire, *Good Omens*’ gaze politics are queer-coded as a close reading of the series will reveal. The visuals convey a deep yearning experienced by the characters, a longing that is *shown* rather than explicitly *told* (until the final moments of the second season, of course). This analysis aims to dissect the intricate gaze politics of *Good Omens* to understand how queer longing and desire are visually presented and what implications this has for the queer nature of the show’s romance narrative.

Aside from this introduction and the conclusion, this chapter is divided into four parts. An introduction to the concept of gaze politics and queer gazes in audio-visual media is followed by two sections analyzing Aziraphale and Crowley’s gazes, respectively; the last section is dedicated to the back shot and the split screen as stylistic devices in audio-visual media regarding their relevance for gaze politics in *Good Omens*.

The main purpose of this chapter is to work out the extent to which the *Good Omens* series establishes, repeatedly invokes, and develops the topos of queer longing on the level of the gaze, camerawork, and mise-

en-scène. In doing so, *Good Omens* consistently serves and feeds the queer reading of the material (as performed by myriads of fans of the 'ineffable husbands' ship) and unfolds an epic love story that is second to none. Because it actually begins "in the beginning" (SIEI).

Looking, longing, and queering popular culture

Laura Mulvey's pioneering essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) established the study of gaze politics and the voyeuristic aspects of audio-visual media as a core element of feminist film analysis. Mulvey argues that the cinematic gaze is predominantly male and hegemonic, positioning men as active subjects who wield the gaze in opposition to women on screen as passive objects of desire. The voyeuristic pleasure of looking in cinema (for both the camera, the male actor on screen, and the male member of the audience), is described by Mulvey as "fetishistic scopophilia" (Mulvey 1975, 14). According to Mulvey, women on screen "are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle" (Mulvey 1975, 11). In response to Mulvey, numerous scholars have further discussed how the cinematic gaze operates in audio-visual media and sought to deconstruct Mulvey's model and described how gaze politics may disrupt heteronormativity, heterosexual desire, and dominant masculinity in film.

With a particular interest in the horror film genre, Linda Williams (1984) argues that women can be in possession of the gaze. However, the woman's active act of looking is often punished because it goes hand-in-hand with a desire for power. When the woman in the horror film looks at the monster she may be seeing a reflection of her own monstrosity, or an aspect of herself that is considered non-normative or *other* within a patriarchal society and therefore challenging its norms.

In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" (1992), Bell Hooks coins the term 'oppositional gaze' to describe a critical and re-

bellious way of looking, particularly for Black people and, more specifically, for Black women. It stems from a history of being denied the right to look and a simultaneous repression of their representation in the media. Hooks argues that while white audiences could find pleasure in passively consuming films, Black female viewers have a different relationship with cinema. They were often either completely absent from the screen or relegated to stereotypical, dehumanizing roles. As a result, they are forced to engage with the media actively and critically, looking not for a sense of identification, but for the pleasure of deconstruction and interrogation. This act of looking operates as a form of resistance, a way to challenge and subvert the dominant, white, patriarchal narratives. The oppositional gaze, therefore, is about reclaiming the power of looking and using it to critique a system that seeks to erase and control Black identity.

Queers and the depictions of non-heteronormative desires or relationships share the history of marginalization and erasure, stereotyping, ridicule, and demonization in popular culture with (Black) women. Inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal work on literary texts, in which she seeks to uncover the repressed eroticism in male-male relationships in order to make homosociality and homosexuality visible as a continuum (cf. Kosofsky Sedgwick 1985; see also Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990; 1997), scholarship on the relations between queerness and audio-visual media evolved and queer reading became available as a valid film analytical approach (cf. e.g., Benschhoff 1997; Doty 1997; Doty 2000; Cuntz-Leng 2015; Kohnen 2016). "Queer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful and willful misreadings, or 'reading too much into things' readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (Doty 1997, 116). Queer readings reveal where a film resists and/or challenges heteronormative norms, rules, and structures; they uncover the shadow stories that run counter to the heteronormative sign economy of a cinematic narrative (cf. Cuntz-Leng 2015, 53). Queer reading should be understood as an oppositional mode of reception that is available to anyone; this is in

alignment with a broad understanding of the term 'queer'—according to David M. Halperin, queer “demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative—a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or feels marginalized” (Halperin 1995, 62).

Queer readings may operate on any level of the narrative. Sometimes the cinematic spaces, casting choices, costumes, or ambiguous dialogues are meaningful in terms of their queer potentiality, but it is in fact often the gaze politics that invite us to apply Mulvey's ideas of desire and power to a new context—Sal Mineo's admiration and longing for James Dean through his locker's mirror in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), the intimate shots and close-ups of John Dall and Farley Granger in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), the 'staring contest' of the rivals Edward and Jacob in *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* (2010), with the camera circling around them and Bella Swan practically falling out of the frame.

In “The Gaze Revisited, Or Reviewing Queer Viewing” (1995), Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman give a comprehensive overview of works on gaze theory, with a particular focus on John Berger (1972), Michel Foucault (1979), Mulvey, and Mary Ann Doane's (1982) concept of the *masquerade*. Further, they discuss approaches to conceptualize male objectification in cinema and popular culture (e.g., Dyer 1982; Neale 1983; Moore 1989; Tasker 1993). While “gay and lesbian representations and gay and lesbian desire pose a challenge to the Mulveyian framework” (Evans/Gamman 1995, 33), it is essential to note that “all forms of looking are sexually charged because of the scopic drive” (Evans/Gamman 1995, 35). In the second part of their essay, Evans and Gamman refer to the concept of *genderfuck* to highlight that spectatorship may always be “multiple, contradictory, shifting, oscillating, inconsistent and fluid” (Evans/Gamman 1995, 43). And as all texts are ambiguous to a certain degree, they may all be “viewed queerly” (Evans/Gamman 1995, 48); and queer readings are available to anyone despite their gender identity or sexual preferences. Any spectator may find pleasure in the deconstruction of heteronormativity.

Steven Drukman emphasizes that film historian Vito Russo (1981) was among the first scholars to suggest that “there may be a gay way of looking” (Drukman 1995, 95):

“People say that there can be no such thing as a ‘gay sensibility’ because the existence of one would mean that there is a straight sensibility, and clearly there is not. But a gay sensibility can be many things; it can be present even when there is no sign of homosexuality, open or covert, before or behind the camera. Gay sensibility is largely a product of oppression, of the necessity to hide so well for so long. It is a ghetto sensibility, born of the need to develop and use a second sight that will translate silently what the world sees and what the actuality may be.” (Russo 1981, 92)

Grounded in the idea of gay sensibility and the appeal of camp, Drukman proposes a framework for gay male spectatorship. The aspect of camp is of importance here, since camp is “a method whereby one can multiply personalities, play various parts, assume a variety of roles—both for fun as well as out of need” (Babuscio 2005 [1984], 121). The gay sensibility of camp manifests in the desire and awareness to reject any form of normalization and naturalization (cf. Cuntz-Leng 2015, 45). Jack Babuscio identifies irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor as the four essential aspects of camp (one could easily exchange the word ‘camp’ in this sentence with ‘*Good Omens*’). In consequence of the multiplication of personalities, according to Drukman, the gay man can acquire both roles: the gay man can be both the possessor of the gaze and the visual spectacle, departing from Mulvey’s binary opposition of ‘man as maker of meaning/woman as bearer of the look.’ Drukman argues that in music videos (his examples are Madonna and George Michael, respectively) the “sheer abundance of floating signifiers allows for gay enunciation unavailable to the male gaze in mainstream film and television” (Drukman 1995, 103).

Today’s popular culture—thirty years after the publication of Drukman’s essay—is populated by images of LGBTQ+ identities and

lifestyles, queer desire and longing (cf. Wight 2023, 217–220). Queerness stepped out of the margins and into the spotlight of pop culture. However, a series like *Good Omens*—despite the diversity in its cast (cf. King 2021, 32 f.)—supports in the narrative of Crowley and Aziraphale Melanie Kohnen's conclusion that a “fundamental interdependence of whiteness and queer visibility” must be acknowledged and that a “limited vision of queer visibility took hold in the mainstream media” (Kohnen 2016, 3). While the marginalization of queerness by the mass media may be a thing of the past, issues of stereotyping and misrepresentation still need careful evaluation and discussion. Further, the increased visibility of queerness in the media does not imply that practices of queer viewing are obsolete. In fact, current debates on queer-baiting tactics by media producers (luring the audience to a media product with homoerotic suggestiveness that never gets resolved [cf. Nordin 2019, 25 f.]) underline the persistence of the same ambiguity of media texts that Drukman identified with MTV. As we will see, what Drukman astonishingly called the “ineffable gay sensibility” (Drukman 1995, 94) is at the heart of the gaze politics in *Good Omens*, emphasizing the close relationship between queer reading and queerbaiting. A good part of the pleasure of *Good Omens* stems from the ambiguity and the queer possibility of the narrative rather than its queer resolution (the kiss at the end of season 2, that is). As I will show in the following, the inherent queerness in *Good Omens*' gaze politics—referring here to the look of the camera and to the look of the characters on screen at each other rather than to the spectator—enriches the viewing experience and helps to understand the character's motivations. Oppressed by the restrictive systems of Heaven and Hell—maybe not so different from classic Hollywood cinema during the Hays Code era—, there is so much that cannot be said in *Good Omens*, so much that cannot be made explicit, but this makes what the images actually show us all the more abundant.

When Aziraphale looks

Julia Vanessa Pauss argues in her essay on the first season of *Good Omens* that the voice-over of God, memorably conducted by Frances McDormand, signifies an authoritative style in which the narrator speaks “from a position of absolute truth” (Pauss 2023, 32). Pauss reads this as a feminist subversion of power and a contradiction to Christian theology (cf. Pauss 2023, 34). According to Pauss, “God’s ultimate authority is never questioned. As third-person narrator, God occupies a shared space with the image-maker and the audience that allows her command over the narrative, effectively introducing an omnipotent female gaze to *Good Omens*” (Pauss 2023, 43). It may be valid to say that the narrator has more insight into the narrative of season 1 than the audience, but she has no real power over the events, there is really no possibility to influence what is happening whatsoever. After all, God may not even know what Aziraphale did with his flaming sword. Interestingly, when God asks Aziraphale about the sword’s whereabouts, it is in a direct address to Aziraphale and not via voice-over narration. Furthermore, there is no third-person narrator in the cold open of “Hard Times” (S1E3), when the evolution of Crowley and Aziraphale’s relationship is on display in a time-lapse. This indicates that even with God present in season 1, there are enclaves for Aziraphale and Crowley where they direct their own story. In both seasons, it is Aziraphale and Crowley, despite fishing in the dark sometimes, that ultimately drive the plot forward. The voice-over detaches the narrator from the action on screen, underlining the passiveness and eventually the total absence of God from the plot (world). This is emphasized by season 2, in which God has become dead silent. Instead, we are—by the end of the season—presented with a male voice of God, the Metatron. But how far does his power really reach?

“Forgoing all warnings about double narration and showing versus telling, the show’s propensity for voice-over narration indicates Pratchett’s and Gaiman’s literary material will always hold a higher rank than

the visuals. [...] The presence of *Good Omens'* literariness makes the images pale in comparison, enforcing a reading of the series adaptation as an homage to the written word." (Pauss 2023, 39)

Strongly disagreeing with this claim, I would like to argue that the lack of congruency between the spoken word of God and the events on screen, this dissonance between images and text opens up a space of possibility for the characters. It indicates the possibility of free will. But this opportunity manifests itself in what the characters *show* rather than in what they *tell*. So, on the contrary, it is the truth of the image that overwrites the authority of the spoken word—eventually leading to the complete disintegration of God's voice in season 2. Therefore, we may understand the second season as a complete emancipation of the image from the text (the characters from God) until the power of the word is reinforced by the presence of the Metatron.

But that is the end of the second season. Instead, in its opening, there already is no God—unreliable or not—to tell us what the images mean that we are seeing. Only two angels gazing at the newborn universe. As they witness the birth of the universe, we also witness the birth of a relationship. And the birth of their continuous misunderstandings.

AZIRAPHALE: "Um, hello. I'm Aziraphale."

CROWLEY [as angel]: "Nice meeting you. Okay, here goes! Let there be matter, let there be gravity. Let there be everything from pages 11 to 3,000,602 inclusive."

AZIRAPHALE: "... is something meant to happen?"

CROWLEY [as angel]: "Oh, right, sorry, yes yes. Knew I'd missed one. Let there be light."

AZIRAPHALE: "Oh. Good lord."

CROWLEY [as angel]: "Look at you! You're gorgeous!" (S2E1)

It is telling that angel Crowley, before his fall from Grace, encourages Aziraphale from the very beginning of their relationship to actively look (question?) what is happening around him. But this encourage-

ment is only the result of a misunderstanding because Aziraphale at first thinks that the other angel gives him a charming compliment. Angel Crowley has only eyes for his (sub-)creation, the universe, whereas Aziraphale has primarily eyes for Crowley. Pauss is right that “*Good Omens* transgresses the traditional organization of cinematic pleasure by evading the erotization of her [God’s] female body” (Pauss 2023, 41), but we need to ask what becomes the site of spectacle instead. In the opening of season 2, it is—despite the beauty of the star factory—the angel Crowley, the angel who remains nameless to Aziraphale as our focalizer, which either underlines his enigma (an angel that needs no introduction) or his powerlessness (he is not the maker of meaning only the object to be looked at). Through Aziraphale’s look of admiration and fascination—being obviously impressed and a little nervous—we have Crowley on full display. He is caught by the camera mostly through full-frontal shots, all gleaming eyes, exaggerated smile, and red-glowing hair. Aziraphale, on the other hand, is mostly captured from the side by the camera, following his gaze upwards to Crowley who is floating slightly above. Aziraphale’s gaze is one of wonder—as an angel, Crowley’s body is not yet the sexualized spectacle for the gaze that he will become later on but glowing with brightness and innocence.

Michael Sheen said in an interview conducted by Amazon Prime that “From early on I’d decided that I think Aziraphale is a bit in love with Crowley even though he’s like the absolute opposite [...]. I think he just sort of falls in love with Crowley over the hundreds and hundreds, the millennia that they spent together. And, so that helps because David [Tennant] is very easy to fall in love with. So, I just spent most of my time just gazing at him lovingly in scenes.” So, this is what Aziraphale does while the universe is created: Falling in love with Crowley and gazing at him lovingly. However, this sequence tells us that Aziraphale’s falling in love with Crowley is not a gradual process, it is happening right there and then. After all, Aziraphale is ‘a being of love.’ This love is pure and innocent; sexuality may have not been invented yet—we have plenty of reason to believe that sexuality

is a foreign concept to Aziraphale. At this point, he is as clueless as any angel how the 'oodles of people' will come into being.

Aziraphale's gaze of love for Crowley will become a recurring motif of the series: when Crowley removes a stain on the angel's jacket, when Crowley promises to make *Hamlet* a success, when he witnesses Crowley talking to the Bentley as if the car was a darling pet. It is a lingering look that always lasts a little too long. On occasion, this motif is expanded by Aziraphale briefly glancing at Crowley's lips. And since we are well aware of how Aziraphale's desire looks like—we have seen him look at sushi, that is—we do understand this as an expression of infantile and/or suppressed desire. Therefore, the glance to the mouth is no coincidence here but reinforces the link between desire, food, and sexuality in the series. The series invites us to understand Aziraphale as a child with many references to what Sigmund Freud (1905) has called the oral stage, the first stage of a child's psychosexual development. During the pregenital oral stage, the infant's primary source of pleasure and gratification is the mouth, it becomes the first erotogenic zone. Therefore, activities like sucking, chewing, and tasting are essential for the child's sense of comfort and security but also manifestations of infantile sexuality. Freud believes that if an infant's oral needs were not met properly (e.g., denied or neglected), an oral fixation will be developed. According to Freud, an oral fixation could manifest as certain behaviors in adulthood as a way for the adult to seek the oral stimulation they were denied earlier. Two key sequences of the series, in which we witness Aziraphale's look to Crowley's lips, are his cheerful invitation of the 'foul fiend' into the bookshop (cf. S1E1) and when he watches Crowley explaining to Inspector Constable that they are welcome to ask any other question they might have about human love (cf. S2E3).

In terms of Aziraphale's acts of actively looking at Crowley, the sequence of the Blitz is of particular interest. In "Hard Times" (S1E3), Crowley rescues not only Aziraphale but his precious books from destruction by an air strike during World War II. According to Sheen, this is the moment in which Aziraphale falls in love with Crowley (cf. Venzmer 2024, 139f.). "Using only facial expressions, the viewer sees

the realization in Aziraphale’s face that he *loves Crowley*” (Stobbart 2024, 136). In fact, it is not only Aziraphale’s facial expression that gives away the nature of his feelings but several cinematographic techniques. After the bomb explodes, the camera moves from the divine perspective of the top shot toward the gloomy field of rubble, where Aziraphale, positioned in the center of the frame, his clothes in strong contrast to the rest of the image, is marked as the focalizer. Crowley, located at the edge of the frame and almost merging with the dark background, puts on his sunglasses. This indicates Crowley’s status as an object; he is not in possession of the gaze himself, but is being looked at. When Crowley, with exaggerated casualness, presses the bag with the rescued books into Aziraphale’s hand, the camera lingers on Sheen long after Crowley’s departure, his facial expressions show a complex mixture of astonishment, understanding, and affection (Fig. 1). Gentle, romantic violin music begins to play, accompanying the graceful, almost dance-like camera movement into a close-up of Aziraphale’s face (cf. Cuntz-Leng 2025, 200 f.).



Fig. 1: “Little demonic miracle of my own” (S1E3)

Falling in love and realizing you love someone are not the same. To further complicate things, I would argue in reference to the beginning of season 2 that Aziraphale neither falls for Crowley as Sheen stated nor does he realize that he loves him in the Blitz sequence—instead,

Aziraphale realizes due to what he understands as an act of altruism (the miracle of rescuing the books) that the angel he fell in love with in the first place is still alive in Crowley and therefore he did, in fact, love him all along. And since he allows himself henceforth to love about Crowley what he may read as his angel part (and he constantly reminds Crowley that traces of the angel are still part of his nature—something Crowley deeply despises), Aziraphale's affection for Crowley is less constricted since this point in time. It gives him an easy way out of the experienced dilemma, the unsettling dissonance, between what he feels for the demon and what he is told to believe is legit to feel. That Aziraphale allows himself only to love (and maybe even desire) the angel Crowley once was motivates his unbiased enthusiasm for the Metatron's offer to reinstate Crowley as an angel. Aziraphale's naïve desire for simplicity (no shades of grey after all) and his sheer ignorance of the complexity of Crowley's character and biography ultimately lead to tragedy.

When Crowley looks

On far less occasions, Crowley is in possession of the look. Interestingly enough, the opening of season 1 on the wall of Eden operates as a mirror of the opening sequence of season 2. This is highlighted by their similar endings: Whereas angel Crowley shields Aziraphale in season 2 from the falling stars with his wing (the fire foreshadowing Hell), Aziraphale's wing protects Crowley from the impending thunderstorm (linked to the powers of Heaven) (Fig. 1–2). The connection between both sequences also manifests in the way Crowley looks at Aziraphale. It is now Crowley (or Crawly, as he was called back then) who introduces himself by name, it is now Crowley who is driven by curiosity and fascination for the other being. His eyes, yet unshielded by sunglasses, signify a sudden shift in his comprehension of the angel when he learns that Aziraphale had given away his flaming sword to the humans. At this point, Crowley understands that he is not alone in breaking norms and rules because Aziraphale is overstepping boundaries, too. It strikes

him like an epiphany, and he may truly look at Aziraphale for the first time. If we comprehend both opening sequences as mirrors, we may also read this as the exact moment when Crowley falls in love with Aziraphale, he is in awe of what Aziraphale is actually capable of and that he found transgression in this very unexpected moment and individual. But the insight that what he feels is actually love is a discovery he will make much later in the narrative. It seems to dawn on him on several occasions, but in the end, it actually takes Maggie and Nina for him to be able to classify the feeling. Crowley's self-denial to feel love is as strong as Aziraphale's self-denial of desire (that he—despite being an angel—might be tempted).



Fig. 2: "It's the universe, it's not just some fancy wallpaper!" (S2E1)



Fig. 3: "It was a nice day. All the days had been nice [...] and rain hadn't been invented yet. But the storm clouds gathering east of Eden suggested that the first thunderstorm was on its way." (S1E1)

Aziraphale's body is rarely the site of visual spectacle. Rarely is he as openly exposed to Crowley's gaze as he is during the bullet catch trick (cf. S2E4). Interestingly, being on stage of the theater serves as a permission for Crowley to actually take possession of the gaze—a position of power that he usually denies himself to adopt. And he obviously is uneasy with it, he even leaves the sunglasses on. Crowley may well rescue Aziraphale on occasion like a damsel in distress, but this is normally well orchestrated and planned by the angel. Aziraphale lets Crowley play the hero (“[R]escuing me makes him so happy” [S2E5], he tells a bewildered Maggie), but he rarely is the hero of the story. During the bullet catch, he is reluctantly in charge of the course of action with Aziraphale exposing himself to the gaze and the possibly deadly bullet. The grave danger of Crowley's active act of looking is visually amplified by the shot of Aziraphale through the rifle's barrel, notch and bead directly targeting between the angel's eyes.

Additionally, the possible dangers of Crowley's active act of looking are wonderfully narrated and visualized in the sequence at Job's house in the minisode “A Companion to Owls” (S2E2). After agreeing on a plan to save Job's rather naughty children and transforming them into lizards, Aziraphale and Crowley spend the dark and stormy night waiting for the other angels to arrive. Without his dark glasses on, Crowley makes himself comfortable with a goblet of wine while Aziraphale appears to be nervous.

AZIRAPHALE: “Are you ... drinking human wine? It's the source of drunkenness.”

CROWLEY: “Isn't it just? Mmmm. Very promising little vineyard.”

[Aziraphale retching]

CROWLEY: “Yeah alright, you don't drink. Try the food, though. Can't get drunk on food. [offers a plate of meat] Go on. Have an ox-rib.”

AZIRAPHALE: “Are you ... trying to tempt me?”

CROWLEY: “Not at all. Angels can't be tempted, can you?”

AZIRAPHALE: “Certainly not.”

CROWLEY: “Well, there you are then. You’re free to try the food.”

AZIRAPHALE: “[picks up a piece of meat, licks it cautiously, takes a bite, gasps] Oh, I see.”

CROWLEY: “Cheers.” (S2E2)

Crowley tricks Aziraphale and tempts him to try food. Reminding us of the snake in the garden of Eden that Crowley used to be, seducing Eve with an apple, red pomegranates glow fresh and ripe on the table. But instead of the pomegranate, Crowley decides to offer an ox-rib to Aziraphale (Fig. 4). The symbolism is rich here with images of hyper-masculinity and empowerment. But the ox-rib is also a site of gore and repulsion. The meat looks brown and unsavory, it makes a grotesque slurping sound when separated from the bone, alluding to movies of body genres. At first, Aziraphale is reluctant to taste, sniffing the meat, sticking his tongue out. After putting the meat in his mouth, there is no coming back from the experience. By overcoming his learned disgust, Aziraphale’s freshly awakened desire immediately turns into excess. Unblinkingly, Crowley’s eyes follow his every move while Aziraphale devours the ox, practically plunging into the cadaver. Like the viewer of a horror movie, Crowley must continue looking at Aziraphale, interlinking gore with desire, horror with lust. The connection between gore and sex in films of body genres like the horror movie or pornography is multifaceted. As discussed by Linda Williams in her influential essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” (1991), films of body genres often use the physical body as a source of both pleasure and terror, as a battleground where both sexual desire and grotesque transformation occur. What we witness is Aziraphale’s transformation from an innocent vessel of Heaven into a creature of bodily desires, forever connected to earthly pleasures.

After the incident with Job, Aziraphale will continue to consume and enjoy food, continue to desire food (and also wine, eventually). As mentioned above regarding Aziraphale’s gazing at Crowley’s mouth, food serves as a substitute for Aziraphale’s suppressed (or not yet fully developed) sexual desire—his closetedness, if you will (cf. Wight



Fig. 4: "Have an ox-rib." (S2E2)

2023, 223)—which manifests itself in the radical excess of the physical experience of eating (cf. Cuntz-Leng 2025, 202f.). As only a few sequences of the series mark Crowley as clearly as the focalizer as this one, it is important to note that Crowley's appropriation of the gaze is a pattern that is repeated in other scenes with Aziraphale eating. When Aziraphale eats cake, eyes closed and making moaning sounds of pleasure, he becomes the object of Crowley's longing gaze and his fetishistic scopophilia; witnessing the act of eating becomes a spectacle that seems to exceed the pleasure of eating itself.

Whereas Aziraphale is destined as an angel to love, having desires may be seen as his dark spot. He craves food, books, and music—and to some extent he also craves attention (at least Crowley's) as seen by his enthusiasm to perform magic tricks and his joy in being continuously rescued by Crowley. Crowley on the other hand may be seen as a demonly being of desire and temptation, but at his core he feels a lot of love, which he is not supposed to. Crowley loves living beings and does everything to spare their lives—showering his beautiful plants with attention, feeding ducks at the park, saving both Job's goats

and his children. To prevent the difficult revelation that his glances at Aziraphale speak less of desire than of genuine affection, he reliably wears his sunglasses most of the time.

Looking on

The way in which the characters are arranged in the frame, the way in which the camera captures them, and from what perspective the story is told all point to the powerful function of the cinematic gaze. As shown above, who looks and who is being looked at is an ongoing negotiation between Crowley and Aziraphale and their secret love and longing for each other. But there are a number of other memorable, even iconic camera shots that suggest a balancing between both positions and for which Mulvey's concept of the cinematic gaze does not apply.

In this section, we will turn to Yasujiro Ozu instead, one of the greatest virtuosos of cinema. Although *Good Omens* and Ozu's films differ vastly in terms of their cultural background, genre, and historical context, they share a surprising philosophical commonality. Both find their deepest meaning and emotional resonance not in grand, epic events, but in the small, seemingly mundane moments of life. In their shared humanistic perspective, both *Good Omens* and Ozu's films show to us that the most significant things in existence are not grand, fate-driven plans or spectacular events, but the small, unscripted moments of human connection and the appreciation for the world as it is. Ultimately, the 'big picture' (the divine plan or the relentless drive toward a modern age) is less important than the simple choices and relationships that give life its meaning.

Parallels between *Good Omens* and Ozu's cinematic artistry can also be found on an aesthetic level. Ozu often shows his characters sitting side by side; Ozu's unique film style is further known for its frequent low angle shots and pillow shots as well as a static camera use and a distinct "narrational playfulness" (Bordwell 1988, 109). As we have many shots of Aziraphale and Crowley sitting some distance apart, some-

times even filmed from behind, we may understand this as a reminiscence to Ozu (Fig. 5, also Fig. 2–3). The cinematic effect of these shots is impressive—they evoke a sense of intimacy, silent understanding, sometimes melancholy, and a possibly shared agenda or goal (looking in the same direction).

Little has been written about back shots in cinematography or the rear view of characters on screen although it can be very meaningful to position the camera behind the subject (cf. Kirsten 2011). Ozu's characters seem to avoid looking at each other. Shigehiko Hasumi (2024) compares this unnatural style to the films of Carl Theodor Dreyer and Robert Bresson, seeing it in connection with the unnaturalness of cinema itself, which is constantly preoccupied with looking, but must actually admit that it is impossible to truly capture the gaze. In this sense, Ozu confronts the greatest paradox of cinema—as the whole point of cinema is the voyeuristic pleasure of watching, a movie can show us an eye on the screen (reflecting the look back upon the audience) but it is incapable of showing “people looking at each other” (Hasumi 2024, 197). “When two looks intersect, the camera becomes completely powerless” (Hasumi 2024, 197). That is why characters who are actually intimate with each other in Ozu's films usually do not look directly at each other, but gaze ahead in a directionless manner or past each other in parallel. It is not uncommon for (strong) emotions to be expressed through rear shots; Ozu's films achieve their most lyrical expression with shots showing two characters from behind in particular (cf. Hasumi 2024, 161).

In its aesthetics and narrative style, *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949) is a prototypical Ozu film (cf. Bordwell 1988, 311). The film tells the story of a widower whose 27-year-old daughter takes care of the household and refuses to change their joint lifestyle. Eager to get her to marry and live her own life independently, the father eventually tricks her into marrying by telling her that he plans to remarry himself. When bidding her farewell after the wedding celebration (the wedding happens off-screen though), he seems to be overjoyed by happiness for her prospective future. Eventually, the father is left alone in the empty house,

the happiness yielding to a melancholic sadness of his own future in solitude. On many levels, *Late Spring* is about making connections; many shots stress the aspect of closeness between the characters, which results from a tension in the precise mise-en-scène. Not unlike *Good Omens*, it is also a movie about the conflict between traditional values and modernity.

Many Ozuesque shots can be found in *Good Omens*; some of them count as the most memorable images of the series: Aziraphale and Crowley sit side by side on ‘their’ bench in St. James’s Park looking into different directions after their body-switch; the back shot of Crowley and Aziraphale sitting on a rock overlooking the ocean after they saved Job’s children; dining at the Ritz at the end of season 1—sending a hopeful romantic message for their future together to the audience (cf. King 2021, 42; Stobbart 2024, 137) (Fig. 5, right side from top to bottom). These shots carry resemblance to significant moments in *Late Spring*: father and daughter walking around a park in Kyoto and enjoying the beauty of life; the daughter embracing the possibility that she may fall in love at some point; father and daughter sharing a meal and talking about the future (Fig. 5, left side from top to bottom). The camera comes to rest in these moments, pausing to linger on the similarities between the characters and the spaces between them that carry the promise for connection and sometimes the weight of things left unsaid. This relates to Ozu’s cinematic technique to let “the greatest cinematic movement” happen, when “everybody stops and holds perfectly still” (Hasumi 2024, 170). ‘Holding still’ is the motto for sequences in which Ozu explores the limits of cinema itself: a medium for which movement is so crucial, pauses and stands still.

Another interesting reminiscence to Ozu can be found in the intertextual referencing of love scenes in the cinema by Crowley. After all, Crowley’s knowledge about how humans fall in love comes from the movies: “You mean like a sudden rainstorm forces them together beneath a canopy? They look into each other’s eyes... And realize they were made for each other? [...] Get humans wet and staring into each other’s eyes, [claps] Vavoom! Sorted. I saw it in a Richard Curtis



Fig. 5: Similarities in the film aesthetics and mise-en-scène of *Late Spring* and *Good Omens*

film” (S2E2). Stobbart argues that in terms of “generic conventions, *Good Omens* has many of the markers of a romantic comedy” (Stobbart 2024, 130). This applies also here—at least on the surface. We are reminded of romantic comedies written by Richard Curtis like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) or *About Time* (2013) that do in fact feature sequences with lovers getting wet. However, Crowley’s line is also a clue that memories may be unreliable and misleading. There is no scene as remembered by Crowley in any Richard Curtis movie. Of course, Crowley has a point that lovers getting wet is a common trope in cinema—*The Notebook* (2004) or *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) may be other well-known examples that come to mind, so are many Bollywood movies—but it usually is far more complicated than just a ‘Vavoom’ to bring the lovers together. Actually, the famous rain scene

of *Pride & Prejudice* with the central argument of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy and their separation resembles much more the end of *Good Omens*' season 2 than the happily ever after Crowley may have had in mind—actually unthinkable that Aziraphale would not know this, as he is such a Jane Austen enthusiast. If we take a closer look at film history, it appears to be inevitable that the conjured rain will lead to a failure of Maggie and Nina's love story.

But back to Ozu: *Floating Weeds* (*Ukigusa*, 1959) features one of cinema's most iconic rain scenes. We see two lovers, Komajūrō and Sumiko, fighting with each other on opposite sides of the street, walking back and forth. We do not have any of Ozu's typical side by side shots but full-frontal shots of the characters, causing a strong sense of isolation and loneliness. The rain between them operates as an impassable barrier in this artfully composed sequence. Famous film critic Roger Ebert said in a commentary for the Criterion collection that Ozu shows us in this sequence, "how separated they are despite the fact that they seem to belong together." We may well be reminded of the bandstand separation of Crowley and Aziraphale in season 1. Although painful, Ozu's film eventually ends with an opportunity for the characters to be free, to build their relationships more on truth than on biological kinship or traditional values. Komajūrō and Sumiko accidentally meet again at a train station where he fails to find a match to light his cigarette. Sumiko walks over slowly and offers the flame to him. Ebert beautifully sums up the sequence in the Criterion audio commentary: "He [Komajūrō] looks from side to side but he must accept her help and her companionship in life, too, because despite of all of his notions he has no other idea." Despite all the ugly things that happened between them, it is their shared history, trust, and loyalty that bind them to each other. They are side by side again, together in the frame, no shot-reverse-shot editing and no power struggles over the gaze. The balance between the characters is restored and they return to how their story began in *Floating Weeds*. In this context, Ebert emphasizes the symmetry in Ozu's film that is also a core element of the *Good Omens* narrative (e.g., the opening sequences of both seasons, Aziraphale's declarations of forgiveness).

As the frequent back shots in *Good Omens* are a meaningful stylistic device, so is the split screen as aesthetic and narrative means. Therefore, in terms of gaze politics in *Good Omens*, some concluding remarks on the last shot of season 2 shall be given. The second season ends with a split of the main characters that is visualized literally by the split screen. The narrative moves from the intimacy of looking at each other or being side by side in the frame, which the characters had shared throughout the second season, to a divided screen with both Aziraphale and Crowley looking on to an unknown future (Fig. 6). Belonging to the comedy genre, the use of the split screen in *Good Omens* may serve as a reference to romantic comedies like *Lover Come Back* (1961), *Pillow Talk* (1959), and *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) at first glance. These films use split screens to visualize telephone calls between the (prospective) lovers. But in *Good Omens*, there is no fun in the split screen anymore, it is a genre convention turned on its head. As the split screen of the romantic comedy is about lively communication and connection, it is used in the closing of season 2 to emphasize the very opposite—the speechlessness, the disconnection, and the distance between the characters. No nightingales.

Malte Hagener points out that the split screen is by nature an extradiegetic intrusion that confronts the viewer to a certain degree with the artificiality of the narrative (cf. Hagener 2024, 14). In the case of *Good Omens*, this is emphasized by the rolling end credits that not only create a visible gap between the two images but—after six episodes of an absent God—point to the existence of an extradiegetic higher power again, which may control the fate of the characters after all. After a season of the extrapolation of Aziraphale and Crowley's increasing free will, after witnessing this queer love story of epic dimensions unfold, we may be back to square one. In the end of season 2, both Crowley and Aziraphale appear powerless. In contrast to the opening sequence of *Pillow Talk*, in which the characters throw pillows at each other in order to bridge the gap in-between, the divide between Aziraphale and Crowley is firmly in place. It appears as unsurmountable as the down-pour in *Floating Weeds*. We see no back shots that would suggest both

characters look into the same direction but the two single frames with frontal close-ups of their faces, looking on to the unknown (directly at us but without breaking the fourth wall). The dissolution of the alleged opposition between Aziraphale and Crowley is restored on the level of the image.



Fig. 6: The end credits roll over the split screen images at the end of *Good Omens* season 2

Conclusion

Gazes have a decisive function in the storytelling of *Good Omens* and are powerful and laden with meaning in the most important scenes of the narrative. What they tell us is complex and in constant flux. The gazes also resist any attempt at unambiguous interpretation. However, *Good Omens* is a series rich in “queer signifiers” (Coker 2023, 66); and the relationship between Crowley and Aziraphale is constantly queer-coded (cf. Stobbart 2024, 130–135; Xanthoudakis/Donabedian 2024, 80). The dramaturgy of looking and the gaze politics of Aziraphale and Crowley offer highly suggestive visual material that invites queer readings. Reading *Good Omens* queerly is in fact an activity performed by thousands of slash fan fiction writers online on a daily basis, also discussing and exploring further the erotic quality of gaze politics in particular

(cf. Cuntz-Leng 2025). Many fan fictions (and also fan art or video edits) emphasize on the significance of looking to find meaningful ways to let Aziraphale and Crowley accomplish their well-deserved happy ending. That these queer readings are not necessarily produced by fans who identify as queer themselves underlines the universality of the concept of 'queer.' As mentioned above, queer reading is an oppositional mode of reception that is available to anyone. Further, queer readings feed on the marginalization or the ambiguity in the depiction of queerness in popular culture. But they do in fact celebrate any resistance (e.g., camp) towards normative compliance. Therefore, gaining queer visibility in popular culture comes at the cost of gay sensibility. What is explicitly queer may not need to be queered by the audience.

Queerbaiting accusations of *Good Omens* and its producers (cf. Venzmer 2024, 127ff.) actually fall short in acknowledging two pitfalls resulting from the demand for explicitly queer representation. First, queerbaiting critique shows a servile vulnerability of an audience that seems to withdraw from making meaning themselves but rather rely on the author's interpretation (cf. Nordin 2019, 40) as the producer of a certain truth when in fact one not necessarily needs a media producer to tell them if a text can be queered or not. In doing so, the audience gives a great deal of their power to the producers without perhaps realizing it. Secondly, as explicit depictions of queerness always come at the loss of queer possibility, a text leaving little room for queer suggestiveness supports a logic in which only the explicitly depicted form of queerness may be acceptable and other queer readings may be dismissed (cf. Wight 2023, 231). As the many (contradictory) discussions of gaze politics in audio-visual media underline, gazes are and will always be open to interpretation, they will remain as the site where the audience actually makes meaning.

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INTERTEXTS / INTERMEDIA



Beelzebub Has a Devil Put Aside for Me

Good Omens, Postmodernism, and Queen

Bojana Vujić

Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's novel *Good Omens* features a joke where every record eventually turns into Queen, inspired by the fact that everyone had a copy of Queen's *Greatest Hits* (1981) in their car without remembering the act of purchase. The joke might be lost on today's fans, especially if they are neither British nor old enough to remember the late 1980s and early 1990s, just as the original book's intertexts of *The Omen* (1976) and the *Just William* stories (1922–1970) may no longer be an easily recognizable part of the popular culture lexicon. In the television adaptation of *Good Omens*, the musical joke is never explained, and the audience are led to believe that the characters simply enjoy listening to Queen, which allows for a completely different experience and lets the soundtrack rise above the book's joke. This essay delves into the uses, meanings, and interpretations of Queen's music in the context of *Good Omens*, both the novel and TV show, exploring the dialogic relationship between the soundtrack and the story. It also looks into the series' use of classical music and Buddy Holly's "Everyday" (1957), and aims to read David Arnold's theme tune in light of musical genre (waltz) and musical influence (Queen). Finally, as both *Good Omens* and the music of Queen can be understood as examples of postmodern pastiche created through humorous use of intertextuality mixed with genuine emotion and masterful craftsmanship, this essay will serve as an illustration of the series' value as an artistic text that operates as a contemporary transmedia narrative.

Introduction

Queen's music plays a multifaceted role within the context of *Good Omens*, both the original novel and its television adaptation. This chapter aims to explore the dynamic interplay between the soundtrack and the narrative, analyzing how the music enhances, subverts, and engages with the story's themes and tone. Furthermore, the series' use of other musical elements, including classical music and Buddy Holly's song "Everyday," will be analyzed, offering a close reading of David Arnold's theme tune, considering its musical genre (waltz), its stylistic influences (particularly Queen), and its contribution to the overall narrative. Finally, the essay argues that both *Good Omens* and the music of Queen function as exemplary postmodern works of art, combining popular culture with canonical elements through intertextuality and pastiche, ultimately working together to create a transmedia narrative largely resistant to industry incorporation.

As one of the most impactful means of scene-setting and characterization, music has always been an integral part of visual media, even in the silent movie era, when the hardworking cinema pianists strove to match their performance to the action on screen. Some combinations of sound and image have become so iconic that one element cannot be imagined without the other. Would Darth Vader be half as ominous if he did not strut to the militant, disciplined (and surprisingly catchy) tune of John Williams' "The Imperial March" (1980)? Adding to that, would "Anakin's Theme" (1999) from *The Phantom Menace* (1999) be half as poignant if it was not basically a major key transposition of "The Imperial March" (famously composed in G Minor), hinting at the inevitable loss of innocence and hope in the galaxy far, far away? Would the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) be equally unnerving if the bewigged Norman Bates appeared silently, unaccompanied by those hysterical, shrieking violins (courtesy of composer Bernard Herrmann)? Such leitmotifs may be an obvious, even banal way of music adding its own part to the narrative in visual storytelling, but it cannot be denied that associative musical themes work extremely well as

means of characterization (cf. Bribitzer-Stull 2015, 257). Even the melodies that appear before the on-screen action takes place add meaning to the overall effect, setting the audience's mood and expectations—as evidenced by the myriad theme tunes to beloved television shows. One need not think further than any iteration of *Star Trek*, where sweeping, hopeful music—from Alexander Courage's buoyant melody for what eventually became known as *The Original Series* (1966–1969) to Jerry Goldsmith's more introspective *Voyager* (1995–2001) theme—lets the audience know that they can look forward to an optimistic view of the future, befitting Gene Roddenberry's reassuring vision of humanity's innate goodness. Music, as the most ancient form of art, is as inherently human as speech: it makes us bond with each other, create memories, and communicate emotionally (cf. Levitin 2010, 20). Since the mid-20th century rise of what is broadly and commonly understood as contemporary popular culture, music—particularly popular genres like rock and pop, and, more recently, rap and hip-hop—has been practically inseparable from mass media: radio, television, and cinema in the latter half of the 20th century (cf. Frith 1988, 3), social media and internet-based entertainment in the early decades of the new millennium.

In the world of science fiction and fantasy narratives, which have historically drawn more fans (i. e., those audience members whose true engagement with a text starts only *after* having thoroughly absorbed it [cf. Jenkins 1992]) than any other media genres, music has a way of speaking to the passionate audience in a knowingly direct manner. Since fans tend to focus more on the characters than on almost any other part of the text (cf. Jenkins 1992, 178), certain musical elements become inextricably linked in the fans' minds to particular characters (just think of all the official and unofficial 'character playlists' floating around the internet) and are recognized as indicative of character relationships. In the hands of a skilful music editor, a snippet of a song is enough to set the scene and invoke the desired emotion. A moving example would be the use of Cream's "Tales of Brave Ulysses" (1967) in Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). In the humorous episode "Band

Candy” (S3E6), Buffy’s watcher Giles and her mother Joyce eat chocolate that has been tampered with. Along with all the other adults in Sunnydale, they mentally turn into unhinged teenage versions of themselves. Before leaving for their short-lived petty crime spree that culminates in a sexual encounter on the hood of a police car, they spend some time listening to “Tales of Brave Ulysses” on vinyl. Two years later, in the episode “Forever” (S5E17), Giles is listening to the song again, this time while drinking alone in his flat. As Buffy’s mother Joyce died in the previous, harrowing episode “The Body” (S5E16), this sequence functions as a reminiscence to that particular scene, with music doing the majority of heavy lifting when it comes to telling the story of grief. Such re-contextualisation of musical motifs also occurs in the TV adaptation of the novel *Good Omens*, where the short reprise of Tori Amos’ cover of the Sherwin–Maschwitz 1940 classic “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square” in the season 2 finale “Every Day” (S2E6) jarringly contrasts with an earlier, happy moment, when it was featured in the conclusion of season 1, “The Very Last Day of the Rest of their Lives” (S1E6). In that episode, the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley were celebrating their (temporary) victory over Heaven and Hell, enjoying a meal at the Ritz, while a nightingale was, as John Keats observed in “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819), “pouring forth [its] soul abroad in such an ecstasy” (Keats 1998, 176). In the episode “Every Day” (S2E6), however, when Crowley angrily turns off the music, this indicates that the relationship between the two leads has also come to an abrupt end, just like the song on the car stereo; and if a nightingale happened to sing, its song would probably turn into a “plaintive anthem” (Keats 1998, 176), like it did for the melancholic, tragic Keats.

A match made in hell? *Good Omens* and Queen

Of course, while “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square” with its connotations of nostalgia and the lyrics that reference angels and The Ritz Hotel, may be an unofficial theme song for the characters Aziraphale

and Crowley in the series, *Good Omens* as a whole is musically largely indebted to the band Queen, whose compositions form the majority of the show's soundtrack, particularly in season 1. The original book's joke that every tape left in Crowley's car for a fortnight turns into *The Best of Queen* (a compilation that does not exist in the real world) definitely results in a delighted (or horrified) giggle in the reader, but it might not be as benevolently silly and out-of-nowhere as it appears at first glance. The book certainly displays a tongue-in-cheek attitude towards Queen, as evidenced, for instance, by the fact that Crowley briefly considers playing the cassette in which he trapped the demon Hastur "over and over again, until he turn[s] into Freddie Mercury," but decides against it, because "[h]e might be a bastard, but you could only go so far" (Pratchett/Gaiman 2006, 262). Today's audience, particularly if they are too young to remember the late 20th century, might not even realize that Queen were not always considered to be the legendary creative musicians that they are (rightfully) lauded as in the 2020s. On the contrary, in the late 1980s, Queen were still popular, though not as much as in the 1970s. They were, however, increasingly seen as old, unfashionable, and even obsolete, the kind of music that no self-respecting 'cool' person would ever actively choose to listen to (cf. Hodgkinson 2004, 198; Brooks/Lupton 2008, 139–144). Crowley (at least the book version) certainly does not: he is forced into it by his car's annoying quirk, which was inspired by the authors' observation that everyone had a copy of Queen's *Greatest Hits* (1981) in their car without any memory of buying it. Today, Queen are a deeply beloved classic rock band, more familiar to young audiences than any other—according to Spotify statistics, Queen are the most popular classic rock artists with more than 58,000,000 monthly listeners (as of Jan. 21, 2025). Music criticism, too, has changed its tune about Queen only in the last couple of decades. Earlier critics championed vague ideas of musical 'authenticity,' usually interpreted in a narrow (and narrow-minded) way that excluded musicians who were either queer or middle class or both, and they held utter disdain for artists who did not at least pretend to be proper, laddish, salt-of-the-earth types who would scoff at opera

or ballet. In contrast to this outright hostility, today's critics tend to pay respect to Queen's innovative craftsmanship and musical virtuosity, even when they do not personally like their style. In their collection of essays, *Reading Rock and Roll* (1999), Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey explain that the use of "Bohemian Rhapsody" (1975) in the hit film *Wayne's World* (1992) should have been ironic instead of genuine, because "the overproduced and deadly self-important music of Queen" is a blatant example of "boomer music," something that should only ever be seen as "a great source of cheese;" they go on to state that the movie's protagonists, Wayne and Garth, need to be "indicted," because "they've pulled 'Bohemian Rhapsody' from the trash heap of contemporary history" and started listening to it without being forced to; finally, Dettmar and Richey bemoan the fact that "an entire generation of music consumers [note the use of the marketplace-coded word *consumers* instead of the neutral *listeners*] was introduced to Queen and 'Bohemian Rhapsody' by *Wayne's World*, and they didn't see anything wrong with it" (Dettmar/Richey 1999, 317). This was the typical view of Queen in music criticism circles up until fairly recently, particularly in the US-American press, and it could be argued that the band's appearance in the *Good Omens* book, where their music is, after all, mostly treated as a joke, aligns with such a contemptuous stance rather too well. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suggest that a pre-emptive strike against ridicule could have been the reasoning behind Brian May's initial refusal to allow the production team to use Queen's music in the *Good Omens* TV show (he had already refused the same request for the book's BBC radio adaptation). On his Tumblr, Gaiman shared the letter he wrote to May, in which he insisted that the late Pratchett, he himself, and everyone in the production team was a huge Queen fan (cf. Gaiman 2023). This tactic obviously worked, regardless of whether the sentiment behind the letter was entirely genuine (its tone is almost too placating), and May, as Gaiman put it in his Tumblr post, "cheerfully apologised" (Gaiman 2023) and let the *Good Omens* team use Queen's music in the series, acquiring a whole new group of fans (or perhaps 'music consumers') as a result.

In any case, Pratchett and Gaiman's personal attitudes towards Queen hardly matter and are completely irrelevant for the reader's interpretation of the book anyway. Whatever the reason behind the joke, mocking ridicule or loving embrace of absurdity, the fact remains that the interdiscursive presence of Queen in *Good Omens* is not only a source of humor in the novel, but also a particularly apt illustration of postmodern strategies in both works—Pratchett and Gaiman's book and Queen's musical catalogue. Basic building blocks of postmodern works of art, such as playfulness, pastiche, generic promiscuity, intertextuality, and interdiscursivity all contribute to a quintessentially irreverent, humorous, and yet heart-warming tone of both *Good Omens* and Queen. It seems quite strange that, in all their effort to dismiss Queen as self-aggrandizing, self-important, pompous, and humorless relic of the past, Dettmar and Richey fail to recognize the omnipresent irony and self-mockery inherent in many of their songs (anyone who does not notice the tongue-in-cheek tone of the opera section of "Bohemian Rhapsody" must not have listened to it particularly carefully). A song like "It's a Hard Life" from *The Works* (1984) may incorporate seemingly highbrow elements like a direct musical quote from "Vesti la Giubba" from Ruggero Leoncavallo's opera *Pagliacci* (1892), but the sheer over-the-topness of the delightfully camp music video (featuring May's skull guitar and Mercury's 'giant prawn' costume) encourages the audience not to take the whole extravaganza too seriously, while at the same time, the emotion behind the song is genuine. Furthermore, "Vesti la Giubba" is no obscure composition from some overly intellectual artistic creation: after all, one of the first, if not the very first, hit record that sold over a million copies was Enrico Caruso's early 20th century recording of the aria. Even Leoncavallo's original opera was based on the hugely popular dramatic genre of Commedia dell'Arte, hardly a choice of cultural gurus. In other words, 'canon' is not as monolithic a concept as it might appear, and, even more importantly, the mere presence of canonical elements within a postmodern creation does not necessarily indicate a judgmental testimony towards the material. Or, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, "Postmodernism signals its dependence [on

the dominant culture] by its *use* of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic *abuse* of it” (Hutcheon 2004, 130).

The *Good Omens* novel is a parody of non-canonical, pop-culture staples from the late 20th century, like Richard Donner’s horror classic *The Omen* and Richmal Crompton’s *Just William* book series (popular in the 1950s and 1960s), with the obligatory references to *Star Wars* (1977–), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Doctor Who* (1963–). But the text it *really* goes after with all the force of its humor is the most canonical of all: The Bible, more specifically, the Book of Genesis and the Book of Revelation. And yet, it never reads as mean-spirited, because it is precisely this intertextual playfulness and humorous irreverence that makes the novel just funny enough to disregard or entirely dismiss the blasphemy that (lovingly) lies at the heart of it (cf. Krombholz/Vujan 2022). In this context, the music of Queen, which parodies canonical musical genres such as opera, rhapsody, or waltz, pairs beautifully with the novel’s text to create an amusing, well-crafted bricolage.

The instances of Queen appearing in the book are numerous. Most of them serve as an illustration of the running joke about spontaneous musical metamorphosis, e.g., when the car stereo plays “J. S. Bach’s Mass in B Minor, vocals by F. Mercury” (Pratchett/Gaiman 2006, 121) or when Aziraphale and Crowley set off to Tadfield and listen to some ‘classical’ music: Tchaikovsky’s “Another One Bites the Dust,” Byrd’s “We Are the Champions,” and Beethoven’s “I Want to Break Free,” with none of them being “as good as Vaughan Williams’s ‘Fat-Bottomed Girls’” (Pratchett/Gaiman 2006, 95). Some appearances of Queen’s music, however, carry an ampler meaning and contribute to the book’s theme of choice vs. predestination. At the beginning of the novel, as Crowley listens to Antonio Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons* (1725) while driving, the music suddenly turns into Queen and the Devil starts talking to him in Mercury’s voice, reminding him that “*THIS IS THE BIG ONE*” (Pratchett/Gaiman 2006, 31). Vivaldi’s violin concerti, a series of compositions that imitate sounds of nature and invoke the idea of the universe’s eternal, cyclical quality, are halted in favor of an apocalyptic talk, which, of course, makes perfect intertextual and

parodic sense: it is not enough to simply allude to something; that allusion should direct the reader towards a more meaningful engagement with both the text and the intertext, emphasizing the interplay between the two. Moreover, the choice of “Bohemian Rhapsody,” a song that speaks of an agonizing inner struggle, is not coincidental. This struggle is represented most palpably via the battle of the voices, where inner demons have been externalized as multi-layered vocals and grotesque characters, fighting over the speaker’s soul in the “let me go”/“we will never let you go” dichotomous cascade of harmonies, with both God (present in the Arabic phrase “Bismillah”) and Satan (represented here via “Beelzebub”) having a stake in the events. In other words, “Bohemian Rhapsody” is an especially appropriate song if you want to allude to the apocalypse, Heaven and Hell, all the while being funny and parodic about it. Going even further, the song serves as a foreshadowing of the events, because after the chaos and confusion of the opera section and the angry tirade of the heavy metal section, the dénouement returns the listener to the status quo, with the speaker (in a rather Existentialist manner) declaring that “nothing really matters” and “anyway the wind blows,” after which the song (the world?) ends, not with a bang *or* a whimper, but with a well-placed gong instead. This is also the conclusion of *Good Omens*, where after a few almost-catastrophes caused by Adam the Antichrist as well as some bickering and yelling on the part of angelic and demonic entities, the apocalypse sizzles out, rather anticlimactically. At least for now.

Crowley’s unwillingness to participate in the apocalypse and helplessness to do anything about it is underlined by the statement, “[y]ou couldn’t be a demon and have free will,” and metaphorically, through the lyrics that follow that thought: “... *I will not let you go (let him go) ...*” (Pratchett/Gaiman 2006, 32). If the lyrics were not referential enough, the fact that Crowley cannot even choose the music played in his car should drive the point home. In addition, after the apocalypse is thwarted and Crowley commandeers a jeep, he and Aziraphale start listening to Georg Friedrich Händel’s *Water Music* (1717) which “stay[s] Handel’s *Water Music* all the way home” (Pratchett/Gaiman

2006, 379). This simple musical signpost indicates that choice has finally won over destiny, even if the readers have not paid attention to Agnes Nutter's prophecy, which predicted that "the black chariot of the Serpente will flayme, and a Queene wille sing quickfilveres songes no moar" (Pratchett/Gaiman 2006, 312). On the other hand, if Agnes predicted it, was any of it a matter of choice after all?

Unlike his book counterpart, however, the TV series' version of Crowley is not a victim of his car's musical whims. And while he listens to Queen all the time, the show does not imply that this is anything other than his own taste in music (barring a blink-and-you-might-miss-it scene in season 1 when a Mozart CD starts playing Queen and a longer scene in season 2, when Aziraphale politely asks the car to play classical music and *keep it* classical—this is, however, never mentioned in connection to Queen and the reference is lost on the viewers who have not read the book). It lies in the nature of adaptation that certain things get lost or left out in the transition from one medium to another; they are usually unimportant, untranslatable, or contextually and/or culturally inappropriate, the latter often being the explanation behind revisionist adaptations (cf. Stam 2017). While it would be in extremely poor taste to suggest that the less ironic portrayal of Queen in the TV series equates to righting a historical wrong or even to drawing attention to certain historical injustices, as is the case with many revisionist adaptations, the fact remains that the novel's love-hate relationship with Queen turns into nothing but love in the adaptation. The original sentiment may be lost in today's musical climate anyway, which is, as previously explained, more favorable towards Queen than ever before. More cynically, since Gaiman and the rest of the production team needed May's permission to use the band's music, they could not afford to be anything other than complimentary towards it.

Thus, when "Bohemian Rhapsody" first appears in the show—rather early on, at the beginning of the first episode, fittingly titled "In the Beginning" (S1E1)—its purpose is not to show Crowley's lamentable lack of free will and his Bentley's inexplicable musical hyperfixation, but to illustrate what the demons Hastur and Ligur have been talking

about: that Crowley has “gone native” (S1E1). Again, our attention is drawn to the opera section of “Bohemian Rhapsody,” as the story of moral dilemma, Heaven and Hell, and freedom of choice is introduced more explicitly into the narrative. On a more literal level, this section of the song also mentions Beelzebub, one of the major players in *Good Omens*, whose role has been expanded in the series. And as Crowley is entering the convent to deliver—or more accurately, hand over—the baby Antichrist, while God is telling us in a voice-over that most of humanity’s triumphs and tragedies have been caused not by people being good or bad but by “people being fundamentally people” (S1E1), Queen’s song “It’s a Hard Life” is heard in the distance, with its lyrics advocating optimism in the face of repeated disappointment (“It’s a hard life/in a world that’s filled with sorrow/there are people searching for love in every way—/it’s a long hard fight—/but I’ll always live for tomorrow”). This intertextual, parodic song functions in this sequence on both the diegetic and extra-diegetic level: it serves as a musical characterization of Crowley, its parodic treatment of the opera it references serves as reassurance that the series’ allusion to *The Omen* ought to be taken with a grain of salt, and finally, its sad, yet ultimately optimistic lyrics illustrate the show’s unshakeable faith in humanity.

Such playful crossing of diegetic lines is used repeatedly in the show. Illustratively, in the episode “The Book” (S1E2), while Aziraphale and Crowley are driving back from their paintball misadventure at the former convent and talking about the war meant to end everything, one of the most wistful, nostalgic songs in Queen’s entire catalogue, “These Are the Days of Our Lives” (1991), is playing in the car. Even though it is evident that the characters are actually listening to it (or more accurately, that their car is playing it), the true purpose of the song is to comment on the forthcoming apocalypse and to offer a simple solution: acceptance. When the days of our lives come to a close, the song lyrics suggest, the only thing left to do is to enjoy the few remaining, (seemingly) permanent things in life: feelings and memories. Aziraphale and Crowley, however, cannot do that (as much as Crowley might want for them to just run away together to Alpha Centauri);

they need to be more active and help, no matter how incompetently. Thus, the song is there to contrast conciliatory resignation with more decisive participation. The choices the protagonists (similar to Adam and Anathema later on) need to make are necessary in order to wrestle their lives from the clutches of predestination. Therefore, instead of cruising leisurely to the soothing, appeasing tones of “These Are the Days of Our Lives,” the Bentley is going to arrive at the final show-down on fire, to the demented sounds of “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

Occasionally, however, the music is simply there to superficially pair up with the action. Towards the end of “The Book” (S1E2), when Crowley accidentally hits the bike-riding Anathema with his car, Queen’s humorous “Bicycle Race” from the album *Jazz* (1978) is played as a rather obvious musical choice. In this instance, the song is almost embodying the action that is happening on screen, while both Anathema and her bicycle are getting a heavenly healing session, courtesy of Aziraphale. Something similar occurs in “The Doomsday Option” (S1E5), where the Bentley is on fire and the only thing keeping it from falling apart is Crowley’s imagination. While God is explaining this via voice-over, Roger Taylor is singing the line “the machine of a dream” from his *A Night at the Opera* (1975) song “I’m in Love with My Car” (after Crowley has put a CD of Mozart into the deck). This song is a good example of the postmodern ‘abuse’ of canon (cf. Hutcheon 2004, 130), because it almost functions as a parody of Petrarchan sonnets: instead of a lover’s clichéd cataloguing of an unreachable lady’s golden hair, coral lips, or star-lit eyes, the song’s speaker is lovingly admiring pistons, hubcaps, and carburetor of a car. The lines “When I’m holding your wheel/all I hear is your gear/when my hand is on your grease gun/oh it’s like a disease son” are filled with humorous sexual innuendo and can easily be read through a queer lens. Instead of using these elements for its own parodic treatment of love and sexual attraction (mostly present in the pairings of Shadwell and Madame Tracy as well as Anathema and Newt, where the story playfully subverts romance tropes of ‘reforming a fallen woman’ and ‘love at first sight’ respectively), the series reduces the song to simple commentary, corresponding

exactly with the action on screen. Although the song obviously serves as a means of musical characterization of Crowley, its full parodic potential is ultimately not used.

Unlike the relationships between secondary characters, the relationship between the two leads, while certainly *unconventional*, is always treated as *genuine*. When “Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy” (1976) starts playing in “The Arrival” (S2E1) the camera hovers in bird’s eye view above the Bentley, and even though it is nominally part of the diegesis, since Crowley is listening to it while driving, the ultimate purpose of the song is to describe the relationship between Aziraphale and Crowley, which is placed center-stage in season 2. Here, the show opts to stay on the surface level of the song’s meaning and not draw attention to its parodic subtext. “Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy,” along with similar songs like “The Millionaire Waltz” from *A Day at the Races* (1976) and “Lazing on a Sunday Afternoon” from *A Night at the Opera* (an instrumental version of which is played by a brass band while Aziraphale and Crowley are strolling through a park in the season 1 finale), belongs to a group of Mercury’s nostalgic parodies of British music hall tradition. The song is an overly exaggerated, lampooning re-enactment of clichéd romantic notions, demonstrated by the lyrics, e.g., “I can serenade and gently play on your heart strings/be your Valentino just for you” or “I’d like for you and I to go romancing/say the word—your wish is my command.” The speaker is using everything he learned “in the good old-fashioned school of lover boys” to woo the addressee, and the pretense of his over-the-top romantic approach can be detected in the (good old-fashioned) pick-up-artist tools at his disposal, made explicit in the lyrics such as “set my alarm, turn on my charm” or “I’ll use my fancy patter on the telephone.” The ultimate desire of the song’s speaker is not to serenade or gently woo the addressee, despite his pretty words; it is to entice them to “come on and sit on [his] hot seat of love.” In other words, the song is a sexual invitation masquerading as a respectable (good old-fashioned), hyperbolically romanticized emotional overture. Moreover, the song’s undertone is unquestionably queer: the “good-old fashioned school of lover

boys” alludes to British all-male boarding schools and the stereotype of homosexual shenanigans happening there, whereas “I will pay the bill, you taste the wine” might make connoisseurs of proper old-fashioned Rules of Etiquette raise a knowing eyebrow, because those outdated traditions suggest that the man is the one who both chooses the wine and pays the bill on a date (at the Ritz, naturally), meaning that, in Mercury’s parody of such traditions, both the speaker and the object of his attraction are men. Although *Good Omens* does effectively queer old-fashioned etiquette rules in the Austenesque cotillion ball in “The Ball” (S2E5), it does not utilize the same potential of “Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy” to its full extent. Instead, just like with the song “I’m in Love with My Car,” the show makes sure to reference certain on-screen events (“dining at the Ritz” or “driving back in style in my saloon”), but chooses not to engage with the song’s transgressive subtext. Adding to that, even extremely well-executed fanvids, like Alex Whelan’s “Crowley & Aziraphale | Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy” (2023), remain on the surface of the song’s text, pairing the lyrics referring to dimming the lights, dancing, or talking on the telephone with the corresponding actions on screen. This is, however, in accordance with the vidding tradition. Discussing fannish practices is outside of this article’s scope; nevertheless, it should be stated that the purpose of a fanvid is not to shed light on the chosen music, but to use that music as a tool for the visuals, which in turn offer interpretations of characters or character relationships to the broader fan community (cf. Coppa 2008).

Even if neither “I’m in Love with My Car” nor “Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy” are used to their full parodic and/or transgressive potential in the show, two other Queen songs are extremely skillfully placed in the narrative and offer insightful commentary on the characters and plot. “The Doomsday Option” (S1E5) opens with “You’re My Best Friend” (1975), the song which was also used in the first trailer for the series (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5KazJ-5a5A>), indicating the change of focus from the apocalypse (in the book) to the relationship between Aziraphale and Crowley (in the show). The song

is, again, at least nominally part of the diegesis, because Crowley is (probably) listening to it in his car, but it is more important in the extra-diegetic sense, describing the relationship between the two leads. The lyrics that accompany the scene of Crowley calling Aziraphale while driving are, “Whenever the world is cruel to me, I’ve got you to help me forgive.” The lyrics paint a rather telling picture. That our focalizer in this scene is Crowley (the world is often cruel to him, but he has someone to help him get through it) showcases both his increasing humanity and his dependence on Aziraphale. Moreover, Aziraphale’s angelic nature is emphasized by the idea of forgiveness, something that the demonic Crowley naturally struggles with. The music continues even after Crowley steps out of the car, neatly moving into narrative commentary. As Crowley enters the flaming bookshop, Mercury sings, “I know I’ll never be lonely, you’re the only one,” which brings home the dramatic irony of the scene—Crowley believes that Aziraphale is dead, yelling, “Somebody killed my best friend!” (the first time he explicitly refers to Aziraphale as such)—and emphasizes Crowley’s loneliness, in contrast to the lyrics. The song also contributes to the queer subtext of the show: even though the lyrics focus on friendship, that friendship is certainly not platonic, which is obvious to the listener even if they are unfamiliar with the song’s origin, because lines like “You’re my sunshine/and I want you to know/that my feelings are true/I really love you” reveal the nature of the speaker’s feelings towards the addressee. John Deacon famously wrote “You’re my Best Friend” for his wife Veronica, stressing the importance of friendship and true understanding, not just passion, in a marriage; this is quite an unusual sentiment for 1970s rock, which was dominated by more sexual depictions of love. The fact that this particular song is used to describe the dynamics between Aziraphale and Crowley adds a romantic dimension to their friendship and creates more tension in the sequence, contrasting the song’s warm feelings of love with Crowley’s palpable panic and heartbreak on screen. Indeed, as Crowley is leaving the burning bookshop, the music turns into “Somebody to Love” (1976)—a song that explicitly deals with loneliness and the desire to belong. Moreover, the

section of the song that was chosen here—Mercury’s almost broken plea “Find me somebody to love”—shows Crowley’s overwhelming desperation and fear of being alone. Interestingly enough, “Somebody to Love” is entirely extra-diegetic here, used solely to inform the audience of Crowley’s inner turmoil.

There must be more to life than Queen: Other musical references in *Good Omens*

Although both Aziraphale and Crowley are unconventional, queer, and camp, Crowley, as the more ‘modern’ one (not to mention, the one with the Queen-loving car) is ultimately more firmly connected to the music of Queen, while behind-the-times Aziraphale, who thinks that The Velvet Underground is “be-bop” (S1E2), mostly listens to classical music (78 rpm records, to be precise) on an antique trumpet gramophone. Thus, in the amusing séance scene in “The Doomsday Option” (S1E5), when Aziraphale possesses Madame Tracy, his arrival is signaled by classical music, the famous overture to Gioachino Rossini’s opera *William Tell* (1829). This composition has traditionally been utilized in soundtracks to indicate urgency and accompany fast-paced action, but its excessive use in popular culture (films, cartoons, TV shows, adverts) has turned it into a parodic piece (cf. Goldmark 2005, 8 and 39). *Good Omens* plays with this cultural reference as well—not only does the music signal Aziraphale’s entrance and create suspense, but it also reassures the audience that the demonic possession on screen is humor, not horror. Aziraphale’s music choices are more prominent in season 2, in which more space is given to the characters to simply go about their daily routines. These music choices then often serve as an amusing extra-diegetic commentary. Thus, when Aziraphale takes the car to Edinburgh (to Crowley’s consternation), he listens to Camille Saint-Saëns’ *Danse Macabre* (1874) on the way there and to Glenn Miller’s *Moonlight Serenade* (1939) on the way back. Both of these compositions tell us something about Aziraphale, but can also be interpreted as mu-

sical allusions to the lengthy flashbacks featured in the episodes. *Danse Macabre* is a symphonic poem based on the well-known mediaeval allegory in which both the living and the dead (skeletons and still decomposing bodies alike) dance with Death. It symbolizes death's inevitability and universality; and Saint-Saëns' music has become a common staple of science fiction and fantasy media (e.g., it was used in "Hush" [S4E10], the famous silent episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; it was heavily alluded to in Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* [2008], in which the characters dance the 'Macabray;' and it also appears as a rather ironic recurring musical motif in Jean Renoir's *La règle du jeu* [1939]). The inclusion of *Danse Macabre* into "I Know Where I'm Going" (S2E3)—an episode that features the minisode "The Resurrectionists," where the titular practice of resurrectionism or body-snatching comes into focus—is therefore particularly apt. The dance between the living, the recently deceased, and the non-human (i. e., the angel and the demon) is explored both in the story and in the music that introduces it.

Similarly, in the episode "The Hitchhiker" (S2E4), which features the minisode "Nazi Zombie Flesh Eaters," Aziraphale asks the car to play something modern (but not be-bop) and settles for swing. The car obliges and when the *Moonlight Serenade*, one of the signature tunes of WW2, starts playing, it comes as no surprise that the flashback takes the narrative to wartime London. The music's purpose, therefore, is both to give more insight into Aziraphale's character and to contribute to the story's setting. And even though it might seem—due to cultural elitism and prejudice towards the popular (where products associated with 'high culture' rank higher than those associated with 'mass culture')—that Aziraphale's classical leanings make him less rebellious than Crowley, both the book and the show insert subtle reminders of Aziraphale's (potential) transgressiveness. After all, the only "first grade" musicians who belong to Heaven are, as Crowley explains, "Elgar and Liszt. That's *all*. We've got the rest. Beethoven, Brahms, all the Bachs, Mozart, the lot" (Pratchett/Gaiman 2006, 55). As a lover of classical music, Aziraphale is therefore necessarily an aficionado of Hell music. Indeed, his complicated relationship with the management of Heaven

may be compared to Dmitri Shostakovich's relationship with the apparatus of the Soviet Union, which might explain why Aziraphale is so fond of Shostakovich's music. While Crowley's subversive nature is more easily identifiable than Aziraphale's, these musical signposts paint a less dutiful and more mutinous picture of Aziraphale. He is, after all, the only angel who dances, and, to cap it all, the dance he prefers is the queer-coded gavotte (which he learned "in a discreet gentlemen's club in Portland Place" [Pratchett/Gaiman 2006, 260] during the culturally revolutionary *Fin de siècle*).

Instead of providing characterization or commentary, the presence of Buddy Holly's "Everyday" (1957) in season 2 is a major plot point. The fact that every copy of every single played on the vintage jukebox in *The Resurrectionist* pub turns into "Everyday" can be considered a continuation of the book's Queen joke, which makes for an amusing postmodern self-referential moment. In contrast to the Queen metamorphosis, which is taken in stride by Crowley and probably not even noticed by Aziraphale, the Buddy Holly enigma is treated as a "Clue" (S2E2) and dutifully investigated. The incongruous combination of light-hearted love lyrics ("Everyday it's a-gettin' closer/goin' faster than a roller coaster") and their interpretation in light of a slowly approaching apocalypse (version 2.0) is a deliberate invocation of Pratchett's use of literary nonsense—the Victorian genre that revels in incongruity, linguistic experimentation, and absurd humor, often employed in the *Discworld* novels. While the apocalypse is underway, the amnesiac Archangel Gabriel is absent-mindedly singing, humming, or creepily reciting the Buddy Holly song. Although it seems clear that the reason for such obsessive preoccupation must be ominous, the explanation that is finally given in "Every Day" (S2E6)—this is the song Gabriel and Beelzebub made their own—comes as a surprise and a sigh of relief. Until the audience is reminded that the world is about to implode, anyway. Moreover, the fact that two such powerful, vindictive, and (it must be said) ineffable entities like Gabriel and Beelzebub chose such a sweet, teenybopper song like "Everyday" to refer to their budding romance adds another dimension to the entire story and provides a fresh

insight into their characters. For all their authority and might, they are still innocent in so many regards (especially concerning their knowledge of Earth, humankind, and human feelings) that anything other than a ‘silly love song,’ as Paul McCartney would say, would ultimately be an unsuitable emotional soundtrack. This also serves as a parallel to Aziraphale and Crowley’s more drawn-out, complicated relationship: just like they never do anything about Queen taking over their ‘every day,’ they spend those days together, but not *together*, and cannot (for now) find any real common ground, despite all their shared history.

If Pratchett and Gaiman’s purported undying love for Queen needs to be taken with a grain of salt, the same cannot be said for the TV series’ composer David Arnold. Everything about the *Good Omens* soundtrack, from the opening and closing theme’s melody to its arrangement and incidental musical cues, indicates that Queen were definitely among Arnold’s major influences (e.g., the electric guitar sounds in the show often imitate the recognizable ‘singing’ quality of May’s Red Special). The fact that the series’ main tune is a waltz hints again at Queen—particularly their campy, parodic composition “The Millionaire Waltz.” As I have stated elsewhere, this song is transgressive because it

“takes a classical form which was by the 1970s associated more with pensioners’ clubs and village dance halls than with high culture, and even in its early nineteenth-century heyday it was light music, written as popular dancing entertainment. By combining this decidedly light, feminine-coded style of music with masculine-coded, hard rock guitar sounds, Queen blur the genre and gender binaries, and create a queer, discursive musical piece.” (Vujin 2023, 64)

Arnold’s theme tune builds upon this discursivity and sounds much more like Queen than like Johann Strauss (the son), which invites a queer reading of the show right from the start and hints at the playful interrogation of literal Biblical canon that the audience is about to watch. Furthermore, Arnold’s choice of genre is also significant regard-

ing the series' ultimate theme of choice vs. predestination: the waltz is a strict, repetitive, cyclical style of music; more importantly, it is a *dance*, with set steps that must be followed. The two protagonists, however, are not very good at following those steps. Aziraphale and Crowley's struggle with doing exactly as they are told is metaphorically demonstrated in the closing music of each episode, which is always slightly varied (e.g., a string orchestra version, a fairground/circus music version, a pipe-organ version, and so forth) in order to elaborate further on the events that occurred in the corresponding episode. To add even more to the musical fun, Buddy Holly's "Everyday" is added to the mix in season 2 and becomes part of the closing theme, again with meaningful variations (an acapella version in "The Arrival" [S2E1], to signify that Aziraphale, Crowley, and Gabriel are in this together, with no *orchestrating* parties being known, or a bagpipe version in "I Know Where I'm Going" (S2E3), which partly takes place in Scotland). Taken as a whole, the soundtrack thus perfectly pairs original compositions and existing songs, creating a beautifully coherent accompaniment to the main narrative.

Conclusion

Coming to a conclusion, the presence of Queen in *Good Omens* might have started as a joke, but even the original novel, all those decades ago when Queen were decidedly 'uncool,' made use of the musical and lyrical potential of compositions like "Bohemian Rhapsody" to emphasize that a story of the battle between Heaven and Hell can be fun and morally challenging at the same time. Marrying a parodic, intertextual, postmodern work such as *Good Omens* with the parodic, intertextual, postmodern music of Queen was a stroke of genius on Pratchett and Gaiman's part. It is precisely the fact that neither *Good Omens* nor Queen's music can be regarded as high culture that makes them perfect candidates for playful interpretative treatment, both in academic and fannish spaces. Such typically postmodernist texts, which are "at

once popular bestsellers and objects of intense academic study” employ “conventions of both popular and elite literature” so that they can “actually *use* the invasive culture industry to challenge its own commodification processes from within” (Hutcheon 2004, 20). *Good Omens* in particular travelled the long (though not very winding) road from a beloved cult classic novel to one of the most popular fantasy TV shows in the world, with a significant fan-following. Its transmedia nature allows for a reinvention in every new iteration—be it a television sequel (season 2) or a lengthy TV movie (as rumor has it for season 3)—while remaining faithful to the parodic, humorous tone of the original novel. Henry Jenkins’ (2006) ideas of media convergence and transmedia storytelling can be expanded to also include a narrative’s spillover onto the internet and social media, audience’s responses to such expansion, as well as practices that do not refer simply to transmedia storytelling (i. e., storytelling within the same fictional universe spread over different media), but also to transmedia distribution, such as franchising, adaptations, sequels, even marketing (cf. Evans 2011, 1 f.). In that regard, *Good Omens* might be a better ‘grassroots’ example of transmediality than pop-cultural juggernauts like *Star Wars*, which have been heavily incorporated into the industry and certainly do not challenge their own commodification (cf. Fiske 1989). In contrast, *Good Omens* has not turned into a mega-franchise that constantly churns out content in order to profit off the audience’s investment in its storyworld. Instead, it remains a transmedia narrative dedicated almost solely to storytelling. Furthermore, following T. S. Eliot’s notion of tradition and individual talent (1919), whereby new contexts create fresh interpretations of the existing works of art (cf. Eliot 1975, 38), it can be observed that *Good Omens* also reinterprets Queen’s music in light of its musical and lyrical relation to the characters and plot. As an illustration, a parodic song like “Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy” loses its humorously cynical edge and turns into a much gentler composition befitting the series’ lighter tone and its protagonists’ situation. Hence, the TV adaptation’s usage of Queen’s music brings the characters of Aziraphale and Crowley and their relationship into a sharper focus, while leaving room

for other musical contributions—most significantly various classical compositions and Buddy Holly’s “Everyday”—to add other suggestive and meaningful musical elements into the narrative. Finally, Arnold’s music, particularly his theme tune, ties everything neatly together, balancing beautifully between humor and genuine pathos.

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But It's Pretty

Exploring the Significance of the Color Yellow in *Good Omens* from Page to Screen

Hannah Mitchell

In the *Good Omens* TV series, the color yellow appears in many scenes as the literal backdrop for conversations between Crowley and Aziraphale, painting some of their most profound interactions in the color traditionally associated with cowardice and fear but also with joy and sunlight. This color also appears in a cheerful form when Aziraphale shifts the hue of Crowley's car from black to bright yellow as he drives it for the first time, indicating that—according to many re-readings of the series by fans—Aziraphale's choice of color is connected to his adoration for Crowley's eyes. In some cultures, yellow is the color of ribbons worn by those who are hoping for the return of a loved one from battle. Yellow has also been used as a symbol for heresy in early Christian art. Further, a yellow ribbon was, at the time the *Good Omens* novel was published in 1990, the symbol for AIDS awareness (when the condition was considered the plight of queer men exclusively).

Through the lens of adaptation theory, this chapter seeks to address how the alterations between the *Good Omens* novel and the screen adaptation affect how we interpret the usage and symbolic significance of the color yellow, the inherent queerness of the main characters, and the yellow-as-fear that highlights their interactions.

Introduction

In the novel *Good Omens*, sympathetic readers experience an emotional gut-punch during the burning of the angel Aziraphale's beloved second-hand bookshop. For the first time, the demon Crowley is seen

without his stylish dark sunglasses, revealing to the reader his snake-like yellow eyes as he experiences a profoundly vulnerable moment of loss. Viewers of the televised version of *Good Omens*, however, are introduced to Crowley and his inhuman eyes from the very first scene; as such, the reveal lacks the same narrative weight. Of the many changes made while adapting this novel for the screen, this is arguably one of the most thematically relevant alterations.

No longer a dramatic revelation, the yellow of Crowley's eyes instead bleeds into the background and foreground of the show to color both the past and present, taking on multiple meanings as it winks at each of the (debatable) protagonists in both subtle and obvious ways. In examining the on-screen adaptation of the *Good Omens* novel, it is important to explore the history of the color yellow and its wildly varying historical uses. From the human eye's recognition of the color and through worlds of art, story, and music, this exploration follows an allusive yellow thread that adds multidimensional layers to the novel's on-screen adaptation. Focusing on perhaps the most common symbolic aspects of yellow—fear and joy—can offer further insight into the sometimes conflicting, sometimes cooperative, and surprisingly *human* motivations of the two supernatural beings around whom the *Good Omens* story revolves.

Adapting *Good Omens*

In her excellent book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Linda Hutcheon explores the different ways that humanity has always shared stories. “Seen as a formal entity or product, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This ‘transcoding’ can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation” (Hutcheon 2006, 7). The term ‘adaptation’ is not relegated merely to its use as a noun; Hutcheon describes it as

a doubled process, the act of adapting as both creation and reception: “as a *process of creation*, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-) interpretation and then (re-)creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging, depending on your perspective [...] seen from the perspective of its *process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality” (Hutcheon 2006, 8). Hutcheon describes these transformative adapted works as “a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing” (Hutcheon 2006, 9).

In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel of TIFFBellLightbox (of the Toronto International Film Festival), Hutcheon describes in 2011 the sensations attached to experiencing an adaptation as a sort of double act:

“What’s happening for me is that I’m oscillating between the work I know (the novel or the book, in this case) and the film I’m watching, and I’m flipping between the two. And I’m not necessarily comparing them—I probably am, but I’m not evaluating that comparison. I’m just noticing that ‘this is the same, this is different,’ or whatever. But I’ve always got that doubled experience. So for me, going to see an adaptation or read an adaptation is always a nicely doubled experience.” (TIFFBellLightbox 2011)

In examining the *Good Omens* series through three lenses—looking at it as a product, as a creative process, and as it has been received—viewers and readers actually experience a vast multiplicity of adaptation layers. Initially, it begins as a novel, but even that cannot truly be called the beginning of the *Good Omens* story because of its manifold intertextual references. The novel itself serves in parts as a parody of the 1976 horror film *The Omen* which was in turn inspired by and adapted from Biblical stories found in the chapters of John, Thessalonians, and of course the Book of Revelations.

“But in adapting the plot from simply ‘The’ Omen into ‘Good’ Omens, the novel shifts its focus from the spectacle of horror to the absurdity

of prophecy. Instead of using the Anti-Christ and his evil plans as the focus of the movie, Pratchett and Gaiman create an ensemble cast [...] that comments on the complexities of prophecy, the rhetorical strategies of warning, and the act of planning future actions based on an ‘ineffable’ text.” (Clemons 2017, 86)

The complexity of the allusive nature of the novel broadens exponentially with its shift from the page to the TV screen. From its publication in 1990 to its TV series premiere in 2019, fans old and new experienced nearly thirty years of societal and technological changes; a new adaptation, therefore, required the story itself to adapt. Further, the media shift ensures the storyline’s transformation and reinvention. The *Good Omens* TV series must be understood not only as an adaptation of the novel but as a canonical expansion of the novel and its wider referential storyworld: season 1 most directly, with season 2 continuing the story far beyond the pages of the book, parodying the tropes found in both romantic comedies and ‘whodunit’ mysteries, starring demon Crowley and angel Aziraphale as deuteragonists. The TV adaptation should not necessarily be viewed as a next step from the *Good Omens* novel, existing on a horizontal spectrum of development. Instead, using the lens of adaptation theory, we can begin to explore the multifaceted story elements of the *Good Omens* adaptations “vertically rather than horizontally” (TIFFBellLightbox 2011). In other words, the adaptation does not only add to and continue the story of the novel: it also adds depth, alters context, and develops multiple levels of impact within the storyworld.

The *Good Omens* TV series engages with its source material in a way that plays with and sometimes subverts the expectations set by the book: it acknowledges its place within the broader tradition of apocalyptic and religious-themed media while drawing new references to pop culture and other works of literature, creating an intertextual web that both honors and reinterprets the original text. While the novel is full of wry internal monologues, amusing footnotes, and detailed descriptions of settings and characters, the film adaptation transforms the novel’s

narrative into the visual and auditory languages of television through set and sound design, costuming and makeup, and performances that reinterpret the written characters. The decisions made during the adaptation process allow a multidimensional story to develop, informed not only by the source material but by inspirational elements that spiral out in fractals from its point of inception. Approaching the *Good Omens* TV version through this interconnected process of vertical analysis allows us to observe a prismatic sort of symbolism developing from Crowley's eyes, the 'root of all yellow,' in this particular tale.

Fear and fraud, light and delight

The expression of symbolic meaning through the employment of color is as old as human expression; in the story of *Good Omens*, however, not all colors are treated equally. By investigating artistic, historical, and even biological experiences of the color yellow outside of the story, we can open multiple windows of intertextual understanding. Interestingly, the color yellow is the easiest color for the human eye to detect: the center of the spectrum of visible light falls in the yellow-green zone, an averaged wavelength on neither end of the spectrum (with long-waved reds on one side and short-waved violets on the other). Even those who have red-green color blindness are still capable of seeing the color yellow.

Color theory is, as a concept at large, a massive collection of ideas and connections that are incredibly contextual.

“In both reviewing advances in and identifying weaknesses of the literature on color and psychological functioning, it is important to bear in mind that the existing theoretical and empirical work is at an early stage of development [...] color psychology is a uniquely complex area of inquiry that is only beginning to come into its own.” (Elliot 2015)

In the chapter “Colour in History—Relative and Absolute,” John Gage (1999) explores a small sample of wildly varying symbolism of color

from across the globe and throughout time, negating the notion of coherent color-based symbology. Gage states that the instability in “colour-symbolism [...] in medieval and Renaissance examples in Europe [...] may be attributable to nothing more compelling than the individual imagination of the artists responsible” (Gage 1999, 110). In consequence, it is not possible to give one definition of yellow (or any color) as inarguably representative of a single concept, although there does seem to be some cross-cultural agreement as to what the color might symbolize according to human imagination and experience. Yellow has been identified since the earliest days of modern color theory as being a color of balance, a color on the cusp of being either warm or cold, the sun that could either warm or burn (cf. Gage 1999, 2 ff.). But because the symbolism of color can be so frustratingly broad, assessing an intended meaning behind its use is often an exercise in vagary. Although color theory and color psychology are certainly intertwined in multiple axes of convergence, the context of Christian belief and modern Western culture (in which the *Good Omens* narrative is embedded) does in fact allow for some specific readings of the color symbolism in *Good Omens*.

In Western culture, yellow is often used in negative portrayals of fictional characters. It has long been the color of cowardice: the insult ‘yellow’ or ‘yellow-bellied’ has been used to describe a person without grit, fortitude, or bravery. This use of yellow as the color of cowardice, of fear of standing up for oneself, is often a backdrop for Aziraphale and Crowley’s conversations. In the second episode of season 2, the walls of Job’s home are yellow, surrounding the two main characters as they discover each others’ complexities for the first time in spite of their differences as an angel and a demon on ‘opposite sides.’ The warm yellow walls of the A. Z. Fell & Co. bookshop (throughout both seasons of the show) provide a thematically relevant background to many of Crowley and Aziraphale’s most fraught conversations and vulnerable moments.

In some crucial scenes, Aziraphale wears a yellow or gold vest, symbolically hiding his heart behind his cowardice: for example, during his ‘bullet catch’ magic act in episode 4 of season 2, an adventure-filled

night in 1941 packed with thematic layers of misdirection, disguise, and the threat of discovery and punishment. Aziraphale's vest is again yellow during his trip to Scotland masquerading as a 'newspaperman' in episode 3 of season 2. This invokes the idea of 'yellow press,' a kind of reporting that values sensationalism over facts, relying on the over-exaggeration of news events or scandals in order to increase newspaper sales. Aziraphale's newspaperman disguise could easily be seen as his own unpleasant self-portrait, related to an angelically propagandized idea of the apocalyptic Great Plan and Aziraphale's continued insistence on repeating the heavenly 'party line.'

Throughout both the novel and the series, Crowley and Aziraphale are presented as two sides of the same coin, opposing agents in a sort of satirical Cold War stand-off (cf. Waller 2023, 16). The novel describes their 6,000 year long Arrangement as "the sort of sensible arrangement that many isolated agents, working in awkward conditions a long way from their superiors, reach with their opposite number when they realize that they have more in common with their immediate opponents than their remote allies [...] Both were of angel stock, after all" (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 32). While both characters worked together, it was with the clear understanding that the consequences of their partnership would be dire if discovered by their superiors. While the novel is explicit about the threat of hellish punishment, it is the series that emphasizes the iron fist of Heaven's control. The first angel (aside from Aziraphale) that viewers encounter is Gabriel, the Supreme Archangel of all Heaven, appearing in horror movie fashion behind Aziraphale's own reflection in a mirror, alarmingly out-of-place in a quiet sushi restaurant in the first episode of season 1. While Gabriel is not as directly threatening as Crowley's demonic supervisors, he exudes a sense of casual cruelty that defines him as a creature whose power has never been questioned. As he passes judgment on Aziraphale's attempts at "keeping up appearances" among humans and informs his subordinate to "keep an eye" (SIEI) on the demon Crowley, viewers see Aziraphale's body language alter drastically; while previously relaxed and delighted with his food, upon Gabriel's arrival Aziraphale's shoulders stiffen, his

eyes become shifty, and he physically leans away from his imposing supervisor, clearly uncomfortable. The poor working conditions (to put it lightly) under which both Crowley and Aziraphale labor suggest that there is a sort of ‘yellow-dog contract’ between the superiors and subordinates of both Heaven and Hell; this is a contract between an employer and an employee, wherein the worker agrees to never join a union or engage in union activities. Crowley and Aziraphale are enemies, according to their supervisors; in the novel, Crowley muses, “Aziraphale. The Enemy, of course. But an enemy for six thousand years now, which made him a sort of friend” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 27). Still, their partnership develops into something more, even as any possible anti-establishment ideals of equality and of working openly together are squashed by the threat of those in power over them.

That overbearing power is particularly seen in Heaven itself, where the color yellow makes its presence known through the golden accessories sported by many of Aziraphale’s fellow angels. While some angels add a hint of blue to their look (the pale blue and cream tartan of Aziraphale’s regiment, also worn in some scenes by scrivener Muriel, come to mind, as well as the first suit we see Gabriel wearing in season 1), the angels with the most power seem to stick with white and gold. Some angels are, themselves, gilded; Uriel, for example, has gold leaf accentuating their face; Sandalphon’s smarmy smile is accentuated by a golden dental grill. Even Crowley understands, in-universe, that Heaven exists in its own perpetual Gilded Age: when he sneaks into Heaven with the angel Muriel in episode 6 of season 2, he transforms his habitually stylish black ensemble into a cream and gold leisure suit. With his serpent-mark glinting yellow and with golden nail polish to match, it seems that Crowley is well aware of the notion that Heaven’s purity is truly only gilding: a surface-level appearance, something removed as easily as a costume.

In spite of so much associated negativity, the color yellow is often used with positive connotations. Cheerful people are said to have a sunny disposition, for example; many interior decorators will assert that yellow paint can cheer up even the chilliest of rooms, calling to

mind the warmth of the sun. This does have some scientific basis: in research conducted to assess possible connections between color and alertness, study participants were observed in environments lit by both cool blue light and warm yellow light. Multiple variations on this study confirmed that blue light can “increase subjective alertness and performance on attention-based tasks [...] Participants exposed to blue (relative to yellow) illumination reported greater mental alertness” (Elliot 2015). The inverse findings, therefore, show that warm yellow light has the benefit of promoting relaxation and feelings of calm. In episode 3 of season 2, viewers see Aziraphale driving Crowley’s beloved Bentley to Edinburgh: the angel appears more relaxed and calm than the audience has ever seen him. As the camera pulls away (and as a furious Crowley rants through the radio about the changes to his car), we can see that the Bentley has not only provided Aziraphale with travel sweets and classical music instead of any Queen ‘best-of’ tracks, it has also transformed its exterior from Crowley’s signature black into a sunshiny yellow: “My car is not yellow. It has never been yellow. It is not going to start being yellow now! Change it back,” Crowley seethes; Aziraphale’s relaxed smile has faded to a pout. “But it’s pretty” (S2E3), he pleads.



Fig. 1: Aziraphale drives Crowley's Bentley through the countryside. The car is no longer demonically black and has become a cheerful golden-yellow. (S2E3)

With Crowley threatening to actually sell some of the books in Aziraphale's shop in retaliation, the Bentley obediently speeds up and the yellow melts away. Still, something interesting occurs in this scene that hints at more than humorous banter. Before the audience sees the reveal of the yellow Bentley, we hear Crowley growling infernally over the radio: "You realize I can feel when you drive the Bentley under the speed limit." As the yellow Bentley comes into view, Crowley continues to harangue Aziraphale: "You've done something to the car, haven't you? I can feel it!" (Fig. 1). If we accept Crowley's connection with his car as part of himself and his carefully crafted persona, then Crowley's words here seem to suggest that, for all his demonic bite and disdain, Crowley could in fact be more naturally sunny were he to 'let Aziraphale in,' so to speak. Conversely, much of Aziraphale's journey through the *Good Omens* story relates to notions of control: who has it, how is it wielded, in what ways can it help and harm? The yellow Bentley may be foreshadowing Aziraphale's disastrously hypnotic co-tillion and his acceptance of the position of Supreme Archangel at the end of season 2, separating himself from Crowley—ostensibly out of a desire to protect them both from reprisals. With Aziraphale literally behind the wheel, everything appears much more pleasant. As previously mentioned, however, Crowley knows that this yellow is simply another example of heavenly gilding: the Bentley resumes its original black with miraculous speed. Still, Aziraphale's delight in this softer version of Crowley's car suggests that he identifies the color yellow with only pleasant connotations: it could only have been Aziraphale's own decision to paint the interior of his beloved bookshop yellow, after all. At this point, upon his first experience driving Crowley's Bentley, he has taken the liberty of making it "pretty," the color of Crowley's demonic eyes.

Good Omens in context of yellow's cultural significance

To the multiple and intersecting connotations that surround the color of Crowley's eyes, we can continue to add more and more layers of meaning through historical and literary references in order to inform our interpretation of these characters, their universe, and their relationship. Yellow has been used extensively in art and literature, often with unpleasant connotations in spite of its brightness. The short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a claustrophobia-inducing tale of a woman confined to her bedroom for her health by her husband, a doctor. As she is continually denied her own agency, she becomes obsessed with the yellow wallpaper of her room, eventually ripping it apart in a desperate attempt to assert her own freedom and self-identity. Another alarming literary symbol hails from the Gilded Age pages of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925): looming over the wasteland outside of town, "The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose" (Fitzgerald 2000, 26). This decaying billboard in the valley of ashes watches the novel's story unfold, vigilant and all-seeing, a menacing blue and gold presence over the lives of everyone in the narrative. In another novel of contrasting freedom and fear, *Alan and Naomi* (1977) by Myron Levoy, the color yellow serves as a complex symbol of both trauma and potential freedom. The color weaves through the story, contrasting the weight of fear with the hope of healing, linking the personal history of Naomi's trauma to her eventual recovery. This symbolism underscores the novel's exploration of how individuals respond to and recover from the wounds of the past, moving from fear to a tentative embrace of freedom. These tales of being trapped both by and within the framework of a senseless power structure could easily speak to the character arcs of either (or both) Aziraphale and Crowley.

Yellow symbolism does not end with literary references. It is often employed in film as a sort of color-shorthand for joy and wonder; the Yellow Brick Road in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) easily comes to mind in

this context. Like Aziraphale's "pretty" Bentley, there are some other famous yellow cars in film history, such as the inimitable Volkswagen bus from the tragicomedy *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) and the titular vehicle in the British composite-film *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (1964). Interestingly, the yellow vehicles in both of these wildly different films act as places of temporary safety and love in the midst of complexities and conflict: concepts that might feel familiar to both Aziraphale and Crowley.

One of the most expensive and luminous pigments in art history, Indian Yellow, is responsible for some of the most striking examples of yellow as an artistic focal point. From Giotto's *The Kiss of Judas* (1306) to the stars of Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1889), this radiant pigment captures the eye and the imagination. Drobniak (2022) observes that Giotto's choice of a sickly yellow for the clothing of Judas may be a deliberate attempt to visually symbolize his decay and weakness. This aligns with the trend in medieval and Renaissance art to associate Judas with gold and yellow, using a bright, attention-grabbing color to further emphasize the gravity of his betrayal. The manufacture of the Indian Yellow pigment was banned, however, in 1908 due to the cruelty necessary to obtain its golden glow: it was made from the urine of cows intentionally kept on the brink of starvation and fed only mango leaves to increase the bile content of their urine, which was refined by boiling and then drying the resulting syrup (cf. Ploeger/Shugar 2017, 197). The historical connection between Judas and the color yellow as a symbol of betrayal of God aligns interestingly with Crowley's yellow eyes as the only visible aspect that marks him as demonic in nature, a mutineer against God, as distinctly *other*. The stars of *Starry Night*, painted in the exact same cruelty-crafted pigment, however, call to mind Crowley's task as an angel before the fall:¹ that of a star-maker, a creator of nebu-

1 The closest readers come to any specificity regarding Crowley's backstory is in the book's cast of characters page before the narration begins, stating that Crowley was "an Angel who did not Fall so much as Saunter Vaguely Downwards," only marginally clarified later when the character is actually introduced in the story: "He'd been an angel once. He hadn't meant to Fall. He'd just hung around with the wrong people" (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 12).

lae. This aspect of Crowley's history is never mentioned in the *Good Omens* novel but a meaningful addition by the TV series. In episode 4 of season 1, Crowley deliberates running away from Earth's Armageddon entirely, flipping through interstellar destinations and commenting on a nebula, "I helped build that one" (S1E4). Season 2 in fact opens with this moment of creation, offering audiences a heart-wrenching scene of Crowley as an angel without a hint of demonic yellow in his eyes, at first delighted in his work and then appalled at the Great Plan that would see it destroyed. Aziraphale's body language during this scene is off-puttingly similar to his body language whenever he speaks to a superior angel: his discomfort and fear in the face of angel Crowley's impertinent questions are obvious. Viewers are left with the clear conclusion that "always asking damn fool questions" (as the intimidating Metatron and Voice of God says at the end of episode 6 of season 2) has always been Crowley's weakness, while Aziraphale's weakness has always been a paralyzing terror of punishment.

The song "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square," written by Eric Maschwitz and Sherwin Manning in 1940 and performed by Tori Amos (2019) for the TV adaptation, may be understood as a hint towards Aziraphale's fear, his apparent yellow-bellied cowardice and unwillingness to take risks. In the *Good Omens* novel, this song is the textual exit music for Aziraphale and Crowley's participation in the narrative: "They went to the Ritz again, where a table was mysteriously vacant. And perhaps the recent exertions had had some fallout in the nature of reality because, while they were eating, for the first time ever, a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square. No one heard it over the noise of the traffic, but it was there, right enough" (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 359). Topping the charts in December of 1940, "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square" is situated as a popular song in the timeline of the *Good Omens* universe, in particular during Crowley and Aziraphale's misadventures during the London Blitz in 1941. That the song serves as the romantic theme music for the lead characters of Fritz Lang's political thriller *Man Hunt* (1941) may underline the personal significance of the Blitz episode for Aziraphale and Crowley rather than its political

implications. The overt use of the song in the TV series transitions what is only hinted at in the novel to a stronger assessment of the relations of the characters: “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square” becomes ‘their song’ for Aziraphale and Crowley that speaks to the secretive nature of their Arrangement. The lyrics, upon first glance, speak delicately of romance; however, upon a closer analysis (and with respect to the power structures looming over the couple in question) becomes a bit ominous: the singer observes a frowning moon and wonders suspiciously, “How could he know we two were so in love?” The ever-present golden yellow that colors the televised series again appears in the lines, “dawn came stealing up all gold and blue/to interrupt our rendezvous.” As aforesaid, gold and blue are colors associated with Heaven, a continually threatening presence in both versions of the *Good Omens* story.

Perhaps the most devastating use of this song is Crowley’s overt reference to it during the final fifteen minutes of season 2. A manic, distracted, clearly terrified Aziraphale presents Crowley with the Metatron’s offer to return him to angelic status, but only if he agrees to support Aziraphale in his new position as Supreme Archangel. Crowley—distracted by his own internal anguish about voicing the nature of their relationship out loud after 6,000 years of secretive, encoded interaction—refuses to return to servitude in Heaven, to a system that already cast him out once. He addresses Aziraphale and asks coldly, “Listen. Do you hear that?” When Aziraphale answers, “I don’t hear anything,” Crowley responds, “That’s the point. No nightingales” (S2E6). While season 1 ends with the soft strains of “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square” playing over the credits, season 2 ends with Crowley and Aziraphale bitterly going their separate ways. “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square” plays softly, almost apologetically, over the Bentley’s radio before Crowley savagely turns it off and drives away from Aziraphale’s bookshop. The end credits song for season 2 is a melancholic instrumental piece, whose title on the official soundtrack is listed as “The End?” The question mark is a frustrating coda as viewers watch the main characters march away from each other towards what can only be anticipated as a battle between Heaven and Earth.

Another example of yellow in a cultural-historical context that is relevant to *Good Omens* is its usage as a symbol of devotion to a loved one serving in battle. Women with lovers, husbands, or family serving in the military wore a yellow ribbon somewhere on their person to show their loyalty. There are a number of folk songs and tales surrounding this practice, such as “Round Her Neck She Wears a Yeller Ribbon.” As a folk song, it existed for many years before finally being recorded and copyrighted by George A. Norton in 1917. In the song “Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree” (1973), written and performed by Tony Orlando and Dawn, it is unclear whether the singer is returning from a criminal prison or from an experience as a prisoner of war. At the end of the *Good Omens* novel, after the budding apocalypse is stopped in its tracks—and with no thanks to either angel or demon, as Aziraphale muses to Crowley, “‘We seem to have survived,’ he said. ‘Just imagine how terrible it might have been if we’d been at all competent’” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 337)—it occurs to Crowley that a reality-shattering battle may yet loom on the horizon. As he and Aziraphale consider the possibility of a future that, according to the Great Plan, was never supposed to exist, Crowley explains that they are only in the eye of the storm: “A breathing space [...] A chance to morally re-arm. Get the defenses up. Ready for the big one. [...] For my money, the really big one will be all of Us against all of Them” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 357), meaning all supernatural beings against humanity. With Crowley and Aziraphale going their separate ways at the end of season 2 and Heaven gearing up for another attempt at an apocalypse, the looming threat of battle may have viewers reaching for a yellow ribbon of their own.

Still, yellow ribbons have more meanings than the one connected to military movements. Since the 1990s, the yellow ribbon has been a symbol for suicide prevention in the US, particularly related to the suicide of young people (cf. Freedenthal 2011). This symbol was taken up by the UK shortly afterwards; the UK charity Yellow Ribbon continues to perform phenomenal direct action in this area. Perhaps the most interesting yellow ribbon in the context of the *Good Omens* universe is,

however, the yellow ribbon as a sign of support and awareness of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. Inspired by the yellow ribbon of support for those in battle, it was worn as “an emblem for those battling what was a relatively new, stigmatized, and deadly disease” (Leahy 2018, 60). The more familiar red ribbon, the symbol of AIDS awareness that is now recognized worldwide, was adopted in 1991, developed by a group of artists working with Visual AIDS, a New York HIV-awareness arts organization. In an effort to convey the universal relevance of HIV, the designers consciously avoided utilizing colors typically associated with the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., rainbow stripes). Instead, they chose red for its striking visual impact and its symbolic connection to passion, the heart, and love. Still, a yellow ribbon was, when the *Good Omens* novel was published in 1990, the symbol for AIDS awareness at a time when the condition was considered the plight of queer men exclusively. Against this cultural backdrop, the connections between Crowley’s yellow eyes and the queered nature of both *Good Omens* deuteragonists become somewhat striking. As the textual threat of divine wrath is at the center of the plot of *Good Omens*, we may identify this as a symbol for the fear during the height of the AIDS crisis that the disease was God’s punishment for homosexuality.

The color yellow has been connected with ideas surrounding homosexuality long before the advent of the yellow ribbon, however. Sabine Doran’s masterwork of color analysis *The Culture of Yellow; or, The Visual Politics of Late Modernity* (2013) explores the rich and complex history of which I have barely scratched the surface. Of particular interest in the context of this exploration is the history of *The Yellow Book*, an avant-garde periodical in the 1890s whose time of popularity was cut short by its association with the trial of Oscar Wilde, whose first editions Aziraphale “had a penchant for” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 36). The press of the time mistakenly reported that Wilde arrived at the courthouse with the magazine under his arm; in spite of Wilde actually carrying a different yellow-covered text, “in the cultural imagination of its time, *The Yellow Book* was not only linked to the decadent movement, but also to homosexuality; the avant-garde had always been

suspected of homosexual tendencies, and yellow had also been a color that stigmatized sexual deviance (in the Middle Ages, prostitutes were forced to wear yellow signs)” (Doran 2013, 53).

Crowley's eyes

Throughout this exploration of the color yellow's use—in history, literature, art, and even how it is biologically perceived—a thread of fear has stitched its way through even the more pleasant connotations. Overwhelmingly, the color yellow in the televised adaptation of *Good Omens* is connected to some level of threat: the yellow of the bookshop walls, Aziraphale and Crowley's only safe place that, effectively, becomes a sort of cage; the yellow of Job's home as his life is destroyed by God to win a bet, where Aziraphale lies to Heaven and expects his own damnation as a result; the color-changing Bentley, bending itself to Aziraphale's will and possibly foreshadowing the angel's acceptance of a position of power from whence he can possibly make everything better, up to and including Crowley himself; the golden yellow that gilds Heaven, the power structure that threatens all of existence (both the book and the series are clear on this point: Heaven is invested in the destruction of Creation even more so than Hell—they are not 'the good guys,' in spite of Aziraphale's wishes).

However, in the novel, the only significant appearance of anything described as yellow is the reveal of Crowley's eyes (cf. Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 239). Why, then, does this color occur so strikingly throughout the adaptation? The answer lies, obviously, in Crowley's eyes. In the novel, readers are originally introduced to Crowley as a somewhat insufferable late-80s style 'cool guy.' Wearing sunglasses “even when he dunt need to” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 8), as Hastur states in the novel, would have caused contemporary readers to immediately be reminded of Corey Hart's hit of 1984 “Sunglasses at Night.” The cryptic lyrics were adopted by 'cool guy' try-hards everywhere; unnecessary sunglasses were a cultural shorthand for “the sort of hu-

man [Crowley] tried to be” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 224). This sort of human was a bit like James Bond: cool, unattached, sleek, modern (Crowley’s Bond-branded bullet-hole decals on his Bentley are almost too earnest to mention in this context [cf. Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 13]). While Aziraphale is famously described in the novel as “gayer than a tree full of monkeys on nitrous oxide” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 147), Crowley is never described as having any clear attractions or even strong emotions—aside from an accurate sense of impending doom, of course. However, when Aziraphale disappears and his bookshop catches fire, readers see Crowley desperately searching for the angel, dropping his cool-guy façade for the first time: “His shades flew to a far corner of the room, and became a puddle of burning plastic. Yellow eyes with slitted vertical pupils were revealed. Wet and steaming, face ash-blackened, as far from cool as it was possible for him to be, on all fours in the blazing bookshop, Crowley cursed Aziraphale, and the ineffable plan, and Above, and Below” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 239). This moment of vulnerability is witnessed only by the readers: Crowley is utterly alone in the fire. His helplessness does not last, however: he rescues Anathema’s book of prophecy, finds Aziraphale’s note regarding the location of the Antichrist, and is again threatened by his superiors in Hell through the Bentley’s radio (cf. Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 255). What follows is perhaps the most crucial note on the nature of Crowley’s glasses, a moment that does not occur in the TV adaptation at all: “Then [Crowley] began to smile. He snapped his fingers. A pair of dark glasses materialized out of his eyes” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 256). The unsettling imagery here, suggesting the idea of serpentine eye-scales, explicitly shows the reader that these glasses are—or at least can be—a literal part of Crowley. Because his eyes are the only visual aspect of his appearance that marks him as a supernatural being, it makes sense that he needs to hide them in order to blend in on Earth. His sunglasses in the novel are a sort of portable ‘closet,’ within which Crowley can hide his otherness among even his fellow immortals: his feelings of undemonic affection for humanity as well as his devotion to and trust in Aziraphale.

In the adaptation, however, viewers see Crowley's bare eyes from the beginning: he only hides them from humans within the narrative but not from the audience or from Aziraphale. This adapted version of Crowley's character differs significantly from the novel: he is older and more open than his previous incarnation. While the audience witnesses Crowley and Aziraphale's relationship grow over a vastly expanded timeline via the insertion of flashbacks, they are presented as the primary protagonists of the series, whereas the novel's protagonist is arguably the young Antichrist Adam (cf. Giannini/Taylor 2023, 2). The reason for this difference may lie in the cultural context of the two versions of this story: published in 1990, the *Good Omens* novel is inescapably impacted by the nightmare of the AIDS epidemic and the incredible stigmatization of the queer community that came with it. Aziraphale and Crowley as ambiguously described "men, or at least men-shaped creatures" (Gaiman/Pratchett 1996, 31) are both textually and subtextually queered subversions of expectations surrounding conventional masculinity. In their different ways, both characters are each a threat to the power structures wherein they are meant to serve. Translating this to the screen after nearly thirty years of social progress required a different approach, a new language of cultural shorthand, in order to provide an analogous sense of overbearing threat to the characters. Although it is impossible to suggest that the queer community enjoys unvarnished approval within modern Western society, the strides toward equality that have been made since the AIDS crisis cannot be overstated. In the 2020s, Crowley no longer needs the portable closet of his sunglasses to hide who he is: he can park his glasses on a table and sprawl his gender-nonconforming self all over Aziraphale's bookshop, yellow eyes bright as he drinks wine with an angel who is so heavily queer-coded that a child calls him a slur. Still, the story requires a sense of dread—requires the weight of judgment and the terror of punishment—in order to motivate the characters to abandon their comfort zone and act on that fear. The novel's lowest point, the burning of the bookshop and Crowley's resulting moment of deeply uncool vulnerability, still occurs in season 1 of the adaptation

but with the drama increased. As Crowley enters the burning building, a song is playing miraculously on Aziraphale's record player: Queen's "You're My Best Friend" (1975) is quickly drowned out by the crackling flames, Crowley's shouting, and a literal drowning jet from a fireman's hose. Crowley, sunglasses knocked off and himself knocked down by the blast of water, cries out from the bookshop floor: "Somebody killed my best friend! Bastards, all of you!" (S1E5).

The societal expectations of the 2020s are, in some ways, strikingly different than those of the 1980s when the *Good Omens* novel was being plotted and written. That two immortal "man-shaped beings" might fall in love over the course of 6,000 years is not as taboo a concept as it once was. However, the social demand for following orders, doing as one is told, performing one's role as instructed and expected, and acknowledging an 'it's us or them' dichotomy—those expectations have not changed. The threat of stepping out of line has only become more subtle and insidious even as social progress has been enacted. The sleek, featureless, corporate-flavored Heaven in the *Good Omens* adaptation could not be a more uncomfortable environment for Aziraphale, contrasted with his cluttered and comfortable bookshop. The basement-office mess and chaos of Hell with its noise, filth, and casual cruelty could not be more at odds with Crowley's purposeful style and unintentional kindness. For viewers unfamiliar with the looming threat of being outed as a queer person in the 1980s and 1990s, the threat of being perceived and punished by a corporate overlord in an era of late-stage capitalism—no matter which flavor, Above or Below—has a similarly horrible aftertaste. Perhaps being outed might not kill a person outright; perhaps losing a job might not kill a person outright; the possibility increases dramatically, however, and whether one suffers violence or poverty, the helplessness one feels would have the same flavor profile.

Conclusion

Adaptation is somewhat akin to the task of translation: more than a literal word-to-word update, further consideration must be given to context, history, intention, the different media, and to shifts of meaning. As Hutcheon points out, the transposition of a text to another medium causes its reformatting, which inevitably leads to both changes and loss but also gain of information (cf. Hutcheon 2006, 16). However, Hutcheon acknowledges that traditional concepts of translation often prioritize the source text, emphasizing 'faithfulness' to the material (*fidelity*). However, referencing "The Task of the Translator" (1923), Hutcheon describes how Walter Benjamin challenged this perspective by arguing that translation is not about the replication of a fixed meaning, but rather an engagement with the original text that offers new interpretations/readings (cf. for example reception theorist Wolfgang Iser's work [1971]). If a translation is perceived as a transaction between texts and media (and languages), it operates, according to Susan Bassnett, as "an act of both inter-cultural and inter-temporal communication" (Bassnett 2002, 9). This understanding of translation aligns closely with the definition of adaptation:

"In many cases, because adaptations are to a different medium, they are re-mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images). This is translation but in a very specific sense: as transmutation or transcoding, that is, as necessarily a recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs." (Hutcheon 2006, 16)

The color of Crowley's eyes—the inarguable sign of his fall from Grace and his demonic nature—bleeds out into the sets and environs of the novel's adaptation, painting the story with a veneer of conflicting fears and hopes that trigger different reactions in both deuteragonists of the story. Both the novel and the show rely heavily on intertextuality, on a common cultural shorthand composed of winks and nods to popu-

lar culture; the process of renewal inherent to an effective adaptation invites a contemporary audience to experience an old story in a fresh way. Whereas the novel presented the color yellow as signifier for terrified vulnerability in a crucial single moment when the readers see behind Crowley's impenetrable sunglasses, the color yellow in the TV series transforms into a many-layered allusion to other works: works that deal with both interpersonal and institutional conflict, works with themes of secrets and subversions, of the complications found between joys and responsibilities, expectations and demands. The adaptation's departure from depicting Crowley's eyes as a secret, instead weaving that flash of yellow into the most thematically important scenes of the series, brings the story into starkly modern focus. Like Crowley, viewers in the 2020s understand that the Western world now seems to allow for more variety of self-expression; like Aziraphale, however, modern viewers also know that someone is always watching.

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The Beauty of Uncertainty

Magic as Liminal Space for Self-Determination

Kate Doak-Keszler & Gloria Blumanhourst

Both Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001) and *Good Omens* deal with the tension between humanity and divinity and the important balance between our roles as individuals and members of a community. The worlds in both stories are shaped through magic—both human prestidigitation and supernatural miracles. Each kind of magic has its own rules. But the dividing line between sleight of hand magic and the miracle—between human and divine—is not definitive. In these fantastical worlds, it is in the liminal space between the two where free will and self-determination bloom.

Shadow Moon, the protagonist at the heart of *American Gods*, begins his journey as a human convict with a beloved wife and a hobby of coin tricks. For Shadow, prestidigitation is initially a means for entertaining other humans and a self-soothing action. As the story progresses and Shadow is granted coins from gods and goddesses with miraculous powers, the very nature of his identity and choices is altered.

Good Omens' Aziraphale and Crowley are both well-versed in miracles, which they use to shape the world. However, through their developing relationship with humanity on Earth, they turn to using their miracles in tandem and augment it with prestidigitation to protect humans and ultimately one another.

As all three protagonists find themselves 'choosing' which set of rules they will employ in any situation, and in the process they—and we, the observers—have the opportunity to discover how religious and social norms influence who they are, and ultimately, what it means to be human.

Introduction

Good Omens and *American Gods* have in common that they critically engage with the dynamic interplay between humanity and divinity, examining the integral balance between individual agency and communal belonging. Both narratives construct worlds where magic, encompassing both human prestidigitation and supernatural miracles, serves as a formative force. While distinct rules govern each magical system, the demarcation between human artifice and divine intervention remains fluid and indeterminate. It is within this liminal space of magic that both stories posit the emergence of free will and self-determination.

Illusionist Raymond Teller—half of the famous duo of Penn & Teller—said of magic in an interview with the *Smithsonian Magazine*:

“You experience magic as real and unreal at the same time. It’s a very, very odd form, compelling, uneasy, and rich in irony. A romantic novel can make you cry. A horror movie can make you shiver. A symphony can carry you away on an emotional storm; it can go straight to the heart or the feet. But magic goes straight to the brain; its essence is intellectual . . . There’s an explosion of pain/pleasure when what you see collides with what you know. It’s intense, though not altogether comfortable. Some people can’t stand it. They hate knowing their senses have fed them incorrect information. To enjoy magic, you must like dissonance.” (Stromberg 2012)

Katharina Rein affirms Teller’s notion that the experience of dissonance is the appeal of magic. The emotion aroused by dissonance can be positive or negative for individual audience members (Teller’s pleasure/pain; cf. Bran/Vaidis 2020, 20). And the resolution of the dissonance—whether by positing some hypothesis of how the illusion is accomplished or simply by the completion of the illusion—restores a sense of control and autonomy to the viewer (cf. Rein 2018, 159). That is, the audience knows that the skill of the magician is concealing the ‘how’ of the illusion, but the actor/magician and the audience concur, that for

the moment, the actor *is* the magician (cf. Rein 2018, 5 f.); and the actor wants the audience to admire their technical skill (cf. Rein 2018, 9).

For the purposes of this chapter, the term ‘magic’ is broadly used to describe both prestidigitation and miracles. Prestidigitation refers to magic tricks, especially ones performed in a very skillful way using the hands that deceive people; this type of magic is more commonly associated with humanity. Miracles, on the other hand, are unusual and mysterious events thought to have been caused by a divine power because the incident does not follow the usual laws of nature; miracles are associated with ethereal or occult forces.

Although quite different in style and narrative, both *American Gods* and *Good Omens* share some prominent similarities regarding their central questions and problems presented: What does it mean to be human? How are we torn between archaic beliefs and modern lifestyles? Both novels deal with the tension between humanity and divinity and the important balance between our roles as individuals and members of a community. Although both *American Gods* and *Good Omens* have been adapted into television series, our comparison will focus on the book *American Gods* and the screen adaptation of *Good Omens*, because this approach gives us the most complete narrative of each: The screen adaptation of *Good Omens* told the story of the book in season 1, with season 2 as a continuation, placing Aziraphale and Crowley at the center of the action (cf. Giannini/Taylor 2023, 2); the screen adaptation of *American Gods*, on the other hand, was canceled before the book’s full story could be completed.

Fantasy: Magic, liminality, and the *other*

Magic plays a central role in fantasy worlds and fantastic narratives. But the nature of magic, how magic is accessed and expressed, and the limits of magic vary greatly between stories. In most cases, there is a separation between those who use magic and those who do not, and non-users may not even be aware of magic. In many portal-quest

fantasy stories, magic exists in a connected but separated world. The portal by which the magic realm can be reached serves as “a theoretical border, a red thin line, that can be difficult to cross” (Conkan 2014, 106)—think of the looking glass Alice passes through or the wardrobe entry to Narnia (cf. Mendlesohn 2008, 1 and 18). But the worlds of *American Gods* and *Good Omens* instead offer a liminal fantasy, one which “hides the threshold, suggesting that the boundaries between fantasy and reality are elusive or insignificant” (Klapcsik 2008, 318; cf. Mendlesohn 2008, xxiii f. and 182–245).

The notion of liminality is rooted in Arnold van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage* (1960). In defining the numerous transitions that occur in the human biological state and the status of humans in society over the course of an individual’s life, van Gennep first noted the recurrence of a liminal state wherein the individual “wavers between two worlds” (Gennep 1960, 18). He notes that this state contains elements of the past state as well as the future state, and that for some cultures, this transitional state is linked to the movements of celestial objects, thereby relating human existence and transits to universal rhythms (cf. Gennep 1960, 194). Victor Turner (1977) expands van Gennep’s diagram of the transitional process from the tripartite breach-crisis-redressive restoration to include the possibility of failure, resulting in a schism. Turner amplifies the notion of the liminal phase to say that it contains ambiguous ideas, unique experiences, and multiple possible meanings or outcomes. Farah Mendelsohn, applying the notion of liminality to literature of the fantasy genre, says that a liminal fantasy is that which includes magic in the “consensus reality” (Mendelsohn 2008, xxii) by providing details about the world in the fantasy that match up to the world we live in (cf. Mendelsohn 2008, xxiii). She notes that the potential for multiple meanings (cf. Mendelsohn 2008, 240) is common and that magic and the marvelous may be contained within the mundane, not being exterior to it (cf. Mendelsohn 2008, 251).

To a certain degree, both *Good Omens* and *American Gods* qualify Mendelsohn’s rather broad definition of the liminal fantasy that is in close alignment with what Tzvetan Todorov described as key functions

of the fantastic—“uncertainty” and “hesitation” (Todorov 1975, 25). Aziraphale and Crowley live in London, UK, where Aziraphale owns a bookstore in Soho, Crowley drives a vintage Bentley, and their favorite date is eating at the Ritz. Shadow Moon crosses the United States stopping in towns whose names can be found in any decent road atlas. Nonetheless, the essential liminal nature of these stories lies in the fact that all three characters incorporate both supernatural and human characteristics.

In the two fantastical worlds of *Good Omens* and *American Gods*, miracle magic is the purview of the supernatural powers, used as a tool to manipulate and assimilate humans and other supernatural beings in a battle for supremacy. The dividing line between sleight of hand magic and the supernatural miracle, between human and divine, proves to be elusive. Moreover, magic as a (stage) performance is an important concept in both stories. Comparisons between portal-quest and liminal fantasies can be applied to our experiences of performance art. In many traditional forms of theater, the goal is to view the performance as a portal. The audience is asked to suspend their disbelief for the duration of the show, to allow themselves to be transported into this alternate world where the performance is reality. Magic shows, however, operate more as a liminal fantasy—closer to the experience of rituals (Arnold van Gennep) and to post-dramatical performance art (Victor Turner). For prestidigitation to be successful, the audience must remain aware of their lived reality and understand that “what they are apparently witnessing is, in fact, impossible. But if the impossible event is relegated to the realm of fantasy via suspension of disbelief, then it is no longer apparently witnessed at all” (Leddington 2016, 256).

Further, the history and cultural perception of prestidigitation is also relevant for understanding the significance of magic in both works. Often panned as unsophisticated or tawdry, magic performances are nonetheless enduringly popular. Rein posits that magic performances contain a taint or memory of ancient ritual contact with the supernatural (cf. Rein 2023, 8) and that during a performance of illusion, audiences collude with the magician to create a liminal space where the

audience knows this is a ‘trick’ but it remains unclear how it is done (cf. Rein 2023, 2). Historically, performers of magic tricks in Europe existed in a liminal social space, travelling across borders, absorbing and exhibiting cultural practices, and consisting of performers from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds (cf. Gasche 2022, 236). The wandering circuses of Europe consisted largely of Roma groups who functioned as small, tight social groups due to legal harassment (cf. Gasche 2022, 237) and resulted in a confederation of wanderers with a shared language (cf. Gasche 2022, 239). Facing similar otherness within society, Jewish and Sinti Romani intermarried and individuals from the more sedentary population groups decided to leave home and join the wanderers (cf. Gasche 2022, 237). The forced Aryanization of circuses during the Nazi era led the Roma to join resistance groups, provide refuge to Jews, and use their performances as coded messages encouraging others to join the resistance (cf. Gasche 2022, 245). Performers were adept at changing acts and appearances (cf. Prempain 2022, 270) and often adopted exotic identities both to enhance the audiences’ sense of adventure and to escape detection (cf. Gasche 2022, 246). Interestingly, European and American magicians continue to adopt the exotic masks, despite the lack of social risk faced by the Roma. Additionally, the collaboration of Roma and Jewish performers as outsiders carries to modern United States where estimates say that about 20 % of American magicians are Jewish, despite Jewish Americans only comprising 2.4 % of all adults in the US (cf. Moshe 2019; Pew Research Center 2021). Even today, the community of magicians is a tight-knit and insular group, often stereotyped as being odd or different. Nonetheless, despite the enduring tendency to adopt exotic identities, Rein posits that most magicians are in fact cisgendered, white, heterosexual males (cf. Rein 2023, 18) while women and minorities usually perform the roles of assistants (cf. Rein 2023, 20). Otherness becomes the magician, adding to the adventure, mystery, and entertainment value and—sets the stage for our protagonists.

Otherness and magic play a critical role in the character arc of all three protagonists Shadow Moon, Aziraphale, and Crowley. All three

begin with a rather limited sense of self, and therefore they accept the definition of their place and purpose from an external higher power—ethereal or occult powers, be they Heaven, Hell, or an American Asgard—which tries to assert its own agenda on them. All three also experience being *other*, those who do not quite fit into the roles assigned to them by the higher powers or their community. Through magic, the protagonists explore the liminal space between human and supernatural, miracle and prestidigitation, but also the space between who they are told to be and who they desire to become. By using magic to discover their own power, all three question the notion that any being or institution is infallible or absolute and move towards self-acceptance.

In the beginning of *American Gods*, Shadow Moon is presented as a character who is a bit unrealized. His otherness is related to his heritage, both his unknown father and the complicated nature of his racial identity on his mother's side. He initially views himself as a rational person with no sense of connection to the divine. But in Shadow's world, there are multiple sets of gods in America, as the divinities emigrated from various cultures by accompanying human emigrants. The merging/emerging American culture spawns its own deities—television, automobiles, the internet, etc. All these various deities are at war for dominance in America, where the powers of Indigenous magic declare that this is not a good land for gods—that stewardship and community are more important than dedication to divine identities. Initially, prestidigitation serves as both a means for entertaining others and as a self-soothing action for Shadow, but he is increasingly caught in the struggle for dominance between warring factions of gods and his own desire to discover his identity. As he is granted coins from gods and goddesses, his prestidigitation becomes entangled with more miraculous powers.

In *Good Omens*, the theocracy itself is split into warring factions, represented by the competing corporate hierarchies of Heaven and Hell. At first, the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley are defined by their respective duties—the ethereal mandates of Heaven and the occult missions of Hell. Both are well-versed in miracles, which they use to shape the human Earth. However, through their long assign-

ments as emissaries on Earth, they find themselves developing relationships with humanity, Earth, and one another. In the process, they must negotiate the conflicting tensions between compliance and rebellion, between absolute standards and situational ethics, and recognize the price for exercising free will. As their affection for humanity and each other deepens, they develop a relationship by using their miracles in tandem with prestidigitation to protect humans and, ultimately, one another. For Crowley and Aziraphale, their otherness comes not from a question of heritage. Crowley is at first defined by the fact that he is a fallen angel, a personification of otherness. He embraces the liminal existence on earth and joyously celebrates it by tempting Aziraphale with food, cossetting his vehicle, taking glee in his ability to confound and tempt humans, and sympathizing with the humans surrounding him. While seemingly more entrenched in his ethereal identity, Aziraphale adopts a humanized form of his name, acquires a bookshop where he prefers to keep the books instead of selling them, and succumbs to the sin of gluttony. His otherness is noted by Nina and Maggie when they ask about his relationship with Crowley, Shadwell when he calls Aziraphale a poof, and when Aziraphale admits to Gabriel that he is soft—not angelic at all.

Magic and free will in *American Gods*

Shadow Moon is a mystery to himself and the humans around him, who repeatedly question his race, his relations, and his role in society. Shadow's journey to discover who he is takes place in North America, where supernatural beings native to the continent as well as those transplanted by subsequent waves of immigrants, are engaged in a struggle for control and attempt to engage Shadow's allegiance and sometimes provide him with powerful gifts. The most impactful of these gifts are coins, and throughout the journey these coins—common coins, fake coins, magical coins—and coin tricks figure large in the development of Shadow's identity and exercise of free will.

Shadow's dependence on the coins for comfort, distraction, and decision-making is complicated by his changing relationship with supernatural beings. All of these influences seem to throw Shadow into the space between self-determination (free will) and magical intervention of the divine (fate) in his life. He moves from an unknown entity through semi-divinity, all the while exploring what it means to be human.

A toss of the coin: Becoming Shadow Moon

The story begins in prison, a no-man's land where social identity is largely stripped from the incarcerated. When Shadow pictures a life outside of imprisonment, it is not about himself, his occupation, or any other means of self-definition but primarily as the husband of Laura. To others, his appearance as a large man is what many, both human and supernatural, seem to notice about him first. With black hair, grey eyes, and coffee-colored skin, his appearance leads to attempts to define him by his ethnicity. While in prison, his fellow inmate Sam Fetishier queries, "Where you from? [...] Where are your folks from?" (Gaiman 2021, 9). Wilson, one of the prison guards, asks him, "And what are you? A spic? A gypsy? [...] Maybe you got nigger blood in you" (Gaiman 2021, 10). After his release, he meets Samantha Black Crow, a young hitchhiker, and she asks, "Mm. You got Indian blood in you? [...] Are you sure you aren't part Indian?" (Gaiman 2021, 147).

Shadow's response to Samantha—that he thinks his mom would have told him if he had Native American blood—brings up another important part of his identity. Raised by his single mother with no other family, Shadow never knew who his father was despite arguing with her trying to get information. She simply told him his father was dead, leaving no pictures, and "you ain't missed nothing" (Gaiman 2021, 420). Despite this assertion, Shadow remembers how his mother tried and failed to tell him something important on her deathbed, but he couldn't understand her. During his childhood, she had worked at various em-

bassies in Europe on classified communications and as a result, they had moved around a lot. Shadow remembers his mother as a beautiful woman who was born and died in Chicago and had been proud of him.

Aside from ethnicity and heritage, there are questions about the nature of Shadow's existence. As a small, quiet, bookish child who preferred the company of adults, Shadow lacked close relationships with his peers. Even his sports activities, which contributed to his bulk, were swimming and weightlifting—both individual sports. His childhood nickname of Shadow stuck, and the literal meaning of shadow—the negative space cast by a solid object as it blocks light—is important to Laura, who says she can find Shadow because he shines “like a beacon in a dark world” (Gaiman 2021, 136). Laura, from her vantage point of the unalive, notes that he is “like this big, solid, man-shaped hole in the world” or a shadow but poses the existential question, “But are you sure you are alive?” (Gaiman 2021, 326).

The irony for a man who is remarkable because he is so hard to define, Shadow desperately wants “things to be normal” (Gaiman 2021, 139) and desires a life with purpose as well as justice. He repeatedly demonstrates his desire to be fair, even in defiance of the Old Gods, including when he gives the waitress back the money Wednesday bilked from her, or when he refuses to accept the hospitality of Ibis without compensating him, saying “I’ll work for my keep” (Gaiman 2021, 179).

Have some change: The gift of prestidigitation

While in prison, Shadow finds ways to pass the time. He reads and plays checkers. He notes that “he was not temperamentally suited to chess. He did not like planning ahead. He preferred picking the perfect move for the moment. You could win checkers like that, sometimes” (Gaiman 2021, 74). Importantly, he spends time with his cellmate Low Key Lyesmith, who he will come to learn later is the US-manifested facet of Loki, Norse god of mischief. Low Key introduces him to Herodotus, whose notions of free will and divine retribution (cf. Fischer

2002, 199f.) underscore Shadow's story. Shadow embraces Herodotus' notion that happiness is a post-life assessment, not a daily condition. But more importantly, Low Key gives Shadow his first gift of coins. The gift is an intentional manipulation of Shadow's interests, meant to prepare him to accept the Old Gods who seek his services.

When Low Key Lyesmith is released, he leaves coins in the copy of Herodotus. Shadow notes that coins are contraband because their edges can be sharpened to make them weapons, but "Shadow didn't want a weapon; Shadow just wanted something to do with his hands" (Gaiman 2021, 6). The coins allow Shadow to develop the prestidigitation skills of misdirection and skillful physical manipulation with the help of a book he found in the prison library. Shadow practices prestidigitation because it takes his mind off of his worries about prison life, his wife Laura, and his boredom. For Shadow, "The thing about coin manipulation was that it took all Shadow's head to do it; or rather, he could not do it if he was angry or upset, so the action of practising an illusion, even one with no possible use on its own ... calmed him, cleared his mind of turmoil and fear" (Gaiman 2021, 130).

Only days before Shadow's own release from prison, his wife dies in a car accident, along with his best friend who had promised Shadow a job. Without his role as husband, friend, or employee, he is once again undefined and with no direction for his life, much like an extension of his existence in prison.

Gold wins: The gift of miracles

In light of his loss of Laura, practicing coin tricks continues to be a source of comfort and self-soothing for Shadow, but he also uses coin flips—or chance—to make decisions. Through a number of transportation 'coincidences' the mysterious Wednesday, a facet of the Norse god Odin, inserts himself into Shadow's life. During a protracted conversation about Shadow working for Wednesday, in which Shadow initially declines the offer of employment because he is on his way to his

wife's funeral, the decision is eventually made with a coin toss. Shadow chooses a double-sided coin but Wednesday manipulates the toss to give himself a favorable outcome.

Ironically, it is during the negotiation of his services to Wednesday, who we learn is the leader of the Old Gods, that Shadow receives his second gifted coin. Wednesday brings Mad Sweeney in, a leprechaun, to test the new recruit. After a surfeit of mead and a fistfight with Mad Sweeney, Shadow is shown how to perform his first miracle coin trick—how to retrieve a coin from the leprechaun's hoard—which he promptly forgets how to do. Mad Sweeney then gives Shadow one of the magic gold coins to keep.

The gift is a drunken accident on the part of Mad Sweeney. As a result, Shadow does not recognize the mystical nature of the gold coin or the full power of the gift. Shadow then passes the gift on to the corpse of his dead wife. This is the repetition of a long-standing pattern of relinquishing his power to his wife—just as he did when he used physical force to get his share of the profit from a robbery he participated in at Laura's behest, the act which landed him in prison in the first place. Giving the gold coin to Laura has mixed results: she refrains from using it to cross over to the afterlife by making the symbolic payment to Charon at the ferry across the River Styx. Instead, the coin operates as an anchor to keep her soul in her body, allowing her to stay around to 'watch out' for Shadow, but it does not stop her body from decaying. Furthermore, it leads to Mad Sweeney's punishment of death for giving the coin away. This is a repeating pattern of the interactions between Shadow and the Old Gods, who give him items without instructions or explanation, leaving both parties to deal with the consequences of Shadow using the gifts in unexpected ways.

The patterns of interactions between Shadow and the cohort of New Gods are vastly different. Instead of gifts, there are threats and attempts at coercion. His first encounter is being captured by Tech Boy, a young man with acne and a willingness to order others to do acts of violence. The meeting foreshadows the conflict to come and personifies the role of technology in the changing belief systems of modern

American society. In his limousine with fiber optic mood lighting, cocktails, and smokes that smell like burning electrical parts, Tech Boy tells Shadow that reality has been reprogrammed and the future rides the “superhighway of tomorrow” (Gaiman 2021, 49). Tech Boy releases Shadow with minimal physical damage after making him promise to relay his message to Wednesday—the coming storm is a paradigm shift that will eliminate the Old Gods. In his second encounter, he is taken hostage by the enforcers for Mr. World, the apparent leader of the New Gods, for the purpose of being eliminated. This time, Laura saves Shadow by killing the enforcers. His third encounter is Media, who appears to him through his TV set disguised as characters in sitcoms to try to lure him to their cause. This time Shadow ends the encounter simply by switching off the TV.

Despite the attempts of the New Gods to either recruit or remove Shadow, he continues to work for Wednesday and learns miracle magic in service of Wednesday’s goals and needs as they work together. In their first joint venture—a peaceful bank robbery—Wednesday instructs Shadow to cause a snowstorm with the power of his belief. His belief in his own power is still questionable. Even as the snowstorm starts, Shadow muses that “He knew, rationally, that he had nothing to do with the snow . . . But still . . .” (Gaiman 2021, 99).

Despite his apparent allegiance to the Old Gods and ostensibly working for Wednesday, Shadow is forming a connection with a third faction that is uninterested in taking sides between the Old and New Gods. Represented by Buffalo Man and Whiskey Jack, this faction existed in America before even the imported gods brought by immigrants. It is Wednesday himself who introduces Shadow to Whiskey Jack, the embodiment of Indigenous human culture on the continent, to ask for his alliance in the coming conflict. It is a curious question why Wednesday believes Shadow might be persuasive, an indication that perhaps Shadow does, in fact, have an Indigenous lineage.

Shadow’s dreams put him in direct contact with Buffalo Man and the thunderbirds outside of Wednesday’s influence. As embodiment of the land, Buffalo Man appears to Shadow in a dream and tells him,

“This is not a land for gods” (Gaiman 2021, 217). He instructs Shadow to believe in everything, and Shadow offers himself—the only thing he has to bargain with—and is then reborn through the earth, an act which echoes one of the origin tales common to many Native American peoples. The connection persists throughout the story with Shadow’s dreams of thunderbirds, revered by many Indigenous American people. Wednesday’s response to this dream—“Everybody damn well knows what you were dreaming. Christ almighty. What’s the point in hiding you, if you’re going to start to fucking advertise” (Gaiman 2021, 269)—implies that Shadow’s involvement with the ‘no gods’ faction may be seen as dangerous to both New and Old Gods.

Silver lights the way: The gift of choice

The third important coin gift comes when Shadow meets the fates in the form of four Slavic gods. The Zoryas, the Slavic version of the Three Fates (cf. Walker 1983, 1102) and their brother Czernobog, the demi-god of ill fortune (cf. Gorbachov 2017, 209), welcome Shadow and Wednesday into their home. When Wednesday fails to convince Czernobog to join the cause of the Old Gods, Shadow offers a wager based on the outcome of a game of checkers. If Shadow wins, Czernobog will join them. If he loses, he forfeits his life to Czernobog. While Wednesday and the Zoryas both tell Shadow not to take the wager, he accepts and does end up losing. Despite the knowledge that he will be killed at the end of the coming war, Shadow is at peace with a choice that was his own.

After this important game, one of the sisters steps in. Zorya Polnochnaya pulls down the moon and presents it to Shadow as a Liberty Dollar. He recognizes the mystical nature of the silver coin, as he did not when Sweeney gifted him the gold coin and treasures it, both relying on it to provide comfort when he is troubled and taking pains to hide it when in danger. As with the bargain with Czernobog, Shadow knows he will have to pay back the coin—but the Slavic gods gave him

a choice in their interactions, which neither the other Old Gods nor the New Gods truly did.

Even while learning miracle magic, Shadow's use of simple prestidigitation continues with coin tricks as a soothing act—both for himself and as a way to aid or comfort others. This is apparent when he cheats at a coin toss and so pays for Samantha Black Crow's dinner or performs tricks to distract and calm or entertain people in various settings, though he is humble about his skills, saying he is, "Just an amateur, I've got a long way to go" (Gaiman 2021, 282). The two times Mr. World captures him—first taken hostage by his men and second arrested in Lakeside—Shadow also uses his prestidigitation as he is 'passing time' while waiting.

Just before the battle begins, Wednesday is killed, which is the catalyst for getting the remaining Old Gods to join. Shadow is faced with a choice, to commit to the nine-day vigil for Wednesday he promised the god, or to do as the remaining Old Gods counsel and skip the ritual. Choosing to follow through, Shadow is tied to a tree by the Norns, the Norse version of the three fates. His ensuing vision of his mother, barely an adult, being seduced by Wednesday and drunkenly leaving the dance floor with the god, reveals that Wednesday was his father. He also realizes that Mr. World is none other than Low Key, and that the entire war is just a con to get the Old Gods and New Gods to fight so that the Americanized Norse duo can absorb the power generated by the battle for themselves. Shadow is faced with the duality of the gods. While Loki and Odin are at odds in their homeland, they have joined forces against the New Gods even to the point of enlisting the assistance of the other emigrant gods in the battle. Opposites they may be, but power is the unifying factor, and Low Key and Wednesday two sides of the same coin, which illuminates Shadow Moon's duality as supernatural and human and the choices he can make about his supernatural powers.

Again, Shadow faces a choice. As the demi-god son of Wednesday, he could benefit from letting the battle be carried out. But he comes to the realization that being a god makes you reliant on the attention and

adoration of others and limits your choices. After revealing the con and ending the war with no clear winners, Shadow travels to Iceland where he meets Odin prime. Shadow and Odin recognize each other, and Shadow palms Wednesday's false eye and leaves it in Odin's hand. Impressed by the prestidigitation, Odin insists on another demonstration. Shadow responds, "You people... You're never satisfied..." (Gaiman 2021, 519). Then, he performs the trick that Mad Sweeney had taught him and pulls a coin from nothing. Having made his decision of refraining from returning to America and eschewing his divine role that awaits there, Shadow pulls a common non-miracle gold coin, tosses it into the air in front of Odin and walks away without bothering to watch the coin land.

Magic and free will in *Good Omens*

In the world of *Good Omens*, the C-Suites of Heaven and the basement of Hell face off in using the Earth as their battleground. The long game of seeing who can recruit the most humans is just a way to pass the time until the big show of Armageddon. The respective journeys of angel Aziraphale and demon Crowley as representatives of Heaven and Hell stationed on Earth, from adversaries in the Garden of Eden to co-conspirators in preventing Armageddon, do differ. Aziraphale bases their understanding of free will for humans on the notion that a set of prescriptive standards for good exist and that questioning is unnecessary. Crowley, on the other hand, sees good as a situational outcome and balks at the idea of not seeking to understand. This will be a basic difference in their concept of morality, which shapes their relationship as well as how each interacts with humanity. As Aziraphale and Crowley find themselves debating the nature of free will and the right to question authority throughout the millennia, their understanding of what constitutes good and evil in humanity is shaped by humanity itself. In the book, Crowley observes, "Being a demon, of course, was supposed to mean you had no free will. But you couldn't hang around humans

for very long without learning a thing or two” (Gaiman/Pratchett 2019, 38). While this line did not transfer from book to script, Crowley’s behavior throughout the episodes is in line with his observation.

This similarly impacts the way these two use magic. As Heaven and Hell fail to pay close attention to humanity, the use of prestidigitation by Crowley and Aziraphale is more successful against their fellow angels and demons. These tricks are less successful with humanity, though people can still be redirected by miracles. However, when looking at various scenarios when the two engage in magic together, a pattern begins to emerge: When they work together, utilizing both miracles and prestidigitation, the results are often positive for them. When they are not coordinating their efforts, disaster can strike. This pattern becomes clear when looking at the key moments of magical use.

Think of the kids: Uz, 2500 BC

The story of Job, as told in the Bible, describes a good man who is faithful to God. Satan, however, tells God that Job is only good because he has had a happy life. As a result, God allows Satan to put Job’s faith to the test (cf. Job 1:9–12). Satan proceeds to make Job suffer by taking away his livestock, servants, and children. When God in *Good Omens* finally reveals herself to Job, it is to ask the man a series of impossible questions to prove how ineffable the divine plan is. According to the Biblical tale, Job never learns why he suffered (cf. Job 42:3), but God restores his health, his wealth, and his children (cf. Job 42:10).

It is here in the land of Uz that Crawly (who will later change his name) and Aziraphale use magic together for the first time. The sequence opens with Crawly, who has been ordered to destroy Job’s holdings—his livestock and children. Initially, it appears that Crawly does truly destroy the goats, and when confronted by Aziraphale before apparently going to destroy the children, Crawly is saying all the right demonic things: “I want to. I long to destroy the blameless children of blameless Job, just as I destroyed his blameless goats” (S2E2). However,

just as Aziraphale appears to have accepted that he is unable to stop Crawly, the demon subtly pulls back the curtain on his act, allowing Aziraphale to see the sleight of hand taking place—the goats were only transformed into crows. Aziraphale decides to step into the role of the magician's assistant and helps Crawly to successfully pull off his magic act. What follows is a performance played out in front of the angels of Heaven to save Job's (more or less) innocent but bratty children. When the Heavenly Host arrives to grant Job blessings after the supposed destruction of his livestock and children, Crawly, in his role as Bildad the Shuhite, proceeds to help Job and his wife Sitis to birth 'new children' from Job's ribs. What the Heavenly Host does not know is that overnight, while riding out the storm sent to destroy Job's home, Crawly had turned the children into newts (and Aziraphale ate almost an entire ox). This allows Aziraphale and Crawly to pull off their magic mix of prestidigitation and miracles. By placing the newt-children in Job's robe and then having Sitis miraculously pull the ox ribs out at the same time, the children are transfigured back into humans. In this sense, Crawly manages to produce an illusion of a birth similar to that of Eve in the Garden. This magical performance successfully fools the other angels (but only when Sitis catches onto the act and nudges Job into playing along). Aziraphale operates as witness, and his lies and deception complete Crawly's trickery.

In the case of Job, Aziraphale and Crawly work in tandem to fool both Heaven and Hell. Both prestidigitation and miracles were used in their plan, and their goal—to protect Job's children—is achieved. However, Aziraphale is experiencing his first existential crisis because he is now convinced that he will be punished and fall from God's grace (and maybe still fears being manipulated by Crawly all along).

A play within a play: The Globe in London, 1601

Crowley (formerly known as Crawly) and Aziraphale continue to cross paths throughout history, including at the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ in Golgotha, in Rome during the reign of Caligula, and in Wessex as knights on opposing sides of the war between order and chaos (or historically speaking, the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes). However, their rendezvous at the Globe Theatre is the first to be seen after reaching their so-called Arrangement, and while no magic takes place in this scene, it does give important insight into their relationship and magic use. The meeting is not a chance encounter, though they try to stage it as such. It takes place in a theater, and while the two are not on stage, they are factually acting—playing their roles as demon and angel for their supernatural superiors as well as the role of total strangers for the humans around. It is revealed that their Arrangement—to avoid working at cross purposes to reduce their respective workloads—sometimes involves performing miraculous acts on each other’s behalf.

The backdrop of a performance of *Hamlet* (1623) adds additional context. Written at a time of great unrest in England, the story of *Hamlet* addresses the religious tension and political intrigues of Elizabethan England. The sense of constant observation and covert spying in the play reflects the actual surveillance state that England was at the time. Hamlet himself is conflicted over his role in a corrupt system and feels trapped in a ‘play within a play.’ All of this echoes the way both Crowley and Aziraphale feel as they act and speak in ways that misdirect their respective head offices and hide their relationship.

In addition to the political intrigue, there is an underlying spiritual battle taking place. The ghost of Hamlet’s father demands justice and revenge “embellished with some superstitious touches of nominal Christianity” (Battenhouse 1951, 164) which reflects the tensions between Catholics and Protestants in Shakespeare’s time. Ghosts were in fact a bit of a flashpoint. Catholics believed that souls trapped in purgatory could appear as spirits seeking intercession by expressing repentance and faith (cf. Battenhouse 1951, 190). Protestants did not believe

that souls could return as ghosts and that spectral hauntings were the work of angels or demons. Hamlet finds himself unable to decide if the ghost is truly his father, an avenging angel seeking retribution, or a demon leading him to commit murder. This notion of moral ambiguity reflects the increasingly grey areas Crowley and Aziraphale find their personal development and their relationship leading them into.

Perhaps most interestingly, the scene at the Globe shows complicity in Crowley and Aziraphale's performance, with Shakespeare stepping in to address the two "in your roles as the audience" (S1E3). There is a great deal of symbolism in the fact that humanity recognizes the duo as an audience (demon and angel on Earth)—outside of their stage but still involved. Shakespeare invites their opinion and engagement. It speaks to Aziraphale and Crowley's increasing affinity with humanity (and each other) over Heaven and Hell. Even Crowley's decision to intercede to miraculously ensure *Hamlet* is a success boils down to his affection for Aziraphale. After concluding their negotiations of duties in accordance with their Arrangement, as if it were a simple *quid pro quo*, Shakespeare's comment, "It'd take a miracle to get people to come and see Hamlet" (S2E2), drives Aziraphale to plead with Crowley, using only a meaningful look. Crowley's capitulation is a favor well outside the scope of a tit-for-tat agreement and shows the complexity of the duo's relationship.

Tale of a body thief: Edinburgh, 1823

Whereas all went well for Crowley and Aziraphale during the French Revolution just thirty years prior—like in Uz, they worked in tandem to free Aziraphale from the Bastille, heavily using miracles but also relying on the element of prestidigitation when they swapped clothing between Aziraphale and his executioner—everything goes pear-shaped in Edinburgh in 1823. As a long-standing center for anatomy education, Edinburgh has a history of anatomists finding creative and sometimes illegal ways to procure bodies (cf. MacDonald 2009, 380).

When Crowley and Aziraphale come upon a poor woman named Elspeth in the act of digging up a body in a graveyard, it sets off a series of events through which Crowley guides Aziraphale in interrogating his faith. Aziraphale initially determines, based on her actions, that Elspeth is wicked. But Crowley offers to assist her in transporting the corpse to the surgeon and potential buyer, Mr. Dalrymple. On their way, the two discuss their very different ideas of what constitutes good and evil and the impact of free will on whether people are virtuous or wicked.

Eventually, Aziraphale has been led to recognize that his initial black-and-white assessment of Elspeth might have been righteous, but unjust. When Elspeth decides to end her life after losing her partner Wee Morag in a botched body snatching, it is Crowley who steps in with a second miracle to intimidate Elspeth away from her suicide and into a 'good' life.

At no point do Aziraphale and Crowley manage to truly work in tandem in this sequence. There is a reliance on miracles with little to no prestidigitation used—their manipulations of Elspeth, Wee Morag, and Dalrymple are a reflection of the heavy-handed arrogance of both Heaven and Hell in dealing with humanity. Humans are suspicious of this type of blatant miraculous interference, as seen when Elspeth accuses Aziraphale of ruining the body she attempted to sell to Dalrymple. His response to her—that the body's rapid decomposition was "just an unexpected blessing"—leaves her angry. Ultimately, the outcome of Aziraphale using miracles to coerce leads to Wee Morag's untimely death.

For most of this story, it is only Aziraphale who is using miraculous interventions. At the end, when Elspeth is in danger of death by suicide, Crowley finally actively intervenes himself. His use of slight-of-hand-magic to steal Elspeth's laudanum prevents her immediate death, but he ends up leveraging miracles to head off future attempts on her own life. By appearing frighteningly large and telling her to "be good. Not just pretendy good. But properly good..." (S2E3), Crowley might have saved her from Hell, but still leaves her separated from

Wee Morag. This separation is mirrored as Crowley is subsequently pulled from Aziraphale and dragged back to Hell himself, ostensibly to be punished for using miracles to prevent a suicide. While we do not know what type of consequence Crowley faces in Hell, it is dire enough that during his next meeting with Aziraphale, he asks the angel to obtain holy water for him as insurance against future punishments.

There was magic abroad in the air: London, 1941

During the Second World War, the Germans engaged in a bombing campaign against the United Kingdom. Known as the Blitz—from the term *Blitzkrieg*, the German word meaning ‘lightning war’—this campaign took place from September 1940 to May 1941, with approximately 43,000 civilian casualties (cf. Richards 1954, 217). It is in the middle of a Blitz that Aziraphale and Crowley meet after a prolonged separation. Through a night of dramatic and romantic escapades, we see them both work to save each other from spies, demons, and zombies.

Their night begins with Crowley—arriving just in time as a reprise to the rescue of Aziraphale during the French Revolution at the Bastille—when Aziraphale is threatened with ‘death’ at the hands of Nazi spies. Immediately, he uses some cleverly coded speech to convince Aziraphale to partner with him in a double miracle. While Crowley uses a demonic miracle to redirect a bomb to the church, he muses out loud, “If the bomb does land here, it would take a *real miracle* for my friend and I to survive it” (S1E3). Whereas the humans present may understand these words as simply an observation of the facts, Aziraphale decodes the message as instruction for him to act accordingly. Afterwards, as they stand in the ruins of the church, Crowley puts the icing on the cake when he hands Aziraphale his satchel of books, which Crowley saved from the bombs “with a little demonic miracle of my own” (S1E3).

When season 2 picks up where this brief flashback in season 1 left off, it paints the picture of a wild night as Aziraphale accompanies

Crowley on his hellish duties—in this case, to deliver illegal booze to a West End theater. When it is revealed that the bottles were broken during the bombing, Aziraphale offers to appease the theater owner by stepping in to fill the vacant position of stage magician that night. In a moment of dramatic flair, Aziraphale chooses the daunting bullet catch act for his West End debut—assuming that if anything goes wrong, they can always use their miracles. The bullet catch trick requires the use of blank ammunition, restricted access to the weapon prior to the illusion, and a narrative for the audience’s consumption about the risks and dangers of the act (cf. Rein 2018, 166 f.). Rein cites actual incidences of where the member from the audience called up to participate inserted a small item into the gun which is propelled by the force of the blank and injured or even killed the magician (cf. Rein 2018, 161). In *Good Omens*, the trick ends up being much more dangerous for the duo when the demon Furfur, determined to catch them colluding, brings a miracle blocker to the theater.

The bullet catch scene is perhaps one of the most fraught moments in the second season. When Aziraphale says to Crowley, “aim for my mouth but shoot past my ear” (S2E4), the line applies to the mechanisms of the bullet catch trick but it has far greater meaning for their relationship. As beings who are under constant threat of surveillance and punishment if caught acting against their orders, they must pretend to be enemies but still have ways to communicate throughout their charades. In this sense, the line also means that the two must speak and act in ways that either pacify or confuse those watching but that clearly communicate to one another.

Although the magic trick is a success without supernatural aid, Furfur confronts Aziraphale and Crowley later in the dressing-room with a photograph of the two that he plans to show the superiors in Hell. Undeterred by his fumbled tricks up to this point, Aziraphale manages to swap out the incriminating photo for a playbill of the show. When discussing their successes in saving one another that night, the two end up discussing the nature of good and evil again, coming closer to an understanding than ever before:

AZIRAPHALE: “You could’ve walked away. If you were truly as evil as you like to paint yourself, you would’ve done.”

CROWLEY: “Nah. That’s the trouble with you lot. You don’t just see things in black and white. Sometimes, you’ve just gotta blur the edges.”

AZIRAPHALE: “Well, maybe there is something to be said for. Shades of grey.”

CROWLEY: “Well, shades of... dark grey.”

AZIRAPHALE: “Shades of a very light grey, I rather fancy.” (S2E4)

Through the long night in 1941, Aziraphale and Crowley come together to form and execute a plan in tandem. Notably, both prestidigitation and miracles are used in the course of the evening, though again humans prove to be more adept at picking up on both types of magic. The greatest danger takes place during the bullet catch, when their ability to perform miracles is blocked. Therefore, their magic is limited to prestidigitation in front of a mixed audience of humans and demonic powers. By surviving the ordeal, the duo has the opportunity to once again employ a slight of hand trick against their head offices. Aziraphale’s success at stealing the evidence of their collusion works because, again, Heaven and Hell underestimate humanity and human magic.

Best birthday party ever! Warlock’s birthday,
Wednesday before Armageddon

To be present at Warlock’s birthday party, where they hope to witness whether the anticipated Antichrist comes into his power or not, Aziraphale and Crowley both disguise themselves as party staff. While Crowley is in the background as one of the caterers, Aziraphale takes the role of party magician to perform for entertainment. In their discussions prior to the event, when Aziraphale proposes putting on a magic show, Crowley begs him not to:

CROWLEY: “Don’t do your magic act. Please. I am actually begging you, and you have no idea how demeaning that is. Please . . . Fun? It’s humiliating. You can do proper magic, you can make things disappear.”
 AZIRAPHALE: “But it’s not as fun.” (S1E1)

In the case of Warlock’s birthday, Aziraphale and Crowley are not working in tandem, with Aziraphale only utilizing prestidigitation as he attempts to play human. Just as the use of miracles failed to convince Elspeth in Edinburgh, Aziraphale’s sole reliance on prestidigitation fails to impress the birthday party attendees, who insult him and eventually turn to a food fight for excitement. While their goal here is slightly more nebulous than in other situations—they are, in theory, simply there to observe the arrival of the hell hound—the whole exercise is a failure. They have spent the last eleven years helping to raise the wrong boy: Warlock is not, in fact, the Antichrist at all.

Choose your faces wisely: Heaven and Hell, the day after Armage-didn't

In the immediate aftermath of the failed Armageddon, Crowley and Aziraphale know they will likely face repercussions from their respective head offices for their interference. As they look for a way out, their only advice comes from the witch Agnes Nutter and her book of prophecies: “When alle is sayed and all is done, ye must choose your faces wisely, for soon enouff, ye will be playing with fyre” (S1E5).

Taking her advice literally, the two end up trading appearances and, therefore, swapping places for punishment. This requires a mix of miracles and prestidigitation—the miracles to swap their appearance and their skills at misdirection and performance to convincingly act as the other. This turns out to be very wise, as Heaven and Hell attempt to use holy water and hellfire against the two wayward beings. Crowley, appearing as Aziraphale, is immune to the hellfire he is asked to step in. Aziraphale-as-Crowley is likewise unaffected by the holy water bath he

is subjected to. By working in tandem to pull off their deception, using miracles to swap appearances but—even more importantly—by heavily relying on camouflage, acting, and the misdirection of playing their roles as one another, the ultimate goal—their shared survival—is achieved.

Conclusion

In the two years following the failed Armageddon, Crowley and Aziraphale lead a relatively peaceful existence in London. They are able to be more open about their relationship, but Crowley waits for the other shoe to drop. His fears prove founded when the former Supreme Archangel Gabriel shows up naked on the doorstep of the bookshop, completely unaware of who he is. Crowley initially refuses to help hide Gabriel (now known as Jim) who had tried to destroy Aziraphale with hellfire. But threats to Aziraphale convince Crowley to work with him, each doing a 'tiny half miracle' to make 'Jim' invisible to their respective sides (cf. S2E1). The issue with their plan is that it backfires on them. Instead of a tiny half miracle each, their tandem magic registers on Heaven's miracle rating system as so powerful that only an archangel could have performed it. They have still managed to trick both Heaven and Hell—the combination of miracle and camouflage make 'Jim' unrecognizable to both angels and demons. Neither side realizes it was their two wayward agents responsible for the miracle, but both sides engage in scrutiny that leads to the separation of Aziraphale and Crowley at the end of the season.

While season 3 has yet to be released, there has been a great deal of speculation about how *Good Omens* will end. Given the themes of the story, having Crowley and Aziraphale give up their existence within the liminal space—to return to Heaven/Hell or to become fully human—feels not only disappointing but disingenuous to their story. We expect the concluding episode to show the duo working together again to avert the hinted-at Second Coming, and devise a way to live together, on Earth, as miraculous beings.

Aziraphale, Crowley, and Shadow Moon begin their stories being largely defined by supernatural powers which reduce them to their function within that power's agenda. An important component of their self-actualization is leaning into ambiguity, accepting that there are no black-and-white definitives. By exploring the liminal space between miracle and prestidigitation, learning to harness their full magic potential and embracing their otherness, the three protagonists are able to break away from their assigned roles.

Shadow Moon's otherness is related to his heritage—his human racial identity and his demi-divinity. In both cases, his mixed background means he does not fit neatly into categories among either humans or supernatural beings. For Shadow, who is expected to define himself by his relationships to others, his growth as an individual means he must learn to define himself outside of his relationships and embrace the contradictions of his ancestry. Aziraphale and Crowley's otherness comes from the way they relate to one another and how their individual desires contradict their assigned roles in Heaven and Hell. As a demon and an angel who are viewed by their respective sides as individual pieces in a predetermined pantomime, learning to clearly define themselves as individuals outside that pantomime within a relationship and embrace their desires is radical.

While magic is something all three do for personal enjoyment, it also serves the powerful function as a tool for providing aid to others. For Shadow, when done for a human audience, his magic is frequently used to soothe. In the case of Crowley and Aziraphale, their miraculous performances are often to protect either humans or each other. In this way, their sense of self encompasses each of them individually and their role within their chosen community. Additionally, their magic is most successful when they blend their miracles and prestidigitation. Symbolically, their actions emphasize the power of the grey area between supernatural and human and the fact that both are required to make the whole. Their magic becomes a way to test their assumptions and the assertions of those in power, to question and make meaning.

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FREE WILL / MORALITY



Gaiman's Death, Pratchett's Death, or the Classic Four Horsemen

Considering Compassion and Free Will

Valerie Estelle Frankel

In the beloved Discworld series, Terry Pratchett's Death insists there's no justice or fairness, but after this inflexible coldness, he evolves. In *Reaper Man* (1991), he pleads with Azrael, the inflexible personification (and boss) of Death for a chance to make things right. As he goes on, he continues to advocate for humanity. In his first central novel, *Mort* (1987), he might have sided with the Auditors who seek order so much they'll delete humanity to get it. However, in his adventures afterwards, he defeats them on behalf of humanity. Is this one of the Four Horsemen of *Good Omens*?

Neil Gaiman's sweet Death from his *The Sandman* (1989–1996) graphic novels and TV show (2022–2025) is further removed—a loving and sympathetic friend who saves lives where she can. Her character has little connection to the harbinger of the end times, too.

In the book *Good Omens* and in season 1 of the TV series, Death is bringing the apocalypse as an obedient servant of entropy. Unlike him, the protagonists defy the system and stand in the way of total destruction. Over and over, the stories celebrate free will, with the love found in *Good Omens* a reflection of and homage to Pratchett's and Gaiman's beloved series characters and their repeated advocacy for compassion and free will.

Introduction

When Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman created their Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, they were each forming their own personifications of the Grim Reaper. Pratchett's in his Discworld series shares the classic look of skull, scythe, and black robe (and even rides a motorcycle on one occasion). He eventually rides with other horsemen as it has been written. In the graphic novel epic *The Sandman*, Gaiman took his in the other direction. As he explains, "I knew that readers expected Death to be just like the Sandman, only more so—larger, darker, very male" (Bender 1999, 238f.). He thus subverted her, making her girlish and trendily goth. Gaiman says that traditional representations of Death are mostly "scary, humorless, implacable people" (Bender 1999, 238), so he preferred to give his some sympathy.

Pratchett's Death is less kind, but evolves over the course of the series. In *Reaper Man*, he is transformed into a mortal and discovers a value to human existence. After this, he intervenes, even with the end of the world approaching, to save lives. Gaiman's Death (from both his *Sandman* graphic novels and the recent Netflix show) is even more compassionate, as the gentle, loving young woman guiding souls to the afterlife. She treats everyone with kindness and has already completed her journey of empathy to mentor others. Is either character related to the Four Horsemen of *Good Omens*?

In the novel *Good Omens* and in season 1 of the TV series, Death obeys his traditional role in bringing the apocalypse. (His partners are humorously updated, but his classic appearance does suggest Pratchett's character as well as the original mythology.) Most of the angels and demons likewise obey orders, with only the protagonists Crowley and Aziraphale choosing independent thought and resisting total destruction. Pratchett's Death, it seems, has left the building—if he was ever in it. Gaiman's certainly wasn't. Both Deaths journey to understand the responsibility of collecting lives—what this means to humanity and themselves. This journey teaches them a sympathy and compassion that Crowley and Aziraphale have found, but one that their four horsemen have not.

The aim of this chapter is to explore to what extent Death in Pratchett's and Gaiman's respective storyworlds influences the one of *Good Omens*, and therefore what the three epics are saying about entropy and the dichotomy of justice and mercy. In all three, interceders between humanity and the divine must take advantage of their free will to find a little kindness, a little compromise in their harsh duties. Still, while Death gets this role in Discworld and *The Sandman*, it goes to Crowley and Aziraphale in *Good Omens*.

This is also an interesting topic because these popular personifications of Death subvert the classic chilling image from mythology and famous films such as Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957). On *Supernatural* (2005–2020), for example, Death has a cadaverous face and an unshatterable calm but also enjoys Chicago pizza and fried pickles. He prioritizes balance, helping the heroes when the world is threatened. Other series that lean into humor and subversion like *Dead Like Me* (2003–2004) promote a human to Reaper—in this case a teenage girl killed by a falling toilet seat—and focus on her relationships in her frustrating new career. Christopher Moore's *A Dirty Job* (2006) likewise emphasizes the protagonist's humanity as an ordinary man forced into a painful calling—thus adding relatability and empathy. Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) has a Death closer to Gaiman's and Pratchett's—crippled by a complete lack of humanity and thus eagerly observing ordinary people. As such, Death's inhumanity becomes a pathway to pathos as the character longs for the human condition and becomes an ally. Each time, Death understands the brightnesses of earth—all the complexities of the human condition that deserve compassion. As a larger allegory, these all warn modern people to care for others, irrespective of laws, religious texts, and the impersonal greater good.

The Sandman

Gaiman's critically-acclaimed and popular graphic novel epic *The Sandman* lasted from 1989 to 1996, spanning 75 issues, with additional spinoffs. The first collection, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, sees the Sandman, Dream (also known as Morpheus), escape imprisonment and reclaim his kingdom and his three lost magical treasures. It ends with his spending the day with his older sister, Death. Their other siblings are Despair, Desire, Destruction, Delirium, and Destiny—all known as the Endless.

The Endless, as described in Dream's epic love story, "are not gods and will never die like gods" (Gaiman/Dringenberg/Jones 1989, 252). They are something more and lack gods' impermanence. Likewise, Death adds in "Façade" (1990) that she will outlast the gods and everything else too: "When the first living thing existed, I was there, waiting. When the last living thing dies, my job will be *finished*. I'll put the *chairs* on the *tables*, turn out the lights and lock the *universe* behind me when I leave" (Gaiman/Doran 1990, 54). Dream is also seen dimension-hopping, suggesting the Endless' influence extends beyond the ordinary realm. Death similarly describes how she cares for everyone. "In the farthest reaches of a distant Galaxy, a planet is being ripped apart by internal stresses; the planet was the home of many crystal intelligences, calm and fine and beautiful. I am there as well" (Gaiman/Doran 1990, 54).

At the same time, their closeness to humanity comes with obligation, even beyond that of deities. In "Lost Hearts" (1990), Dream tells Desire, "We of the Endless are the servants of the living—we are not their masters. We exist because they know, deep in their hearts, that we exist. When the last living thing has left this universe, then our task will be done. And we do not manipulate them. If anything, they manipulate us" (Gaiman/Dringenberg/Jones 1990, 452).

Death is introduced in "The Sound of her Wings" (1988), corresponding to the sixth episode of the first season of the Netflix show. In a note in *The Annotated Sandman*, Gaiman describes this slower comic

as “a change of pace, but it’s a one-off, and it’s the one I’ve been looking forward to writing since we began” (Gaiman/Dringenberg/Jones 1988, 215). His Death is clearly a figure he adores. “Prior installments had the arch humor and cleverness that are part of Gaiman’s voice, but here the author settles into the wistful, melancholic mood that would flavor subsequent issues” (Wagner/Golden/Bissette 2008, 37).

Death is the first of the siblings shown, connecting Dream with family after his epic quests and battles with monsters and demons. An assertive, supportive yet bullying quality emphasizes her role as sister. She tells Dream, when he mopes, “You are *utterly* the stupidest, most *self-centered*, appallingest *excuse* for an *anthropomorphic personification* on *this* or any *other* plane! An infantile, *adolescent*, *pathetic* specimen! Feeling all *sorry* for yourself because your little *game* is *over* and you haven’t got the—the *balls* to go and find a *new* one!” (Gaiman/Dringenberg/Jones 1988, 219). In the comic, she snatches the bread he’s been feeding the birds with and bounces it off his head, emphasizing their sibling dynamic.

Onscreen, Dream’s (Tom Sturridge) moping is slow, ponderous, and echoey—like the voice of Pratchett’s Death. In response, the sweet, feminine Death (Kirby Howell-Baptiste), reaches out and takes his hand. “You could’ve called me, y’know” (S1E6), she says simply, echoing her line from the comic. Only after this does she add some of her chiding speech, but still offered compassionately with a smile. Multiple times she emphasizes that she has been worried about him. With this, she shows her affection, even as she tries to jolly him out of his mood.

“Most of the time when we see a representation of Death, it’s so focused on the end,” Howell-Baptiste observes. “But this character says, ‘I was there in the beginning, and I’ll be there in the end.’ Death is born of life. I think there’s something very beautiful and cyclical about her position in the world, because it’s so much about the full journey that she is there for. That lends itself to a more feminine energy — there is this much more nurturing, caring side to Death than we’ve ever seen before” (Holub 2022). In contrast, Death in *Good Omens* is

not comforting and has no familial relation with his fellow riders. He is entropy, but not kindness.

As they walk onscreen, Dream's sister takes the time to enjoy an apple and chat with their seller, who gives her one free. Here, she shows her relatability and ordinary lightheartedness. This continues to contrast with her brooding brother. When she takes her shoes off, she shows a sensual desire to explore the world that is more knowledgeable and outgoing than other incarnations.

Toward the dead, she is truly compassionate. She kneels before Harry, an elderly Jewish man, and with a large, welcoming smile, asks him, "Do you know who I am?" When he resists, she gently tells him, "It's time" (Gaiman/Dringenberg/Jones 1988, 227). Onscreen, she says "of course" (SiE6) when he asks to say the Sh'ma for a moment. Likewise, she tells Sam "I'm so sorry" (SiE6) when he asks to give his wife their flight information. On the page, she gathers a comedian and tells her, "I thought you were really funny" (Gaiman/Dringenberg/Jones 1988, 231). When the other woman complains about not having a few more years, she says, "I'm sorry, Esme. Your time was up. Come here, honey" (Gaiman/Dringenberg/Jones 1988, 231). Each time, she shows herself bound by the rules but offering compassion.

Howell-Baptiste, the actress playing Death in the Netflix series, describes people coming up to her, appreciating the solace her portrayal offered as they dealt with loss: "Neil wrote a character that is so warm and so caring, that I think that's why people have connected so deeply with it. Because we've all lost someone that we love, and the hope would be that they felt at peace... How lovely it would be to feel like there was that one person who sort of took them and took all of those feelings and all that insecurity and acted as a guide into... whatever is next" (Yee 2022).

Still, all this takes a toll. Death even comments that gathering the souls of the dead "gets me down too. Mostly they aren't too keen to see me. They fear the sunless lands" (Gaiman/Dringenberg/Jones 1988, 231). On the show, this exchange is light and teasing. Still, she adds that long before this, she had considered giving up. "Eventually I learned

that all they really need is a kind word and a friendly face. Like they had in the beginning” (StE6).

DEATH: “It’s funny looking back now. I used to think I had to do this all by myself.”

DREAM: “But you do.”

DEATH: “No. At the end, I’m there with them. I’m holding their hand and they’re holding mine. I’m not alone when I’m doing my job. And neither are you. Think about it. The only reason we even exist, you and I, and Desire and Despair, the whole family. We’re here to serve them. It isn’t about quests or finding purpose outside our function. Our purpose is our function. We’re here for them. Since I figured that out, I realized I need them as much as they need me. I’ve seen so many cool things and people and worlds. I’ve learned so much. Lots of people don’t have a job they love doing, do they? So, I think I’m really very lucky. Listen, I’ve got to head back soon.”

DREAM: “You’ve taught me something I had forgotten. I thank you, my sister.” (StE6)

While Dream is the star of the comic and show, this interaction shows all Death has to teach: “Being with Death, seeing the love, kindness, and acceptance with which she conducts her business, reminds Dream that he has a function to perform, that he has responsibilities . . . And yet she also makes him see that life—and his return to freedom—can be cherished and celebrated” (Wagner/Golden/Bissette 2008, 38).

In “Death: A Winter’s Tale” (1999), Death tells about having a crisis in which she stopped taking lives. “The chaos and the pain got bad, and they got worse. Like I said, nothing died. They sent a young man to see me. He came a long way, but eventually he found me, and he pleaded, and I went and looked at what I’d done. And then I went back to work. You know? Just like that. Because I knew what the alternative was. And it wasn’t very nice” (Gaiman/Jones 1999, 62). She withdrew and went cold—then was shaken when people disliked her. At last, a little girl pointed out that her being “all icy and distant

and vain” (Gaiman/Jones 1999, 63) was unkind. After this, Death embraced warmth. “And I resolved that every hundred years, I’d take a day to live, to see how I liked it, and to see what I could learn” (Gaiman/Jones 1999, 63). Considering this change, Kiki V. Canon writes in *Not Cruel, Blessed, or Merciful: Pratchett, Gaiman, and the Personification of Death* (2018): “Death of the Endless realized she had never considered what mortality might mean to the mortal and decided in that moment that she should explore how her arrival would look and feel to the dying by experiencing it through their own eyes” (Canon 2018, 24). She realizes that when people die they need “a kind word and a friendly face” (Gaiman/Jones 1999, 64)—the journey is easier in the company of a friend.

The price of this is explored in “Death: The High Cost of Living” (1993). As the character explains, “One day in every century, Death takes on mortal flesh, better to comprehend what the lives she takes must feel like, to taste the bitter tang of mortality: and this is the price you must pay for being the divider of the living from all that has gone before, all that must come after” (Gaiman/Bachalo 1993, 124). She mentions later that while the sensations of Earth are delightful, she has also been many other species in many far-off places. It’s a universal quest to gain empathy.

This time, she comes to Earth as a girl named Didi, whose family was recently killed. She still wears all black, but with a slightly different look, including a notable yellow happy face sticker. She explores the world, taking joy in simple things. At one point, she remarks (hearkening back to her television episode), “Don’t apples taste great? I mean the way they taste and the texture. And the way when you chew them they kind of crunch and the juice runs out in your mouth. Isn’t it amazing?” (Gaiman/Bachalo 1993, 84). Everyone tends to be nice to her and give her things. Thus, the first lesson is the preciousness of life—all the delights and beauties that humanity hesitates to abandon.

With her duty set aside, Death rescues and befriends the young man Sexton Furnival, “a 16-year-old New Yorker who is so disconnected from life that he sees no remedy but suicide” (Canon 2018, 33).

Sexton watches as she takes in, as she gushes, “the good bits and the bad bits and the dull bits and the painful bits” and accepts that it is “part of the whole thing” (Gaiman/Bachalo 1993, 137) of living. He realizes there are things and people worth loving and living for, like Didi herself.

“Perhaps Didi’s day was not about learning the joy of living, but the joy of knowing you’ve made a positive impact on the life of another. [...] She gives of her limited time to help another [and] must learn [...] how it feels to know the existential terror of mortality. The more important test in empathy is sacrificing what little time you have in order to save another.” (Canon 2018, 35)

She continues her optimistic side as they hang out together—arguably she has vibes of a classic manic pixie dream girl as her perky attitude infects Sexton. As they chat, she describes her love for children’s movies, especially *The Little Mermaid* (1989): “My brother—one of my brothers anyway—he’s kind of a purist about these things. But I don’t see *why* she has to lose her soul and die and everything. I *like* happy endings” (Gaiman/Bachalo 1993, 113). Taken together, all these aspects show her personality when freed of her burden, throwing herself into enjoying Earth’s delights. She carries the optimism and joy Sexton lacks, but slowly works out how to share it with him.

Seizing momentary happiness is all. This knowledge gives her compassion, which she can pass on to others: “That one mortal day, reinforced every 100 years, showed Death of the Endless the importance of kindness and caring at the end of all things, and a sense of respect for and contentment in her designated task” (Canon 2018, 25). As Didi concludes, “It always ends. That’s what gives it value. When you get to be alive, even for a day ... Well, there’s only one way to stop living. Was it worth it?” (Gaiman/Bachalo 1993, 140).

Discworld

Pratchett's Death appears in every book of the massive Discworld series except *The Wee Free Men* (2003) and *Snuff* (2011): "You know how it is when a studio has a big star under contract, they try to put him in all their films..." (Pratchett/Briggs 2014, 427), joked Pratchett. In *Thief of Time* (2001), Ronnie Soak (who used to be the fifth horseman, Chaos, before creative differences broke them up) describes himself as an "anthropomorphic personification" and adds "but I've always preferred the term Avatar" (Pratchett 2001, 345). Like Gaiman's Endless, these riders existed before the gods and will continue after them. Death reveals in his first central novel, *Mort*, "The gods can demand nothing of *me*. Even gods answer to me, eventually" (Pratchett 1987, 287).

Death is also described as an anthropomorphic personification, dreamed up by mankind and thus filling the role humanity has imagined for him. As noted in *Hogfather* (1998): "The shape of Death was the shape people had created for him, over the centuries. Why bony? Because bones were associated with death. He'd got a scythe because agricultural people could spot a decent metaphor. And he lived in a somber land because the human imagination would be rather stretched to let him live somewhere nice with flowers" (Pratchett 1998, 276). At times he leans into clichés, as with his omega sigil and black-cowled robe. Other times, he tries playing the banjo, insists he hates chess, and otherwise rejects the expectations of his role. Fun moments appear when he vacations and tries other personas: "Death has taken on multiple other jobs throughout the Discworld series, from a short-order cook (*Mort*) to an actor (*Wyrd Sisters*). Perhaps his most memorable job is as the Hogfather, in the book of the same title, when he tries to revive Discworldians' belief in the Santa Claus figure. He also has worked as a beggar, a farmer, and in the foreign legion as a soldier" (Washington/Pyykkonen 2008, 128).

He even allows the Death of Rats and Death of Fleas to separate from him, with the former exercising whimsical trickiness. This moment is shown as bending the rules out of a desire for companionship. This shows a vulnerability in itself:

“Discworld—it’s improbability as a world on a disc supported by elephants supported by a turtle swimming through space, it’s codification of all that need be understood in a coherent (and irreverent) system—is itself a journey away from fearful nothingness. That personification of death, Death, brought into creation by the dualistic need of the living as they struggle to understand, compelled into being without his consent or cooperation, has been set to a thankless task and is destined to remain till the last of the Disc’s sentient passengers passes off past the great terrapin frontier. Death is a fundamental human drive expressed in a marvelously creative way by Sir Terry, who showed us that the anthropomorphic personification of death makes the end of our existence just a little less scary.” (Miori 2016, 183)

Death in *Good Omens* is skull-faced and robed like Pratchett’s, but lacks some of the nuance. Novel and screen do not feature his ocellar-blue eyes. As the Pratchett-coauthored *The Folklore of Discworld* (2014) observes of his differentiation, “Each bone of his tall, human skeleton body is ‘pleasantly polished,’ the depths of his eye sockets contain a piercing point of blue light, and his voice is oft compared to such sounds as that of the ‘clang of leaden doors of a crypt when slammed deep underground’” (Pratchett/Simpson 2014, 226). *Good Omens* also lacks a subtle twinkle of self-aware humor. Most of all, his growth from Pratchett’s series is missing.

Good Omens was published between the first and second Death-centric books, *Mort* and *Reaper Man*. This is significant because the *Good Omens* character resembles Pratchett’s Death, but only before his enlightenment. Pratchett explains of the Discworld character:

“He’s really the generic medieval personification, right out of *The Seventh Seal*, but with a few adjustments. I think people like him because he’s got this pathetic lack of any sense of humour and is powerful and innocent and vulnerable all at the same time. It’s true that he was a lot nastier in the first few books. By *Reaper Man* he’s clearly going through some sort of mid-life crisis. Or mid-Death crisis.” (Pratchett/Briggs 2014, 427).

In *Mort*, the rules are established as unchangeable with no mercy possible. In fact, Death tells his apprentice, “Fair doesn’t come into it. You can’t take sides. Good Grief. When it’s time, it’s time. That’s all there is to it, Boy” (Pratchett 1987, 49). As he adds, “Only the gods are allowed to do that [...] To tinker with the fate of even one individual could destroy the whole world” (Pratchett 1987, 55). However, Death’s adopted daughter Ysabell points out that even if the rules say that tinkering could destroy everything, he rescued her and his servant Alfred. Clearly, there is an infinite space for flexibility—also a place for choice.

From the very beginning, Death does display emotion, describing himself as “really upset” (Pratchett 1987, 23) when he finds a sack of drowned kittens. After this, Death treats Mort with amusement and forbearance (even as Death takes a holiday to become a short-order cook with lots of cats around that bring him acknowledged happiness). When Mort breaks the rules to save a murdered princess, Death’s duel with him includes a lecture that roars in fury. Death even turns melancholic at the death of Princess Keli, musing, “One so young... time like an ever-rolling stream bears all its...” (Pratchett 1987, 65). Clearly, he has feelings. In fact, all these emotional moments are explained by his spending so much time with people:

“Sooner or later it would get to you. Death was fascinated by humans, and study was never a one-way thing. A man might spend his life peering at the private life of elementary particles and then find he either knew who he was or where he was, but not both. Death had picked up... humanity. Not the real thing, but something that might pass for it until you examined it closely.” (Pratchett 1998, 103)

He has a good relationship with Ysabell, though she adds that “he never feels anything” (Pratchett 1987, 130) because he does not have glands. Still, he gives her whimsical gifts and tries to make her happy. He respects that she does not want to return to a static existence but feels misery at her loss. *The Folklore of Discworld* adds that “Death has often tried to act in human ways as a relief from his unremitting memory

of both past and future, but he rarely gets much satisfaction from it” (Pratchett/Simpson 2014, 487). In later books, he forms a relationship with Ysabell’s daughter Susan and directly tells her, “You know I care for you” (Pratchett 2001, 94). They form a family of choice.

In *Reaper Man*, condemned to mortality, he takes a job as a farm-hand in a small town. Miss Flitworth, his employer, teaches him a great deal through her uncompromising ethics. Death undergoes a significant transformation as a result of the Auditors’ intervention. Compelled to assume a mortal form necessitates a shift in Death’s perspective from an abstract, detached observation of humanity to a visceral awareness of individual lives. This evolution is evident in his developing relationship with Miss Flitworth and is brought to climax by the tragic event of a child caught in a fire. While Death, as the embodiment of mortality, acknowledges the inevitability of death for all, his human persona, Bill Door, rejects this detached philosophical stance. This transition signifies a profound shift in Death’s perception of humanity, moving from an understanding that the life or death of any single individual holds little significance to a recognition of the value of personalized relationships and the profound importance of human connection (cf. Neely 2014, 12).

After offering his own limited time to save the dying child and having Miss Flitworth sacrifice her own to aid him, he has a revelation: “There is no hope but us. There is no mercy but us. There is no justice. There is just us . . . but we must care. For if we do not care, we do not exist. If we do not exist, then there is nothing but blind oblivion. And even oblivion must end someday” (Pratchett 1991, 264). Like Gaiman’s Death, he must feel sympathy for humanity or the world will be flawed. On this adventure, he learns, as Canon (2018) observes, “that humans cannot be treated as one homogenous mass, no matter how much the Auditors wish that were the case. In life, and in death, humans should be considered as individuals worthy of individual respect” (Canon 2018, 27).

In *Reaper Man*, the Auditors of Reality try deposing Death to replace him with a less caring figure. After failing, they continue to battle

Death in their next books, *Hogfather* and *Thief of Time*. As Death describes them, “They run the universe. They see to it that gravity works and the atoms spin, or whatever atoms do. And they hate life . . . it is . . . irregular. It was never supposed to happen” (Pratchett 1998, 324). The Auditors are convinced they have “a duty to rid the universe of sloopy thinking” (Pratchett 1998, 88)—especially imaginative, emotional humans. Refusing individuation, the Auditors appear as empty gray robes: “If monotonous drabness could take on a shape, this would be the shape it would choose” (Pratchett 1998, 10). In *Hogfather* and *Thief of Time*, Death obeys the letter of the law but also subtly enlists his granddaughter Susan to stop the Auditors from destroying humanity. If they are the cosmic threat, he is humanity’s interceder.

In later stories like *Maskerade* (1995), Death is also seen showing a little humorous flexibility, to the point of telling Granny Weatherwax that in their poker game she wins with four queens while “all I have is four ones” (Pratchett 1995, 89). With Death’s deliberate aid, she saves a dying baby. Stepping in for the Hogfather (equivalent to Santa Claus), Death takes advantage of his new job to save a dying girl himself. When Albert protests that Death is not supposed to change things, he says, “The Hogfather can. The Hogfather gives presents. There’s no better present than a future” (Pratchett 1998, 191). As Hogfather, he is allowed a new generosity. Clearly, Death has grown to help human beings when he can find enough of a loophole.

Death’s fellow riders of the apocalypse appear in Discworld—in *Interesting Times* (1994) and *Thief of Time*. In the latter, Pratchett’s Death insists he must ride out as the world is ending: “It is one of my functions. I have to obey the rules”; and he adds of the Auditors, “They have found a loophole. I do not have that kind of imagination” (Pratchett 2001, 214), but this of course has been proven untrue multiple times.

This book teams him up with War, Pestilence, and Famine, but (besides the absence of Pollution) they are notably different from the *Good Omens* team. No longer eager for destruction or even obedient to the summons, Famine and Pestilence dismiss the argument of duty. Famine denies its importance: “There are other worlds . . . You’re too senti-

mental, Death. I've always said so" (Pratchett 2001, 245). With this, he prepares to let the entire planet die. Pestilence twitches and hesitates. As Death thinks, "Humans had definitely created Pestilence. They had a genius for crowding together, for poking around in jungles, for setting the midden so handily next to the well. Pestilence was, therefore, part human, with all that this entailed. He was frightened" (Pratchett 2001, 225). War has even retired. "To be human was to change, Death realized. The horsemen ... were horse*men*. Men had wished upon them a certain shape, a certain form. And, just like the gods, and the Tooth Fairy, and the Hogfather, their shape had changed them. They would never *be* human, but they had caught aspects of humanity as though they were some kind of disease" (Pratchett 2001, 267). These personifications can think. Death concludes, "Thank goodness ... that I am completely unchanging and exactly the same as I ever was" (Pratchett 2001, 267), but the dramatic irony, and possibly self-aware irony, lies in the fact that he has grown a great deal—especially in comparison to the other riders.

In this adventure, War is the funniest and most developed, as his nagging Valkyrie wife insists he bundle up and stop eating and drinking rich foods. At last, War comes to ride out—wearing a wooly scarf with Mrs. War hanging on behind. "He's not to strain himself," she insists. "And you're not to let him do anything dangerous" (Pratchett 2001, 36). This goofy pairing continues to fill the pages with jokes. In *Interesting Times*, Death and War appear together with War's sons Terror and Panic (an Ares reference) and his daughter Clancy (apparently left out of the classic myths). Thus, Pratchett's works add nuance to the horsemen, undercutting their seriousness rather than emphasizing their destruction.

When the *Thief of Time* horsemen ride, Death is the one to stop them all. The Auditors summon the quartet and he protests the end of the world, insisting, "What is being done is wrong. [...] This is too soon. There is *unfinished* business" (Pratchett 2001, 354f.). This, as he adds, is "everything" (Pratchett 2001, 355). Death finally discovers a loophole and leads his companions against the Auditors. As he ob-

serves, “While it is true we have to ride out . . . it doesn’t say anywhere against *whom*” (Pratchett 2001, 361). He asks his friends to think what side they are really on, and they all choose humanity. This is a startling rebellion—one the *Good Omens* riders are unprepared to take. The battle on humanity’s behalf is instead led by Crowley and Aziraphale. Lacking them, however, Pratchett’s Death is prepared to take their place.

Good Omens

“When John of Patmos wrote *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, the Second Horseman, War, is described as follows: ‘War rides a red horse, and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword’ (Revelation 6:4, in the King James Translation). The description of War in *Good Omens* is vastly different. She (not he) is known as Scarlett, who has made a killing—excuse the pun—by selling arms to various (and typically, all) sides of conflicts worldwide; later (after getting bored of her profession) she is known as Carmine ‘Red’ Zuigiber, the most successful war correspondent there ever was, who has an uncanny talent of going where wars will be. She still wears red, and she still rides red—a red motorcycle as a Hell’s Angel (one of the original four, representing the chapter of Revelations 6).” (Manninen 2012, 143 f.)

Of course, the others are changed as well. Famine—or Dr. Raven Sable—has updated to producing diet plans, frozen meals with no food content, and equally empty fast food. By following the diet plan he advocates, “It didn’t matter how much you ate, you lost weight. And hair. And skin tone. And, if you ate enough of it long enough, vital signs” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1990, 138). Pestilence has transformed even more, as he retired from the group in 1936 while muttering something about penicillin. His replacement, Pollution, destroys the environment with every step.

The final horseman, Death, still maintains the traditional look. The novel implies that while the tools of conflict and deprivation have changed—and pestilence/pollution most of all, death has not altered or paused through human history. “While the other three have kept up with the times, Death has not had the leisure to do so. And being a true professional, he’s carried on his craft while others have explored alternate career paths” (Manninen 2012, 144).

Interestingly, the four horsemen were written by Gaiman: “The Agnes Nutter scenes and the kids mostly originated with Terry, the four horsemen and anything that involved maggots started with Neil. Neil had the most influence on the opening, Terry on the ending. Apart from that, they just shouted excitedly a lot” (Gaiman/Pratchett 2018, 372). The *Good Omens* novel is not explicitly described as existing in any of their literary realms, and indeed, it appeared early in their respective careers. The authors observe: “You have to remember, you see, that in those days Neil Gaiman was barely Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett was only just Terry Pratchett” (Gaiman/Pratchett 2018, 371). As such, they were still defining their characters. All three Deaths are anthropomorphic personifications, but they have different levels of power and certainly different attitudes towards the job.

Death’s appearance in the *Good Omens* book and show is chilling. The International Express deliveryman has brought talismans to the other three horsemen, with lighthearted jokes. Then he reads the instructions on his final delivery and sees that Death is located everywhere. He writes his wife that he loves her and walks “purposefully” (Gaiman/Pratchett 1990, 178) across the road, letting himself get hit by an oncoming vehicle. The show brings him back to life at the end, along with restoring Aziraphale’s bookshop and Crowley’s car. It seems that the price for bringing about the climax need not be his life. Still, when his sacrifice happens, it is terribly disturbing.

“Don’t think of it as dying,” says Death (Brian Cox). “Just think of it as leaving early to avoid the rush” (S1E4). (He has a point, as all of humanity is doomed at this part of the story.) Starry letters spell out *Death* against the sky, dramatically emphasizing his cosmic nature. The

novel adds, "The delivery man had a brief moment to wonder whether his new companion was making a joke, and to decide that he wasn't; and then there was nothing" (Gaiman/Pratchett 1990, 178). This line emphasizes Death's humorless approach—not cruel but simply matter-of-fact about doing his duty.

Later, behind his black motorcycle helmet, Death's face on the show is a disquieting skull, crumbling and ancient. Mist and ominous music accompany his appearance when the camera zooms very slowly on the mysterious robed figure. After he is told to come and see, Death cries, "Finally!" (SiE4) with something of a note of triumph.

In the *Good Omens* book, the four horsemen gather in the Happy Porker Café. War's motorbike is "a deep, bloody red, rich and dark and hateful" (Gaiman/Pratchett 1990, 243). She thinks that it has been a good day since "the sight of a beautiful woman on a powerful motorbike with a sword stuck on the back" (Gaiman/Pratchett 1990, 243) encourages men to race her and there have been several fatalities. She and Famine exchange general pleasantries, and she adds in both book and show that it feels strange waiting thousands of years and then finally having the event arrive. Pollution sweeps in, while Death continues winning at trivia. In book and show, Death has always been present (as he is present everywhere) and explains this with the creepy line "I never went away" (SiE5). The book adds, "His voice was a dark echo from the night places, a cold slab of sound, gray and dead. If that voice was a stone it would have had words chiseled on it a long time ago: a name and two dates" (Gaiman/Pratchett 1990, 248). This description adds extra uncanniness. Famine addresses him as Lord, emphasizing that even in their camaraderie, he is beyond them. Onscreen, the other three are physical with a hug and shoulder clap, again setting Death apart. Death's bone-ribbed bike is shown with menacing arcade music as Death plays a trivia game that pointedly blinks 'Game Over.'

As they approach the airbase, Death commands, "We go in, we do the job, we go out, we let human nature take its course" (Gaiman/Pratchett 1990, 310). This too sounds like the uninvolved, dutiful Death of *Mort*. Onscreen, the four riders directly sabotage the Air Force Base

and global weaponry. They are not just riding to accompany the end of the world; they directly make it happen. Pratchett's Death denies killing, "People get killed, but that's their business. I just take over from then on" (Pratchett 1987, 15). By setting the apocalypse in motion, Death and his team are its instigators—much more sinister than the cleanup crew.

As the inevitable approaches onscreen, Death offers a simple: "It has Begun" (StE6). When Adam protests, Death retorts, "Your very existence demands the ending of the world" (StE6); he offers no flexibility, unlike Aziraphale and Crowley.

After this, Death goads Adam to start the apocalypse: "You could finish this for them with one thought. You can make the world anew" (StE6). In the book, this role goes to Pollution and Famine, mitigating Death's role as the force of entropy. In both, the horsemen want the world to end. When Shadwell, Aziraphale, and Crowley arrive to stop Adam, Death offers, "A word from you and I will end their lives" (StE6). This too seems unusually savage, as the traditional Death does not *kill* living people, only collects them when they have been killed by other means.

The onscreen narrator describes them as "Death and three monsters who came from the minds of humanity" (StE6)—this word choice emphasizes their cruelty. Adam calls them 'nightmares' that are not real. Of course, he and his three friends face them down and they crumble, supporting this worldview. *Discworld* and *Sandman* likewise emphasize the power of belief, both in shaping the anthropomorphic personifications and defying them. Humans sometimes can trick them or escape their decrees, even as the Deaths have been shaped by expectation. In this case, Adam, who is more than human, uses his free will to avert the apocalypse. His onscreen version insists, "Death, this all has to stop now" (StE6). Death replies, "It has stopped. But they will be back. We are never far away. I am creation's shadow. You cannot destroy me; that would destroy the world" (StE6). In the book, he adds that his name is Azrael (cf. Gaiman/Pratchett 1990, 329). This gives an additional clue to his place in Pratchett's schema. On Earth, Azrael, 'Help of God,' is the Islamic angel of death (cf. Pratchett/Simpson 2014, 495). As such, he presumably takes his place alongside the bureaucratic, inflexible

Good Omens angels committed to war. In the Discworld storyworld, Azrael is known as Death's master, "as the Great Attractor, the Death of the Whole Multiverse, the Beginning and End of Time" (Pratchett/Simpson 2014, 495). In consequence, Discworld's Death is perceived as less powerful, possibly local to his zany flat planet, while Azrael commands all the anthropomorphic personifications. In *Reaper Man*, the powerful Azrael grants mercy to a plea by Death, but showing justice rather than emotion. If the *Good Omens* character is Azrael, he also follows his commands strictly, without the compassion other characters adopt after caring for humanity.

Conclusion

Pratchett's and Gaiman's Deaths thus experience humanity and grow through the struggle to choose for themselves and become true interceders for humanity. Pratchett's even saves the world from the Auditors, pushing his constraints to their limits. Both Death of the Endless and Discworld's Death embody a defining characteristic: a profound sense of duty. They recognize death as the inevitable culmination of life and acknowledge their inherent responsibility to ensure that this inevitable transition occurs equitably for all beings. This commitment manifests in their respective personae. Death in *Sandman* embodies this duty through an ethereal and somewhat comforting appearance, while Pratchett's Death demonstrates his compassion by maintaining his tools—the scythe and sword—with meticulous care, in order to ensure a swift and painless separation of body and soul (cf. Canon 2018, 21).

With nearly no help from *Good Omens'* Death, the more hopeful heroes avert the apocalypse and continue through the day after the end of the world. The second season of *Good Omens*, written after Pratchett's (actual) death but influenced by his co-written outline, shows more angels and demons softening to rebel against their masters. Meanwhile, smaller episodes, like the Job story, show how even in Aziraphale's most innocent days, he was already subverting commandments.

As the show continues into its final instalment, Death (of any version) has not reappeared, but Death's pattern of growth—from an obedient reaper to humanity's champion or from ice maiden to a force of compassion—is still present. Aziraphale and Crowley are the all-too-human and compassionate supernatural figures defying commands from above as they indulge their individual desires. Their love for human things and their steadfast friendship have evolved from rebellion to pure love—and a little of their creators' rebellious spirit will finally bring them their hearts' desire.

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The Naming

Identity and Free Will in *Good Omens*

Stacy Kessler

An examination of word play extant in both the book and the TV series adaptation of Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens* presents an interesting study of the importance of one's name and the process of naming. The characters Aziraphale and Crowley—an angel and a demon respectively—spend a great deal of their time on Earth actively exploring the complications which arise from, as John Searle theorized, acts of speech. In particular, *Good Omens* explores the relationship between identity and appellation, manifest in characters such as Dog, Adam, and Anathema. David Tennant's self-aware Crowley (formerly Crawly) constantly taunts his naive counterpart Aziraphale, portrayed by Michael Sheen, with the notion that God's intentional design is inherently flawed. Free will, argues Crowley, tosses the ineffable plan right out the window, and with it, the rules of language which we think govern our world, one which both angels and demons are ill-equipped to handle (unless, of course, they have lived among the humans since the beginning of time). The aim of this chapter is to show how *Good Omens* sets up both the reader and the viewer by suggesting that titles—names—create our reality, and then stirs the pot further by returning fan favorites from season 1 in new roles in the second season—with new names and identities. The literary and directorial decision to base behaviors and appearances on the selection of an appellation reinforces the idea that identity is unduly influenced by linguistic applications beyond an individual's control.

Introduction

In an increasingly fraught environment, where common elements of grammar such as pronouns have become contentious, what drives us to point to an item—a person, place, thing, or idea—and proclaim: ‘Yes! You are (fill in the blank here)?’ It is the drive to classify our world which leads to the common practice of naming; but how well do we handle this responsibility? Labels are meant to provide information; everyday products such as shampoo, detergents, food, and even clothing feature them to apprise the consumer of ingredients, potential uses or hazards, and calories per serving, among other things. Similarly, the selection of a name—the literal label placed upon a person, place, or thing—is expected to provide a wealth of information about a variety of topics, including ethnicity, character traits, gender identification, etcetera. Most expectant parents agonize over their choice of the perfect moniker for their children, buying books and perusing websites for the ideal selection based on their own criteria. Some look for names based on meaning, country of origin, and gender, whilst others prefer a more traditional approach, such as selecting an ancestral name—or, as in the case of the author of this paper, only a male name was selected by the expecting parents in anticipation of a son, but a girl-child was delivered and the name of the mother was given to the child in lieu of an alternative. This common practice raises an important question: how much of our identity is influenced by the name both designated and applied by our parents, a description over which we are given no agency? Is our behavior, our attitude, our very essence predetermined by that appellation over which we have no input? *Good Omens*, both the novel and the subsequent Amazon series adaptation, sets up this debate in the form of conversations between two foes ... associates ... friends ... lovers—labels are very complex. The line between ally and antagonist is a little blurred here, seemingly following John Searle’s convention of expressed proposition; a statement “not obviously true to both the speaker and the hearer in the context of utterance” (Searle 1975, 322). The angel Aziraphale and his counterpart, the demon Crowley, spend much

of the narrative discussing nature versus nurture, free will, and identity (both their own and that of the humans around them). Specifically, the two examine the potential of the Antichrist, a boy named Adam Young by his adoptive parents, and how his choices are shaped by both appellation and influence. Additional characters, such as Dog—a hellhound with an enforced Napoleonic complex—and Anathema, witch and professional descendent, encourage the audience to think about how much of our personalities, our identities, are the result of a process during which we were not consulted. The complex interplay between word choice and visual representation and characterization is expressed in a nuanced form by the unlikeliest of allies in particular—Aziraphale, the bearer of the flaming sword, and Crowley, the Serpent—exploring the connections between identifier—our names—and the concept of free will. Whereas Janet Brennan Croft’s (2023) reading of the significance of names and practices of naming in *Good Omens* was grounded in J.R.R. Tolkien’s idea of sub-creation, famously elaborated on in his essay “On Fairy-Stories” (1968), the aim of this chapter is to intertwine Searlean thought on speech acts with the naming practices at work in *Good Omens* in order to highlight how the central theme of the story, free will (versus predestination), is conveyed via the act of naming.

An examination of explicit dialogue between Aziraphale and Crowley lends credence to the argument that some aspects of the Divine Plan (“Is that the ineffable plan?” [StE6]) have been erroneously misrepresented. It is precisely these errors which open the debate about what these characters are implicitly stating or, as John Searle explicates, “Almost any important work of fiction conveys a ‘message’ or ‘messages’ which are conveyed *by* the text but are not *in* the text” (Searle 1975, 332). The bulk of the demonic/angelic discourse centers, specifically, on the Searlean theory of speech acts, with profound attention placed on both “the essential rule: the maker of an assertion commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition” and “the sincerity rule: the speaker commits himself to a belief in the truth of the expressed proposition” (Fotion 2003, 35). Crowley sincerely believes he did not fall during the battle for heavenly supremacy; he simply asked

too many questions. Aziraphale repeatedly asserts that Heaven will, as a matter of course, win all subsequent battles, as this—in his expressed proposition—is all part of ‘The Plan’ (cf. StE6).

Adapting a written work for the screen presents its own unique set of challenges, which Searle assures, “A fictional story is a pretended representation of a state of affairs; but a play, a play as it is performed, is not a pretended *representation* of a state of affairs but a pretended state of affairs itself, the actors pretend *to be* the characters” (Searle 1975, 328). The caliber of talent recruited by Amazon is evident, given the believability of representation and the attachment to character exhibited by the actors. Additionally, conversations that begun in the series—on identity and free will—have bled over into David Tennant and Michael Sheen’s scripted reality show *Staged* (2020–2023), which validates the assertion, “One of the conditions of the successful performance of the speech act is that there must exist an object the speaker is referring to” (Searle 1975, 330). Even David’s wife, Georgia Tennant, has embraced the old married couple energy which Crowley and Aziraphale’s characters reflect during their on-screen interactions.

Identity, free will, and destiny?

Free will, the notion that humans have the ability to choose their own destinies and are not following a predetermined course, has been debated by theologians and philosophers for the extent of human existence. In his 1918 article, “Fate and Free Will,” C. A. Strong queries, “What is it from which the will is free? It is free, first, from the necessity of deciding upon any one course of action, rather than its opposite, or than no action at all [...] we can choose, and take our time about it” (Strong 1918, 6). According to some beliefs, it is this liberty to decide one’s own path which differentiates humans from angels, as the latter have no choice but to serve God, i. e., taking the side of Good. The principality Aziraphale mentions this very fact during a conversation with his best frenemy, asserting, “I can’t disod-disoy-not do what I’m

told. ‘M a’ nangel’ (StE1). It was in questioning this ability, this gift, that Lucifer first began to doubt the ineffability of God’s plan, leading to his eventual fall from Grace. Crowley, or the demon formerly known as Crawly and the serpent who tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden, explains to his erstwhile companion that, “the whole point was that when a human was good or bad it was because they wanted to be” (Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 39). Humans are not constrained by innate abilities, but are capable of making their own decisions, an ability which caused Crowley’s downward saunter or, as suggested by Strong, “We are not playthings of a blind or cruel power upon whose pleasure we must wait, even though all our acts are caused—we are *nostra fortuna fabri*, and the fatalistic conclusion rests upon sheer fallacy and illusion” (Strong 1918, 6). Humans, in the flawed (Crowley’s assumed opinion) logic of the Divine Plan, are allowed the freedom of choice, an avenue firmly closed to angels. Interestingly, when Crowley decides to change his name, he emancipates himself from fatefulness—and becomes more human in consequence.

Of course, the capacity to chart ones’ own path through time and space does mean that some people choose to reject their agency. These individuals believe in predetermination, an action which negates their responsibilities over their decision-making processes. While free will, in practice, eliminates the concept of fate and destiny—an intelligent design which dictates the course of a life—it allows for individual belief in a divine plan or random chaos, depending upon the person. A prime example of this is astrology, the thought that the patterns of movement of celestial bodies will reveal the future. At the most basic level, *Good Omens* is about the destruction of Earth—and, by extension, the elimination of all humanity. The Earth is given an identity; in this case, the authors of *Good Omens* go to great lengths to verify the exact date of creation, citing the work of several historical scholars—and (in the novel) providing detailed criticism which is meant to identify out the inaccuracies of their methodologies, enabling them to confirm that, “The Earth is a Libra” (Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 14). Any good student of the Zodiac recognizes that Libras are known for their

generosity and self-effacement, both qualities necessary for sustaining life. The voice of Frances McDormand—portraying God—adds Libra’s horoscope for the week in which the events of the novel take place; as imaginable, it is less than favorable, though, “help could come from an unexpected quarter” (SiEi). The foreshadowing is strong with this prediction.

It is important to note that astrological forecasting is, objectively, a form of predestination. In order to see the future by any means, there must be some type of intelligent design; otherwise, one would have no idea the sequence of events, much less the outcome. The notion of prediction, therefore, contradicts the concept of free will or, as Searle notes, “When it comes to explaining a certain class of human behavior, it seems that we typically have the experience of acting ‘freely’ or ‘voluntarily’ in a sense of these words that makes it impossible to have deterministic explanations” (Searle 2001, 492). *Good Omens* routinely plays with the very fine line between predestination and independent function.

Of witches and witch-finders

Practices of moniker selection vary widely: some people peruse the various databases—electronic and print—in search of the perfect descriptor for their little bundle of joy, some vehemently cling to tradition and genealogical legacy, and some seek inspiration in history and literature. No matter what process is used, one thing is certain; the child is not consulted. Gisli Pálsson contends, “It seems that names not only specify and individualize their bearers, they also represent ‘technologies of self,’ serving as means of domination and empowerment, facilitating collective action, surveillance, and subjugation—exclusion as well as belonging” (Pálsson 2014, 619). Human parents name their offspring based solely on *their* hopes and dreams: take, for example, Henry VII, who named his eldest son Arthur in hopes of emulating that most famous of British (fictional) monarchs, ensuring the rise of a second

Camelot. It did not work out quite as planned. In accordance with this idea of furthering dynasty, Palsson continues, “Practices of naming, it is argued, are not only key elements of identification and personhood, embodied in the biosocial habitus much like other biomarkers, but they also situate people in genealogies, social networks, states, and empires” (Palsson 2014, 618). Names provide a plethora of information about almost everything—except details about the individual’s personality.

Good Omens’ Anathema’s name, similarly to others presented in the series, has a dual meaning. Whereas ‘anathema’ in its modern context is perceived as a person or thing someone deeply dislikes, the secondary—and, perhaps, less well-known—definition carries an ecclesiastical connotation, as declaring someone anathema was equivalent to excommunication. This idea of ostracizing an individual from religious practice affirms Palsson’s assertion that, “Names serve the purpose of situating people in a social space, connecting them to family, lineage, ethnic group, and such” (Palsson 2014, 621). The reader is informed that Anathema’s mother read this appellation in a book and found it to be pretty. This name reflects the pariah status granted to her ancestor, the witch Agnes Nutter, and it is through Anathema that the audience learns of the predictions made by Mistress Nutter—a real person convicted of witchcraft in 1612—concerning the end of existence.

In an ironic twist, the man sent to deal with the prophetess, one Witchfinder Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery Pulsifer, also has a descendant, the young man Newton (named, perhaps, for Sir Isaac) Pulsifer. The name Newt comes, comparable to Henry VII’s son, with a set of expectations—inventiveness and a knack for technology—that the character cannot fulfill. Or at least, his name is misleading regarding the achievements Newt will make over the course of the narrative. Newt sweeps Anathema Device off of her feet—or, at the very least, stuns her with the power of his car Dick Turpin, highway man and Wasabi. Newt identifies as a computer programmer, though his skills with technology are somewhat more destructive than needed for this position. However, as it turns out, these (lack of) skills are exactly right for what is needed to prevent the apocalypse from happening.

As mentioned previously, the selection of the perfect name is a decision most parents agonize over, which raises an interesting question about the puritanical Witchfinder Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery, Newt's ancestor. Rather than trying to pinpoint his parents' aspirations for his future personality, it seems as though someone was taking the opportunity presented by the birth of Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery to publicly shame their marital partner. This implication is further magnified by the man's chosen profession; if a guess was to be hazarded, I would speculate that Pulsifer's mother strayed from her vows, hence the son's bitter vengeance upon other willful women. In this instance, moniker wields the ultimate power in determining identity or, as Strong asserts, "when the decision finally comes, it will be the expression of our innermost, our entire nature" (Strong 1918, 6). In this case, the influence of the applied label is very hard to deny.

Adam, Dog, and other adversaries

Agnes Nutter, it seems, wrote the only book to accurately foretell the future, including the coming of the Antichrist. Crowley is tasked with 'delivering' the infant to his 'adopted' parents, though he is not thrilled with the honor. He has, according to his coworker Hastur, "gone native" (Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 18): Crowley rather enjoys life on Earth and is in no rush to see it all ending. After the handoff of the "Adversary, Destroyer of Kings, Angel of the Bottomless Pit, Great Beast that is called Dragon, Prince of This World, Father of Lies, Spawn of Satan, and Lord of Darkness" (Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 27), Crowley consults with his friend, Aziraphale, over potential solutions to this new arrival. In Crowley's opinion, nurture, not nature, shapes a person's personality. This lengthy moniker is a combination of titles held by the Antichrist in the Bible, none of which seem particularly cheerful, indicating that the sole purpose of this child is the utter destruction of humanity. Crowley tells his friend, "Look at Satan. Created as an angel, grows up to be the Great Adversary... saying he'll

[Adam] grow up to be a demon just because his dad *became* one is like saying a mouse with its tail cut off will give birth to tailless mice” (Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 58). The demon assures Aziraphale that the child is, “Just this huge powerful *potentiality* waiting to be shaped” (Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 58). It is Crowley’s belief that, if the infant is exposed to both hellish and heavenly influence, he will grow up ‘normal.’ This plan backfires spectacularly when it is discovered—too late, mind you—that the son of the American attaché is not, in fact, the correct child, and they have spent the past eleven years exerting their influences on a mere human.

While this argument over child development occurs in London, in a Satanic nunnery in Tadfield, Mr. Young is contending with his own set of problems regarding the Adversary, Destroyer of Kings, Angel of the Bottomless Pit, Great Beast that is called Dragon, Prince of This World, Father of Lies, Spawn of Satan, and Lord of Darkness. His wife, having just given birth, is asleep, leaving Mr. Young the twin tasks of entertaining a Satanic nun—no mean feat, since Sister Mary is overly gregarious even by the standards of The Chattering Order of St. Beryl—and deciding upon a name for their newly-delivered bundle of evil. The two humans wrangle over a variety of names—the nun’s choices come hand-picked from the Book of Revelations (Damien and Cain), of course, with Mr. Young protesting, “We’ve always gone in for good simple names in our family” (StEt). After many a false start, Sister Mary finally stumbles upon ‘Adam,’ which, as seen before in *Good Omens*, is a double entendre: this is the name of both the first man, through whom humans were introduced to Sin and exiled from the Garden of Eden (though *he* put the blame squarely upon Eve’s shoulders ...), and a *nom de plume* for Lucifer, as is explained to Anathema by her landlady: “That young Adam’s full of the Old Adam” (Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 143). Ironically, Mrs. Henderson apparently knows Adam better than anyone in town, as she recognizes his similarity to his father. The potentiality of the child, proclaimed by Crowley in conversation with Aziraphale, is inscribed in its name, as stated by Brennan Croft: “Adam is a wonderfully ambiguous name, full of potential for

good or evil, implying a state of prelapsarian balance and innocence, a fresh beginning, a child who could be as much God's as Satan's" (Brennan Croft 2023, 156).

Crowley is informed that the son of Satan is set to receive a hell-hound for his eleventh birthday, the naming of which will establish his rule on Earth. In relating this bit of information to Aziraphale, the demon confirms, "It's the start of it all. The boy's meant to name it" (SIEI). God further elaborates in the voice-over: "And this is the moment. The naming. This will give it its purpose, its function, its identity. This is the moment that sets Armageddon into motion" (SIEI). Beelzebub has set aside the most fearsome of hounds to send to Satan's spawn, determined to unleash absolute evil on the unsuspecting world. Regrettably for Hell, the child naming said hound is a boy who knows nothing about his supernatural origins. Loren Graham explains, "Knowing the name of something or someone gives one power over that thing or person [...] 'Naming' something or someone is seen as the exertion of dominion over that thing or person" (Graham 2013, 229). Adam, who is told by his friends that he will never be given a dog for his birthday, sensibly decides his animal should be named 'Dog.' The enormous beast meant to intimidate the damned is transformed by this moniker, morphing into a small, nondescript mutt. The demonic Doberman, replete with CGI enhancement, is reduced to what is, in essence, the very definition of 'dog' (in opposition to 'hound'): a brown, non-descript canine who no longer causes the damned to quiver in fear (in fact, said animal cannot even intimidate the ginger cat from next door). Graham explains this transformation by stating, "Universal essences are concepts formed in our minds when we see similarities among the things in the world" (Graham 2013, 230)—Adam associates Dog with a mixed-breed companion, not a pure-bred terror. "The choice of the name Dog [...] re-creates the hell-hound as what Adam considers the Platonic ideal of dog-ness, and even more specifically, a certain type of dog-ness in relation to a certain kind of human-ness" (Brennan Croft 2023, 157)—that of an average eleven-year-old boy that looks for companionship and a sense of belonging rather than destruction.

In the end of season 1, Adam cannot allow his father Satan dominion; taking a hint from Aziraphale and Crowley, who have shown up just in time to witness Adam's ascension to Ruler of All (though he really just wants dominion over Tadfield), he deliberately chooses Mr. Young, the man who raised him, over Satan. In Brennan Croft's terms, it is Adam's free will that "sub-creates a new reality" (Brennan Croft 2023, 159). Lack of influence from supernatural forces appears to have negated the evil nature of the Antichrist, enabling him to just be (human). Adam, growing up entirely under the influence of humans, comprehends something that took Crowley a thousand years to grasp—humans, through the grace of free will, are capable of both extremes. When "recounting the Deeds of the Day" (StEr) to Hastur and Ligur, Crowley realizes that his associates are severely out of touch with the desires of humanity. Crowley even contemplates how, "Nothing he could think up was half as bad as the stuff they thought up themselves" (Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 38). Free will allows mankind to simultaneously achieve the heights of virtue and the depths of depravity. In fact, C.A. Strong posits, "We should perhaps do well to remember (1) that the world would be a tolerably satisfactory place to live in if it were not for human beings; (2) that the majority of these presumably have the same fundamental will with which we find in ourselves, and, even if not, could probably be brought to see that good is more profitable than evil; (3) that it may well be that, since the prominence of good is so important to us, and since we are empirically free, it has been left to us to secure its predominance by our own efforts" (Strong 1918, 8).

After-effects of ineffability

Season 2 of *Good Omens* leaves the text created by Gaiman and Pratchett behind to delve into the after-effects of thwarting the Divine Plan (again, are we talking about the ineffable one? I keep getting confused...) and the lengths to which the servants of both Heaven and Hell will go to cause the Final Battle. Gabriel, portrayed by Jon Hamm,

has vanished from Heaven—in an analogy to Adam and Eve, he vanished from Paradise, only to reappear naked in Aziraphale’s bookshop (newly rebuilt, courtesy of the Antichrist at the end of season 1—and replete with a shiny new selection of Young Adult fiction) holding what is assumed to be an empty box. The last season’s antagonist is also in possession of amnesia; he has no idea who he is, nor what is in the box. The only thing Gabriel is certain of is that Aziraphale represents safety. Due to his memory loss, Gabriel is merely an empty vessel, ready to be filled with a new identity that is liberated from his old self. As a disguise, Aziraphale assigns Gabriel with a new name—Jim: “James. Long for Jim, short for Gabriel” (S2E1). The banality of such a common-place name is an homage to season 1, a casual throwback to Dog as the archetypical canine. This new name in all of his human-ness invites for all sorts of questions surrounding the very human choice ‘Jim’ makes during the finale of season 2 (renounce Heaven to be with Beelzebub). Moreover, Aziraphale’s act of re-naming Gabriel serves an act of empowerment which actually makes the audience hopeful that the angel has been able to emancipate himself from Heaven. Eventually, we become aware that this emancipation did not happen (Aziraphale returns to Heaven at the end of the last episode of season 2), but it is actually Gabriel who—freed from the burden of his angelic name—is empowered to make his own decisions.

In what is one of the more ironic twists of many employed by the production crew at Amazon, S2E1 raises the question of Crowley’s true purpose; he is seen in the opening of the first episode creating galaxies, even utilizing the most famous line from one of the most easily recognizable texts in the Western world—“Let there be Light” (S2E1). The dichotomy of creation/sub-creation here borders on blasphemy. With Aziraphale assisting, the angel that Crowley once was describes the wonders of the universe, only for his newly acquired companion to give him an expiration date. Thus begins Crowley’s journey towards the pit—it is upon learning that his (perhaps deserving of a capital letter?) creation will come to an end that Crowley begins to question, “What’s the point?” (S2E1). He also mentions that he would welcome curiosity

in his world, as no harm ever came from asking for clarifications or more information. It is in this same moment that the audience begins to wonder who Crowley really is. This is the query which haunts the remainder of the season, and one which is never satisfactorily (or definitively) answered.

Maggie and Nina, portrayed by Maggie Service (the nun formerly known as Sister Garrulous in season 1) and Nina Sosanya (the nun formerly known as Sister Loquacious in season 1) respectively, supply the voices of reason—and humanity—in an increasingly confusing montage of new and old characters: as the season unfolds, the viewer is assailed with familiar faces and/or familiar characters, in spite of the fact that these adjustments are rarely addressed. For example, Beelzebub has swapped faces—actress Anna Maxwell is replaced with Shelley Conn—an occurrence noted only in passing. Season 2's Shax and season 1's Madam Tracy are both played by Miranda Richardson, which rounds out the roster of convoluted, but no less dynamic, casting choices. The casting shuffle causes some confusion—did Madam Tracy die, perhaps due to boredom after finally bagging a witchfinder of her own in the form of Mr. Shadwell? But all the more, it adds to the question of what defines a person and how we classify them once a single label has been applied. By assigning new names and identities to known characters as well as changes in the cast of returning characters, the ambivalence and fluidity of identity is reinforced rather than assumptions of any dependability on stable identities.

Conclusion

Somewhere between the levity brought on by abject annihilation and the weight of responsibility for completion of the ineffable plan, *Good Omens* manages to ask the viewer a question deserving of an answer: does the name of a thing represent—or, in this case, does it change—the reality of a thing? No less a character than God herself informs the audience that the naming of Dog solidifies its purpose, an act which

reaffirms the notion that identity may, in fact, hinge upon appellation. Additionally, the very act of choosing a name, as in the case of Gabriel-turned-Jim, expresses the very humanity which angels are supposed to reject, specifically the notion of free will. It should be noted, however, that what a person is called can also be misleading; Newt, for example, with his scientific associations, destroys every piece of technology with which he comes into contact. Adding yet another wrinkle is the tendency for the producers of the series to recast characters featured in previous seasons—Madam Tracy and Sister Garrulous of season 1 become season 2's Shax and Maggie, respectively—complicating the question further.

As season 2 closes and the production of a concluding 90-minute feature may be expected to air in early 2026 at the latest (due to Gaiman's further exclusion from the project because of multiple credible allegations against him for inappropriate behaviors and assault), we shall see if we are able to exclude the actions of one of the creators from the beloved work of art he created or, as Searle suggests, "Perhaps one should not consider an author's ulterior motives when analyzing his work" (Searle 1975, 325). Is it possible that mass annihilation, as implied by C.A. Strong, is indeed the answer to the human condition—and, if so, where does that leave Aziraphale and Crowley? What about the master of disguise, the not-an-angel-but-a-human-Inspector-Constable Muriel? Searle explains, "On one hand, we have the experience of freedom, and on the other hand we find it very hard to give up the view that because every event has a cause, and human actions are events, they must have sufficient causal explanations as much as earthquakes or rain storms" (Searle 2001, 492). Accordingly, if the so-called ineffable plan is indeed... ineffable, then Crowley and Aziraphale and all the rest were free this whole time to explore what it truly means to be human; in which case, the final irony is the title, or, more accurately, the name, of God's Plan.

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I'm Down with Wicked

Morality Tales in the "The Resurrectionists" Minisode

Kate Doak-Keszler

Following centuries of the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley's lives on earth, *Good Omens* explores concepts of free will, friendship, and moral ethics. The use of distinct historical flashbacks, told as separate but related minisodes within an episode, mimics popular literary frameworks to tell a story within a story. This embedded story leverages the audience's experience and understanding of trans-media storytelling by referring to books, songs, movies, and religious knowledge and indicates a shift in perspective for a main character with whom the audience identifies. The embedded story contributes new information from a self-contained storyline.

The minisode "The Resurrectionists" in season 2 of *Good Omens* is told in a format similar to a morality tale. This popular genre of children's literature in late Georgian's England presented a black-and-white version of morality, with good triumphing over evil and clear instructions on leading a respectable, Christian life. While utilizing the framework of a Christian morality tale for "The Resurrectionists," the minisode subverts the binary paradigm of good and evil found in these stories. The characters instead engage in *midrash*, an interpretive act important in the Jewish faith for seeking the answers to both practical and theological questions—in this case, what is the real nature of good and what does it mean to do evil? This is done via the characters who represent three different types of 'wickedness' discussed in the Hebrew Bible—*pesha*, *avah*, and *khata*.

Through two complementary theatrical tools—Crowley's switching of accents and his placement in the scene relative to Aziraphale—the demon guides the angel in questioning his own assumptions. As a

duo, they are exploring the long-standing tension between historical ideas of religious education (and the purpose of religion itself): Are we instructed to gain obedience or taught to cultivate questioning?

Introduction

“[F]antasy is a literature intrinsically situated at intersections: the intersection of history and culture; the intersection of ideas; the intersection of literary traditions; and the intersection between worlds.” (Baker 2016, 470)

A clever use of historical flashbacks in season 1 of *Good Omens* helped add context to the relationship between Crowley and Aziraphale. This technique was expanded in season 2, where the historic flashbacks went from single moments in time to their own storylines as distinct minisodes within episodes. These minisodes create intertextual relationships where each of the three flashbacks in season 2 have some relation, in style and structure, to various types of literature and are embedded into historical contexts. This serves to highlight their function as a story within a story. All three minisodes share a feeling of being slightly exaggerated versions, such as they might be told between two old friends sitting in the back room of a bookshop reminiscing while soused off wine and whisky. Or, perhaps as a journal entry that you don't actually expect outsiders to see.

The “The Resurrectionists” (S2E3) minisode reveals angel Aziraphale's memory of a journey he and the demon Crowley made to explore history, philosophy, and social change in 1800s Scotland and also Aziraphale's simplistic notion of good and evil. During the journey, Crowley questions Aziraphale's judgement about the choices and actions of various people and the trends within society as a whole. In each case, Aziraphale acknowledges the value of asking these questions and his notions of good and evil become more nuanced. While the minisode “A Companion to Owls” (S2E2) reflects an illustrated Bible story and “Nazi Zombie Flesh

Eaters” (S2E4) reads like a pulp fiction novel, the “The Resurrectionists” minisode is a morality tale.¹ This genre of children’s literature was extremely popular in the late Georgian era of 19th century England (cf. Goldie 1951; Shefrin 1999; Morgenstern 2001; Fleming 2016), which is when the minisode, set in Edinburgh in 1827, takes place. Morality tales for children presented a black-and-white version of morality during that time, with good triumphing over evil and clear instructions on leading a respectable, Christian life. However, the morality tale of “The Resurrectionists” presents a more nuanced version of these stories, along the lines of the *Good Omens* narrative: “The Resurrectionists” causes a shift in point of view to occur multiple times throughout the episode—from the omniscient observer’s perspective to Aziraphale’s narrated memory—or, to put it another way, from a seemingly authoritative bird’s eye view to a perhaps unreliable character memory. Assuming that the story is told to a diary indicates that it is not meant to be shared which gives the whole minisode a feeling of voyeurism.

In “The Resurrectionists,” Aziraphale and Crowley encounter a grave robber during their meeting at a graveyard in Edinburgh. Aziraphale initially condemns her actions, believing she is destined for Hell. However, when they learn the bodies are used by a doctor for medical research, Aziraphale reconsiders. He realizes that the grave robbing, while morally questionable, serves a greater purpose by advancing medical science and helping the poor. Aziraphale understands that actions may not

1 While the three minisodes are individual intertextual works, they are interrelated. Each represents a different time in Crowley and Aziraphale’s long history in which they worked together and gives important context to their relationship. The varying levels of success of each of their adventures have a great deal to do with how coordinated their efforts were. In “Companion to Owls,” they have a common goal and work together, and they manage to pull off the trick and evade punishment. In “Nazi Zombies,” they have a common goal but Aziraphale comes up with a plan and Crowley goes along with it; they barely manage to evade punishment. In “The Resurrectionists,” their goals are not completely aligned, and Crowley comes up with a plan that Aziraphale stumblingly follows; while comical to a certain degree, the minisode concludes in Crowley being dragged down to Hell. It would be interesting to further explore the intertextual relations between these three minisodes, considering their narrative structures as well as the cinematography and mise-en-scène.

always be simply good or evil. This lesson is further emphasized when Crowley compassionately drinks poison intended for the grave robber in order to save her soul from Hell and is sucked to Hell instead for punishment. This act demonstrates that even seemingly 'bad' beings can make morally 'good' choices. The minisode illustrates a long-standing tension between historical ideas of religious education (and the purpose of religion itself): Are we instructed to gain obedience or taught to cultivate questioning? Moreover, there is an interplay between the flashback and the present-day story taking place. While Aziraphale in 1827 needed to be taught to question, Aziraphale in the present is doing more than making simple inquiries. His choice to actively investigate shows how far he has come.

The complex dramaturgical interplay between the timelines in the episodes and the flashback-minisodes adds both to the illumination of Aziraphale's character development and to the significance of the relationship between Aziraphale and Crowley. In this context, the primary question is: How does a transmedia approach to storytelling enhance the meaning of the minisodes? Henry Jenkins asserts that transmedia storytelling is a process wherein the impact of multiple products is the creation of meaning and that each product makes a unique contribution to the whole (cf. Jenkins 2007, 104). The embedded stories of season 2 leverage the audience's experience and understanding of transmedia storytelling, and they provide a powerful example of a story that can be disassembled and reassembled at will (cf. Jenkins 2007, 110). While the main narrative appears to be told in a linear manner, the minisodes being interspersed as flashbacks means that the story is never continuous and easily broken. As a result, the flashback minisodes change the audience's understanding of present-day events, sometimes quite suddenly, with pieces of information gleaned from past events, and therefore blurring the line between past and present. The interplay between the framing story of the episode and the embedded story of the minisode suggests that other texts of all sorts may also provide insight (cf. Zengin 2016, 300). The historical context—including industrialization, philosophy and traditions, and

educational/literary trends as well as traditional religious and theatrical practices—provides ways to explore the meaning of the episode/minisode in its entirety. The aim of this chapter is to dissect the historical and political contexts as well as the complex intertextual references in “The Resurrections” in order to better understand the function of the minisode in the overall *Good Omens* storyworld. By doing that, it will be possible to highlight how the minisode operates as a parable for the core themes of *Good Omens*.

Historical and philosophical underpinnings of “The Resurrectionists”

The setting and the historical background of the minisode are crucial for understanding “The Resurrectionists” as a morality tale and will be explored in this section. During the 1820s, Britain saw major social and economic changes as it became a manufacturing society and dealt with the domestic tensions inspired by this transition. As the economy was being restructured, debates over the rights of the working class—especially related to labor, religious freedom, the criminal justice system, and education—were taking place both in parliament and in the streets. Nowhere is this more evident than in Edinburgh, which underwent a profound transformation between 1760 and 1830 (cf. Blum/McLaughlin 2019).

During this time, the Scottish capital was expanded with the construction of New Town, the largest planned city development in the world and an increasingly important center of finance and education. However, while New Town flourished, the conditions for the poor housed in Old Town deteriorated. The rich and poor were increasingly separated, physically and socially (cf. Blum/McLaughlin 2019). Data collected at the University of Edinburgh in the 1830s recording student heights demonstrated clear discrepancies in the health indicators of students from differing economic classes in the early 19th century (cf. Blum/McLaughlin 2019, 185).

Unravelling of the handloomers: The effects of industrialization

A stunning example of the rapid changes in the economy was textile production. Until the 1820s, handloom weaving was the highest-paid craft for working-class people. With the surge in the production of yarn due to the introduction of powered spinning factories in the 1780s, the demand for skilled weavers also grew. In 1820, there were some 240,000 handloom weavers in Britain and they were a major force in the labor movement for better pay and representation (cf. Nardinelli 1986, 89). The decade opened with three major examples of radical political activity. In Manchester in 1819, the cavalry charged into a crowd of 60,000 working-class people who had gathered to demand a reform of parliamentary representation. What came to be known as the Peterloo Massacre resulted in 18 casualties and around 700 injured (cf. Muller 2020, 41). The government responded by passing the Six Acts, laws intended to counter radicalism. However, laborer continued to protest. The following year, the police managed to prevent the carrying out of the Cato Street Conspiracy, a plan to assassinate the cabinet and prime minister and stage a revolution (cf. McElligott/Conboy 2020). A week of strikes and unrest led primarily by weavers in Scotland, called the Radical Rising, resulted in 88 men being charged with treason (cf. Berresford Ellis/Mac a'Ghobhainn 2001).

The protests did have some success. Labor saw an increase in their collective powers with the repeal of both the Seditious Meetings Prevention Act (barring large assemblies) and the Combination Act (banning trade unions) in 1824. However, the rise of powered weaving factories was a threat to the newfound power of workers. Richard Roberts, a Manchester engineer, perfected his design for the production of machine-woven textiles between 1825 and 1830. While there were an estimated 2,400 power looms in British factories in 1813, by 1835 the number had increased to 115,000. This led to a rapid decline in work for handloom weavers, who numbered about 30,000 by 1861 (cf. Nardinelli 1986, 89). This shift led to activists focusing on creating cooperative communities—not just trade unions but also mutual aid

societies, movements for religious equity and secular education, as well as a growing focus on criminal justice and healthcare reform.

These issues found a strange confluence in one particular field—the study and practice of anatomy. It was a widespread Christian belief that the body must be kept intact for the day of resurrection, meaning that dissections and autopsies were seen as abhorrent by much of the public (cf. Knott 1985, 13 f.). At the same time, the need for dissection in order to learn about the human body had been recognized by the law for well over two centuries. The debate was playing out on the national stage, but no city serves as a better case study than Edinburgh, which was the “center of surgical and medical education in northern Europe” (Gordon 2009, 5) in the early 19th century.

Crime, punishment, and anatomy: The cost of medical education

A law passed in 1505 that granted the newly incorporated Craft Guild of Surgeons and Barbers in Edinburgh possession of one body of an executed criminal per year to be used for public dissection (cf. Knott 1985, 1 f.). However, by the 1710s, there were reports of medical practitioners unearthing bodies from cemeteries for dissection. Despite public outcry over stories of ‘resurrectionists’ snatching bodies from the grave, the surgeons and barbers in Edinburgh were an influential group. The guild was instrumental in establishing the Edinburgh Medicine School in 1726—the oldest medical school in the United Kingdom. As the school was growing, there was initially an increase in the number of cadavers available. The Murder Act of 1752 “for better preventing the horrid crime of murder” disallowed the burial of executed murderers to “further terror and peculiar mark of infamy be added to the punishment” (Tarlow/Battell Lowman 2018, 87), and the cadavers were either put on display or donated to medical science. Even with this legislation in place, the growing number of medical students at the time—from 300 total between Edinburgh and London in the 1790s to over 400 in Edinburgh alone in the 1820s—meant that even with the historically

high access to cadavers, there were not enough available to meet educational needs (cf. Knott 1985, 1f.).

The 1820s saw a severe change in both demand and supply. The number of students continued to grow, but reforms to the criminal justice system were leading to more humane treatment of the convicted. In 1822, Britain repealed the death penalty for over 100 crimes, and many of the more gruesome punishments—such as drawing and quartering and flagellation—fell out of use. There were attempts to gain cadavers by other legal means, which served to highlight the imbalance between social classes and dragged many worker rights activists into the debate. The first attempt at passing the Anatomy Bill in 1828, which allowed workhouses and hospitals to relinquish possession of unclaimed bodies, failed to pass (cf. MacDonald 2009, 380 ff.).

At the same time, there was a pervasive social anxiety over the role of anatomists at large. These medical practitioners were tasked with both performing surgery on living patients, conducting examinations of the dead, but also held a dubious distinction of ensuring people were truly deceased and their bodies were incapable of rising from the grave. Even operations to preserve life were often gruesome. Until the mid-1800s, neither anesthetics nor tools such as artery forceps were widespread—which means that patients faced brutal tactics such as ‘bleeding’ before operations to make them compliant and that wounds often had to be cauterized to stop bleeding. According to medical records, at least one-quarter of patients did not survive these surgeries (cf. Ravilious 2013, 5f.). On the other end of the spectrum, anatomists employed some rather violent techniques to ensure that the recently deceased were truly dead. This included such extreme measures as pouring scalding water over bodies or cutting off fingers, which would be a nasty shock if the person happened to still be alive. While rare, there are certainly reports of people being revived under such circumstances. All of this created a sense of unease around the profession—were they preserving life or ending it? However, public outrage over body-snatching by ‘resurrectionists’ reached a fever peak with cases of

murders committed to obtain bodies for sale to medical practitioners. The most famous was that of Burke and Hare.

Between January and October 1828, William Burke and William Hare—with the aid of their partners Helen McDougal and Margaret Hare—murdered at least 15 people solely for profit (cf. Gordon 2009, 2 ff.). The victims were mostly vulnerable people, those who were infirm, elderly, or very drunk. Hare would invite them back to a room at Log's Lodging-House, ply them with alcohol, and suffocate them. The deceased victims were delivered to Dr. Robert Knox, who paid them for the corpses (cf. Gordon 2009, 191). While horrific on their own, the details of the murders did not seem to be initially viewed by the general public as overly sensational. Instead, they seemed simply to confirm long-standing suspicions about 'resurrectionists.' However, as the case unfolded, the media and the public began to take interest; Burke, Hare, and Knox were headed towards infamy.

Almost immediately after apprehension, Hare agreed to turn evidence against Burke, thus sparing him from standing trial. Burke was found guilty and sentenced to death, and his body was subjected to postmortem punishment via dissection. On 28 January 1829, William Burke was hanged at the Lawnmarket in Edinburgh in front of a crowd of 20,000 people looking on. Afterwards, his body was delivered to Dr. Alexander Monro at the University of Edinburgh for public dissection. It is estimated that the number of people who attended the dissection or passed through the anatomy theater to view the body was at least equal to the number who attended his execution (cf. Gordon 2009, 175).

It was not just the sensational nature of the murders that caught the public's imagination. The notoriety of Burke and Hare had just as much to do with the missing details of the story as the known gruesome facts. There was plenty of room for speculation, which meant the story was told and retold often, and as a result, cultural memory today still associates the 'resurrectionists' with murder.

One major mystery is the character of Dr. Knox, who was never prosecuted for his involvement with Burke and Hare. Throughout the investigation and trial, he remained largely silent, refusing to ac-

knowledge any wrongdoing or even discuss his role in the situation. However, his professional reputation was irreparably damaged. He was encouraged to leave his position as curator of the Museum of Anatomy and Pathology located within the College of Surgeons which he had helped to establish. He was likewise no longer welcome to lecture. It is a bit of an irony that before the case, Dr. Knox was well-known for the gory nature of his public displays. After a tour of the dissecting theater with Knox, John James Audubon wrote in his journal that it was a charnel house full of shocking and disagreeable sights (cf. Audubon 1899, 146 and 152 f.). While those in higher education waged debates around the professional teaching of anatomists, advocates were making moral arguments in support of primary education for working-class children.

For liturgy and literacy: The rise of children's literature

In the larger social discourse over the nature of the human soul and the divine purpose of the body, debates over education began to grow. There had long been differing views in European circles of thought about the nature of children—were they born innately tainted by Original Sin or were they born as blank slates? In the mid-1700s to early 1800s, the view of the blank slate (*tabula rasa*) was winning with the help of highly influential educators like John Locke (cf. Duschinsky 2012). Locke believed that virtue and morality are not innate but learned through experience and practice. Educating children through storytelling can provide children with moral exemplars and teach valuable lessons about right and wrong, good and evil.

Moreover, the Sunday School movement had gained immense impact in the education of British children by the mid-1800s resulting in a spread of literacy (cf. Morgenstern 2001, 64 f.). Within this cultural context, a new genre of books became vogue in the UK—children's literature. Already a successful publisher of books for adults, John Newbery struck out into new territory when he had a book for chil-

dren printed in 1744. *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* was just the first in his successful line of children's books. Like Locke and others, Newbery believed that children learned better through the enticement of play than the threat of physical discipline. By the standards of the day, his stories were whimsical and fun, but they also all served an educational purpose (cf. Morgenstern 2001, 69 f.).

Up to this point, the few books in publication intended for children tended to be rather didactic lessons in manners. Newbery's books, while still having a foundation in moral development and instruction, couched the lessons in amusing stories as morality tales. The lessons were extremely binary, black and white in their presentation of morality, something which deeply influenced many authors who were raised reading them—authors like G.K. Chesterton, to whom the *Good Omens* novel is dedicated: “The authors would like to join the demon Crowley in dedicating this book to the memory of G.K. Chesterton” (Pratchett/Gaiman 2019, Dedication).

Born in 1874 in London, Gilbert Keith Chesterton was a devout Christian who counted himself among various denominations throughout his life. As an infant, Chesterton was baptized in the Church of England, though raised as an “irregularly practising Unitarian” (Ker 2011, 13). He became fascinated with the occult, dabbling in things such as Ouija boards. After marrying Francis Blogg in 1901, Chesterton returned to the Anglican church. However, by 1922 Chesterton had fully converted and entered into full communion with the Catholic church.

Chesterton studied both literature and illustration, though he never completed a degree in either. However, with his experience and talent, Chesterton began a career in publishing and journalism. Over the course of his life, Chesterton wrote several plays, 80 books, several hundred poems, 200 short stories, and 4,000 essays. His work reflected that he was deeply Christian, and it contained a lot of religious themes and symbolism, which he used to write serious commentary on politics, economics, and philosophy (cf. Hetzler 1982, 72 ff.).

According to *Good Omens*' Crowley, Chesterton was the “only poet in the twentieth century to even come close to the Truth” (Pratchett/

Gaiman 2019, 265). This makes Chesterton's views on children's morality tales all the more significant. He once wrote:

“Many people have wondered why it is that children's stories are so full of moralising. The reason is perfectly simple: it is that children like moralising more than anything else, and eat it up as if it were so much jam. The reason why we, who are grown up, dislike moralising is equally clear: it is that we have discovered how much perversion and hypocrisy can be mixed with it; we have grown to dislike morality not because morality is moral, but because morality is so often immoral. But the child has never seen the virtues twisted into vices; the child does not know that men are not only bad from good motives, but also often good from bad motives. The child does not know that whereas the Jesuit may do evil that good may come, the man of the world often does good that evil may come.” (Chesterton 1906, 569)

In summary, we know that children's morality tales were supposed to teach important lessons about good and evil. We also know that later authors like Chesterton were aware of this genre and it influenced their writing (which in turn informs the *Good Omens* universe). By picking this framework for the minisode, the audience accompanies Aziraphale who learns, quite child-like himself, through a familiar framework, how little may relate to what is right, how complicated doing good can be. Therefore, the minisode lays out a strong case for the complete inadequacy of black and white world views—and not just religious ones.

Jewish faith and the right to question

While utilizing the framework of a Christian morality tale for “The Resurrectionists,” the minisode subverts the binary paradigm of good and evil found in these stories and introduces the concept of questioning over blind faith. The characters instead engage in *midrash*, an interpretive act important in the Jewish faith for seeking answers to

both practical and theological questions—in this case, what is the real nature of good and what does it mean to do evil? This is done by presenting characters who represent different types of ‘wickedness.’ As Rachel Barenblat explains:

“Through midrash we reveal Torah’s meanings. Midrash allows us to posit answers to our questions, to explore hidden motivations for mysterious moments in Torah, to offer explanation. Sometimes through midrash we temper Torah, rendering it more comprehensible to a contemporary audience or more in-tune with contemporary values. Midrash allows us to celebrate the loopholes and inconsistencies in Torah. They are not (only) accidents or signs of where the text was stitched together from disparate elements, but rather the hooks placed there by God precisely for the purpose of giving us something to work with.” (Barenblat 2011, 172)

The importance of questioning in the Jewish faith can be illustrated by the rituals associated with the Passover Seder. Passover itself is a seven-day affair, honoring the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. The Passover Seder is integral to Jewish faith and identity as a re-dedication to the idea of liberation, and it is also an important vehicle for the transmission of the Jewish faith from one person to another or one generation to the next. One key element is the Four Children in the *maggid* or ‘telling’ section of the Seder (cf. Plener Cover 2015, 561f.). The Four Children originated in four distinct passages in the Torah, which offer instruction on how to teach the story of Passover. Aliza Plener Cover (2015) notes that in Jewish scholarship, the four children may represent generations, developmental stages of understanding in an individual or even the varied understanding of individuals within a generation based on the individual’s personality, experience, knowledge, or belief. The labels given to these children, as well as their questions, were compiled from the Torah and other Jewish sources over time. Each child asks a different question, representing the various levels of understanding that community members may be

approaching this important celebration from—one wise, one wicked (or rebellious), one simple, and “one who does not know how to ask” (Plener Cover 2015, 558). The child who does not know how to ask must instead be taught to question. While curiosity may be seen as an innate human trait, the ability to intentionally investigate, to ask meaningful questions and then critically think about the answers, is more of a learned skill. Teaching children to embrace curiosity, and indeed to recognize where there is something to learn, is the first step. Alternatively, Jewish tradition says the child may have lost the ability to question, because it may have lost connection with the community (cf. Plener Cover 2015, 588 f.).

The simple child is learning to ask questions and is seeking to understand the very basics. In the case of Passover, this calls for straightforward, factual answers (cf. Plener Cover 2015, 570). The wicked child (cf. Plener Cover 2015, 577 f.), while appearing to challenge with their question, is looking for the personal relevance. This is important for two reasons—developmentally speaking, this is a critical milestone for children and how they view themselves in relation to the world. Understanding our role in a community begins when we first understand who we are as an individual. But it is also a reminder of the importance of community and how traditions and shared rituals have the power to connect us. Additionally, these challenges serve to evoke and illuminate justifications for traditions and even to reveal traditions that may have unjust consequences (cf. Plener Cover 2015, 578 f.).

The wise child (cf. Plener Cover 2015, 563 ff.) has a foundational understanding of themselves as an individual and their role in the community. What they are now exploring is the nuance, the specific meaning of the laws governing observances. This is about deep reflection on faith.

Throughout this Edinburgh journey, the demon Crowley—who fell from Grace because of persistent questioning—tendentiously guides Aziraphale in questioning his own notions about good and evil. The minisode also brings in the Jewish concepts of ‘wickedness.’ As is common in translations from Hebrew texts, nuance can be lost. One exam-

ple is that different types of ‘wickedness’ are discussed in the Hebrew Bible—*pesha*, *avah*, *khata*, and *resha*—which are largely translated into contemporary Christian texts simply as ‘sin’ (cf. Morford 2003, 406). But they have different meanings and relate to different fallible actions. In “The Resurrectionists,” the grave robber Elspeth, the surgeon Mr. Dalrymple, and Aziraphale himself demonstrate three types of wickedness.

Elspeth, a woman in poverty, displays *avah* or *iniquity*, to bend or distort what is good. Stories about *avah* are often concerned with people acting in their own self-interest (cf. Morford 2003, 406). While the intention is not to harm others, they are not primarily concerned about the effects of their actions on other people either. In the case of Elspeth, her motivations are to ensure the survival of herself and her partner Wee Morag, leading her to body-snatching to earn money.

The surgeon, Mr. Dalrymple, illustrates *pesha* or *transgression*, to cross a boundary. In the Hebrew Bible, *Pesha* is associated with choices to mistreat or ignore the vulnerable, including justifying the mistreatment of some in the name of the greater good (cf. Morford 2003, 406). As a surgeon teaching students through dissection, Dalrymple wants to alleviate human suffering but shifts liability for the body-snatching to those in poverty and treats them cruelly in the process.

The angel Aziraphale demonstrates *khata* or *to fail*, to miss the goal. In general terms, every human is created in the image of God and a sacred being worthy of respect. When we fail to treat others with basic dignity, we fall short—often with no intention of causing harm but still doing so (cf. Morford 2003, 406). Aziraphale’s knee-jerk reaction to evaluate individuals as good or evil, therefore misses the goal because he fails to recognize their innate dignity.

It is interesting that no character in the minisode displays *resha*, an act that is committed with full wicked intention (cf. Morford 2003, 406). As the minisode is told from Aziraphale’s perspective, we may assume that the demon Crowley serves by definition as the *resha* in this setup. However, Crowley’s role is switched to that of a teacher and moral compass for Aziraphale. Moreover, choosing to tell this tale through the historic lens of 1820s Edinburgh adds a context of pop-cultural

awareness of the historical crimes by Burke and Hare that helps frame this moral tale. By having a couple engaged in body-snatching—the more common type, those taking corpses and not making them—the characters of Elspeth and Wee Morag are playing off the basic awareness the audience may have of the infamous Burke and Hare. It encourages the audience to have an initial reaction to Elspeth much like Aziraphale has, which leads to reading her initially as someone capable of *resha*.

Key elements of storytelling in “The Resurrectionists”

The tale of Crowley and Aziraphale’s time in Edinburgh is told as a historical flashback that is interwoven with related events taking place in the current era. As we see have seen by recapitulating the short history of the 1820s, it was a turbulent decade, rife with ethical and moral debates, which make it an ideal setting for this minisode. “The Resurrectionists” opens with Aziraphale relating the story in a journal entry, letting us know upfront that this version is the angel’s memory and perhaps not a strict retelling of facts. Additionally, there is an interplay between the flashback and the present-day story taking place with Aziraphale’s investigation of the mysterious jukebox in Edinburgh that turns every song in Buddy Holly’s “Everyday” (1957). While Aziraphale in 1827 needed to be taught to question, Aziraphale in the present is doing more than making simple inquiries (“Give me the facts” [S2E3], he asks the bartender in the present-day Resurrectionist Pub). His choice to actively investigate shows how far he has come.

Walk this way, talk this way

Two complementary narrative tools—Crowley’s accent and the arrangement of Aziraphale in relation to Crowley in the frame—hold significance in the minisode regarding the act of questioning and moral learning. Throughout the minisode, Crowley switches between his

standard English accent and a comically non-specific Scottish accent. He also swaps sides with Aziraphale on screen. These choices are not random but, in fact, are a visual and audio cue to the audience.

The arrangement of the couple in the frame was well-established in season 1. In most instances where Aziraphale and Crowley are situated side by side, Aziraphale is on the right and Crowley on the left, a nod to common conceptions of right being good and left being evil. This dichotomy is common to many cultures and manifests in the Bible as “the tendency to connect the right side to the law, order and justice, and the left side to the unpredictable, chaos and divination” (Fabbro/Fabbro/Crescentini 2018, 5). This symbolism is leveraged in *Good Omens*, meaning that those instances where the two characters swap sides hold meaning. Notably, side swapping occurs in the first series of historical flashbacks in “Hard Times” (S1E3), occurring frequently in the scenes at the Globe Theatre and the Bastille as the two discuss their relationship. This pattern is extremely prevalent in “The Resurrectionists.”

Likewise, Crowley and Aziraphale affect different accents in season 1. Both adopt different appearances and mannerisms while employed with the Dowlings as Nanny Ashtoreth and Brother Francis. However, in “The Resurrectionists,” Crowley has a curious habit of switching between two accents throughout the episode, which indicates two different roles within the narrative. Crowley’s Scottish lines refer to the demon Crowley who moves the plot of the story along, whereas the standard English accent is used when Crowley serves as a moral guide leading Aziraphale.

The child who does not know how to ask
must be taught to question

We open in the graveyard, with Aziraphale and Crowley in their standard positions in the frame, observing the statue of Gabriel. Then they notice Elspeth digging up a corpse. When Aziraphale approaches Elspeth to inform her that her actions are Not Good, he ends up swapping with Crowley and finds himself on the left because what he is doing—

making moral judgments on Elspeth's actions with no understanding of what led her there—is doing Good, not good.

Crowley, however, volunteers to help Elspeth cart the corpse away from the graveyard. During their journey, the trio debates all the other ways Elspeth could make money. Aziraphale suggests running a bookshop, farming, and—in reference to industrialization and the handloomers of this particular period—weaving. The last occupation is the most telling, since at this point in history, handweaving was already a dying profession. Through this debate, Aziraphale remains on the left—after all, those supposed options are completely unrealistic, unobtainable professions for someone in Elspeth's socioeconomic position. Aziraphale only finds himself back on the right side when he and Crowley are introduced to Wee Morag, and he takes some time to listen and observe the reality of their situation.

Leaving Wee Morag behind, the trio begins the second half of their journey where Aziraphale is again on the left as he waxes poetic about the virtues of poverty—doing Good, not good again. Here, Crowley asks the first question of Aziraphale, inviting the angel to be curious and question assumptions and biases he holds:

AZIRAPHALE: “There is a stolen body in that barrel! This is wicked!

CROWLEY: “Oh, I'm down with wicked! Anyway, is it wicked? She needed the money.”

AZIRAPHALE: “That is irrelevant. Look, I am good. You, I'm afraid, are evil. But people get a choice. You know, they cannot be truly holy unless they also get the opportunity to be wicked. She is wicked.”

CROWLEY: “Yeah, that only works if you start everyone off equal. You can't start someone off like that and expect her to do as well as someone born in a castle.”

AZIRAPHALE: “Ah, but no, no. That's the good bit. The lower you start, the more opportunities you have. So Elspeth here has all the opportunities because she's so poor.”

CROWLEY: “That's lunacy.”

AZIRAPHALE: “No, that's ineffable.” (S2E3)

The simple child must be given the facts

Upon reaching the lodging of Mr. Dalrymple, Crowley and Aziraphale take their standard places, Aziraphale on the right and Crowley on the left. When they open the barrel to find the rotted corpse (Aziraphale used a miracle to make the corpse unusable for dissection), the look on Crowley's face is one of extreme disappointment. He often finds Aziraphale's machinations amusing even when they are annoying, but while Aziraphale might have done Good by rendering the body unsellable, what good did it do? The body is still un-interred. Elspeth has wasted her energy and has made a terrible first impression to the surgeon whom she desperately needs to pay her for her services.

With Elspeth's departure, the angel and demon join the surgeon for a drink to discuss his work, and Crowley asks Aziraphale his second question. This is a straightforward question, one inviting Aziraphale to consider the basic facts of the situation:

CROWLEY: [picks up a jar] "Well, in my professional opinion, that seems to be ... I say that seems to me a ... um ... well, what do you think?"

AZIRAPHALE: "[takes the jar] Well, that's a foot. So it's definitely not a foot."

DALRYMPLE: "That's my point. If you two smart gentlemen can't identify it, then what are my students to make of it? I removed this tumor from a seven-year-old boy."

AZIRAPHALE: "Oh. Oh dear. And ... Is he ...?"

DALRYMPLE: "And that is why we need a steady supply of cadavers. We need to cut. If we can't cut, we can't learn. If we can't learn more, a lot more, then how on earth are we going to win the battle against monstrosities like this one? I'm just trying to save lives and teach students. I either end up with a knighthood or condemned as a resurrectionist and hanging from a rope." (S2E3)

Crowley's question here serves to illuminate the consequences of body-snatching and dissection for society and the individuals living within the society. Further, the question reveals the laws and the religious beliefs about resurrection—both legal and philosophical—which underpins the possibility of legal consequences for unintended victims.

The wicked child must be made to consider others

After the discussion with Mr. Dalrymple, in which Aziraphale realizes the importance of dissections for educating medical students and thus leading to better care for the living, he makes a leap of logic. Body-snatching serves the ultimate good, which makes it a Good activity. He decides to offer to help Elspeth and Wee Morag obtain another corpse and even coerces Wee Morag into joining them. Aziraphale is again on the wrong side, standing left of Crowley as he makes his offer, as he fails to consider the potential implications for Elspeth and Wee Morag.

First, there is the discomfort of Wee Morag, who is deeply conflicted about the morality of body-snatching. At the very least, Aziraphale could have explained that her core fears—that participating in dissection will prevent you from entering Heaven—are unfounded instead of just pressuring her into participating. Second, there is the danger inherent in going into the graveyard, which is guarded and features grave guns and other contraptions that present immediate physical danger to would-be body-snatchers. Third, there are the possible repercussions of being caught—likely to be imprisoned and put to death for the crime of grave robbing.

Back at the graveyard, Aziraphale spends basically the entire sequence on the left. First, he notices the ingenuity of the grave guns but fails to acknowledge the travesty of their purpose. Crowley asks his third question, challenging Aziraphale to consider the wider implications of a system that values wealthy corpses over the living poor:

CROWLEY: “So the rich can afford all these gubbins to protect their rellies from being dug up, and the poor just have to lump it? You’re okay with that, yeah?”

WEE MORAG: “You alright down there, hen?”

ELSPETH: “Yeah. Almost there, Morag. It’s nice, fresh earth. Easy to dig. [Elspeth opens the coffin to find the corpse of a priest, causing Wee Morag to scream and stumble back, tripping the grave gun which then shoots her].” (S2E3)

The wise child will seek to understand

After Wee Morag is shot, Aziraphale wastes time justifying saving her, resulting in her dying before he can act. And after all this, after the heartbreak of seeing her partner die, we see Elspeth come to a logical conclusion. If body-snatching is Good, then might as well take Wee Morag off to Mr. Dalrymple, right?

CROWLEY: “Well, I could be wrong, but I think Elspeth’s taking Wee Morag to Mr. Dalrymple.”

AZIRAPHALE: “But ...”

ELSPETH: “But what? I should let her rot in the ground while I starve? Is that what you’d have me do, Mr. McFell? Because it is certainly not what Wee Morag would want.”

AZIRAPHALE: “Well no. No, of course not. I just ... I ...”

CROWLEY: It’s a bit different when it’s someone you know, isn’t it?”
(S2E3)

When Elspeth gets Wee Morag’s body to Mr. Dalrymple, Aziraphale is illustrating the dangers of black-and-white morality through religion, whereas Dalrymple is showing that black-and-white morality through science is just as bad. Dalrymple has an unshakable belief in the power of science and knowledge to alleviate human suffering and sees his work as Good. He cares about preventing illness, but ignores his role

in perpetuating poverty—an unfortunate side effect of rigid belief systems of all shapes and sizes. He is downright cruel to Elspeth.

Conclusion

What makes the “The Resurrectionists” minisode so powerful is the use of well-known story frameworks and historical references to evoke common tropes and then turn these tropes on their head. Opening the story with a grave robbery in 1820s Edinburgh gives the immediate clue that Elspeth is evil. However, we are promptly asked to empathize with her plight. This pattern is repeated with characters demonstrating an alternation between good and evil actions, demonstrating the more nuanced concepts of Jewish ‘wickedness’ that conceptualizes good and evil not as intrinsic states of being but as actions which should be carefully considered and can be learned from. Industrialization and medical research, both progressive movements within society, create conflicts between the individual impacted by the change and the future good of other individuals. A simplistic choice may create undesirable consequences for either or both individuals. Crowley imparts this knowledge to Aziraphale by carefully questioning the assumptions and choices exhibited by Aziraphale throughout the minisode. Outside that minisode, we see Aziraphale launching his own investigation—the asking of questions—a sign that he has absorbed at least a part of the lesson that Crowley was presenting.

As a stand-alone story, “The Resurrectionists” presents a moral argument for questioning as a critical component of doing good instead of a prescriptive notion of being Good. As a complementary narrative within the whole episode “I Know Where I’m Going” (S2E3), in which Aziraphale takes the initiative to investigate, it demonstrates both the importance of questioning and the need for critical compassion over dogmatic judgement that is at the heart of the *Good Omens* narrative.

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**STARDOM /
FANDOM /
COMMUNITY**

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Infinite Variety

Shakespeare, His Works, and the Globe in *Good Omens* Fan Fiction

Kara Cremonese

William Shakespeare has a presence in popular culture not only as one of the most influential writers in the English language but also as a fictionalized version of himself across media. As Shakespeare's works are adapted and performed over and over again, so too is the Bard. Many versions of Shakespeare exist in the minds of the audience, and these many Shakespeares coalesce into a folk character in popular culture that may or may not resemble the historical figure but is nonetheless compelling. Shakespeare's works have their own fan spaces and fan fiction in addition to commercial adaptations, but Shakespeare also continues to be adapted in other unrelated works and their fandoms. This chapter explores the use of Shakespeare and his plays as a character and plot point in *Good Omens* fan works specifically. Fans of the *Good Omens* television adaptation have drawn upon a brief season 1 flashback and on Shakespeare as a folk character, the Globe setting, and his works in general to further explore the relationship between Crowley and Aziraphale in their fan fiction. This chapter analyzes these intertextual fan works and draws upon recent scholarship in both fan studies and Shakespeare studies to explore literary trends in the *Good Omens* fan community. Examining the trends in one fandom can reveal broader implications for how Shakespeare (as a popular character) and his works (as part of the literary canon) are perceived and used by the layman rather than the academic.

Introduction

William Shakespeare has a presence in popular culture not only as one of the most influential writers in the English language but also as a fictionalized character across media. As Shakespeare's works are adapted and performed over and over again, so is the Bard. Although historians know scant details about his life, many versions of Shakespeare exist in the minds of the audience. These many Shakespeares coalesce into a folk character in popular culture that may or may not resemble the historical figure but is nonetheless compelling. For instance, Shakespeare shows up in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), which does not pretend to be historically accurate (cf. Menon 2008, 115 ff.), and in *Doctor Who* (2005–), which pokes fun both at his much-debated sexual orientation and the identity of the Dark Lady (cf. *Doctor Who*, S3E2). In fan spaces, often as a way to legitimize fan fiction as worthwhile literature, Shakespeare is routinely compared to a fan fiction writer—what Henry Jenkins would call a “textual poacher” (Jenkins 2013, 24). This comparison follows from the fact that Shakespeare created new stories from known works. Now Shakespeare's works have their own fan spaces and fan fiction in addition to commercial adaptations, but Shakespeare also continues to be adapted in other unrelated (or semi-related) works and their fandoms. This chapter explores the use of Shakespeare and his plays, characters, and plot points in *Good Omens* and within the context of related fan works specifically. I argue that writers, both professional and amateur, can easily borrow from the archive of well-known literary figures and their works; fan writers, with only a little prompting from the canon, use versions of Shakespeare and references to his work in order to explore the plot and characterization of the *Good Omens* characters more deeply.

The third episode of the first season of *Good Omens*, “Hard Times,” features a flashback sequence chronicling the demon Crowley and the angel Aziraphale's relationship over the course of 6,000 years. The different parts of this sequence were newly written for the TV series to flesh out the characters and to show how they interact with the

world and with one another throughout history. One of these historical scenes takes place in a nearly empty Globe Theatre during an early performance of *Hamlet* (1623) and features Shakespeare himself as a character.

Good Omens fans have drawn upon this scene and on Shakespeare's character, the Globe setting, and his works in general to further explore the relationship between Crowley and Aziraphale in their fan fiction. This chapter analyzes a selection of these fan works and draws upon scholarship in both fan studies and Shakespeare studies to explore literary trends in the *Good Omens* fan community. Examining the trends in a specific fandom can reveal broader implications for how Shakespeare (as a popular character) and his works (as part of the literary canon) are perceived and used in popular culture.

Michelle K. Yost writes in "Stratford-Upon-Web: Shakespeare in Twenty-First-Century Fanfiction" (2017):

"Broadly speaking, Shakespearean fanfiction takes three basic forms: William Shakespeare as a character in the fiction (placed in both historical and anachronistic settings), Shakespeare's works as inspiration (for parody, reinterpretation, modernisation, etc.), and Shakespeare as incidental (an object in the fiction rather than subject)." (Yost 2017, 195)

We see in Yost's categories the ways Shakespeare fans are using Shakespeare, and we see strokes of the same categories outside the Shakespeare fandom as well—as in the analyses below—when he and his work are not the main focus, but rather a component, of the transformative literature. In the first section, I discuss Shakespeare as a folk character both in the *Good Omens* TV adaptation and in related fan fiction based in the Elizabethan period. In the second section, fan works that have drawn inspiration from or adapted Shakespeare's poetry and plays, particularly the operability of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) as a narrative device, will be analyzed. And in the third section, *Good Omens* fan works that use the Globe Theatre as a significant setting in any time period will be discussed.

The fan works discussed below were selected via autoethnography (cf. Ellis/Adams/Bochner 2011, 264; Hills 2021, 143 f.). The TV adaptation had injected additional content (and new fans) into a 29-year-old fandom. Many of the works analyzed here were written shortly after the first season premiered in 2019 as fans began to engage deeply with the details of the adaptation. When I began drafting what would become this chapter, in 2020, I had already noticed a trend within the *Good Omens* fandom of fan writers and fan artists expanding on the flashback scenes from “Hard Times” in their works. As such, several works discussed here were written by fan writers I already followed on Archive of Our Own (AO3) or the microblogging site Tumblr or whose work was recommended to me by other fans. In other words, these authors, among many others, were using Shakespeare as a character or the Globe as a setting often enough that it was noticeable before I ever started seeking out fan works that included these elements. To collect additional fan works for discussion and analysis, I did a search for fan works on AO3, the largest fan fiction archive online, for works in the ‘Good Omens (TV)’ fandom, tagged with terms related to Shakespeare and the episode “Hard Times,” including the additional tags suggested by the site, meaning multiple users had tagged their works with them.¹ These terms included: the character tags ‘William Shakespeare’ or ‘Shakespeare’ and the additional tags ‘References to Shakespeare,’ ‘Romeo and Juliet References,’ and ‘References to Hamlet.’ These tag searches, while useful, provided limited results as tagging on AO3 is subjective and depends in most cases on what the fan writer thinks is an important element of the story. Oblique or even major references to Shakespeare may not be the sole focus of a specific story or the author may not have felt the need to tag them.

1 On Feb. 19, 2025, there were a total of 77,556 fan fictions categorized as ‘Good Omens (TV)’ on AO3; refining the search for the character tag ‘William Shakespeare’ had 101 results and 27 for ‘Shakespeare’; further, 309 fan fictions were tagged with ‘References to Shakespeare’, 35 with ‘Romeo and Juliet References’, and 46 with ‘References to Hamlet – Shakespeare.’

The selected fan works in this chapter, therefore, are necessarily a subjective snapshot of one scholar-fan's experience of the fandom, but the works are illustrative not only of broader fandom trends but also give insight to the ways fan writers engage with canon, with history, and with other literary works in their transformative writing.

Shakespeare as folk character

The *Good Omens* episode "Hard Times" (S1E3) features a cold open that spans half the length of the episode, about thirty minutes. The flashback sequence contained within this half-hour takes a break from the ongoing plot to chronicle the development of Aziraphale and Crowley's relationship with each other over the course of about 6,000 years, lingering on several selected significant moments in time. Although the scene that takes place in the Globe Theatre in 1601 occurs more than 5,500 years into their acquaintance, it stands both at the approximate midpoint of the nine scenes the two share in the cold open and near an emotional turning point in their relationship. During a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, David Tennant's Crowley enters the theater to meet Aziraphale. Michael Sheen's Aziraphale smiles at Crowley's arrival but then schools his features into a more neutral expression before Crowley can notice. This is the first time in the flashback sequence that the audience sees Crowley and Aziraphale meet at a prearranged time and location. Through their conversation, the audience learns they have formed a clandestine professional Arrangement to share their workload even though they would be in danger if their employers, Heaven and Hell, found out. Their words and actions throughout the scene demonstrate their concern for each other's well-being beyond the professional.

Shakespeare stops the play taking place onstage and interrupts Aziraphale and Crowley's conversation to ask them to give the actors more to work with in their "role as the audience." Richard Burbage, onstage as Hamlet, complains it is a waste of time. Aziraphale encourages Burbage, and as the actor picks up with, "To be or not to be . . .,"

the angel says to Crowley, “He’s very good, isn’t he?” Crowley responds, “Age does not wither nor custom stale his infinite variety.” Shakespeare, hearing this, says, “Hmm. Yeah, I like that,” and pulls out a piece of paper to surreptitiously write it down. The dedicated Shakespeare aficionado might recall this famous line from Shakespeare’s play *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607).

As the angel and demon conclude their professional business, they overhear Shakespeare complain to the oyster woman, Juliet, that “it would take a miracle for anyone to come see *Hamlet*.” Aziraphale looks imploringly at Crowley, who sighs and says, “Yes, all right. I’ll do that one. My treat” (S1E3).

This scene, lasting just under four minutes, is packed with references recognizable as obviously Shakespearean even to a non-Shakespearean audience. Anyone who ever passed within three feet of a literature textbook could identify *Juliet*, *Burbage*, *Hamlet*, and “*To be or not to be*,” not to mention the famed Globe and the Bard himself, complete with gold earring as in the *Chandos portrait* (attributed to John Taylor, 1600–1610). The fact that Shakespeare steals Crowley’s phrase for *Antony and Cleopatra*—and that the woman employed to sell oysters and oranges to the crowd is named Juliet—plays into the popular notion of Shakespeare as poacher (cf. Greenblatt 2004, 13; Martindale/Taylor 2004, 1f.). In positive terms, Shakespeare’s role as a “textual poacher” (Jenkins 2013, 24) can be linked to Abigail Derecho’s (2006) reflections on archontic literature. In “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction,” she writes:

“[A]ll texts that build on a previously existing text are not lesser than the source text, and they do not violate the boundaries of the source text; rather, they only add to that text’s archive, becoming a part of the archive and expanding it. An archontic text allows, or even invites, writers to enter it, select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects, and deposit the newly made work back into the source text’s archive.” (Derecho 2006, 64)

Drawing on Julia Kristeva's and Roland Barthes's concepts of intertextuality and borrowing language from Jacques Derrida, Derecho asserts that all texts, not only fan works, are archontic because every text builds on what has come before (cf. Derecho 2006, 65). Shakespeare, the Globe, and his works are an easily accessible archive for English-speaking writers because Shakespeare is so prominently featured in secondary English education. And Shakespeare is no exception to archontic writing, as he notably reworks historical figures and ancient stories for his plays. This is highlighted with the joke about Shakespeare stealing Crowley's line, but *Good Omens* is also participating in archontic writership, and not only by placing Aziraphale and Crowley within major historical events throughout the "Hard Times" cold open. The entire original novel uses Biblical texts and apocalyptic literature that came before it to retell these stories in a new way.

Fan writers, of course, also participate as archontic writers to extend and rework—or even, in the case of alternate universe fan fiction, re-imagine entirely—the plots and characters from other media. Deborah Kaplan, in "Construction of Fan Fiction Character Through Narrative" (2006), explains, "Rewriting characters for a work of fan fiction is an interpretive act [...] in which the text offers one possible understanding of characterization. The work both contributes to and draws from the community's collective understanding of character" (Kaplan 2006, 136).

As Yost writes, "Although deceased for four hundred years, Shakespeare's celebrity and iconography are the fuel of fannish imagination, remaking him into their own folk hero" (Yost 2017, 200) who can be remade and reinterpreted through fiction. This thriving community activity is further emphasized by the large number of academic works dedicated to Shakespeare fan fiction and adaptation.

Two *Good Omens* fan writers who use their transformative writing as an interpretation not only of Aziraphale and Crowley's relationship but also of Shakespeare as a folk character are CopperBeech and bambabam. CopperBeech's chaptered work, *That You May Be Without a Mate Until You Find Me* (2020), follows Aziraphale and Crowley

through history and beyond the averted apocalypse of the original canon. Most chapters chronologically follow the events of each scene in the “Hard Times” cold open, often serving as an extension of the plot or building on the emotional tension between Aziraphale and Crowley as their relationship develops. CopperBeech’s story is canon-compliant, with each scene slotting neatly into the events in the first season without infringing on its plot as the author builds a parallel narrative. Chapter Five, “Nothing Like The Sun”—the chapter title and later dialogue is a reference to *Sonnet 130* (1609)—takes place after the Globe scene in 1601 and is predicated on the assumption that Aziraphale and Shakespeare were previously acquainted.

CopperBeech shows Aziraphale and Crowley drinking with Shakespeare and Kit Marlowe in the Mermaid Tavern (cf. CopperBeech 2020), legendary watering hole for Shakespeare and his Elizabethan contemporaries (cf. Shapiro 1950, 6). Shakespeare announces that all writers must be able to read people well in order to produce good work. He says he has been accused of sorcery, implying he thinks he is very good at it (cf. CopperBeech 2020). Although Aziraphale had denied being friends with or even knowing Crowley before their meeting in the theater (cf. StE3), Shakespeare announces the pair have been lovers in the past and predicts they will be again. (In this particular narrative, he is not wrong.) Marlowe interrupts to flirt with Crowley on his way to hit on an actor nearby.

Although Aziraphale demurs, Shakespeare points out how they speak to each other, act around each other, and smile when the other is not looking. He says, “I could model characters on you, and everyone would know who’d be married at the end of the play. [...] I know all the tells” (CopperBeech 2020). He even offers to write a commissioned sonnet for Aziraphale to win Crowley back. They are distracted from the conversation when Marlowe drunkenly recites poetry to the actor before passing out, and Shakespeare says he will steal those lines because Marlowe will not remember them when he is sober (cf. CopperBeech 2020).

CopperBeech knows enough about Shakespeare and his contemporaries to make references to the Mermaid as well as to Christopher

Marlowe's nickname, alleged propensity for drink—perhaps an allusion to the “tavern brawl” (Levin 1952, 4) that killed him—and homosexuality. While CopperBeech does not address Shakespeare's sexuality, the character is supportive of a romantic or sexual relationship between what he believes to be two men. CopperBeech is clearly aware of at least the popular ideas associated with Shakespeare, and the author is knowledgeable enough to have Marlowe there to flirt with Crowley, a demon, as a reference to the former's *Doctor Faustus* (1592), who makes a deal with the devil (despite the fact that the real Christopher Marlowe would have been dead eight years by 1601) (cf. CopperBeech 2020).

In *That You May Be Without a Mate Until You Find Me*, Shakespeare (and those associated with him) is used as a folk character, using whatever details fit to drive the narrative forward. Yost writes, “In a lot of fanfiction, Shakespeare is an object in the plot hovering on the periphery, a tool for telling the kind of story the fan writer wants to tell. Neither Shakespeare himself nor his characters are part of the cast” (Yost 2017, 206). And although Shakespeare is a prominent character in this scene, he has little to do with the overall plot and serves more as a device to force Aziraphale and Crowley to confront their feelings for each other.

Another *Good Omens* fan writer who uses Shakespeare as a folk character in this way is bambabam, whose short work, *How NOT to be discreet* (2019), features six small episodes in the popular ‘5 + 1’ format (cf. Neugarten 2024): in this case, five times someone assumed Aziraphale and Crowley were a couple and one time they actually were. The first scene takes place during the Globe scene in “Hard Times” but is written from Shakespeare's perspective. He watches Burbage call Crowley Aziraphale's friend and finds the angel's denial of them even knowing each other utterly unconvincing. The pair captures Shakespeare's attention, and he notes that their body language and expressions scream “*affection* and *adoration* for each other” (bambabam 2019), but he also knows there is something keeping them apart. Like CopperBeech's Shakespeare, this version of the Bard seems unfazed by his own assumption that the pair is homosexual and he is astute enough to

understand there seems to be some other barrier to their relationship (cf. bambabam 2019).

The leap from Crowley and Aziraphale to *Romeo and Juliet* is obvious here, and bambabam and other fan writers can be forgiven for taking it. The author either does not know or disregards the real-life writing and performance dates for *Romeo and Juliet*, half a decade prior to *Hamlet*, and bambabam's folk Shakespeare later uses Crowley and Aziraphale as inspiration for the doomed lovers who harbor forbidden love for each other (cf. bambabam 2019).

Good Omens, *That You May Be Without a Mate Until You Find Me*, and *How NOT to be discreet* all adapt a folk Shakespeare to suit their narratives, selecting whichever details—whether historically accurate or not—will push their plot forward most effectively. In these fictions, Shakespeare as a folk character is perceived as a great observer of humanity who draws inspiration from the world around him and is unashamed of stealing phrases from and basing characters on people he knows. But Shakespeare, despite his prominence in the scenes described, is not the focus here.

Shakespeare's works as narrative device

Fan fiction writers routinely draw upon not only the canon plot and characters of the fandom within which they are writing, but they borrow freely from the archives of many other texts as well. Considering Shakespeare's place in the Western literary canon, it is intuitive that his plays and poetry should be put to work as a narrative device in otherwise unrelated fandoms. *Good Omens* fan writers, armed with both the "Hard Times" Globe scene and two characters who may love one another when they should be enemies, often take the opportunity to quote prodigiously from Shakespeare. Well known lines from his most famous plays can help a writer convey the mood or the plot of their writing based on shared cultural knowledge of Shakespeare's works.

Fan author Waywarder, for example, uses some of the most well-known lines from *Romeo and Juliet* to help Aziraphale and Crowley find an excuse for intimacy in the short story *if i profane* (2020). As Yost explains, “The study or production of Shakespeare in amateur fiction can be the *raison d’être* for the plot and can be a MacGuffin requiring no profound explanation for its presence in the narrative” (Yost 2017, 208). Waywarder takes advantage of this trope. In *if i profane*, Aziraphale and Crowley are drinking and arguing together in 1595 London. Aziraphale claims *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare’s latest, is romantic, while Crowley thinks it is nonsense—two stupid teenagers making bad decisions—until Aziraphale says, “You really don’t think there’s anything romantic about two beings choosing to defy everything they’ve ever known ... their families, their homes, their loyalties ... for one another?” (cf. Waywarder 2020). Crowley understands then that Aziraphale’s fondness of the play is because he sees the two of them in the characters.

After a tense moment, Aziraphale changes the subject, saying he would like to be in a play sometime, and this gives Crowley the idea for a loophole in their relationship. He approaches Aziraphale and speaks Romeo’s first lines to Juliet:

“*If I profane with my unworthing hand,*’ His voice was not his own. No, he spoke now with an over dramatic affectation to mask the sincerity boiling in his blood.

The words tripped off his tongue so easily.

Fuck.

‘*This holy shrine,*’ Crowley reached out, and grasped Aziraphale’s hand, wringing a surprised gasp out of the angel. ‘*The gentle fine is this: My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.*’

And then, doing everything in his actual demonic power to not drop any of his pretense, he lowered his lips to Aziraphale’s hand, and kissed it softly.” (Waywarder 2020)

Aziraphale initially questions Crowley, but Crowley, true to character, helps Aziraphale find a way to justify doing something he wants to do but thinks he is not allowed to do. We see evidence of this in “In the Beginning” (S1E1) when Crowley talks Aziraphale into helping him influence the Antichrist by framing it as thwarting Crowley’s demonic influence, and in “The Clue” (S2E2) when Crowley introduces Aziraphale to human food. In *if i profane*, Crowley says, “Aziraphale, we’re just acting... We’re *acting*, so it’s okay” (Waywarder 2020). Aziraphale gives in then, taking up Juliet’s lines, holding his palm to Crowley’s until they kiss on the lips for the first time. The pair drop the pretense after this, kissing through the night until, like Romeo and Juliet, they are interrupted by birdsong at dawn and must separate.

Other authors, while they evoke the doomed lovers in *Romeo and Juliet* through the lines of the play, may choose to give the angel and demon a post-canon happy ending. The short piece *Through Yonder Window* (2020) by fan author fits_in_frames works as a character study of Aziraphale, who, being an angel, does not need to sleep and therefore has never considered mornings significant: that is, until the first night he spends in a cottage with Crowley once they have moved in together after the events of the canon plot of season 1. Crowley, who does not need sleep but likes it, wakes next to Aziraphale in the morning and quotes Romeo:

“*But soft,*’ he murmurs, *‘what light through yonder window breaks?’*”

“And I always thought *I* was Romeo,” Aziraphale says.

Crowley shakes his head as best he can while still lying down. “Absolutely not.” He shifts, touches his forehead to Aziraphale’s side. “I mean, if anything, we’re Gregory and Balthasar.”

“The servants?” Aziraphale says, equal parts confused and amused.

“Don’t they get into a fight in the very first scene of the play?”

“Yeah, well,” Crowley says, and snuggles down into the duvet a little further. “Nobody’s perfect.” (fits_in_frames 2020)

The author here not only makes a reference to the famous balcony scene, placing Crowley and Aziraphale in the starring roles when it comes to romance, but Crowley's allusion to the minor characters Gregory and Balthasar is perhaps a humorous reference to the overall influence Crowley and Aziraphale actually had on the plot of *Good Omens* in the canon, in which they did very little to avert the apocalypse beyond providing moral support for the antichrist in the end (cf. SIE6). By recontextualizing Gregory and Balthasar through romanticizing their quarrels, *fits_in_frames* provides the readers not only with a queer reading of *Good Omens* but in addition with a queer reading of Shakespeare's text via the interpretation voiced by Crowley.

Romeo and Juliet serves as a common framework in fan fiction for exploring romantic connections between characters beyond the play's original focus, likely due to its status as Shakespeare's most popular and adapted work in fannish writings (cf. Yost 2017, 208). Fan fiction writers borrow from Shakespeare's rich archive of texts, well known in popular culture, to convey meaning about stories and characters in other media.

The Globe as setting

Beyond Shakespeare as a character and Shakespeare's plays as narrative devices, amateur and professional authors alike put Shakespeare's most famous theater to work in their transformative writing. In the case of "Hard Times," the opportunity to film a scene in the actual Globe Theatre—replica of the original building and contemporary tourist hotspot—came with a caveat. Showrunner and author Gaiman revealed in interviews that the 1601 Globe Theatre scene as originally written was populated by a crowd of Elizabethans packed in to see *Hamlet* while Crowley and Aziraphale blended in for their clandestine meeting. Real-life time constraints for the theater's availability meant the production crew would never be able to costume and direct so many extras in the time allotted, so the scene was reworked and most

of the extras were written out (cf. Baysinger 2019), leaving Crowley and Aziraphale in a far more intimate setting both as the audience and with each other.

This intimacy lends itself to the emotional turning point depicted in this scene. Crowley and Aziraphale have established a professional relationship, but Crowley's volunteering to perform a miracle to bless *Hamlet* and make it a success is purely for Aziraphale's benefit. Crowley, who does not enjoy Shakespeare's 'gloomy' plays, acts only on a look from Aziraphale and with no expectation of a return (cf. S1E3). *Good Omens* fan writers often interpret *Hamlet's* great and enduring success as one of Shakespeare's most famous and most beloved plays not as the result of a genius playwright but as Crowley going overboard with his miracle to make the angel happy.

Fan writers often press the Globe into service as a setting in order to explore the growing intimacy and emotional attachment between Crowley and Aziraphale—and Aziraphale's crumbling determination to keep distance between them—in their fan fiction. Like Shakespeare as a folk character built from popular ideas associated with the real person, the Globe becomes a sort of shorthand for Elizabethan times in general as well as the "Hard Times" scene in particular. To use the Globe as a setting does not require architectural or historical knowledge of the playhouse beyond the basics, but fan writers can still draw on the building as an element integral to their explorations of emotional growth between characters.

One such fan writer is racketghost, who sets a short, untitled piece (here referred to by its first line *He's here* [2020]) in the Globe Theatre during a production of *Hamlet* shortly after Crowley has made it a success. Aziraphale is in the crowd as a thunderstorm gathers overhead, visible through the open roof, casting the actors into shadow. Aziraphale knows Crowley is in the theater somewhere. As raindrops begin to fall, Aziraphale travels farther into the building, blending into the shadows and seeking Crowley:

“There is a ghost on the stage and another one somewhere else, in the galleries perhaps, circling him.

The oak timbers swell, they give up their heat. The smell of the roof thatching pillows around him, through the narrow chambers nearest the stage. He walks. He can feel his pulse in his fingertips, in the hinges of his joints. And if he closes his eyes tight enough he can hear him, hear Crowley saying *funny running into you here*. As if they both don’t orchestrate it to happen.” (racketghost 2020)

Here racketghost uses the theater itself—and Aziraphale’s journey through it—to build the tension in the scene. The smells and shadows and tight corridors press in on Aziraphale, and as the ghost on-stage speaks, “somewhere below him on those oak timbers,” Aziraphale blends into the shadows, ghostlike, and almost becomes a part of the theater (cf. racketghost 2020).

When Crowley arrives, dressed in black as usual, racketghost describes him as a part of the dark, moving with the shadows like Aziraphale, who “can hear his own name in that familiar mouth and knows with a sort of exquisite understanding that Crowley can see him, all of him, right now, even in the dark” (racketghost 2020). Aziraphale moves farther into the shadows; Crowley follows, moves close enough to whisper in his ear, and Aziraphale considers kissing Crowley there in the darkness. In the light, under the open ceiling, they are vulnerable to discovery and Aziraphale keeps his distance to keep them safe (cf. S1E3). But here, concealed by the Globe, they can be honest with each other. It is Crowley who puts the distance between them this time, brushing their fingertips together as an understanding even as he pulls back (cf. racketghost 2020).

In *He’s here*, racketghost uses the features of the Globe Theatre to press Aziraphale forward, away from the spotlight of Heaven, represented by the open ceiling, and into the dark and safety of the auditorium and galleries to meet more honestly with Crowley. The Globe becomes a metaphor for the actual earth, where Crowley and Aziraphale take refuge and come to understand and know one another better than their respective sides, Heaven and Hell, understand their field agents.

Another *Good Omens* fan work that uses the Globe as a setting to highlight the emotional connection between the characters is *Loosely Ballroom* (2020) by author team *marginalia_device* and *mortifyingideal*. These authors take a different approach because *Loosely Ballroom* is set in an alternate universe (AU) in which Crowley and Aziraphale are human. AU fan fiction borrows characters and highlights specific elements of the canon plot by placing those characters within the framework of a new premise. In the case of *Loosely Ballroom*, Aziraphale and Crowley are a professional ballroom dancer and celebrity contestant, respectively, on reality television series *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004–). Although the beginning of their dance partnership is tense, the pair eventually grow closer to each other, echoing their canon relationship’s progress (cf. *marginalia_device/mortifyingideal* 2020).

By week eight of the reality dance competition, Crowley as the celebrity contestant is called upon by the producers to introduce the audience to a meaningful location. While most contestants bring the cameras to their childhood homes or alma maters, Crowley, mysteriously, chooses the Globe. As they wait for the production crew to set up, Crowley and Aziraphale discuss the physical structure and history of the Globe with each other. “It’s a bit like being under God’s eye, innit?” (*marginalia_device/mortifyingideal* 2020), Crowley says of the open ceiling and blue sky beyond.

When the cameras begin rolling, Crowley is reticent when he is asked why he chose the Globe as his meaningful location. Aziraphale is the only one who can get him to open up in front of the cameras and crew, and Crowley reveals the Globe is as close as he can get to his old television series, *Shakespearean*—an AU within the AU featuring Shakespeare’s characters as university students together—in which Crowley played Hamlet. By the end of the segment, Aziraphale has convinced Crowley to perform a piece from *Hamlet* onstage (cf. *marginalia_device/mortifyingideal* 2020).

The Globe Theatre serves a double purpose in *Loosely Ballroom*. For Crowley’s alternate-universe character, it stands as a physical representation of a meaningful time in his life. Although the *Shakespearean*

TV sets have been torn down, the Globe remains. Even the Globe as a replica, rebuilt after the original burned down, is meaningful for Crowley, who is attempting to revitalize his career. In another way, the Globe scene in *Loosely Ballroom* serves as an emotional climactic moment, reflecting the emotional turning point in the canon plot of “Hard Times.” At this point in the story, Aziraphale has acknowledged that he has romantic feelings for Crowley, but he has resolved not to act on them. Like his canon television counterpart, he is trying and failing to maintain some sort of distance. However, their rapport at the Globe demonstrates their emotional intimacy, and after filming the segment, the pair spend the rest of the day together by unspoken agreement. By the time they end their evening at Crowley’s door, Aziraphale acts on his feelings, and the pair share their first kiss (cf. [marginalia_device/mortifyingideal 2020](#)).

Ultimately, the Globe as a setting is not integral to these stories by virtue of being the Globe. For *Good Omens* fan writers, the theater represents emotional connection and new and evolving intimacy. Further, fan authors may play out on the analogy of the Globe being Earth itself. Like Shakespeare as a folk character, writers draw upon the popular notions associated with the theater to push their narratives forward.

Conclusion

Avid fans of a particular author or piece of media are rarely accused of knowing too little about the subject of their admiration. Fan authors writing within the Shakespeare fandoms—whether that means real person fiction, missing scenes and sequels to the plays, or even alternate universe adaptations—are likely to include details beyond the ken of a fan writer from outside the fandom with a more general knowledge of Shakespeare’s works. As such, the fan works analyzed above were chosen from a fandom only tangentially related to Shakespeare via one scene in the televised version of *Good Omens*. In contrast to Shakespeare fan fiction, one might assume that in cases of Shakespeare and

Shakespearean tropes in *Good Omens* fan fiction, the Shakespeare fandom of the writer is secondary to their dedication to the *Good Omens* fandom. However, these fan fictions not only add to the *Good Omens* storyworld but to the archive of Shakespeare texts as well, as Derecho (2006) might describe it.

Yost (2017) argues that the traditional view of Shakespeare as exclusively 'highbrow' is challenged by the enormous amount of amateur Shakespeare fan fiction online. Therefore, we need a 'lowbrow' lens that acknowledges his role as a popular, accessible figure, shaped by amateur writers and online communities in order to understand Shakespeare's presence in contemporary culture (cf. Yost 2017, 190). Although there is some debate over whether there should be any distinction at all between so-called 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' culture, the point still stands. This is all the truer, since the example of *Good Omens* fan fictions underlines a relevancy of Shakespeare in popular culture that transcends the borders of fandoms and genres. Kavita Mudan Finn and Jessica McCall (2016) describe Shakespeare's ubiquity as a result of education in the English-speaking world. They write, "Pedagogically speaking, the amateur nature of fanfiction undercuts the authority of 'Shakespeare' and empowers students to make meaning out of Shakespeare through a method that requires they translate the text for themselves" (Mudan Finn/McCall 2016, 29). The authors of the works analyzed above have done just that, whether they have used Shakespeare as a folk character to suit their purposes, drawn upon Shakespeare's works as inspiration or as narrative device, or used the setting of the Globe itself to interpret the emotional intimacy of two characters who seem at first a world apart from Shakespeare himself. Through the work of these fan authors, the archive of Shakespeare changes and is changed by the archive of *Good Omens*, linking their texts in fannish imagination and communal interpretation.

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Bromance in Action¹

Tracing the Onscreen/Offscreen Interdependencies of the Sheen/Tennant Bromance

Celia Lam

This chapter explores the current phenomenon of the celebrity 'bromance' (brother+romance) as a form of cultural commodity. While celebrity bromance pairings are used to promote films, they also have a value in and of themselves as cultural products. This value is termed 'bromance capital' and operates at the intersections between the public visibility of the celebrity figure, the cultural value of the bromance, and the logic of fan engagement. This chapter elucidates the notion of bromance capital by applying it as an analytical lens to deconstruct the celebrity dynamic between actors Michael Sheen and David Tennant.

Sheen and Tennant have come to recent attention for their portrayal of the angel Aziraphale and demon Crowley in the TV adaptation of Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's novel *Good Omens*. Having broadcast two seasons (in 2019 and 2023, with a concluding 90-minute film in the making in 2025), the series follows the unlikely relationship between theologically opposed entities as they work together to prevent Armageddon and the aftermath of their success. In the production gap between season 1 and 2 of *Good Omens*, both actors appeared in three seasons of the BBC comedy *Staged* (2020–2023), set during Covid lockdowns in the UK, where they played fictionalized versions of themselves. During press interviews for *Good Omens*, Sheen and Tennant presented a close bond that mimicked the

¹ Some central aspects and ideas presented in this chapter have been published earlier in *Celebrity Bromances: Constructing, Interpreting and Utilising Personas* by Celia Lam and Jackie Raphael, reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa plc. ©2022

rambunctious dynamic of their onscreen characters, later replicating the bantering and bickering mode of interaction in *Staged*.

Tracing a bromance that flows on- and offscreen between character dynamics in *Good Omens*, Sheen and Tennant in 'real life,' and their turn as fictionalized versions of themselves in *Staged*, this chapter argues that it is bromance capital which ultimately authenticates the Sheen/Tennant dynamic and legitimizes the narrative conceit of *Staged*.

Introduction

It was a nice series. All the series had been nice. There had been rather more than five of them, and intertextual allusions had been invented. A facetious opening to proceedings, admittedly; one meant firmly in homage not imitation, a feeble attempt at evocation. The format should be familiar to *Good Omens* fans for they form the opening three sentences of the novel: "It was a nice day. All the days had been nice. There had been rather more than seven of them, and rain had not yet been invented" (Gaiman/Pratchett 2018, 3). Given the tongue-in-cheek nature of the texts, permit some indulgence in playful engagement with form. For this discussion equally concerns form as it does substance. More accurately, it concerns the concertinaed accord of fiction and reality that is the conflated on-off-screen celebrity-character persona. But I digress. This discussion should, like all good stories, start at the beginning.

In the beginning was a novel, which enterprising authors and television (and streaming) producers decided to adapt for screen. Welcome *Good Omens* season 1 to the world of British/American (and other as distribution agreements allow) entertainment. Filling the snakeskin and leather shoes of central characters Crowley and Aziraphale are British stalwarts David Tennant and Michael Sheen. They later go on to play fictionalized versions of themselves in the three seasons of the BBC comedy series *Staged* before reprising their roles as Crowley and

Aziraphale in *Good Omens* season 2. Fear not, this is not a tangent but the main thesis of the discussion. For it is the interconnections between the two texts and the celebrity personas of Tennant and Sheen that sits at the heart of this reflection, wherein the tangled ball of wool that is their turns in *Good Omens* and *Staged* is read through their celebrity bromance. Expanding on prior conceptualizations of the bromance and its capital, this chapter expounds on how the celebrity bromance connects two media texts and legitimates one.

Bromances of a fictional nature

Bromance emerged from 1990s American youth culture. A conflation of ‘brother’ and ‘romance,’ the term articulates male intimacy that is homosocial; a closeness and an “emotionally intense bond between presumably straight males [...] that they neither regard, acknowledge avow, nor express sexually” (DeAngelis 2014, 1). Deployed as a fictional concept, the bromance enables the exploration of masculinity and male relationships. Echoing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1985) exploration of male intimacy as a continuum of homosexuality and homosociality in English literature, Michael DeAngelis focuses on American culture. Arguing that fictional bromances reflect increasing representation of male intimacy, DeAngelis traces its development through the broader cultural context of American literature, popular culture, and cultural discourse. Specifically, DeAngelis contrasts the growing acceptance of male intimacy within society with a denial of the “naturalized ‘given’” (DeAngelis 2014, 2) of a homosexual relationship. Arguing that the bromance genre of film emerged as a manifestation of the tension between homosocial acceptance and homosexual disavowal, DeAngelis suggests fictional representations of bromances offer spaces to consider contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality. Bromance films become a “litmus test for discerning not only the extent to which homosexuality has been assimilated in contemporary culture [but also the] degree of comfort (or discomfort) that

this culture actually experiences with such assimilated homosexuality” (DeAngelis 2014, 14 f.). For DeAngelis, a reliance on homosexual tropes in the bromance genre is problematic as it ultimately undercuts any notion of acceptance of homosexuality through the deployment of homosexual tropes for humor. Played for humor, homosexual tropes are—if not ridiculed—deployed as a stop measure to foreground and exaggerate intimacy, in the process downplaying any relational significance (cf. DeAngelis 2014, 2).

DeAngelis argues that the use of homosexual tropes in bromance films ultimately reinforces heteronormativity through the presentation of homosocial interaction, but privileging heterosexual narrative conclusions. Nonetheless, changes in the cultural context enable some degree of acceptance of non-normative gender relationships. DeAngelis, Ron Becker (2009), Cynthia Fuchs (1993), and others outline shifting attitudes towards masculinity (specifically hegemonic masculinity) that contribute to increasingly fluid representations of male homosocial relationships. DeAngelis and Fuchs point to the male buddy film as a space for the exploration of male identity, while Becker locates shifts in conceptualizations of masculinity to the American gay rights movements of the 1980s. Through the public expression of nonnormative sexual orientation, Becker argues it is “at least possible to envision alternative ways to think about straight masculinity and organise (hetero) sexual identities, desires, and behaviors” (Becker 2009, 122). Thus, changes in expressions of masculinity resulted in the greater acceptance of male homosocial friendships. John Alberti highlights for example how bromance films present alternatives to hegemonic gender behavior by revealing “other types of relationships” (Alberti 2013, 160) that he locates within shifting cultural discourses on masculinity.

Influenced by a loosening of definitions of masculinity, bromance films such as *Superbad* (2007) construct narrative contexts in which the central question of ‘what it means to be a man’ is examined by adolescent characters embarking on adulthood. The pre-adult stage provides a space to explore the fluidity of masculine behavior, as well as same-sex friendships that ultimately dissolve (or are diluted), when heterosexual

love interests are introduced. This reinforces the heteronormativity of bromance relationships by shaping them as passing phases in individual development (cf. Boyle/Berridge 2014). Films examining adult male intimacy similarly provide heteronormative narrative contexts in which male homosocial relationships are negotiated alongside male/female relationships (e.g., *I Love You Man* [2009]) or through the establishment of the heterosexual credentials of the main characters despite the absence of heterosexual love interests (e.g., *Step Brothers* [2008]; the *Hangover* series [2009–2013]). Thus, as DeAngelis and others argue, while performance of masculinity is explored with some degree of flexibility, representations of homosocial friendships nevertheless contain the “homophobic caveat that these relationships remain non-sexual” (Rennet 2015, 571).

In her entry in the *International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication* on the topic, Hannah Hamad likewise notes the bromance to be non-sexual in nature, highlighting how the term helped to normalize male intimacy in “21st-century anglophone media cultures” (Hamad 2020). The normalization of male homosocial intimacy and the ubiquity of bromance as a term might suggest that all male friendships are considered under a bromance banner. However, it should be noted that the bromance occurs under what Alberti describes (in films) as “confused homosocial/homoerotic relationships between putatively straight male characters” (Alberti 2013, 159).

Bromance discourse and celebrity

The normalization of male intimacy through the construct of the bromance and its popularization in anglophone media cultures gives rise to a discourse of bromance. It is one grounded in the display and performance of male intimacy, yet one that is firmly established within a heteronormative framework, becoming the fodder of celebrity cultures in a variety of contexts and nations. Tracing the origins of the term ‘bromance,’ DeAngelis notes its use by popular media to attenuate homoerotic readings of intimacy between male celebrities:

“[W]hen popular media reports about the close relationship between the “suddenly single” Lance Armstrong and Matthew McConaughey began to develop into rumors that the men were gay, the media introduced the term “bromance” in an attempt to secure the nonsexual nature of their relationship, providing both the celebrities and the media with a means of dispelling sexual intimacy while also highlighting the ‘innocence’ of the male-male bond.” (DeAngelis 2014, 2)

The usage of the term by popular presses had been the precursor for a more widespread proliferation in popular culture, aiding the rise of what is now a ubiquitous term and concept. As recently as July 2024, news outlets such as *The Guardian* adopted the term to describe the dynamic between actors Ryan Reynolds and Hugh Jackman during the promotion of their film *Deadpool and Wolverine* (2024). Indeed, although the celebrity bromance is often associated with replication of onscreen dynamics featuring close (or potentially close) relationships between male characters, celebrity bromances often demonstrate a longevity that extends beyond the promotion period of media works. Reflecting on this in a monograph about the topic, my co-author Jackie Raphael-Luu and I posit that “while the bromance is an instrument utilized to promote products, it possesses a more sustained value located in qualities intrinsic to the bromance as a concept” (Lam/Raphael 2022, 87). That is, the bromance as a concept and a discourse has a value in contemporary celebrity culture: one which is independent of the celebrity figures who enact it. This value and its operation will be elucidated later in this chapter. Before embarking on that exploration, it is prudent to highlight the intersections between the bromance-as-concept and theorizations of celebrity, namely the concepts of persona and performance.

A seminal concept in the study of celebrity is located in film scholar Richard Dyer’s (1986) notion that stars can be conceptualized as texts, formed from a multiplicity of images distributed throughout media platforms (in films, on television, at photoshoots, and red-carpet appearances). Like all texts, these star-texts are capable of being

read and convey values dominant in a social context. Celebrity figures are thus formed of public images or personae: they are archetypal examples of imagined comprehensive personalities that reflect notions to be enforced or reinforced. Formed of—and reliant on—the public visibility bestowed by media attention, the public persona of celebrity figures are products of a “celebrity industry” (Driessens 2012, 642), constructed and maintained by sub-industries such as agents and publicists (cf. Gamson 1994). Media savvy audiences, aware of the mechanisms of entertainment industries, engage in what media scholar Joshua Gamson terms “game player” (Gamson 1994, 146) activities, deriving delight from uncovering the traces of construction in an attempt to glimpse “behind the manufactured mask of fame” (Holmes/Redmond 2006, 4). The notion that behind fame exists another entity—a more authentic individual—is a recurrent theme of discussions of authenticity in celebrity studies, its conceptual foundation located in sociologist Erving Goffman’s 1959 dramaturgical analogy of identity management. In Goffman’s analogy, interactions between individuals are compared with the performance of actors onstage in front of an audience, where interactants are both actor and audience presenting (performing) their identities. This performance is achieved through the management of public ‘front’ stage selves where identity information is both consciously and unconsciously presented. In contrast the ‘back’ stage self is the self of the private space where the trappings of performance are discarded. The separation between the performative front space and the authentic back space underpins the framing of the celebrity persona as a publicly performed façade aided by celebrity industries and sustained through public visibility. It is a performance which extends to the seemingly private spaces of social media where an impression of access behind the public front stage self is offered in the ‘private public’ persona (cf. Marshall 2010), curated for a digital age.

While the public image of a celebrity figure focuses on the maintenance of a singular public persona and its attendant meanings, the celebrity bromance is expressed through the formation of a joint bro-

mance persona. This joint persona, replete with unique moniker conflating the names of the celebrities involved, encapsulates recognition of the bromance pairing, attests to its history and signifies the nature of the male intimacy displayed (cf. Lam/Raphael 2022, 54 ff.). The bromance of celebrity culture is an inherently performative one, expressed for public consumption as a vehicle for promotion; it centers the interactions between well-known celebrity figures with established public personas of their own. At its core, the bromance persona is an ongoing manifestation of dynamics as articulated in *Celebrity Bromances* (2022) through six bromance types:

1. *Frat-boy*: This fraternal bond is expressed in a juvenile and hyper-masculine tone. In the UK, this would be described as laddish. It often revolves around pranks and competitions [...]
2. *Fake-feud*: This is a planned performative approach where a narrative is built to pretend that people are fighting in a humorous way, when they are actually friends in real life [...]
3. *Familiar*: This is a more subtle and less performative approach. This is evident when people are comfortable with one another and show knowledge of one another's personal lives, while also expressing a loving intimacy. They acknowledge spending private time together [...]
4. *Flirty*: This is often expressed in a slightly homoerotic way. It can be verbal or physical [...]
5. *Funny*: Having a natural banter between people shows their chemistry [...]
6. *Familial*: In some instances, the bond goes beyond a close friendship between two men to express a sibling or family-like relationship among a pair or group. (Lam/Raphael 2022, 31)

Bromance capital

The value of the bromance as a concept is independent of its association with individual celebrity figures or onscreen character dynamics, as previously mentioned. Indeed, being engaged in a bromance can bestow visibility to a celebrity figure which enhances their value in a crowded celebrity market. The bromance is a manifestation of the bromance discourse, commercialized within the logics of celebrity culture, and gains a form of value in its own right: a bromance capital.

Capital is not a novel notion in celebrity studies, with scholars expanding Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) articulation of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital to define a celebrity capital active within popular culture and society more broadly. Celebrity capital is generally associated with attention (cf. van Krieken 2012) and the broad visibility associated with the familiarity and influence (cf. Gunter 2014) of a public profile. Olivier Driessens (2013) emphasizes the role of media exposure, centering mediated visibility (that bestowed by media attention) at the core of celebrity capital. On this basis, Driessens differentiates celebrity capital from Bourdieu's other forms of capital: "celebrity capital finds its material basis in recurrent media representations or accumulated media visibility. In this sense, it is a specific kind of attention-generating capacity [...] that, importantly, cannot be reduced to symbolic capital" (Driessens 2013, 550). Unlike the field-specific relevancy of Bourdieu's symbolic capital, Driessens argues that celebrity capital transcends and traverses fields—with celebrity the currency that expresses the mediated visibility accumulated (and maintained) by an individual.

In the same way that celebrity becomes the currency of the public individual, bromance is a currency of contemporary cultural relevance. Drawing from the power of bromance discourse, as well as the ubiquity of the notion outside of popular culture (consider uses of the term to describe relationships between political leaders), bromance capital transcends celebrity as a field in much the same way as celebrity capital transcends social fields. For while "it may be contingent upon the me-

dia visibility of celebrity capital, its influence is not related to visibility but in engagement with topical concepts. As such, bromance capital bestows cultural relevance and currency to those who engage (or enact) a bromance” (Lam/Raphael 2022, 96). Bromance capital is formulated in parallel to the attention of celebrity capital, but trades on the currency of the bromance as a concept expressing the value associated not with attention (as in celebrity capital), but in the consistent engagement with ‘the bromance.’ This engagement is manifest through the presentation of celebrity dynamics and activated through four key elements: a performative relationship, a fragmented presentation, an authenticity puzzle, and fan spaces.

First, at the center of a bromance dynamic is a relationship. It is presented through highly expressive and externalized interactions as the manifestation of the interhuman connection—the ‘chemistry’—between celebrity figures. The success of a celebrity bromance capitalizes on underlying interest in celebrity relationships in both popular press and fan cultures, as well as broader cultural discourses that anticipate the formalization of intimacy between individuals (cf. McAlister 2021). Yet this relationship is illusive.

The second element of the bromance capital is the fragmented presentation of said relationship. Dispersed through videos, social media interactions, and snippets of press interviews, the celebrity bromance is a scattered impression of its formation, its nature (whether funny, flirty, familiar, or otherwise), and its ongoing narrative. The celebrity bromance is not as neatly packaged and easily assessable as its fictional counterpart (e.g., in movies or TV series). Those consuming celebrity bromances are forced (for lack of a better word) to seek out titbits and locate their own instalments of the ongoing bromance narrative in the flow of media content. The function of the instalments is primarily to promote works connected to the celebrities in the bromance pair, yet it also generates viewer investment as audiences and fans ‘follow’ the unfolding bromance much like episodes in a mini-series.

The bromance capitalizes on this viewer investment through the third element: engagement with what media scholar Gunn Enli (2015)

terms the “authenticity puzzle” (Enli 2015, 2). Generated because of mediated representations of reality, Enli suggests media producers and audiences negotiate “authenticity contract[s]” (Enli 2015, 2)—an unspoken agreement to believe in the truthfulness of representations until the contract is broken. Media audiences interact with the media landscape by solving authenticity puzzles to separate the fake from the real as part of “established audience practices for interpreting the media” (Enli 2015, 132). The authenticity puzzle presented by the bromance lies in the liminal space between performance and genuineness: how much a pair ‘actually’ likes each other and the authenticity of their interactions become a puzzle for audiences to solve. Finding evidence to satisfy the desire to solve the puzzle is compounded by the performative nature of a bromance that is only given through fragmented texts.

Finally, the fragmented bromance narrative creates spaces for fan imagination; “the speculative potential of the bromance is a feature that invites further investment, offering the concept as a framework for fan activity” (Lam/Raphael 2022, 94). By filling the gaps of a fragmented narrative, additional affective connections are generated, prolonging the awareness of the celebrity pairing while solidifying the cultural relevance of the bromance as concept.

Having established the nature of the celebrity bromance and bromance capital, let us return, finally, to the dynamic presented in the opening passages of this chapter and to an exploration of the function of the Sheen/Tennant bromance. The following reflects upon how bromance capital manifests not only to ensure awareness of two media texts, but to connect two unrelated narratives and legitimize the dramatic conceit of one.

Good Omens to *Staged*: Intertextual links via celebrity bromance

Filmed between September 2017 and March 2018, released on Amazon Prime Video in May 2019 and airing on BBC Two in January 2020, *Good Omens* is the first text of the triumvirate (two media and one celebrity text) that will be taken into account. Based on the novel of the same name, *Good Omens* season 1 faithfully followed the plot of the book, pitting the angel/demon duo against their respective headquarters (Heaven and Hell) as they fight to prevent the coming of Armageddon. The TV series, like the novel, devotes an equal amount of time to the unfolding plot and plethora of characters as it does to the dynamic between the renegade pair. Indeed, while Tennant (as Crowley) and Sheen (as Aziraphale) were most prominently featured as the leads of the series, the first season adopted an ensemble approach, each character serving at least one vital role in the intricate network of cause/effect, action/reaction that brought the novel and the season to its conclusion (avoiding Armageddon).

Following the success of season 1, a second season was commissioned in June 2021 and released on Amazon Prime Video on July 28, 2023. Now in the territory of extension beyond the pages of the book, season 2 takes the relationship between the demon Crowley and the angel Aziraphale as its central premise. Excommunicated from their respective headquarters as punishment for preventing Armageddon, Aziraphale and Crowley are disturbed from their peaceful existence as bookstore owner and his homeless friend when an amnesiac Archangel Gabriel arrives, naked and carrying a box, on the former's doorstep. The ensuing plot revolves around solving the mystery of Gabriel's amnesia, culminating in the prevention of an uprising from the forces of Hell, and saving Gabriel from prosecution by two overzealous Archangels. Like the first season, the overarching theme of season 2 questioned the distinction between 'good' and 'evil,' however, season 2 more prominently featured the themes of relationships and love.

From the outset, the season centered relationships between its main and supporting characters. A series of flashback stories reveal the trajectory of Crowley and Aziraphale's relationship from their first meeting at the beginning of the universe to their growing antipathy towards Heaven and Hell, while dovetailing with the present in which a good portion of screen time is devoted to their attempts to make fellow store owners Maggie and Nina fall in love. The fact that they must do so to hide a miracle jointly performed to hide Gabriel from both Heaven and Hell rationalizes and legitimizes the exercise in the narrative, while creating a none-too-subtle allegory for their own relationship and ample opportunity for commentary on the direction of its development. In the final episode of the season, Nina, having learnt of their machinations, admonishes Crowley for treating her relationship with Maggie like a game. In the same breadth, Maggie points out how the humans have been used as proxies for the demon and angel, "you never say what you are really thinking [to each other]" (S2E6), forcing Crowley to consider his feelings for Aziraphale. Whilst setting up Nina and Maggie was the main subplot of the season, the pairing that more closely echoes Crowley and Aziraphale is that of demon Beelzebub and angel Gabriel. Revealed in the final episode, Beelzebub and Gabriel are depicted forming a friendship based on a strong sense of comradery built on a desire to maintain the balance between their two forces and to stave off (a second attempt) at bringing about Armageddon. Born initially as an alliance of convenience, the relationship soon develops into friendship and then romance. The parallels with Crowley and Aziraphale evidenced in the mirrored purpose from season 1 (to prevent Armageddon), their alliance with opposing camps, and their status as demon and angel. Indeed, in a ploy to save Gabriel from Heaven, Beelzebub gives him a fly in which to store his memory (leaving him amnesiac); Gabriel had intended to rendezvous with Beelzebub but mistakenly reached Aziraphale (and Crowley) instead, reinforcing the correspondences between the pairs.

Compounding the discovery of their 'true' feelings for each other is the ongoing negotiation of their relative positions within their re-

spective camps. As a result to the concluding events of season 1, both angel and demon are placed in the position to reject former allegiances and form new ones. The question of allegiances—and allegiance to reinforce identity—is one which the characters, and especially Crowley, have posed since the first season. Season 2 continues this theme, with flashback stories establishing the existential question facing the pair in the present day: whether their allegiances define their identity. Riding the blurred line between doing ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ Crowley always operates according to his own principles finding loopholes to disobey orders when human lives are threatened. Through their adventures throughout time, Aziraphale similarly starts to deviate from blindly following Heaven’s instructions, though not without reservation. Unlike Aziraphale’s struggles to deviate from the ‘good’ of Heaven, Crowley’s acceptance of ‘shades of grey’ reveals his recognition of the fallacy of an absolutist view of taking sides and his belief that both sides are equally flawed. This prompts Crowley to strike out on his own, encouraging Aziraphale to set off with him to create their own side. Aziraphale, seemingly believing in the righteousness of his side, wants to go back to Heaven and take Crowley with him. The cliffhanger of season 2 leaves the main pair—having recognized their burgeoning feelings for each other—separated once again by the burden of choosing allegiances: Aziraphale seemingly choosing a promotion in Heaven and Crowley alone on the road with his Bentley.

Filed during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, roughly around March to May 2020, *Staged* premiered on June 10, 2020 airing on BBC One. A second season aired on January 4, 2021, followed by a third season on November 24, 2022. As a comedy, *Staged* trades in the same tongue-in-cheek outlook as *Good Omens*, admittedly with less sardonic characters and a decidedly earth-bound narrative. Season 1 features Tennant and Sheen appearing as fictionalized versions of themselves, trapped at home² with their respective partners (played by their partners

2 To contain the spread of the Covid-19 virus, countries around the world implemented stay at home orders, colloquially known as ‘lockdowns’ in 2020. Restrictions were eased from the beginning of 2021 in the UK.

Georgia Moffat and Anna Lundberg). The series is written and directed by Simon Evans, appearing as ‘Simon,’ the underconfident director, helming ‘David’ and ‘Michael’³ in Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). The resulting effect is a timely reflection on mediated communication and its impact on human interactions—set against an all too familiar (by then globally experienced) backdrop of lockdown. The text also toys with levels of reality. Not content to echo the lived experience of its viewers—who shared not only the character’s physical restrictions but also their mode of communication via video conferencing—the text presents in addition conflated character/actor entities that blur the distinction between ‘real’ celebrity and ‘scripted’ character. This is further complicated in season 2 when the plot shifts to follow the ‘real’ David and Michael as they struggle to come to terms with the fact that they are not asked to reprise their roles as ‘themselves’ in the American remake. The third season starts in similar fashion to the second with Simon attempting to get David and Michael to appear in a Christmas version of *Staged*, before breaking out of both lockdown (the series is no longer presented solely through split screen talking heads) and its previous narrative conceit. For the remainder of season 3, the series morphs into a metafictional documentary of the making of *Staged*, titled *Backstaged*, which follows Tennant and Sheen’s attempts to finish writing the Christmas special after firing writer/director Evans.

By the time the closing credits of the final episode of *Staged* roll, the series has presented no less than three versions of its cast: the fictional ‘David’ and ‘Michael’ of season 1, the ‘real’ David and Michael of season 2 interacting through computer mediated screens, and the ‘real, in the flesh’ Tennant and Sheen of season 3 interacting in person and filmed for the in-text documentary. (Notwithstanding the fact that all three versions are scripted by Evans.) The series thus offers levels of reality through which to navigate, each staking a claim on reality by virtue of distance from performance (season 2 acknowledges the ‘David’

3 The fictionalized versions of David Tennant and Michael Sheen from season 1 of *Staged* will be referred to as ‘David’ and ‘Michael’; the season 2 versions as David and Michael; the season 3 and celebrity figures as Tennant and Sheen.

and 'Michael' of season 1 to be fictional and thereby more performed) or by virtue of medium of communication (the split screen of video conferencing deemed more contrived than the roaming camera of the metafictional documentary). With each season, the text offers viewers a new conceit, presenting first fictional, then 'real', then 'actual' versions of the cast and narrative world. Despite its fickleness with respect to reality and its use of the medium, the text is compellingly coherent. As will be argued in the following section, this coherence is due in large part to the bromance as a framework and the bromance capital of the Tennant/Sheen pairing. Not only does the Tennant/Sheen bromance provide connections between on- and offscreen iterations of character and actors, it is argued that *Staged* owes much of its legitimacy to the pre-established bromance of the conflated bromance persona emerging from *Good Omens* and the promotion thereof.

Bromance persona

Having known each other since the beginning of time, the dynamic established between the characters of Crowley and Aziraphale is inherently familiar, expressed through their long association and knowledge of intimate details of each other's earthly adventures. Through the quick-witted writing of the novel and series, their dynamic is also an extremely funny one, replete with good-humored banter, bickering their way through time (via the flashbacks).

The bromance dynamic of the characters is one of comfortable familiarity and performative, playful animosity. The dynamic is based on their respective allegiances and their personalities; Crowley sullen and sarcastic to Aziraphale's exuberant and angelic curiosity about humanity.

The David Tennant/Michael Sheen celebrity bromance persona shares similarly funny aspects of presentation and is grounded in a camaraderie and professional respect emerging from their time on the *Good Omens* set. Through the long hours spent during press junket interviews during the promotion of *Good Omens*, a familiar friendship

is presented as developing.⁴ Speaking of their relationship during the promotion of *Staged*, they report developing a good chemistry while filming and promoting *Good Omens* which they were keen to rediscover in *Staged* (cf. BBC 2020), able to “take the piss” (Maxwell 2020) with each other and displaying similar levels of banter as their *Good Omens* counterparts.

In *Staged*, the ‘David’ and ‘Michael’ of *Good Omens* seasons 1 and 2 continue their banter while adding real-life bromance dynamics, bickering as a means of indicating their familiarity with each other and their ease in each other’s presence. In the third season of *Staged*, they experience a falling out, feuding for a short period of time towards the end of the season before reuniting in the final episode. The form of bickering mirrors that established in *Good Omens*, with much of the interactions based on teasing and undercutting the other, safely able to ‘take the piss’ due to the strength of their underlying relationship. Indeed, when promoting the first season of *Staged*, they reported agreeing to the series to reconnect after *Good Omens* and work together again. While statements made during the promotional period potentially compromise the authenticity of the sentiment, it does establish the framework of a prior relationship (the onscreen bromance evolving into an offscreen friendship) into which the second text fits.

By season 2 of *Good Omens*, the relationship between Crowley and Aziraphale evolved from the funny and familiar bromance of the initial installation to a conventionally recognized romance, both through analogies to other romantic relationships in the supporting cast and through subtle changes in the performance of both actors. Tennant plays Crowley much as he did in the first season until the final episode, when Crowley finally recognizes the nature of his relationship with Aziraphale and kisses him on the lips, in a move consistent with the more direct but emotionally disconnected personality of the character.

4 Incidentally, a close friendship between key creatives is not a novel promotional strategy, with the celebrity friendship between authors Gaiman and Pratchett featured in promotion of the *Good Omens* book in the 1990s, whereby both staged themselves as mirrors of the angel and the demon in their story respectively.

By contrast, Sheen played Aziraphale with increased moments of intimacy and attachment to Crowley. From lingering looks, references to Crowley's Bentley as 'our car' and dialogue with supporting characters hinting at their recognition of a romantic connection, Aziraphale is depicted as more sensitive to the changing nature of their attachment from bromance to romance, keen to return to the folds of Heaven as a pair.

Intertextual links

Good Omens and *Staged* both exist within intertextual networks, with season 2 of the former filled with references to David Tennant's other famous media property *Doctor Who* (1963–). Placed like easter eggs throughout the season, each episode contains at least one reference to Doctor-esque character traits. Most notable are references in episode 3, when Crowley refers to himself as a doctor, episode 5 when Crowley tries on a red Fez hat in a magic shop (the Fez associated with the 11th Doctor), and references to storing one's memory and personality in an object (the Doctor's memory has often been stored in a Fob watch, changing their personality). In the final episode, when deliberating on where to send Gabriel and Beelzebub as both wished to escape Heaven and Hell, Crowley quotes the 10th Doctor (played by Tennant) almost verbatim when he suggests: "You know Alpha Centauri is nice, always wanted to go there. A couple of decent planets. No night life to speak of" (S2E6).

Allusions to other media texts are not uncommon to the postmodern patchwork of contemporary popular culture. Yet, as shall be explored, allusions between *Good Omens* and *Staged* are (for the most part), indirect. It is through the concept of the bromance, as enacted by the celebrity pairing of Tennant and Sheen, that intertextual connections between *Good Omens* and *Staged* are achieved.

As outlined above, the bromance dynamic is formulated in the first instance through the onscreen characters of Crowley and Aziraphale

in the text *Good Omens*. It is extended offscreen through replication of similar dynamics (funny and familiar) in the celebrity text of the Tennant/Sheen bromance. This then forms the foundation for the onscreen character dynamics of *Staged*, casting the bromance at the center of an intriguing puzzle of intermingled performativity and authenticity. The reflexive nature of *Staged* foregrounds its artifice not only through its (professionalized) engagement with the split screen aesthetic (that mimics the video conferencing experience), but also through its self-referential layering of 'performance' and 'reality' between the first and second season. The juxtaposition of the first season's fictionalized 'David' and 'Michael' with the second season's presumed 'actual' David and Michael already casts the former offering as a performative rendition of the latter, even though both are equally performed (in this case literally scripted by Evans). The third season actively deconstructs the video conference aesthetic of the first two seasons by setting Tennant and Sheen in in-situ locations and depicting their attempts to recreate their mediated interactions by pretending to still be in lockdown or called away to far-off countries. At the same time, the presentation of the relationship between the central characters both capitalizes on and is authenticated by the performativity of the bromance.

Staged trades on the performativity of the bromance firstly by playing with versions of a known dynamic which was already established onscreen and traced offscreen. While *Staged* represents a text that plays with versions of an actor/character conflation, it simultaneously plays with their publicly presented joint bromance persona (that of a funny, familiar dynamic). The presentation of a celebrity bromance is inherently performative due to the need to externalize emotional connections; further, the presentation of these connections is dispersed through media representations as an extension of the celebrity commodity, in this case as a commodified relationship. The mechanisms producing these commodities such as agents, publicists, and popular press are part of a celebrity industry recognized by media savvy audiences (cf. Gamson 1994), who delight in deconstructing the artifice of the mediated personae. Thus, the presentation of the characters in the

series engages with two authenticity puzzles (cf. Enli 2015): that of the reality of the text and that of the reality of the broader bromance between Tennant and Sheen. The consistency of the bromance narrative is thus important to authenticate the bromance narrative. Therefore, “it is presented through multiple mediums and in variously fictional and pseudo-fictional settings” (Lam/Raphael 2022, 97).

Additionally, the bromance capital of the Tennant/Sheen pairing legitimizes the narrative conceit of *Staged* primarily due to its position as the central narrative thread. In a text in which the ‘reality’ of the narrative world is unstable and the format of presentation is adjusted from video conferencing to conventional roaming camera and back again, the relationship between ‘David’ and ‘Michael’ remains constant and consistent. Thus, the bromance operates as the central narrative conceit of the series: one could say it is a series about seeing how David and Michael react when stressed by life and concluding that, at the end of the day, it is their friendship that counts. It is the bromance and its cultural currency, which gives the relationship relevance within the narrative of *Staged*. The text capitalizes on the currency of the bromance as concept to quickly categorize the relationship. At the same time, it builds on the enjoyment of watching the enactment of bromance dynamics as a form of entertainment (cf. Lam/Raphael 2022) to establish the main point of entry to the text. If viewers enjoy watching Tennant and Sheen bantering in talk shows, they will enjoy ‘David’ and ‘Michael’ bickering in *Staged*. The connection to the onscreen bromance of Aziraphale and Crowley in *Good Omens* and the offscreen bromance of the celebrity figures shapes the dynamics between the fictionalized ‘David’ and ‘Michael’ as another installation of their ongoing bromance narrative. Thus, both the authenticity of their bromance and the text *Staged* (as part of this ongoing narrative) is legitimized as *Staged* becomes folded into a broader bromance narrative—the broader narrative reinforcing the singular narrative. As elsewhere stated, *Staged* “leverages the intertextual links between on and off screen expressions of the Sheen/Tennant bromance to capture the imagination of viewers, while at the same time providing further materials for continued (re)imagination of

their relationship. It thus relies on the value of the bromance to imbue the narrative with conceptual relevance, reflecting its cultural significance” (Lam/Raphael 2022, 98).

The final intertextual link comes in the form of the minisode “Good Omens: Lockdown” (2020), released on YouTube on May 1, 2020, between seasons 1 and 2 of the series. The minisode depicts a physically separated Crowley and Aziraphale recounting their lockdown activities (baking for Aziraphale, sleeping till June for Crowley). They communicate through telephone, their version of video conferencing, and reflect upon the global experience of home isolation. The episode could also be interpreted as a nod to *Staged*, which was released a month later in June 2020. While the minisode is unlikely to have been inspired by the comedy series, both are placed in the network of intertextuality through its lockdown connection and the replication of bantering dynamics between the central characters.

The second season of *Good Omens* moves the relationship between Crowley and Aziraphale from a bromance to a romance. Yet this development does not excessively impact on the bromance network primarily as intertextual links have already been established between *Good Omens*, the celebrity figures, and *Staged*, solidified by the minisode. Additionally, the performativity of the celebrity bromance is established in a space of suspended disbelief. It is play within the space of the authenticity puzzle where the reality of the situation (in this case the sexual orientation of the celebrity figures) is kept outside of playful engagement with their dynamic. Three conceptual spaces facilitate this playfulness: the ‘reality’ of the individual celebrity figures, the bromance persona of the Tennant/Sheen pairing, and the fictional bromance-turned-romance of the Crowley/Aziraphale relationship. Specifically, it is separation of the ‘real’ space of the celebrity from the playful space of the bromance (both real and fictional) that accommodates multiple expressions of their relationship.

Fan works pairing Tennant and Sheen are frequently filtered through their onscreen characters of Crowley and Aziraphale, with Sheen noting that “there’s a lot of that going on” (*Graham Norton Show*, Dec.

31, 2021). These pairings occur within the speculative space of the bromance and bridge onscreen and offscreen intimacies while at the same time blurring bromance and romance. They adapt the homosocial intimacy of the celebrity bromance persona, borrow from the subtext of character dynamics, and extend the interpretation into a homosexual romance. Thus, the onscreen development of intimacy between Crowley and Aziraphale from bromance to romance is not misaligned with fan experimentation in the wake of season 1. It is the bromance persona which makes the intimacy plausible as it acts as a buffer between fan shipping and the ‘reality’ of the celebrity figures (and their heterosexual orientation). The offscreen bromance has already established a firm basis from which other onscreen bromances (in *Staged*) are founded. It exists in parallel with the onscreen bromance of *Good Omens* season 1 and becomes a bridge to the onscreen romance of season 2. Ultimately, it is playfulness with the concept of the Crowley/‘David’/Tennant and Aziraphale/‘Michael’/Sheen conflated persona—and a disengagement from the ‘actual’ Sheen and Tennant—that ensures the success of the bromance.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the intertextual links between *Good Omens* and *Staged* through the notion of the celebrity bromance, arguing that it is the cultural capital of the bromance as a concept which reinforces and legitimizes the latter text. First established as onscreen dynamic between characters, the bromance of the Tennant/Sheen pairing is extended offscreen through replication of similar forms of interaction. The offscreen interactions draw heavily from the onscreen character dynamics and from its engagement with the cultural relevance of the bromance as a currency (the capital associated with the bromance). It is this capital which in turn provides the framework for the character dynamics and central narrative thread in *Staged*, rendering the bromance persona of the Tennant/Sheen pairing as the overarching con-

ceptual scaffold through which the media texts of *Good Omens* and *Staged* and the celebrity text of the Tennant/Sheen bromance persona are conjoined.

The Tennant/Sheen celebrity bromance is rendered as a complex transmedia narrative that is formed through onscreen character dynamics in two media texts, fan fiction, and various media appearances and social media posts. This narrative blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, between character, fictionalized version of actor, and actor. It highlights the centrality of celebrity dynamics in the promotion of contemporary media works and for contemporary popular culture at large. Distilled in this chapter through the bromance dynamics between celebrities, bromance capital leverages the celebrity status of individual celebrity figures, adding to existing persona in the formation of new joint persona that are performatively displayed through intertextual connections to offscreen media appearances and onscreen media works. In the highly competitive market space of a commodified celebrity culture, this manifests as a powerful tool to attain and sustain media visibility. For the bromance in particular, its prominence in popular culture is reinforced through engagement with the concept as a promotional strategy. At the same time, beyond its utilization to attract media attention, it is rendered an important cultural concept to articulate interpersonal dynamics and male intimacy in both fictional and non-fictional contexts.

The *Good Omens* narrative has moved into the realm of romance as far as the two main characters are concerned, in effect canonizing (some) fan imagination of the relationship. Yet in some way it separates the bromantic intimacy between the actors (and fictionalized versions thereof in *Staged*) from the romantic intimacy between the characters. Acting as intertextual glue, the bromance capital associated with the Tennant/Sheen pairing operates as an effective conduit bridging the fictional, non-fictional, bromantic and romantic, further solidifying its position as a potent concept in contemporary popular culture.

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Doing Good with *Good Omens*

Fan Communities as Drivers of Social Change

Ariane Manutscheri

This essay explores fan activism and related social phenomena among *Good Omens* fans. Building on established research into fan-driven activism and charity, it showcases how such practices manifest in this specific fandom. Although *Good Omens* has sustained a passionate and creative fan base since 1990, which was significantly reinvigorated by the TV adaptation, academic attention to this fandom has been limited compared to others and its fan activism has not been studied yet. This research addresses that gap by exploring the following questions: What kinds of fan activism can be observed in the *Good Omens* fandom? How can existing research on fan activism help contextualize and better understand the civically motivated actions of this fandom? How do the fan object and the themes it addresses inspire actions towards social justice and sustainability? And, finally, how have key personas associated with the fan object (Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, David Tennant, and Michael Sheen) inspired civic action among fans? Using online and social media analysis as well as interviews with organizers of The Ineffable Con (a charity-focused fan convention) and moderators of Good Old-Fashioned Lovers (a charity fanzine), this chapter seeks to answer these questions while highlighting the spectrum of social and civic actions undertaken by fans. In addition, fan responses to the sexual assault allegations involving Gaiman will be addressed to discuss their influence on fan activism and community dynamics. Ultimately, the study seeks to enrich present understandings of fan activism while also aiming to provide insights into the reception and societal impact of *Good Omens*.

Introduction

Fan communities are increasingly recognized as spaces where civic engagement flourishes, blending shared passions with collective action. This phenomenon is most commonly known as ‘fan activism.’ While many different definitions exist, fan activism can broadly be explained as channeling the emotional, intellectual, financial, and temporal investment fans bring to a fandom towards promoting social and/or political causes. Building on previous research on this subject, this essay discusses *Good Omens* fan activism through several key questions. It investigates how fan activism and related phenomena manifest specifically within this fandom, offering insights on some of the concrete actions via online/social media research and interviews, conducted with the organizers of the charity fan convention The Ineffable Con and the moderators of the charity fanzine Good Old-Fashioned Lovers. It also explores how the story’s central themes may possibly inspire actions toward social change and what influence the authors Gaiman and Pratchett as well as the show’s most prominent actors, Sheen and Tennant, have had in mobilizing fans toward charitable and civic endeavors. In this context, fan responses to the sexual assault allegations against Gaiman need to be addressed to understand their effect on fan activism and community dynamics. Since *Good Omens* fan activism has not been researched so far, this chapter seeks to both enrich present understandings of fan activism and to give insight into the reception and societal impact of the text.

“This huge powerful potentiality:” What is fan activism?

There are several overlapping, sometimes conflicting definitions of fan activism. Whereas Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport asserted that fan activism is “not about the mix between political concerns and culture but rather action that looks like political activism but is used toward nonpolitical ends” (Earl/Kimport 2009, 221), other scholars and activ-

ists have more recently defined fan activism as explicitly political or civically oriented. Perhaps the most influential definition in this vein stems from Henry Jenkins (2012), according to whom fan activism “refers to forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed within metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture” (Jenkins 2012).

Although research on fan activism specifically has only gradually been established in the last 20 years, the phenomenon itself is much older. Jenkins traces fan activism as far back as to the formation of science fiction fan clubs in the 1930s and 1940s, which often “recruit[ed] fans into larger labor and social movements” (Jenkins 2012). The technological developments of the 1990s, most notably the internet, made it possible for fans to connect, converse, and share their content, regardless of their geographical location. Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* (1992), one of the fundamental texts of the new discipline of fan studies that developed in parallel, contributed significantly to the legitimization of fandom within academia and to a change in society’s perception of fans. The public image of fannish engagement largely changed from attributions like “immature,” “obsessive,” “frivolous” activities conducted by “socially awkward, unbalanced individuals” to a more positive view that “highlight[s] the pleasure and valuable participation individuals can experience within fandom” (Herr Stephenson 2017, 285). It is this shift that has enabled the exploration of fandom as a “training ground” (Kligler-Vilenchik 2016, 113) for civic and political engagement.

In this context, the idea of *cultural acupuncture* must be examined—a metaphor originally coined by Andrew Slack, founder of the Harry Potter Alliance, one of the most-renowned fan activist organizations (renamed Fandom Forward in 2021, ceased operations in 2024), to denote the practice of “finding where the psychological energy is in the culture and moving that energy towards creating a healthier world” (Slack 2010). This concept has subsequently been described by Jen-

kins as “a conscious rhetorical strategy [of] mapping fictional content worlds onto real-world concerns” (Jenkins 2012). It is this strategy, this transformational ‘mapping’ process between the fictional and the real world that could be the key to understanding fan activism’s success.

At the heart of *cultural acupuncture* lies a “content world,” meaning “the network of characters, settings, situations, and values that forms the basis for the generation of a range of stories, in the hands of either a commercial producer or a grassroots community” (Jenkins 2012). According to this definition, a story does not remain confined to a single medium, which neatly ties in with the concept of transmedia storytelling: the process in which “integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” (Jenkins 2007). As an example, the content world of *Good Omens* does not only include the original novel, but a radio play (2015), a graphic novel (upcoming), several theater adaptations (2013; 2017), and the TV series—all of which is content that fans readily draw from to produce and circulate their extensions of the story in the form of fan videos, fan art, fan fiction, podcasts, discussion forums, cosplay, and many other types of creative output. According to Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, these content worlds facilitate entrance to civic engagement by breaking down complex societal issues in our real world through the practice of relating them to the issues discussed in these other familiar worlds and adapting the tools and strategies for civic engagement from those employed in the fan spaces that foster participatory culture (cf. Kligler-Vilenchik 2016, 7). The term refers to “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices” (Jenkins/Purushotma/Weigel/Clinton/Robison 2009, xi). These are practices that fan activist organizations then use in their campaigns for justice, equality, and sustainability. “[F]andoms have unquestionably always involved a significant component of helping others” (Kligler-Vilenchik/Mcveigh-Schultz/Weitbrecht/Tokuhama 2012), for example providing feedback and proofreading of fan fiction (beta-read-

ing) or teaching less experienced members about community resources and (online) tools. Building on these inherent infrastructures of fandom, fan activist organizations are “uniquely positioned” (Kligler-Vilenchik/Mcveigh-Schultz/Weitbrecht/Tokuhamma 2012) to introduce people into civic life.

Moreover, fan activism involves and promotes “civic imagination” (Jenkins/Peters-Lazaro/Shresthova 2020, 5)—the ability to imagine alternatives to current social, political, and economic conditions, the capacity to picture a different world than our current one. Fans often ask ‘What if?’ questions related to their beloved content (cf. Duncombe 2012; Carriere 2018) and answer them via their fannish productions. What if Crowley and Aziraphale shared a flat or went to Alpha Centauri together? Fans write fan fiction that explores these scenarios for other interested readers. What if Aziraphale was the demon and Crowley was the angel? There is role-reversal fan art by talented artists that addresses this topic. What if the ‘Ineffable Husbands,’ a term coined by the *Good Omens* fan community, presented as female and were ‘Ineffable Wives’ instead? There are cosplayers who answer this question with the most elaborate costumes. Fan activism uses this creative potential to ask other ‘What if’ questions: What if everyone had enough to eat? What if no one was persecuted for their ethnicity, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation? What if we could eradicate illnesses through science or create prosperity without depleting our planet’s resources?

While they should never be idealized, fan spaces offer opportunities for individuals to experience themselves as agentic members of a community, specifically, in an “environment that feels inherently theirs” (Kligler-Vilenchik/Mcveigh-Schultz/Weitbrecht/Tokuhamma 2012) and where their expertise and resources are taken seriously. In fan activism, the emotional attachment to and the extensive (often time-consuming) engagement with a book, movie, TV series, or celebrity is valued and used to make the major social issues and challenges of our time accessible. Due to these qualities, fan activism could be a way to speak to those who have not been previously involved in social movements and those who might usually feel left out of political discourse, but also to

those who already have some experience with civic engagement, offering them innovative entrance points.

Paul Booth even goes as far as to refer to fandom as “the classroom of the future” because it is a space in which people are “encouraged to think critically, to write, and to make thoughtful and critical judgments about hegemonic culture” (Booth 2015). Booth’s statement, however, should not be misinterpreted to mean that all fandom is inherently critical fandom. In fact, “complicit fandom as a particular type of fan audience that is uncritical of the media and reinforces dominant readings and hegemonies” (Booth 2015) is very prevalent. Several scholars have pointed towards the limitations, contradictions, and blindspots within fan spaces and fan studies, such as the centering of white, Western perspectives over those provided by fans and creators with different racial, cultural or ethnic backgrounds (cf. Pande 2018a; 2018b; Stanfill 2018). Nevertheless, the relationship between fandom and critical literacy *has* been exemplified by various fan efforts to increase racial diversity and LGBTQIA+ representation in different content worlds, via petitions against the ‘whitewashing’ of originally non-white characters in film and TV adaptations (cf. Kido Lopez 2012) or, conversely, the creation of fan art or fan fiction that reimagines canonically white characters as characters of color or canonically straight characters in queer relationships.

“Great big bugger:” The social impact of *Good Omens* fandom

Fannish activities and practices are as diverse as the fans themselves. To illustrate this, I sought to compile some key data on the *Good Omens* fandom to gain an approximate sense of its magnitude and social impact. Tracing a 35-year-old fandom is no easy feat, especially considering it has not been the subject of much scholarly interest yet (cf. Ingram-Waters 2023, 77). It is very hard to measure a fandom’s activity or quantify its cultural relevance. Luckily, the fandom itself has members keeping track of the developments and collectively chronicling

metadata. Online platforms and wikis provide information supporting the hypothesis that *Good Omens* has had an active, creative, and prolific fandom for decades. According to the fandom wiki Fanlore, *Good Omens* has had a dedicated following on LiveJournal since the mid-2000s, which then later mostly moved to Tumblr (cf. Fanlore 2024a).¹ There are also records showing that *Good Omens* fans were already known for their active rapport with Gaiman and Pratchett, long before engagement with fans was facilitated by Tumblr and Twitter (cf. Fanlore 2024a). Furthermore, “The *Good Omens* Holiday Exchange” in which fans create and receive gifts, such as fan fiction and fan art, was celebrating its 20th anniversary last year, once again proving the fandom’s longevity (cf. Fanlore 2024b).

Since the TV adaptation, however, there has been a drastic and measurable increase in fannish activity (cf. Cuntz-Leng 2025, 186 ff.). The fandom has consequently become more powerful, its cultural capital growing at rapid speed. More metrics suggest that the *Good Omens* fandom, once mobilized, is a formidable force to be reckoned with. A recent Kickstarter campaign to finance the *Good Omens* graphic novel, for instance, set a new record by reaching its target amount of money (GBP 25,000) in only ten minutes. “It proceeded to break the record for the highest-funded first 24 hours of a comic project as well as the most backed and funded comic overall” (Batts 2023), raising a total of GBP 2,419,973. Furthermore, ToastyStats (2019) observed *Good-Omens*-related developments on multi-fandom fan fiction repository Archive of Our Own (AO3) and found that within 45 days of the show’s release date, the amount of fan works doubled and, looking at the total number of works uploaded onto AO3 per month, there was a veritable surge that surpassed many other popular fandoms. This development further increased significantly following the release of the second season in 2023 (cf. Cuntz-Leng 2025, 188) but may have dropped since the sexual assault and abuse allegations against Gaiman have been reported by Tortoise Media (cf. Caruana Galizia/Gunning/Johnson 2024) in the summer of 2024.

1 This was also corroborated by my interviewee, Rachael, who herself was an active *Good Omens* fan on LiveJournal in the mid-2000s.

The most prominent theme in fan works by far is the ‘Ineffable Husbands’ ship, i. e., the romantic pairing of Crowley and Aziraphale in fan works, which may have shaped the outcome of the TV series itself. Edmonds, for example, directly traces the “amplified queerness of the show” in comparison to Aziraphale and Crowley’s less prominent roles and ambiguous relationship in the original novel back to the “interests and voices of the fandom” (Edmonds 2019):

“Only 60 of 369 pages feature Crowley and Aziraphale interacting with one another. [...] That’s 84 percent of the book in which Crowley and Aziraphale as characters, let alone as characters with any sort of relationship, don’t even factor in at all. [...] So what changed? [...] You, of course, already know where they got the idea. [...] [I]t was in fanfiction that I found [...] stories with Crowley and Aziraphale’s relationship as the focus [...]. The most exciting part about this is that the fandom had the power to shift the narrative of the original text.” (Edmonds 2019)

Good Omens, the TV show, has garnered widespread praise for being a shining example of LGBTQIA+ representation in popular fantasy media (cf. Edmonds 2019; Fleenor 2019; Asher-Perrin 2023; Weatherbed 2023). A key moment in this regard was the conclusion of season 2. The emotional kiss of Crowley and Aziraphale gave many fans, especially the ‘Ineffable Husbands’ shippers, what they had long hoped for: a confirmation of their love. As Weatherbed aptly puts it: “The fight is over. The shippers have won” (Weatherbed 2023).

This phenomenon is certainly not unheard of in fan studies, which concerns itself not only with what objects of fandom do with fans but equally as much with the question of what fans *do to their object of fandom* (cf. Lundy/Jenkins/Van Den Bulck 2020). In connection to this, Catherine Coker explores the concept of ‘liberated texts’ and finds that

“[b]y examining fan texts closely, we will see both exceptional readings and exceptional counter-readings of source texts as fans actively engage their chosen material with their personal politics. [...] [W]hen a fan

chooses to look at a work as something more than mere entertainment, s/he is ascribing a belief to it—one that the original author may or may not have intended.” (Coker 2012, 82)

Coker sees the liberation from the original text as a ‘political act’ in which fans attempt to address an aspect of the source material that they feel is inadequate (cf. Coker 2012, 86f.). In comparison to the original novel and season 1, season 2 greatly expands LGBTQIA+ visibility with a secondary storyline involving a lesbian romance between Nina and Maggie. Furthermore, the show has been labelled “radically inclusive” (Sam 2024) by Mediaversity regarding other aspects of queer identities, such as canonically non-binary/genderqueer characters, a more racially diverse cast, and the inclusion of characters with visible disabilities—all of which are groups regularly underrepresented in popular media, which many members of various fandoms have been seeking to change via petitions, email/letter-writing, voicing criticism in videos or on social media, and by creating inclusive fan art, fan fiction, or cosplay to fill the gap.

It is likely that such fannish activity has shaped the storyworld of *Good Omens*, too. “Liberated texts can become a new source unto themselves, which can be subsequently adopted not only by other fans but even by the creator-authors themselves. Such textual collaborations, sometimes known as ‘fan service,’ are becoming increasingly visible in new media” (Coker 2012, 94). Regarding the fans’ influence on *Good Omens*, Edmonds argues that “Gaiman and Pratchett might have created Aziraphale and Crowley, but in the years since the book’s publication, the fandom wrote their love story. This show is the fruit of that labor—a celebration of fan culture that, I’d argue, is as much *by* them as it is *for* them” (Edmonds 2019).

As a powerful community, the *Good Omens* fandom realizes its own potential and leverages it for civic and charitable engagement in various campaigns and formats. Previous research into fan activism gives us the tools to understand the motivational driving forces as well as the infrastructure that makes these activities possible in the first place. Since fandoms are moving targets, this essay cannot claim to comprehensively

cover all forms of *Good Omens* related activism/charity. It can only present a snapshot of a handful of examples to showcase the different forms and media in and through which civic engagement is being fostered and social change is promoted in the *Good Omens* fandom. For the sake of brevity and to give appropriate space to each of these meaningful contributions, civic engagement via charity raffles and fan work auctions (e.g., Fandom Trumps Hate²) as well as the particular impact of the *Good Omens* fan community in connection to LGBTQIA+ issues and visibility (e.g., cosplay of Aziraphale and Crowley at Pride marches or Pride-themed fan art) will be engaged with in depth in a future publication. For this essay, the following phenomena were investigated in more detail:

- Conventions, specifically The Ineffable Con
- Charity fanzines, specifically Good Old-Fashioned Lovers: A Good Omens Zine
- Celebrity (fan) activism

In addition to the exploration of these phenomena via online and social media research, two structured email interviews were conducted with Bethany and Rachael Windsor, the founders and organizers of The Ineffable Con (see Fig. 1 for the logo of the convention), and Shark and Bat, two moderators of Good Old-Fashioned Lovers: A Good Omens Zine (see Fig. 2 for the cover artwork of the fanzine). The object of these interviews³ was broadly to trace the motivations, reflections, learnings, and practices of fans who use *Good Omens* to do good. I would like to

2 An online auction of fan works, originally launched in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, that raises donations for progressive nonprofits and has generated over USD 300,000 in the past eight years. While many different fandoms take part in the auctions, *Good Omens* is listed among the top-most prolific fandoms within the project (Fandom Trumps Hate 2019; 2024).

3 Thirteen questions were sent to the respective participants to be answered in their own time, in as little or as much detail as they chose and with the explicit opportunity to skip questions or modify them to make them fit their respective endeavors, thereby ensuring the flexibility of the format and that only questions the partners felt comfortable in answering, would, in fact, be answered.

take this opportunity to thank them for their time and their detailed insights, which have allowed me to zoom in on two prevalent forms of fannish civic engagement, charity convention organization, and charity zine production, respectively.



Fig. 1: The Ineffable Con: Logo
© Rachael and Bethany Windsor



Fig. 2: Good Old-Fashioned Lovers Zine: Front Cover
© Bat (@batfiend_) and Shark (@melonsharks)

"Ineffable" efforts: Good Old-Fashioned Lovers and The Ineffable Con

Prior to the internet, collaborative magazines created by fans for fans, featuring fan art, fan fiction, and other forms of creative expression, were one of the main channels through which fans could connect with the community and share their works. While the advent of social media may have shifted these dynamics, fanzines are still very much alive and their creators have adapted towards mixing analogue with digital production and distribution strategies (many zines, for instance, are available in print and as PDF files). At the time of writing, Fanlore (2024c) records 35 different fanzines based on *Good Omens*, most of them charity zines, donating a portion or even all their proceeds to charitable causes. The dedicated volunteer creators, coordinated by at least one if not a team of moderators, spend hours of unpaid labor crafting works that channel proceeds into multiple different organizations. I was fortunate enough to interview the moderators of one charity fanzine, Bat and Shark, who describe their endeavor as follows: "Good Old-Fashioned Lovers: A Good Omens Zine is an unofficial fan-made charity zine where we reimagine our favorite romantic comedies as Aziraphale and Crowley from Good Omens, through (mainly) movie posters, but also comics, illustrations and fanfiction." Proceeds from the zine support Doctors Without Borders, an organization chosen by the moderators for their humanitarian work in crisis areas, especially their current efforts in Gaza.

Fan conventions have an equally longstanding tradition. Some of the most prominent fan-organized *Good Omens* events are hosted by The Ineffable Con (TIC), whose organizers, Bethany and Rachael Windsor, I have had the privilege of interviewing as well. They "run conventions, online parties and rewatches for fans of *Good Omens*." Their biggest event, the annual convention, has been held since 2019, integrating charity work into its core mission from the beginning. Through ticket sales and additional donations, TIC, which is "entirely run by volunteers in their free time," fundraises toward Alzheimer's

Research UK (ARUK) in memory of Pratchett. Bethany and Rachael underscore, “TIC events are a labour of love—we are not paid, they are not our job, and they are better when we have support through volunteers.”

The following findings highlight several features and topics that both teams of interviewees have in common, even though their methods for leveraging their creative output for good differ. To create a profile of my interviewees as fans as well as civic agents, I asked them questions regarding their fannish and civic identities and personal connections to the source material, namely, how they became part of the *Good Omens* fandom, if they were involved in any other fandoms/fan projects and whether they had engaged in other forms of activism/charity.

TIC’s organizers, Rachael and Bethany, both have strong, but very different connections to *Good Omens*. For Rachael, *Good Omens* has been a longstanding favorite since childhood; she first read it after running out of Pratchett’s Discworld books in the early 1990s. Her interest was rekindled in 2006 as *Good Omens* became a popular topic on LiveJournal, which led her to fan fiction. Years later, the release of the *Good Omens* TV adaptation coincided with her return to the UK after living abroad. Feeling isolated, she turned to the fandom for connection and founded TIC to bring fans together and raise money in memory of Pratchett. “I’ve run lots of fan conventions before,” Rachael shares, “and the goal is always to raise money for charity as they’re non-profit but inevitably end up with some money left over.” Bethany came to *Good Omens* more recently. She watched the show to have something to talk about with a colleague and found herself “hooked” by episode 3: “I took straight to Twitter to find out what other people were saying, and that’s how I found The Ineffable Con.” At a time when her job had her frequently traveling, she found community in the fandom, which suited her need for a hobby that was not tied to one particular geographical location.

Bethany is not involved in other fandoms, while Rachael is also a dedicated fan of *Star Trek* (1966–) and J.R.R. Tolkien and has prior experience in fundraising and advocacy in and outside fandom:

“I was Treasurer of the Tolkien Society in the early-mid 2000s, which is a registered educational charity. When I started running my own conventions I started with Harry Potter, raising about £10k for Book Aid International. I then ran Star Trek conventions for many years which raised money for a variety of causes, either LGBT-related or charities relating to illnesses affecting the community. Outside of fandom, I’ve been involved in activism as a member of a political party [...], I volunteered on the campaign for voting reform in 2010/11 and was a speaker at the March for Science rally in Austin, Texas in 2017.”

For Shark and Bat of the Good Old-Fashioned Lovers fanzine, *Good Omens* fulfills their shared love of “character-driven” stories, romantic comedies, and queer representation in the media. They “hop fandoms a lot” and have worked on other fanzines before, many of which “do end up being charity zines” with significant fundraising success:

“We ran Pink To Blue, a Half Life VR: But The AI is Self Aware zine that raised \$6k for The Able Gamers Charity. Shark co-runs a press with the fulfillment mod of this project, Ghost, named GhostShark Press which has also run and published charity zines for fandoms like Bill and Ted with Party On Dudes! (which raised \$9k+ for the Save The Musical Foundation) and even fandoms like My Chemical Romance with The Venom Zine (raised \$11k+ for the Transgender Law Center.)”

Participants in fannish social endeavors come to them in different ways. These differences—varying levels of experience with fundraising and community organization, identification with monofandom vs. multifandom, long- or short-term affiliation with the fandom—appear to be no divisive factor or hindrance for joining.

I also asked participants to describe their project regarding its origins and motivations, goals, the cause it supports—along with the reasoning behind this choice—and how they measure and define the impact of their project by reflecting on their achievements in whatever success metrics they found most meaningful. For Rachael and

Bethany, the success of TIC is measured as follows: “We consider TIC successful by the metrics of funds raised and attendance at events,” Bethany explains, noting the positive response from attendees and ARUK’s recognition of TIC as a major fundraiser during the pandemic. The 2024 TIC hosted 560 people in person or online, from all over the world, and raised GBP 11,148.71 for ARUK. Since their first event in 2019, they have raised over GBP 51,000 in total. Their success also encompasses specific moments at these conventions, i. e., when fans learned how much their support had contributed to scientific research: “ARUK shared how many test tubes the [...] [money] had raised, which was well received by the audience.” This feedback loop by fans reacting to what they have achieved as a community also seems to be a crucial motivational factor. Bethany further explains: “We keep doing it for several reasons: the community, the charity fundraising, the fact we both like organizing events and that TIC 1 was what brought us together (we later got married... Good Omens themed wedding, of course!).”

For Shark and Bat, the “all-encompassing goal” of their zine was to bring artists together to “celebrate both Good Omens, as well as romantic comedies” in a format for charity “so that we may put the love we have for the things we enjoy into some good.” Like Rachael and Bethany, they find joy in the community’s shared dedication to what they could accomplish together: “The motivation to keep [up] the project was the sheer determination to see it brought to life.” The moderators view the success of their endeavors through the mix of charitable impact and creative collaboration by over 85 artists, stating: “There are a lot of aspects about our book that we are proud of, including the wonderful work our artists have contributed, the design aspects, [and] the beautiful merch that has been made.” Although their final donation is still pending, Shark and Bat have shared that they are very satisfied with the amount that has been raised so far.

I also wanted to explore my interview partners’ perspective on fan activism and to give them an opportunity to consider their respective project’s place within the broader context of civic engagement in fan

culture, including the question of whether they considered themselves ‘fan activists.’ In order to investigate if/how Jenkins’ (2012) prevalent idea of ‘mapping’ was applicable to the analysis of these case studies, I further asked how *Good Omens* specifically related to my partners’ charity or advocacy in their opinion, i. e., whether they saw any parallels between the story world and their work.

Both groups expressed reluctance to identify as ‘fan activists.’ They view their activities more as creative charity fundraising rather than broader political activism, suggesting a common understanding of the boundaries of their endeavors. They do, however, see some overlap with Fandom Forward’s definition: “Fan activism is an organizing strategy that draws parallels between beloved pop culture and real world issues of inequity to mobilize fans for social good.” Bethany explained: “The events give a focal point for fundraising, reminding fans of the creator of *Good Omens* and using this link to raise money for a good cause. The ‘mobilisation’ is in the fundraising and the events are the vehicle.” Shark and Bat share this view and emphasize that they believe this kind of work does not always need direct parallels to real-world issues, saying, “[t]here’s a lot of power in loving something and using that love to spread a good message, regardless of its relevance to real-world events.”

The interviewees’ responses, while not representative of the entire fandom, raise new questions concerning our understanding of fan activism. At the same time, previous research can help to contextualize these responses, which seemingly go against established definitions. In fact, there is no single, uniform definition of fan activism. While frequently cited in the field, Jenkins (2012) never claims to have conclusively defined what fan activism is. Bethan Jones points to “the absence of commonly agreed-upon or conventionally used definitions of ‘fan charity’ and ‘fan activism’” (Jones 2012) and proceeds to establish how they can possibly be distinguished from one another. Following Merriam-Webster’s definition of charity as “generosity and helpfulness especially toward the needy or suffering” and of activism as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in

support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue,” she ultimately defines “‘fan charity’ as a concerted effort made by a group of fans to raise money for an organization nominated by or affiliated with their fandom, and ‘fan activism’ as fans actively campaigning for issues nominated by or affiliated with the fandom, either through issues raised in the text or by awareness raised by the star” (Jones 2012). This distinction between fan charity and fan activism seems to correspond to the interviewees’ perspectives as well. Nevertheless, a certain permeability between these two terms is evident. For instance, I do consider TIC’s awareness raising for Alzheimer’s research at their various events and via their online presence as equally important as their monetary donations and perhaps more aligned with conceptions of activism than charity. In a similar vein, Good Old-Fashioned Lovers’ framing of their efforts specifically for Doctors Without Borders emphasizes the organization’s current humanitarian aid work to support Palestinian civilians; thereby also potentially helping to raise awareness for the overall issue and, arguably, taking a political stance.

The interviewees’ views on ‘mapping’ can be contextualized in a similar way. This may mean that ‘mapping’ strategies need to be conceptualized in broader terms than perhaps originally anticipated. It may also mean that parallels between text and real world are not equally central or overt in each project. While all four interviewees made it clear that looking for explicit parallels or analogies was not part of their work, I agree with the observation that though “[s]cholars of fan and celebrity activism often focus on cases that contain an explicit reference to the source text” (Hunting/Hinck 2017, 443), the connections between source material and civic appeal can be much more implicit and abstract. In the case of *Good Omens*, they can be found in the values it conveys, such as pacifism, love for humanity, acceptance, and an overall belief in human potential and agency to make a difference.

"People being fundamentally people:"
Celebrity (fan) activism

Critics of celebrity (fan) activism often dismiss fans as uncritical followers who support causes merely because their favorite celebrities encourage them, without understanding the actual issues involved (cf. Hunting/Hinck 2017, 432). However, these critiques overlook how fan-celebrity relationships have been shown to inspire civic engagement. Research suggests that "commitment to a celebrity may actually be connected to a commitment to a public issue" (Hunting/Hinck 2017, 432) and can serve as a bridge to subsequent broader civic action (cf. Hunting/Hinck 2017, 433), mobilizing even fans with no prior activism experience (cf. Bennett 2014, 138). This challenges the idea that celebrity fandom necessarily serves to 'depoliticize or distract' people, instead showcasing its potential to empower them and inspire meaningful social engagement (cf. Bennett 2014, 139 and 145).

Previous studies on celebrity fan activism (cf. Bennett 2014; Xanthoudakis 2020; Hunting/Hinck 2017; Jones 2012), revealed that fans look for certain qualities in a celebrity who inspires them towards social movement. Celebrities can employ various strategies towards mobilizing their fan bases for social good: mediating authenticity and proximity, highlighting community, acknowledging fan labor, and establishing a 'paratextual triangle.' When looking at prominent figures in the franchise that have potentially impacted the fans' desire to 'do good with *Good Omens*,' four main personas come to mind: Gaiman, Pratchett, Tennant, and Sheen. All these key players in the storytelling of *Good Omens* have leveraged their fame and some of their fortune to champion social causes, each taking on various issues in distinctive ways that connected to their fan base and the broader public.

Pratchett was not only an advocate for Alzheimer's awareness and patron of ARUK (cf. Tubby 2017) but also a passionate supporter of wildlife conservation, serving as a trustee of the Orangutan Foundation, a UK-based charity dedicated to protecting orangutans and their rainforest habitats. Sheen is widely recognized as a philanthropist and

activist, supporting both global and local endeavors, especially in his home country, Wales, such as Keep Wales Tidy or TREAT Trust Wales. Tennant, similarly, is known for supporting many different charities, such as Headway Essex, Circle or Worldwide Cancer Research, and advocating for various social justice causes, including, perhaps most prominently, LGBTQIA+ rights, particularly speaking out on behalf of trans- and nonbinary youth, which has recently even won him a Celebrity Ally award at the 2024 British LGBTQIA+ Awards (cf. Butt 2024).

Until recently, Gaiman upheld a similarly positive public image. He has been known for supporting multiple humanitarian causes, for instance as a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, advocating for refugees' rights. He has also been a patron of many other organizations such as the Bookend Trust and RAINN. However, recent sexual assault and abuse allegations reported by Tortoise Media (cf. Caruana Galizia/Gunning/Johnson 2024) have cast a profound shadow over his past advocacy. The UN Refugee Agency has recognized these allegations as "very serious" (@pcaruanagalizia 2024). Fans, in turn, have responded to the allegations in ways that fall under the umbrella of fan activism: There are movements within the fandom urging the respective organizations to distance themselves from Gaiman via email/letter writing campaigns and also petitions demanding proper investigation as well as calling on Amazon to fire Gaiman and replace him with a new showrunner (cf. "Fire Neil Gaiman" 2024). Additionally, an "international Good Omens fundraiser" called On Our Own Side was launched via GoFundMe in September 2024; its mission is "to channel this fandom's passion for Good Omens into a benefit for the Take Back The Night Foundation to fund real-world support for sexual abuse survivors" and, so far, over USD 7,200 have been raised (On Our Own Side 2025). These actions show that fan activism (and related phenomena) can, in fact, encompass practices that challenge and oppose the commercial rights holders/key players of the fan object itself—even if they are celebrities who previously endorsed/inspired social engagement.

Hunting and Hinck trace celebrity activism and its rich research history back to the emergence of radio and television itself (cf. Hunt-

ing/Hinck 2017, 434). In recent years, the prevalence of celebrity activism has increased notably, in fact, nonprofits often rely on this kind of star power for their social endeavors (cf. Brockington/Henson 2014, 432). Celebrities possess unique opportunities to raise awareness and inspire action for important causes in ways that other people cannot. Their influence and financial resources enable them to put various humanitarian efforts in the spotlight and secure funding for them, and even directly address, work with, and lobby for politicians to tackle certain issues (cf. Van Den Bulck 2018, 77).

A “spectrum or continuum” (Jones 2012) of celebrity involvement in fan activism/charity can be recognized—from endeavors that are celebrity-led to those that feature less overt involvement and control by the celebrity, where “the onus is on the fans themselves to organize, act, produce, and raise awareness” (Jones 2012) and the celebrity’s active role is either non-existent or de-centered to merely ‘aiding’ their fans’ work, e.g., by donating items that can be auctioned off.

However, even on the end of the spectrum where celebrity involvement is less central, fans’ sense of direct connection to these personas may still be beneficial to a cause. With the exception of the late Pratchett, of course, all the *Good Omens* key players (directly or at least indirectly) maintain regular contact with their fans via frequent social media posts and have a wide reach on various platforms with easily over half a million followers each, if not more.⁴ These platforms have significantly facilitated mobilizing fans for social engagement. Social media enables celebrities “previously thought of as untouchable” (Xanthoudakis 2020) to foster closeness by sharing personal, vulnerable moments as well as mundane details of their daily lives, shifting the communication structure from a ‘vertical’ to a ‘horizontal’ one that

4 Gaiman was present on Tumblr and Bluesky until February 2024 and had, according to the latest available data 602,238 (December 2022) and 316,060 followers (April 2025) on these platforms respectively. Sheen currently has 684,089 followers on X; Tennant does not have a personal social media account, but he frequently appears on his wife Georgia Tennant’s Instagram which currently has 434,000 followers (April 2025).

promotes interaction and community (cf. Bennett 2024, 150). Frequent updates create a sense of relatability, positioning celebrities on the same level as their fans (cf. Bennett 2014, 140). Such displays, termed ‘celebrity confessionals,’ amplify authenticity, establish trust, and subsequently encourage fans to emotionally invest in the celebrity’s causes (cf. Redmond 2008, 110).

Sheen, Tennant, and their partners have been known to establish a sense of proximity in these ways as well, by posting pictures and videos of (joint) family outings, cooking or other chores, spending time with their pets, etc. They have also been shown as emotionally vulnerable when promoting civic endeavors: Sheen broke down and walked away from the camera whilst shooting a documentary about children in the care system (cf. Evans 2022), Tennant got ‘choked up’ discussing the Russo-Ukrainian war while hosting Comic Relief (cf. Allday 2022). The emotional openness in a public forum is crucial for a connection that can eventually mobilize fans towards humanitarian efforts: “Through celebrities, we feel outrage at suffering on the other side of the world” (Hunting/Hinck 2017, 435). Displays such as these also evoke a perception of genuine, caring, ‘good’ citizens, politically engaged, aspiring to ‘do the right thing,’ and standing up for what they believe in (cf. Bennett 2014, 147).

Celebrities often employ familial and community language, such as ‘we’ and ‘our’ pronouns in their communication as well, emphasizing unity in shared group efforts and framing activism as a partnership with fans (cf. Xanthoudakis 2020). This framing minimizes the divide between celebrity and audience, cultivating a sense of equal status and belonging. Engaging fans in shared experiences of any kind reinforces the idea of this companionship. Tennant, Gaiman, and Sheen have, for instance, all participated in *Doctor Who* (1963–) ‘tweetalongs’ and frequently use the above-mentioned language when endorsing organizations and fundraising efforts. For example, this can be seen in Sheen’s videos on Twitter [@michaelsheen] about MabGwalia in 2023 (“We have to make sure that fairness comes first;” “There should be nothing holding *us* back from achieving what *we* can dream of”) or on Hey-

GirlsUK (“HeyGirls, a UK-based social enterprise, is here to help *us* dads end the stigma of talking about periods”) in 2019.

Furthermore, celebrities wishing to harness fannish potential for civic purposes must publicly acknowledge and show respect for the significant amount of time and energy fans devote to their fandom. Xanthoudakis finds that the encouragement of fans’ shipping activities “implies an acceptance, enthusiasm, and participation in fannish behavior” which, in turn, elicits “trust and loyalty” (Xanthoudakis 2020) from fans. This is vital to the success of mobilization efforts. In this vein, Sheen has openly admitted to using fan fiction as inspiration for the role of Aziraphale (cf. Edmonds 2019) and often responds to fan theories, memes, and fan art on X—to the delight of his followers. In general, Pratchett, Gaiman, Tennant, and Sheen have all earned a reputation for their strong rapport with fans, frequently and appreciatively engaging with their ideas and creative contributions. These acts of acknowledgment encourage ongoing participation and have the potential to empower fans to see their individual (artistic and civic) efforts as impactful.

Hunting and Hinck build on Elizabeth Ellcessor’s (2016) work, observing that activism cannot only “be knitted into a celebrity persona to create a connected star text,” but that a third dimension can be added to this, namely, the fusion “with on-screen characters’ personae and narratives” (Hunting/Hinck 2017, 433). They thereby conceptualize “a paratextual triangle” in which “a commitment to a celebrity but also to an on-screen character and to a public issue” are being “reinforced and unified through the routinized experience of social media” (Hunting/Hinck 2017, 433). They argue that television celebrities, who by the nature of their profession “already face the potential for slippage between actor and character,” can play with these overlaps by alluding to “principles and iconic images introduced in the television text” (Hunting/Hinck 2017, 436). This strategy has the power to boost the impact of their civic appeals by ‘merging’ the intimacy fans feel for a character with the intimacy they feel for the performer, thereby also ‘imbuing’ the celebrity’s activism with the values their character represents on screen (cf. Hunting/Hinck 2017, 432). These connections serve to ce-

ment the previously mentioned image of authenticity, combining the various dimensions to present fans with the impression of a person who ‘practices what they preach.’

For example, Pratchett’s fascination with orangutans even made its way into a character in his Discworld series: the librarian of the Unseen University. Pratchett’s involvement in causes to do with protecting endangered species and environmental preservation is also echoed in the themes of *Good Omens*. As for establishing a parallel between Sheen’s advocacy and *Good Omens*, he has been overtly compared to his character by Gaiman himself, who stated: “I wanted to cast him as an angel because he really is a Good Person” (@neil-gaiman 2021). Sheen’s public image as a compassionate advocate aligns well with Aziraphale’s role in *Good Omens*. His joint endeavor with *Supernatural*’s (2005–2020) Mi-sha Collins, #SuperGood, for instance, consisted of a T-Shirt depicting their respective angel characters, Aziraphale and Castiel, to fundraise against homelessness (cf. Highfill 2020). Tennant has similarly alluded to his character and related iconic imagery when promoting the ‘David Tennant and Friends Charity Raffle’ for ACCORD Hospice. Tennant’s promotional video message is shot in his trailer “from the set of *Good Omens 2*” (People’s Fundraising 2022), wearing his hair styled as Crowley. The actor’s performance as Crowley also resonates well with his overall dedication to LGBTQIA+ rights, since his character transcends heteronormativity and gender norms.

When Sheen and Tennant ‘join forces’ in their charitable efforts, such as in their co-moderation at the “Pub in the Park All Star Charity Gala” (FuckYeahGoodOmens 2024) in aid of the Multibank, they arguably further increase their impact on the *Good Omens* fan community. Tennant and Sheen’s on-screen chemistry has been much lauded in *Good Omens* and *Staged* (2020–2023) (cf. Lam/Raphael 2022, 97ff.; Lewis 2024). Joint appearances, such as this one, suggest an authentic link between their personas, their characters, and their common desire to do good—all of which fans can invest in. When constructing the celebrity as a ‘role model’ for fans, the paratextual triangle comes into play again. Beloved characters *and* their actors are ascribed with certain attributes

by fans which they think are important and aspirational (cf. Jones 2012). A key element to this process of ascription is the idea that when fans find a role model in a celebrity, they are actually “responding to attributes [...] that already exist within themselves”—i. e., the potential for civic action lies less in the ‘actual’ celebrity and more in fans’ desire and ability to bring the positive attributes associated with the celebrity “into their own lives for the benefit of themselves and others” (Jones 2012).

These favorable interpretations of the phenomenon notwithstanding, one needs to remember a few important truths when discussing celebrity inspired (fan) activism. Critics argue that celebrity activism reflects and perpetuates the neoliberal status quo instead of emphasizing structural transformation, self-reliance, and equitable partnerships (cf. Van Den Bulck 2018, 77). Xanthoudakis addresses another problematic aspect of these unequal partnerships, which can arise when the perceived emotional proximity within a parasocial relationship is harnessed towards mobilization for fan activism: “When a celebrity refers to a fandom as a family and works to treat that fandom as a friend, it can be very easy for the audience to labor in excess and endanger their mental health for what will still be a relationship with a very large imbalance of power” (Xanthoudakis 2020). Additionally, activism that heavily relies on emotional connections to a celebrity runs the risk of strengthening the fans’ loyalty to that individual more than their actual commitment to the underlying public issues (cf. Brockington/Henson 2014, 443). Ultimately, critics point out that celebrity activist campaigns can be somewhat “self-serving” (Hunting/Hinck 2017, 435), promoting the celebrity’s image and brand and ensuring media coverage rather than sustainably addressing the concerns they claim to champion (cf. Bennett 2014, 148).

Celebrity charity and activism could even be considered a vital part of “a strategy for building and maintaining audience loyalty” (Jones 2012). However, Stuart Hall warns that there is a danger in “think[ing] of cultural forms as whole and coherent,” trying to separate the ones that are “wholly authentic” from those that are “wholly corrupt,” rather than recognizing that artefacts that “function in the

domain of the ‘popular’” are all “deeply contradictory” (Hall 1981, 513). The greatest risk in a binary construction and expectation of moralistic absolutes is that it can paralyze any efforts to do good. Celebrities potentially draw other benefits from their advocacy and charity—but so do the fans. They may initially join a movement for the friendship and community or take part in a charity raffle or auction primarily because they want the item, with the charitable aspect being a secondary factor (cf. Jones 2012). In this sense, there is a good chance that celebrities showcasing a kind of “messy” or “im-pure activism” (Hunting/Hinck 2017, 441) further reinforce the stars’ semblance of approachability; thus building trust with fans who are equally aware of their ‘imperfections.’

The fact, for example, that Sheen and Tennant, via their involvement with *Good Omens*, have contracts with Amazon, a company which has made headlines due to allegations of environmental issues, tax avoidance, and workers’ rights abuse, does not just seem ironic given the themes of the story but also runs counter to many of the causes they publicly support. At the same time, audience members who stream on and have packages delivered from Amazon themselves may not only be able to look past but actually empathize with the impossibility of being morally pure within a neoliberal system. Much like the characters in *Good Omens*, people are not infallible.

There is, however, a line. With allegations about sexual assault/abuse coming to light, many fans agree that Gaiman has crossed that line. They, along with various organizations he has been publicly associated with, must now grapple with re-negotiating their relationships with him. Bethany and Rachael emphasize in their interview: “The reason for TIC’s charity is Sir Terry—who wrote 75 % anyway).” By referencing an old interview snippet, in which Pratchett indeed mentioned that he “wrote a bit over two thirds of Good Omens” (Breebart/Kew 2016), they find a strategy to disentangle Gaiman as star persona from both the *Good Omens* text and their fan-cultural efforts. In a statement issued in their newsletter, The Ineffable Con’s organizers wrote:

“[W]e [...] want to make it clear that while we hope to continue to celebrate Good Omens through our events, this does not equate to an endorsement of Neil Gaiman or his alleged actions. We stand with those who have bravely come forward with their stories. Our priority is to ensure that our events remain a welcoming space for everyone. We want to continue to host events that centre around Good Omens in a way that aligns with our values and to foster a respectful and supportive environment for all members of our community. With that in mind, we are asking you, our community, whether you would like to see The Ineffable Con 6.”

Fans can distance themselves from people they previously held in high regard and separate their love for the creation from the creator. Conversations about how to support only certain aspects and/or creators of the source material or how to do so without financially benefitting somebody you do not wish to support are being held by the hundreds on social media. Stereotypes about fans blindly idolizing celebrities fall flat in the face of such discussions.

Perhaps it is beneficial to adopt a pragmatic view of seeing celebrities merely as “a catalyst” (Bennett 2014, 149) for social change—no more, no less. In fact, my admittedly very small-scale sample of interviewees did not center celebrities in their actions at all. Apart from Pratchett’s significance to Bethany and Rachael, no celebrities were cited as influential or motivational. This de-centering of idols also, arguably, makes fan activism/charity more sustainable because it means that movements and actions from within the fandom do not solely hinge on the personality, moral character, or reputation of individuals and can thus not be thwarted by their potential misconduct either. As the prominent example of the *Harry Potter* fandom shows, fans are capable of claiming a text as “theirs” (Duggan 2022, 163), separating it from its creator and adapting it to reflect their own values. Despite Rowling’s transphobic stance, fan works continue to thrive through queer-affirming reinterpretations (cf. Cuntz-Leng 2024, 39), sustained by the text’s “polysemic richness” (Cuntz-Leng 2024, 57) and its consequent open-

ness to more inclusive readings. *Good Omens* shares this interpretive flexibility: its themes create space for readings that resonate with multiple causes of social justice and sustainability regardless of whether the key players involved in its creation embody these ideals or not.

"There'll be paperwork:"
From source text to (future) action

The fact that neither set of interview partners chose to overtly relate their endeavors back to elements of the source text is a very interesting finding. However, interviewees in a qualitative small-scale setting cannot speak for everybody in the fandom. In my role as an 'acafan,' I personally see overt connections and parallels between the storyworld and our real world's most pressing problems and I am not alone in this assessment.

Adam has, for example, been described as a "mouthpiece [...] speak[ing] for the generation of children and young people that will have to heft the consequences of the abuse that their elders heaped upon the planet" (O'Brien 2019). The growth of Adam's powers parallels his education about environmental destruction and injustice; he becomes increasingly angry about the state of the world and frustrated with the adults' attitudes and inaction. Many young people in our real world today share a profound sense of similar anger (cf. Tseveni/Proutsos/Tseveni/Tigkas 2023).

In this regard, *Good Omens* has actually increased in relevance 35 years after the novel's initial release (cf. O'Brien 2019). The Four Bikers of the Apocalypse—War, Pollution, Famine, and Death—symbolically stand in for what can be called humanity's biggest challenges. Via the rhetorical figure of personification, current complex and pressing problems that kill people by the millions globally are cast into a more tangible form. Thus, the idea of overcoming them becomes more accessible as well.

In the book, Adam tells his friends, the Them, to take sticks, stones, and grass to recreate the symbolic weapons of the Apocalyptic riders

(a sword for War, a scale for Famine, and a crown for Pollution). He reminds them of the games they play, their capacity to imagine, to get creative and make do with what they have. At the final ‘showdown,’ the children are armed with nothing but their makeshift tools and a lot of imagination. In the end, Pepper defeats War, Wensleydale takes out Famine, and Brian banishes Pollution, temporarily at least (cf. Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 422 f.). In the TV series, while the outcome remains the same, the scene plays out quite differently. The Them each face one of the riders by saying what they believe:

BRIAN: “I believe in a clean world!”

WENSLEYDALE: “I believe in food and a healthy lunch.”

PEPPER: “I believe in peace, bitch.” (StE6)

What these two variations have in common, however, is their emphasis on imagination and the fact that words and symbols can have an enormous impact. Assuming that we “live in an age of political fantasy” (Duncombe 2019, 24) in which “[t]he political terrain [...] is largely one of signs and symbols, stories and spectacles” (Duncombe 2019, 27), those fighting for social justice and a healthy planet must recognize the power of these elements to harness them for civic purposes.

This is in accordance with the aforementioned concept of civic imagination:

“We define civic imagination as the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions; one cannot change the world without imagining what a better world might look like. Beyond that, the civic imagination requires and is realized through the ability to imagine the process of change, to see oneself as a civic agent capable of making change, to feel solidarity with others whose perspectives and experiences are different than one’s own, to join a larger collective with shared interests, and to bring imaginative dimensions to real-world spaces and places.” (Jenkins/Peters-Lazarro/Shresthova 2020, 5)

The fantasy text, however, should not be misunderstood to provide any kind of ‘blueprint’ for how we or future generations come to approach problems in the real world (cf. Duncombe 2012, 13). On the contrary, its potential lies precisely in the fact that there can be no 1:1 translation. “When we read a fantasy story [...], we are simultaneously enveloped in a commentary about the real world” (Castro 2021, 3); but since the “story, settings, costumes, and characters are always, at some level, absurd,” we are kept “from fully losing ourselves in the prepackaged imagination of another” (Duncombe 2012, 13). Therefore, we have no choice but to make our own plans and arrive at new conclusions and courses of action.

In many ways, *Good Omens* is a celebration of humanity’s imagination and agency. Imagination is described as a defining feature of humans (cf. Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 43), which most angels and demons lack. Humanity’s potential to bring about change through imagination and free will is highlighted over and over (cf. Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 67) and the topic of agency is central to all major plotlines: Aziraphale and Crowley go against the commands of their respective ‘higher-ups’ in trying to avert the apocalypse, Anathema Device decides not to follow Agnes Nutter’s prophecies anymore and chooses her own destiny, Newton Pulsifer descends from a long line of witch-hunters but falls for a witch, the Them speak back against their leader, Adam, when his powers turn destructive. And finally, Adam himself chooses not to bring about Armageddon even though “it is written” (Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 431) in the Great Ineffable Plan. All these flawed, imperfect characters can each do their part to save the world, despite making mistakes, being selfish, clumsy, or misinformed along the way. This serves as a strong message of hope that—as clichéd as this sounds—we, “people being fundamentally people” (Gaiman/Pratchett 2006, 33), can make a difference. In other words, there is room for imperfect activism (as there is, within the aforementioned crucial boundaries, for equally imperfect role models). In *Good Omens*, everyone is flawed. This can be considered as a particular strength of the narrative when it comes to inspiring accessible forms of civic engagement. In our real world,

naysayers often seek to undermine activist efforts by sidestepping the actual issue (e.g., climate injustice) and instead attacking the advocates themselves—nitpicking and measuring these individuals against the standard of moral perfection, demanding that the activists be ‘angels’ (e.g., produce zero waste or emissions). When activists inevitably fall short of such an ideal, they are subsequently labelled as hypocrites and their right to criticize the status quo and speak on solutions is called into question (cf. De Ceglie 2019). A bitter side effect of such practices is the perpetuation of the myth of perfect activism. In consequence, the idea of contributing to positive change becomes unattainable when in fact, it is the imperfect masses that need to be mobilized for an idea or movement to take root.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore fan activism and related phenomena in the *Good Omens* fandom. Through diverse projects, practices, and by creating community-driven content, the fandom illustrates how fan practices extend beyond appreciation and creativity into meaningful social action. These endeavors are collaborative in nature: zines like *Good Old-Fashioned Lovers* involve the contributions of dozens of artists, while initiatives like *The Ineffable Con* rely on a network of volunteers to succeed. Even individual actions, like cosplaying at *Pride*, gain traction through their amplification on digital platforms by other fans. Similarly, celebrities can act as ‘catalysts’ for positive change only if and for as long as they have earned their fanbase’s trust in order to successfully mobilize them towards collective action. These efforts highlight the potential of fandom as a decentralized but profoundly interconnected force for civic engagement. At the same time, they invite critical reflection on the dynamics of fan-driven forms of civic participation and certain questions remain unanswered. For instance, with the TV series’ final installment being planned as a single episode and Gaiman stepping down from its production in the aftermath of the

sexual assault allegations (cf. Otterson 2024), how will the fandom sustain its energy and continue its social efforts once the series concludes?

Based on the fandom's longevity and prolificity, I am optimistic that it will persevere for many more years to come. Fan activism, as explored through *Good Omens*, underscores a timeless truth: narratives transcend their creators and the communities they inspire are often far more significant than the original work alone. As fandom continues to evolve, certain practices remain remarkably resilient. Events like The Ineffable Con follow a long tradition of (charity) conventions around shared passions, fanzines have been a staple of fan culture for decades and are used to fundraise for important causes, exemplifying the enduring connection between fandom and philanthropy. These practices stand the test of time because they are rooted in a simple yet powerful motivation: love. Love for a story and the values it represents—values that fans often carry into the real world in their efforts to create positive change—but also, importantly, the shared love of the fan community. Ultimately, this essay is intended not only to document the social achievements of the *Good Omens* fandom, but also to encourage its members to explore new ways to use their love and collective creativity for good, perhaps now more than ever. To the world.

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Thanks for Watching

Video Essays, Fan Theories, and YouTube

David Höwelkröger in conversation with Sendarya

As a YouTuber and video essayist, Sendarya has a unique insight both into the *Good Omens* fandom and the fan-cultural practices on YouTube that come out of it. In this interview, David Höwelkröger talks with Sendarya about the channel's history, her interaction with the fandom and experiences as a member of it as well as the challenges she faces on YouTube as a platform. The interview also applies Jason Mittell's concept of "orienting paratexts" (Mittell 2015, 261ff.) to fan theory videos. This conversation serves as a reflection on *Good Omens* as a media text from a fandom perspective. The interview was conducted via Zoom on Jun. 20, 2024.

On the channel's history

David Höwelkröger (DH): Sendarya, thank you for taking the time to do this interview! Let's begin with your channel history: How did you get started with your channel? You started posting videos on *Good Omens* in August 2023. However, your channel has existed since September 2013, so how did this idea of posting fan videos come about?

Sendarya (S): As you said, my YouTube channel has been around for longer than this *Good Omens* portion of it. I originally created it mostly as a gardening channel because I do have a rather large one. I wanted to share what I'm doing with it with my friends and family. And then, for a little while, I really got into making parody videos in another fandom.

DH: Yes, your *A Wheel of Time* (2021–) song parodies, I’ve seen those, from a year ago.

S: And that was really just for fun. This kind of started the same way. I didn’t sit down and think “I’m going to be a YouTuber.” I’m just making stuff to amuse myself. That’s basically what it was: After watching season 2 of *Good Omens*, I wanted to watch some breakdowns, theories, and analytical types of videos. But I couldn’t find any on YouTube. I suspect there are some on other platforms, but being not a spring chicken anymore, I don’t consume videos on TikTok. YouTube is still where I’m at. What I did find on here were some fan edits, so I made a few fan edits myself. But there wasn’t any video essay type of stuff on this particular fandom. So, I thought I’d make it myself and then I did and then it blew up pretty rapidly—probably because there were none before. My friends asked me “How did you do it?” and I said: “I found a niche. No one was filling it and I was just one of the first people filling it.” I just made the content I wanted to see, essentially.

DH: Great! I feel like this is a really common suggestion you get from other people in the creative field.

S: That’s true!

DH: To what extent would you conceptualize video essays as a means for fandom expression, both when you watch videos by others and on your own channel?

S: I think video essays are a great way for fans to go way out into the weeds and explore topics and ideas in depth. I also think such in-depth exploration can turn casual fans into more serious fans. Given the right circumstances, they can create discussion that really helps bring fans together, too.

As an example of how video essays may appeal even to casual fans, I may listen to another channel talk about some of the deep lore of Tolkien’s Middle Earth. I consider myself a ‘casual fan,’ as I have only read *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), and a few

short stories when I was younger. I have never read *The Silmarillion* (1977) or any of the things Tolkien's son published after his father's death. And I will probably never read those things. Video essays can be a great way for me to experience more about a world I already enjoy and make me feel more knowledgeable and connected to it. People often want to hear more about, and talk about, the things they love. If they don't have many, or in some cases, any friends or family to share the love of a fandom with, video essays seem to be one of the first places people look to fill that need.

DH: It's also remarkable to me how common analyses and breakdowns have become as fandom expressions over the last years, I mean YouTube is about to turn 20 years old. Genre-wise, your channel offers a lot of variety: You've already mentioned fan edits and parodies. There is certainly a sensibility of remixing pre-existing content in every fandom as a sort of appropriation (cf. Stevens 2020, 49 and 70; Coppa 2020, 11–15). But quantitatively, going from your playlists, you focus mostly on theories and analyses. How do you decide what to do each week as a new video? I've just seen you've uploaded a tier list (Sendarya 2024d).

S: Yes, at one point I was laying it out more specifically on purpose. Lately, because of the time of year [summer] and getting stuff done around the house, it's kind of been whatever I have time to do. It takes *a lot* more time to put together a thoughtful essay, do the research, and make it make sense and not have a ton of errors in it than it does to do a tier list. That was also fun. I try to do something every other week, at least. I just didn't have time to sit down and write a full essay and there was no news. It had been something I thought would be fun to do. It's life-dependent because it's not a job. Although it's kind of being sort of self-employed.

On theories and analysis in Sendarya's video essays

DH: How do you differentiate between theories and your essay videos in how you're approaching them as distinct formats? The comments below your videos, for example, refer to your theory videos as essays, too. They do include analysis, but they are different from, e.g., your video on Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016) (cf. Sendarya 2024b).

S: That's a tricky one. I've come across this problem lately when it comes to labeling the videos or putting them in watchlists. I would say all theories must, by definition, also contain analysis. You have to analyze things in order to get to a theory. However, not all analyses end in a theory. Even the tier list I just did is mostly analysis. All of it is analysis-based and then other things sometimes happen aside from it. Even the parodies are analysis-based because you have to watch what you're parodying and think about where the joke is. To me, the root is analyzing everything about the show, the dialogue, the humor, all of it.

Regarding *Arrival*, I love these kinds of movies that suck you in and that you can have a philosophical discussion with your family about. When my husband and I watch a movie or television show, we frequently spend hours talking about it over the next week or whatever and breaking it down. It's amazing that some media enables that level of discussion. That's why we tell stories to each other, isn't it? Not just to entertain but to also convey important information about our shared humanity. When I did this video, I wasn't sure how it would be received. It hasn't amassed many views as of now.¹ People really want you to stay in your lane on YouTube. You do anything else and they go, "No, thank you, I would not like to watch that," although the comments on the *Arrival* video have been pretty positive. It's still a lot of work though, and I'm going out on a limb with it, and it's a bit out of my lane, thematically speaking. I have a list of other media I want to talk about. But it's hard to stretch your neck out and put yourself out there, you know? I'm not terribly thick-skinned, so when you make

1 The video, uploaded on Feb. 16, 2024 has amassed 3,053 views as of Mar. 18, 2025.

any type of art—and I do see this as a kind of art—you have to make yourself vulnerable and emotionally risk yourself, at least a little.² So you just have to show it to people and see what happens. But sometimes you just don't have the internal drive to do it. My daughter—she's 17 now—got me into *Hazbin Hotel* (2023–). We also watched *The Good Place* (2016–2020) together. And these are shows I would also like to talk about on my channel, eventually, and branch out a little.

DH: I like what you said about analysis, which explains the motto on your channel header above the videos: “Exploring visual media through analysis.” Still, with regards to theories, you're maybe not constructing a thesis that is necessarily as explicit as in your “A Companion to Owls” (Sendarya 2023b) video, for example, which we will get to later.

S: Yeah, that's true. I don't really know. The theories usually come to me while I'm doing an analysis. I and a couple of friends of mine do rewatches. We'll share information back and forth. Sometimes, one of us will spot a small thing during the process of analysis that will cause us to say, “Well, what if *this* means *that*?” Then you just spawn a theory out of it. But to explain the theory—and I find that this happens a lot and I'm already joking about it—I sometimes spend 15 minutes talking about one frame. Because my theory hinges on one little thing I saw. I used to include a section in my older videos where I talked about what this means for the series. It's been harder and harder to do because there is only so much content and I can only speculate so far. Plus, I do feel like too much speculation can be problematic. We saw that a little bit recently in the fandom. I forget exactly what happened, but somebody asked Neil Gaiman something on social media. David Tennant had spoken to a fan about the ending of season 3. He said that it was a good ending, but he wasn't sure whether it would be an ending the fan would like. This kind of blew up in the fandom, though I didn't say anything about it. Neil was trying to shush everybody down

2 On the question whether YouTube videos can be considered art, see MacDowell 2019; on the question of vulnerability in audiovisual essays, see Kreutzer/Binotto 2023.

and try and make them stop panicking! I don't ever want to feed into this sort of speculation with my videos. It's not a healthy thing to do. Fandoms can get really hooked on what they want to happen and then they get disappointed when they see what *actually* happens and I don't want to be a part of that. That's why I'm always trying to tell people: "I'm happy if I'm proven wrong eventually. These theories are just for fun," you know?

DH: Right, so I think the difference between analysis and theories then comes down to speculating and theorizing collectively and maybe analyzing a bit more solitary because you tend to explain where you *tell* people your personal interpretations. It's good when all of this is purely happening on a plot level, but whenever extratextual factors come in, like statements from people involved in the series, then the fun is lost a bit.

S: Yes, agreed. Both aspects are present when analyzing media. There is a community aspect to it. People want to talk about their interpretations and that's a big deal. That's one of the reasons I've created a Discord server. I didn't want to make a Discord server, but I could see other people wanting another place to talk about it, which is weird because there are already five *Good Omens* servers. But there is also a level of, I don't want to say 'lecturing,' but ... yeah, that's essentially it because it's just me, talking. 'Explanatory' is a good word for that. My very first non-fan-edit type of theory video came about just because I had a random idea about the show (cf. Sendarya 2023a). Some of my theories are responses as to what's happening in the fandom—not just the news videos, which are an obvious response—but something I see or someone saying something and me wanting to address it. When I started to get into the fandom more and started reading other people's theories about the show, I read a particular theory that shall remain unnamed and I thought: "I want to explain what I think is actually happening." The theory I read was very convoluted, almost like a conspiracy theory. I wanted to provide a theory that is more straightforward about the metaphor happening in the show. But I never want to call anybody out or step on anybody else's theories.

DH: I appreciate the aspect of not calling members of the fandom out, but always keeping the engagement respectful. Because I'm aware of other fandoms having toxic aspects to it and there being a lot of drama.

S: Yes, I don't like that at all. I was in the *Star Wars* (1977–) fandom and used to be a big fan but then it got hairy. Most fandoms appear to end up that way, don't they? (laughs).

DH: Yeah, I don't know why. Whether it's just the anonymity online or the feedback loop ...

S: It takes a very small number of people to ruin it for everyone.³

On video essays as fan-cultural practice

DH: So, when season 2 was ending, *Good Omens* was already an established fandom. What do you think attracts people to this fandom?

S: That is a very good question and I think it's one we've all been trying to figure out. It's still a very small IP, comparatively. Two seasons of television, with a third one⁴ in the works, and one novel with a couple of additional things. But that's all there is, really. The dedication of the fandom is a pretty interesting thing because the people who love this *really* love it. Even though it is such a small thing. I think it has a lot of relatabilities to outsider themes. That's the main thing, for me. The

3 It is of course a different conversation when the original creator comes under attack. Since this interview was conducted before the allegations against Gaiman came to public, it does not discuss them any further. Between this interview and the publication of this book, Sendarya released a video statement about her decision to keep covering the series on her channel. She emphasizes the collective creative process behind *Good Omens*, especially regarding Terry Pratchett's contribution and the feeling of togetherness and community the fandom created that make the series feel special to her regardless of any allegations against Gaiman (cf. Sendarya 2024a; see also the introduction of this book).

4 This interview was conducted before the announcement that season 3 would become a 90-minute special.

fandom consists of a lot of people who feel they're in an out-group, whatever group that may be, so they can relate to one or more of the characters. Because all of the characters, not just the main two characters, but *all* of the characters are in some kind of out-groups as well and trying to cope with that. A lot of it just comes down to the themes of the story that are very relatable.

DH: Let's talk about your videos as fan practice a bit more: You started with your videos after season 2. Since you already mentioned 'gaps:' scholar Jason Mittell talks about gaps between serial installments—in this case, between seasons—that provide ample ground for speculation (cf. Mittell 2015, 27 f., 40, 46 and throughout).

S: Yes, that gap in the middle is really important for a fandom to fill in. It is where fandom thrives the most. I've even said to a lot of people to enjoy this time because when season 3 comes out, it's done. There will be a brief time afterward while everyone's enjoying it and talking about it. It's not going to keep going forever. This is really a precious moment.

DH: Definitely. Mittell is also interested in what he calls "the cultural practice of *theorizing*" (Mittell 2015 173). He calls videos such as yours "orienting paratexts" (Mittell 2015, 261 ff.) because they help fans to make sense of the things they have seen. In your "Companion to Owls Video," for example, you talk about the chiasmic structure of the second season, something that makes this television text worth going over and re-examining again and again. There is this 'drillable' quality to the series, that, according to Mittell, is used by so-called 'forensic fandom' to engage with a series or program (cf. Mittell 2009; Mittell 2012; Mittell 2015, 52 and 288 ff.). You do sort of allude to this practice in your video "Good Omens || PARODY Fan Vid || A Million Theories" (Sendarya 2024c). Can you talk a bit about how that came about and where else you might see this tendency, both in the fandom generally and in your other videos?

S: At least to some extent, this is just human nature. It's what is technically called apophenia or patternicity. We have a need to find patterns

and seek meaning in things, even when those things aren't really there. I'm well aware that a lot of what I'm seeing and reading meaning into may not be intended by the writers and actors, but that doesn't stop my need to keep looking. It's a natural function of the brain and I think a lot of people find it soothing. Nowadays you see this term 'hyperfixation' a lot online, and I think that this deep pattern seeking is one way that people, including myself, justify experiencing the same movie, TV show, book, etc. over and over again. First, we love it, then we look closer at it because we love it, and eventually we are looking even closer at it, almost in an attempt to justify why we love it.

DH: I want to take your analysis of the minisode "A Companion to Owls" (Sendarya 2023b) as a case study for your video essays in particular: It combines narrative theory and thematic analysis in an essayistic fashion and focuses on the flashback scenes in "The Cure" (S2E2) which tell the biblical story of Job from Aziraphale's and Crowley's perspective—back when they were still an angel and a demon in Heaven and Hell, respectively. One aspect I particularly noticed while watching the video was your comparative and contrasting application of the themes from *The Book of Job* to the themes of *Good Omens*. When I watch video essays, I always pay attention to the interaction between words and images, what Volker Pantenburg calls "videographic operations" (Pantenburg 2024). You primarily use voice-over for commentary (cf. Garwood 2016). On the visual level, words appear on the screen when you are quoting bible verses and you switch between still images and moving images of the episode. I would be interested to hear about your editing process.

S: I'm still so new to video editing. I'm using text inserts on-screen to depict anything that is an actual direct quote. I know that, visually, it's going to be easier for people to understand what I'm saying if it's text-on-screen. Not everyone watches videos with the subtitles turned on. With lists, it's the same kind of thing: whenever I'm trying to condense something or make a point, I will put it up in writing on screen. Whether it's stills or moving images, a lot of this is decided based on what I can get—especially back then. I did not have access to all of the

episodes at first. “A Companion to Owls” is one of my older ones, I think I did start to have some access to more images and more of the sections of the actual show. Some of it is just practical: YouTube will flag your content if you use footage for more than ten seconds. So, if something I’m trying to say is too long of a segment to show, then I will have to use still images. If it is a nice short segment, then I like to use the video. I also try to punctuate it and try to break it up, so that there is some more variety. Reading about how people consume YouTube content is also a factor. I found out that the first 15 to 30 seconds of a video is the most important part, so I tend to cram a lot of faster-paced stuff in there, so that people keep watching, as a hook. I wish I could tell you that I thought about it more academically, at least with regard to the video-editing portion. I’m also still learning how to make it more engaging and constantly improving. I just started to use other software to make little graphics.

On YouTube’s platform affordances

DH: You do have a point that, apart from it being a creative work, it’s also just a lot of pragmatics. “Platform affordances” (Ronzhyn/Cardenal/Battle Rubio 2023, 3178), like the Copyright ID system, watch time or the audience’s retention rate, shape the way videos are edited. That then contributes in the case of YouTube to so-called “platform vernaculars” (Burgess/Green 2018, 87; cf. Gibbs/Meese/Arnold/Nansen/Carter 2015), like having an engaging beginning. I think YouTube still has a lot of DIY spirit when you look at what was popular on the platform during its initial years. Nowadays, there are a lot of commercial professionals here, too. However, when you’re coming from a fandom and are deciding to use YouTube as a platform for your fandom expression and practices, it’s all very down-to-earth, even now. How do you deal with YouTube as a platform, not just with regards to the copyright system, but also the formalities like thumbnail design, titles, description, tags, and everything that’s connected to the uploading process?

S: That's been evolving over time, too. Of course, in my initial videos, I didn't know how to make a thumbnail. I just took a screenshot and put some text over it. I was just using my video editor to do everything because I didn't have any other tools, back then. That still seemed to work, it wasn't bad. I think that's because simplicity seems to work well for thumbnails. For a little while, my process became a lot more complicated, I was trying too hard. I've gone back to the simpler look. You need to get all of the information in the video across quickly and efficiently. If it's cluttered or too much, it tends to overwhelm people. Only recently did I realize that the video title doesn't have to match the one on the thumbnail, it should be different. That was maybe two or three months ago when I realized I should be doing those differently. It's just a constant learning process about how to keep people engaged. It gets harder to keep people engaged now because we're a year out from the show now. I've been spacing out my content a bit more because of that. Honestly, there is a lot of copying of what other people do, see what works, and do your own spin on it. People really like to see the same thing, I've discovered. They want familiarity and simplicity. I'm not even sure if tags still work on YouTube or have that much relevance. I tend to just copy them over from the last video. I write all of the things that go into the description box while the video is uploading to YouTube in five to ten minutes, I probably should get better at that and put a little bit more effort in ... (laughs)⁵

DH: I think hashtags might have somewhat replaced tags on YouTube.

S: Yes, when you're uploading, it even says now "Tags will not help people find your video." I think they used to. I think now it says all that's helpful here is common misspellings. I need to fix this too in my older videos. When I first started using tags, I didn't know how they worked. I didn't have hashtags in my first description of my first few videos. I use mostly the hashtags now, at the bottom of the video. I

5 For an academic discussion on visibility on YouTube, see Burgess 2021, 27–29 and Bishop 2018, 73; Bishop 2019; Bishop 2020; Arrigada/Bishop 2021 as well as the related concept of "platform imaginaries" (Es/Poell 2020).

don't know how useful those are, either. I think the majority of people, from looking at my analytics, just come from their feed and whether it pops up there, or not. Most people aren't searching for it, it's a very small percentage, 10 % or less that are searching for the content.

DH: Yes, YouTube even recommended some of your videos to me when I started watching them.

S: Yes, the algorithm will feed you more of what you're always watching.

DH: While looking through your channel, I noticed your most popular viewers appear to be centered on the character of the demon Crowley. Why do you think that is?

S: Well, I do have some speculation about this but it's just that. The "Why Does Crowley Kiss Aziraphale?" video (Sendarya 2023d) is the one that kind of launched my channel. People still watch that. Every time I look at my analytics on YouTube, every time it's in the top 5 or even top 3, usually of my videos—every week for the last six months. People want to watch David Tennant and Michael Sheen kiss! (laughs) That's an explanation. There's also an emotional hook in that scene because it is not just a romance scene. It's a heartbreaking romance scene between two well-liked actors and characters. I already mentioned the aspect of the outsider themes. So, an angel and a demon kissing relates to that and the queer section of the fandom likes it. I think it gets negative attention, too, but that's fine, that is still attention. The reaction I got is mostly positive, though. I haven't seen a lot of negativity about that particular moment in the show, though it does still exist.

During season two, we all thought: "Oh no, we thought they were going to be happy and now it's sad." So, there is this unexpected strong emotion attached to this scene. Anything about Crowley tends to be popular, generally. Even my old videos that aren't very good. People are just really attached to this character, he's just kind of an emo-goth, the cool cat with the sunglasses, and the red hair, all dressed in black, and it's David Tennant! If you look through my videos, at some point I've

started to put Crowley's face on the majority of my videos, even the ones that are also about Aziraphale, because I noticed they get twice as many views. A lot of people relate to him, which is funny because in the fandom a lot of people—even though they might know in their heart that they are more the bookish nerdy Aziraphale type—want to be cool like Crowley (laughs). Though some people can certainly be both.

Some videos just came out right within a couple of months of the end of the second season, so a lot of people probably had questions about what the heck was going on, especially my video on the scene in the “Give Me Coffee or Give Me Death” coffee shop (Sendarya 2023c). I wanted to talk about what was up with the coffee in that scene and apparently other people wanted to talk about it, too. The interest has cooled off a little, though. There will be upswings, simply due to fan engagement, I suspect, when news of filming comes out.

DH: Is that why you're doing news videos, too?

S: I started doing news because when they announced the official greenlight for season 3, I really wanted to announce that, I wanted to share that, it was very exciting. That got so much engagement so quickly that I thought it would be a good thing to do. It takes a lot less effort on my part, they are quick and also a lot of fun to do and don't stress me out as much. I tend to do at least one video a month. They tend to have a pretty good engagement, though not long-term, of course, because it is news. Also, the research isn't too difficult because a lot of people just send me news.

On the creative process

DH: When looking closer at the structure of the “A Companion to Owls” video (Sendarya 2023b), I noticed your script is basically a five-paragraph essay with an introduction, a body paragraph consisting of three arguments, and a conclusion. You even separate your video into distinct chapters that would correspond with each paragraph.

S: Yes, it is a five-paragraph essay, that's one of my secrets! I've joked with my husband that I'm writing tiny little high school or early college essays, this is not graduate-level, obviously. I am writing senior high school or junior college level papers in the same format, the same format I learned in college. I was like: "Why do people want to listen to me?", but it works as far as how to organize and layout information. I've never had anyone notice before, apart from my husband.

DH: Please tell us more about your working process.

S: As I'm writing my scripts, I'm already imagining what I'm going to put on the screen. I will even make notes on which clips to use in certain sections of my script. I will write around the clips. When it comes to the still images, the use there is a bit more free-form, so I just have whatever I am thinking about in my head, as I'm listening to myself. I write what I want to say. Sometimes I do have to edit it because sometimes, something does not work as well visually in the way I wrote it, so I have to re-write it or re-work it, so it translates better into a visual medium. I do try to keep the visual aspect in mind as I'm writing, because if I don't, then it is ten times more work. I think it helps that I started creating videos by doing parodies. There, I had to re-write the song lyrics and then my friend, who I initially used to do this with, laid out the spreadsheets and wrote down what image she wanted each lyric to be accompanied by, visually. Either she would be filming herself, myself, or doing something in a costume. And I'm thinking similarly, always in paragraphs: During each paragraph, I want to show this selection of images, this particular scene, or I'll write down if I want to put down a specific scene. It is almost like a storyboard. On Patreon, I share my so-called 'disaster notes' that include my first drafts, just free-form brainstorming. From there, I piece things together. Sometimes, I'll even forget to take out my notes and they end up in the video description. I've done this once or twice.

DH: What stands out to me in your videos, is your rather conversational tone of the voice-over that might not work as well in writing.

S: That is a good point. I do have a fairly conversational tone because that is what I am literally pretending to have—a conversation with the viewer. I spent 15 years daily reading library books aloud to children and I attribute a lot of my channel's success to this. So even though I don't have the face for it, my voice needs to convey most of what I'm presenting. I do have a lot of free-form open questions in my original videos that invite the audience to participate. A lot of times I do have ideas that I don't want to express too strongly, too prescriptively, in the sense of 'this is the way it is.' My ideas are more intended as a starting point of 'here's a thing I noticed – what do you think?'

DH: You give an entry-point into these discussions with the last two chapters of the "A Companion to Owls" minisode analysis (Sendarya 2023b): your predictions (starting from 11:09) and then random thoughts (12:04). That reminded me of other video essayists who also sometimes tend to include a section on 'observations that didn't fit anywhere else,' especially when these videos tend to be longer.⁶

S: You're right, that's essentially what it is. Even though I'm not consciously copying other video essayists specifically, I'm definitely doing it subconsciously because I do watch a lot of them. I do follow *Hello Future Me* and *Daniel Greene*, for example, who sometimes also does video essays. Actually, an enormous number of my subscriptions are to other video essayists, probably. Even science essays—and this is kind of funny but it's true—Tony Scott is actually where I got the idea of inserting 'random thoughts' from. He always has a random thought at the end of his videos. It helps when viewers watch the videos all the way to the end because you have something interesting to say. I get ideas from everywhere, really, just by watching how other people make videos.

6 One possible example for this is Jacob Geller's video essay "The Strangest Game of 2023" (Geller 2023) in which he titles one part of the video 'Bizarre facts I couldn't fit into the video's main script.'

DH: Generally, I observe that there are two forms of video essays on YouTube: voice-over narrated ones like the ones you are doing and then more vlogging types of essays.

S: Yes, like you said, there are generally two and people don't tend to mix them up too much. I chose voice-over because I'm not really that great at speaking the way a lot of people do for the face-versions of these essays. I tend to stutter a lot and get lost which is why I like to write and follow a script. I could maybe do that with a teleprompter. So, a lot of it just has to do what I'm comfortable with. But at the same time, taking just a 15-minute script and putting images and video over—that takes an enormous amount of time and effort. I figured it takes me roughly ten hours to make a video. That's just for putting footage on it. I tried showing my face in the tier list video because I thought it would be less editing. I am wrong. It takes the same amount of time to edit. I haven't settled on any one thing yet, though.

On fan labor and parasocial relationships

DH: I would like to stay with the aspect of invisible labor or fan labor a bit more (cf. DiGravio 2023; Andrejevic 2009; Andrejevic 2013 155; De Kosnik 2012). For a lot of fans, their hobby is their passion. Still, would you call that work?

S: Yeah, absolutely. That's been something that, as this goes along, becomes more and more of a tension or a conflict. It's still a very small channel, but you get followers who have expectations.⁷ It starts to be more of a job where you get the feeling: "I'm doing this because I'm supposed to or because I have a deadline," rather than "I'm doing this because it caught my interest and I want to talk about it." It goes back and forth more, now. I still try to be focused on the things I'm most

7 As of March 2025, Sendarya's channel has 11,800 followers and 243 members on Patreon. The most popular video is "Why Does Crowley Kiss Aziraphale? || Scene and Character Analysis || Good Omens" (2023d) with 107,135 views.

interested in. But I'm definitely into, well, it's not really a trap, or maybe it is? I don't know. But there is some difficulty there in keeping the balance between it. I think a lot of fans who make content just stop whenever they become frustrated. They take a break from it. But it becomes harder to take a break from making the content when there is an expectation to make it. That's the tension there with that. At first, at least initially, I was 150 percent in. I was having a lot of fun with everything I was doing. Sometime around the holiday of 2023, it started to get a little bit tiring. Maybe because it was the holidays. It's kind of been up and down since then. Sometimes I'm really in the mood for this and still having fun with it, but sometimes I'm just doing a video because it's just time for another. I don't want it to harm the fandom though, I've talked with my friends about this. I don't want it to harm my feelings about the fandom and *Good Omens*. I see a lot of YouTubers having similar experiences, too.

DH: Yes, you already talked about that aspect of vulnerability, earlier. One facet that is, from my point of view, connected to it, is that of parasocial relationships. I would be curious to hear about your thoughts and experiences with it.

S: It's a little strange to be on the other end of it, now. Because I've only ever been on the fan end of it. I am still a fan, obviously. But to have anybody be a fan of *you*—even if it's just a couple 100 people—is very different (laughs). And this of course didn't come intentionally. I got to meet some people through the Discord server, and once I started it, I got to be closer friends with them. There was a little bump at first and they even talked to me about how they were like: "Oh my gosh, I can't believe I'm talking to you," but now I'm just another person to them, which is great, I like that (laughs). They realized I really *am* just another fan. I try to remove that sheen, so it seems weird to be anything but a fan who has got a little bit of a voice. I am aware that I am in a slight position of power through this, so I never punch down. I never want to call anyone out, if there is anything I'm hearing or if I say anything about anyone's specific ideas, or if I see other fans doing cool stuff, I'm trying to share it.

DH: You also foster engagement with your audience through call-to-actions like encouraging them to post their theory in the comments.

S: Yes, I don't say "like and subscribe" very often because I'm not trying to build a giant YouTube empire, I'm just trying to talk to some other fans. I do want to hear their ideas because every time I read other people's ideas; I find some other good ideas that I never thought of. Sometimes people correct mistakes I've made—I like that social engagement, that's why I'm doing it. I'm not doing it to grow my channel, I'm doing it to communicate.

DH: A good way to bookend this conversation. Thank you for participating in this interview!

S: My pleasure. It was helpful to hear your questions. I'm trying to figure out why people care about what I'm doing. Because I'm just over here in the US making fan content and it's just weird having people showing academic interest and wondering how it works and why it's happening.

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