

Truth! Freedom! Justice! And A Joke!:

Finding the Political in Pratchett

by

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*For my mom, who makes it all possible.*

*And, of course, for Sir Terry,*

*who makes me want to believe in the human race.*

*GNU.*

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the uses of humor and fantasy in creating political and social commentary in Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels. The internet is full of anecdotes about people forming new political beliefs based on his comedic fantasy books, but academia seems slow to catch up. While scholarly work examining Pratchett does exist, very little focuses on the specific political themes of his books. This thesis aims to change that by examining the critique woven throughout his writing. More specifically, I argue that the very comedic and fantastical elements that bar Pratchett from being considered "literature" are what make the commentary so effective. Humor and fantasy both force the suspension of disbelief in order to create a distance between the material and the "real" world, one that allows old assumptions to be examined in an entirely new light. Through this technique, Pratchett's rage, love, and underlying senses of fairness and anti-elitism shape commentary that is as biting as it is gentle.

Although Pratchett wrote over fifty books during his career, I will be focusing mainly on *Going Postal* and *Monstrous Regiment*. Both books were published in the early 2000s and are standalone stories that don't require prior understanding of Discworld, as well as being easily applicable to current politics. My first chapter looks at theories on the uses of fantasy and humor, as well as the way each device provides a way to reimagine the world as we know it. My second chapter analyzes *Going Postal* and its themes relating to the failures of modern capitalism as it describes a struggle between public services and private corporations. The third chapter is structured around a close reading and analysis of *Monstrous Regiment*, a book about a group of young women who dress as men in order to join the army, through the lens of Judith Butler's theories of gender performance.

To build my arguments about the political and social commentary in Pratchett's writing, I look at a range of materials including his literary work, personal essays, and interviews given during his lifetime. I also look at modern journalistic writing and social media responses in order to show how his commentary remains relevant. While I firmly believe Pratchett wrote his books to be enjoyable satire rather than political manifestos, his writing nonetheless reveals a faith in humanity that is nothing less than radical.

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Short Titles

*GP*: Pratchett, Terry. *Going Postal*. Harper Collins, 2004.

*MR*: Pratchett, Terry. *Monstrous Regiment*. Corgi Books. 2004.



## Introduction

Anger is wonderful. It keeps you going. I'm angry about bankers. About the government.  
-Terry Pratchett

Somewhere in space there is a turtle. On that turtle, called Great A'Tuin, stand four elephants, names unknown. On top of them? A disc. And on that disc? Witches, vampires, and an orangutan who works as a librarian. Welcome to Sir Terry Pratchett's Discworld, a universe Pratchett describes as "what Middle Earth would be like 500 years later if things evolved like they did here" (Walker). The best-selling comic-fantasy series had forty-one books at the time of the British author's death in 2015 and includes everything from "traditional" fantasy quest narratives to a book about the invention of the printing press. Despite Pratchett's substantial body of work, there has yet to be a huge critical response to his writing. This thesis aims to examine why, as well as point to the facets of Pratchett's writing that complicate his position as simply a writer of funny fantasy books.

Discworld initially began as a way to satirize the high fantasy Pratchett grew up reading. Published in 1983, the first book, titled *The Colour of Magic*, was "an attempt to do for the classical fantasy universe what *Blazing Saddles* did for Westerns" ("Why Gandalf Never Married"). Whether it achieved this or not,<sup>1</sup> the next few books continue the theme, featuring strong fantasy elements as they simultaneously parody the genre. Pratchett eventually moves in different directions with the series, but the books (an average of two published each year) retain their fantasy setting. Pratchett's prolific writing led him to become Britain's bestselling author of

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<sup>1</sup> Although *The Colour of Magic* is not generally considered Pratchett's strongest writing, I do believe the series does act similarly to *Blazing Saddles* through the way its satire comes from an obvious place of love and admiration for the earlier works of the genre, as well as the conversations about conventional tropes it brought up.

the 90s, only being overtaken by J.K. Rowling in 2005 (Weale). Rumor has it that he authored 10% of the science-fiction and fantasy sold in Britain, and over 85 million copies of his books have been sold worldwide. In fact, he was so influential that in 2009 he was knighted for his “services to literature.” Despite this, in the United States he remains little talked about outside of fantasy circles, something Pratchett attributes to failures of his early publishers to properly promote his works (Gaiman xv).

Due to the sheer size of the Discworld series in its entirety, fans tend to break it down into a handful of subseries based on theme. There’s no overarching plot to the series, but each subseries tends to feature recurring characters who create a sense of continuity. Most stories take place in the Disc’s largest city, which is called Ankh-Morpork and ruled by the Patrician Lord Vetinari.<sup>2</sup> There’s a subseries about witches, one on the Disc’s police force (called the City Watch<sup>3</sup>), and another on an anthropomorphized version of Death. He enjoys farming, and cats. Towards the latter half of Discworld’s publication comes a group of books colloquially known as the Industrial Revolution subseries. These books examine new inventions<sup>4</sup> on the Disc as its society moves from something akin to a traditional medieval-adjacent fantasy setting to one more similar to our own world (which Pratchett refers to as “Roundworld”). And, as a society changes, so do its politics.

Historically, fantasy has not been a widely respected genre within literary circles. While this is slowly changing, it’s still typically deemed non-serious “fluff,” and many creative writing MFA programs refuse to consider it for writing samples, let alone as a serious literary practice. In a transcribed interview that appeared in *The Onion* in the mid-90s, a journalist called fantasy “a

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<sup>2</sup> He’s considered a dictator, but a benevolent one

<sup>3</sup> The title of this thesis comes from one of the City Watch books, *Night Watch*. In it, a revolution is fought for “Truth! Freedom! Justice! Reasonably priced love! And a hard-boiled egg!”

<sup>4</sup> Such as newspaper and digital messaging

rather ghettoized genre” (Rothfuss).<sup>5</sup> Pratchett responds to this comment by talking about how popular his books are, but the journalist doesn’t back down. “It’s certainly regarded as less than serious fiction,” they said. Pratchett’s sigh in response to this statement is included in the transcript.

The interviewer revealed their own bias against the genre early on in the interview by describing the qualities that mark Pratchett as a good writer but then asking why in the world he would use his gifts to write fantasy. Pratchett responds, somewhat mockingly, without answering the question directly— saying that he’d “had a decent lunch” and was “feeling quite amiable. That’s the only reason [the interviewer is] still alive” (Rothfuss). When the journalist persists, saying fantasy isn’t “serious fiction,” Pratchett launches into a monologue about how the first stories humans told each other were what we’d now consider fantasy. He calls the genre “ur-literature, the spring from which all other literature has flown.” The fact that many medieval stories feature death as a personified character gets a mention, likely a reference to his own characterized Death. “Fantasy,” he says, “is a kind of plasma in which other things can be carried. I don’t think this is a ghetto.” Finally, he mentions the fact that fantasy can be serious, and uses the social commentary in *Gulliver’s Travels* as an example. He ends this by saying everyone wants him to “strip away the trolls and the dwarves... get everyone into modern dress, get them to agonize a bit, mention Virginia Woolf a bit, and there! Hey! I’ve got a serious novel”

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<sup>5</sup> Despite months of searching, I was not able to find the original interview in either *The Onion* or their counterpart *The A.V. Club*’s archive. There is a picture of the print article verifying its existence (although leaving out information such as the author and date of publication), and fantasy author Patrick Rothfuss apparently had a copy and typed a transcript of the piece in a blog post at one point. His transcript matches the picture word for word, so one can only assume it is accurate. Although Rothfuss was not involved in the original interview, this blog post is what I will be citing when referring to this interview.

(Rothfuss). This is obvious sarcasm, but points out just how absurd it is to assume his writing isn't serious just because it takes place in a fantasy world.

The interview transcript leaves out any comments the journalist may have made during this, letting Pratchett's response feel like a single, frustrated rant. This display of anger exemplifies a phenomenon Neil Gaiman, Pratchett's close friend and writing partner for the 1990 novel *Good Omens*, describes in the introduction to *A Slip of the Keyboard*, a collection of Pratchett's nonfiction writing. In the introduction, Gaiman refutes the popular idea that Pratchett was a "jolly old elf" (Gaiman xiii). Rather, he describes the fury Pratchett wrote with: "It's the fury that was the engine that powered Discworld... it's the anger at the headmaster who would decide that six-year-old Terry Pratchett would never be smart enough... anger at pompous critics, and at those who think serious is the opposite of funny." As Discworld continued, the target of Pratchett's fury shifts as he learns he has a rare form of early-onset Alzheimers. "Now he is angry with his brain and his genetics," Gaiman writes, "and that anger, it seems to me, is about Terry's underlying sense of what is fair and what is not" (xv).

This sense of fairness permeates Pratchett's writing, elevating his books from simple satire of the fantasy genre to writing recognizable as social commentary. Gaiman's comments speak to the underlying theme of anti-elitism that can be found in much of Pratchett's writing, and although Pratchett's satire can be biting, he always "punches up," going after the ruling class and those perceived to be in power. The very act of writing Discworld as a satire of the fantasy genre can be seen as a challenge to the rigid hierarchies and worldbuilding popularized by fantasy giants such as Tolkein and C.S. Lewis, and Pratchett's characters challenge expected hierarchies at every turn. A clear example of this can be found in Carrot Ironfoundersson, a member of the City Watch who is revealed to be the heir to the throne of Ankh-Morpork. Carrot,

however, never acknowledges his birthright and seemingly has no interest in taking power, instead keeping his position on the Watch. Rather than a world with natural-born kings and clear class divides (ones that mimic the British class system), Pratchett writes Discworld as a place where the little guy beats the dragon, whether it be a literal one or simply an oppressive social system.

Less than a year before Pratchett's death at the age of sixty-six, Gaiman wrote about his friend's imminent death:

Terry Pratchett is not one to go gentle into any night, good or otherwise. He will rage, as he leaves, against so many things: stupidity, injustice, human foolishness and shortsightedness.... And, hand in hand with the anger, like an angel and a demon walking hand in hand into the sunset, there is love: for human beings, in all our fallibility; for treasured objects; for stories; and ultimately and in all things, love for human dignity. Or to put it another way, anger is the engine that drives him, but it is the greatness of spirit that deploys that anger on the side of the angels. (Gaiman xvii)

Instead of using anger to condemn the injustice of our world, Terry Pratchett uses it to propel the creation of a new one— one that contains horrors, yes, but also hope. The social commentary in Discworld books becomes clearer as Pratchett becomes angrier, something I think is trackable if reading the series in publication order. While he never publicly spoke about his own politics, the way he writes about the social issues and politics of Discworld indicates someone imagining a radical rethinking of the way things work. This can especially be seen in the Industrial Revolution subseries, as the rage, sense of fairness, and love for humanity that Gaiman identifies combine to describe a changing (i.e. “radically rethought”) world as it adjusts to new technology and social institutions. While still undeniably works of humorous fantasy, these books in

particular involve politics easily recognizable as reflections of our own world as they deal with topics such as the privatization of public services, the struggle to live morally under capitalism, and the exploitation of various social classes war can cause.

Although these texts include very real examples of relevant politics, critics don't typically regard Pratchett's books as social commentary. There are some scholarly articles about his writing as it relates to social commentary, especially in regards to gender and feminism in the Witches subseries, but scholarship about the Industrial Revolution books is harder to find. This was surprising to me, as I see these books as clearly political. One notable exception is Mariza Breytenbach's 2015 paper "Recasting social criticism in 19th century fiction and modern fantasy fiction: Corrupt institutions as theme in *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens and *Going Postal* by Terry Pratchett." In this, Breytenbach compares the techniques used to create commentary in Pratchett's *Going Postal* to those used by Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. Breytenbach illustrates how Pratchett's commentary is built through his subversion of fantasy tropes and argues that if we accept Dickens as a writer of social commentary, we must also accept Pratchett. While I agree with many of Breytenbach's points and appreciate the way her comparisons to Dickens situate Pratchett firmly within the long history of British satirical literature, I found the *Going Postal* section to be a more general overview of technique rather than a deep dive into the book's specific political commentary.

Why are most discussions of Pratchett's politics relegated to social media forums rather than academic works? It is certainly not due to any sort of unpopularity; while Pratchett may not be as well known in the United States as he is in Britain, he's definitely not an "unknown" writer. Therefore, it stands to reason that the lack of critical scholarship on his writing is due to its genre. This is evidenced by two pieces published by *The Guardian* art critic Jonathan Jones

following Pratchett's death in 2015. In the first article, in which Jones describes why he doesn't consider Discworld to be "literature," he says that taking Pratchett seriously is "dissolving the difference between serious and light reading" and "justifying mental laziness and robbing readers of the true delights of ambitious fiction" ("Get Real"). Two weeks later, Jones published a follow-up responding to criticism based on the fact that he hadn't actually read any of Pratchett's books before writing his original article. He did apologize for this, but said his opinion hadn't changed even after reading one. Apparently, "the fantasy genre is a graveyard for the English language" ("I've Read").

*The Onion* journalist wasn't wrong when they described fantasy as "ghettoized." In a 1974 speech, Ursula K. Le Guin defines this "ghettoization," the dismissal of fantasy as a serious genre, as a distinctly American problem. This would certainly explain the clash between a British fantasy writer and an American journalist, but not *The Guardian* pieces. Although it may be more of an international issue than Le Guin claimed, she points out a "moral disapproval of fantasy" within American culture and attributes it to "our Puritanism, our work ethic, our profitmindedness, and even our sexual mores" ("Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?"). Whether we like it or not, the puritan values The United States was founded on persist in American culture today. Within this frame, Le Guin says anything that "cannot be justified as "educational" or as "self-improvement,"... can only be self-indulgence or escapism. For pleasure is not a value, to the Puritan; on the contrary, it is a sin" (Le Guin). Of course, culture has changed a lot in the last fifty years, but Le Guin's observations still ring true. Once something is considered fantasy, it is written off as trivial fluff, escapism that's only acceptable in childhood.

Although opinions are slowly changing, fantasy is still rarely considered worth studying in any sort of academic context. One possible exception to this could be magical realism, but

where exactly the genre falls in relation to fantasy is debatable. It's usually distinguished by being set firmly in "our" world, with fantasy elements being added on top rather than forming an integral part of the setting. Pratchett, however, calls it "just fantasy wearing a collar and tie" ("Let There Be Dragons" 109) and said calling yourself an author of magical realism is simply a "polite way of saying you write fantasy [that] is more acceptable to certain people" (Richard). He also has an anecdote about Salman Rushdie coming in second place in a science fiction contest, and makes a joke about if he had won he would "have had none of that trouble over *The Satanic Verses*, 'cos it would have been SF and therefore unimportant" ("Straight From The Heart" 55). While I do think magical realism is different enough from "traditional" fantasy or science fiction to warrant its own definition, I can see why Pratchett would be upset that a genre that is essentially a subcategory of fantasy is considered so much more serious than what he writes.

It can be dangerous to discount an entire genre from "serious" analysis, especially one that's been around as long as humans have been storytellers. Luckily, some have recognized the progressive potential a genre that relies on a complete reimagining of the world could have. This thesis aims to use Terry Pratchett's books *Going Postal* and *Monstrous Regiment* to highlight some of the ways fantasy, alongside the humor Pratchett's writing is known for, can be used to make political and social commentary. These novels are both stand-alone stories that can be easily read and understood without previous knowledge of Discworld, making them an accessible entry point into Pratchett's particular method of political satire. Additionally, as both are typically classified under the Industrial Revolution subseries, the topics they discuss are easily applicable to the world we live in. My first chapter outlines my approach to Pratchett's work by using existing theory on the subversive power of humor and satire to show how each narrative strategy creates the possibility of an alternate reality— one where jokes are logical and



dragons are real. Once these strategies have been explained, I'll do a deeper dive into each of the two books I'm focusing on to show how Pratchett utilizes these techniques to make political commentary. *Going Postal* examines what it means to be a criminal and the uses of public services through a story about the new postmaster general of Ankh-Morpork, while *Monstrous Regiment* is a book about a bunch of girls involved in a "man's" war. I will be arguing for the existence of political messages within these two books as well as the vital importance of both fantasy and humor in crafting said messages. If fury is the engine powering Pratchett's writing, the political *why*, I want to show that fantasy and humor are the *how*.

## Chapter One

### Funny Fantasy

HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING  
ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE.

*Hogfather*

Most people don't have political beliefs just for the fun of it.<sup>6</sup> Our opinions are formed by a myriad of factors, such as the people around us, our own life experiences, and personal morals. Our views are bound to change over time, but this typically depends on some sort of change in circumstances. This change can be as drastic as watching social systems fail during a global pandemic or it could simply be meeting someone who has different opinions than you. Either way, there's usually some catalyst required to make people see the world (and their own beliefs) differently. Luckily, this catalyst can also be something as small as a cheap fantasy book or a well-timed joke. Fantasy and humor both jolt us into an alternate world for a moment, breaking us away from normal thought patterns and habits. Each requires a suspension of disbelief that can prompt us to think more critically about assumptions usually taken for granted. When used in conjunction, fantasy and humor change how we see the world while simultaneously creating a new one in which to explore new possibilities. They prompt the reader to examine their own assumptions and reconsider all the structures of reality normally taken for granted. Once this change in thinking has begun in the reader, it's not hard to bridge the gap between jokes and political messages.

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<sup>6</sup> I can't think of many people who would call politics "fun" at all. Maybe a few political science students, but I'm not sure they count as "people."

The exact definition of fantasy (as well as how it differs from sci-fi or magical realism) seems to be constantly in flux. It's a category without strict walls, and instead depends on an "I know it when I see it" approach. For the sake of this thesis, I will be using Gideon Haberkorn's description of modern fantasy as "a body of narratives featuring *existents* (i.e., characters and settings) and *events* (i.e., actions and happening) which are to a large extent not consistent with what we see as reality" ("Debugging the Mind" 174). Because the setting never promised to be "consistent with what we see as reality," fantasy offers the chance to reimagine the world as the author believes it *should* be without getting held back by any of the pitfalls of actuality. While these worlds do still have problems, their creators can create entirely fantastical solutions, no matter how unrealistic they may be. When thought about in this way, fantasy can be seen as an aspirational model for our own world. It asks us to consider how problems would be solved in a world where literally anything is possible, to play around with possibilities that would normally be called too idealist. In many ways, the world created by the author is more rational than the reality we live in, the only problem is bridging the gap. Pratchett himself points to this in an essay titled "Roots of Fantasy," saying that fantasy allows for a form of human order to be superimposed on the universe, making it a place where everything happens for a reason. "The world isn't really like that," he writes, "but it ought to be, and if we believe it enough we might get through another night" ("Roots of Fantasy" 95). When this is combined with the incongruous-yet-also-logical humor Pratchett is so adept at, this new world begins to feel like a possibility, if only everyone else would agree to make it happen. He's shown us what society could be, but it's up to us to get ourselves there.

In the editorial introduction to *Symposium: Marxism and Fantasy*, China Miéville writes "we need fantasy to think the world, and to change it" (48). However, he also argues that fantasy

is not inherently subversive, going so far as to say that to “claim that fantasy is in some systematic way resistant to ideology or rebellious against authority is, and anyone who knows the genre can attest, laugh-out-loud funny” (Baker qt Miéville, 438). In his essay “Why We Need Dragons: The Progressive Potential of Fantasy,” Daniel Baker attributes this to “a long history of reactionary fantasy.” He uses J. R. R. Tolkien as an example, calling Middle-earth a “specifically nostalgic, golden-age, and reactionary utopian form” driven by “not so much a desire to create a “better” world but to escape into a pre-industrial landscape: it turns aside from the deep-rooted structural problems of post-global conflict modernity in favor of the perceived simplicity of pastoral Hobbiton, colonial Gondor, and immortal Valinor” (Baker 439). By idolizing the past (Baker specifically mentions the medieval imagery *The Lord of The Rings* is steeped in), some of the most well-known fantasy authors attempt to create an “escape” from the modern era, thereby reflecting conservative politics by “affirming dominant ideologies” of the past, no matter how nationalistic or bigoted they may be (Baker 438). While these are valid points to consider, to write off all fantasy as reactionary is to discount an entire genre due to one popular author and setting. Pratchett, for example, demonstrates the opposite of what Baker describes. Instead of reaffirming outdated ideas, he deconstructs them through jokes that contribute to the anti-elitism of his writing. Miéville eventually does return to the aspirational model of fantasy, saying “fantastic mode’s basic predicate - that the impossible is true” demonstrates an “epistemological radicalism” that lends itself towards a Marxist lens (42-43). With Atterbery’s point that “the politics of fantasy are probably not a matter of right versus left” in mind, it’s possible to see how fantasy lends itself to political ideas without claiming the entire genre is in some way radical or reactionary. This being said, my later chapters will demonstrate how Pratchett’s works lean more towards the radical end of the spectrum.

In the two books I have chosen to analyze, Pratchett's "epistemological radicalism," his rethinking of our world, can be seen in the way his characters challenge the identities society has placed upon them. In doing so, each story points out flaws that exist within our society as a whole. In *Going Postal*, a reformed criminal becomes the head of a formerly-defunct post office competing against a private messaging company that aims to make a profit no matter the cost. Pratchett flips the meanings of criminal and morality and creates a scenario where the "bad guy" becomes the hero. The story also involves commentary on capitalism, private vs public services, and a myriad of other economic themes. In *Monstrous Regiment*, a group of girls each disguise themselves as men in order to join the army. I will examine how Pratchett writes about the construction of gender through the disguises donned by each character, as well as touch on the anti-war messages scattered throughout the story. These clear examples of characters going against the societal hierarchies they normally live in ask us to examine what we consider impossible, which logic we're content to live with and which we should be picking apart, with potentially radical results.

When Miéville discusses the political potential of the genre, he does so by comparing it to capitalism, saying "fantasy is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible probability - constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work, *true* - mimics the "absurdity" of capitalist reality" (42). This comparison implies some of fantasy's validity comes through reflections of reality. In "The Politics (If Any) of Fantasy," Brian Attebery touches on the concept of anachronism while discussing the use of medieval imagery in fantasy. He says "the most important function-- dare I say the political function-- of creative anachronism occurs when you take a little bit of the Middle Ages and plop it down in the midst of freeways and shopping malls. The contrast, the disjunction, transforms the present" (Attebery

16). If we expand this sense of transformative “disjunction” outside of the time period of a story’s setting, it can be argued that fantasy’s political power comes from the combination (and inherent juxtaposition) of fantasy and reality.

Pratchett’s fantasy is strewn with reality. While perhaps most obvious in the Industrial Revolution subseries, which includes books on printing presses and the movie industry alongside *Going Postal* and *Monstrous Regiment*, examples can be found in virtually all of his books. He acknowledges this directly, saying all his best ideas are stolen from reality (57). Take, for example, the eggs of the Fools Guild (one of the many artisan guilds that make up Ankh-Morpork). The guild consists of clowns, each of which has a hollow egg on which they paint mini recreations of their face paint. These eggs are kept for generations, each one documenting the specific appearance of clowns through the ages. Without these painted eggs, members of the fools guild have no identity, something that becomes an issue when someone begins impersonating a dead clown during a murder investigation in the City Watch book *Men at Arms*. While this storyline may be a bit of a stretch, eggs are actually used to record faces among some Roundworld clown circles. An entire plotline is built around this absurd little fact Pratchett stumbled across one day, mingling strange truth and fiction. This can also be seen in Pratchett’s characters as a whole. “They worry about the sort of things we worry about,” he says about them, “like death, taxes, and not falling off. The Discworld is funny because everyone on it believes they’re in real life” (“Whose Fantasy Are You?” 84).

These overlaps with reality turn Discworld into a mirror of our world. Along with jokes or interesting plots, these overlaps are used to make political points that, to return to Miéville, “mimic the “absurdity” of capitalist reality,” and give Pratchett’s commentary a sense of authority that would be hard to recreate in an entirely made-up world (“Editorial,” 42). However,

the fantasy and humor elements still distance Pratchett's writing enough that the political points he makes don't seem like heavy-handed analogies, making the entire series balance between "serious politics" and simple fluff. He takes his commentary seriously, saying his books give him "a place to rant," and that "fantasy potentially gives you a lot of good metaphors to consider, because most current affairs are only ubiquitous, everlasting affairs which turn up again and again in different disguises throughout history" (Richard). When asked how the "heavy thought," the commentary, comes into play, he claims it's a matter of "simply taking your metaphors seriously" (Richard). Still, at the end of the day, the metaphors he's referring to contain dragons and jokes more often than not. The very nature of Pratchett's writing gives him plausible deniability-- the commentary is there for you to consider, but no one would ever write *Discworld* off as "too political." After all, they're just jokes, right? Take *The Boots Theory*, a passage from *Men at Arms* that can constantly be found circulating on some social media site and has, at least anecdotally, been taught in introductory economics classes. It reads:

The reason that the rich were so rich, Vimes reasoned, was because they managed to spend less money.

Take boots, for example. He earned thirty-eight dollars a month plus allowances. A really good pair of leather boots cost fifty dollars. But an affordable pair of boots, which were sort of OK for a season or two and then leaked like hell when the cardboard gave out, cost about ten dollars. Those were the kind of boots Vimes always bought, and wore until the soles were so thin that he could tell where he was in Ankh-Morpork on a foggy night by the feel of the cobbles.

But the thing was that good boots lasted for years and years. A man who could afford fifty dollars had a pair of boots that'd still be keeping his feet dry in ten years' time, while the poor man who could only afford cheap boots would have spent a hundred dollars on boots in the same time and would still have wet feet.

This was the Captain Samuel Vimes 'Boots' theory of socioeconomic unfairness. (*Men at Arms* 34)

Sam Vimes is the captain of Ankh-Morpork's City Watch, a position akin to a police chief. This moment happens while he is going to see his fiancée, a woman who runs a sanctuary for sick dragons. Most of us won't be able to relate to dragon rescues, but the Boots Theory may feel familiar. The idea that it's actually *expensive* to be poor, and that escaping poverty takes a certain amount of capital is not unique to Discworld; it's just more commonly referred to as "poverty traps" in our reality. But, by sandwiching this Discworld-version of an actual economic concept in with the fantastical in a book about clown murders, Pratchett can plant the idea in his reader's minds without spending a ton of time defending the idea. No one reading about the intricacies of dragon rescue is expecting to be presented with economic theory instead, and by dropping it in and then moving on to more light-hearted content, Pratchett leaves no room to argue. Each point is made assuming the reader agrees with the previous, and eventually the reader is led directly to Pratchett's larger point. Who would bother arguing against the idea that higher-quality things cost more? And, because no one would disagree with that, it's assumed that everyone will also agree that lower quality items must be replaced more often. On and on it goes until the reader is suddenly agreeing that it's more expensive to be poor, no matter their initial thoughts on the



topic. The logic he uses is sound, and because it's such a short, simple moment that has no real impact on the plot, it's barely worth disagreeing with.

Boot Theory has next to nothing to do with the main story of *Men at Arms*, but it's what people know from the book. Screenshots of the passage are widely shared on social media sites, and casual references to it can be found in conversations that have nothing to do with Pratchett. Most remarkable, perhaps, is the recent use of Boot Theory by British anti-poverty activist Jack Monroe. In January 2022, Monroe announced her idea for the "Vimes Boot Index," which aims to "document the "insidiously creeping prices" of basic food products" in Britain (Flood). She was inspired to create her own price index after realizing that the consumer price index, which is meant to track the rate of inflation, pays more attention to things like new furniture and full legs of lamb rather than the food and products available to those struggling with poverty. By only examining prices of "luxury" goods, Monroe says the current system can "only tell a fragment of the story of inflation" and "grossly underestimate[s] the true cost-of-living crisis" (Monroe). The index is named after Sam Vimes due to Boot Theory's focus on those who are limited by budget constraints and don't have the option to buy better boots, or legs of lamb. The Pratchett Estate authorized the name of the index, and Rhianna Pratchett, the author's daughter, spoke to the Guardian to show her support:

Vimes's musing on how expensive it is to be poor via the cost of boots was a razor-sharp evaluation of socio-economic unfairness. And one that's all too pertinent today, where our most vulnerable so often bear the brunt of austerity measures and are cast adrift from protection and empathy. Whilst we don't have Vimes any more, we do have Jack and Dad would be proud to see his work used in such a way (Flood).

Boot Theory's popularity can be attributed to how easy it is to explain and how simply it explains a complicated economic concept that is identifiable in our own world. Roundworld poverty traps, however, are a topic that still cause arguments over whether or not they exist. Although people like Monroe are showing that it is possible to make change (the UK's Office of National Statistics has announced they will be changing the way they collect data on inflation to better reflect varying income levels), there's still a long way to go (Flood). Consider, for example, all the "budget tips" that recommend buying groceries in bulk to lower food bills without considering the high membership costs most bulk stores charge. While it may be cheaper in the long run, it's often harder to pay the initial fee than it would be to simply spend a few dollars on a meal, yet this is something still frequently misunderstood. Sam Vimes, however, doesn't have to deal with anyone disputing his theory. As the author, Pratchett can make things "true" in his universe without needing to defend them, and, as discussed earlier, the fantasy setting frees him from any potential disagreements. His word is law.

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"Fantasy works best when you take it seriously," Pratchett writes, "it can also become a lot funnier." This belief leads him to "apply logic in places it wasn't intended to exist," intermingling reality and the fantastical ("Notes From A..." 81). Although this logic differs from what we might expect as Roundworld inhabitants, it does make a certain amount of sense. Often, this logic is much simpler than what we expect (waterproof boots cost money!), which allows Pratchett to make simple jokes that point out flaws in the "normal" way of thinking about things. An example of this "logic" can be seen in *Going Postal*, with the phrase "See a pin and pick it up, and all day long you'll have a pin" (Pratchett, 105). Of course, the Roundworld ending to this phrase is "all day long you'll have good luck." The incongruity-resolution theory of humor states

“the essence of humor is the perception of the incongruity and its resolution” (Attardo 64).

Things are funny when the unexpected happens, when the punchline doesn't follow normal logic.

As Haberkorn notes in his essay “Debugging the Mind,” human brains make meaning “by creating connections and relationships” with patterns (161). Following the incongruity theory, Haberkorn argues it is the brief disruption of a pattern that makes something funny. He applies this to Pratchett's writing through a sequence that goes assumption/mistake/correction (Haberkorn 165). The set-up of the joke leads readers to make an assumption that is almost immediately revealed to be wrong. This is the incongruity side of the theory, and the resolution comes through Pratchett's “correction,” whatever he wrote the punchline to be. It's as if he's constantly pulling the rug out from under the reader only to immediately replace it with a softer, sturdier, and more logical rug. The humor exists while slipping between these two “rugs,” when you're not quite sure where you're going but you know you're going down.

By changing the ending to something that is technically more logical, Pratchett disrupts our assumptions, creating both an incongruity (what we expect the phrase to be vs what it actually is) and a correction (simply stating the fact that picking up a pin will give one a pin).

Haberkorn states that “Humor can be seen as a playful process of noting that there is more than one way of looking at something” (163). The disruption of the pattern of meaning-making can be funny, but it also asks us to step back and examine the process as a whole. In making the pin joke, Pratchett also asks us to wonder just why pins are considered good luck. The Discworld phrase actually makes more sense, so why does the Roundworld one exist? Through prompting us to question our normal assumptions and thought processes, humor helps us accept and embrace new ways of thinking. Examples of this can be seen through Pratchett's use of what I call “small questions,” from which “new characters arise and new twists

are put on an old tale” (“Notes From A...” 81). The simple and humorous questions Pratchett adds to his writing act as breadcrumbs, leading characters to a more complicated realization, such as mentioned with *Boot Theory*. Some other small questions fall under what Haberkorn classifies as “self-disparaging irony, in which a character puts on a mask of an “ignorant, credulous, earnest, or over-enthusiastic person”” in order to make some point (qtd. Muecke, 170). He uses a passage from *Hogfather*<sup>7</sup> to demonstrate this, as a character is asking why a holiday party (which, importantly, women are not allowed at) has a long running tradition of hanging mistletoe:

“Well, er... it’s... well, it’s... it’s symbolic, Archchancellor.”

“Ah?”

The Senior Wrangler felt that something more was expected. [...]

“Of... the leaves, d’y’see... they’re symbolic of... of green, d’y’see, whereas the berries, in fact, yes, the berries symbolize... symbolize white. Yes. White and green. Very... symbolic.” [...]

“What of?”

The Senior Wrangler coughed.

“I’m not so sure there *has to be* an *of*,” he said.

“Ah? So,” said the Archchancellor, thoughtfully, “It could be said that the white and green symbolize a small parasitic plant?”

“Yes, indeed,” said the Senior Wrangler.

“So mistletoe, in fact, symbolizes mistletoe?” (Haberkorn qtd Pratchett, 170-171)

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<sup>7</sup> A story in which the Hogfather, a Santa-like figure, goes missing and Death is tasked with replacing him.

Through asking these small questions, none of which seem particularly inflammatory, the Archchancellor is able to demonstrate the pointlessness of a group of men<sup>8</sup> hanging mistletoe in an environment without any women. To make matters worse, the party is taking place in the Unseen University, a wizard school that is presumably full of Discworld's brightest academics. If the Archchancellor had initially come forward and called it meaningless from the get-go he'd be questioning the logic of the "smartest" people in the city, but the questioning process allows the Senior Wrangler to reach the conclusion alongside him. While Pratchett often uses this technique to be funny, it's also an effective way to make political points. Even here, this simple joke about mistletoe calls into question expected hierarchies of intelligence within academic settings. To take Haberkorn's analysis a step further, I'd like to propose that Pratchett uses this self-disparaging irony on his own readers. As I will demonstrate in my later chapters, readers are presented with questions or statements that at first seem obvious and inconsequential. Over the course of these small questions, however, Pratchett builds a political argument. Rather than simply making a potentially divisive statement out of the blue, the listener is walked through every step of the logic, making the final conclusion seem obvious and irrefutable.

Having explored Pratchett's incongruous humor and the "epistemological radicalism" of his fantastical "logic," we can now return to our discussion of fantasy's political dynamics and potentials. The genre lends itself towards this process of creating a space where our normal assumptions can be cast aside. If the suspension of disbelief can allow for dragons and trolls, why can't a world exist where pins are simply pins and mistletoe is useless? According to Attebery, "the impossible changes everything in the text that contains it" (20). Whether a piece of fantasy writing is meant to be commentary or subversive in any way or not, the simple act of existing as part of the fantasy genre makes readers examine whatever social structures are

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<sup>8</sup> Presumably all heterosexual

described more closely simply due to the fact that, however familiar they may seem on the surface, they exist in a world that is not ours. Even the smallest pieces of everyday life are given a slightly different meaning when placed in a fantasy context, purely because nothing in this “other” world is a given. The suspension of disbelief required for reading the genre means this is something easily forgotten by readers unless an author happens to highlight the assumptions made while reading, such as with Pratchett’s pins. Keeping this idea in mind, however, is vital for determining just where politics can exist in fantasy.

Attebery continues with this idea that the politics in fantasy arise from dismantling our assumptions about life by acknowledging the new reality it exists in, the Other:

In [speaking] the voice of the Other, fantasy makes some pretty broad political claims. It says that reality is a social contract, easily voided. . . . It says that ordinary life—that is, middle class American life—is a fluke, a local-ized and temporary aberration. Perhaps the most profound political statement that fantasy can make is to let the Other become a self. When that happens, the past threatens to break into the present, colonies become capitals, and the natural world takes its revenge on civilization. . . . I said before that the politics of fantasy are probably not a matter of right versus left. What fantasy seems to be able to do is sidestep conventional politics and make us aware of other kinds of power and injustice.

(Attebery 24)

If we accept that life as we know it is a fluke, how might we go on living? Sixty-one percent of Americans live paycheck to paycheck. Imagine how opinions towards systems like welfare or universal health care might change if everyone suddenly realized how just a few bad months, a hospital stay, a job loss, could be enough to take everything. We live precariously. Fantasy wants us to notice.

This is not to say the entire fantasy genre is inherently full of radical politics, but rather that it offers a place to explore them simply by virtue of *being* fantasy. In a comparison between fantasy and the political implications of magical realism, Haberkorn writes that “fantasy does not make statements about the nature of reality because it is concerned with real politics– it makes statements about the nature of reality because it is concerned with the politics of the real” (178). Why does middle-class American life have any more stake in the claim of “real” than any other sort of life? In examining what we consider to be possible and asking us to cast aside our assumptions by introducing the concept of Attebery’s “Other,” fantasy forces us to confront everything we normally take for granted and imagine a new, aspirational world. When this is combined with the incongruous-yet-logical humor Pratchett is so adept at, this world begins to feel possible, if only everyone else would agree.

## Chapter Two

### Capitalism and Criminal Morality in *Going Postal*

I believe in freedom. Not many people do, although they will of course protest otherwise. And no practical definition of freedom would be complete without the freedom to take the consequences. Indeed, it is the freedom upon which all the others are based.

*Going Postal*

Moist von Lipwig has everything he needs to make a living as a con man: excellent pickpocketing skills, three fake diamond rings sewn into his coat, and an honest-yet-extremely-forgettable face. He's spent years using these skills and an arsenal of fake names to live his life as a petty thief on the streets of the Disc. Over the course of *Going Postal*, however, these skills are put to a new use: running the Ankh-Morpork post office. Early on in his new role as postmaster, Moist is told that everything he does affects other people, and that "When Banks Fail, It Is Seldom Bankers Who Starve" (*GP* 121). Pratchett uses this idea throughout the book to examine how the "little guy" is affected, and sometimes left to starve, by decisions made by large corporations. Reminiscent of stories like John Henry or David and Goliath, *Going Postal* pits human against machine, individual against giant corporation. Through the distance provided by fantasy and humor, Pratchett comments on the pitfalls of modern capitalism, the danger of monopolies, and the privatization of public services, and questions our ideas of morality and what it means to be a criminal.

The story begins with Moist, under the name of Alfred Spangler, about to be hanged for theft. Earlier that morning, Moist had finally finished chiseling away at a brick in his cell wall, only to find a brand new brick in place behind it. He's told that his efforts to escape had been noticed but allowed to continue, as Lord Vetinari believes every prisoner deserves "the prospect



of freedom,” if not the actual thing (*GP* 7). Escape plan having failed, Moist is soon led to the platform he will die on, which is surrounded by a crowd of people both cheering and booing. “Steal five dollars and you were a petty thief,” Moist thinks, “steal thousands of dollars and you were either a government or a hero” (11). Unfortunately for him, he’s neither government nor hero.<sup>9</sup> Already, Pratchett is asking the reader to think about what we consider criminal. We typically accept giving the government money through things like taxes as part of the social contract between citizens and the government, while stealing five dollars from someone on the street breaks that contract. Besides, it’s illegal, which typically goes hand-in-hand with immoral. Pratchett will challenge this idea later in the book, but right now Moist is in the gallows preparing to die a criminal’s death. For the first time in his life, he can’t find a way out of the situation he’s found himself in. Having lost all hope, he commends his soul “to any god that can find it” with his last words, and “Alfred Spangler” is no more.

Of course, this makes for a pretty short story. Luckily for us, Moist wakes up in Lord Vetinari’s office, who reveals that he was simply “hanged within a half inch of [his] life” (*GP* 15). To Moist’s surprise, Vetinari asks him to become the postmaster general and get the mostly-defunct post office back on its feet. If Moist chooses to decline the offer, he once again has the option of “the prospect of freedom” and can walk out the door. However, he soon discovers this door leads to a deep, dark, pit. “The prospect of freedom?” Moist asks. “Exactly,” Vetinari responds, “there is always a choice” (18). Even deciding between life and death is a choice, he explains, as “no practical definition of freedom would be completely without the freedom to take the consequences” (18). Given these options, Moist chooses government service.

As postmaster, Moist is faced with piles of guano, twenty-year-old letters that seem to whisper, and the knowledge that the last few postmasters died on the job. More pressing,

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<sup>9</sup> Yet.

however, is the fact that any revival of the post directly threatens Reacher Gilt, chairman of The Grand Trunk semaphore company. The Grand Trunk recently acquired the Clacks, which are the Discworld equivalent of digital mail. Similar to a visual telegram, the Clacks allow messages to be sent quickly and cheaply through a complicated system of wires and towers. Since being bought out by The Grand Trunk two months prior to the start of the plot, however, quality of service has decreased rapidly, with prices rising and breakdowns increasing. Additionally, rumors have started to spread about experienced employees mysteriously “falling” from towers to their deaths. No other company has managed to create any meaningful competition for The Grand Trunk, but Moist’s new job delivering mail is a government-funded way to do exactly that. On a more personal level, Moist is also struggling with his “criminal” nature. He tries running away, but is quickly brought back by his parole officer, a clay golem named Mr. Pump. Moist instinctively wants to find some way to scam the system for his own benefit, but is continually foiled by Vetinari. Eventually, he decides on a “fake it till you make it” technique and decides to play along with the job until he can make his escape. Over the course of the novel, however, Moist realizes that the position he holds against The Grand Trunk affects people outside himself, and his revival of the post office becomes a genuine attempt to do good rather than a simple ploy to get Vetinari off his back.

Pratchett uses some of Haberkorn’s self-disparaging irony in order to reveal the true extent of The Grand Trunk’s lack of ethics fairly early in the plot. As Moist is learning about the requirements of his new position, Vetinari is in a meeting with The Grand Trunk’s board members, several of whom are also high on the ladder of various banks and lending companies around Ankh-Morpork. Vetinari sets the stage for his performance of ignorance by claiming “the mysterious world of finance is a closed... ledger to [him]” (*GP* 85). A statement like this would

put the board at ease, believing they're dealing with someone who doesn't know much about running a business. However, Vetinari immediately follows up by asking if it's "normal" for the same people to be on the boards of multiple rival companies. After a few more simple questions and a misused reference to the glass ceiling, Vetinari gets The Grand Trunk's lawyer to admit that the "Agatean<sup>10</sup> Wall," which is supposed to ensure there will be no breaches of confidentiality between companies "which could conceivably be used by another department for unethical gain," is actually just an agreement to not use their insider information (86). Typically, these "walls" represent a complete separation of the people who know insider information and those making business decisions in order to avoid any conflict of interest, but The Grand Trunk simply brushes this aside by claiming their code of conduct would prevent anything unethical.

Of course, this is suspicious on its own, but Vetinari uses it as a springboard to his next point. "Since the question of wrongdoing has been brought up," he says, making The Grand Trunk responsible for the topic, "I am sure you are aware of talk suggesting a conspiracy among yourself to keep rates high and competition nonexistent... And, indeed, some rumors about the death of young Mr. Dearheart<sup>11</sup> last month" (*GP* 88). The statement is met with protests, and Vetinari finally drops his ignorant persona to fully lay out the path The Grand Trunk took to acquiring the Clacks, which involved taking advantage of the original inventors and secretly buying it out from under them. It's done in a way where "everything is legal, it really is... actual illegality, it would appear, has not taken place. Business is business" (90). Despite technically following the laws, The Grand Trunk is made out to be the villain in this passage. It's explained that they were not honest during their meetings with the original owners of the Clacks, and used a lot of trickery and jargon in their contracts. It's legal, but not moral.

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<sup>10</sup> Discworld equivalent of China

<sup>11</sup> An employee related to the original owners of the Clacks

By asking small questions and using self-disparaging irony, Pratchett lays out a scenario in which the “highly inventive men” with huge amounts of “passionate ingenuity” who invented the Clacks lose everything simply because a company made up almost entirely of bankers was better at moving money around (*GP* 89). And really, who could blame them? Is it their fault for losing such a clearly uneven fight? The Clacks were initially built because someone had an idea that could benefit the city as a whole, but The Grand Trunk’s takeover has turned the entire system into a self-destructive profit machine. Although there may not be any “actual illegality,” the situation is incredibly frustrating. The “right” answer feels obvious, but there’s nothing that can be done in the eyes of the law. Unfortunately, situations like this are all too common in our world, and the obvious unfairness of this Discworld example demonstrates Pratchett’s anger at a system that allows honest people to be taken advantage of so easily. However, instead of writing a divisive statement like “big corporations are evil” or “laws are not always moral,” Pratchett builds a logical scenario that challenges readers to ask these questions of themselves—the answers of which may get them to that conclusion anyway.

After revealing he knows how The Grand Trunk took over the Clacks, Vetinari asks the board about the system’s recent shutdowns. He’s told they’re due to “essential maintenance” (*GP* 91). The Patrician counters this by pointing out that, under previous ownership, the Clacks were shut down for an hour a day for maintenance, and never for extended periods like they’re seeing now. The Grand Trunk, it seems, is not doing regular maintenance but instead lets towers run alone until they break down entirely, at which point it takes a few days to get them up and running again. Even then, the “repairs” are simply the bare minimum required to make the towers run rather than long-term solutions. It may save the company money in the short term to

have twenty-four hours of service and not pay technicians continually, but with breakdowns becoming more regular, customers are the ones who suffer.

There are a lot of companies in our world that may employ similar techniques, but there's also a comparison that can be made to the idea of "just-in-time inventory." Using this method, businesses keep as little inventory on hand as possible, and instead of stocking up early, they simply order more materials when they run out. From the business' point of view, this method requires less storage space for raw materials and, most importantly, lowers the chance of unsold inventory. On the customer end, however, there are more chances of products being out of stock. While this is a risk that businesses using the method are willing to take under normal circumstances, these issues are exaggerated in times of crisis. When something like a pandemic or a boat stuck in a canal disrupts supply lines, just-in-time inventories run out much quicker than they would normally. While this is inconvenient to everyone, the cost-saving technique could very easily lead to serious problems for those who depend on a regular supply of said product. It is not the bankers who starve. In Discworld, the bare minimum in repairs leaves the Clacks vulnerable to sabotage. Additionally, the new profit-driven approach is paid for with workers' lives. "The Grand Trunk runs on blood now, since the new gang took over," a post office employee tells Moist, "it's killin' men for money" (*GP* 280). In addition to the mysterious falls that have been occurring on the towers, it's explained that The Grand Trunk overworks staff, like the towers, to the point of breakdown. They cut their staff and then still forced the remaining employees to do repairs three times as fast. A traditional day of slow service once a week was replaced with "high speed all the time," and no one in the towers can handle it (280). "Lads come down from them towers with their eyes spinning and their hands shaking and no idea what day it is," the employee says, "it drives 'em mad" (280).

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The conversation with Vetinari continues to drive home the image of Gilt as a hardcore capitalist. He tells The Patrician that “Property is the foundation of freedom,” (*GP* 91) a line which seems like a twist on French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s slogan that “Property<sup>12</sup> is theft” (Proudhon 12). Karl Marx famously picked up on this slogan and wrote that “the theory of the Communists may be summed up in a single sentence: Abolition of private property” (Engels and Marx 23). With one simple phrase, Pratchett has shown Gilt directly in opposition to any form of collectivized system. Gilt also mentions that his business is not answerable to Vetinari, but rather their shareholders and the market, mirroring the Roundworld argument that a free market regulates better than government intervention (*GP* 91). However, his shareholders don’t care about whether The Clacks are working efficiently. The lack of maintenance on The Clacks shows that they value making a profit now more than the continued success of the company, or for that matter, the needs of those who depend on its service. With no serious competitors, The Clacks are the main form of communication between cities. Even with unreliable service, Gilt claims they “have no shortage of customers at whatever cost” (91). Vetinari points out that this is only because the customers don’t have any other options; “the only *choice*... is between you and nothing.” “Exactly,” Gilt responds, “there is always a choice. They can ride a horse a few thousand miles or they can wait patiently until we can send their message” (92). This is word for word Vetinari’s response when Moist asks about the choice between life and death, and it pokes a hole in the free market argument by showing that a capitalistic system without any government oversight is simply setting itself up for monopolies. Gilt’s argument about choices indicates that he would protest being called a monopoly, as no one is being forced to use his service, but in

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<sup>12</sup> Property in the Marxist definition, “a social relationship in which the property owner takes possession of anything that another person or group produces with that property”

reality, there's nothing else. In a world without any good options, "the freedom to choose" becomes entirely meaningless.

The revival of the post office makes Moist Gilt's number one competitor. Gilt initially isn't worried, as the Clacks have proven to be more efficient than the Postal System's horse-drawn mail carriages. Then, the Clacks go down again. Moist offers a free mail run to the next town in order to deliver any unsent Clacks messages, and for the first time threatens to step on the monopoly's toes. Gilt doesn't say anything antagonistic publically, and even goes so far as to thank Moist for being "kind enough to carry some of [the Clack's] messages" (*GP* 302). Then, he burns down the post office and sets a banshee on its employees.<sup>13</sup> Luckily, everyone survives (even the office cat) due to Moist heroically running inside to help people, and plans are made to rebuild. Moist struggles with the idea of entering a burning building, but eventually realizes "he couldn't *not* go in there, it wouldn't fit with the whole persona" (309). He's still struggling with his image as a public servant vs his natural instinct for self-preservation, and this is a moment where he has to make a potentially life-changing<sup>14</sup> choice. There are no good options here, he can choose himself and let his coworkers die, or potentially give his life in order to fit with his new persona as a selfless person. An impossible choice. Crucially, he chooses anyway, and ends up saving a man's (and the cat's) life.

The newspaper prints a picture of Moist carrying the cat<sup>15</sup> out of the burning building on the front page and he instantly becomes a hero. He's officially "made it," but it's up to the reader to decide whether he's still faking it. Gilt, in contrast, is decidedly not "making it." Rather than killing Moist and ending the post office entirely, he's inadvertently made the postmaster a figure the public wants to root for. The Grand Trunk, on the other hand, is falling apart. Despite the

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<sup>13</sup> You know, normal friendly competition stuff

<sup>14</sup> Or even life-ending

<sup>15</sup> His name is Tiddles

increasing shutdowns, they still refuse to allocate the proper time or funds for necessary repairs. Instead, they give each tower just seventy dollars for repairs that will give the company “a year of reasonable service.” Gilt says that after a year the engineers can make any repairs they need without worrying about the budget, but it is not the first time he has promised this (362). He’s still thinking simply about his profit rather than the long-term survival of his company.

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Moist is, by his own admission, a “natural-born criminal” (17). He’s spent most of his life swindling people on the streets, after all. He doesn’t have issues selling a glass ring as a diamond in order to make a profit, and he privately thinks that “a lot of his crimes weren’t even crimes.” This is further justified by saying that “it was depressing how quickly honest citizens warmed to an opportunity to take advantage of a poor benighted traveler,” referring to the persona he uses to draw his “victims” in (142). While he can make excuses for himself, it’s clear that he doesn’t think of himself as a good person or understand why he’s been given the responsibility of delivering mail. As touched on earlier, he thinks of himself as merely playing along until he has the chance to run away, claiming to simply be a “con man in a golden suit”<sup>16</sup> (325). He’s shocked when Vetinari initially makes him postmaster, thinking “what kind of man would put a known criminal in charge of a major branch of government? Apart from, say, the average voter” (56). This line especially shows the incongruity theory of humor at work in this book— the basic idea of a notorious criminal being “punished” with a government job is absurd, which Pratchett seems to acknowledge with the first sentence. Despite being fantasy, readers know that criminals are not normally put in charge, even in Discworld. At the last minute, however, the situation is again flipped to say that criminals *are* put in charge, because we, the average voters, put them there.

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<sup>16</sup> The postmaster’s uniform consists of a shiny gold suit with matching hat



This very simple joke isn't out of place within the context of the story, but also doubles as a bit of commentary on our own politicians.

Despite the readiness with which Moist accepts himself to be a criminal, he does have moral limits. He's shocked when Mr. Pump, the parole officer, tells him he's responsible for 2,338 deaths. He protests, saying "I have never laid a finger on anyone in my life, Mr. Pump. I may be— all the things you know I am, but I am *not* a killer! I have never so much as drawn a sword!" Mr. Pump responds by listing all the things he *has* done:

You have Stolen, Embezzled, Defrauded, and Swindled Without Discrimination, Mr. Lipvig. You Have Ruined Businesses And Destroyed Jobs. When Banks Fail, It Is Seldom Bankers Who Starve. Your Actions Have Taken Money From Those Who Had Little Enough To Begin With. In A Myriad Of Small Ways You Have Hastened The Death Of Many. You Did Not Know Them. You Did Not See Them Bleed. But You Snatched Bread From Their Mouths And Tore Clothes From Their Backs. For Sport, Mr. Lipvig. For Sport. For The Joy Of The Game (*GP* 121).

Moist is angry about the allegations, but appears horrified to realize just what his actions could have caused.

Reacher Gilt, on the other hand, has no such qualms about killing people in order to get ahead. He tries to kill everyone in the post office with the fire and banshee, doesn't care about the recent deaths of Clacks operators or the rumors that he caused them on purpose, and one of his own board members dies a "mysterious" death after revealing too much during the meeting with Vetinari. Despite this, Gilt is generally considered a respectable member of society. He somehow remains far enough removed from any rumors of murders that most people brush them off, and even his role in buying out the Clacks is, as mentioned earlier, appears to be entirely

legal and simply a matter of normal business practices. Additionally, Pratchett describes Gilt as having a certain sense of “style” (302). He’s “a great, bear-shaped man” with a golden waistcoat and a cockatoo on his shoulder (300). He also has an eyepatch and “pirate curls” (303). This description alone should be enough to signal to anyone that Gilt is here to plunder, whether it’s happening on the high seas or in a Clacks tower. However, this apparently works to his advantage. Moist always relied on having an unmemorable appearance when he ran his scams, constantly changing his name and outfits in order to avoid getting caught, and he *still* ended up at the gallows. Gilt, however, “advertises” what he does. From his appearance to his name, which calls to mind concepts such as “guilt” and being “gilded” rather than pure gold,<sup>17</sup> everything about Gilt screams “conman.” In fact, it’s so obvious people assume it’s a joke—“He told him what he was, and they laughed and loved him for it” (303). Moist is in awe of this when they first meet in person, calling Gilt “the biggest fraud he’d ever met” and saying “he was in the presence of a master” (303). Despite their obvious differences in morals and how well they get away with their various criminal activities, Moist can’t help but admire Gilt for being a “master” of the craft.

Through this comparison of Moist and Gilt and the different ways they engage with the law, Pratchett subtly challenges common ideas of what it means to be a criminal. Words like “con man,” “criminal,” and “crook” are repeatedly used to describe Moist, but never used for Gilt. Even then, Moist is very clearly the “good” guy in this story. Despite his initial misgivings, and the fact that his uniform of a shiny gold suit makes him look gilded, he does end up committed to his role as postmaster. Whatever the suit hides at first, it doesn’t remain a disguise for long. Moist even goes as far as using the secret stash of money accumulated from his years as

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<sup>17</sup> Moist von Lipwig, on the other hand, is simply stuck with “wet fake mustache.” A clever name for a conman in disguise, but not one I’d keep in the family.

a thief to rebuild after the fire.<sup>18</sup> He risks his life to save his coworkers, stands against The Grand Trunk simply because he sees the harm they cause, and generally seems like he's making an effort to become a better person. All in all, he's a fairly easy character to root for. Gilt, on the other hand, is literally a caricature of a pirate. He's greedy and ruthless, and doesn't mind hurting others if he thinks it'll benefit him. However, for most of the story it's assumed that everything he's doing is technically legal, even if not necessarily "nice." After all, who wouldn't trust the successful businessman over the man on the street offering to sell you a diamond ring? There's obviously a sense of incongruity here in the way each character ends up going against expectations, and it speaks to Pratchett's persistent theme of anti-elitism. While it may not be as nicely laid out as a snappy joke, the entire situation reads as snarky commentary about just what we allow people deemed "respectful" to get away with, while ignoring the goodness that can exist within more "unsavory" types.

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The Clacks are killing people. Employees are forced to deal with unsafe working conditions, and customers are being squeezed dry by high prices and unreliable service. The banks are failing, the people are the ones starving. Even with all these issues, citizens have no options but the Clacks until Vetinari's job offer to Moist. The Post Office, in contrast, has rarely killed anyone. I say "rarely" due to the previous postmasters killed on the job before Moist took on the position, but most of those were accidents that aren't entirely relevant.<sup>19</sup> The post is

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<sup>18</sup> Another important difference between Moist and Gilt— Moist is willing to use his personal (if stolen) savings in order to help the post office, while Gilt refuses to repair the Clacks with company money to avoid losing any profit. If we view capitalism as a game, Moist is playing the way we are told to by contributing to the economy and the flow of capital by using money. While Gilt's hoarding isn't technically against the rules, he's ruining the game for others for his own benefit.

<sup>19</sup> As it turns out, unsent letters in *Discworld* are somewhat sentient and may cause hallucinations, leading to heart attacks, falls from great heights, and, in rare cases, travel between dimensions.

slower than the Clacks, and it takes more manpower (and more paychecks) to deliver letters by hand rather than digitally, but it used to be incredibly reliable back in its heyday, with some areas of the city receiving seven deliveries a day.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, those days are long past by the time Moist enters the scene. Rather than a proud institution which had, according to an aging employee, “brass an’ copper everywhere, polished up like gold... balconies... all round the big hall on every floor, made of iron, like lace,” the building is now a decrepit ruin filled to the brim with unsent letters. Gilt calls the Post Office a “lumbering, smug, overstaffed, overweight monster of a place...the very essence and exemplar of public enterprise” and claims the fact is still funded at all is “a classic example of a corroded government organization dragging on the public purse” (92-93). One of his main complaints is that “it barely earned its keep” (93). While a private business’s goal may be to make a profit, government services are supposed to exist to serve the public. Vetinari points this out to him, saying the mail system began to crumble when it “came to be seen not as a system for moving the mail efficiently, to the benefit and profit of all, but as a moneybox” (93). A warning, perhaps, for the future of Gilt’s own business ventures.

It isn’t surprising that Gilt isn’t a huge fan of public services, but even Moist seems to share his thinking. “Governments took money off people,” he thinks soon after becoming Postmaster, “That’s what they were for” (112). It makes sense that people wouldn’t trust an institution that takes money from citizens without providing any meaningful services in return. When private companies may fill in the gaps to offer people what they need, such as a way to send messages, it’s not hard to feel that your tax dollars are being wasted. People aren’t wrong for being angry when the government fails them, but the answer doesn’t have to be simply handing all control over to other corporations.

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<sup>20</sup> The book was reportedly inspired by the Victorian mail system, in which some locations had twelve deliveries each day. Another little brush with reality for you.

Unfortunately, this idea, or even Gilt's thoughts about institutions "earning their keep," are not unique to the citizens of Ankh-Morpork. Take, for example, the situation the United States Postal Service faced over the summer of 2020. Former President Donald Trump blocked federal funding, something I'm sure Gilt would have been a fan of. A new postmaster general, Lewis DeJoy,<sup>21</sup> also made sweeping changes within his first few months in the position. These changes, which involved hiring freezes, less overtime, and a complete reorganization of the mail sorting system, were meant to fix what DeJoy referred to as the "broken business model" the post office ran on (Goodkind). Instead of "reduce[ing] our cost base and captur[ing] new revenue," as DeJoy hoped for, these cost-cutting measures caused slowdowns and price increases (Goodkind). USPS union officials criticized these changes, saying they "worry about the repeated framing of the Postal Service as a business... By thinking of the USPS as a business, the goal becomes increasing revenue at the cost of servicing Americans" (Goodkind).

If we consider that *Going Postal* was published sixteen years before the events of 2020, Pratchett seems like some sort of visionary. Whether he meant to or not, he accurately predicted the issues that come from viewing government services as profitable businesses, and the way the public suffers as a result. Even the piles of mail strewn around the Ankh-Morpork post office seem to reference the issues that came from DeJoy cutting overtime at the USPS. Moist asks about the letters, some piles so high that they touch the ceiling, and is given an explanation of what happens when employees were overwhelmed by deliveries:

"A man's busy, got a full round, maybe it's Hogswatch, lots of cards, see? And the inspector is after him about his timekeeping, and so maybe he just shoves half a bag of letters somewhere safe...but he will deliver 'em, right? I mean, it's not his fault if they keeps pushing, sir, pushing him all the time. Then it's tomorrow and he's got an even

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<sup>21</sup> Appointed by Trump

bigger bag, 'cos they're pushing all the time, so he reckons, I'll just drop a few off today, too, 'cos it's my day off on Thursday and I can catch up then, but you see by Thursday he's behind by more'n a day's work because they keeps on pushing, and he's tired anyway, tired as a dog, so then he says to himself, got some leave coming up soon, but he gets his leave and by then—well, it all got very nasty toward the end. There was...unpleasantness. We'd gone too far, sir, that's what it was, we'd tried too hard. Sometimes things smash so bad it's better to leave it alone than try to pick up the pieces. I mean, where would you start?" (GP 49)

When the USPS stopped paying mail deliverers overtime, a similar cycle started. Rather than working until the end of their delivery run, employees were confined to specific work hours. Any mail that hadn't been delivered got added to the next day's run, and so on. Luckily the Roundworld version of this issue wasn't nearly as bad as Discworld's, but the root cause, the constant "pushing" capitalism requires to cut costs, is the same.

As discussed in Chapter One, Pratchett is under no obligation to "adhere to the social contract." Writing fantasy releases him from all responsibility to reflect reality. Why, then, are his villains recreating modern capitalism? The distance created by the humor and fantasy elements prevent it from being an exact copy, but it's close enough to be obvious. I've established that Discworld mirrors reality, but why bother writing fantasy at all, then? In this case, I think the answer comes from the end of the story. Although *Going Postal* is a reflection of modern politics,<sup>22</sup> it's a warped one. It contains pieces of truths and politics that are applicable to the way things run in Roundworld, but the final outcome, the full picture that appears in the glass, is entirely up to Pratchett. Moist eventually challenges Gilt to a race, and the mail and the Clacks compete against each other to send the contents of a book to another city. The book has

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<sup>22</sup> Perhaps more of a crystal ball that tells the future, considering its publication date.

pictures, which are difficult to convey through the Clacks system, but the final location is still days away by horseback. Despite the pictures, the Clacks should beat the post with plenty of time to spare. However, the public is firmly convinced that Moist will win. And, as in any good story, he does. In a way. Through a complicated plan with many moving parts, Moist tricks the Trunk into revealing the full extent of their corruption and embezzlement publicly. The Clacks do deliver their message first, but warrants have already been served and before long the board is behind bars with ownership of the Clacks is being transferred back to the family who initially started it. The book ends with Gilt being asked to make the same choice Moist made at the start, government service or a long fall. Gilt, however, “*really* believes in freedom of choice,” and chooses death (*GP* 471).

With this ending, Pratchett has created a world in which the simple truth is enough to defeat the villain, and everyone gets what they “deserve.” The underdog has done the impossible by beating the machine and the little guy beats the giant with a well-placed stone. And, because it’s fantasy, Pratchett can show how public services being replaced by private corporations is bad rather than spending any time arguing with those who may support privatization. Gilt, along with the Grand Trunk as a whole, is clearly meant to be the bad guy, and no one in the book thinks otherwise. No one plays devil's advocate and tries to defend the way he made his money; no one tells Moist he needs to work harder and pick himself up by his Vimes-priced bootstraps. It is understood that Gilt’s actions were unfair and have harmed people, and not a single character argues that profit-seeking gave him the “right” to do so. Compare this to our reality, in which even the mildest criticism of someone like Elon Musk acts like a homing call to his supporters. In a fantasy setting where anything is possible, Pratchett decided to simply make things fair for once.

### Chapter Three

#### War and Gender in *Monstrous Regiment*

Trousers. That's the secret. Trousers and a pair of socks. I never dreamed it was like this. Put on trousers and the world changes. We walk different. We act different. I see these girls and I think:  
 Idiot's Get yourself some trousers!

*Monstrous Regiment*

Having women in the Borogravian army is an Abomination unto Nuggan. Nuggan, of course, is an aging god whose frequently-updated list of Abominations (banned things) also includes beets, crop rotation, and rocks. As citizens of a small country that grows mostly root vegetables and is surrounded by mountains, Borogravians find it increasingly difficult to go about daily life with each new Abomination, yet they remain steadfast in their faith. So begins *Monstrous Regiment*, the thirty-first Discworld book and the third installment in the industrial revolution subseries.

Actually, no. Scratch that. *Monstrous Regiment* begins with a haircut. Polly Perks's brother Paul joined the Borogravian army and has invariably gone missing. No one really remembers how the current war against the neighboring country Zlobenia began, but Borogravia is one of those countries in which "There was always a war... Borogravia was a peace-loving country in the midst of treacherous, devious, warlike enemies. They had to be treacherous, devious, and warlike, otherwise [Borogravia] wouldn't be fighting them, eh? There was always a war" (*MR* 15) The Abominations keep most of the country in a state of constant poverty, and the ban of crop rotation coupled with the fact that the army recruited most men who would normally be farming means the nation is on the brink of famine. Unmarried women such as Polly are in an even worse position, as property owned by women is another Abomination unto Nuggan. Polly's



only source of income comes from running an inn owned by her family, but if Paul dies there will be no one left to inherit the business. Without it, Polly has no prospects. To avoid this, Polly decides to join the army, find Paul, and get out before either of them gets hurt—resecuring the family’s ownership of the inn in the process. Borogravia’s government has been reassuring its citizens for months about the war’s imminent end and their own success, so Polly figures it will be easy to get in and out quickly. However, she’s a girl, and the military follows the Nuggantic law that forbids women from joining up. Hence, the haircut. With a newly-shorn head, she sets off as a young boy named “Oliver” to find the nearest recruiting party.

Polly is successfully recruited and joins “The Tenth Foot,” an infantry also known as the “Ins-and-Outs,” “The Cheesemongers,” or “Jackrum’s Little Lads,” after the Sergeant in charge of the unit. Joining her as new recruits are a few other boys, a vampire, a troll, and an undead “Igor,” who happens to be named Igor. Everyone seems to accept “Oliver” (or “Ozzer,” as she becomes more commonly called) without question, but there is a single moment in the bathroom where a mysterious stranger tells Polly that she “don’t bulge where [she] should bulge” and gives her a pair of socks— not for her feet, but for her pants— officially cementing her identity as Oliver (*MR* 51).

If anyone happens to know English folk songs, they may recognize these names. “Sweet Polly Oliver” tells the story of a girl who dresses in her brother's clothes to join the army. Fitting, considering her actions. And, if one happens to be familiar with historical protestant pamphlets, they may recognize the book title as part of John Knox’s 1558 work “The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women.” Knox wrote the pamphlet to argue that women are unfit to rule and that the people of Scotland should rise up against Queen Mary. This tongue-in-cheek reference is also fitting, as over the course of the book Polly discovers she is not

the only “woman with extra socks.” In fact, her entire regiment was born female. These early examples not only give an informed reader some idea of what the story will be about, but the “Monstrous Regiment” reference in particular ties the fantasy story to real-world events before the reader has even opened the book. It’s the first example of fantastical anachronism we find in the story, and it forecasts the politics to come.

As members of the Army, the “Little Lads” learn the truth about the war. Borogravia isn’t about to win, and in fact has been losing badly for quite some time. The country’s leaders refuse to acknowledge this, and instead continue sending troops to their deaths. Just as in *Going Postal*, luckily, Pratchett gives the story a good ending and the Lads end up being the ones to finally end the war. Polly finds her brother, and once again is free to run the inn. The little guy wins. Before this happens, however, are countless small comments and questions that condemn the war and the nationalism it’s rooted in. Borogravia is a proud country, even when it has very little to be proud of due to decades of adhering to Nuggantic Law. One of the Lads describes this pride as being willing to “fight for... stupidity, ‘cos it’s *our* stupidity” (MR 72).

Borogravia’s fanaticism in following Nuggan is also visible in their approach to the war. The recruitment pamphlet that gets sent around, for example, is “very patriotic. That is, it talked about killing foreigners” (MR 48). This is obviously a joke, but it plays with incongruity just enough to make readers wonder whether Pratchett really thinks patriotism is analogous to killing foreigners or if he’s just trying to characterize Borogravia. Other jokes, like “if you couldn’t trust the government, who could you trust? Very nearly everyone, come to think of it . . .” (144), poke fun at the gap that often exists between leaders and the people they’re supposed to represent. This can also be seen in statements such as “The enemy dun’t really want to fight you, ‘cos the enemy is mostly blokes like you who want to go home with all their bits still on” (102). The

people dying on the battlefield are not the same as the governments who started the conflict. However, to refuse to fight would be seen as unpatriotic and a betrayal to your country. In order to perform the part of a good citizen, one who loves their country, foreigners must be killed. Another line, towards the end of the book, describes what Polly learned from the war as “the enemy wasn't men, or women, or the old, or even the dead. It was just bleedin' stupid people, who came in all varieties. And no one had the right to be stupid” (493). The stupid people, in this case, are the ones who started a war and then refused to let it end, even long after everyone had forgotten what had started it.

These lines are spread throughout the book and surrounded by jokes, so none of them seem particularly aggressive in their original context. They're little moments that might invite the reader to think deeper, but they're also easy to gloss over. Small questions. However, compiled together, they reveal what I take to be a fairly blatant attack on the idea of going to war for war's sake, along with a warning about how easily fanaticism of any type can be manipulated and used as a weapon. It's stupid. And frustrating. And Pratchett is angry about it. No one has the right to be stupid, he says, especially when others are dying for it. While Pratchett has written other books that include conversations about war,<sup>23</sup> *Monstrous Regiment* was published in 2003. Based on this timing, Pratchett was most likely writing during the beginning of the United States invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. Without any solid evidence I'm hesitant to claim this was intentional, and I don't believe *Monstrous Regiment* should be read as a pure reaction to the war. However, books can't escape the context of the world in which they are read, and Pratchett doesn't discourage us from considering these connections.

The Lads soon come to conclusions similar to the commentary I have just outlined. Polly's thinking about “the enemy,” for example, shows that she holds no resentment towards the

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<sup>23</sup> Such as *Jingo*

country she fought, but rather she resents the people who perpetrated a pointless war. “It’s all trickery,” another lad says about patriotism, “They keep you down and when they piss off some other country, *you* have to fight for them! It’s only *your* country when they want you to get killed!” (73). This comment could be referring to class status, as a lot of military recruitment techniques<sup>24</sup> target those who don’t have much money to begin with, but it is especially poignant considering the Lads are female. Borogravia’s adherence to Nuggantic law makes them second class citizens, yet here they are putting their lives at risk for the country. Women in Borogravia technically aren’t even allowed to know how to write, let alone become war heroes. However, it’s too late for anyone in the Tenth Foot to change their minds— the punishment for deserting the Borogravian Army is beheading, and the regiment has no choice but to fight for a country that has never valued them. The Lads are all “outed” as women by the end, and must deal with the repercussions that come from committing Abominations during their time in the army on top of the everyday sexism they’ve grown used to. As each character’s various identities are revealed along the course of the story (gay, caffeine-addict, conduit-for-a-goddess, all the normal things), however, a second way of interpreting the Lads becomes possible. Just as Moist attempts to pretend to be a good person led to him caring for others in a new way, as each lad dives deeper into their male persona, the lines between gender and disguise begin to blur.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance states that the entire concept of “gender” is an “identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 519). Rather than a signifier of whether one was born with “socks” or not, gender can be understood as a shifting identity reflecting both the way one is acting at the moment and the way these “acts” form patterns over time. The longer the little lads perform masculinity, the more internalized it becomes, reflecting

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<sup>24</sup> Free college, which won’t entice as many people who can afford school through other means, is the most obvious Roundworld example of this.

Butler's theory and bringing up the question of whether we should still consider them cisgender women at all. As each of the lads "comes out" to Polly at a different time, the pronouns used for each of them shift depending on who is talking about them, with the main narration following Polly's perception of each character. At the end of the book most return to their lives as women, but some continue presenting as men. The sex of one character in particular remains a mystery until the very end of the plot. Due to this, it becomes difficult to determine which names and pronouns to use for each character while writing about them. I've decided to continue using "Polly" and she/her pronouns for Perks, as these are the terms her internal narration uses for herself. When discussing the character Maladict I will be using "they/them," and Sergeant Jackrum will be "he/him."

Polly puts a considerable amount of effort into becoming Oliver. The idea had "begun as a sudden strange fancy, but had continued as a plan." Working as a barmaid in the family inn had given her "good muscles for a girl," and she had specifically chosen jobs that would roughen her hands until her skin matched that of a typical working man (*MR* 80). The bar also "provided plenty of observational material" when it came to young men (12). This observation had apparently been "reciprocated hopefully by a few of them," but Polly was uninterested in relationships (80). Instead, she studied how they walked, talked, and punched. She furthered this research by learning how to fake shaving with a blunted blade and, perhaps most impressively, figuring out how to pee standing up. All of these plans put her at considerable risk. Even just wearing "a pair of her brother's old breeches under her long skirt, to get the feel of them" is an Abomination unto Nuggan and considered a beatable offense (80). It follows that fully crossdressing and passing as a boy to join the army (two Abominations at once) would come with even harsher consequences. Moist also had to put effort into creating his new identity, but

he was effectively forced into the role by Lord Vetinari.<sup>25</sup> Polly, on the other hand, made this choice on her own. Yes, saving her brother (and the family business) is a noble cause, but why is she willing to risk so much for a “strange fancy?” All the planning she did helped her avoid detection, but eventually the work she is putting into performing masculinity seems to be less of a strategic choice and more of an internal representation of some sort of shifting gender identity.

Polly is only “spotted” once in the beginning, when she’s given the socks. The stranger in the bathroom tells her it isn’t obvious that she isn’t a boy, but the socks will help as people “notice what’s missing more than they notice what’s there” (52). This is in part referring to the rest of Polly’s figure, which is apparently conveniently boyish. The stranger then tells her not to “get ambitions” by trying to fit more than one pair of socks down her pants, and also advises her to pick her nose some more (52). For as sophisticated as Pratchett’s jokes can be, it seems that sometimes you still need some (literal) bathroom humor. Other than these small tweaks, however, the mysterious stranger tells Polly she comes across as a “frightened young lad trying to look big and brave” (52). Socks aside, all of her preparation served her well.

Polly’s an outsider in this. It seems that most of the other lads joined the army impulsively, or at least didn’t plan as far ahead as Polly. Lofty, a quiet girl with an inclination for arson, is discovered when Polly accidentally stumbles into her during a bathroom break. While this coincidence could have just as easily happened to Polly, she begins to notice “all the little clues that Lofty was a girl, and a girl who hadn’t planned enough” (79). While these little clues are never written out, Polly seems resentful that Lofty isn’t putting as much effort into the performance as she is. After all, Polly “didn’t just cut [her] hair and wear trousers. [She] *planned...*” (79). If Lofty can’t keep up appearances and gets caught by someone higher up, Polly is in danger of also being discovered. And for what? Lofty seems to be dating another

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<sup>25</sup> Or, technically, given a very lopsided “choice”

member of the regiment, Tonker, and Polly assumes she joined the army simply to follow “her boy” (Tonker is later also revealed to be female, but their relationship is never disputed). Coincidentally, this is the storyline of the song Polly is named after. She does acknowledge the romance of this gesture, but she also believes it to be “very, very dumb” (79). The same Polly who joined the army in search of her brother is criticizing Lofty for joining to stay with her “boyfriend.” One can argue about the difference between family and partners as much as you like, but at the end of the day both scenarios are still about putting yourself in danger for another person. With this in mind, the only real difference between Lofty and Polly is how well they perform.

Two other girls are “outed” to Polly through basic mistakes. Shufti, a pregnant girl who joined up to find the father of her child, accidentally says “sugar” instead of an actual swear word (women swearing is yet another Abomination). Polly talks to her about it, and ends up giving her another pair of socks. Then Wozzer, a religious fanatic, is seen curtsying on instinct instead of bowing. It is at this point that Polly begins to wonder at the number of girls in the regiment (four out of eight at this moment) and the amount of socks between them, thinking “this was soon going to be a barefoot army” (117). Over the course of these events, Polly has a few conversations with the character Maladict, a vampire of indeterminate gender. During these, they reveal they know about Lofty and Shufti, and they also tell Polly about Tonker being a girl. Polly begins to suspect they were the one who gave her the first pair of socks, but can’t confirm it without officially revealing herself. Later, a conversation with the entire group leads to Shufti announcing “We’re girls.... Well, not Carborundum and Ozzer... and I’m not sure about Maladict and Igor. But I know the rest of us are, right? I’ve got eyes, I’ve got ears, I’ve got a brain” (148). The troll Carborundum responds to this by admitting her name is actually Jade, and

Polly comes out as Polly. She feels a sense of relief when doing so, but it's interesting that she passed so well Shufti thought she (as "Ozzer") wasn't a girl even while admitting to being one herself. Igor eventually admits to actually being Igorina, and when questioned about their gender Maladict simply "smiled in a distinctly non-committal way." (149). Despite any lingering questions that may remain about Maladict, the lads are bound together in new ways after their sexes are revealed. Although they all come from entirely different backgrounds, they have common ground when it comes to this specific form of gender expression. Pratchett has a habit of using conflict between different species (such as dwarfs and trolls) to talk about racism, but none of that comes up in this book. Instead, the Lads laugh about their leaders trying to emasculate them by calling them "ladies," and they begin to talk about the changes brought on by their socks. Most of this evidence comes from Polly through her internal monologue, but Shufti brings it up at one point too, indicating a shared experience.

If we follow Butler's thinking, the more one performs specific gendered acts, the more they become that gender. Fake it till you make it, right? As we have seen, Polly has put a lot of effort and thought into her performance as a male. However, it's only with the socks that we begin to see a real shift in mentality. Throughout the course of the book, there are instances where Polly purposely changes something about how she is acting due to the male persona she is presenting. For example, while talking to a servant she begins to say "excuse me," but then "remembered the socks, raised her voice and tried to sound angry" (103). Then, she begins surprising herself with similar, yet apparently unplanned, actions. In each case, she blames it on the socks. Due to them, "Ozzer" is suddenly incongruous with the person Polly has considered herself to be her entire life. She talks back to her corporal at one point, and then curses "herself for her idiot bravado," saying "it must have been the socks talking" (61). When she instinctually



raises her crossbow when surprised by a noise, she concludes that “the socks were doing the thinking again” (239). Obviously a pair of socks can’t actually make someone act different, but viewing them through Butler’s claim that “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts that are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” turns the simple concept of the socks into a gendered act that is being constantly renewed through wear and use. Because Polly is acting like a man, she needs the socks, which then in turn make her act more like a man. It’s a self-renewing cycle.

Polly’s performance of masculinity, whatever it may mean for her gender identity, only works because the Borogravian society has decided to agree on gender norms, much like our world today. Butler’s concept that gender is a performance requires rejecting the concept that it is something innate, for “there is nothing about the binary gender system that is a given” (Butler 531). The performance is happening to an audience whose standards could change at any whim, and both actor and audience know it. The social construction of gender is, Butler argues, the exact reason some are so eager to punish those who step past the bounds of what they were assigned at birth. It’s an eagerness compelled by anxiety, and “should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled” (528). Because no one actually wants to acknowledge this, those who perform gender differently represent a threat to the system most people have lived within their entire lives. Therefore, they may be more willing to overlook some things. In *Monstrous Regiment*, this anxiety is fueled by fear of going against Nuggan. Polly credits her success to the fact that “People didn’t look for a woman in trousers. To the casual observer, men’s clothes and short hair and a bit of swagger were what it took to be a man. Oh, and a second pair of socks” (80). Because no one assumes someone would commit an Abomination so blatantly, they’re able to

write her off as a young boy.<sup>26</sup> The preconceived notions of what it means to be a man or a woman end up working to her own advantage.

Chapter One touched on Atterbery's idea that fantasy allows for the possibility of "the Other." The genre shows reality is a social construct, that life as we know it is a fluke and "the most profound political statement that fantasy can make is to let the Other become a self" (Atterbery 24). Polly, of course, is this self.<sup>27</sup> She is Othered through presenting as male, which both changes her internal sense of gender and falls into Butler's theory of gender as a performance that either embraces or rejects societal norms. Someone's shifting gender identity is by no means something that happens only in fantasy, but the fact that Pratchett includes it in his fantasy at all is political in a sense. *Monstrous Regiment* was published in 2003. Assuming he was working on the book before this, Pratchett would have been writing about these characters while being transgender was still considered a mental illness in England; it wasn't until December of 2002 that the "Government Policy Concerning Transsexual People," categorized it as simply a "medical condition."

Going a step past Polly, the characters of Maladict and Jackrum are the easiest to read as transgender. As all the other Little Lads reveal themselves throughout the story, Maladict remains a mystery for most of it. Towards the very end they eventually reveal themselves as "Maladicta," and the pronouns Pratchett uses switch to "she." However, the story ends with Polly and Maladict running into each other alongside two new army recruits. Polly is back to wearing a skirt at this point, but it should be noted that she's wearing pants underneath and that while putting on the skirt she had to "put aside the nagging feeling that she was dressing as a woman" (*MR* 490). Maladict, however, is in "full uniform," presumably without a skirt (492). The two

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<sup>26</sup> This is the same tactic Gilt uses to get away with his various crimes.

<sup>27</sup> Moist, too, is othered through his criminality and performance of goodness, which eventually becomes real.

new recruits are “country lads in ragged, ill-fitting clothes,” and when Polly looks at them “the world turned upside down, and history repeated” (493). These “lads,” of course, are actually named Rosemary and Mary. They’ve heard that women were allowed in the army now (a result of the Ins-and-Out’s efforts in ending the war), but were still worried. Polly, with a wink at Maladict, reassures them simply: “you can join as men if you want,” she says, “we need a few good men... You get better swear words... and the trousers are useful. But it’s your choice” (494). And, after all, why shouldn’t it be?

With the end of the war, Jackrum is also revealed to have been born a woman. He tells Polly about joining the army to follow his “sweetheart,” and how he’s spent the decades since living as a man and working his way through the ranks. Now, he has a plan to use his savings to open up an inn of his own, much like the motivation that fueled Polly in the beginning. Jackrum does mention that he has a son who thinks both his parents are dead, but states that he doesn’t want to “inconvenience” him by meeting him as “some fat ol’ biddy banging on his back door and gobbling baccy juice all over the place and telling him she’s his mother” (480). However, Polly brings up the fact that Jackrum doesn’t have to be anyone’s mother, but can instead meet his son as a “distinguished sergeant major, shiny with braid, loaded with medals...telling [his son] he’s his father” (480). Throughout this conversation, the pronouns used for Jackrum are “she” and “her,” following the earlier trend of pronouns switching when characters come out to Polly. However, after Polly presents her idea, framed as a fun scheme and “one last lie” that justifies all the ones Jackrum told while in the army, the sergeant is once again referred to as “him” (482). Readers are later told that he did finally meet his son, as a man. With the war over, Borogravia has been less concerned with following Nuggan’s Abominations and more worried about feeding its own citizens. With the amount of money Jackrum has saved up, he could have

enacted his initial plan to buy an inn while living as a woman. There's no real reason to continue living as a man at this point; it's simply a choice he makes. This decision once again shows the story aligning with Butler's theory of gender as a choice, and it also makes Jackrum out to be a character I see as undeniably trans, showing Pratchett's engagement with "trans issues" as early as 2003.

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The "man in a dress" trope remains easily recognizable in humor, although as awareness of trans issues increases it is starting to go out of style. The trope usually involves an absurd and campy performance of someone the audience is meant to immediately recognize as a "man" prancing around pretending to be what he is "obviously" not— a woman. Like most of Pratchett's jokes, a man in a dress joke follows the incongruity-resolution theory. A man, typically one that looks fairly masculine, puts on a costume and performs an exaggerated portrayal of femininity. The "humor" comes from the juxtaposition between the two extremes of gender stereotypes, as well as the actual idea of a man acting feminine, and the resolution appears in the form of other characters responding to said "man" by laughing and treating them as a joke. Take, for example, the British tradition of the "Pantomime," a theatrical show in which the main characters are often portrayed by cross-dressing actors. Queer Kernow, a nonprofit based in Cornwall, England, says the "Pantomime Dame," a female character usually played by an older man, is acceptable because the man is "acting as a woman with exaggeration for comedic effect; their gender was obvious and therefore not challenged, and they are not celebrating femininity but are ridiculing it. Whereas the art of drag is the exact opposite; it's playing with gender in a considered and thoughtful way rather than as the butt of a joke."

Portrayals such as the Pantomime Dame<sup>28</sup> have historically been more socially acceptable than

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<sup>28</sup> Pantomimes also typically cast a woman to play the role of "Principle Boy."

queer-centered practices such as drag, or even the trans people they're theoretically portraying. Butler summarizes this by pointing out that "the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" (Butler 527). She posits that this is because the appearance of "transvestite on the bus" draws attention to the gap between sex and the performance of gender. The man in a dress is safe as long as they're a joke, and not actually threatening gender norms once they leave the stage.

*Monstrous Regiment* very easily could have turned into the man in a dress trope (or a reversal, considering the sex of the characters), especially considering it was written in the early 2000s when trans issues weren't in the public eye as much. In fact, it almost does.

Wrigglesworth, a background character only mentioned in passing, is known as an "amazingly clever chap at laying his hands on a dress" who especially enjoyed "men dressing up as gels" (*MR* 307-309). Wrigglesworth plays no role in the plot, and seems to only exist for comedic purposes. His existence seems to show Pratchett leaning, however briefly, into the potentially transphobic trope. Even so, although he represents a problematic type of "joke," Pratchett does not actually fulfill the typical "punchline" in which the "man in the dress" is laughed at and ostracized. Instead, Wrigglesworth is a respected member of the army, and known to be a "fine officer" (426). The incongruity is there, but the typical resolution is not.

There is one other instance of Pratchett coming close to the trope. Lieutenant Blouse, a cisgender man, dresses as a washerwoman to infiltrate an enemy base. Unlike Wrigglesworth, Blouse is laughed at, but his "dress up" is less of a trope fulfillment and more of a method to serve as contrast to the crossdressing the Lads do. He falls firmly into the type of cross-dressing Queer Kernow would describe as "ridiculing femininity," but in this case, his performance is

comedic not because he is a man wearing a dress, but simply because of how *bad* he is at it. His female persona speaks with a “fingernail screech” and he asks for a pair of balloons, as “a big bosom always gets a laugh” (311). His approach to the whole ordeal basically follows the exaggeration of the comedy trope step for step, but the humor comes from how out of place it is within the larger context of sneaking into an enemy building. Once again following the incongruity-resolution theory of humor, the joke here comes not from the idea of Blouse wearing a dress but from the disjunction that exists in how and where the joke exists in the larger context of the story. Again, Pratchett approaches the transphobic trope but ultimately fails to fall into it. Compared to the way the Little Lads are performing gender, Blouse’s attempts come across as crass and offensive. He’s the stereotypical man in a dress, but it’s recognized that the way he tries to joke about it is inappropriate and out of place. In this way, Pratchett makes meta-commentary on the trope itself, condemning it through turning the “joke” into a joke in and of itself.

In late July of 2021, Pratchett’s name began circulating on Twitter. This isn’t an uncommon phenomenon, but it typically happens earlier in the spring, either on the anniversary of his death<sup>29</sup> or on the 25th of May, a reference to an event in his novel *Night Watch*.<sup>30</sup> The tweets in July were not commemorative, but rather a fight between Pratchett’s own friends and family and gender critical (GC) activists over what the author’s position towards trans people would be if he were alive today. For those unaware, gender critics<sup>31</sup> use the guise of feminism to uphold the idea that sex and gender are immutable. Although they claim this is in order to protect women’s rights and fight the patriarchy, they typically target the trans community specifically.

Most of the original tweets from this specific argument have been deleted, but screenshots and

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<sup>29</sup> March 12, 2015

<sup>30</sup> Characters in the book wore sprigs of lilac on this day in order to commemorate a revolution, while some Roundworld fans do the same to commemorate Pratchett’s writing and support Alzheimer’s research.

<sup>31</sup> Also know as Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs)

tweets *about* the original ones do still exist. The fight began when Neil Gaiman commented “Not very surprising” in response to a thread showing the “intersection between anti-semitism and transmisogyny” (Neil Gaiman, Laurie Penny). Many of the tweets responding to Gaiman are no longer visible, but the conversation eventually turned to Pratchett and his beliefs. One tweet<sup>32</sup> reads “Honestly don’t know how anyone can read Pratchett, esp. the *Witches*, and think he didn’t know what ‘female’ is and means in the world,” a reference to the GC belief that trans women are somehow erasing the “true” meaning of what it means to be a woman due to not having uteri (“Since you’re...”). The *Witches* subseries mentioned does feature many well-written, strong, female characters,<sup>33</sup> which this specific poster took as proof that Pratchett would defend the definition of “female” as a purely biological identity.<sup>34</sup> A different Twitter user summarized the situation as “the GCs are trying to recruit Terry Pratchett posthumously presumably because they know he can't contradict them” (“I note...”). This post was then retweeted by Rhianna Pratchett, the author’s daughter, who commented “This is horrifying. My father would most definitely not be a GC if he was still alive. Read. The. Books.” (Rhianna Pratchett). Although Terry is gone, his daughter is carrying on his legacy of anger over injustices through Twitter.<sup>35</sup> Of course, this fueled both sides of the argument, with some claiming that she doesn’t actually know what it

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<sup>32</sup> This tweet has been deleted, but someone took a screenshot. My citation refers to the tweet that includes the screenshot.

<sup>33</sup> Pratchett gave a speech in 1985 called “Why Gandalf Never Married” about the lack of female wizards and male witches. The first *Witches* book came out two years later.

<sup>34</sup> Ironically, the very first book of the series, *Equal Rites*, features a girl who uses wizard (“male”) magic instead of witch (“female”).

<sup>35</sup> Rhianna also recently retweeted and commented on a post which reads “People don't get pissed off at Terry Pratchett for not always getting things right, because you can see him trying to do better as you go through the Discworld series, and he does. By the end he's just FURIOUS about all kinds of inequality and it shows.” (Doctor Johnny Bananas). The original tweet was written in response to J.K. Rowling’s continued transphobia, and Rhianna’s retweet indicate she at least somewhat agrees that her dad was angry about inequality and that she still believes he would have supported the trans community.

means to be GC and trans fans of Discworld sharing memories of their own positive interactions with Pratchett when he heard they related to his characters.

Gaiman once again joined the conversation after Rhianna Pratchett's tweet, saying "Terry was wise and Terry was kind" and would have "had no time for this nonsense." He also specifically points to *Monstrous Regiment* as evidence that Pratchett would have supported trans rights ("Terry was..."). In a perfect fantasy world, the discussion ends here. Unfortunately, I've spent this entire thesis trying to show how fantasy differs from reality. The discussion decidedly does not end, and in fact reaches mainstream journalism. On August 3rd, Sarah Ditum published a piece in *The Times* titled "You Can't Hijack the Dead for Today's Battles" with the subheading "It's absurd for either trans activists or gender critical feminists to claim that Terry Pratchett would have supported them." In her article, Ditum outlines the Twitter argument and does touch on how Gaiman and Rhianna knew Pratchett personally,<sup>36</sup> yet she ultimately concludes "no one, not even those who knew Pratchett best, can be certain what he would have thought, because the terms of the row taking place over his dead body were not in place when he was alive" (Ditum). She may be correct if she were simply talking about the terminology used,<sup>37</sup> but she goes on to say "it makes as much sense to speculate about which "side" he'd have chosen as it does to ask what PG Wodehouse would have thought about lockdown, or how Jane Austen would have taken the decolonisation of the National Trust. The dead cannot be measured by the standards of a world in which they never lived" (Ditum). But Pratchett did, in fact, live in a world in which trans people existed. In 1996 he published *Feet of Clay*, in which a dwarf named Cheery Littlebottom notably begins living publicly as a woman, despite the fact that all dwarves in

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<sup>36</sup> obviously

<sup>37</sup> "gender critical" didn't reach the mainstream until the late 2010s' to early 2020s', with the controversial subreddit r/gendercritical being formed in 2016.



Discworld have beards and (until Cheery) use male pronouns.<sup>38</sup> When specifically asked about whether Cheery is meant to be trans, Pratchett responded by saying it wasn't intentional, and that it simply "comes from the characters" ("Terry Pratchett and the Discworld"). While Cheery does initially face backlash for her identity, she is eventually accepted as a woman. Even if she wasn't written into Discworld to serve as an example of a trans woman, Pratchett treats her with the same dignity he gives the rest of his characters, dignity many GCs would rather trans women weren't given at all. Again, this was in 1996. *Monstrous Regiment*, along with Jackrum, was still seven years away. Pratchett himself had trans friends, and, based on anecdotes mentioned on Twitter, was always kind to trans fans at conventions. His closest friends and family members have come forward about his beliefs. Against all this evidence, Ditum's argument that Pratchett somehow lived in a world "before" trans people and therefore couldn't have had a stance on the current argument reads entirely as a bad-faith attempt to erase Pratchett's history of acceptance, as well as the progressiveness of his literary legacy.

Nothing in *Monstrous Regiment* suggests that Pratchett would have bought into the bioessentialism GCs are trying to pin on him. Just as in war, the enemy isn't men or women,<sup>39</sup> but rather stupid people of any gender. Not "stupid" as in a lack of intelligence, exactly, but those who are unwilling to step outside of their own experiences and try to imagine someone else's viewpoint. Stupid as in buying into a fanatical belief system no matter how many people are harmed by it. Pratchett's writing shows how easily the lines drawn by society can be erased, and his protagonists are the ones who work up the nerve to do it and step outside the boxes assigned to them. Those trying to redraw the lines are the giants they are up against. As shown with Pratchett's commentary on war, this can be applied to any issue, not just the question of gender.

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<sup>38</sup> This is apparently a parody of Tolkein's entirely-male dwarves

<sup>39</sup> Of either sex

However, the gender “troubles” explored by the lads make the story feel particularly relevant to 2021 and modern conversations surrounding trans issues. As much as I appreciate the timelessness of Pratchett’s writing in terms of building my argument here, I’d much rather live in a world that didn’t have to worry about never-ending wars or arguments about whether we should accept trans people. Unfortunately, we don’t live in a fantasy world, and I don’t think either is likely to happen anytime soon.

## Conclusion

“It may help to understand human affairs to be clear that most of the great triumphs and tragedies of history are caused, not by people being fundamentally good or fundamentally bad, but by people being fundamentally people.” - Good Omens

Fantasy and humor both help authors subvert reader expectations, and Pratchett's use of both makes it possible for him to make political points in a way that seems nonthreatening and simple. The jokes and puns he slips into every story make it easy to simply take his books as fluffy inconsequential writing, and many do. These jokes, however, also work to create a world where the logical is shown to be illogical, and vice versa. Time and time again, the assumptions we make about our world are revealed and mocked through funny questions. Irony is used as breadcrumbs leading the reader to statements that would be considered overtly bold in most situations, but here are simply logical. Humorous asides ask us just why we're willing to accept things the way that they are, why we assume systems are set in stone in a world that also says luck is determined by whether or not you picked up a pin that day. Our world is full of incongruity, and Pratchett is simply pointing out how absurdly funny that can be, if we let it.

As Pratchett's jokes have made readers notice the parts of the world they've perhaps never truly considered before, his fantasy creates a brand new world, with its own set of assumptions. The genre gives him free rein to point out issues that exist in Roundworld societies along with the distance to use his stories to experiment with possible solutions without getting bogged down by bureaucracy. He creates the world's logic from the ground up. Discworld is a place where every law, every societal norm, was decided by a single man rather than centuries of human history dictating the way things are done. Even when situations in this world mirror

things we might recognize from our own reality, in Discworld the bad guy gets caught and the underdogs win the war.

The decisions Pratchett made when creating Discworld reveal his radical hope for humanity. I'm still hesitant to formally ascribe specific politics to Pratchett, but readers can probably get a fairly good idea of where he stood based on who the targets of his anger are. In *Going Postal* and *Monstrous Regiment*, for example, the "bad guys" are those who take advantage of others for profit or blind nationalism. The way Pratchett's books both depend on and stray from fantasy traditions also reveals a glimpse into his political ideals. The good guy winning is a common trope, but the good guy being a slowly-reforming criminal rather than, say, a hobbit who has until now followed all the norms of polite society, is not. A ragtag group goes to war and wins against all odds, which has been seen before, but most stories like this don't also fit into some of the most widespread theories on gender identity and expression so neatly. Pratchett's characters are heroes, but they're also normal people. Some are marginalized, and it actually affects their lives rather than simply being background information that only gets mentioned once. Others are privileged in ways we might recognize, yet their character is shown through how they choose to work through it. Take, for example, Reacher Gilt having enough money and connections to get away with murder compared to Moist's horror that his history of taking advantage of others may have caused suffering and death rather than just inconvenience. Discworld stories aren't full of perfect people making perfect decisions, but things still somehow end up working out alright. Even if we don't live in a fantasy series, who says anything is stopping us from trying to recreate that same success here?

I chose *Going Postal* and *Monstrous Regiment* to serve as my examples simply out of convenience. These are books that I have loved for a long time, and when I found out how little

formal analysis existed for either of them I wanted to rectify the situation. This being said, I want to stress that Pratchett's political commentary is not confined to these two books. His subseries about Witches, as mentioned, is often interpreted through a feminist lens. *Small Gods*, a novel not generally considered part of any specific subseries, satirizes the way politics and religion intersect, as well as religious institutions as a whole. *Jingo*, a City Watch novel, has the same anti-war message as *Monstrous Regiment* as it deals with themes of imperialism, nationalism, and racism between two warring cities. The City Watch subseries as a whole deals with many of the same questions of morality that can be found in *Going Postal* as it follows the characters in charge of policing Ankh-Morpork. Rather than the more common "cops and robbers" story where law enforcement is the picture of morality, the City Watch books ask readers to consider how we consider laws as a whole. Who decides them? How far should people be allowed to go in enforcing them? The people who make up Ankh-Morpork's Watch are not necessarily the most moral people, and aren't afraid to break laws to their own benefit. However, there's still a clear message about what Pratchett thinks the role of law enforcement is within the novels. A quote from the book *Snuff*, for example, calls out the increasing militarization of police forces, as well as the separation between law enforcement and "regular" citizens:

"It always embarrassed Samuel Vimes when civilians tried to speak to him in what they thought was "policeman." If it came to that, he hated thinking of them as civilians. What was a policeman, if not a civilian with a uniform and a badge? But they tended to use the term these days as a way of describing people who were not policemen. It was a dangerous habit: once policemen stopped being civilians the only other thing they could be was soldiers." (*Snuff* 370)

The idea that police are somehow different from other people is one of the main talking points behind arguments over the concept of the “thin blue line,” or that police are somehow the only thing keeping society from falling into complete chaos. *Snuff* was published in 2011, but this quote in particular resurfaced during the Black Lives Matter riots of 2020. Just as with *Boot Theory* or the mail situation as it ties to *Going Postal*, the moments in which Pratchett gets overtly political are the things that keep his books feeling relevant and his quotes circulating Twitter.

Let me end this with a disclaimer. I still don’t know anything about Terry Pratchett’s personal politics. I know where he stands on a few very specific issues, such as his outspoken support of legalizing assisted suicide.<sup>40</sup> As a whole, however, there isn’t much information beyond this. Perhaps someone could comb through the opinions his friends and family share on social media in an attempt to construct a political identity based on those he spent time with, but I don’t believe there’d be any point. What I do believe, however, is that Terry Pratchett had a deep-seated faith in humanity as a whole, the kind of faith the Borogravians have in the aging Nuggan. We make mistakes, we make stupid rules and start even stupider wars, yet to write us off entirely would be blasphemous. Pratchett’s anger at an unfair world comes through in his writing, but along with it comes the unwavering belief that things could be better, if only we’d agree to try and make it happen. I don’t think political commentary is the main reason Pratchett wrote his stories, but I hope this thesis has done the work of convincing my readers that its existence is no accident. No one has to engage with it, and the story will be readable even to someone who disagrees with everything I’ve pointed out. Pratchett could simply be pointing out

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<sup>40</sup> After being diagnosed with Alzheimer's, Pratchett became a staunch advocate for what he called the right to “a good death.” He gave lectures, took part in a documentary, and funded legal inquiries for fellow terminally-ill people and their families who face prosecution for choosing to end their lives (BBC). Despite his continued efforts to get the laws changed in England, he died of natural causes in the end.

the absurdities of life itself. As he writes in *Nation*, “sometimes you laugh because you've got no more room for crying. Sometimes you laugh because table manners on a beach are funny. And sometimes you laugh because you're alive, when you really shouldn't be” (*Nation* 98). Millions of coincidences across time and space have led to us, a race who can't even agree to stop killing each other, let alone decide how best to send messages long distance or deal with all the complexities of gender. Discworld's political commentary could simply be interpreted as talking about table manners on a beach, making fun of something we do despite its relative absurdity in the bigger picture. Or, we can take it as seriously as Pratchett took fantasy. The option for more is always there—if only we agree to see it.

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