FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Special Issue 02 | Summer 2008

Title	The Ludic Parody of Terry Pratchett
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	Special 02
Issue Date	Summer 2008
Publication Date	01/08/2008
Editors	Ana Salzberg & Gesine Strenge

The Ludic Parody of Terry Pratchett

This paper will look at how Pratchett's universe creates a ludic parody through its use of juxtaposition, puncturing and awareness of stereotypes. I will also show through an analysis of some of Pratchett's characters how narrative conventions are undermined. Finally, I will show how Pratchett, by using the Discworld as a background for more specific parody, manages to avoid Bakhtin's charge of modern parody as narrow ridicule.

The subdivision of the current 36 Discworld books is not a matter of linearity or homogeneity. The Discworld can be roughly divided into sub-series such as the Witches, the City Watch or the Death novels, but there are also stand-alone books which take part of the Discworld universe without belonging to such a sub-series, such as *Small Gods* (1992) or *Pyramids* (1989). It should be noted that these sub-series in themselves are not fixed and clearly separated: they bleed into one another through characters like Death, who is everywhere, or through characters being introduced in a setting different from their normal one, a technique which mirrors how Pratchett treats other patterns and their naturalised positions, as I will show later. Finally, the books of the sub-series are not published sequentially: a Witch book may be published between a Rincewind and a Watch book, for example, or the other way around. There is, then, an instability to the ordering of the series itself; it is reaching outside its borders and creating semi-borders to be overstepped. Reading this as a rejection of the static structuredness of Being, an affirmation of the impossibility of such a reduction of Life and Becoming, may seem tenuous. Such a reading does become more plausible, however, when seen in the context of the Discworld universe itself. The Discworld thematises these issues in both form and content: firstly by the very nature of parody, and secondly through the ludic, carnivalesque universe and its characters.

Parody is a hybrid. As Bakhtin pointed out, it consists in the meeting and intermingling of different positions (Bakhtin 1981:59). He was dissatisfied with modern parody, as is well known: parody can be a controlled affair with one position subsumed under the other, which would appear to be what Bakhtin saw and criticised as narrow and unproductive ridicule in modern parody (Bakhtin 1981:71).

Considering the case of the Discworld, however, it becomes clear that we are dealing with a multidirectional, multilayered parody, generally without clear allegiances. As will be shown, it is ludic parody, which, rather than restrain meaning and direction, allows different positions to meet in unresolved play. It thereby manages to destabilise them, and make them funny, without necessarily resorting to ridicule.

Pratchett's parody works in part by juxtaposing stereotypes, worlds and patterns. Stereotypes form our expectations: certain patterns appear natural in one context, but not in another. The general attitude to such patterns would be to reinforce them by conforming to them: For a story to seem plausible, the storyteller needs to follow the rules governing what seems plausible in which context. Bringing two incompatible patterns together, however, destabilises both.

Much of the Discworld consists in taking the world of fantasy and fairytales, which is ordinarily characterised by its separation from our world, and bringing it into contact with our world, for example by bringing the society of laws into the question of dragon disposal in *Guards! Guards!* (1989), a tactic which corresponds to the carnivalesque treatment of the epic world according to Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1984:17; Bakhtin 1981:21). The worlds of high fantasy or fairytales are set apart from our world much in the way of Bakhtin's world of the epic (Bakhtin 1981:16); these are the contexts in which dragons will appear and invariably be killed by the hero. The society of laws, however, is founded on the idea of the rights of the prisoner not to be harmed, for example, or the right to a trial. These are brought together when Carrot, a six foot adoptive dwarf and rightful king of Ankh-Morpork, arrests the dragon that has been menacing the city, and finds himself in the seemingly absurd situation of the hero protecting the dragon from harm (Pratchett 1990:286). Pratchett does the same to language: by combining conventionally high language with low language, he destabilises and denaturalises both. One example is Granny Weatherwax' puncturing of the Tolkien fantasy high speak in Witches Abroad (1991): "Then she stood back ... and spake thusly: 'Open up, you little sods!'" (Pratchett 1992:49). Granny Weatherwax, as will be shown later, is not one to abide by literary conventions. Pratchett's play with language is also characterised by his puncturing of metaphors and clichés. It could be asked whether there is a clear distinction between Pratchett's play with language and his play with genre, patterns and stereotype at all, or whether they are all manifestations of the same method, only in different degrees.

Carrot arguably presents a prime example on both counts. He himself punctures the pattern of the king who will come bringing "Law and Justice, and know nothing but the Truth, and Protect and Serve the People with his Sword" (Pratchett 1990:18): Carrot, the reader is given to understand, is the true king, and he does in fact bring the law in the form of the book "The Laws and Ordinances of Ankh-Morpork". In his work as a watchman he is also ensuring order and obedience to the law. It would never occur to Carrot to lie – he does not even know how to react to metaphors, sarcasm or euphemism. Also, he uses his (unusually unmagical and unspectacular) sword to protect and serve the people in a very literal sense, not in the metaphoric sense that kings would generally be expected to do this. To sum up, he is a literalisation of the stereotypical phrase, which changes it beyond the recognition of those expecting it to be followed. Carrot's unfamiliarity with untruth, moreover, is connected to his ignorance of metaphor, which provides Pratchett with an excellent opportunity for playing with literalisation of commonly used expressions: Carrot is told to "throw the book at" the villain in *Guards! Guards!*, and rather than charging him with his numerous offences, he throws the actual law book at the man, causing him to plummet to his death. Someone astutely remarks that he was "killed by a metaphor", only to be told "it looked like the ground to me" (Pratchett 1990:299).

The Discworld universe also puts stereotypes in play through the awareness of narrative conventions exhibited by its characters. It is a side point in *Guards! Guards!*, where the awareness of narrative patterns, and the use of them as rules of guidance, undermines the very patterns it emphasises: the palace guard are terrified and very reluctant when asked to arrest Vimes, the reluctant hero of the City Watch books; they are well aware that guards asked to attack unarmed heroes always end up in very bad shape (Pratchett 1990:248-9). This awareness of convention also explains the villain's otherwise rather odd comment to Vetinari later on in the same book: "Oh, you think you're so clever, so in-control, so swave [sic], just because I have a sword and you haven't" (Pratchett 1990:297). Narrative conventions are magnified and held up as real rules of guidance, and this leads to an inversion of power: the armed and the ones traditionally in control are expected to have a smaller rate of success. Whether Pratchett still upholds the narrative conventions in these cases varies, but by having drawn our attention to them, he has denaturalised them, and they are no longer allowed to function in the same way.

In *Witches Abroad* the theme of the power of stories is part of the main plot. It discusses the problem of patterns, conventions and stereotypes in connection with the figure of Lilith, Granny Weatherwax' evil sister, who has taken to heart the role of fairy godmother to the extent that she will threaten and force the orphaned girl (who is an orphan because Lilith has killed her parents) to marry a frog turned into a man. Lilith's goal is, in Bakhtin's terms, a monoglossic conformity to the pattern of stories, and people not conforming to the pattern are punished severely for what Pratchett calls "crimes against narrative expectation" (Pratchett 1992:75). The heroes of the book are those who refuse to conform to this expectation, those who put the stereotype into play, rejecting the restrictions it sets. The good witches set out to rescue the poor kitchen maid from having to go to the ball by turning the carriage into a pumpkin (Pratchett 1992:200). Again we find that inversion is central to Pratchett's treatment of convention, but he does not stop at a simple inversion of good and bad: the patterns themselves are questioned.

We find that there is no clear distinction between good and bad in terms of following stories in the book. Lilith is the bad one, but she considers herself to be good, and, when compared to traditional fairy-tales, she does fill the role of the good fairy godmother. She herself thinks that a bad fairy godmother is just a fairy godmother with a different perspective, still operating within the story and therefore in Lilith's terms good (Pratchett 1992:146). We also know that Black Aliss, who is often referred to in asides in the Witches series as an example of a witch gone bad, corresponds to both the good fairy godmother (turning a pumpkin into a coach, sending a palace to sleep) and the evil witch in fairy-tales (gingerbread houses, poisoned apples). This brings us back to how the heroes are those who do not follow the direction of the story: Nanny Ogg, another of Pratchett's witches, whose red boots lead to her having a house crash on top of her, resists the obvious end to that story by sheer vitality; and Granny does it by confronting the stories with real, everyday life: the 'happy ending' of the story we recognise as that of Sleeping Beauty is rejected because the ability to hack one's way through brambles says nothing about a man's qualities as a husband (Pratchett 1992:118).

It is characteristic, and echoes Bakthin, when it is stated that the only time Lilith can be stopped is during the carnival, the time when people who do not fit into the perfectly ordered and controlled world of Lilith take the power (Pratchett 1992:97). Carnival is here tied to rhythm and music – one assumes jazz music, as

Genua is related to the idea of New Orleans with its Mardi Gras and swamp land. Jazz, of course, is characterised by improvisation and departure from fixed patterns. Carnival and heteroglossia belong together, and they undermine the static and monoglossic. The world which is powerful in the carnival, that of the swamp with zombies, voodoo and gumbo, rejects clear cut distinctions. The swamp is both land and water; the zombie both dead and alive, breaking one of our clearest distinctions; voodoo is a prime example of syncretism, and gumbo is distinguished precisely by the indistinguishability of its contents. This world is a world of the unfinished, the becoming, which Bakhtin also connects to the world of the carnival (Bakhtin 1984:81-2).

It is tempting to see the witches (perhaps especially Nanny Ogg and Granny Weatherwax) as the representatives of Life – rather than Art – with all its inaccuracies, odd additions and lack of orderliness, opposed to narrative conventions and artificial stories. Life is not as Lilith wants it to be: it breaks borders and does not fit into a neat narrative pattern. What we find in Pratchett is a celebration of the variations that escape such patterns. Magrat, the third witch, is at her most ridiculous when attempting to follow the stereotype of the New Age witch, and at her most powerful when she lets it go: it is when you bring something new to bear on a pattern that it changes and develops, and it is this that Pratchett embraces.

As I mentioned earlier, Bakhtin accused modern parody of being narrow and unproductive. Several attempts have been made at defending modern parody from this charge, some better than others. Some theorists (notably Bertel Pedersen and Linda Hutcheon) have connected Bakhtin's criticism to the parody that focuses on a single work (Hutcheon 2000:7; Pedersen 1976:36-7). The question then arises how to write a close parody of one target text without reducing it to unproductive ridicule. The many heterogeneous elements of the Discworld come together to shape it as a sovereign universe which has an internal coherence (or coherent incoherence) and is independent of any single other work of art while mirroring many. This in turn can be used as a background for the more specific parody of books like Macbeth, Faust or The Phantom of the Opera. The placement of any such well-known work within the Discworld will destabilise it without recourse to ridicule: drawing on the Discworld and its intertextual threads allows a ludic juggling of juxtapositions, drawing on the well-known text and setting it in motion, thereby producing something entirely new.

While following one target text, moreover, it retains the established multi-directionality of the Discworld, drawing on our knowledge of the other books in this series, and the rhizomatic play which Pratchett's world favours.

The questions asked by Pratchett mirror those asked by the foremost critics of the past decades: Deleuze and Guattari tie the static, enclosed, entirely structured to death, repression and depression, and the eternal Becoming to life and escape lines (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 15, 23, 250-55; Deleuze and Guattari 1986); Derrida spent his life undoing rigid oppositions and centred structures, setting them in play (e.g. Derrida 1997); earlier, Benjamin was extolling the allegorist whose at once destructive and creative practice defeated melancholy (Benjamin 2003:159-235). By letting various stereotypes, patterns and worlds play against each other, Pratchett shows how they are not a given. He dismantles them, but in so doing reintroduces them in a new constellation where they gain and produce new meaning.

This parody is as much of a reaction against controlling patterns as Bakhtin's carnivalesque. But where that was set against a controlling hierarchy and religion, Pratchett reacts against genre limitations, story patterns, stereotypes, and clichés and the blind adherence to these as natural. In so doing he echoes many theorists – but Pratchett is *funny*.

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