

Margaret Mahy's *The Catalogue of the Universe*: Wobbles, Asymmetry, and Dangerous Edges

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In *The Catalogue of the Universe*, Anthony Tycho Potter, observer of the night skies, has another passion—his passion for Angela May. As he tells Angela, however, there is a “wobble” in the symmetry of things (46). During two intense days, Tycho and Angela experience a “wobble” in their personal universe as their relationship changes, and they are caught up in the shifting dynamics of asymmetrical family relationships. Men of science have measured and predicted so as to bring order to the cataloguing of the universe, but Mahy’s text performs to show her characters experiencing the aberrations, irrationalities, mysteries, and “dangerous edges” of life.

It is not, of course, by chance alone, that Anthony Tycho Potter, who has a passion for observing the night skies, shares his middle name with the celebrated sixteenth century Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe (although Tycho’s mother has an alternative story to tell). In her Arbuthnot Honor Lecture, “A Dissolving Ghost: Possible Operations of Truth in Children’s Books and the Lives of Children,” delivered in Pittsburgh in 1989, Mahy reveals her interest in two astronomers, Tycho Brahe and the man who became his assistant, Johannes Kepler. In the *Catalogue of the Universe*, Tycho’s name is metonymically aligned with the astronomer, Brahe, whose accurate astronomical observations are reported to have revealed certain anomalies in the orbiting of the planets that led to the understanding that the heavens could no longer be considered fixed and unchangeable.¹ Tycho’s name is also contiguous with the name of the moon crater, Tycho, which emits lunar rays²--and with “Tycho’s Star,” an exploding star that “went supernova in 1572” and which was measured and recorded by Brahe (111). The relationship between Tycho Potter and Brahe is further linked by Tycho’s references to his nose—significant because Brahe is described, in the literature about him, as covering a missing part of his nose lost in a duel with a piece of metal.³ His nose, however, comments Tycho, is “not golden” but “just sunburnt” (46).

Tycho, named “Big Science” by Angela, his best friend, is a serious observer of the night skies and student of the men who studied them. He knows about the Ionians: Thales, Anaximander of Milan, Anaxagoras, and Pythagoras who had envisaged a world with “an inner order” that they could understand through the practice of scientific measurement (115-16). He knows the names and different features of the Galilean moons: Io, Callisto, Europa, Ganymede, and Amalthea and is amazed by their “apparently irrational” variety (120). Textually, Tycho is constructed at the meeting point of different discourses in Mahy’s text, particularly discourses of astronomy, the romance of science—a romance that Mahy shares in her Arbuthnot speech—and a discourse of romantic love.

In her article, “The Fabulous in the Ordinary: An Interview with Margaret Mahy,” Mary Hoffmann comments that in *The Catalogue of the Universe*, Mahy creates “the fabulous in the ordinary” (215). Mahy, however, does more than juxtapose the fantastic with the ordinary; she brings into her text a passion for the romance of science constructed through a language that

evokes the wonder of a mysterious universe into the landscape of the ordinary. “Galactic spirals” swirl in coffee cups and dishwater, the “elliptical rising curve” of the road that leads to Angela’s home is perceived by Tycho to be “the beginning of a helix” (144-45), and Tycho constantly reflects on the relationships between facts, explanations, and the role of imagination. The “first scientists,” he notes, “had all been imaginative men” (116); and Tycho is open to the suggestion that “the true beauty of the world lay in its mystery, which, however, men must struggle to understand” (115).

One might argue that there is also (borrowing from Ursula Le Guin who also wrote about science, truth, and imagination) a “language of the night” in Mahy’s novel. In the chapter, “Moonshine,” moonlight can be mysterious, “disturbing,” filling one’s eyes with silver (1-2), evoking memories of a mythology of the moon. At the beginning of the chapter, Angela awakes in her room, flooded by moonlight, and observes her mother, Dido, like a “fairy-tale woman” scything the lawn at two o’clock in the morning, her eyes filled with the silver light of the moon which “so clear and intense” seemed to be “the very light of visions and prophesies” (4). It is this perception that encourages Angela to sit down with her mother in the moonlight to ask if she would tell her once more the story she used to tell her—the fairy-tale of the romance between Dido and the father she has never known but whose stunning good looks she has inherited. But the moon, as Tycho has informed Angela, is also known to reflect light, an irrefutable fact first discovered by the Ionian astronomer, Anaximedes (1). When Dido’s version that night fails to mirror Angela’s distorted fantasies of being a love child who has the power to bring her parents together again, she arranges to confront Roland Chase, the man she has discovered is her father.

By the light of day, Angela has to face the irrefutable facts about her birth and her life with Dido. In daylight, her romantic fantasy that her mother and biological father “would be married” in her “every cell” is shown to be an irrational one (62). Roland Chase is an unpleasant man who does not wish to acknowledge Angela as his daughter and who, she finds, has not contributed to the well-being of Dido and herself. She finds, moreover, that she was given the name “Angela” by her father, a name she shares with Chase’s mother, a “whippet” of a woman with “nails like drops of blood, the hands of a true blood relation” who had offered Dido money for an abortion, but Dido, as she tells Angela, had spent the money on things she would need for a baby plus a bottle of wine for herself (175).

Dido can be identified as one of those strong female characters that Josephine Raburn points out is prevalent in Mahy’s books (27). Appearing to Angela as a moon goddess figure at the beginning of the novel, Dido is now seen, by Angela, in a very different light. While Dido, unlike her namesake in Greek mythology, had not “sacrificed everything for love,” (9) Angela understands the real sacrifices made by her mother who, for years, struggled with poverty in order to provide Angela with a home. Angela reflects that “porridge days had been much more desperate than Dido had allowed her to believe” (91). Knowing now the difference between the fantasy and reality of her birth and childhood, Angela tells her mother that their life together as mother and daughter is “a real adventure story” (176).

The truths that emerge from these events illustrate yet another of Tycho’s revelations. “Actual truth,” Tycho tells Angela, “wobbles and hides” (46). “Wobbles and hides, wobbles and hides!” chants Angela, smiling back at him. “You’ve invented a chorus! Wobbling, hiding truth”

(46). Through characters who possess a self-awareness in how they use language, Mahy emphasizes its play. Double-meanings, puns, jokes that deconstruct the stability of meaning and truth are visible, for example, in the bantering dialogue exchanged between Tycho and Angela. Tycho's revelation that there is "a wobble" in the "symmetry" of things is changed by Angela who insists on substituting the word "cemetery" for "symmetry" thus creating an irrational disconnection that has no referent in regard to Tycho's original point. She has been cleverer than she thought, she tells him (47). "Write it down and pin it up over your bed, Anthony Tycho Potter" (47). Tycho is also aware of how things signify differently taking on new meanings depending on one's perspective.

Tycho, may be metonymically linked to Brahe, the astronomer, but he is also associated with the silvery rays of a lunar crater. The moon in Mahy's text takes on a different meaning for Tycho when viewed as an object through the lens of his telescope than when used in a reference to his relationship with Angela. He remembers, for example, that it was during an eclipse of the moon that he and Angela first became real friends. "The moon's shadow went over us both and married us," Angela tells Tycho toward the end of Mahy's novel (182) in a sentence that perfectly conjoins the language of astronomy and romance: the romance of science made real. A language of astronomy is used doubly to describe the passion of romance, for there are wobbles in "the heart of the heart," ellipses are described as "silky" (46); and love, which is unpredictable, wobbles "violently in its unstable orbit" (159).

Tycho, passionate observer of the night skies, has, of course, had another passion in his life—Angela May, whom he has loved since he was five years old when he lent her his felt pens because he thought her "so pretty" (106). The asymmetry of the beginning of their relationship is made clear at the beginning of Mahy's novel as Tycho, aware that Angela, blessed with beauty and brains, already has a boyfriend, one of many in the past, is unable to bring himself to express his true feelings. A more equal balance constructs their relationship, however, when Tycho is ordered by Angela to stand on *The Catalogue of the Universe*, a text she had given to him as a gift, in order that Tycho can physically meet her on the same level so that they might kiss (135). Standing on a catalogue of the stars (one of Brahe's major works is known by the abbreviated title, *De Nova Stella*⁴), Tycho is, indeed, raised in stature. "I always knew that was a good book," mumbles Tycho (135).

As friends, Angela and Tycho first construct their relationship through "romantic notions" and dialogues based on their viewings of *Casablanca* and their reading of the *Sheik* with its delicious hyperbole: "OK, now you can strip the boyish clothes from my limbs and lay my beautiful white body bare!" (135). The development of their relationship from friendship to lovers is marked, however, by passages of true sensuality as, for example, when Tycho lends Angela his sweater and watches it "vanish in the shower. He felt he was watching a sort of striptease in reverse. He thought of her pulling his sweater, with something of his shape in it, down over his head, and over her body as if she had pulled his hide down over hers" (129). The moment is made even more meaningful for Tycho when he remembers that this was the sweater under which he had hidden *The Joy of Sex* from his mother (130).

In a heart-to-heart fencing dialogue with his mother about his relationship with Angela, whom she mistrusts because of her blatant sexuality (there are no conversations within the Potter

family, it is all thrust, cut, and jab), Tycho suggests that it might have been more use to him if she had chosen the name, Casanova. Mrs. Potter replies, in her matter-of-fact manner, that this might have been “a burden to him at school” (112). Using a wild humor that is frequently located in a discourse of mild rebellion, Mahy emphasizes the aberrations and disorder in the universe of family relationships through the derrings-do of the Potter family. Tycho’s sister’s wedding anniversary turns into a farcical and messy culmination of a marriage, and Richard, Tycho’s elder brother, is described as violating everyone’s idea of what is proper behavior particularly in the way he addresses his parents and his choice of dress, which includes an outfit consisting of a “Russian blouse, leather trousers patched on the knees, and a slightly moth-eaten fur bolero” (162).

Mrs. Potter, represented as possessing a middle-class stability and down-to-earth quality in the center of Tycho’s family, has her own “raffish” quality. She has chosen imaginative or, depending on one’s point-of-view, outlandish middle names for her three children allowing them a freedom to construct their subjectivities through alternative names: Rosemary and/or Africa, Anthony and/or Tycho, Richard and/or November (101). Tycho, however, learns that she had chosen his middle name from a magazine in the doctor’s office, which suggests, perhaps, that these are accidental rather than deliberate choices. Mrs. Potter, moreover, has “her own way of living dangerously,” represented by her daily smoking of one or two cigarettes, which she rolls herself with meticulous care (105).

Mahy’s characters are represented as having “dangerous edges” in their lives on which they choose to dance. Tycho’s father, subject to epileptic fits because of head injuries in a car accident, decides for himself to phase out his dependency on medicine with unfortunate results. Africa chooses to wreak destruction upon her marriage. Opposing the humor and farcical representation of the Potter family, there is a darkness constructed through Mahy’s text made visible through a figurative language of cliffs and edges that symbolize a Fall. Tycho knows, for example, that the “view for a man standing on *The Catalogue of the Universe*” is “different,” but should one fall, it would be “infinite” (159). After Angela’s meeting with her father, Tycho muses that for Angela, “the wobble had suddenly turned into a fall” (103), and Dido is worried, not that Angela would deliberately choose to fall from the top of the cliff, but that she might fall accidentally (117). Angela, indeed, chooses to, literally, risk being a “Fallen Angel” after drinking in a bar after the confrontation with her father (127-29).

Angela has also recognized the “dangerous edges” in Dido’s life, for Dido has chosen to live at the end of narrow Dry Creek Road with its dangerous serpentine bends and overhanging curves leading from the city. “Like the road, Dido had a dangerous edge and sometimes she went right out to it and danced, apparently challenging it to crumble away under her” (5). The setting of this road, with its bad fences separating drivers from the “abyss,” is imbued with meanings of blood sacrifices by Dido; the road “wants blood,” she declares (72). The visions and prophecies of a “mythological” Dido are shown to be as valid as predictions of astronomers—those men of science—although, in the occurrence of the fateful event itself, there is an unexpected aberration. When Angela, who has told Dido to “Get in the car and drive up Dry Creek Road and—and *be* a bloody sacrifice,” sees the car plunge and fall off the road, her expectations are that it is indeed her mother who has fallen from those dangerous edges, but it turns out this is not so. Tycho, observer of the night skies becomes, at the close of the novel, akin the romantic hero as, “[Q]uick

as the shadow of the eclipsing moon,” he rescues Dido’s neighbor from the burning car. Literally and metaphorically, the Fall in Mahy’s story, is reserved for two characters, Phil and Jerry Cherry, who have been previously associated by Angela and Dido with “the forces of evil.”

Hoffmann comments that Mahy provides in her books a “coda,” a winding down of tension after “an earth-spinning climax,” and reports that Mahy is saying that “People should go away feeling sustained and healed. I don’t want to do away with the mystery but I do want to reassure” (216). Certainly, Mahy constructs a symmetry to the catalogue of events in her novel as Angela constructs a new relationship with Dido and falls in love with Tycho. In one day, she had “been born, loved, orphaned, had died and been reborn” (174), but calm is restored.

In *The Catalogue of the Universe*, Mahy has created two characters for her readers who shine as brightly as stars: Anthony Tycho Potter, focalized by Angela as part enchanter and magician, and the radiantly beautiful Angela May, who also “enjoyed struggling with the mystery of a mysterious world” (27). In her Arbutnot speech, Mahy emphasizes the importance of retaining the wonder and mystery associated with science (324). Using a language of the night, Mahy has created in *The Catalogue of the Universe* a romance, both of science and of the human heart, but she also makes visible the instability, disorder, and dangerous edges of life. The very repetitiveness of this theme, played out in her text in different ways, emphasizes its importance. Dido’s words to Angela at the end of Mahy’s novel are: “do take care” (185).

Notes

¹ *The Galileo Project: Tycho Brahe (1546-1601)*. Rice University. 1995. 19 May 2005 <http://galileo.rice.edu/scie/brahe.html>

² Nemiroff, Robert and Jerry Bondell. "Tycho and Copernicus: Lunar Ray Craters." NASA/GSFC. 20 May 2005 <http://antwarp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/ap010809.html>

³ *The Galileo Project: Tycho Brahe (1546-1601)*. Rice University. 1995. 19 May 2005 <http://galileo.rice.edu/scie/brahe.html>

⁴ *De Nova et Nullius Aevi Memoria Prius Visa Stella* (On the New and Never Previously Seen Star) Copenhagen, 1573. *The Galileo Project: Tycho Brahe (1546-1601)*. Rice University. 1995. 19 May 2005 <http://galileo.rice.edu/scie/brahe.html>

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