

2-26-2021

## Adam's Task: Naming and Sub-creation in Good Omens

Janet Brennan Croft  
*University of Northern Iowa*

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright ©2021 Janet Brennan Croft

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.uni.edu/lib\\_facpub](https://scholarworks.uni.edu/lib_facpub)



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Croft, Janet Brennan, "Adam's Task: Naming and Sub-creation in Good Omens" (2021). *Rod Library Faculty Publications*. 18.

[https://scholarworks.uni.edu/lib\\_facpub/18](https://scholarworks.uni.edu/lib_facpub/18)

This Conference is brought to you for free and open access by the Rod Library at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rod Library Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

## SLIDE 1: Title

### Adam's Task: Naming and Sub-creation in *Good Omens*

Janet Brennan Croft

## Slide 2: Adam naming the animals

Names, as a special category of powerful (and, in a very real sense, embodied) language, are vitally significant, and naming is a primary and primal speech act. In Genesis 2, naming is the first officially delegated *sub-creational* task, for God does not name the animals, but brings them before Adam to see what he will call them.

*Sub-creation* is J.R.R. Tolkien's term for a human being's right, need, and divinely sanctioned, even *appointed*, task to create, not *ex nihilo*, but as a being created in the image of a Creator. As a writer and a philologist Tolkien sees that artistic power first manifesting in language, in narrative art (61), in "combining nouns and redistributing adjectives" (64). In the beginning was the Word; and we name, as language-makers, as our first sub-creative task.

## SLIDE 3: Good Omens book covers

Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, working individually, both take pleasure in names and have a keen understanding of how they work in story. In their sole collaborative work, names fizz and pop and delight. *Good Omens* (book, 1990; television series, 2019)<sup>1</sup> concerns itself with the last days of the world. At its heart are the demon Crowley and the angel Aziraphale, who, due to their long posting on Earth among humanity and their frequent interactions with each other, have forged a sort of working arrangement, and a fond attachment to the comforts and delights of the twentieth century (and to each other). They would rather Apocalypse *not* take place, thank you, and work together to derail what all the rest of the forces of Heaven and Hell look forward to with such anticipation.

*Good Omens* is rife with significant acts of naming by both humans and other sentient beings. While all humans have the power to name, to rename, to take a new name, and so on, the child Antichrist, Adam Young, has this power in spades. Reality bends to his will, and his acts of naming \*stick\* and change what he names. While other name stories will be examined in this paper, the naming acts I will concentrate on will be the naming of Adam himself, Adam's naming of his hell-hound, and his climactic act (in the show) of naming Satan to be *not* his father, and thereby making it so.

## POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES

### SLIDE 4: CROWLEY AND AZIRAPHALE

Let us start at the level closest to the Ineffable, as the book does. It is not just humans who have the power of naming in this fictional world; supernatural beings also name, rename, self-name, and nick-name. Self-naming in fact shows up on the very first page of the text: the Serpent, introduced as Crawly, has decided the name is simply “*not him*” and is thinking of changing it (*Good Omens* 5). When he reappears in the next chapter, set in contemporary times, he has a new name (15). “Crawley just wasn’t doing it for me,” he says to Aziraphale. “A bit too squirming at your feet-ish” (*Script Book* 173).

## HUMANS

### SLIDE 5: CHATTERING NUNS

Venturing further from contact with the supernatural, we might consider the Chattering Nuns of St Beryl. A Satanic order, they invert expectations; for example, being expected to speak whatever is on their minds at all times except for a half an hour on Tuesday afternoons (*Good Omens* 25). Their names are satires on traditional virtue- or saint-connected names taken in conventional orders: Sisters Mary Loquacious, Maria Verbose, Katherine Prolix, Grace Voluble, and Theresa Garrulous are among their members (*Script Book* 31 et seq.).

### SLIDE 6: Shadwell

The Witchfinder Army is also a font of original and humorous names. In Puritan times Witchfinder Major Thou-Shalt-Not-Commit-Adultery Pulsifer was the one responsible for putting Agnes Nutter, author of the centrally important *Nice and Accurate Prophecies*, to the torch (*Good Omens* 188). The modern head of the much-reduced army, Witchfinder Sergeant Shadwell, is a namer par excellence, padding the pay ledger with “Witchfinder Majors Jackson, Robinson, [...] Smith [...], Saucepan, Tin, Milk, and Cupboard” and on down through “Witchfinder Captains Smith, Smith, Smith, and Smythe and Ditto” and some five hundred lower ranks, also mostly named Smith (*Good Omens* 176).

### SLIDE 7: The Them

Adam Young, the child Antichrist, and his friends constitute a gang darkly referred to in Lower Tadfield as the Them (*Good Omens* 121n). In the depiction of the imaginative play of the Them, there is a great deal of fun with names and words. They role-play the British (formerly Spanish) Inquisition, sprinkling their speech with bits of fake Spanish and Latin and refencing Torturemada in place of Torquemada (*Good Omens* 133). Adam is excited about the *Aquarium* Age (151), talks about *Atlantisans* rather than Atlanteans (152), and references tunnels under the *Goby* Desert (157) which are inhabited by the Secret Master *Tibettors* (162). As Adam’s powers start to grow and the wildly

jumbled contents of his imagination start to become real, it is perhaps for the best that he never gets the names quite exactly right.

## ADAM YOUNG, AN ANTICHRIST

### SLIDE 8: ADAM

Adam's personal name-story begins with the Chattering Nuns, at their birthing hospital where, in the best tradition of the classic horror movie trope, the infant Antichrist is to be switched for the newborn child of the American Cultural Attaché's wife. The presence of local resident Dierdre Young, showing up to give birth at the same time, results in a mix-up where her baby winds up with the Americans, and Mr. and Mrs. Young go home with the little Antichrist.

But before the children can go home, they must be named. "The proper name," as Michael Ragussis reminds us, "exerts the power of a magical wish which expresses the will of the family" (7), and in this case, the nuns attempt to influence the earthly parents of the Antichrist to express the will of Satan, reinforcing Ragussis's observation that "what is at stake in the naming process is no less than an act of possession" (7). Sister Mary Loquacious, thinking that Arthur Young (Daniel Mays) is the American attaché, which he isn't, and the baby is the Antichrist, which he is, "archly" suggests Wormwood or Damien, "remembering her classics" (*Good Omens* 33-34), but when she suggests Adam, Mr. Young "stare[s] down at the golden curls of the Adversary, Destroyer of Kings, Angel of the Bottomless Pit, Great Beast that is called Dragon, Prince of This World, Father of Lies, Spawn of Satan, and Lord of Darkness" and observes "You know [...] I think he actually looks like an Adam" (40). The adaptation adds a scene showing the parallel naming of the other child: Mother Superior, more persuasive than Sister Mary, also suggests Damien to Harriet Dowling, thinking *she* has the baby Antichrist, but Harriet settles on Warlock.

Adam is a wonderfully ambiguous name, full of potential for good or evil, implying a state of prelapsarian balance and innocence, a fresh beginning, a child who could be as much God's as Satan's. In meaning, it derives from the Hebrew "adama," meaning earth or soil; whatever Adam's parentage, he is also of the earth, in a human body, and develops a deep human love of the landscape of his own little corner of the world.

### "WHAT ADAM BELIEVED WAS TRUE WAS BEGINNING TO HAPPEN IN REALITY"

### SLIDE 9: HELLHOUND

Up until the eleventh birthday of the children, we spend time only with Warlock, whom Aziraphale and Crowley believe to be the Antichrist. But when a certain event does NOT happen at Warlock's birthday party, they realize they have been on the wrong track all along. Crowley has told Aziraphale:

They're sending him a hell-hound, to pad by his side and guard him from all harm. [...]. It'll sort of home in on him. He's supposed to name it himself. It's very important that he names it himself. It gives it its purpose. It'll be Killer, or Terror, or Stalks-by-Night, I expect. [...] If he *does* name it, we've lost. He'll have all his powers and Armageddon is just around the corner. (*Good Omens* 66-67)

The hell-hound materializes in Lower Tadfield rather than at Warlock's party in London, and homes in on the voice "it had been created to obey, could not *help* but obey" (*Good Omens* 75). Subverting all the expectations of Hell, Adam's rock-solid declaration that the dog he fully expects to get for his birthday will be "a *pedigree* mongrel," the right size to go down rabbit holes, with "one funny ear that always looks inside out" (78) transforms the hell-hound itself from a huge beast with "the sort of growl that starts in the back of one throat and ends up in someone else's" (75) into Dog, immediately possessed by "a great and sudden love [for] its Master" and an overwhelming desire to jump up on people and wag his tail (80).

#### **Slide 10: "I'll Call Him Dog"**

Adam's act—saying "I'll call him Dog. [...] It saves a lot of trouble, a name like that" (*Good Omens* 80)—is his first major act as he comes into his powers on his birthday. As with the original Adam in the Garden of Eden, it is a sub-creative act of naming. Dog here is as "freshly named" as the animals in the garden (7); in the words of John Hollander's poem "Adam's Task," he "came for the name [Adam] had to give [...] in a fire of becoming."

Animal trainer and philosopher Vicki Hearne places a mystical importance on the naming of animals; it is when animals "learn their names" that they become capable of a reciprocal relationship with a human (Hearne 167). "Without a name and someone to call [him] by name," Hearne insists, the animal can't "enter the moral life" (168).

The choice of the name Dog doesn't just save time; it re-creates the hell-hound as what Adam considers the Platonic ideal of dog-ness, and even more specifically, a certain type of dog-ness in relation to a certain kind of human-ness. Adam, the quintessential eleven-year-old boy, wants a dog he can have fun with (78). God says in a voiceover in the script, "Form shapes nature. There are certain ways of behaviour appropriate to small dogs which are in fact welded into their genes" (*Script Book* 203), the implication being that Dog had been rewritten down to the level of his DNA by Adam's naming. In a nicely ambiguous passage, Adam notes "He's got to do what he's told. I read it in a book. Trainin' is very important. [...]. My father says I can only keep him if he's prop'ly trained." Dog obeys his Master's voice, and "a little bit more of Hell burn[s] away . . ." (*Good Omens* 137).

It is all the more poignant, then, when, at the height of Adam's demonic temptation to remake the world, when his friends have turned away from him in horror and revulsion, Dog also rejects him, siding with the Them. "Give me back my dog," howls Adam, and Pepper responds "He's not your dog. He's his own dog. And I don't think he likes you anymore."

But Dog is the first to realize when Adam has overcome his temptation, licking the boy's face in joyful reunion (*Script Book* 367-368). Through naming and training, Dog has developed a moral life of his own.

#### "ADAM RARELY DID WHAT HIS FATHER WANTED"

##### SLIDE 11: GABRIEL AND BEELZEBUB

The entire reason the Antichrist, the offspring of Satan, exists is to bring about Armageddon, the culmination of the Great Plan, the final battle between good and evil to determine the ultimate fate of the world.

Gabriel<sup>2</sup> and Beelzebub each alternately threaten and cajole Adam, perhaps the least effective tactic that can possibly be used with a stubborn and intelligent eleven year old boy—especially one who has already faced temptation and come out the other side with a very clear idea of what he is *not* going to do with his powers. In the show, Gabriel chastises Adam: "You're a disobedient little brat. I hope someone tells your father," and Beelzebub hisses "Someone will. And your father . . . will not be pleased" (*Script Book* 425).

It's not entirely clear *what* Adam does in the book, but there are clues. Crowley realizes that "this boy could not only make you cease to exist merely by thinking about it, but probably arrange matters so that you never had existed at all" (*Good Omens* 340), and Adam himself says "I don't see why it matters what is written. Not when it's about people. It can always be crossed out" (345). Adam waves his hand, and Satan's imminent threatened appearance on the scene simply . . . doesn't happen (350).

##### SLIDE 12: SATAN

The show is less subtle about it, making it clear that there is a distinction between Adam's "earthly father," who "wouldn't hurt anybody," and his Satanic father, coming to destroy Adam for his refusal to start the battle (*Script Book* 428). As Satan erupts through the pavement of the deserted airfield, Crowley urgently explains to Adam, "Reality will listen to you, right now. You can change things" (429). When Satan demands that his "rebellious son" come to him, Adam rejects him: "You're not my dad. Dads don't wait till you're eleven to say hello. And then turn up to tell you off. [...] If I'm in trouble with my dad . . . [...] then it won't be you. It's going to be the dad who was there." And then, the clincher that bends reality to Adam's will, that sub-creates a new reality: "You're not my dad. You never were." At that point, it is true and always has been true; solid and

comfortingly concerned Mr. Young *is* his dad, approaching through the smoke haze left by the banished Satan, and Satan . . . *is not*, and *never has been*, Adam's father.

Jean Shinoda Bolen, in speaking of the major Greek gods, points out that these powerful figures exemplified the "dark side of the patriarchy" and were often "hostile towards their children, especially towards sons, whom they feared would challenge their authority" (18). Such a "destructive father" (18) will insist that his children "not differ from him or deviate from his plans for them" (22). He will "consume" his son's life, whether that son "lives out his father's ambitions" or "the son's own bent differs from the position his father expects him to play" (26); this father's fear is that "unless he is swallowed up in some way a son will someday be in a position to challenge his father's power and overthrow his authority" (29).

### **Slide 13: Arthur Young**

But Adam did not grow up with Satan present in his life; as Crowley points out, "He was left alone! He grew up human! He's not Evil Incarnate or Good Incarnate, he's just . . . a *human* incarnate" (*Good Omens* 245). Instead he grew up with Arthur Young, "a serious-minded man who smoked a pipe and wore a mustache" and had "exactly the right amount of insurance [and] drove three miles per hour below the speed limit" (351). Arthur is not the father as Evil Incarnate or Good Incarnate, but loving, decent, solid, and simply human incarnate. Arthur and Dierdre Young are such fixed points for Adam, representing "stability, the epitome of goodness" (Sian Brooke, quoted in Whyman 187), that even at the height of Adam's temptation to remake the world, when he says he will make his friends "new mummies and daddies" —he seems to imply this will not apply to himself (*Script Book* 300), since all he wants is Tadfield, "same as always" (365).

### **CONCLUSION: "I'VE GOT ALL THE WORLD I WANT"**

#### **SLIDE 14: TAROT CARD**

In *Good Omens*, increasing closeness or receptiveness to the supernatural, to fantasy and imagination, seems to heighten the individual's sub-creative power and hence their power to name. A fizzing fecundity of sub-creative power seems to increase as beings originate closer to, or draw nearer to, or open up to, the Ineffable source of creation. Human children at play, Satanist nuns, and Witchfinders are more open to this influence than the average London pedestrian who *knows* that ancient Bentleys can't do 90 MPH in the heart of the city and therefore they did *not* actually see it happen—the sort of person who, in Tolkien's formulation, "dislike[s] any meddling with the primary World, or such small glimpses of it as are familiar to them" (OFS 60).

Adam's power is far more than human, and given his supernatural parentage, rivals all but the power of the Creator itself. Tolkien might characterize the conundrum facing Adam as the conflict between Enchantment, which, as we see in the games the Them play, "produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can

enter, to the satisfaction of their senses when they are inside” — and Magic, which Tolkien distinguishes as the operation of “*power* in this world, domination of things and wills” (OFS 64). Adam has the wisdom to know his limits, and postulate potential actions to their unforeseen conclusions, as he does in refusing to “bring all the whales back” — “An’ that’d stop people from killing them, would it?” he sensibly asks (*Good Omens* 346). He could bring them back, but he can’t change human nature without doing enormous harm to the balance of the world: “Once I start messing around like that, there’d be no stoppin’ it” (346). Enchantment and art are our appropriate *métier* as human sub-creators — not the desire for power, which is “the mark of the mere Magician” (OFS 64).

“We make,” Tolkien declares, “in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (OFS 66). Naming is, in this Biblical and mythological sense, our first and greatest sub-creative power as humans. We may, as Pratchett and Gaiman have done, fill “all the crannies of the world” with not-so-evil demons and slightly tarnished angels and perfectly human Antichrists. It is our right to sub-create: “The right has not decayed. / We make still by the law in which we’re made” (Tolkien, “Mythopoeia”).

#### SLIDE 16: END – BOOK COVER

#### Bibliography

- Bolen, Jean Shinoda. *Gods in Everyman: Archetypes That Shape Men’s Lives*. Twenty-fifth anniversary edition. Harper, 2014.
- “The Book.” *Good Omens*. Dir. Neil Gaiman. Perf. David Tennant, Michael Sheen, et al. Episode 2. BBC Worldwide, 2019.
- Casillas, Caspian. “‘Good Omens’ Radical Take on Non-Binary Representation.” *The Geekiary*. 14 Aug. 2019. <https://thegeekiary.com/good-omens-radical-take-on-non-binary-representation/68751>
- Croft, Janet Brennan. “The Name of the Ring; or, There and Back Again.” *Mythlore*, vol. 35, no. 2 (#130), 2017, pp. 81-94.
- “The Doomsday Option.” *Good Omens*. Dir. Neil Gaiman. Perf. David Tennant, Michael Sheen, et al. Episode 5. BBC Worldwide, 2019.
- Gaiman, Neil *The Quite Nice and Fairly Accurate Good Omens Script Book*. William Morrow, 2019.
- “Hard Times.” *Good Omens*. Dir. Neil Gaiman. Perf. David Tennant, Michael Sheen, et al. Episode 3. BBC Worldwide, 2019.
- Hearne, Vicki. *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name*. Knopf, 1987.
- Hollander, John. “Adam’s Task.” *Selected Poetry*. Knopf, 1993, [page](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49110/adams-task). <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49110/adams-task>
- “In the Beginning.” *Good Omens*. Dir. Neil Gaiman. Perf. David Tennant, Michael Sheen, et al. Episode 1. BBC Worldwide, 2019.
- Mershon, Katharine. “The Theology of Dog Training in Vicki Hearne’s *Adam’s Task*.” *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 25. 2019. [www.mdpi.com/journal/religions](http://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions), doi:10.3390/rel10010025

@neilhimsel (Neil Gaiman). "@Italian\_Hobbit it was a typo that we liked. It was originally meant to be zingiber." Twitter, 31 Mar. 2016, 1:28 p.m., [twitter.com/neilhimsel/status/715606704306720768?lang=en](https://twitter.com/neilhimsel/status/715606704306720768?lang=en)

Pratchett, Terry and Neil Gaiman. *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*. Illustrated by Paul Kidby. Limited edition. Gollancz, 2019.

Ragussis, Michael. *Acts of Naming: The Family Plot in Fiction*. Oxford University Press, 1986.

"Saturday Morning Funtime." *Good Omens*. Dir. Neil Gaiman. Perf. David Tennant, Michael Sheen, et al. Episode 4. BBC Worldwide, 2019.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "Mythopoeia." *Tree and Leaf, Including the Poem Mythopoeia*, Houghton Mifflin, 1989, pp. 97-101.

---. "On Fairy-stories." *Tolkien on Fairy-stories*, edited by Douglas A. Anderson and Verlyn Flieger, HarperCollins, 2008, pp. 27-84.

"The Very Last Day of the Rest of Their Lives." *Good Omens*. Dir. Neil Gaiman. Perf. David Tennant, Michael Sheen, et al. Episode 6. BBC Worldwide, 2019.

Whyman, Matt et al. *The Nice and Accurate Good Omens TV Companion: Your Guide to Armageddon and the Series Based on the Bestselling Novel by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman*. HarperCollins, 2019.

---

<sup>1</sup> The original book will be cited as *Good Omens*, the filmed miniseries by the episode title, and the script book (which does not match the filmed series dialogue and settings precisely) as *Script Book*.

<sup>2</sup> This role goes to the Metatron in the book.