

Counterfactual Christianity: Myth and Re-Imagined Religion in Jacqueline Carey's *Kushiel's Legacy*

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Introduction

A thousand and more years ago, as the true-gotten son of the One God, Yeshua ben Yosef, hung dying upon the wooden cross, his side was pierced by a Tiberian spear and his blood fell upon the soil, mingling with the tears of his beloved, the Magdalene. And because their union had never been sealed, Earth Herself took pity upon them and in the damp soil She quickened the divine seed of life, and of it blessed Elua was born, and he was nurtured in the womb of Earth.¹

Jacqueline Carey's *Kushiel's Legacy* trilogy is a historical fantasy set against the backdrop of a Renaissance-like world. However, in Carey's world, Jesus (known as Yeshua ben Yosef), died but was not resurrected, and Christianity never conquered Roman paganism. The spread of Christianity was halted, and the miraculously begotten son of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, Blessed Elua, walked the lands instead. He settled in Terre d'Ange (land of the angels), where the human inhabitants and his angelic companions interbred and passed on his legacy, encapsulated in the teaching 'Love as thou wilt'. This paper will explore the religious beliefs of Terre d'Ange, the home of Carey's heroine, Phèdre, while also seeking to uncover the historical and mythological origins for the counterfactually realized Renaissance Europe in which the action of the trilogy takes place.

This paper explores the first trilogy of Jacqueline Carey's *Kushiel* series, which comprises *Kushiel's Dart* (2001), *Kushiel's Chosen* (2002) and *Kushiel's Avatar* (2003).² These novels fall within the category of speculative

¹ Jacqueline Carey, *Earth Begotten*, at <http://www.jacquelinecarey.com/earthb.htm>. Accessed 25/12/09.

² Carey has also published another series of three books set within the realm of Terre d'Ange, but with a new protagonist, Imriel nò Montrève de la Courcel, who is introduced in *Kushiel's Avatar* the third book in the *Kushiel's Legacy* series. The books in the Imriel series are *Kushiel's Scion* (June, 2006); *Kushiel's Justice* (June, 2007); and *Kushiel's Mercy* (June, 2008). Another book, *Naamah's Kiss*, once again set in the same realm, but in an

fiction, which includes such sub-genres as science fiction, fantasy, and counterfactual historical novels. Carey was an established author, but the first Kushiel trilogy became a publishing phenomenon, selling millions of copies and winning her a devoted following.³ The imaginative richness of the world portrayed within the novels justified this enthusiastic response from readers. Carey blends familiar elements into a distinctive secondary world; her backdrop is recognisably Europe from late antiquity to the Renaissance, but with a twist. Therefore, while the Tiberians are obviously Roman and the D'Angelines are clearly French, the cultures that Carey develops for each society are believable, counterfactual alternative historical developments, which tease out minor strands in 'real' history, making them dominant themes within the novels. These include the erotic relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene,⁴ the romantic environs of the water-surrounded city of La Serenissima (Venice) and Alba (Britain), and encounters with the Saba, the lost tribes of Israel.

Carey's heroine is Phédre, beautiful, sensual, and trained in the arts of pleasure. She was raised within the Court of Night Blooming Flowers (essentially a temple to erotic pursuits), in which dedicated men and women learn the cultured arts (including music, dancing, and sexual skills). These men and women are the servants of Naamah, one of the Angelic Companions of Blessed Elua (the divine founder of Terre d'Ange).⁵ At the age of ten, Phédre (her beauty being flawed by a red mote in her left eye) is sold to private citizen and peer of the realm, Anafield Delaunay. Here she is trained alongside his other pupil, Alcuin, not only in the arts of seduction and pleasure, but to observe, remember, scrutinise, and analyse – in short, as a spy. Delaunay's purpose and mission is the protection of the Dauphin, the heir to the throne, and Phédre and Alcuin use their erotic skills to prise secrets from potential enemies of the crown.

The religious aspects of the trilogy are apparent in the description of Phédre's destiny. She is chosen by an immortal angel, Kushiel, to be an

earlier era and with a new protagonist, Moirin, a princess from Alba, was released in June 2009.

³ She had published a non-fiction work, *Angels: Celestial Spirits in Art and Legend* (New York: Metro Books, 1997).

⁴ See Marvin Meyer, *The Gospels of Mary: The Secret Tradition of Mary Magdalene, The Companion of Jesus*, with Esther A. De Boer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).

⁵ Naamah or Na'amah (Hebrew: נַעֲמָה, meaning *pleasant*) is a figure from Jewish mythology. The *Zohar* characterises her as one of four Angels of prostitution, with Lilith, Eisheth Zenunim and Agrat Bat Mahlat. See Raphael Patai, 'Lilith', *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 77, no. 306 (1964), pp. 295-314.

anguissette, one who experiences anguish, peculiarly, the fusion of pleasure and pain. The disfiguring mote is Kushiel's mark of fate:

Mighty Kushiel, of rod and weal
Late of brazen portals
With blood-tipp'd dart a wound unhealed
Pricks the eyes of chosen mortals.⁶

At the age of sixteen Phédre is old enough to make her *début* as a courtesan, soon rising in popularity among the D'Angeline nobles with a taste for darker pleasure. But as a spy for Delaunay her work – both in and out of the bedchambers – is dangerous, and eventually Delaunay procures a 'bodyguard' for her, Joscelin Verreuli. The irony here is that the young and handsome Joscelin is a member of the Cassuline brotherhood, the one religious order in D'Angeline society that is celibate. Consequently, his opinion of Phédre's profession is not high, and his role as her protector is ambivalent. Throughout the three books, Phédre (accompanied by Joscelin) travels across the seas and continent, ensnared in what seems to be a never-ending web of schemes to destroy her homeland and devastate those she loves. Thus she must rely on her skills to help her save the day, for as Kushiel's chosen she is an instrument of fate and balance, a theme especially poignant in the final book of the trilogy.

Alternate History and Speculative Fiction

Apart from its fast-moving plot, memorable characters and dark erotic undertones, Carey's series presents an excellent example of alternate history, a sub-genre of the speculative fiction genre, which also includes science fiction and fantasy. In this genre, similar to the 'what if' of 'speculative history', authors explore the possible outcome of changing big (or small) events in history. Unlike historical writings, which simply seek to "re-create a historical milieu", alternate history allows its writers to freedom to create their own versions of history, enabling their characters to interact in a world of their own making, a world which is both foreign yet strangely familiar to its readers.⁷ Unlike other versions of alternate history, where the protagonist is personally involved in the climactic turn of events that change the course of history, Phédre is born into an already altered version of Renaissance Europe, where the major changes to history have occurred in the past.⁸ In Carey's world, while Jesus Christ existed and was crucified (he is known in the series as

⁶ Jacqueline Carey, *Kushiel's Dart* (New York: Tor Books, 2001), p. 27.

⁷ Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (Ashland: Kent State University Press, 2001), p. 22.

⁸ For example, Nancy H. Traill's critical study, *Possible Worlds of the Fantastic: The Rise of the Paranormal in Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); and E. L. Doctorow's award-winning novel, *Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1975).

Yeshua ben Yosef, a Jewish-influenced rendering of his name), this was not the catalyst we know it to have been for the history of Europe. In Carey's imagined world, Christianity never penetrated the western world. Instead, Yeshua's crucifixion eventually led to the creation of a new people, the D'Angelines. The D'Angelines are the people of Blessed Elua, who was conceived when the blood of Yeshua ben Yosef mixed with the tears of Mary Magdalene. Elua and his Companions, eight angels who choose to leave 'heaven' and the One God and stay with Elua on earth out of love, are essential to the worldview of the D'Angeline characters. They function as gods, and their teaching, 'Love as thou wilt', forms the basis of D'Angeline life and values.⁹

Carey has created a unique world for her novels, a world where Christianity never took hold, where there were no mass conversions, no Crusades, and no loss of pre-Christian culture and religion. It is a world where pagan rituals and heathen beliefs still abound, where gods and celestial beings still intervene in and influence the lives of human beings. Thus Phédre, raised in the splendour and sophistication of the Renaissance world, is able to interact with indigenous Celtic cultures, to dance with a woad-tattooed prince of the Picti, seek out the lost tribes of Israel, and experience the mysteries presided over by the Kore, at the House of Minos (which references the historical Eleusinian Mysteries).¹⁰ Carey has painted a backdrop in which all manner of mythologies, cultural traditions and threads of religion can be woven into the mix. It is these elements, the religious themes and motifs found within the series, which are the subject of this article.

Religious Themes Within the Beliefs of the D'Angelines

Before examining the religious threads within the novels, it is advantageous to consider the geographical landscape in which the action is set. Carey's Terre d'Ange is essentially late medieval and Renaissance France and Burgundy. It is bordered on the west by Aragonia (Aragon and Navarre), the east by Skaldia (Germany, occupied by Roman troops in the Renaissance), with Caerdicca Unitas (Italy and the Papal States) sharing a small border to the south-east. The British Isles are referred to by more familiar terms, with Alba for England, Wales and Scotland, and Erin for Ireland.¹¹ Terre d'Ange itself is divided into

⁹ See Carey, *Kushiel's Dart*, pp. 11-15, for a more detailed version of the 'Eluine Cycle'.

¹⁰ Marvin W. Meyer (ed.), *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), Chapter 2, 'The Greek Mysteries of Mother and Daughter', pp. 15-46.

¹¹ Alba and Erin are terms used to refer to these places within their own local mythologies. See Alwyn D. and Briley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994 [1961]), p. 100, p. 253.

seven provinces, each named after one of Elua's angelic companions,¹² and as such renowned for merits owing to the nature of that particular angel.¹³ The region of L'Agnace is named for Anael, who gave the gifts of husbandry and the nurturing of crops to her people; and Namarre was founded by the angel Namaah, who offers the gifts of love and sensual pleasure for all. The angel Azza gifted humanity with knowledge of navigation, and his province, Azzalle, runs along the northern coast of Terre d'Ange. Camlach is the eastern province of Terre d'Ange, founded by the martial angel Camael; his people are known for being warlike and tough. Eisande is the smallest of the seven provinces of Terre d'Ange, founded by Eisheth and is known for its healers and chirgeons (surgeons). Shemhazai is noted for treasuring knowledge, and is credited with teaching the D'Angelines their written language. His territory is Siovale, a lush mountainous region. The province of Kusheth was named after Kushiel, who is the punisher for the One God. It is the home of the Shahrizai, one of the Great Houses, who are from his line and often involved in politics and intrigue.¹⁴ Elua himself chose to claim no land, "wandering freely in the whole; yet along the banks of the mighty river, where he tarried longest, the City of Elua with its white walls was founded", becoming the heart of the nation, its beloved capital and home to its ruling dynasty.¹⁵

The origins of Terre d'Ange are encapsulated in mythology. After his conception at the cross of Yeshua ben Yosef, Elua was cast out by both the Yeshuities (Jews) and Tiberians (Romans), and forced to wander the earth and seek his own place. From the beginning, religion, specifically the religion of the D'Angelines, plays a major role in the socio-historical setting of the novels. When asked about her prominent placement of religion and religious themes, Carey replied that:

A lot of fantasy novels use religion as a plot device... there's seldom any actual sense of religion as a living, breathing faith. Th[is] was

¹² All bar Cassiel, who chooses to stay as Elua's constant companion, thus not claiming a people or province as his own.

¹³ Carey's previous work on angels can be seen in her borrowing of angel's names and temperaments from both Christian and Jewish texts, namely the *Bible* and the *Zohar*. For example Shemhazai is one the fallen angels, along with Uziah or Azael (most likely the inspiration for Carey's Azza), who breed with mortals and created the *Nephilim*; See Leo Jung, 'Fallen Angels in Jewish, Christian and Mohammedan Literature: A Study in Comparative Folk-Lore', *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1926), pp. 287-336, while Eisheth is described as a 'vixen' an 'angel of prostitution and mate of Sammael' by Gustav Davidson in his *A Dictionary of Angels Including the Fallen Angels* (New York, 1967), pp. xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁴ For more information on the angels and their provinces see *Terre d'Ange Wiki*, at <http://www.terre-dange.info/Category:Geography>. Accessed 18/12/09.

¹⁵ Carey, *Earth Begotten*.

definitely something I wanted to address... I wanted to imbue the books with a sense of the numinous.¹⁶

Thus Carey has also authored and published an account of Elua's creation and the subsequent founding of Terre d'Ange, in a short piece called *Earth Begotten*,¹⁷ which tells of Elua's travels and how flowers bloomed in his wake.¹⁸ Despite this sign of blessedness, people were afraid and scorned him, as a 'misbegotten' son of the One God. At one stage, he was thrown into prison by the King of Persia, but this only led to him being joined by eight angels from heaven who took pity on him, and became his angelic companions.

Continuing his wanderings, and meeting all manner of peoples but finding none ready to accept him (for most already had their own gods and traditions), Elua roamed until he reached:

a land unnamed, where olives grew, grapes and melons, and lavender bloomed in fragrant clouds. And here the people welcomed him as he crossed the fields, opening their arms, and Blessed Elua took them for his own and loved them.¹⁹

Elua and his angels established themselves in this land, mingling their blood with the people, as they accepted Elua's precept of 'Love as thou wilt', with only Cassiel keeping to the One God's commandments. Eventually this new flourishing land came to the One God's attention, and seeing that the D'Angelines, with their god-mingled origins, were multiplying swiftly, He sought to entice Elua and his companions to join him in heaven. It was then that Elua, conceived of blood and carried in the womb of the Earth, made a counter-offer, cutting his hand to spill his blood on the earth;

My grandfather's heaven is bloodless ... And I am not. Let his offer a better place, where we may love and sing and grow as we are wont, where our children and our children's children may join us, and I will go.²⁰

So Earth and her once-husband the One God created "a true Terre d'Ange that lies beyond mortal perception, and blessed Elua and his Companions went

¹⁶ Julie Marillier, 'Interview: Jacqueline Carey, Part 1', *Writer Unboxed* (2 November 2007), at <http://writerunboxed.com/2007/11/02/interview-j.-carey-part-1/>. Accessed 25/12/09.

¹⁷ *Earth Begotten* was originally published in a small release hand printed edition, but is also available freely online via her official website. See Carey, *Earth Begotten*.

¹⁸ Lotus spring up in the footsteps of the Buddha. See William E. Ward, 'The Lotus Symbol in Buddhist Art and Philosophy', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1952), pp. 135-146.

¹⁹ Carey, *Earth Begotten*.

²⁰ Carey, *Earth Begotten*.

willing into it, passing not through the dark gate of death, but straightway through the bright gate".²¹

But not all of the inhabitants of Terre d'Ange are followers of Elua and his companions. There are also communities of Yeshuites (Jews), followers of the One God, as well as wandering Tsingani (gypsies), who live by their own tradition and culture. Both communities play a role within the series, their beliefs and customs entwined into the fabric of the novel, providing pivotal plot features, and offering Phédre information and insights needed to complete her quests. The most important Tsingani character is Hyacinthe, a half-blooded Tsingani known as the 'Prince of Travellers'. Introduced early in the series as Phédre's first friend, he possesses the *dromonde*, the gift of looking through the mists of time to the future, or parting them to see events of the past. However, the *dromonde*, passed down and taught to him by his mother, is customarily an art only practiced by Tsingani women, for a man to do so is *vrajna* – forbidden.²² Carey's presentation of the Tsingani lifestyle and customs is based on the real life Gitanos, known as *Tsiganes* in French. Like their literary counterparts, the Gitanos are known for their nomadic lifestyle, often dealing in horses, reputed to be keen gamblers and fortune-tellers, and follow strict customs regarding a woman's virtue and purity.²³ The Yeshuites within the novels are an obvious representation of the Jewish peoples, but as always, Carey has added her own unique twist. There are some elements of Christianity within Yeshuites theology, which has led to some fans believing that Carey has presented a merged religion of Christian and Jewish belief, based on what may have happened if the hypothesised Council of Jamnia (or Javneh), which is said to have separated Christian and Jewish traditions in the first century, never occurred.²⁴

²¹ Carey, *Earth Begotten*.

²² Hyacinthe's use of the *dromonde* in front of other Tsingani results in him being deemed 'dead' by his grandfather, the king of the Tsingani. Carey, *Kushiel's Dart*, pp. 612-614.

²³ For more information on Gitano culture see Sharon Bohn Gmelch 'Groups that Don't Want In: Gypsies and Other Artisan, Trader, and Entertainer Minorities', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 15 (1986), pp. 307-330; Paloma Gay-Y-Blasco, 'A "Different" Body? Desire and Virginity Among Gitanos', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997), pp. 517-535.

²⁴ Anon., 'Yeshuites', *Wikipedia*, at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yeshuites>. Accessed 25/12/09. Another fan describes the Yeshuites as being culturally Jewish and religiously Christian; see 'Customer Reviews', *Amazon.ca*, at <http://www.amazon.ca/product-reviews/0765347539>. Accessed 25/12/09. For information regarding the Council of Jamnia, see David E. Aune, 'On the Origins of the "Council of Javneh" Myth', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 110, no. 3 (1991), pp. 491-493.

***Kushiel's Dart* – Book One**

In the first novel of the series *Kushiel's Dart*, Phédre has major encounters with two other cultures, the Albians and the Skaldi. At the time of the first novel, Drustan mab Necthana is an exiled Prince of the Picti, the true Cruarch of Alba. With Phédre's unique aid (she sleeps with the twin co-rulers of Dalriada [western Alba], first the sister Grainne, which makes her twin brother Eamonn so jealous that he pledges to go to war against Drustan's usurper uncle in order to have his one night with Phédre) he unites with the Dalriada to in order to regain his throne. Elements of mythology embroidered into the story include a black boar erupting from the trees, subsequently heralding the start of, and guiding them to victory, in the battle against Drustan's usurper cousin Maelcon. The black boar or *Cullach Gorrym* is Drustan's symbol, and its use in the book is reminiscent of how Fionn mac Cumhaill or 'Finn McCool' lured his rival Diarmuid Ua Duibhne to his death to be gored by the wild boar.²⁵ This event has had repercussions within in Irish mythology, in that it has inspired prophecies concerning a mythological battle in the 'Valley of the Black Pig', which can be seen as a possible source for Carey, the inspiration behind Drustan mab Necthana's plight and Phédre's adventures in Alba.²⁶ Another thread of Irish mythology is included in this section of the novel, with the great hall of the Dalraida described as echoing "the hall of Tea Muir in Eire" (Tara) and having "seven doors, though which one enters according to rank",²⁷ Da Derga's Hostel is described as having "seven doorways into the house",²⁸ and Fionn mac Cumhaill also encounters a magnificent hall with seven doors in *The Palace of the Quicken Trees*.²⁹

Where the Albians and the people of Dalriada eventually cross the sea to come to the aid of Terre d'Ange, the other nation featured in *Kushiel's Dart* are more interested in conquering and fighting the D'Angelines. Influenced by the Norse and Germanic tribes encountered by the Romans, Carey's Skaldi offer a glimpse of what this society may have become without the influence of Christianity. Carey's choice of name for these tribal warriors is obviously a play on the Norse word *skald*, meaning bard. This can be seen by the way in which she continually makes reference to their love and regard for poetry and

²⁵ See 'The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne', in *Ancient Irish Tales*, eds Tom P. Cross and Clark H. Slover (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1996 [1936]), pp. 408-415.

²⁶ For more information concerning the role of the Black Boar in Irish mythology see W. B. Yeats, 'A Note on the "Valley of the Black Pig"', in *Writing on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth* (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 216-218.

²⁷ Carey, *Kushiel's Dart*, p. 666.

²⁸ 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel', in *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 101.

²⁹ Jan Fries, *Cauldron of the Gods* (Oxford: Mandrake, 2005), p. 499.

songs, describing it as a “deep streak of sentimentality that runs in the Skaldi nature. They love to weep as much as they love to fight and wager”.³⁰ Indeed, later in the story Phédre gains passage across the sea by singing one of the Skaldi women's hearth songs.³¹ The Skaldi, unlike the D'Angelines, keep slaves, though they are generally well-treated. Their religion is akin to Nordic paganism, including worship of Odhinn the All-Father, Freya, and Baldur. Carey describes them as having an elaborate system of law, wherein the lord hears complaints twice a week; his judgements are final and unquestioned³². During the first novel of the series they are presented as a fierce but unorganized group of warriors given to infighting between their numerous tribes, who are being brought under the control of a central figure – Waldemar Selig, who is planning to invade the lush pastures of Terre D' Ange.

Carey's Skaldi have been influenced by historical works including Tacitus's *Germania*. During her time as a slave Phédre makes note of their daily habits and general characteristics, relaying aspects of communal activities, village architecture, pastimes and entertainment, which, in some ways, mirror those describes by Tacitus:

The great hall of the steading was a busy place. It is, I learned, the heart of any Skaldi community. The out lying fields were held by Gunter's thanes, or warriors, and farmed by their carls, who I took to be a class of peasants or bondsmen. For this privilege, they supported the thanes and paid a tithe in herd and grains to Gunter. When Gunter and his thanes were not out raiding or hunting, they spent their time carousing in the hall, wagering on contests of strength and song.³³

The other slaves are not employed after our manner with distinct domestic duties assigned to them, but each one has the management of a house and home of his own. The master requires from the slave a certain quantity of grain, of cattle, and of clothing, as he would from a tenant, and this is the limit of subjection. ... Whenever they are not fighting, they pass much of their time in the chase, and still more in idleness, giving themselves up to sleep and to feasting, the bravest and the most warlike doing nothing ... Then they go armed to business, or no less often to their festal meetings. To pass an entire day and night in drinking disgraces no one.³⁴

³⁰ Carey, *Kushiel's Dart*, p. 382.

³¹ Carey, *Kushiel's Dart*, p. 652.

³² Carey, *Kushiel's Dart*, p. 375.

³³ Carey, *Kushiel's Dart*, p. 375.

³⁴ Tacitus, *The Agricola and Germania*, trans. A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb (London: Macmillan, 1877), p. 87ff.

Carey also includes descriptions of their religious beliefs and level of technology, for example, their lack of writing – only the sacred runes, *futhark*, exist - which she accurately describes as being a gift the people from Odhinn (Odin).³⁵ Phédre is even lucky enough to meet with a priest of Odhinn, a one eyed man called Lodur, nicknamed “One-Eyed”, who explains that his disability was the result of him offering his eye to the gods as an apprentice, “reckoning to become wise like Odhinn”, who gave his eye in order to drink from Mimir’s Fountain and gain the wisdom it contained.³⁶

Kushiel's Chosen – Book Two

In the second book, Phédre travels to La Serenissima, a counter-historical equivalent of Venice, though at this time the courtesans have none of their famous standing, as this occurs later, influenced by Phédre’s actions and the support of some local nobles. The religion here centres on Asherat-of-the-Sea, a deity of water and patron goddess of La Serenissima. Her temple is overseen by women dedicated to the goddess, while the city’s male ruler, the Doge, is said to be married to Asherat, as part of his inauguration ritual, and must pay tribute to her each year. This is similar to the idea of sacral kingship found in Celtic mythology, only here, he weds the goddess incarnate as the lady of the sea rather than as the personification of the land.³⁷ This marriage to the sea is actually part of Venetian history. It first occurred in 1177 when Pope Alexander III gave Doge Ziani a ring symbolising marriage, allegedly saying:

Take this, O Ziani, which you and your successors will use each year to marry the sea, so that posterity knows the lordship of the sea is yours, held by you as an ancient possession and by right of conquest, that the sea was placed under your dominion, as a wife is to a husband.³⁸

In a world where Christianity never gained strength, Carey has kept the tradition of the Doge wedding the sea as a sign of his prosperity, but has added the element of the sea being symbolic of a powerful goddess. Within the novel Phédre notes that in “La Serenissima, they worship her as Asherat-of-the-Sea

³⁵ See Carey, *Kushiel's Dart*, p. 385. Odin’s possession of the runes is described in the poem ‘Havamal’, or ‘Ballad of the High One’; see stanzas 139-143 of the ‘Havamal’, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. H. A. Bellows (New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1963), pp. 60-61.

³⁶ Carey, *Kushiel's Dart*, p. 469. For a reference to Odin’s sacrifice at Mimir’s fountain see stanzas 28-29 of ‘The Voluspa’, in Bellows, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 13.

³⁷ See Proinsias Mac Cana, ‘Celtic Goddesses of Sovereignty’, in *Goddesses Who Rule*, eds Elizabeth Benard and Beverly A. Moon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 85-99.

³⁸ Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.124.

and the Dea Coelestis, the Tiberian Queen of Heaven, but she is an ancient goddess and has taken many forms".³⁹ This reference to Dea Coelestis, along with the novel's mention of Baal-Jupiter (as the cause of Asherat's son's death), suggests that Asherat is based on the goddess Ashtoreth, a celestial goddess who can be compared to Diana, Artemis, and Astarte.⁴⁰

In the novel, Asherat mourns the loss of her son and is believed to have created an island off the coast of La Serenissima in his honour. The island is called La Dolorosa and symbolizes her constant mourning. At the time of the second novel La Dolorosa has been turned into a prison. The winds howl around the island constantly and driving the prisoners mad, the winds speaking forever of Asherat's loss and mourning.⁴¹ It is while escaping from La Dolorosa that Phédre becomes beholden to a deity not of her native faith, as she pledges to restore purity to Asherat's temple (where blasphemy has occurred as part of a plot against the throne of Terre De Ange), if Asherat will save her when swept into the sea:

"Asherat", I prayed silently.... "Asherat of the sea, forgive me. For the death of your son Eshmun, I am sorry; I have heard your grief and shared it. Only spare my life, and I swear to you, I will do you honour; on the name of blessed Elua, your bastard gotten son, I vow I will return to La Serenissima and cleanse your temple of those who turn your worship to their own ends".⁴²

Phédre survives the sea, and is eventually brought to Kriti, an island to the south of Hellas, akin to the island of Crete, with a culture that was ancient even during the rule of Tiberium. The language spoken is *Hellene*. The Kritian nobility are known as the scions of Minos, after their legendary king, hinting at the Minoan myth of the Minotaur.⁴³ Here they still practice the Hellenic faith, and Phédre observes, and accidentally takes part, in a ritual reminiscent of the Elysian mysteries, as one of her companions undergoes the *Thetalos* – a ritual to cleanse him of a blood curse/debt.⁴⁴ During the ritual the supplicant is left in

³⁹ Jacqueline Carey, *Kushiel's Chosen* (New York: Tor Books, 2002), p. 268.

⁴⁰ George Rawlinson, *History of Phoenicia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008 [1889]), pp. 217-218.

⁴¹ The story behind the creation of La Dolorosa is explained in the novel as follows: "They say that when Baal-Jupiter slew Asherat's son Eshmun, the Gracious Lady of the Sea wept and raged and stamped her feet, and the floor of the sea rose up in answer, spewing forth La Dolorosa to mark her grief", Carey, *Kushiel's Chosen*, p. 229.

⁴² Carey, *Kushiel's Chosen*, p. 380.

⁴³ Minos was the son of Zeus and Europa, whose married Pasiphae, a daughter of Helios, the sun god. Pasiphae is the mother of the Minotaur. Carey hints at this mythic lineage by naming the ruler of Kriti, the Kore of Temenos, Pasiphae. See Jenny March, *Cassell's Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 592.

⁴⁴ Carey, *Kushiel's Chosen*, pp. 469-480.

darkened cave, representing the womb of the mother, and re-lives and the consequences for all their actions, and must face and accept any guilt that accompanies them. As Phédre partakes in the ritual of the *Thetalo* unprepared although she survives the ordeal, the Kore, overseer of the ritual is unable to 'bestow the rites of absolution' upon her, and she must live with the conscious memories of her choices and their repercussions.⁴⁵ But this is why she is the chosen of Kushiel, gifted, cursed to endure and enjoy pain. It is during her time in the Kriti that she is first called by the title *lypiphera*, a term given to her by slaves meaning 'pain bearer', a title that Phédre must embrace in the final book of the series.⁴⁶

***Kushiel's Avatar* – Book Three**

Kushiel's Avatar is the darkest novel of the series, as it explores not only Phédre's curse/blessing, but also the presence of evil, darkness, and the need for balance in the world. In this book Phédre travels far beyond the borders of Terre d'Ange, trekking across not only the continent, but also into Menenkhet (Egypt) and into Jebe-Barkal (Africa), and Druja (modern day Azerbaijan). Some of the most important action takes place in Drujan, a place that has been over come by darkness. It has burning gases escaping from the rocky ground and borders on the Sea of Khaspar (the Caspian Sea), and was the religious capital, with temples built around the sacred fires.⁴⁷ Its capital is Daršanga. In the books the region has come under the rule of the Mahrkagir (meaning 'Conqueror of Death'), and regained self-rule, cutting itself off from the rest of the world. The religion here is based on Zoroastrianism, but instead of worshiping Ahura Mazdā (the lord of light), and striving to overthrow evil and darkness, the Mahrkagir has turned the religion on its head, centring it on the precept of "ill thoughts, ill words, ill deeds", and the worship of Angra Mainyu (the dark lord).⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, Phédre, with her somewhat unconventional talents, becomes the favourite of the Mahrkagir's *zenna* (harem), as he abuses her nightly with evil thoughts, words, and deeds. But it is here that ideas of balance and fate enter the narrative, as Phédre questions her existence in such a hellish place. The climax occurring when she realises that her ability to bear pain, to find pleasure in it, is what ultimately leads to the down fall of the Mahrkagir and his unholy religion. As Phédre's curse/ blessing allows her to get close enough to destroy the ruler:

⁴⁵ Carey, *Kushiel's Chosen*, pp. 480.

⁴⁶ Carey, *Kushiel's Chosen*, pp. 501-502.

⁴⁷ J. Carey, *Kushiel's Avatar* (New York, Tor Books, 2003), p. 262.

⁴⁸ Carey, *Kushiel's Avatar*, p. 328. See Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2001), for more information on the Zoroastrian religion.

It is said the Mahrkagir searches for the perfect victim...
What was Kushiel's chosen if not that?
Ah, no I thought; Blessed Elua, No! It is too much to ask; too much!
....
What was it that filled me? Not Kushiel, no, nor Naamah, but Elua,
Blessed Elua, the night shadow whom they all followed, all of them,
revealing at last the immensity of his plan ... setting my heat to
beating like a hummingbirds wings, yes, yes, yes.
No, I thought. Tears stung my eyes, No.
It is too much...
The presence continued to fade, withdrawing in regret, all of it.
Farewell, I heard ... farewell,
All of them leaving me forever.
"All right! I will do it!"⁴⁹

The concept of fate and the will of the gods plays a role through the entirety of the series. Carey names one of Drustan mab Necthana's sisters, who is gifted with prophecy and foresight, Moiread, which is a corruption of the Greek term *Moirai*, used to describe the goddesses who govern over the life and death of humans.⁵⁰ Like Phédre, she is needed to create and restore balance in the world, to destroy evil, for in this world where Christianity never took hold, cultures have been left to their own devices, to adapt and grow in semi-isolation. When the religion of Drujan becomes twisted and corrupt, threatening to expand and infect the entire world, only Phédre, chosen by Kushiel, a god of punishment, can rectify the situation. As the high priest of Kushiel's sanctuary explains Kushiel's role, "To impart suffering with out compassion ... is an abomination. Thence the need for an *anguisette* to balance the scales. To endure suffering untold, with infinite compassion".⁵¹ Thus it is Phédre's acceptance of her twisted desire for pain and torture that allows the overthrowing of Angra Mainyu's evil religion. The death of the Mahrkagir at Phédre's hand restoring the balance, and returning the region back to the worship of Ahura Mazda.

However, Phédre's journey does not finish with this heroic achievement. Instead, her travels continue, as she seeks the unfathomable, the Name of God (the One God), in order to save her childhood companion, Hyacinthe, from a prophecy that fates him to be tied forever to an island off the coast of Terre d'Ange. With the help of one of the women from the Mahrkagir's *zenna*, Phédre seeks out the people of Saba, The Tribe of Dâh, who are the keepers of 'The Covenant of Wisdom', the Name of God. Here we see Carey's ability to

⁴⁹ Carey, *Kushiel's Avatar*, pp. 283-284.

⁵⁰ March, *Cassell's Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, p. 320.

⁵¹ Carey, *Kushiel's Avatar*, p. 76.

blend history and myth at its finest. For only in the realms of fantasy literature can a heroine trained in the arts of the bedroom, be blessed enough to seek out and find not only the lost tribe of Israel, the Tribe of Dàn, but also gain entry into the keeping place of 'The Holiest of Holies', 'the Ark of Broken Tables' upon which is written The Name of God.⁵² Thus Carey has come a full circle in her counterfactual world, creating an alternative religion from the heart of Christianity, the birth of Elua from the blood of Yeshua ben Yosef, while also integrating elements of Jewish history and mysticism with the presence of the lost tribe of Israel and the discovery of the Ark of the Covenant.⁵³

Conclusion

When questioned about the inspiration for the non-Christianized cultures and religions Phédre experiences in her novels Carey explained that:

[t]he key lies in the fact that all the supernatural elements are a direct extension of the various mythologies that inform the books ... I think that keeping the supernatural element grounded by myth makes it feel more organic to the setting and the story. And the simple fact that much of the mythology, history, culture and geography is somewhat familiar to the reader probably helps make it seem more accessible.⁵⁴

Carey chose to create a counterfactual world as the setting for her series, as this enabled her to embed the story with familiar elements with which to initially attract readers, while giving herself free range to adapt elements of history and mythology from various cultures and religions. Her imaginative creation of a new religion, that of Blessed Elua and his followers, based on the precept of 'Love as thou Wilt', is ingenious, not only in its simplicity, but also in its appropriateness for a late/post-modern Western audience. The *Kushiel* novels are set in an apparent 'past', yet the permissive, sexually explicit culture and powerful female characters are 'feminist' and contemporary. Dolezel explains that, "counterfactual history should be seen as a thought experiment that changes or eliminates a factor of actual history and thus tests its significance".⁵⁵ In Caery's novels this is achieved though the complete absence of Christianity as a dominant cultural institution, raising intriguing questions about the modern West's struggle to break free from the Christian Church.

⁵² Carey, *Kushiel's Avatar*, p. 566.

⁵³ Gershom Scholem trans. Simon Pleasance, 'The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala', *Diogenes*, vol. 20, no. 79 (1972), pp. 59-80.

⁵⁴ Marillier, 'Interview: Jacqueline Carey, Part 1'.

⁵⁵ Lubomir Dolezel. 'Possible Worlds of Fiction and History', *New Literary History*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1998), pp. 801-802.

Carey's ability to blend and weave threads from diverse sources and cultures has resulted in the creation of a strikingly original series that has enraptured readers, and inspired an enormous fan base online. This paper has only touched on a small percentage of the religious themes and motifs employed within the first *Kushiel* trilogy, but has demonstrated the magnitude of the sources utilised by Carey. Her inclusion of such a diverse amount of religious rituals and beliefs serves a dual purpose; it adds to the rich texture of the novels and the power of the imagined world, while also introducing readers to concepts and cultures that they may not have previously experienced. The counterfactual world presented in the *Kushiel* series contains elements strangely familiar to its readers, while also offering a different set of moral and philosophical viewpoints with which they may choose to engage at their own level. Ultimately Carey's novels are an excellent example of how creative fantasy, taking its inspiration from the religious imagination, can result in a fictional alternate world that permits readers to explore religions, cultures, and philosophies. The pleasure of reading, in this case, has as a (perhaps unintended) side-effect: the acquisition of an education in the world's religions.