

Maturation and Education in George MacDonald's Fairy Tales¹

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During his lifetime, George MacDonald was appreciated mainly for his realistic Scottish novels. But it was as a writer of fantasy novels that he was rediscovered, after a period of virtual neglect, in the sixties and seventies. In particular, MacDonald's children's books have gained widespread critical acclaim, since they, to a large extent, do without moralistic admonishment (in contra-distinction to most children's books, even of the mid-Victorian period) yet go far beyond mere amusement by carrying deep, and specifically religious, meanings.

The fact that MacDonald, unlike many of his contemporaries, did not regard the fairy tale as a vehicle for straightforward teaching, has to do with his special view of the essence of fairy tales and of the imagination, for which ideas he was indebted to German and English Romantic writers. According to MacDonald, fairy tales possess an infinite potential of meaning, of which even the author is only partly aware; readers—adults as well as children—will find access to that potential of meaning spontaneously and intuitively, with no intellectual effort, precisely to the extent of what they need and can use.²

In actual practice, however, MacDonald expressed his teachings rather clearly in some of his stories. His fantasy novels for adults and his children's fantasies—*At the Back of the North Wind*, the *Princess* books, and (even more pronounced) *The Wise Woman*—present learning processes of the protagonists, instigated by (predominantly supernatural) educators who do not stint their advice or teaching. The accusation of didacticism raised by some critics³ against MacDonald is not wholly unfounded.

How do MacDonald's shorter fairy tales, which were written partly before his famous children's books and partly at the same time, fare in this respect? They have found little critical attention hitherto;⁴ and they are so diverse in kind and quality that it is difficult to make any general statements. As regards the fairy tales collected in *The Light Princess and Other Tales*,⁵ this much at least can be said: they were written basically (if not exclusively)

[end of page 10] for children, but they are not conspicuously didactic.

What is of central importance in them is not education but maturation.

This is not the place to discuss the difference between these two notions in detail. I will mention only one important aspect. In its most common use, “maturation” refers to the natural, pre-determined aspect of a person’s physical and mental development. Just like the ripening of a fruit, maturation is basically an unfolding of inherent qualities, even though it may be influenced by certain external conditions. Education is also concerned with a person’s development, but the word implies a conscious manipulation of the process. While maturation seems natural, education aims at cultivation: at transcending a “merely” natural state. Humans do not grow automatically into civilised beings: they need to be taught, through admonishment, praise and punishment, to master their drives and to internalise the values and norms of society.

Seen in this light, “maturation” and “education” appear as downright opposites. But of course, in actual practice they are really complimentary: while “maturation” is the natural development of a personality which involves also cultural factors, “education” should be a gently guiding support of this process.

However, in most fairy tales written in England before and during MacDonald’s career, “education” has a much more down-to-earth meaning. There, pedagogical giants and fairies abound who devour naughty children or turn them into nasty creatures in an attempt to cure them of gluttony, disobedience, and other bad manners. According to these authors (mostly female), the fairy tale has a clearly defined function: it is one of the tools employed to educate children to conform to the norms of middle-class society.⁶

In folk tales, however, such moralistic tendencies are rare. It is well known today that most folk tales can be interpreted as symbolic presentations of maturation processes.⁷ Whether this was sensed by some people in MacDonald’s time is hard to say since the psychological vocabulary to express these insights was not yet available. What is certain is that MacDonald, who allowed himself to be influenced by the *Kunstmärchen* of the German Romantics and by indigenous folk tales, did treat of maturation **[11]** in his fairy tales.⁸ As the following examples will show, he did this in quite diverse ways.

II

Let us look first at “The Giant’s Heart” (1863). At first sight, it is true, the tale seems to deal neither with maturation nor with education. It is the story of a little girl named Tricksey-wee and her younger brother, Buffy-bob. After a childish fight with his sister, Buffy-bob runs off into the woods, and Tricksey-wee sets out to search for him. They meet up again in the home of an ogre. Warned by the ogre’s wife, the children manage to hide themselves from the monster, but they are forced to watch him throw one of the little boys whom he keeps like cattle into the boiling pot. By listening to a conversation between the giant and his wife they learn that he keeps his heart outside his body hidden away in an eagle’s nest. After managing to flee, they set out to search for the giant’s heart. A skylark—huge, like everything in this country—gives them some valuable hints; and spiders, grateful because the children had saved the life of one of their people, help them to get to the eagle’s nest and to seize the giant’s heart. Once possessed of his heart, they are able to force the giant to release the captive children and to vow reformation, but when the giant breaks his word immediately afterwards and tries to grab them, Buffy-bob pierces the giant’s heart and thus kills him.

MacDonald himself supplied an allegorical interpretation of his tale when he incorporated it in his novel *Adela Cathcart*. The narrator, at first rather disappointed by the reaction of his young audience, feels reassured in the evening when a little girl comes up to him and says, “Thank you, dear Mr Smith, I will be good. It was a very nice story. If I was a man I would kill all the wicked people in the world. But I am only a little girl, you know; so I can only be good.” To which the narrator adds: “The darling did not know how much more one good woman can do to kill evil than all the swords of the world in the hands of righteous heroes” (230-31). For the girl, then, the giant represents evil as such, for the narrator, to “kill” evil means to be always on the side of good and thus, by being a good example, to educate others.

It seems fairly obvious that such a general allegorical interpretation cannot do justice to the tale. Children do not think in such abstract ways; if they are fascinated by fairy tales, it is because they feel that the story is about [12] themselves, their own problems and fears. By relating the plot of “The Giant’s Heart” to other folk tales, we shall perhaps see more clearly if this is true also in this case.

The motif of the extra-corporeal heart (striking though it is) is less important here than the more widespread motif of the child-eating ogre who is defeated by his own victims. In England, the classical version of this motif

is “Jack and the Beanstalk”; in France, Perrault’s “Le Petit Poucet.” What has this motif to do with maturation? To see the connection we must remember that maturation is not a smooth, continuous process. Rather, it happens in a succession of attempts to cope with tasks which come up inevitably as the child grows up in a community. One of these central tasks is to achieve gradual emancipation from the sheltered existence in the family. It is done in many separate steps, which are experienced as small crises full of anxieties. The fairy tale re-creates such crises in such a way that children can act out their anxieties without being made explicitly aware of them. At the same time the happy ending of the tale demonstrates that crises can be overcome, that anxieties can be conquered.

The typical plot-line of the magical fairy tale is gauged to this function. Central ingredients are the hero’s departure, the mastering of tasks, usually with some help from friendly creatures, the struggle with, and eventual defeat of, the adversary, and the return home or a marriage. Obviously MacDonald’s tale conforms to this pattern, but it does so in its own peculiar way.

As always, the action is triggered off by a situation of lack: the girl’s little brother has disappeared. Unlike in a folk tale, however, this is preceded by a fight between the siblings, which is realistic rather than fairytale-like in its ambiguity. Tricksey had taunted her brother until he retaliated with a box on the ear, and it is his subsequent feelings of guilt which cause his rash flight. The moral message is not spelled out at this point, although it is clearly implied. But this is not, or only marginally, about sibling rivalry. And the climax of the tale is not the rescue of the brother but the defeat of the giant.

The author’s lack of focus can also be seen in the way he portrays the children’s helpers. In a folk tale, the motif of the helpers has usually a clear moral function: by proving his selflessness the hero proves he is worthy of the helpers’ support. It is true that Tricksey and Buffy save a spider’s life [13] (which costs them little effort), yet in general they appear cunning rather than selfless. But then, they move in a world that is full of moral ambiguities. The owl, whom they turn to first, refuses outright to divulge where the giant’s heart is hidden. The skylark, next, treats them in a supercilious way; only through a flattering song can his wife be moved to betray the secret. The spiders act as helpers, it is true, but they are rather unpleasant—“huge greedy spiders, catching huge silly flies, and devouring them,” (79)—and by no means harmless. When a spider tells the children, “I eat nothing but what is mischievous or useless,” this is not really apt to

reassure them (although it does), for who is to decide what is mischievous or useless remains an open question.

If the giant's world is, in general, too close for comfort to the world of real-life adults, the portrayal of the giant himself presents even more of a moral puzzle. On the one hand the giant is terrible; on the other he is a ridiculous Victorian Philistine whose principal pride is the white stockings he wears on Sundays. The narrator's irony is bearable only if the giant is seen as a satire of Victorian double morality:

To be sure, he did eat little children, but only very little ones; and if it ever crossed his mind that it was wrong to do so, he always said to himself that he wore whiter stockings on Sunday than any other giant in Giantland. (65)

It is true that his wife warns Tricksey of him, but on the other hand the marriage between the two giants is quite harmonious; she thinks her husband "a very good man" (66) and he lovingly calls her "my darling, lighthearted, airy, laughing Doodlem" (71). She has apparently no objections to his peculiar diet. Which is not surprising, for the giant's habits are not only solidly middle-class, but also, in a way, justified: the fat, goggle-eyed boys whom he keeps as his cattle are themselves to blame for their misfortune. They knew if they could only keep from eating, and grow thin, the giant would dislike them and turn them out to find their way home; but notwithstanding this, so greedy were they, that they ate as much as ever they could hold (67). The "dough-faced boy" (67) who is boiled in the giant's kettle is a tattle-tale; ironically, though, he is not punished for telling tales, but because the giant thinks he is a liar. [14]

Whereas in a folk tale an ogre figure would be left sufficiently indeterminate to serve as a concretisation of infantile anxieties, MacDonald supplies his ogre with details which make him appear sometimes terrible and sometimes ridiculous; sometimes an agent for punishment like his colleagues from the moralistic children's books of Victorian times, and then a caricature of a hypocritical adult. Under these circumstances the annihilation of the giant is bound to turn into a moral problem. In a reversal of real-world power relations it is the children in the end who have the capability, and the moral right, to inflict physical punishment. They make ample use of their power to force the whining giant to release his victims and to vow reformation (which pertains both to his dietary and his sartorial habits). Spare the rod and spoil the child; who will not obey will be executed. Tricksey-wee and Buffy-bob have run through the typical learning process of Victorian middle-class

children. By dint of their courage, cunning and politeness (where necessary) they have managed to survive in a harsh and unsympathetic world of adults. In the end they have “matured” into powerful, self-righteous adults who wield their powers *in loco parentis* with no undue qualms and just slight regrets.

MacDonald fails in “The Giant’s Heart” not so much because he is too didactic or too gruesome but because he is not sure about his aims.⁹ He does not seem to see clearly the maturation theme inherent in his subject matter, nor is he sure which lessons he wants to teach and which narrative means are appropriate for his purpose. In other tales he succeeds much better in integrating education and maturation.

III

One example of this is a fairy tale which MacDonald published first in 1866 under the title “The Fairy Fleet, an English Marchen.”¹⁰ It is the story of a twelve-year-old boy named Colin, who lives with his widowed father, a shepherd, in a simple hut somewhere in the hills of Scotland. When he deflects the bed of a small stream to make it run through his cottage he gets into contact with the fairies: tiny, human-like creatures who have a queen and a court and live in small boats on the river. Among the fairies is a human child whom they have stolen. The queen of the fairies promises Colin a free wish, but, when he asks for the child, the queen tries to stall him off by demanding that Colin get her first a bottle of a particularly rare wine, the Carasoy. Colin seeks advice from an old, wise woman, whose hut, however, [15] he finds only after he has stopped looking for it. He is given three tasks: to dream for three days without sleeping, to work for three days without dreaming, and finally to work and dream for three days. He fulfills his first task without noticing it by staying with the old woman and listening to her stories; the second, by working as an apprentice to goblin smiths; and the third by digging a magical trench on the moor, thus enclosing a garden where the magic vine can grow.

Once more the queen of the fairies tries to get off her promise. She changes the girl into various animal shapes, but Colin is not deceived. The fairies depart, and the child stays with Colin and his father. Colin goes to school, and to college; and later he marries the girl.

At first sight Colin seems quite self-sufficient and mature right from the very beginning of the story. By diverting the stream he goes, for the first time, beyond his domestic duties to realise a Utopian thought: to

link nature (the brook) and civilisation (the hut). But he is not aware of the consequences. His deed has brought him into contact with supernatural beings; and that, in turn, has triggered a lengthy process, in which learning and maturing are inextricably combined.

A Jungian explanation which treats the contacts with supernatural beings as a symbolic discovery of the unconscious is possible, but not inevitable. What is certain is that these creatures represent certain basic modes of human existence which Colin must learn to recognise and evaluate.

The fairies appear in a negative light. Although they have a queen and a court, they represent by no means a rational social order; for whatever they do appears as mere superficial play-acting. Their anarchic hyper-activity, their love of play, their hedonism, egoism, and lack of compassion reveal them as personifications of childishness and immaturity, mental states to be overcome by growing up.¹¹ Even the kidnapped seven-year-old girl complains:

I don't like the fairies. They are so silly. And they never grow any wiser. . . . they make me play at being somebody else all night long, and sleep all day. That's what they do themselves.

And I should so like to be myself. (127) **[16]**

Her request to be rescued from the fairies means that Colin has to provide an opportunity for someone other than himself to grow up and mature—in other words, that he takes on the role of a father. To do so he himself has to mature first; which he does in clearly defined stages.

The first stage is his stay with the wise old woman. Without exhausting the rich symbolism of this figure—typical of MacDonald's many grandmother-figures—we may safely interpret her as a representative of God and, at the same time, as a personification of the imagination and the unconscious. Her wisdom can be tapped only through "losing oneself," i.e. temporarily foregoing will-dominated rationality. The tasks she gives Colin aim at the integration of imaginative contemplation ("dreaming") and socially relevant action ("working")—of intuition and rationality.

Colin's introduction into the world of labour through his stay with the goblins is important in this context. The smithy is as hectic as a modern factory: anyone idle faces drastic punishments. But Colin discovers to his surprise that he grows with his task, so that to him this period of heavy labour and unconditional submission passes swiftly.

Colin's experiences teach him the ability to distinguish between essence and appearances, and to pursue steadfastly the right aims. He has

thus gained enough maturity to take on responsibility for others: he is able to redeem the child, to feed, protect and teach her. Compared to this, his formal education at school and college is of lesser importance, even though it is a further prerequisite for the founding of a family.

“The Fairy Fleet” uses motifs from legends and fairy tales, but MacDonald manipulates them freely in order to express his own ideas of a young man’s maturation. He discards all those typically Victorian messages so dear to his fellow writers, who use the fairy tale to scare children away from gluttony, lying, selfishness, impoliteness, and other ways of being naughty. Even the famous Victorian work ethos is given an interesting modification. Work is not equated with self-realisation; getting absorbed in one’s task is only one step towards becoming a well-balanced personality. An end of alienation is achieved by working and dreaming at the same time: “Those three days were the happiest he had ever known. For he understood [17] everything he did himself, and all that everything was doing round about him” (140).

The message of this quasi-parabolic story may be deep, but it is so philosophical, speculative and abstract that children will hardly find it helpful in their day-to-day struggles. “The Fairy Fleet” does not deal clearly with the concrete problems of growing up.¹² This is different in our final examples.

IV

“The Light Princess” (1864) is rightly thought to be one of the most successful of MacDonald’s shorter fairy tales. It is about a princess who, because of a curse, has to grow up without physical gravity. Most of the consequences of this peculiar loss are amusing; but it has the punning side-effect that the princess lacks seriousness as well; she can neither mourn nor sympathise with others. She can regain part of her gravity when she is submerged in water; but her aunt, the wicked witch, drains the lake in which she is wont to swim. Only a man’s body can stop the hole by which the water escapes. A prince, who has been in love with her for a while, is ready to sacrifice himself. For a long time the princess, unperturbed, watches the water rise around him; but at the very last moment she acts on a sudden impulse and saves him. In the same instant that he regains consciousness she is cured of her weightlessness and becomes able to weep.

Original as this fairy tale is in some respects, it is not outside every tradition. Wolff mentions E.T.A. Hoffmann as a possible source of inspiration (117-20); W.M. Thackeray’s fairy-tale parody *The Rose and the Ring* might

also be named. Beyond this, there is the more extensive tradition of the French *contes de fées*, and a certain type of folk tale in which one or several fairies act as powers of fate. The best known example of the latter, of course, is “Cinderella.”

Another of MacDonald’s fairy tales, “Little Daylight,” also stands in this tradition. It was first published as an insertion in his book-length children’s fantasy, *At the Back of the North Wind*. Here the curse of a wicked fairy causes a princess to sleep all day and to wake all night. In addition, her physical condition depends upon the phases of the moon: with a full moon she is healthy and beautiful; when the moon is new, however, she seems ugly, [18] old, and sick to death. Her handicap makes her retreat completely from human society; she spends most of her life in a glade surrounded by thick forests, until a prince takes pity on her while she is in the shape of an old woman, kisses her, and thus breaks the spell.

What characterises tales like “Cinderella,” “The Light Princess,” and “Little Daylight” is that the protagonists are innocent victims of a curse. This is the symbolic narrative concretisation of an experience which is typical of a pubescent child preoccupied with finding her own self. In this phase of her development, the child tries to find her own place in society and begins to look at herself critically. The results are, almost inevitably, feelings of insufficiency that are painful and hard to overcome. By presenting this vivid sense of self-criticism as a curse, the fairy tale offers consolation: it relieves the overly self-critical person of her feelings of guilt and indicates that this period of uneasiness will eventually pass. The motif of the breaking of the spell answers a sense of helplessness in the young reader: if you feel that you want to, but cannot, change yourself, you need help from outside, as symbolised by the fairy-tale prince.

It is not difficult to see that the isolation of the princess in “Little Daylight” is a symbolic rendering of the familiar propensity found in teenagers, especially girls, to withdraw into themselves and to shun the outside world. Her dependency upon the lunar phases suggests a connection with menstruation; but we might also interpret it as a symbol of the abrupt changes of mood frequently found in adolescents. The light princess, by contrast, finds herself trapped in typically childish patterns of behaviour (similarly to the girl in “The Fairy Fleet”). Her lack of seriousness and compassion, and her egocentricity, put a severe strain on the people around her; but she, too, suffers as soon as her swimming makes her aware that a different life-style is possible.

In both cases breaking the spell involves a severe test of the redeemer, who is required to be selfless to the point of self-sacrifice. However, in contrast to Little Daylight, the light princess is not merely a passive object of redemption. What we see in her case is a process in which education and maturation blend. The princess gradually learns to love her partner, partly through the prince's patient endeavours, and partly through the healing powers of the water. Thus exemplary conduct and the maturing forces of [19] nature combine to produce the desired result. The prince's stipulation that the princess stay with him in his last hour and feed him functions as an educational measure: as she fulfils her task, the princess develops a relationship that is so close that it enables her to find access to those forces within herself that allow her to free herself from the spell.

Obviously the four fairy tales that we have discussed cannot be taken to represent all of MacDonald's fairy tales. Yet it seems that they exemplify certain recurring features of his fantasy writings. The uneasy mixture of psychologically meaningful maturation motifs, obtrusive moralizing, and bitter satire that we encountered in "The Giant's Heart" can be found in other stories as well, for instance in *The Princess and Curdie*. Similarly, MacDonald's penchant for an allegorical or parabolic expression of his views surfaces again and again, most clearly, perhaps, in "The Golden Key" and in his adult fantasies, *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895). But there are also times, as in "The Light Princess," when he succeeds in a perfect blending of deep thought and playful lightness, teaching and consolation, education and maturation.

Notes

1. This article is a translation of my article "*Reifen und Erziehen in George MacDonalds Märchen*" which was first published in the 1991 *Inklings Jahrbuch*. No attempt has been made to incorporate criticism published since the date of the original composition, except in footnotes.
2. Cf. MacDonald's fictitious dialogue with his readers in his 1893 essay "The Fantastic Imagination," in which he, late in his life, tried to formulate a theoretical foundation for his own fairy tales:

Everyone . . . who feels the story, will read it after his own nature and development . . . It may be better that you should read your meaning into it. That may be a higher operation of your intellect than the mere reading of mine out of it. Your meaning may be superior to mine . . .

. But indeed your children [20] are not likely to trouble you about the meaning. They find what they are capable of finding, and more

would be too much. For my part I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five (17).

3. Manlove, for instance, talks about a “core of didacticism that is found in much of [MacDonald’s] work” (71). Reis finds—alongside a “symbolic muse”—a “didactic muse,” who uses, admittedly, mainly symbolic methods, in particular the motif of the journey, to present a “spiritual education” (see esp. chapters 5 and 6). Less successfully, Raeper tries to differentiate: “MacDonald was concerned to teach—but not to give lessons” (307).

4. Reviews of single tales, rather terse in part, can be found in Robert Lee Wolff’s book and in my own *Das englische Märchen*. Raeper briefly discusses some of the tales. Two important interpretations of single tales were published by Cynthia Marshall; more have appeared recently in McGillis’s collection of essays on MacDonald. I am also obliged to an unpublished dissertation by Monika Trinkhaus: *Das Reifungsthema in den kürzeren Märchen MacDonaldis* Erlangen 1989.

5. In spite of its subtitle, “Being the Complete Fairy Stories of George MacDonald,” the volume contains by no means all of MacDonald’s shorter fantasy tales, but certainly the most important. All quotations refer to this edition.

6. For a short survey of moralistic tendencies in nineteenth-century children’s literature see Raeper 305-09; cf. also my own *Das englische Märchen*, and Avery’s recent essay on “George MacDonald and the Victorian Fairy Tale.”

7. This view may be regarded as generally accepted among folklorists, although naturally accents are placed differently according to the theoretical premises chosen. For details see Bilz, Bühler, Jöckel, Bettelheim and Scherf.

8. In *Adela Cathcart* he even ascribes a therapeutical function to fairy tales. Cf. Raeper: ‘Having established the therapeutical quality of fairy tales, the progress of his characters from immaturity to maturity in the tales is distinct’ (313). [21]

[9. . . .] predominately negative. Wolff, for instance, calls the two protagonists “vicious little sadists” (125), and even Raeper concludes:

perhaps it is the cynicism of the children, their lack of compassion, and their readiness to break their word which makes this story such uncomfortable reading. The violence is too excessive and the different elements of the tale do not cohere. (316)

McGillis, however, has recently offered a more kindly discussion of the tale in which he welcomes, rather than condemns, its ambiguities (7-14).

10. A substantially expanded version appeared in 1871 under the title “The Carasoy.” Only this later version has been available to me. Since the maturation theme is merely reduplicated and blurred in the second part, I deal only with the first part of “The Carasoy,” which I assume to be near-identical with “The Faery Fleet.”

11. This shows that MacDonald does not subscribe consistently to Wordsworth’s idea of childhood as an ideal state of innocence and closeness to God, although this can also be found in his writings.

12. This is also true of the famous fairy tale “The Golden Key.” The processes of

spiritual development portrayed there are so complex, and encoded in such dense, almost hermetic symbolism, that most children will be able to relate them to their own experiences only in a vague and limited way.

13. The French “fée,” German “Fee” and English “fay” are derived from the Latin *fatum*, “fate.”

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