

# Language, Ideology, and Fairy Tales: George MacDonald's Fairy Tales as a Social Critique of Victorian Norms of Sexuality and Sex Roles

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## **L**anguage and Ideology

This article has a two-fold argument. On the one hand, it tackles the very complicated issues of language, ideology, and subjectivity in children's fiction in general and in some of George MacDonald's fairy tales and fairy-tale novels in particular. On the other hand, it keeps George MacDonald's fairy tales in sight as they represent a social critique of Victorian norms of sexuality and sex roles. MacDonald's alternative ideology gives women self-determination and acknowledges their emotional and intellectual capacities.

Many theorists assert that ideology is "inscribed in language" (Stephens 2; Knowles and Malmkjær 44). Texts often embody a social ideology, while the cultural contexts give authenticity to such texts. This is especially true because ideology, whether it exists in harmony with or in opposition to outside reality, cannot stand by itself. The influence of the cultural context on an author helps determine the ideological content of a text. Besides, reading itself is a dynamic process that involves the reader's role in responding to the ideological content of a text. In this sense, the author reflects a cultural context in a text to which readers are invited to respond. Thus, many literary theorists focus attention on the important role of reader-text interaction. The question that arises is: How do writers of fairy tales question the socialization process and aim at alternative models in the hope of change without using a political discourse? I maintain that the answer to this question is partly language-related.

In *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, John Stephens draws attention to the distinction between fantasy and realism. He "define[s] fantasy as a *metaphoric* mode and realism as a *metonymic* mode" (248; emphasis in the original). Unlike realism, fantasy allows for figuration of language and thus posits a multiplicity of meanings. This is mainly because fantasy privileges the paradigmatic axis of language that designates the superiority of metaphor over metonymy, while realism privileges the syntagmatic axis of language that designates the presence of metonymy. This implies that fantasy embodies a figurative playfulness of language and

thus invites figurative interpretations. The language of fantasy is not a closed totality that consists in the combination of a signifier and a signified. Unlike realistic texts, there is not full semantic correspondence between sign and referent in fantasy narratives. Words in fantasy narratives do not represent actual objects but speech in fictional guise: a fictional language is figurative in the sense that it enables readers to construct imaginary objects. Thus, writing in a fantastic mode, writers of fairy tales will be able to criticize social conditions and express the need to develop alternative models.

Therefore, the combination of ideology and language is fundamental because it mirrors the ideology the authors want to pass on to child readers whether consciously or unconsciously. However, this assertion does not mean that child readers are passive receivers of the writer's ideology; instead, they are active producers of meaning. According to Stephens:

If a child is to take part in society and act purposively within its structures, he or she will have to master the various signifying codes used by society to order itself. The principal code is language, since language is the most common form of social communication, and one particular use of language through which society seeks to exemplify and inculcate its current values and attitudes is the imagining and recording of stories. (8)

The subversive and aesthetic potential of fairy tales may be said to cause a kind of resistance on the part of children. Such resistance is the primary purpose writers of fairy tales want to establish in order to make children question the value system upheld by the dominant socializing process. Zipes writes:

Yet, it is exactly this *disturbance* which the liberating fairy tales seek on both a conscious and unconscious level. They interfere with the civilizing process in hope of creating change and a new awareness of social conditions. This provocation is why it is more important for critics to recognize the *upsetting* effect of emancipatory tales and to study their uncanny institutions for old and young readers. (*Fairy Tales* 191; emphasis in the original)

The fairy tale would thus appear to be otherwise than ideologically innocent. Fairy tales embody ideological messages. On the one hand, fairy tales may question the value system upheld by a society and criticize aspects of social norms. They may, for example, include an implicit satire on political parties,

a criticism of child rearing, or an interrogation of established norms of sexuality, gender, and sex roles. On the other hand, fairy tales may stabilize the values and norms upheld by the social order. Writers of fairy tales may instill in the minds of children ideological messages that socialize them to meet the normative expectations of mainstream culture.

From antiquity to the present, many fairy tales have dramatized, in imaginary representation, human's utopian ideal. This dramatization may disrupt the social and political structure. The king is represented as an idiot; the servant becomes a king; the poor become rich; the prince marries a servant. One reason for the durability of old fairy tales may be that they cross social and political borders and disrupt them. The disruption of social relationships in figurative representation gives fairy tales aesthetic capacity to reveal the familiar world in a new light. In other words, wonder in fairy tales, according to Zipes, is ideological; wonder gives the fairy tale its subversive potential to evoke surprise in readers who respond to their hidden message.

Stephens presents a theory that helps the student of children's literature locate the ideological content in children's books. He claims that "a narrative without an ideology is unthinkable: ideology is formulated *in* and *by* language, meanings within language are socially determined, and narratives are constructed out of language" (8; emphasis added). Stephens comments on the works of critics such as Peter Hollindale and Aidan Chambers. According to Stephens, Hollindale has brought about an important discussion of the ways ideology functions in children's literature; the latter stresses the importance of filling gaps in the act of reading. Hollindale differentiates between three levels of ideology in children's books. The first level is the explicit "intended surface ideology" of the writer's assumptions that he or she consciously wishes to pass to readers (28). The second level is "*passive* ideology" which necessitates the presence of "the individual writer's unexamined assumptions . . . which are taken for granted" (29-30; emphasis in the original). The third level of ideology is *inscribed* in language's constituent part. Ideology on this level "transcends the idea of individual authorship, and reappraises the relationship between the author and reader" (32). This suggests that the mutual involvement of author-reader-text overlaps at this level of ideology.

Chambers, in turn, stresses the importance of the process of filling gaps in the narrative on the part of the reader, and "stage-management" on the part of the author. Gaps are the unwritten implications that language embodies; that is, words and sentences present something beyond what they

actually say, primarily based on the values and assumptions that readers relate to what theorists call the “unwritten parts” of the text. The meaning deduced from gaps will be guided in the sense that authors impose certain limits on gaps in order to prevent them from becoming impossible to understand. By piecing meaning together, readers establish an interconnectedness of the written and unwritten parts into a complete meaning. Chambers asserts that as a tale unfolds, the reader discovers its meaning. Authors can strive . . . to make their meaning plain . . . . Other authors leave gaps, which the reader must fill before the meaning can be complete. A skillful author wishing to do this is somewhat like a play-leader: he structures his narrative so as to direct it in a dramatic pattern that leads the reader towards possible meaning(s); he stage-manages the reader’s involvement by bringing into play various techniques which he knows influence the reader’s responses and expectations . . . . (102)

Stephens argues that Chambers’s notion of filling gaps is similar to what Stephens calls a “process of subjection,” which involves “the reader’s internalization of the text’s implicit ideologies” (10). Stephens’s overall proposal is that

the discourse of narratives must be read simultaneously as a linguistic and a narratological process. This includes reference to important discursal components such as (among others) mode, point of view, narrating voice and order of events. It also includes a compulsion to read narrative discourse both for its story and its significance; ideology operates at both levels. (43)

Therefore, ideology functions both at the level of language’s constituent parts and at the level of meaning or significance; that is, the morals, values, and assumptions embodied in the text. Narrators often play a predominant role in synthesizing a multiplicity of meanings depending on their position in the story. The third person narrator directs the reader’s construction of meaning by facilitating the process of subjection. In contrast, the first person narrator is unreliable and biased. Stephens maintains that “there are many strategies by which readers may be ‘estranged’ from the possibility of simple identification, and so prevented from adopting a single subject position, and these function with different degrees of severity” (70). Point of view, “the construction of an attitude towards the story events and existents,” is another discursal component that constitutes a narrative. In this way, the narrator often influences readers by directing their attitudes

by purposeful “effacement” or “focalization” of narrative. The narrator shifts the point of view to contribute to the textual subjection of the reader; that is, readers will identify with the focalized character’s intentions and motives. Children engage in a dialectical relationship with the text’s implicit ideologies as the focalizer creates a subject position for readers to identify themselves with. Another strategy by which readers may be estranged from the possibility of simple identification is through “focalizers who are not ‘nice people’, and hence do not invite reader identification” (70). This suggests that both acceptance and rejection of the text’s ideologies are part of the socialization process.

“Intertextual allusiveness” and “overtly inscribed indeterminacies” are two other strategies that offer a variety of possible subject positions (70). Stephens defines intertextuality as follows: “The production of meaning from the interrelationships between audience, text, other texts, and the socio-cultural determinations of significance, is a process which may be conveniently summed up in the term *intertextuality*” (84; emphasis in the original). Intertextuality refers, partly, to narratives that evoke the reader’s experiences in the sense that meaning reveals itself by the interaction of the reader’s subjectivity and the text. As Stephens suggests, “the relationship between a subject’s activities as a reader and a work of fiction which is the object of reading both replicates other forms of subject/sociality interactions and constructs a specular, or mirroring, form of those interactions” (47). Since readers’ attitudes differ because of their changing circumstances, there are several semantic possibilities. Thus, intertextual references often prevent the reader from adopting a single subject position. As will be detailed later, MacDonald includes many intertextual references in his fairy tales as *iconoclastic* gestures aiming at criticizing the socialization process upheld by Victorian society.

### **MacDonald’s Narrative Techniques: Style and Ideology**

MacDonald’s fairy tales and fairy-tale novels have a first person narrator, who is omniscient and thus knows the psychological and emotional dimensions of the characters. The narrator’s knowledge facilitates the textual subjection of child readers to the prevailing ideology in the text, partly because the narrator explains that ideology to readers through focalization of narrative. MacDonald’s narrative strategies attempt to persuade children to recognize certain features in his work as being similar to those they know and/or have experienced.

In my view, in spite of the fact that MacDonald's narrators are omniscient, the narrator activates readers' minds through two important narrative techniques—intrusion and effacement. When there is an important dialogue between characters, the narrator effaces his influence and the narrative is focalized through the main characters in the story. In this case, readers are left to grasp the hidden ideology of the story on their own. "The Light Princess," for example, is replete with authorial narrative intrusions. For instance, the narrator creates an affirmative picture of the queen and a negative picture of the king and the princess. The king is portrayed as passive and stupid throughout; he is not capable of understanding the manipulations of language. To stress the ignorance of the king the narrator intrudes: "Perhaps she [the princess] shared her father's aversion to punning." This is when the prince asks the princess, "How do you like falling in?" (34). While the prince means falling in love, the princess is unable to understand the merits of the verb "falling in" and thinks that she cannot fall in because of the loss of her gravity. When later the prince intends to sacrifice himself for the sake of the princess, everyone in the kingdom is anxiously waiting for the survival of the princess. But "the king had already gone home to dinner" (47). Such intrusions on the part of the narrator will probably help child readers identify with the main thesis of the text; that is, the cause of the princess's real loss of gravity is the instability of family solidarity.

The narrator in *At the Back of the North Wind* challenges the Victorian notion of nobility. Diamond does not hesitate to rescue Nanny from the vengeance of some "imps" who try to steal her broom. Diamond asks his father: "I couldn't let them behave so to a poor girl—could I, father?" Diamond's father responds: "Certainly not, Diamond." The narrator intrudes to contradict one of the established norms of Victorian middle-class; the intrusion is class-related, as the narrator continues, "for Diamond's father was a gentleman" (143). The nonconformity of this intrusion assures the nobility of Diamond and his father despite their poverty: gentleness should be judged based on nobility of character not on wealth. Thus, the narrator undermines the social hierarchy of Victorian standards of nobility.

MacDonald uses other narrative techniques to arouse the curiosity of his readers and guide subject positioning. These techniques include intertextuality, juxtaposition, and the descriptive mode. The opening paragraph of *North Wind* invites readers' trust:

I have been asked to tell you about the back of the North Wind.  
An old Greek writer mentions a people who lived there, and

were so uncomfortable that they could not bear it any longer, and drowned themselves. My story is not the same as his. I do not think Herodotus had got the right account of the place. I am going to tell you how it fared with a boy who went there. (1)

“I am going to tell you” is an evocative sentence. The direct address of the narrator to the reader establishes a bridge of confidence. This is especially true because the narrator uses the first person pronoun; the reference to “you” gives the impression that the narrator addresses readers personally. Thus, the distance between the narrator and the child reader is very close. By alluding to classical history, the narrator imposes his authority from the beginning. The narrator communicates objective confessing that he does not know much about certain parts of Diamond’s story. He comments: “I have now come to the most difficult part of my story. And why? Because I do not know enough about it” (93). Therefore, to give his story credibility, the narrator gives a “true account of every one” who has been in the country at the back of the north wind. He addresses child readers: “I will tell you something of what two very different people have reported, both of whom knew more about it [the country at the back of the north wind,] I believe, than Herodotus” (93).

The narrator of *North Wind* communicates an absence of gender-bias in “Nanny’s Dream” by maintaining that it would not be fair to tell about Diamond’s dream and ignore that of Nanny’s: “And I am the more desirous of doing this for her that I have already done the best I could for Diamond’s dream, and it would be a shame to give the boy all the advantage” (247). This appeal arouses a sense of honesty and trust on the part of the reader making the narrator appear reliable and not biased.

One of the more unusual techniques that the narrator uses in *North Wind* is to reveal his identity. The narrator ceases to be an anonymous voice and instead becomes a character who participates in the events of the story. He argues that “it was very soon after this that I came to know Diamond. I was then a tutor in a family” (294). Diamond is portrayed as innocent throughout and his innocence empowers the narrator. The latter writes about Diamond:

The whole ways and look of the child, so full of quiet wisdom, yet so ready to accept the judgment of others in his own dispraise, took hold of my heart, and I felt myself wonderfully drawn towards him. It seemed to me, somehow, as if little Diamond possessed the secret of life, and was himself what he was so ready to think the lowest living thing—an angel of God

with something special to say or do. (297; emphasis added)

The narrator adopts an understanding attitude towards children's innocence and becomes an active producer of meaning—an activity that manifests itself at the level of identification and characterization.

In *North Wind* MacDonald also makes an intertextual reference by referring to a real place, Sandwich, one of the main boroughs of southeast England, near Dover. The narrator explains that one of the main causes of the deterioration of the business market and the prosperity of land was excessive greed. The narrator explains:

It [Sandwich] used to be one of the five chief seaports in England, but it began to hold itself too high, and the consequence was the sea grew less and less intimate with it, gradually drew back, and kept more to itself, till at length it left it high and dry: Sandwich was a seaport no more; the sea went on with its own tide-business a long way off, and forgot it. Of course it went to sleep, and had no more to do with ships. That's what comes to cities and nations, and boys and girls, who say, '*I can do without your help. I'm enough for myself.*' (77; emphasis added)

Linked to the social environment that Victorian readers were familiar with, the intertextual reference to Sandwich underlines the ideology of greed and self-interest, coming when the narrator shows the consequences of what may happen when people do not care about the common good. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, for example, Curdie suspects the harm of the goblins and tries to figure out their plans. Curdie knows one plan and in order to know the other one he spends many hours in the mine watching the goblins. The narrator explains that

in order to manage this, or rather the return from it, better than the first time, he had bought a huge ball of fine string, having learned the trick from Hop-o'-my-Thumb, whose history his mother had often told him. Not that Hop-o'-my-Thumb had ever used a ball of string—I should be sorry to be supposed so far out in my classics—but the principle was the same as that of the pebbles. (99)

In Perrault's classic "Hop" the boy is pictured as active, brave, and honest; Hop manages to get rid of the evil monster (an Ogre) and finally Hop restores order to his family and saves his brothers. Intertextual reference to this story evokes the reader's active participation in producing meaning. Similarly,



the narrator makes an intertextual reference to “Tom Thumb” in *North Wind*. North Wind has the capability to transform herself into many forms. Diamond becomes acquainted with the variety of shapes that North Wind transforms herself into. When Diamond sits alone, argues the narrator, “[A small creature] passed him again and again, flying in circles around him, and he concluded that it must be North Wind herself, no bigger than Tom Thumb when his mother put him in the nutshell lined with flannel” (101). The ideology behind this intertextual reference is that North Wind, who is allegorized as a feminine omnipotent force, is strong and remains so despite her size. Like Little Tom Thumb, North Wind is powerful, courageous and sacrifices herself for the sake of the common good. Therefore, shape and size are not MacDonald’s standards by which to judge the social hierarchy of people.

*The Princess and Curdie*, too, contains many continuous juxtapositions that create subject positions similar to or different from those of the narrator. During his quest to put things right in the capital city of Gwyntystorm, Curdie is surprised at the selfishness and inhospitality of the people. As a result, he passes through a process of remembrance of his countryside and family. The narrator comments that in the king’s kitchen

the rats were running about the floor. Curdie’s heart ached to think of the lovely child princess living over such a sty. The mine was a paradise to a palace with such servants in it . . . . Everywhere was *filth* and *disorder* . . . . It was like a hideous dream. He felt as if he should never get out of it, and longed for one glimpse of his mother’s poor little kitchen, so *clean* and *bright* and *airy*. (144-45; emphasis added)

The mine is juxtaposed with the palace, and the king’s kitchen is juxtaposed with Joan’s kitchen. The unstable political situation in the king’s palace creates undesirable images in Curdie’s mind and, thus, he concludes that the subjects of the king are dishonest and their dishonesty makes them wicked. The narrator highlights the ideological message of his intrusions when he maintains that the king is unable to cleanse from his palace the cause of disorder because he is no longer the same mighty king, for “a voice altogether unlike what he remembered of the *mighty, noble* king on his white horse came from the bed, *thin, feeble, hollow*, and *husky*. . .” (148-49; emphasis added). The adjectives *mighty* and *noble* create an image that highlights the stable physical and psychological situation of the king, which leads to the political stability of the kingdom. The adjectives *thin, feeble, hollow*, and

*husky* indicate that the kingdom is no longer stable partly because the king is physically and psychologically unstable: the king cannot get rid of the wicked people.

In addition, MacDonald uses detailed descriptions so as to encourage imagination, arouse curiosity, and broaden insight. Most importantly, the descriptive mode creates a subject position for readers to identify themselves with. The use of adjectives creates positive and negative impressions in order to make readers accept or reject a situation or a character. In *The Princess and the Goblin* the narrator claims that not all kings are indifferent and unwise. These claims are not stated but they are implied through the images and similes that the narrator uses. He comments:

I wish I could describe the king so that you could *see him in your mind*. He had gentle blue eyes, but a nose that made him look like an eagle. A long dark beard, streaked with silvery lines, flowed from his mouth almost to his waist, and as Irene sat on the saddle and hid her glad face upon his bosom, it mingled with the golden hair which her mother had given her, and the two together were like a cloud with streaks of the sun woven through it. (82; emphasis added)

MacDonald's use of the descriptive mode in his fairy tales and fairy-tale novels is no accident. I base my claim on the grounds that MacDonald is a visionary writer and that he sees in his fairy tales a fertile soil for the inclusion of his mystic beliefs of the divine perfection of the human heart. MacDonald's philosophy of imagination and perfection is indebted to Romanticism. Therefore, he favors the use of the descriptive mode to the argumentative one because the former allows readers to imagine. But MacDonald is far from alone in this. Many writers of children's literature, like Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, were aware of the fact that readers, young and old, have the potential to imagine and pursue the visionary perspective of the writer's descriptive mode. These writers contradict the restrictions on the imagination of children and stress the descriptive mode because it gives them the opportunity to be persuasive. Thus, the descriptive mode is not exclusive to fairy-tale writers but the mode is part of a growing interest among writers of children's literature. In summary, MacDonald's use of narrative techniques—such as, among others, effacement, focalization, intrusion, intertextuality, juxtaposition and the descriptive mode—is ideological. Besides, MacDonald's fairy tales and fairy-tale novels question Victorian middle-class norms of gender and sexuality. The subversive capacity of his

work is a part of a growing tendency to question the socialization process of the time.

### **A Critique of Victorian Norms of Gender, Sexuality, and Sex Roles**

*“Were I not a man I would be a woman  
such as thou”* (The Princess and Curdie 239)

In “The Light Princess” the king imposes patriarchal notions of female inferiority on the queen and the princess. The notion of a privileged sex was prevalent in Victorian society. MacDonald contradicts these assumptions by portraying the king as ignorant, greedy, unwise, and ill-tempered. In deliberate contrast, the queen is portrayed as wise and witty. Males and females, in MacDonald’s alternative ideology, are comparable in potential and should complement each other in harmonious interaction. Women, for MacDonald, are sexually aware, and they have the potential of expressing their emotional and intellectual power. Women can rely on men and be submissive to them but not at the expense of their intellectual, emotional, and sexual drives. Indeed, this was a radical doctrine in 1860s Victorian London. In *Free and Ennobled: Source Readings in the Development of Victorian Feminism*, Bauer and Ritt argue that the ideal Victorian woman was

reserved as a semi-sacred mother figure, but considered incapable of sexual enjoyment; regarded as superior to man morally and spiritually, but held to be inferior to him in intellect and personality; credited with enormous influence at precisely the moment in modern history when she was probably most powerless; ostensibly idolized as the bearer of “the stainless sceptre of womanhood.” (1)

MacDonald’s ideas on sexuality and gender contradicted those of middle-class socialization processes. Some Victorian thinkers and social critics argued in favor of the emancipation of women and refuted the Victorian middle-class concept of the subordination of one sex to the other. John Stuart Mill wrote several books that showed his nonconformity to Victorian norms of patriarchy. In *On Liberty: The Subjection of Women* (1869) he proposes that “women in general should be brought up equally capable of understanding business, public affairs, and the higher matters of speculation, with men in the same class of society” (360). In other words, MacDonald was part of the cultural debate over the liberation of women. His fairy tales and fairy-tale novels highlight his idealism of the relationship between the sexes.

One can see MacDonald's ideal of the relationship of the sexes in the adventures of the prince and the princess in "The Light Princess" and Photogen and Nycteris in "The Day Boy and the Night Girl." When the king, in "The Light Princess," prepares to christen his daughter, he sends invitations to everybody in his kingdom except the princess Makemnoit. As a result, Makemnoit feels insulted and intends to take revenge: she bewitches the king's daughter and makes her lose her gravity. The king is astonished to see his daughter bouncing up and down claiming: "She *can't* be ours, queen!" (18; emphasis in the original). To establish a counterview to that of the privileged sex, the narrator intrudes to mock the king and to establish an image that assures the queen's intellectual superiority to the king. He comments: "Now the queen is *much cleverer* than the king, and had begun already to suspect that 'this effect defective came by cause'" (18; emphasis added). The use of the comparative and superlative aspect of language assures that the queen has intellectual capacity. The queen is witty, and playfulness is part of her language; therefore, women's intellectual potential is the superiority acknowledged while men is diminished.

The queen proves to have a high sense of intuition when she discovers that the cause of the princess's loss of gravity is Makemnoit. She maintains that "I am sure she is ours . . . but we ought to have taken better care of her at the christening. People who were never invited ought not to have been present" (18). The king proves himself to be ignorant and lacks this sense of intuition. The narrator comments: "For he was a little king with a great throne, like many other kings" (18). The ideology of this intrusion is revealed at the level of language. The use of the adjective *little* indicates inferiority in one's intellectual and/or physical potential; in the king's case the adjective *little* is used to indicate his inferior intellectual *and* physical power. The phrase "like many other kings" is a historicization and rationalization of the inferiority of many male kings. Therefore, the nonconformity of the narrator's intrusion is that it acknowledges feminine intellectual potential and undermines masculine witticism. In another episode the king and the queen quarrel about the implications of "light-footed," "light-fingered," "light-haired" and "light-heired." The narrator undermines the king's sense of intuition. Interestingly, MacDonald punctuates "The Light Princess" by the frequent italicization of words and phrases. His use of italics is part of his style to highlight the dominant ideology. For example, the use of italics in the following passage creates a belief that undermines, as I said earlier, the intellectual capacity of the king and ensures the intellectual power of the

queen. This is especially true because the italicization of the words *haired* and *heired* stresses MacDonald's point—the king is unable to understand punning. He comments:

But it was not this reflection on his hair that arrested him; it was the double use of the word *light*. For the king hated all witticisms, and punning especially. And besides, he could tell not whether the queen meant *light-haired* or *light-heired*; for why might she not aspirate her vowels when she was exasperated herself? (21; emphasis in the original)

In several episodes in “The Day Boy and The Night Girl” MacDonald questions the arrogance of the male characters and sides with the female characters. He depicts the latter as persuasive, humble, and brave and the former as unconvincing, arrogant, and cowardly. When Nycteris wanders in the garden near the castle, she catches sight of a strange being lying beside the river; as she approaches she becomes convinced that the figure is “another girl like herself.” The following dialogue portrays the arrogance of the male characters who are represented by Photogen's assumptions about feminine cowardice and masculine courage:

“Come, come, dear!” said Nycteris, “you must not go on this way. You must be a brave girl, and—”

“A girl!” shouted Photogen, and started to his feet in wrath. “If you were a man, I should kill you.”

“A man?” repeated Nycteris: “what is that? How could I be that? We are both girls—are we not?”

“No, I am not a girl,” he answered; “—although,” he added, changing his tone, and casting himself on the ground at her feet, “I have given you too good reason to call me one.” (322)

MacDonald reverses the standards of normality with respect to the weakness of the female characters in the sense that he acknowledges feminine bravery and negates the masculine. Indeed, the radicalism of this acknowledgement had socio-political implications in 1870s England because it challenged the ideology of the privileged sex.

The closure of MacDonald's fairy tales is significant, coming when the plot is thematically complete; the closed plot shows MacDonald's utopian ideal of the relationship between the two sexes. The narrative renders male and female characters as complementary in the sense that both work in a harmonious interaction as a step forward toward unity. The characters become aware that one cannot function without the presence of the other.

Therefore, survival demands unity. Photogen finally realizes that he is not perfect and his individual perfection is incomplete till he gets rid of his arrogance. Therefore, Photogen argues that “she has got to teach me to be a brave man in the dark, and I have got to look after her until she can bear the heat of the sun, and he helps her to see, instead of blinding her” (340). Similarly, in “Little Daylight” and “The Light Princess” the princes become aware that they cannot function without the princess they love. They are united after a long separation which teaches them how to be brave, honest and compassionate. U. C. Knoepfelmacher writes that

though separated, children who develop into adults over the course of such stories as . . . “Photogen and Nycteris,” continue to be steadily juxtaposed, treated as incomplete halves of a single, *bi-gendered psyche that requires their eventual integration*. (xii; emphasis added)

In *The Princess and the Goblin* Curdie does his best to unravel the goblins’ plot. They plan to dig under the king’s castle and kidnap the princess Irene. If this plan fails, the goblins will try another; they will change the course of the river to flood it over the miners. In the chapters entitled “Irene’s Clue” and “Escape,” Irene proves to be a courageous child who takes risks to save Curdie. Curdie tries to convince Irene he knows best but she “*insists on taking the lead*” (165; emphasis added). In the last chapters of *The Princess and Curdie*, Curdie takes the lead. At the end, Irene and Curdie get married, convinced that the survival of the kingdom, as well as themselves, demands their unity.

In *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art*, Reynolds and Humble argue that “the denial of female sexuality was long seen as the dominant feature of Victorian culture and society” (11). MacDonald questions Victorian notions around the sexual innocence of girls and boys. Children are portrayed as passionate and possessing the capacity to physically express their feelings and emotions toward members of the opposite sex. “The Light Princess” includes many passages that have sexual implications that show how MacDonald’s ideology contradicts the doctrines of the socialization process of the Victorian middle-class. The prince sets out to find a princess to marry: he loses his way in the forest near the lake where the princess usually swims. As he approaches the lake the prince wonders about the strange sounds he hears in the direction of the water. The narrator comments:

Looking over the lake, he saw something white in the water;

and, in an instant, he had torn off his tunic, kicked off his sandals, and plunged in. He soon reached the white object, and found that it was a woman. There was no light enough to show that she was a princess, but quite enough to show that she was a lady, *for it does not want much light to see that.* (32; emphasis added)

The italicized phrase may be viewed as an intertextual reference to a social habit of most Victorian women; that is, “the princess lacks the elaborate swimming apparel with which Victorian ladies concealed their bodies” (Knoepfmacher 344). MacDonald encourages girls and women to preserve their feminine traits and not to be ashamed of their passionate feelings toward the other sex. For example, the princess is very astonished to see a man swimming with her and expresses her anger by screaming. The narrator intrudes and argues that

the condition of her dress [the princess’s,] increasing her usual difficulty in walking, compelled her to cling to him; and he hardly persuade himself that he was not in a delightful dream, not withstanding the torrent of musical abuse with which she *overwhelmed* him. The prince being *therefore* in *no hurry* . . . . (34; emphasis added)

The passage cited above creates a duality of cause and effect. The cause is the princess’s beauty that resulted from the attractive situation of her clothes. The effect is two-fold. First, the verb *overwhelmed* designates an activation of the prince’s emotional potential because of the princess’s beauty; second, the phrase *no hurry* implies that the prince is willing to slow down his movement to delight himself in the princess’s beauty. The prince’s reluctance reveals itself through the use of the adverb *therefore*. The prince is passionate but the princess is angry. However, this anger is not to last for long for the princess expresses her willingness and delight in swimming with the prince. Thus, there is a mutual acceptance from both: “The prince took off his scarf, then his sword-belt, then his tunic . . . . The princess was in ecstasies of delight and their swim was delicious” (38).

In *The Princess and the Goblin*, Curdie protects Irene from the goblins and in return she promises to give him a kiss. The nurse prevents Irene from fulfilling her promise to Curdie lest the kiss gets the nurse into trouble. In the chapter “The King and the Kiss,” Irene finally keeps her promise. The narrator intrudes to rationalize this act of intimacy, commenting: “And as he spoke he held her towards him” (228). The use of

the conjunction *and* implies a quickness of action. Irene and Curdie do not feel embarrassed or reluctant: “The princess reached down, threw her arms around Curdie’s neck, and *kissed him on the mouth*, saying—“There, Curdie! There’s the kiss I promised you!” (228; emphasis added). MacDonald is one of the English fairy tale writers to give women self-determination. Zipes suggests that MacDonald’s fairy tales posit “the triumph of the self [which] is a union of the masculine and feminine, an erotic display of the utopian drive” (Introduction 176).

In conclusion, MacDonald’s ideal relationship of the sexes is akin to one of the founding pillars of Chinese philosophy. That is, the Yin-Yang duality: “At the basis of MacDonald’s utopia is the perfect social and sexual relationship” (Zipes, *Fairy Tales*, 107). Thus, MacDonald contradicts the logocentricism of Victorian middle-class by denying the notion of the inferior sex. Men are not genetically superior to women; women are brave, witty, and sexually aware. And here lies MacDonald’s nonconformity by giving women rational as well as emotional identity—central to this identity is self-determination. Ideology in MacDonald is powerful social criticism.

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