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When Bad Girls Go Good: Stereotype Reversals in George MacDonald's *Alec Forbes of Howglen*

Ginger Stelle

Considered by some critics to be MacDonald's finest realistic novel (Reis 52), *Alec Forbes of Howglen* presents itself ostensibly as a coming-of-age story, tracing the title character from childhood through his education and an unhappy love affair, to his eventual conversion and marriage. The plot is conventional enough, but, as is typical of MacDonald, the plot is not the point; it is a device through which to study humanity and our relationship to God and each other. As the relationship between men and women is a fundamental relationship in real lives, so it is in MacDonald's novel. One "major thematic strand of the novel is the treatment of women in Scotland's"—and by extension, England's—"markedly masculine society and the horror of what it can turn them into" (Robb 25).

The characteristics of the Victorian "ideal woman" are well known, having been exhaustively analyzed and catalogued. As the period progressed, novelists grew more and more bold in their attacks against the ideals; however, at the time MacDonald produced *Alec Forbes*, "novelists, male and female, could seldom find a real alternative" to the prescribed role of women in society, and "the pressures for conformity to the stereotypes were so great that exposure of the destructive consequences of stereotypic roles was achievement enough" (Barickman, et. al, 12). Hence, MacDonald attacks the standard view of women with its own stereotypes. He executes this attack through the two primary female characters, Annie and Kate. Annie possesses all the inner qualities a Victorian would expect to find in a young woman, yet she behaves in defiance of the code of behavior. Kate, on the other hand, embodies all the outward signs of a proper Victorian young lady, but possesses none of the inner qualities. Taken together, these contrasting portraits result in a scathing indictment of Victorian gender stereotypes.

Despite the title, *Alec Forbes* is really more about the character of Annie Anderson than it is about Alec. The novel begins and ends with Annie. Alec does not even appear until chapter nine, and important events in his history, such as his shipwreck and subsequent conversion, occur offstage and are told to readers only when Alec tells them to Annie (438-39). Compared to Annie, Alec is flat and uninteresting, changing very little throughout the novel.

Even MacDonald acknowledges that Annie has “much more character and personality than” Alec (140). Robert Lee Wolff goes so far as to say that Annie is “worth two” of Alec (318).

The novel traces Annie’s development from childhood through adolescence to womanhood. Despite her youth throughout much of the book, Annie nonetheless confronts the specter of the “Angel in the House.” Girls “were the mothers of tomorrow and were constantly being groomed for their role as future Angels in the House” (Honig 67). In many ways, Richard Reis’s comment that Annie is “pallidly angelic” (64) is accurate because she embodies many of the “angelic” traits expected in a woman. She is physically delicate, with a “feebleness of constitution” (12). She fears rodents, a stereotypical feminine attribute (25). She is long-suffering, enduring a great deal of mistreatment without complaint (39). She frequently needs rescue from Alec, whether from the blows of Mr. Malison (49) or from a flood (285-90). She tells the truth, even when it could result in punishment (59). She is self-sacrificing. She puts the comfort of others ahead of her own safety (279-80). She is always willing to help others, even at great personal expense (426-7). Finally, one of her greatest concerns is the spiritual well-being of the men (or, in her case, boys) she cares about (129). Indeed, with all of these characteristics, a surface reading of Annie suggests a pallid angel, “enduringly, incorruptibly good” (Ruskin 86).

However, a different story hides just beneath this surface. Yes, Annie is a good girl, but some of the very traits that Victorian society valued highly lead to a large portion of her misery. For example, Victorians expected women to lack self-assertion. This characterizes Annie perfectly at the beginning of her residence with the Bruces:

[The other children] despised Annie because she was a girl, and because she had no self-assertion. If she had shown herself aggressively disagreeable, they would have made some attempt to conciliate her; but as it was she became at once the object of a succession of spiteful annoyances, varying in intensity with the fluctuating invention of the two boys. (23-24)

If she had been a bit more assertive and defended herself, she might have been spared some discomfort. Instead, her lack of self-assertion results in emotional turmoil and physical distress (24). Her reward for proper behavior is abuse.

That Annie’s possession of many traits Victorians considered virtues lead

to suffering is evidence of a flaw in the social system. However, MacDonald does not stop there. Alongside the virtues, MacDonald places a number of what would have been considered questionable behaviors. One important example of this is found in Annie's relationship with Robert Bruce. The patriarchal nature of society dictated that children be submissive and respectful to authority, in whatever form it was manifest. Most often this was embodied in the person of the father, but not always. Despite the financial basis of Annie's stay (15), her mere residence in his home places her under his authority.

Notwithstanding, Annie's relationship with Bruce is marked by anything but submission and respect. Shortly after coming to live with them, he falsely accuses her of stealing candies from the store. MacDonald describes her reaction: "Overcome with shame and righteous anger, Annie burst out in the midst of fresh tears: 'I wish Auntie had come an tak me awa'! It's an ill hoose to be in.'" A few moments later, she "dropped [Bruce's peace offering—a lump of sugar] on the floor with disgust" and walked away (37). This outburst verbalizes a direct challenge to Bruce's patriarchal rights as the man of the house. By wishing to be out from under his authority, she criticizes his right to be in authority. Likewise, a few chapters later, MacDonald comments: "It was wonderful how Bruce's influence over Annie, an influence of distress, was growing gradually weaker. He could make her uncomfortable enough; but as to his opinion of her, she had almost reached the point of not caring a straw for that" (59). This is hardly a respectful attitude.

Within a few years, Annie progresses to blatant disobedience. On the night of a torrential rain, Annie wants to go stay with her friend Tibbie Dyster, a blind woman to whom Annie has become a friend, companion, and helper. Bruce forbids it, saying "Lat the blin' sleep wi' the blin,' an' come ye hame wi' me." Annie acquiesces, but only for the moment. Once she is certain her exit will not be detected, "she [steals] out of the house as quietly as a kitten" (279-80). For the Victorians, "wickedness and innocence [in children] were absolutes. Disobedience was absolutely bad, regardless of circumstances" (Calder 86). However, Annie's disobedience is motivated by the best of motives, a self-sacrificing concern for the needs of her friend, a quality Victorians cherished. She is a walking contradiction.

Annie clearly has personality, and a will, of her own. Her problematic relationship with Bruce exists as a result of this personality and individual will. MacDonald is challenging a mindset that believed "the most foolish of

men [was] . . . by virtue of his sex, superior to the most intelligent of women” (Thomson 87). Patriarchy was absolute. Whatever the nature of his character, the mere fact of being the male head of the household gives Bruce the right to command the respect of all who live there. He claims, “I was only wissin ‘at she wad keep a sma’ part o’ her *ministrations* for her ain hame and her ain fowk ‘at has the ministerin’ to her. There’s the mistress and me jist mairtyrs to that chop! And there’s the bit infant in want o’ some ministration noo and than, gin [if] that be what ye ca’ it” (197). He is implying, as was believed, that a girl “owed a duty to her family . . . [and] deserved no respect if she put her own wishes before theirs” (Williams 24).

MacDonald indicates that this is not necessarily the case. In fact, he refutes Bruce’s claim in no uncertain terms:

[I]f anyone should take exception to this, on the ground that she sought her own service and neglected home duties, I would . . . take the opportunity of asking whether to sleep in a certain house and be at liberty to take one’s meals there, be sufficient to make it a home, and the source of home-obligations—to indicate the will of God as to the region of one’s labour, other regions lying open at the same time. Ought Annie to have given her aid as a child where there was no parental recognition of the relationship—an aid whose value in the eyes of the Bruces would have consisted in the leisure it gave to Mrs. Bruce for ministering more devotedly in the temple of Mammon? (206)

Where submission and respect are deserved, Annie willingly complies (103). Bruce does not deserve it. Not only is he a petty, greedy little man who cares for nothing except his own pocketbook, his only interest in Annie is in keeping control of her money. MacDonald argues that simply being the man of the house should not automatically entitle someone to be obeyed as a despot. Nonetheless, as any “criticism of paternalism challenged not only the structure of the family but the structure of society also,” this “was a profoundly radical criticism” for its time (Calder 14). Though Annie’s nature is to be submissive and respectful, her behavior towards Bruce would have been considered deviant and dangerous. Nonetheless, Annie grows into a truly virtuous woman.

Again, it is not through what would have been considered normal channels that Annie achieves that end. MacDonald believed that women had the right to a far better education than they were generally given. Despite continued agitations for reforms in women’s education, in the middle of the

nineteenth century, this was still an unpopular idea. In fact, there were still those who believed that study would physically impair a woman's ability to be a mother (Blake 116). The result was an educational system in which "the acquisition of knowledge must aim only to dispel the most glaring errors that crowd the woman's weak brain. . . and make her a more enlightened companion for the male" (Basch 5). The idea of a woman wanting to learn for the sake of learning was still very rare. Even in fiction, whenever a heroine would desire an education, her desire would usually disappear when she fell in love (Thomson 61).

Annie possesses such a love of learning, particularly of reading. MacDonald describes the delight with which she accepts Mr. Cowie's offer of his library (131). She reads from a pure desire to read and learn. Nor are the books she receives from Mr. Cowie fluff. During her adventures in his library, she discovers Milton. MacDonald seems to have had a tremendous amount of respect for Milton's writings. References to the author appear throughout his entire body of work, and that love of Milton is reflected in Annie:

Mrs. Forbes found her standing spell-bound, reading the rhymed poems of the man whose blank-verse, two years before, she had declined as not what poetry ought to be. I have often seen a child refuse his food, and, after being compelled to eat one mouthful, gladly devour the whole. In like manner, Annie, having once tasted Milton's poetry, did not let it go till she had devoured even the *Paradise Lost*, of which when she could not make sense, she at least made music. (177-78)

This is a description of what could almost be called a passionate love affair. It is not something in which she engages out of duty or expectations, but because she wants to do it. She wants to spend time absorbing the words on the page. In addition, it is not something that, once she falls in love with a man, goes away. On the contrary, she is still reading Milton when Alec finds her to propose, a few years after her initial encounter with the poet (437).

Nor is literature Annie's only foray into "unfeminine" intellectual realms. As Judith Rowbotham discusses, women were discouraged from the study of such fields because to do otherwise "encouraged women in intellectual realms that bordered dangerously on the realms of theological speculation" (120). For all the restrictions placed on women, few areas were as strictly forbidden as theology. Women were believed and expected to be more

religious than men, but they were supposed to accept without question the theological conclusions of men. Indulging in theological inquiry represented a threat to social stability as a whole. Women could doubt, but they could not seek their own answers without risking “serious damage to their minds and souls” (Rowbotham 120).

Here, again, MacDonald attacks the established view of women. Annie has a genuine desire to understand the true nature of God and his relationship to mankind. She is a deeply spiritual and devout young woman, but she is not content to simply sit in church every Sunday and absorb the teachings of the pastor, despite her high regard for Mr. Cowie. It is not that she necessarily wants to seek her own answers; she is given little choice. Going to Mr. Cowie for guidance while struggling through some serious doubts regarding her spiritual condition, she comes away disappointed. Though he tries to comfort her, he is unable to adequately answer her questions. As a result, “she began to doubt whether he knew much about the matter. He had put her off without answering her questions, either because he thought she had no business with such things, or because he had no answer to give” (123). The latter seems to be the case. MacDonald describes the difference between the pastor and the “little theologian” (121):

The fact was that Annie was further on than Mr. Cowie. She was a child looking about to find the face of her Father in heaven: he was but one of God’s babies, who had been lying on his knees, receiving contentedly and happily the good things he gave him, but never looking up to find the eyes of him from whom the good gifts came. (122)

Annie is better able to answer her own questions than the representative of the established Church.

As for theological speculation, in at least two separate occasions, MacDonald captures Annie’s spiritual musings. In the first, she says, “The face o’ God’s like the sun . . . for no man cud see him and live But the mune . . . maun be like the face o’ Christ, for it gies licht and ye can luik at it notwithstandin’. The mune’s just like the sun wi’ the ower-muckle taen oot o’ ‘t’” (251). In another instance, upon being admonished for levity by Thomas Crann, a man to whom Annie has looked for spiritual guidance in the past, with the explanation “we dinna hear ‘at the Saviour himsel’ ever sae muckle as smiled,” Annie responds:

Weel, that wad hae been little wonner, wi’ what he had upo’
‘m. But I’m nae sure that he didna, for a’ that. Fowk

disna aye tell whan a body lauchs. I'm thinkin' gin ane o' the bairnies that he took upo' 's knee . . . had hauden up his wee timmer horsie, wi' a broken leg, and had prayed him to work a miracle an' men' the leg, he wadna hae wrocht a miracle maybe, I daursay, but he wad hae smilet, or maybe lauchen a wee, and he wad hae men't the leg some gait or ither to please the bairnie. (310)

It is clear from these two passages that Annie spends a great deal of her time meditating about the nature of God. She is not merely a passive Christian absorbing what she is taught by earthly teachers, but actively pursuing the ultimate Teacher himself.

This aspect of Annie's life feeds into another attack on the stereotype. Annie depends upon her relationship with a personal, loving God. Therefore, being in a relationship with an earthly man is not a great concern to her. Victorian women were expected to get married. If they did not, they were marginalized for the rest of their lives. Therefore, they spent the majority of their time thinking about, preparing for, and trying to ensure marriage. Actually, they were not supposed to think about much else. One can imagine that, for many women, when the situation seemed hopeless, it was a time of stress and discomfort. Not so for Annie. When the possibility of a future with the man she loves seems impossible, Annie is "quite peaceful as to the future" (435). She loves Alec, and wants to be his wife. She has other things in her life, however, and does not feel the need for marriage to make her life complete. To a society that viewed marriage as a woman's only viable option in life, this would have been difficult to accept.

Despite all of Annie's "deviant" behavior, there can be no question that MacDonald intended Annie to represent the best of womankind, with all the virtues anyone could have expected. This is a direct and effective attack upon the stereotype of womanhood, but MacDonald does not stop there. He presents another character, possessing all of the proper behaviors, but none of the inner virtues. This character is Alec's first love, Kate Fraser.

From the moment of her appearance, Kate is a symbol of Victorian womanhood. She is introduced in a drawing room, seated by the hearth, embroidering (180). She is coy and demure; she blushes when complimented (185). She is accomplished, proficient in needlepoint (181) and music (249-50). She has small, delicate hands (182), an important signifier of ladyhood (Langland 217). She is prone to fainting (234, 320), a condition generally "associated [with] feminine fortitude" (Rowbotham 36). She needs help to

navigate through the obstacles on the pier, where she and Alec go to meet a friend of hers (187). She is completely reliant upon the guidance of others (215). She has very delicate sensibilities, blanching at the merest mention of anything unseemly (306). Finally, she believes that a woman's first duty is to Love, and to the beloved, to the exclusion of all else (217). Outwardly, Kate is the perfect Victorian middle class lady.

Inwardly, however, Kate is a completely different character. Beneath that coy and demure exterior, Kate is something of a flirt. It is evident in her first meeting with Alec. He says:

"What are you working at?"

"A duster," she answered instantly—this time without looking up.

Now the said duster was of the finest cambric; so that Alec could not help seeing that she was making game of him.

This banished his shyness, and put him on his mettle.

"I see," he said, "when I ask questions, you—"

"Tell lies," she interposed, without even giving him time to hesitate. (181)

This would not have been viewed as an acceptable way to talk to a young man of recent acquaintance. She is toying with him, "making game" as MacDonald describes it. Flirtatiousness "was universally condemned as unfair, deceitful, and impious . . . and ultimately, a sure path to misery for the flirt herself, as well as the unfortunates she played with" (Rowbotham 50). The reasoning behind this was rooted in the importance of marriage in a woman's life. It was far too important to risk getting a reputation for coquetry.

Kate's flirtatiousness is actually rooted in another aspect of her character. She has very little actual substance. MacDonald describes her face as "a spiritual mirror, which reflected in human forms the look of that weary waste of waters" (188). She is a spiritual wasteland. In another passage, she is characterized as "an absorbent rather than a diffuser of life." He goes on to detail Kate's "own unsatisfied nature, her excitableness, her openness to all influences from the external world, and her incapacity for supplying her needs in any approximate degree from inward resources; [and] her consequent changeableness, moodiness, and dependency" (271-72). To some extent, this is what Victorians wanted in women. They were not supposed to be self-sufficient, even emotionally.

MacDonald's attempt to expose the "destructive consequences of

stereotypic roles" (Barickman 12) leads Kate into what is probably this novel's most scathing criticism of Victorian attitudes regarding gender. His outwardly proper Victorian young lady commits the most serious breach of propriety it was possible to commit. She is seduced by the evil Patrick Beauchamp. But more than simply being seduced, she puts herself entirely in his power (Wolff 209). Victorian women were supposed to depend upon and submit completely to the men in their lives, first their father, then their husband. Here, that dependence is carried to an extreme. During a midnight tryst in the library, Kate reveals the extent of her submission. She says, "Why were you so unkind, Patrick? . . . You know I can refuse you nothing; and you should be generous. . . . You don't know how I love you, Patrick—though you are unkind sometimes. The world used to look so cold, and narrow, and grey; but now there is a flush like sunset over everything, and I am so happy!" (319). Kate admits that Beauchamp is unkind, and that he makes her do things she does not wish to do, yet she offers no other resistance than a weak plea, followed by a kiss. Despite Beauchamp's rakish behavior, she has become totally dependent and submissive to him. This is a relationship that no one can approve, ultimately brought about by a system that did not allow Kate to develop a proper self-sufficiency.

Finally, Kate's ultimate end is hardly such that any Victorian parent would wish for their daughter. Throughout the novel, she is portrayed as having tendencies towards hysterics. Hysteria was a recognized and common malady among Victorian women, characterized by any or all of the following: "a nervous temperament, violent and unstable emotions, depression, excitement, poor attention span, disturbed intellect, disturbed will, deficient judgment, dependency, immaturity, egocentricity, attention-seeking, deceitfulness, theatricality, simulation, jealousy, fearfulness, and irritability" (Small 17-18). Kate does not demonstrate all of these, but she possesses enough of them to make a diagnosis clear. She has an unnatural fear of water (189). She has irrational crying fits (247). Her dependency and deficient judgment have already been established. Furthermore, MacDonald reveals that "her nerves came, as it were, nearer the surface than those of other people, and that thence she was exposed to those sudden changes of feeling which had so often bewildered [Alec]" (306).

Hysteria was a familiar theme in literature during the first half of the nineteenth century, as was the motif of "women who go mad when they lose their lovers" (Small, i). Beauchamp deserts Kate. She becomes insane and ultimately drowns herself. However, MacDonald does not blame her fate on

Beauchamp. Nor, even though he acknowledges a “natural predisposition” towards insanity, does he name that as the root cause of her demise. Kate’s fate is the result of her “having never been taught to provide for her own mental sustenance, and so nourish a necessary independence.” Lacking this, “she had been too ready to squander the wealth of a rich and lovely nature upon an unworthy person, and the reaction had been madness and death” (365). Kate’s ending is the fault of a system that never allowed her to develop that “necessary independence,” instead teaching only dependence and frailty.

Annie and Kate represent opposite extremes of the Victorian stereotype. Several times throughout the novel, MacDonald places those extremes side by side by introducing each girl to a similar situation, and their different reactions are revealing. First of all, both women deal with the unwanted affections of a young man. Kate responds to Alec’s outburst of love with “You dear boy!” and a resolution to be kind even though she can not love him. Kate “could not see that Alec would either take what she gave for more than she gave, or turn from it as no gift at all” (249). Kate’s inability to commit, to choose either to love Alec or to be completely honest with him, makes a bad situation worse. Annie, meanwhile, is confronted by a proclamation from a childhood friend. Her first reaction is shock, but she tries to make the rejection hurt as little as possible, saying “It’s no that I dinna like ye, Curly. Ye ken that. I wad do onything for ye that I cud do. Ye hae been a gude frien’ to me.” Notwithstanding, when he presses she does not hesitate to tell him the truth. “Na, na, Curly. Dinna think o’ ‘t. There’s no chance for ye, dear Curly,” she answers (391). Annie is confident enough in who she is, and in what she wants, that she is able to be honest and risk hurting him a little now for his ultimate good.

In another pair of situations with different consequences, MacDonald presents each girl with accusations against her beloved. Kate knows that Beauchamp is a scoundrel, that he does not treat her very well, but she loves him anyway. When Alec confronts Beauchamp in Kate’s presence, her reaction is to faint and to go into delirious denial, murmuring, “Never, mind dear. . . [Alec] is wild. He doesn’t know what he says. Oh Patrick, my heart is aching with love to you. It is good love, I know; and you must be kind to me and not make me do what I don’t like to do” (321). If Kate would examine the situation, she would see the contradiction in what she is saying. She knows that Beauchamp is unkind to her, and that Alec has never been anything but kind and loving towards her. Yet, she has so completely

wrapped up her identity in her relationship with Beauchamp that she is unable to accept that he is bad.

Annie's reaction to Alec's fall from grace is very different. MacDonald describes it thus:

But now, rejected and disgraced, his mother dissatisfied, his friend disappointed, and himself foiled in the battle of life, he had fallen upon evil days, and all the woman in Annie rose for his defense The strong youth was weak and defenseless: the gentle girl opened the heart almost of motherhood, to receive and shelter the worn outraged man. (362-63)

Annie does not deny Alec's mistakes. His imperfections merely make her love him more now that she is able to do more than just worship from afar. Here, again, Annie reacts in precisely the way the Victorian public would have expected their ideal woman to react (Thomson 111).

Throughout his body of work, MacDonald questions the validity of the "Angel in the House" stereotype. Annie and Kate represent positive and negative images of women. He presents expected character attributes and deviant character attributes, expected behavior and deviant behavior. One character has strength, independence, and individuality; the other has frailty, weakness, and dependency. Annie has the expected virtues, but possesses them alongside a well-developed understanding of her world, her beliefs, and herself. Kate embodies the Victorian stereotype, defining herself entirely based upon the people around her. Through these two portraits, MacDonald dissects the Victorian view, ultimately concluding, with the wedding of Annie and the death of Kate, that the former should be preferred to the latter.

Alec Forbes of Howglen is not a feminist novel. That was not MacDonald's intention. The challenges to the normal view of women are subtle. Annie is, in many ways, an angelic character. Furthermore, she is a character in an unusual, if not extraordinary, situation. The novel traces her through a difficult period of time and ends (as did most Victorian novels) at the altar. There is every indication that after she and Alec are married, Annie will settle down and become an ideal wife. In addition, MacDonald states explicitly that his "object has not been to set [Annie] forth as an exemplar" (206).

Nonetheless, despite the restraint, it is clear that MacDonald saw flaws in the attitudes of Victorian society towards women. *Alec Forbes* makes significant strides in challenging and exposing that system. This trend

continues throughout MacDonald's subsequent writings. Many of the ideas expressed in authorial addresses are fleshed out in later novels, and MacDonald continues to explore the condition and status of women through wonderfully deep and realistic characters.

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