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George MacDonald Then and Now: The Case of “The Light Princess”

Roderick McGillis

My argument is that children’s books often survive because publishers see an opportunity for new editions with new illustrations. Texts for children’s books are not sacrosanct, as a look at the many variations on Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* will indicate. But what sells these many variations is, as often as not, the illustrations. Even with a book as justly famous both for its text and its illustrations as *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, we have editions with edited texts and fresh illustrations. My focus here is not Carroll’s book, but George MacDonald’s “The Light Princess,” a story that has remained in print since it first appeared in the 1860s. When the story appeared in MacDonald’s collection of fairy tales, *Dealings With the Fairies* (1867), it was accompanied by Arthur Hughes’s illustrations. Although perhaps not as famous as John Tenniel’s illustrations of *Alice*, Hughes’s illustrations are as closely associated with MacDonald as Tenniel’s are with Carroll. And, yes, we have seen a string of republications of MacDonald’s story with illustrations by others. My concern here is to examine a number of these illustrations and see if I can come to any conclusions regarding illustration and story. With “The Light Princess,” we have an example of “crosswriting,” that is writing that appeals to both an adult and a child audience, and the illustrations publishers use for the story will indicate which audience they seek to reach.

First Appearances

Although MacDonald appears to have written this story for his own children, “The Light Princess” first appears as one of several stories told within the realistic novel for adults, *Adela Cathcart*, which MacDonald published in 1864 (for a discussion of the various forms of the story, see Susina). In this context, the audience for the story is made problematic because the novel was not aimed specifically at “children,” although undoubtedly what we think of as adolescents would be part of the “adult” audience for whom the book was published. Without going into the complex issue of audience, I note only that by placing the story within the novel, MacDonald clearly indicates both the moral and therapeutic aspects of this story; its telling is part of the homeopathic cure of the novel’s main female character, the eponymous Adela, who suffers from a debilitating spiritual malaise. One means of overcoming such malaise, both the

fairy tale and the longer novel appear to say, is to engage in a successful sexual relationship.

Sex, then, is a theme in “The Light Princess.” Right away we have difficulty in situating this story for a child audience, unless we either accept the Bettelheim thesis which argues that the coded presence of sex in a fairy tale helps young children overcome fear of their own sexuality and the changes it brings in their physiology, or the Foucauldian notion of an expanding discourse of sexuality demanded by the power structure of capitalist society. Once again, I do not wish to argue either of these positions, but rather to posit the sexual content of the story as a given. Once given, how do successive presentations of the story deal with this content? Clearly, the particular circumstances of publication—the physical appearance of the book in which the story occurs, the editing of the text, the use of illustrations all imply a specific readership. For example, when the story appears in the novel *Adela Cathcart* it appears not as a story for children; it comes with no accompanying illustrations and it comes to the reader in the context of the entire novel. Although the story might be self-contained, it appears not to be so when published as an interpolated tale. More recently, in Glenn Sadler's 1973 two-volume edition of MacDonald's short fiction and in the edition illustrated by Craig Yoe (1980), “The Light Princess” appears to call for a readership of adults rather than children. Here the publisher (Eerdmans in both cases), the lack of illustrations (in the case of Sadler), and the rudimentary scholarly apparatus surrounding the stories suggest a readership more narrowly conceived perhaps than that of the novel *Adela Cathcart*.

Let us focus directly on versions of the story targeted at young readers. I propose to look at a series of illustrations of the scene in which the Prince in the story uses his body to plug the hole in the lake bottom and the Princess languidly sits in a boat near him while the water rises. My first illustration is—what else?—that of Arthur Hughes for the version of the story that appeared in MacDonald's first book for children, *Dealings with the Fairies*. In keeping with other famous first illustrations of stories (I think of Tenniel's illustrations for *Alice* or Shepard's for *The Wind in the Willows*, for example), Hughes's illustrations have influenced the manner in which subsequent illustrators have viewed and interpreted the story. In this instance he chooses to illustrate the following passage:

Then she sat down again, and looked at him. The water
rose and rose. It touched his chin. It touched his lower lip.
It touched between his lips. He shut them hard to keep it out.
The Princess began to feel strange. It touched his upper lip. He

breathed through his nostrils. The Princess looked wild. It covered his nostrils. Her eyes looked scared, and shone strange in the moonlight. His head fell back; the water closed over it, and the bubbles of his last breath bubbled up through the water. (59-60)



On the Water

What we see in the illustration is the Princess leaning over the side of her boat and one of its oars, her head resting in her right hand and her eyes focused on the Prince whose face looms from just under the surface of the water. On the left and under the boat's canopy we can discern the wine and biscuits that the Princess feeds the Prince now and then as the water rises. On the right is the prow of the boat in the shape of a swan's neck and head with a crown on it. The Princess grasps the neck of the bird just under its beak. In the background we see the shoreline with trees and evidence of the palace. The largest figure in the illustration is the Princess, and she looks anything but "scared" or "wild." She looks like a typical Pre-Raphaelite stunner with her heavy neck, full lips, and long hair. As for the Prince, he reminds us of a death's head. The code here

communicates the theme of sex I mentioned a bit ago. Sex and death. The conjunction of these is a familiar nineteenth-century concern. Here the oar and especially the swan's head and neck communicate the phallic content of the illustration. The Princess dominates the phallic images in the illustration just as she dominates the Prince, looming over him and regarding him with sublime unconcern.

We can, of course, do more with this illustration. Especially interesting is the tension between horizontal and vertical sight lines, the obviously strong line of the boat and oar crossed by the equally insistent line created by the canopy post and the Princess's right arm and hand. Clearly, the Prince and the Princess are connected while at the same time they are separated. What both connects and separates them is sex. Perhaps they are disconnected because the Prince inhabits the feminine space of the water and the Princess occupies the masculine space with its phallic oar and swan. What's needed is a realignment of their sexual relationship, something that will come at the end of the story when the Princess and the Prince both "come round" (62).

Hughes's illustration is simple in its design, offering little difficulty for the young reader and carrying with it that otherworldly romance familiar in much Victorian painting. It is a mood piece. But it is also something more; it opens itself to a reading and in doing so it participates in the thematic function of the text. This is a story that deals with human sexual relations, with the adjustment and understanding of the self and other. The Princess, caught as she is between male and female codes (note here position between the phallic swan and the domestic pitcher and salver with the wine and biscuits), must learn to take her place in rightful partnership with the male. For all MacDonald's championing of female independence, he is perforce a Victorian and accepts his culture's placing of men and women. The woman out of her place, this picture and this story seem to say, can spell death for a man.

Now let's move to an edition of the story published in 1926. Here the illustrations are by Dorothy P. Lathrop, and they have a distinctly late nineteenth-century look about them. They conjure up the world of Beardsley and aestheticism. Lathrop offers the reader the same scene Hughes's does and she accepts his vision of a boat with a phallic prow. But she shows us the scene moments before Hughes does; she shows us the final kiss before the waters close over the Prince. This illustration has few details; gone are the background trees and architecture, the boat's canopy, and the pitcher and salver. The design on the boat, especially that near the top of the prow is decorative and suggestive. That small figure near the top of the prow reminds me of the tiny satyrs in some

of Beardsley's drawings. The swirl of water around the Prince's head appears to be the Princess's hair, and this drawing into conjunction the two figures through the swirl of water and hair draws attention to the androgynous aspect of the two figures. The connection of hair with water—a connection that also appears in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872)—reminds us just how thoroughly the Princess surrounds the Prince. The two figures are joined, as the kiss indicates, but their unity is strong. No space (or very little) is visible between them; the boat that separates them so emphatically in Hughes does not impede between them here. The whole design is strongly decorative: stillness reigns. Even the movement of the water is frozen in design, the design marked by swatches of black and white. This illustration celebrates the kiss; the lovers' relationship is beautiful, something to decorate life.



"Will you kiss me,

Mid-Century

In 1962, a version of the story appeared illustrated by William Pene Du Bois. As you might expect, this version directs itself unequivocally at children. Take our scene for example. Here it occupies a lavish double-page spread. The

whole scene is washed in moonlight, Du Bois's water-colour drawings aiding his mood. In the center of the picture is the Princess leaning far out from the boat to give the Prince a kiss. She appears to be held in place by a strap, and she lies on soft pillows. She leans out so far that she is nearly tipping the boat, and she is certainly spilling the wine, fruit and biscuits that had rested on a small table on the left. She leans so far that her little feet rise, either to assist her in keeping her balance or because she is so thrilled at the kiss she is bestowing on her benefactor. The Prince for his part is barely visible; only his head—and he rather impossibly wears a crown that should fall off because his head is so far tilted—only his head is visible above the surface of the lake. His eyes are closed, as are the Princess's, and their lips delicately touch. In the background is the shore with its palace and a row of rather bizarre rectangular trees. Discernable on the palace, above both the right and left doorways, are two insignia consisting of a capital “L” and a small crown; this insignia appears throughout the book, offering something for young readers to hunt for. In the distance we can see a castle. Like the colour, the impact of this illustration is soft; if anything the mood is comic, and without the sexual frisson of early illustrations. This is definitely a version aimed at a young audience. The same is not the case with the next version of the story.¹

Sendak and MacDonald

Forty-three years separate Lathrop's illustration of “The Light Princess” from those of Maurice Sendak, and rather than developing in the direction of Lathrop, Sendak returns to Hughes, even going so far as to place Hughes's initials on the top left of the boat's canopy. The illustration clearly takes its cue from Hughes, placing the two figures in similar positions to those they hold in the Hughes illustration, showing the oar and canopy of the boat in similar positions, and indicating a tree-lined shore in the background. Gone are the palace and the swan. But Sendak does festoon the side of the boat in a manner reminiscent of Lathrop. He also chooses a different moment to show the two lovers. Rather than taking the moment of the Prince's submersion or the moment of the kiss, Sendak chooses to depict the Princess feeding the Prince a biscuit. She holds a biscuit in her right hand and a small plate with biscuits and a glass of wine in her left. More clearly than in the previous two illustrations, the Prince and Princess here make eye contact, intense eye contact. As in Hughes, the two figures are sharply separated by the side of the boat and the insistent oar that cuts diagonally across and between the two figures. Again as in Hughes, the Princess's right elbow crosses the oar to make a gesture of

connection with the Prince, although here the gesture is less dramatic than in the earlier illustration. Whereas Hughes emphasizes the erotic implications in the scene, Sendak emphasizes the implications of the eucharist and of yearning.

Close to the centre of the composition and occupying what is perhaps the most prominent place in the composition are the biscuits and wine. Somewhat obscured behind the Princess's right hand and underneath the canopy, we discern a flask and some fruit. These might well be reminders of the erotic implications, but they remain subdued. Certainly the looks on the faces of the two figures are more deeply probing than they are simply erotic. The Prince's face, swathed in moonlight, is especially powerful as he gazes intensely at the person he has chosen to die for. His hair stretching from his head to the water implies that the Prince is straining to keep above the water, to keep looking at the one he loves. The suspended right hand of the Princess, coupled with her intense gaze, might communicate her growing realization of something she had not expected. This is a moment of revelation, of communion. What Sendak celebrates is not the erotic moment, but the spiritual moment. His figures are simple and clear, easily understood by readers both young and old.

Picturebook Transformation

In 1988, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich published a picture book version of "The Light Princess," adapted by Robin McKinley and illustrated by Katie Thamer Treherne. By "adaptation" the publishers mean "streamlining" or making shorter, for obvious reasons. But let's look at the illustration of our scene. Here is a full page spread in colour, mostly blues and mauve and purple and pink. Once again, the ghost of Hughes haunts this illustration. The swans that decorate the top of the boat's canopy and that peek from the borders of the picture hark back to Hughes's swan-prow. The Prince and Princess are again in similar positions to those in Hughes and Sendak, and again we have a tree-lined shore. The Princess has what appears to be obligatory long hair, and her lips are full and pouting as they were in Hughes. To the Princess's right we see a bottle of wine half full and a basket of fruit. This detail reminds us of Sendak. The entire shot is from a position farther removed than that in any of the previous illustrations; we see more of the lake, more of the boat, and more of the shore. But, correct me if I'm wrong, the force of this illustration is strangely uncertain.

Treherne chooses to show the Princess as she feeds the Prince "with bits of biscuit and sips of wine" (38). The Prince's head is lowered as he appears to take food from her outstretched hand. In other words, the two people do not look at each other and, consequently, this picture lacks the intimacy of the

others. We cannot make out the Prince's expression; the Princess's is vacant or perhaps even scornful with her half closed eyelids and reclining posture. At the centre of this composition are the two figures, their connection through her arms and their two heads, but just as insistent is the scene itself because we see so much of it. We see a plethora of rocks and rather flaccid snakes (or eels) as well as the evergreens with clearly depicted trunks and the mountains in the distance. At the top of the picture we have the four swan necks and heads. I'm trying to say that phallic images dominate this scene. I might even note that when the water does rise, the Prince will rise with it in order to keep his head above the surface as long as he can. In other words, he will grow erect as the waters come home. I might also add that the boat in this scene is distinctly more bowl-like than in any of the other illustrations. Just what is the message here?

Frankly I'm not certain. The colours and the use of a decorative border might suggest that this illustration partakes of the aesthetic impetus of Lathrop. Rather than an interpretation of the story, it serves as a decoration of it. On the other hand, the clearly phallic images remind us of the sexual theme. But the two figures themselves seem not intimately involved with each other. For my money, this illustration communicates neither the spiritual power of the Sendak illustration nor the erotic revelation of Hughes's. Let me also say that it lacks the decorative power of Lathrop's and the comic force of Du Bois. For me, this is a flat reflection of MacDonald's story. We might ask what this illustration implies about this book's sense of its audience. It is busier and more colourful than anything we have seen so far, but it also offers less of a coherent interpretation.

From Stillness to Movement: Film Version

Lastly, I take a brief look at the 1985 BBC film version of the story. This combines live action and animation. Andrew Gosling is the director, Errol Le Cain provides the illustrations, Michael Hibbert the animation, and Ian Keill the teleplay. The scene with the Princess in the boat and the Prince in the water is familiar from previous representations. The two characters look suitably like the longhaired Prince and Princess of the illustrations we have seen. The boat has a canopy; it contains not only the Princess, but also fruit, biscuits, and wine. The prow rises and swells decoratively and, of course, the phallic implications are unavoidable. The Princess is on the Prince's right as she is in Lathrop. We have a two-shot in which the boat and the two characters are visible, but little else. The scene is notable for its comic effect; even touches such as the wine becoming blood-like when the Prince's head submerges are played for comedy.

Of course the owl is an addition, as is the allusion to Sir Walter Scott.

Conclusions

What to conclude from all this? First, I must confess that any conclusions I have are tentative. However, here goes:

- The original illustrations of a story such as "The Light Princess" hold a powerful influence on subsequent illustrations.
- Illustrations of the story imply particular readers. For example, the illustrations by Hughes, Lathrop, and Sendak imply a readership of both child and adult, whereas those of Du Bois, Treherne, and Le Cain attempt to draw in a child audience. The difference between the two sets of illustrations occurs in a movement to caricature or stylization in those illustrations meant for the young, and of course in the use of colour.
- In order to appeal to modern sensibilities, recent illustrators looking for a child audience have yielded to the story's undoubted comic element and bypassed the emphasis on beauty and death evident in earlier illustrations.
- Publishers appear more ready to violate a text's original integrity when that text has as its apparent target audience, children. In other words, children's literature remains closer to an oral culture in that the sanctity of the text appears not to be of central importance. What matters is the story, and not the manner in which the story might have come from a particular author.
- Children's books survive either by becoming institutionalized, and by this I mean by being taken into educational curricula, or by being adapted and recreated for changing taste. I suspect the real measure of survival has to do with successful marketing, and here a comparison between "The Light Princess" and, say, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* would indicate a much more successful survival for Alice and her cronies than for our airy Princess and her castle-mates. The marketing and recasting of the *Alice* books began even before Carroll's death. My guess is that survival depends not upon the quality of MacDonald's story versus that of his friend Carroll's, but rather the relative attractiveness of a Royal Dalton Mad Hatter as opposed to a Royal Dalton Hum Drum or Kopy-Keck.
- The theme of sex can and does appear in books for the young. However, the coding of sexuality is more readily apparent in the early editions of the book than in more recent ones. The "lightness" of "The Light Princess" manifests itself in early illustrations in visual metaphor, visual wit, and visual allusion.

More recent illustrations (e.g. those by du Bois and Treherne) assume their audience is less sophisticated than the audience imagined by the likes of Hughes or Lathrop or Sendak.

- The illustrations to a story such as “The Light Princess” give a clear indication as to audience, and we can see just how accepting the Victorian reading public was to what we now refer to as dual-audience texts. A closer study of my subject would indicate that the dual-audience (or what some have dubbed “cross-writing” for child and adult) is a feature of many contemporary books for the young, and that it was a feature of many Victorian books for the young. One reason Sendak stands out among illustrators of picture books is that he was creating dual-audience books for the young in the late 1950s and early 1960s when most books for children focused on the single audience of children. However you look at the question of survival, what seems clear is that books survive by changing and adapting. We don't continue to value what MacDonald and his nineteenth-century readers valued; instead we render our values visible in those stories that somehow appear amenable to change and manipulation. We exploit texts. We may exploit texts for any number of reasons – accessibility of a story, promotion of a particular theme or set of values, desire to maintain cultural continuity, the pursuit of financial gain—but whatever the reason, changes to a part of a text and illustrations are a part of a text, will alter the communicative force and meaning of that text. Of the texts I have looked at here, those illustrated by Hughes and Sendak strike me as the most appealing because they preserve the integrity of MacDonald's text and they offer a sensitive reading of what MacDonald wrote. In short, they are both closer to the spirit of MacDonald's story than are the other illustrations. They are amusing as well as thought provoking; they are interpretive rather than simply decorative; they create a tension between picture and verbal text that rouses the faculties to act.

Endnote

1. Due to copyright restrictions, *North Wind* cannot reprint the illustrations by William Pene Du Bois, Maurice Sendak, and Katie Thamer Treherne.

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