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Notes and Queries

Fracturing MacDonald: *The Princess and the Goblin* and “Fractured Fairy Tales”

Ginger Stelle

Despite the shifting popular and critical opinions of his novels, and even his adult fantasies, George MacDonald’s books for children have consistently remained both popularly and critically acclaimed. Unlike many of his works, these have remained continuously in print and have, undoubtedly, been a part of the childhood of many who are unaware MacDonald ever wrote anything else. Furthermore, at least in the case of *The Princess and the Goblin*, MacDonald’s writing for children has been considered mainstream enough to adapt into other media. The animated film version of *The Princess and the Goblin* is fairly well known. Less widely recognized is the version of this story that appeared in the early 1960s as part of the *Rocky & Bullwinkle & Friends* show, as one of their “Fractured Fairy Tales.” Nonetheless, this particular version sheds interesting light on MacDonald, on both his popularity and the difficulty he poses for a modern audience.

Titled “The Princess and the Goblins,” the tale opens with a king from long ago deciding to tax all the “little people” in order to finance a new robe. Taken literally, this means a tax on everyone under four-foot-six, and that means the Goblin family. In protest of this unfair taxation, the Goblins, declaring that “Maybe we don’t have height, but we’ve got heart!” decide to move inside the mountain. The story jumps ahead several generations. The goblins—whose two weaknesses are their extremely sensitive feet and their aversion to poetry—continue to live under the mountain, but come out at night to “get people.” Meanwhile, the present king, reading a book entitled *Ye Birds and Bees*, decides to explain “the facts of life” (that “the goblins will get [her] if she doesn’t watch out!”) to his daughter Irene. A goblin appears and chases Irene into the woods where she meets a “young miner named Curdie,” who immediately falls in love with her and starts spouting poetry. Irene asks Curdie if he is a prince, but, alas, he is not. However, the goblin that chased her is and intends to marry her. He and a friend dig a tunnel under the king’s home, but instead of capturing Irene, they grab Curdie. He explains who he is, but cannot escape because, without Irene’s presence, he cannot think of any poetry. During the wedding, the goblin prince realizes that his bride “sure looks different.” The goblin prince then drags

Curdie out into the sunlight, where Curdie sees Irene, instantaneously composes a love poem, and escapes from the Goblins. The tale ends with Irene seated upon Curdie's lap on the throne next to her father, explaining to her father that not the goblins, but "the love bug will get you if you don't watch out!"

Despite the fact that MacDonald is not credited (at least on the DVD version), this fractured fairy tale is clearly based on MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* and is indicative of his popularity in the mid-twentieth century. After all, part of the fun in a "fractured" fairy tale lies in comparing it to the original. Consequently, most are based on the so-called "traditional" fairy tales, such as *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Rapunzel*, *Tom Thumb*, and others with their roots in oral literature and folklore. Still others, titled things like "Little Fred Robin Hood" and "Slow White and Nose Red" obviously have their origin in those traditional tales. *The Princess and the Goblin* is one of the very few "Fractured Fairy Tales" attributable entirely to a particular person. A few can be traced to Hans Christian Andersen, such as "The Princess and the Pea," but even these have become so familiar as to be considered "traditional." By including MacDonald's story in this series, the producers recognized that it would have been widely-enough known for the audience to get the jokes.

At the same time, however, the "fracturing" of *The Princess and the Goblin* is symptomatic of the problems surrounding MacDonald's works in the twentieth century. Admittedly, one must be cautious not to read too much into a "Fractured Fairy Tale" version of anything; after all, the purpose is to twist the story into something funny and to satirize the fairy-tale genre itself. But in choosing to do this to MacDonald's book, the adapters force the story into a particular mold, robbing it of everything that makes it uniquely MacDonald and turning it into something completely different.

While *The Princess and the Goblin* can undoubtedly be considered a fairy tale, it does not necessarily fit the average person's idea of a fairy tale, quite simply because it contains no "love plot" in the traditional sense. MacDonald saves that for the final two pages of *The Princess and Curdie* (319-20), and even then he does not emphasize it. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, the central boy and girl are twelve and eight respectively (51, 15). Nor does either book end with "and they lived happily ever after"; on the contrary, the tale of Curdie and Irene actually ends quite un-happily with Gwyntystorm (after Curdie and Irene have died) collapsing into rubble and "the very name . . . [ceasing] from the lips of men" (320). Even *The Princess and the Goblin*, which has a much happier ending than its sequel, makes it clear that the story will continue (308). Consequently, in order to "fracture" it, the adapters had to first force it into a

more traditional fairy tale mold. Irene is transmuted from naïve and innocent eight-year-old into a buxom and sensual young woman. Likewise, Curdie goes from being a brave and pure-hearted pre-adolescent with a genuine poetic gift to being a slightly stupid man with stars in his eyes capable only of spouting doggerel like “Oh Princess fair / Your golden hair / Upon your head / I see it there.” While admittedly, this is quite humorous, it is much farther removed from MacDonald’s tale than the usual “Fractured Fairy Tale” from its original.

Furthermore, by focusing on the non-existent love plot, the adapters remove all traces of religious content. If there is one area of universal agreement among MacDonald scholars, it is that MacDonald’s religion was of supreme importance to him. *The Princess and the Goblin*, like so many of his other works, has a deeply religious center, embodied in this case by the great-great-grandmother, whose presence hovers over the entire story, teaching lessons of spiritual significance. Irene’s journey is ultimately directed at learning to obey and walk in faith, such as when she has to follow her great-great-grandmother’s thread to rescue Curdie (196). Curdie likewise learns about trusting, even where he cannot see (279-83). As the story progresses, they both, along with MacDonald’s readers, learn many other lessons from the great-great-grandmother.

Additionally, besides the moral lessons, the novel makes numerous observations about character, about princely (and princessly) behavior, about nobility and courage, truthfulness and fairness. Though it would be even more fully developed in *The Princess and Curdie*, throughout the novel, MacDonald develops the idea that rank and title are not all-important; Irene is only truly a princess when she keeps her word and gives Curdie her promised kiss (295). Likewise, of Curdie, MacDonald says, “there is some ground for supposing that Curdie was not a miner only, but a prince as well” because of his behavior (255). All of this is missing from the “fractured” version. The great-great-grandmother does not exist; the only moral lesson to be learned is examine your bride in the sunlight before getting married; and Irene makes a point to ask Curdie if he “couldn’t go somewhere and learn to be a prince?” because he is just a miner. The ideas MacDonald valued are completely excluded.

On top of this, the adapters added a political element that was missing from MacDonald’s novel. MacDonald does comment that the goblins went underground because “the king had laid what they thought too severe taxes upon them, or had required observances of them they did not like, or had begun to treat them with more severity, in some way or other, and impose stricter laws” (11). However, he makes it clear that their subsequent behavior is motivated by

“the ancestral grudge against those who occupied their former possessions” (13-14) and that their “chief business . . . was to devise trouble for their neighbours” (14). The goblins’ ultimate plans are motivated by this desire for revenge. Whatever wrong was done to them, they have gone beyond any justified retaliation. They are not nice characters, and MacDonald portrays them accordingly. The goblin-queen, in particular, is vicious in her suggestions regarding Curdie when they capture him (186-88).

The “fractured” version, on the other hand, imbues the goblins with a mixture of benign stupidity and injured nobility in the face of an unfair government. Their initial migration under the mountain is the direct result of taxation. The leader’s impassioned cry of “Maybe we don’t have height, but we’ve got heart!” and his subsequent exhortation to action are delivered from the top of a box labeled “Soap” in the style of a political rally speaker. Also, the goblin prince’s desire to marry Irene is not motivated by revenge, but by love, and their failure is not the result of Curdie’s courage and Irene’s faithfulness, but by their own bungling. Ultimately, the goblins appear to be the innocent victims of the government, rather than vicious revenge-seekers, making “The Princess and the Goblins” a possible commentary on the contemporary public concerns about government oppression. By dropping MacDonald’s religious content and adding this political element, the “Fractured Fairy Tale” version transforms *The Princess and the Goblin* into something MacDonald never intended.

While MacDonald’s children’s books have remained popular since his lifetime, never going out of print, this adaptation is symptomatic of some of the problems surrounding MacDonald’s works. *The Princess and the Goblin* does not fit the traditional “fairy-tale” mold, and the changes required to make it “fracturable” are understandable. Far more significant, a widespread belief surrounding MacDonald’s works that his emphasis on religious themes lacks relevance in a modern world has relegated him to a marginal literary position in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. That the *Rocky & Bullwinkle & Friends* show thought MacDonald important and recognizable enough to fracture in the first place shows that he was still popular at mid-century. That they removed everything which made his book uniquely his demonstrates his diminishing relevance. Though it can be dangerous to read too much into a “Fractured Fairy Tale,” in the light of MacDonald’s subsequent reputation, this version nonetheless serves as a snapshot of the issues involving MacDonald’s work in the twentieth century.

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