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Connections

Let the Wild Rumpus Start: Subversive Desire in MacDonald's *Phantastes* and Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*

John Pennington

In Maurice Sendak's illustrated edition of George MacDonald's fairy tale "The Light Princess" (1969), one illustration finds a book nestled on a table (89). With a bit of magnification, the reader can see that Sendak has inserted *Phantastes* (1858), MacDonald's first foray into fantasy literature. That Sendak would connect "The Light Princess" with *Phantastes* seems an obvious allusion, for both works have a playful—yet serious—attitude about fantasy. *Phantastes*, one might argue, plays a more important role for Sendak than just a clever intertext in "The Light Princess." In fact, *Phantastes*, I argue, is at the heart of *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), one of the greatest and most famous children's picture books ever written.

Phantastes posits that there is a fine line that separates the real world from the fantasy world, as the main character Anodos discovers after meeting a fairy godmother while exploring the papers left behind by his father. The fairy promises Anodos that he will discover the portal to fairyland, which he does the next morning: he discovers his bedroom transforming before his very eyes into a new fantastical world. This transformation scene is the ur-text for Sendak. Let us follow MacDonald as he transforms Anodos's bedroom into fairyland and chart how Sendak illustrates this very transformation in *Where the Wild Things Are*. (Please note: getting copyright approval to use Sendak's illustrations is complicated and expensive, particularly for a critical journal that is also housed online. I am hoping that readers will have a copy of *Where the Wild Things Are* handy in order to follow along in that book):

While these strange events were passing through my mind, I suddenly, as one awakes to the consciousness that the sea has been moaning by him for hours, or that the storm has been howling about his window all night, became aware of the sound of running water near me; and, looking out of bed, I saw that a large green

marble basin, in which I was wont to wash, and which stood on a low pedestal of the same material in a corner of my room, was overflowing like a spring; and that a stream of clear water was running over the carpet, all the length of the room, finding its outlet I knew not where. And, stranger still, where this carpet, which I had myself designed to imitate a field of grass and daisies, bordered the course of the little stream, the grass-blades and daisies seemed to wave in a tiny breeze that followed the water's flow; while under the rivulet they bent and swayed with every motion of the changeful current, as if they were about to dissolve with it, and, forsaking their fixed form, become fluent as the waters.

[When Max is sent "to bed without eating anything" we see him in his wolf-suit with an angry expression. His bedroom is normal, with a plant on the table underneath an open window with the moon shining through. Phantastes's title page has a quotation: "In good sooth, my master, this is no door, / Yet is it a little window, that looketh upon a great world.'" That window plays an important role for Sendak. On the next page the text reads, "That very night in Max's room a forest grew," and the illustration finds Max with eyes closed and his bedframe made of trees and this ceiling a canopy of leaves.]

My dressing-table was an old-fashioned piece of furniture of black oak, with drawers all down the front. These were elaborately carved in foliage, of which ivy formed the chief part. The nearer end of this table remained just as it had been, but on the further end a singular change had commenced. I happened to fix my eye on a little cluster of ivy-leaves. The first of these was evidently the work of the carver; the next looked curious; the third was unmistakable ivy; and just beyond it a tendril of clematis had twined itself about the gilt handle of one of the drawers. Hearing next a slight motion above me, I looked up, and saw that the branches and leaves designed upon the curtains of my bed were slightly in motion. Not knowing what change might follow next, I thought it high time to get up; and, springing from the bed, my bare feet alighted upon a cool green sward; and although I dressed in all haste, I found myself completing my toilet under the boughs of a great tree, whose top waved in the golden stream of the sunrise with many interchanging lights, and

with shadows of leaf and branch gliding over leaf and branch, as the cool morning wind swung it to and fro, like a sinking sea-wave.

[The next picture depicts Max, eyes still closed, apparently giggling. His room further transforms, with the table near the window now a full bush, the carpeting MacDonald's "cool green sward of grass," and more plants populating his bedroom.]

After washing as well as I could in the clear stream, I rose and looked around me. The tree under which I seemed to have lain all night was one of the advanced guard of a dense forest, towards which the rivulet ran. Faint traces of a footpath, much overgrown with grass and moss, and with here and there a pimpernel even, were discernible along the right bank. "This," thought I, "must surely be the path into Fairy Land, which the lady of last night promised I should so soon find." I crossed the rivulet, and accompanied it, keeping the footpath on its right bank, until it led me, as I expected, into the wood. Here I left it, without any good reason: and with a vague feeling that I ought to have followed its course, I took a more southerly direction.

[The text tells us that "his ceiling hung with vines and the wall became the world all around . . ." Max's bedroom is now completely transformed into a forest, with Max, still in his wolf-suit, his back to us, his claws in the air, looking into the forest. The next picture finds Max in a boat as he heads to "where the wild things are" to begin his journey— "'And now,' cried Max, 'let the wild rumpus start!'" At the end of the story Max sails back home, and the last picture has Max, now with his head uncovered, looking relieved: his bedroom is back to normal and there's now food— "and it was still hot"—on the table under the window waiting for him to eat.]

Phantastes and *Where the Wild Things Are* begin with the mundane, the bedroom, and transform that mundaneness into a world of adventure and desire.

MacDonald and Sendak create wild rumpuses as they venture into their respective worlds of desire. Sendak translates the more adult desires that are found in *Phantastes*—desire for the Marble Lady, the desire to lose his shadow, and his desire to die into more life—into the subversive desires of

younger children, who long for a space of their own, where they can cavort and explore without adult supervision and intervention. More specifically, in his Caldecott Medal speech, Sendak claims that children desire to confront the “awful fact of childhood,” which is “their vulnerability to fear, anger, hate, frustration—all of the emotions that are an ordinary part of their lives and that they can perceive only as ungovernable and dangerous forces” (151). *Phantastes* and *Where the Wild Things Are* start a wild rumpus of subversive desire that challenge the staid conventions of society and open a space that allows for the vulnerabilities of Anodos and Max to play out in the fantastical realm.

It is no secret that Sendak has an affinity for MacDonald. In *Caldecott & Co.* Sendak writes that MacDonald was “one of the towering and mystifying figures of Victorian literature” (45). “For admirers of MacDonald, such as myself,” he continues, “his work has something of the effect of an hallucinatory drug. Finishing one of his stories is often like waking from a dream—one’s own dream. The best of them [MacDonald’s fairy tales] stimulate long-forgotten images and feelings—the ‘something profound’ that borders frustratingly close to memory without quite every reaching for it” (45). It is important to note that the final chapter of *Phantastes* begins with an epigraph by Novalis: “Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will” (182). And one is reminded of C. S. Lewis’s remarks about *Phantastes* baptizing his imagination.

In addition, Sendak’s illustrations for “The Golden Key” and “The Light Princess” are also responses or interpretations of Arthur Hughes’s illustrations of those tales that appeared in 1867. Sendak was impressed with Hughes, who he called “one of [his] favorite illustrators” (188): “The attraction is the magic of realism—a terrible phrase—a rendering so naturalistic and so heightened by a romanticism—a combination of things—that it’s poetic” (qtd. in Tatar 122). That Sendak would “internalize” MacDonald and Hughes is no large stretch, and it seems reasonable to posit that he may have been channeling *Phantastes* as he composed and illustrated *Where the Wild Things Are*. Hughes did illustrate *Phantastes* for Greville MacDonald’s 1905 edition, though most critics find those illustrations past Hughes’ prime; in fact, George MacDonald never saw these illustrations, and it appears that MacDonald was content for *Phantastes*, a work that demands imaginative investment from its readers, to remain unillustrated. To place *Phantastes* in “The Light Princess,” Sendak may have been making a statement about Hughes’s illustrations for the 1858 fantasy.

The obvious first connection between *Phantastes* and *Where the Wild Things Are* is that both works are structured around the quest: Anodos enters fairyland and Max the land of the Wild Things through the portal of the bedroom; both return to the real world after their adventures with, we presume, some heightened awareness. In effect, Anodos and Max are two heroes out of Campbell's 1000 faces. Yet Anodos's and Max's call to adventure is not concrete—they do not have a set goal for their quests, other than to experience fairyland and Wild-Things-Land. That Anodos means “wandering” or “pathless” is important for his quest, and this pathless nature of the journey seems to be at the heart of Max's quest too. John Cech argues that Sendak created “fearsome, unsettling fantasies—fantasies that the child was perfectly capable of conjuring up and resolving,” with Max's a “mythic hero's journey, there and back again . . .” (104). Max's quest is akin to Anodos's, for they are on journeys of desire, primarily the desire to escape the mundane world and its mundane rules and responsibilities. The quest motif, however, is premised on an important belief of MacDonald and Sendak on the vitality of imaginative play, on the importance of fantasy. Sendak speaks of the power the fantastic has for children to process their fears and become in control of them: “To master these forces, children turn to fantasy: that imagined world where disturbing emotional situations are solved to their satisfaction. Through fantasy, Max . . . discharges his anger against his mother and returns to the real world sleepy, hungry, and at peace with himself” (150). For Sendak, the fantastic allows the child to find catharsis, even though the fantastical world may depict “the logic of illogic” (*Caldecott* 174) for children. In effect, Sendak argues that a child can believe “in a flexible world of fantasy and reality, a world where a child can skip from one to the other and back again in the sure belief that both really exist” (*Caldecott* 152).

Sendak's claims about the fantastic, I would argue, are influenced by MacDonald's “The Fantastic Imagination,” which was a preface written for the 1893 edition of “The Light Princess.” In all likelihood Sendak would be familiar with this essay. MacDonald's most famous statement from this essay is that “for my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five” (366). Sendak, in a variety of interviews, expresses similar sentiments, which he uses to justify the very adult themes that addresses in his picture books (Moyers). Furthermore, MacDonald argues that the fantastic imagination is one that privileges the “logic of the illogic,” and he suggests that the fairy tale, with its loose structure, is aligned

with music: “A fairytale, a sonata, a gathering storm a limitless night, sizes you and sweeps you away: do you begin at once to wrestle with it and ask whence its power over you, whither it is carrying you? . . . The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended” (367). In the essay “The Shape of Music” Sendak argues that the word *quicken* “best suggests the genuine spirit of animation, the breathing to life.” To Sendak, *quicken* suggests “something musical, something rhythmic and impulsive” where music has the “peculiar power of releasing fantasy” and where children find in music “perhaps the medium . . . [to] best express the inexpressible; fantasy and feeling lie deeper than words—beyond the words yet available to a child . . .” (*Caldecott* 4). For MacDonald and Sendak, the musical is essential to the fantastical. *Phantastes* and *Where the Wild Things Are* quicken to life.

The musical connection has a further precedent. “A fairy-story is like a vision without rational connections, a harmonious whole of miraculous thing and events—as, for example, a musical fantasia, the harmonic sequence of an Aeolian harp, indeed Nature itself” (MacDonald, *Phantastes* 1). One could easily attribute this quotation to MacDonald or Sendak. But that would be a wrong answer. This quotation comes from the German Romanticist Novalis. MacDonald translated Novalis and used quotations from him to frame both *Phantastes* and *Lilith* (1895), another full-length fantasy targeted for adults. Maria Tatar suggests that Novalis may have “guided Sendak’s hand more than any other” by promoting “the cult of spiritual quests, and he emphasized the importance of interiority, as well as our perpetual search from home” (122). This statement could have been written about MacDonald generally and about *Phantastes* in particular. The above quotation from Novalis comes from the opening epigraph of *Phantastes* and reinforces the notion that the fairy tale—the fantastic—centers itself in the “logic of illogic” and patterns itself after the spontaneity of the sonata. Anodos’s and Max’s quests are spontaneous, are musical: Anodos’s journey is an adult spiritual one, while Max’s is an adolescent spiritual one. Both works return their questers home. Near the end of *Phantastes* a child sings the following to Anodos:

Thou goest thine, and I go mine—
 Many ways we wend;
 Many days, and many way,
 Ending in one end,
 Many a wrong, and its curing song
 Many a road, and many an inn;

Room to roam, but only one home

For all the world to win. (182)

Max's bedroom is literally that room to roam that finds only the one true home.

Novalis also informs MacDonald and Sendak in the fundamental importance of dream, which leads to a higher, spiritual realm. In "George MacDonald," Sendak writes that "Novalis contended that life would have meaning only when it attained the spiritual, poetic truth of the dream." In his analysis of MacDonald's fairy tale "The Lost Princess," Sendak concludes that MacDonald could have used a quotation by Novalis that MacDonald had used many times before: "For his first great fairy tale for adults, *Phantastes*, and which makes up the closing words of his last book, the dream romance *Lilith*: 'Our life is not dream, but it should and will perhaps become one'" (Caldecott 49). Sendak is incorrect about *Lilith* being MacDonald's last work, but for Sendak, it appears, only MacDonald's fantasies count since Sendak is interested in dreams as a mechanism for escape. Anodos dozes off and enters fairyland, Max enters the land of the Wild Things through his bedroom, as does Mickey from *In the Night Kitchen*, who is in bed ready to fall asleep and literally falls through the floor into the Night Kitchen to begin his fantastic experience that is simultaneously frightening (he is baked into "a delicious Mickey-cake" and dives into a bottle of milk and cries: "I'm in the milk and the milk's in me") and exhilarating (Mickey climbs out of the milk bottle, naked, and coos: "Cock-a-doodle doo!), finally to float back to his bed and to the slumber of sleep.

A final connection between MacDonald and Sendak generally and *Phantastes* and *Where the Wild Things Are* specifically may be found in what Tolkien thought to be MacDonald's greatest talent: the great escape, the "Escape from Death," which Tolkien states: "Death is the theme that most inspired George MacDonald" (67-68). U. C. Knoepfelmacher admits that "critics have yet to explain why so many children's books should be obsessed with death and survival" (109). Knoepfelmacher identifies "the mortuary signs" in Sendak—"Max's voyage was a purgative dream that sated the wolf boy, appeased by his mother's dinner" (110), situating Sendak's obsession with death to the haunting of the Holocaust. One wonders if Sendak found the theme of death reinforced by his reading and illustrating of MacDonald. In *Phantastes* the hero Anodos dies in fairyland, only to be reborn into the real world. MacDonald tells us directly that death is more life—and that Anodos is not ready for death (unlike Diamond in *At the Back of the North*

Wind, who as “God’s baby” is no longer of this world and is prepared to enter the realm at the back of the north wind). Anodos is attacked by “a great brute, like a wolf, but twice the size” (197), and we need to remember little Max “wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind or another,” desiring to eat up his mother. It is tempting to conclude that Sendak found the death theme from *Phantastes* intriguing in MacDonald, a theme reinforced while he was illustrating “The Golden Key” and “The Light Princess.” At the end of “The Golden Key,” for example, Tangle and Mossy, after an arduous journey that takes years, are described as ascending a stairs in a rainbow where “they knew that they were going up to the country whence the shadows fall” (78). In “The Light Princess” the prince intends to sacrifice his life to restore the water to a pond that gives the Light Princess her gravity; he’s inspired by a saying that is found on a gold plate at the bottom of the shrinking pond: “Death alone from death can save. / Love is death, and so is brave— / Love can fill the deepest grave. / Love loves on beneath the wave” (83-4). The Wild Things desire that Max remain in their realm: “Oh please don’t go—we’ll eat you up—we love you so!” But Max’s desire “to be where someone loved him best of all” and the pull “from far away across the world” the smell of “good things to eat” pulls him back home, from a limbo or liminal land of death, to his room, to life. Max and Anodos venture into the realm of death, a place as natural as life, their bedrooms that transitional space between the real and the fantastic, the space between life and something other than life—maybe death. Sendak’s last work, *My Brother’s Book*, channeling Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* and William Blake, seems a fantasy in the spirit of *Phantastes*—in this work, Sendak is focused on the adult near the end of life and the voyage to the land of death, his illustrations modeled after Blake, though could be, in fact, illustrations to *Phantastes*.

Philip Nel reminds us that Sendak’s “books challenge people’s assumptions about what children’s literature is or should be” (112). MacDonald makes similar demands from readers reading his fairy tales and fantasies. It is not surprising, then, that Sendak would find in MacDonald—*Phantastes* in particular—some inspiration for the fantastic voyage of Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*.

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