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God and Laughter: Overcoming the Darkness in Modern Fantasy Literature

Thomas L. Martin

“I wonder if sneering is of the devil and laughter is not wicked?”

—Thackeray

For Michael Harrawood

A friend and colleague teaches a course at my university devoted to the subject of the Devil and Laughter. This mischievously conjunctive course, titled “Comedy and the Devil,” makes some serious points about what we humans find funny. The course examines the phenomenon of laughter and its cultural manifestations in such writers as Petronius, Rabelais, Wilde, and Twain, while other art forms and even contemporary comedians round out this popular course he teaches at our honors college.

As I understand the approach, a central assumption that guides the discussions is that the divine is essentially the serious mode of life. Like the Miltonic voice of heaven, the divine mode maintains itself in a staid and placid simplicity, and despite its assumed fullness it allows no room for either dissent or diversion. The Devil appears as a trickster like Loki, Dionysus, or Robin Goodfellow. He is the surd outside of the order that keeps ordered things off balance. He is order’s necessary counter-force. Acting from this place of opposition, he stirs things up just enough to bring dynamism to life, a dynamism without which life perhaps would not be, or certainly would not be as interesting.

On the other hand, we associate the divine with a level of unbroken seriousness. As the argument continues, the priestly, the liturgical, and the devotional represent a cultural power through the ages intent on curbing laughter wherever it might bubble up to upset some established order. A controversial exception that proves the rule is the medieval Feast of Fools, the one day a year a boy dressed as a bishop presided over all kinds of outrageous behavior the church authority reluctantly allowed. The rest of the year, sober souls who seek heaven above should divest themselves of the deceitfulness of this world and abide in the “house of mourning” rather than the “the house of mirth.” This conviction presumably leads Chaucer, for example, to retract on his deathbed his *Canterbury Tales*, “Thilke that

sownen into synne,” along with his other works of humorous diversion.

Now my esteemed colleague’s course looks at laughter in its various historical and cultural manifestations. I would like to question its assumptions, or at least offer an alternative perspective, not as a formal philosophical argument, as worthwhile as that might be. (Such formal debates abound in the Middle Ages, and the interested reader might start with *The Name of the Rose* for an engaging contemporary précis.) What I offer here instead is a counterstatement, if not resounding alternative chorus, given us by modern fantasy authors. An underappreciated feature of this literature is that these writers have spoken with power and conviction about the spiritual nature of laughter. What they say turns out to be as surprising for our time as it is both culturally and philosophically significant. If their literature indeed stands as a counterstatement, it is so not to traditional theology or the clerically staid, but to the limitations imposed by modern materialism and naturalism, which deny spiritual reality.¹

Of course, modern fantasy begins in the nineteenth century with George MacDonald, and while laughter is central to his imaginative literature,² the point I wish to make is that joyous laughter in MacDonald manifests an essential power over evil. In this regard, his books *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* make an important statement about laughter’s spiritual vigor. In one particularly compelling passage, the narrator tells us of the old fairy princess: “The princess stopped, her [spinning] wheel stopped, and she laughed. And her laugh was sweeter than song and wheel; sweeter than running brook and silver bell; sweeter than joy itself, for the heart of the laugh was love” (*Curdie* 67-68). Here and throughout his two stories, we see laughter as a genuine force for good in the world. It is behind all the good things the narrator mentions, driving them forward as its deepest impulse of love ripples across nature and from the good characters out into society. In MacDonald’s stories, laughter is an irrepressible spiritual good and sign of spiritual health in an age ruled by realism and naturalism. Laughter is as real a force as much as any physical law governing moving bodies in our own material world.

A darker kind of laughter haunts MacDonald’s stories as well. In a bidirectional universe for which all gifts move either toward divine glory or away from it, he also presents the scornful laugh of the mocker. Instead of consecrating divine gifts, the mocker would desecrate them and turn what is meant for good into an occasion for evil. This kind of scornful laugh appears in the very first pages of MacDonald’s *The Princess and the Goblin*. If

anything, it is the typical devil’s laugh we find in such stories. As destructive as that laugh may be in its own right, it is always a lesser power next to the laughter of such characters as the old fairy princess or the young hero Curdie. After being confined in the house for several days, little Princess Irene gets lost in the woods with her nurse Lootie. The dark sets in before they can return home, and they both are frightened by noises they hear. They start running: “‘Who’s that laughing at me?’ said the princess, trying to keep in her sobs, and running too fast for her grazed knees.” The laughter they hear is uncanny, unnerving. It comes out of the dark as “a hoarse indistinct voice that seemed to say: ‘Lies! lies! lies!’” (43). What is this fiendish threat coming to them from a place of shadows? Sensing the danger close in, young Irene and her nurse experience genuine terror.

About that time Curdie arrives merrily singing his song. It is clear the goblins do mean the young princess harm. The nurse in her desperate state is so afraid that she forbids the boy from speaking the name of the evil creatures, lest he give these enemies of the dark more power. But Curdie continues undaunted, singing humorous taunts of their name. He manifests the true power of laughter as he effectively drives the goblins away:

We’re the merry miner-boys,
Make the goblins hold their noise.

...

Hush! scush! scurry!
There you go in a hurry!
Gobble! gobble! goblin!
There you go a wobblin’;
Hobble, hobble, hobblin’—
Cobble! cobble! cobblin’!
Hob-bob-goblin!— (45-46)

Although likely outnumbered by goblins in the shadows, Curdie sings a happy and playful song that drives them and their menacing laughter deep into the dark. Curdie’s joyous laughter saves the young Princess Irene and her doubting nurse.

Before MacDonald’s time, laughter in traditional literature carries a strong ethical component and appeals to a person’s sense of judgment. Aristotle describes the idea that carries well into the eighteenth century: as lower characters act in ways anomalous to standards of behavior, higher-minded characters view the spectacle as a source of the risible. For the wisest characters and the audience viewing them, the laughter that results reinforces

all sorts of moral and social norms. But MacDonald's stories mark a shift: laughter now holds a spiritual power over evil. In his books, we see two countervailing forces at work: while a shadow laughter of evil characters draws on scorn and ridicule that threatens the good, the bright laughter of good characters draws on love and merriment that overcomes the evil.

So where does this idea of laughter come from? While it does not appear in classical literature, it is evident in earlier fairy tale and folk traditions. We see a merriment, or forced merriment, in Nick Bottom caught in the woods in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Alone and fearful in the dark, he decides, "I will walk up and down here, and I will sing, that they shall hear I am not afraid" (III.i.122-23). In a scene much like the Curdie scene above, except for its comic inversions, Bottom sings in the same way to dispel the evil spirits. Of course, Shakespeare defuses any real danger in the situation, but the idea of the power of mirth as it faces evil is clear in the scene. Fantasy literature picks up on the idea and expands it—or perhaps gets to the very heart of it. On that point, J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* reaches deep into the fairy-tale tradition and poses a wonderful mythopoeic invention: laughter is the origin of the fairies themselves. As Peter himself explains, "You see, Wendy, when the first baby laughed for the first time, its laugh broke into a thousand pieces, and they all went skipping about, and that was the beginning of fairies" (17).

The idea of the power of laughter to overcome the darkness is evident across the writings of the Christian fantasists, The Inklings. C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams are all profoundly influenced by MacDonald's fantasies and use this trope in their writings. Williams in *All Hallow's Eve* introduces it at one of the most ominous moments in his story. Evil Simon the Clerk hopes to capture Lester Furnival, the soul of a dead woman roaming the streets of London near the titular holiday. When Simon nearly has her under his control, "Lester unexpectedly laughed. It was years since anyone had laughed in that hall and now the sound, though low, was so rich and free, it so ran and filled the hall" (197). All three wicked characters she confronts in the scene—one living, one dead, and one strange creation neither living nor dead—are noticeably repelled by the force of Lester's laughter. In that moment, Lester's laughter deals evil a significant blow. Laughter wields a genuine spiritual force in Williams's world.

Tolkien distributes laughter throughout his fantasy work in the hobbits generally but specifically in his character Tom Bombadil. Besides the characteristic jollity of the hobbits that gives them their hardiness and

resilience, Tom Bombadil fully embodies this power of laughter over evil. Early in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and his hobbit companions become imprisoned by the Barrow-wights. In the clutches of the ghastly creatures, Frodo hears a cold song like an incantation lull him toward a deathly sleep. Evil has its own poetry and its own songs of peculiar power. The Barrow-wights who have trapped the hobbits appear close to finishing them off. Nearly en-“chanted” into insensibility, Frodo recalls the song of Tom Bombadil. With little strength left, Frodo sings “in a small desperate voice” Tom’s name: “and with that name his voice seemed to grow strong: it had a full and lively sound, and the dark chamber echoed as if to drum and trumpet” (142). Tom appears out of the darkness to rescue them, singing:

None has ever caught him yet, for Tom, he is the master:
His songs are stronger songs, and his feet are faster.

...

Get out, you old Wight! Vanish in the sunlight!
Shrivel like the cold mist, like the winds go wailing,

...

Lost and forgotten be, darker than the darkness,
Where gates stand for ever shut, till the world is mended.

The Barrow-wights cry out at the sound of Tom’s song, followed by their chamber falling with a crash. Tom saves the hobbits, “laughing as he danced round them in the sunlight. One would have thought that nothing dangerous or dreadful had happened; and indeed the horror faded out of their hearts as they looked at him, and saw the merry glint in his eyes” (143). Tom’s warm-hearted laughter dispels the evil of the Barrow-wights like a hearth fire on a cold night dispels a deep chill. The scene is one of many eucatastrophes in Tolkien’s story, those moments of joyous reversal in which the fairy tale singularly excels that he discusses elsewhere.

Lewis develops this theme of the power of laughter over evil and adds a keen insight. Not only does laughter repel evil, but evil makes itself absurd in the face of the good. When in *Out of the Silent Planet* Weston seeks to dominate the sorns either by buying their affections or threatening them with violence, they simply erupt in laughter. These innocent sorns have never seen evil before, but Weston’s alternative overtures of “pouff! bang!” and “Pretty, pretty!” as he threatens them with violence and waves before them a Woolworth’s necklace just elicits the most riotous laughter: they “burst out and rent the silence of that august place, waking echoes from the distant mountain walls. . . . The stars in their courses were fighting against Weston”

(126-127). Laughter not only overflows with a joy of life, but it is also amused with the extremes to which evil will go to avoid that joy.

In some cases, laughter is the only just response on the part of good facing evil. Evil can provoke laughter against itself that can lead to its very downfall, as we see in Lewis's *The Horse and His Boy*. As evil chooses power over joy, mastery over love, it runs against the grain of the universe. After evil Prince Radabash's plans to conquer Narnia are thwarted, Aslan extends mercy to him. Radabash foolishly refuses and continues the battle on verbal grounds, hurling threats and imprecations. Like Collodi's Pinocchio who literally laughs himself into the shape of an ass, Radabash rails himself into an ass. Sprouting ass's ears and with them the full form of the beast, Radabash's railing simply turns to braying. Like Midas in the Greek myth, he is given ass's ears for his poor judgment. Like Bottom in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, he has become the spectacle of absurdity. Thereafter, Lewis's deposed prince is known as "Radabash the Ridiculous." The point is clear: the evil of evil characters that seeks to undo others often ends up undoing itself. In some final sense, evil is its own *reductio ad absurdum*.

The mention of the ridiculous might make any reader of modern fantasy recall the "Riddikulus" spell in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter stories that carries forward this theme. The student uses the spell when confronted by the evil shape-shifting spirit known as a boggart. The opportunistic boggart always takes advantage of its victims by appearing in the form they most fear. The student using the Riddikulus spell changes the boggart into something humorous, and the resulting laughter defeats the menacing creature. In moments like these, fantasy literature addresses important realities of light and dark that "realist" literature cannot touch nor yet acknowledge. Like a rising wave, fantasy literature is a significant living literary form in our time that surges with conviction that a merry heart does good, that laughter is a medicine for body and soul, and that joy is a genuine defense against evil in its various forms that we do not altogether understand yet dare not altogether deny.

Of course, while many fantasy stories use this trope in one way or another to reveal the decisive power of laughter over evil, Ray Bradbury makes it the centerpiece of his *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Mr. Dark arrives with his strange circus that both thrills and frightens the townspeople by playing on their deepest desires and darkest fears. Mr. Dark is a wicked harvester of souls, seeking to enslave those allured by the sights of his circus. He and his accomplices turn murderous, and it is only when Charles

Halloway discovers deep in the library basement that the power of laughter is the way to defeat these forces that he can protect himself and the boys. The witch who nearly kills him by smiting him with a heart attack is repulsed by Halloway's spirited laughter: "Chased, bruised, beaten by his laugh which echoed, rang, swam to fill the [library's] marble vaults . . ." (230). Halloway not only overcomes this and Mr. Dark's other evil powers but also brings himself and young Jim Nightshade back to life through the power of his laughter.

The examples from this literature could be compounded at length, but I finish with a remarkable example of how laughter is a force for good across this literature. Even though the earlier faith of MacDonald and the Inklings does not necessarily continue into some of the later fantasists, it is fascinating to see how powerful the trope is as these later writers style laughter as a key force in the ongoing war against evil. Indeed, can fantasy literature exist without that trope? For these authors perhaps Schopenhauer is right: "Humor is the only divine quality in man." In the third book of Stephen R. Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant* series, Lord Foul finally gets his poetic justice. Yet it comes not from a battle or contest of power but from a place of pure joy. Known throughout the books as "the Despiser," the cynical destroyer and source of large-scale evil in the world, Lord Foul has chained up the giant Saltheart Foamfollower, who is at the brink of despair. Covenant tells him to laugh, to recall the power of laughter: "I want you to laugh. Take joy in it. Bring some joy into this bloody hole. Laugh!" (466). Laughter begins to well up in his soul, and the laughter purifies first himself: "as Foamfollower fought to laugh, his muscles loosened. The constriction of his throat and chest relaxed, allowing a pure wind of humor to blow the ashes of rage and pain from his lungs. Soon something like joy, something like real mirth, appeared in his voice" (467). After the laughter purifies himself, it begins to cleanse the world. It vanquishes Lord Foul, whose life in the face of the laughter unwinds like a clock and finally vanishes. As characters like Donaldson's Covenant and Foamfollower look into the malevolent forces that drive evil, look deep into the gaping void that evil creates about itself, they come to understand that joy is part of the fabric of existence, and to avoid it is to diminish, if not imperil, oneself. That is the great truth evil cannot imagine or understand. Perhaps fantasy writers cannot do without the trope, after all. Perhaps Schopenhauer's one glowing spark might be kindled again.

When it comes to laughter, the fantasists agree with MacDonald that the Devil does not have all the good music. The Devil's laughter rings from

the beginning with a “Hath God said,” rises to ridicule, peaks at something like scorn, and then cools in a valley of cynicism. The laughter of the Devil is ultimately an exploitive laughter that of necessity preys on good. Its joy in tearing down turns to elation when its own fortunes rise as a result. It banks its happiest coin it loots from others. And where does this laugh lead? What is the final outcome of the Devil’s laugh? In time, the scornful laugh at Job—“Does Job love God for nothing? Stretch your hand out against him”—becomes the absurd metaphysical joke—“If you are the Son of God . . . fall down and worship me.” The evil laugh redounds upon its own head.

As for that higher music we find in MacDonald and other fantasists: the laughter of God and of all good creatures is most of all an affirmation of life and joy of creation. At its lowest level, it is the spontaneous breath of goodness before words say anything at all. It is the unmistakable laugh of joy that rational faculties can scarce contain. It is the laugh of life celebrated in all its unexpected turns. It is the laugh of the loving parent viewing a child grow and learn. From a young age, we know the difference between this laugh and that other laugh which comes from a cruel and wicked heart. And so with that distinction, we come to know that at its dividing line two divergent value systems wage war. And perhaps because the casualties can be so great in the ongoing conflict, we are reluctant to choose sides. The Devil’s laugh and God’s are not unknown to our hearts.

What then of the last laugh? As the literature of fantasy gets us to look deep into the spiritual nature of things, the light it shines makes the veil separating this world and the next most diaphanous. We have seen in this literature the power of laughter over evil, how hearty goodness garrisoned in its own breast is its own best spiritual protection. It “fears not those who can destroy the body.” With its existential affirmations, the goodness of laughter overmatches the negating powers of evil. The one laugh finds life, the other loses it.

Laughter from the standpoint of eternity comes clear in a light it shares with this literature. Laughter has something to do with the final disposition of things and in some sense may play a part in their transformation. Comedy is, after all, about the happy ending. It is part of, as Dante has it, the great Divine Comedy. And as Chaucer’s *Troilus* has it, part of the human comedy too, as he looks back on his life from the vantage of the stars and laughs. In the end, maybe comedy’s belly laugh is deeply connected with comedy’s happy ending. In those late transformations touched by laughter, literary and eschatological significance comes to the

old adage: he who laughs last laughs best. Abraham and Sarah’s laugh of unbelief transforms into living faith as her aged body produces a son Isaac, whose very name is laughter. In the same way, our fantasy writers realize the triumph of the divine laugh, a laugh that is the laugh of all the faithful, of whom even suffering Job says, “He will yet fill your mouth with laughter. . . .”

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Bill Senior for his comments on this essay and suggestions for improvement.
2. See Gabelman, who argues for laughter or lightness of being or “devine levity” across MacDonald’s works.

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