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*The Carnavalesque in George MacDonald's The Light Princess*

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**Abstract:** In this article, I apply Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival to an analysis of George MacDonald's *The Light Princess* (1864). First, I define the concept of 'carnival' as explained in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* (1965). The subversive characteristic of the carnival which Bakhtin writes of is paramount in fantasy literature, of which *The Light Princess* exemplifies various elements. Brian Attebery says, "fantastic literature, as a literature that provokes reinterpretations of 'reality' and the boundaries of what is known and accepted, plays an important role in Bakhtin's criticism" (117). Second, I provide an overview of various critical responses to the ideological function of carnival, applying a special focus on how children's literature criticism benefits from carnival by referring to critics such as John Stephens and Maria Nikolajeva. Finally, I examine ways in which MacDonald uses the carnivalesque mode to convey his ideas of social reform.

**Key Words:** Carnival, Humour, Parody, Children's literature.

## Introduction

George MacDonald's *The Light Princess* (1864) embodies a carnivalesque interrogative quality, in the sense that carnival creates space for MacDonald to release the subversive potential of the story, his criticism of received paradigms of behaviour and morality. Bakhtin's concept of carnival, as expressed in *Rabelais and his World*, incorporates various techniques and devices, such as laughter, punning, hyperbole, and humour, that have "a tremendous capacity for parody, debasing, and travesty" (Gardiner 50) of official culture, providing conceptual bases for analysing the story's carnivalesque quality. Simon Dentith defines carnivalised writing as "writing which has taken the carnival spirit into itself and

thus reproduces, within its own structures and by its own practice, the characteristic inversions, parodies and discrownings of carnival proper” (65). MacDonald uses carnivalesque images and motifs that serve to blur the boundaries between seriousness and humour, and through which he provokes the reader’s mockery of the puerility, cruelty and inanity of the official cultures of adults. His carnivalesque attitude resonates with Bakhtin’s thinking about official cultures: “The serious aspects of class structure are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation” (90). The temporality and spatiality of the mode of carnivalisation within the story express MacDonald’s parody of the existing social order.

At the same time, MacDonald empowers the unofficial culture of children over the official culture of adults by creating for child-heroes a pastoral world in which they speak and behave in ways oppositional to normative expectations. By juxtaposing the pastoral world (freedom) with the courtly world (authority), MacDonald’s aim is quintessentially carnivalesque. He makes topsy turvy parodies of the courtly world that function as a frontal assault on the centre of authority, employing the carnivalesque mode to express nonconformity with paradigms of middle-class socialisation. The moral force of the story’s ending, which is about the liberty of the child, is immanent within all of the earlier episodes, so that the moral liberty of the child becomes, retroactively, the motivating spirit of the mode of carnivalisation in the story. MacDonald’s spiritual vision, however, is transformative (that is, redemptive). His views are grounded on individual moral reform, rather than on structural or institutional social reform.

## **Carnival and the Carnavalesque**

In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin traces the history of the popular cultural festivities of the Middle Ages and the impact of Francois Rabelais (1483–1553), a prominent French Renaissance humanist scholar, upon that history. According to Bakhtin, the medieval carnival facilitated a disruption of the normal social order and a temporary reversal of the power structure, since “in the world of the carnival all hierarchies are cancelled” (251). The carnival was revolutionary: “In the Middle Ages folk humor existed and developed outside the official sphere of high ideology and literature, but precisely because of its unofficial existence, it was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness” (71). Fools and clowns became powerful and important, and they mocked and challenged the dominant discourse of authorities through the traditional language of the carnival, including laughter which, according to Bakhtin, “overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority” (90). The carnival was about freedom. “As opposed to the official feast,” Bakhtin argues, “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (10)

During the period of the carnival, the normal social order was suspended and people experienced a temporary liberation from established social hierarchies. Carnival allows for a significant space of what Bakhtin calls “the material bodily element” (79), celebrating the pleasures of the corporeal body by indulging excessively in sex, violence, food, and drink. It celebrates “Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness” (303) as expressions of freedom.

The carnivalesque mode incorporates various images and techniques, including laughter which, according to Bakhtin, serves to parody the existing social order:

For the medieval parodist everything without exception was comic. Laughter was as universal as seriousness: it was directed at the whole world, at history, at all societies, at ideology ... This is why medieval parody played a completely unbridled game with all that is most sacred and important from the point of view of official ideology. (84)

This kind of laughter starts with that which we all share, the body, and its force carries beyond the edges of what is commonly acceptable and permitted, potentially leading to a alteration (not necessarily permanent) in what is socially acceptable and/or valued:

Carnival laughter and mockeries are corporate play. Carnival depends on common senses of the ridiculous, in-jokes, and knowledges. Centrifugal language — that is, the everyday slangy language at the margins of the marketplace (and playground) — becomes part of a shared ‘laughing word,’ which may in turn initiate a moral reorganisation. (Johnston 139)

Carnival therefore encompasses a “time-out” from the existing social order in which people enjoyed a momentary suspension of societal restrictions, subverting and liberating the assumptions of dominant discourses through using common ideas and expressions that are taken from everyday life but elevated to the status of official language.

## **The Ideological Function of Carnival**

The ideological function of carnival as Bakhtin conceptualised it has provoked a variety of critical responses, which can be summarised in two major categories. First, carnival can have a transgressive potential, since it creates space for a disguised interrogation of authorities. Michael Gardiner, for example, locates Bakhtin’s carnival within “an alternative ‘social space’ of freedom, abundance and equality” (45), arguing that carnival “transgresses the usual norms and rules that govern everyday life” (46). Carnival for Gardiner is anti-authoritarian, since it “effectively broke down the formalities of hierarchy and the inherited differences between different social classes, ages and castes, replacing established traditions and canons with a ‘free and familiar’ social interaction based on the principles of

mutual cooperation, solidarity and equality” (52). Second, however, carnival can be viewed as an officially sanctioned relief during a limited period of misrule which effectively maintains the status quo rather than subverts it. M. Keith Booker argues that “Despite the significance of the carnival as an arena for the staging of subversive energies, one must not forget that the carnival itself is in fact a sanctioned form of “subversion” whose very purpose is to sublimate and defuse the social tensions that might lead to genuine subversion — a sort of opiate of the masses” (5-6). Simon Dentith succinctly describes the predominant critique of the ideological function of carnival as anti-authoritarian:

The most common objection to Bakhtin’s view of carnival as an anti-authoritarian force that can be mobilized against the official culture of Church and State, is that on the contrary it is part of that culture; in the typical metaphor of this line of argument, it is best seen as a safety-valve, which in some overall functional way reinforces the bonds of authority by allowing for their temporary suspension. (73)

Children’s literature criticism benefits from Bakhtin’s concept of carnival as a means of critique or complicity. John Stephens writes that the aspect of carnival in children’s literature includes, first, texts that “offer the characters ‘time-out’ from the habitual constraints of society but incorporate a safe return to social normality,” serving as a “safety-valve” to the moral and didactic purposes of the status quo; and second, texts that are “endemically subversive of such things as social authority, received paradigms of behaviour and morality, and major literary genres associated with children’s literature” (121). Stephens defines carnival in children’s literature as being “grounded in a playfulness which situates itself in positions of nonconformity. It expresses opposition to authoritarianism and seriousness, and is often manifested as parody of prevailing literary forms and genres, or as literature in non-canonical forms” (121). The carnivalesque mode, according to Stephens, is intertextual since it “frequently takes the specific form of parody or travesty of a pretext, and its purpose often seems to be an iconoclastic gesture attempting to subvert what is perceived as a dominant discourse” (116). Maria Nikolajeva similarly argues that Bakhtin “applies the concept of carnival to literature, viewing it as a narrative device used to describe reality in a distorting mirror, in a state of temporary deviation from the existing order, as well as total freedom from societal restrictions” (*Voice* 10). She invites scholars of children’s literature to embrace “Bakhtin’s overall view of literature as carnival, a symbolic representation of a socially liberating process, a subversive, that is, disguised, interrogation of authorities” (10). Nikolajeva elsewhere writes that carnival is applicable to children’s literature and often takes the form of “time-out” from the restrictions of adult authority in which the return to normality serves either to enforce established values or to challenge the existing social order: “Carnival theory enables us to see how power reversal works and decide whether return to order cancels the time-out or has some subversive effect” (*Aesthetic* 90).

For Stephens and Nikolajeva, carnival in children’s literature can therefore have a liberating effect, transgressing against established social practices; alternatively, it can be

conservative, complying with the status quo.

## **Mockery of the Courtly World**

*The Light Princess* tells of a king and a queen who finally have a daughter after a long time without children. They invite everyone to attend the christening, but the king forgets to invite his ill-tempered sister Princess Makemnoit, who out of spite and revenge casts a spell over the newborn child to be “light of body,” leaving her floating and flying, and “light of spirit,” always “screeching with laughter” (9) even at serious issues. Astonished at his daughter’s weightlessness and carefree disposition, the king restricts her freedom, putting her under constant surveillance. He expresses to his wife his concerns at the risk weightlessness may involve for their daughter when she gets married: “Just think! If she were to have children! In the course of a hundred years the air might be as full of floating children as of gossamers in autumn” (12). The king seeks advice from philosophers, a spiritualist by the name of Hum-Drum who prescribes a mental cure, and a physician named Kopy-Keck who recommends a physical cure, but all their solutions are absurd and ineffectual. Realising that the princess regains her gravity only while she is immersed in water, Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck advise the king “to bury her alive for three years; in the hope that, as the water did her so much good, the earth would do her yet more” (22). Frustrated in his efforts to find a cure for her weightlessness, the king gives the princess an “awful whipping” (23), on the theory that crying, as Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck suggest, may bring back her lost gravity. The princess escapes the absurdities and restrictions of the adult world and finds refuge in the pastoral world of a lake, which provides her with a social space of freedom, devoid of the fear and repression represented by the king, Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck.

A prince from a neighbouring country sets off in search of a wife. He comes upon the princess in the lake, and thinking that she is drowning, he rushes into the water and soon finds out about her weightlessness. He falls in love with the princess, and their swimming together, expressed in a state of undress, suggests sexual connotations:

The prince took off his scarf, then his sword-belt, then his tunic, and tied them all together, and let them down. But the line was far too short. He unwound his turban, and added it to the rest, when it was all but long enough; and his purse completed it. The princess just managed to lay hold of the knot of money, and was beside him in a moment. This rock was much higher than the other, and the splash and the dive were tremendous. The princess was in ecstasies of delight, and their swim was delicious. (32)

Upon learning that the prince has fallen in love with the princess, Princess Makemnoit deploys a slithering snake that drains the lake by creating a hole in its bottom. The prince sacrifices himself for the sake for the princess, using his body to block the hole through

which the remaining water is flowing. Indifferent to his situation, the princess sits in a boat near the prince while the water rises, almost drowning him. Realising at last the risk to which the prince is subjecting himself, the princess throws herself into the water and saves him. As a result, she regains her physical and emotional gravity. She changes from a conceited girl to a loving, compassionate woman. The king, however, “had already gone home to dinner” (44) during his daughter’s transformation. The story ends on a happy note: Makemnoit drowns in the lake, the land becomes moist and fertile again, and the prince and the princess marry and have many children — a sign of fecundity, which the king and the queen lack.

The content and style of *The Light Princess* annoyed some moralists of the age. Not only did John Ruskin, argues Knoepfmacher, express serious misgivings about the story’s content as being inappropriate for young readers due to erotic encounters between characters, but he also disliked its style (*Ventures* 138). MacDonald sent an unpublished manuscript letter of the story to Ruskin, who told MacDonald “[You] cannot laugh in any exuberant or infectious manner — and the parts which are intended to be laughable are weak.” According to Ruskin, MacDonald’s insight allows him to “see too deeply” to function as a humorist (138). Knoepfmacher remarks that Ruskin wanted the story “to be refined into a more earnest narrative such as his own *King of the Golden River*” (138) which attacks greed in the form of materialism, with magic as a liberating element that questions established moral values.

The carnivalesque quality of *The Light Princess* allows MacDonald to criticise received paradigms of behaviour and morality without being earnestly didactic. Through punning and commentary, for example, MacDonald contrasts the sober tone of the king with the playful tone of the queen to provoke the reader’s humour at an exalted authority and established patriarchal values that regard men as the epitome of rationality. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White view punning as a form of “what Bakhtin calls *grammatica jocose* whereby grammatical order is transgressed to reveal erotic and obscene or merely materially satisfying counter-meaning” (10-11). K. Arthur similarly argues that the pun in Bakhtinian carnival

violates and so unveils the structure of prevailing (pre-vailing) convention; and it provokes laughter. Samuel Beckett’s punning pronouncement ‘In the beginning was the Pun’ sets pun against official Word and at the same time, as puns often do, sets free a chain of other puns. So, too, carnival sets itself up in a punning relationship with official culture and enables a plural, unfixed, comic view of the world. (qtd. in Stallybrass and White 11)

Punning therefore has a transgressive function, and part of this is that in Bakhtinian style punning serves to provoke humour at the official culture of adults, illuminating the relativity of the existing social order and its values. Stephens similarly writes that the discourse of carnival in children’s literature “is often idiomatic, and rich in a play of signifiers which foregrounds the relativity of sign-thing relationships, and hence the

relativity of prevailing 'truths' and ideologies" (121-2). The queen's playful tone clearly demonstrates this feature. The king quarrels with his wife about her ambivalent use of the word "light" in "light-footed," "light-fingered," "light-haired" and "light-heired." The narrator's commentary mocks the intellectual capacity of the king and commends the intellectual intuition of the queen, and much of this is conveyed through punning to which the king is oblivious:

"It is a good thing to be light-hearted, I am sure, whether she be ours or not."  
"It is a bad thing to be light-headed," answered the queen, looking with prophetic soul far into the future.  
"Tis a good thing to be light-handed," said the king.  
"Tis a bad thing to be light-fingered," answered the queen.  
"Tis a good thing to be light-footed," said the king.  
"Tis a bad thing —" began the queen; but the king interrupted her.  
"In fact," said he, with the tone of one who concludes an argument in which he has had only imaginary opponents, and in which, therefore, he has come off triumphant — "in fact, it is a good thing altogether to be light-bodied."  
"But it is a bad thing altogether to be light-minded," retorted the queen, who was beginning to lose her temper." (10-11)

Here the linguistic playfulness, a common feature of carnivalesque interrogative texts, reveals MacDonald's transgression of the king's dignity, in the sense that his inability to devise puns invites a carnivalesque humour of his puerility, which is made intelligible for the reader through narratorial commentary: "But it was not this reflection on his hair that arrested him; it was the double use of the word light. For the king hated all witticisms, and punning especially. And besides, he could not tell whether the queen meant light-haired or light-heired; for why might she not aspirate her vowels when she was exasperated herself?" (11). The story's carnivalesque quality is pervasive; for instance, it undermines the dignity of the king even as he speaks:

Now the queen was much cleverer than the king, and had begun already to suspect that "this effect defective came by cause."  
"I am sure she is ours," answered she. "But we ought to have taken better care of her at the christening. People who were never invited ought not to have been present."  
"Oh, ho!" said the king, tapping his forehead with his forefinger, "I have it all. I've found her out. Don't you see it, queen? Princess Makemnoit has bewitched her."  
"That's just what I say," answered the queen.  
"I beg your pardon, my love; I did not hear you. — John! Bring the steps I get on my throne with." For he was a little king with a great throne, like many other kings. (7)

The narrator's commentary here undermines the king's sense of intuition and portrays his



behaviour in ludicrous terms. The episode closes off with a reminder of the king's slight stature, which is clearly intended to dispel any regal dignity he might otherwise have. Punning and commentary therefore serve a comic effect. Since punning and humour serve to mock the courtly world, the carnivalesque is at play.

MacDonald uses the disguise motif, a common element of carnival, as a narrative strategy that interpellates readers to the ideology in the story, the writer's empowerment of the unofficial culture of children over the official culture of adults. To be near the princess, the prince enters the king's palace in "disguise" and requests to be made "shoeblack" (38) to the princess in order to offer himself to break Makemnoit's spell by using his body to block the hole from which the water is flowing. The narrator's commentary, "It was rather cunning in the prince to request such an easy post, for the princess could not possibly soil as many shoes as other princesses" (38), serves to juxtapose the cunning of the prince with the simplemindedness of the king:

So he knocked at the door of the king's counting-house, where it was all but a capital crime to disturb him. When the king heard the knock he started up, and opened the door in a rage. Seeing only the shoeblack, he drew his sword. This, I am sorry to say, was his usual mode of asserting his regality when he thought his dignity was in danger. But the prince was not in the least alarmed.

"Please your Majesty, I'm your butler," said he.

"My butler! you lying rascal! What do you mean?"

"I mean, I will cork your big bottle."

"Is the fellow mad?" bawled the king, raising the point of his sword.

"I will put a stopper — plug — what you call it, in your leaky lake, grand monarch," said the prince. (41)

Disguise and figurative language have a liberating effect, since they provoke the reader's laughter at the king's incompetence. Through disguise, MacDonald assigns power to the prince rather than to the king, and part of this is portrayed by exposing the insecurity of the king when confronted with strangers. Additionally, the king's inability to understand a simple metaphor shows his simplemindedness. The threat to resort to violence makes him less frightening than ridiculous, especially since it is made against someone who has actually come to help him, a fact that he also fails to comprehend.

The princess's exuberant laughter is emancipatory, illuminating MacDonald's parody of middle-class values that enforce prohibition, fear and limitation. "When she heard that the enemy was on his way to besiege her papa's capital, she laughed hugely; but when she was told that the city would certainly be abandoned to the mercy of the enemy's soldiery — why, then she laughed immoderately" (12). Her laughter has the liberating effect that Bakhtin ascribes to carnival laughter, since it exposes the king's liability in dealing with his daughter's loss of gravity. For Bakhtin, carnival laughter "is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (11-12). When the king and the queen converse about their daughter's carefree

disposition, for instance, they meet “outbursts of laughter over their heads; and looking up with indignation, saw her floating at full length in the air above them, whence she regarded them with the most comical appreciation of the position” (13). The king’s resentment now changes into discipline against his daughter: “The king grew more apprehensive with increasing years, till at last he would not allow her to walk abroad at all without some twenty silken cords fastened to as many parts of her dress, and held by twenty noblemen” (22). Cruelty and, as already mentioned, even violence follow. The narrator’s intrusions invite evaluation of MacDonald’s deep distaste for middle-class values that enforced physical and mental punishment of children as a necessary condition for their reform. MacDonald therefore makes a direct frontal engagement with the centre of authority through which he parodies received paradigms of behaviour and morality.

As noted previously, the carnivalesque mode is hyperbolic, comic and parodic. By juxtaposing serious and comic narrative modes, MacDonald parodies contemporary metaphysical and empirical modes of understanding the world. Gisela Kreglinger writes: “The contemporary Victorian tendency to move from theology to metaphysics to empiricism, and thus a solely material and scientific understanding of reality, is inverted in this story” (95). A parody with a transgressive effect, J. G. Riewald argues, “is neither mere simian imitation nor uncontrolled modulation. It is a form of humorous yet controlled exaggeration. And it is exactly that quality of controlled exaggeration of the salient characteristics of its subject in which lies the value of parody as criticism” (127). The comic, hyperbolic characterisation of Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck demonstrates MacDonald’s parody of entrenched ideologies of the age. Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck diagnose the princess’s illness and prescribe ludicrous and absurd solutions that invite the reader’s mockery of their dogmatism. To regain her gravity, Hum-Drum, for example, believes that the princess

must study every department of its history — its animal history; its vegetable history; its mineral history; its social history; its moral history; its political history, its scientific history; its literary history; its musical history; its artistical history; above all, its metaphysical history. She must begin with the Chinese dynasty and end with Japan. But first of all she must study geology, and especially the history of the extinct races of animals — their natures, their habits, their loves, their hates, their revenges. (18)

Kopy-Keck’s diagnosis is as absurd and ineffectual as that of his friend:

From some cause or other, of no importance to our inquiry, the motion of her heart has been reversed. That remarkable combination of the suction and the forcepump works the wrong way — I mean in the case of the unfortunate princess: it draws in where it should force out, and forces out where it should draw in. The offices of the auricles and the ventricles are subverted ... My proposal for her cure is this: —

“Phlebotomize until she is reduced to the last point of safety ... when she is

reduced to a state of perfect asphyxy, apply a ligature to the left ankle ...” (19)

Through parody MacDonald makes frontal assault on the courtly world as represented by the king, Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck. MacDonald also criticizes the power of institutionalized knowledge as well as nonsense masquerading as academic discourse. These figures of inversion and turning inside out and upside down are quintessentially carnivalesque.

## **The Pastoral World of the Lake and the Corporeal Body**

MacDonald transgresses against paradigms of middle-class socialisation by creating a pastoral world for the characters in which they may speak and behave in ways oppositional to normative social expectations. The prince's and the princess's pleasure in the corporeal body, for example, is no longer suppressed. Carnival celebrated “the material body” in which people indulged in food and sex that freed them from restriction. The pastoral world of the lake clearly demonstrates this feature. Sexuality, “generally displaced into the removal of clothing” in children's literature (Stephens 142), is a recurring motif in the story and its ideological function is expressed in the swimming episodes — mainly, the characters' state of undress that invites transgressive connotations. The structure of the pastoral world of the lake has therefore an interrogative effect, since the lake provides the princess and the prince with a safe environment that frees them from any form of suppression: “The palace was built on the shores of the loveliest lake in the world; and the princess loved this lake more than father or mother” (20). As he approaches the lake the prince wonders about the strange sounds he hears in the direction of the water, rushes to help, and starts to undress

Looking over the lake, he saw something white in the water; and, in an instant, he had torn off his tunic, kicked off his sandals, and plunged in. He soon reached the white object, and found that it was a woman. There was not light enough to show that she was a princess, but quite enough to show that she was a lady, *for it does not want much light to see that.* (25, italics added)

The italicised phrase illuminates a social habit of middle-class Victorian women; that is, that “the princess lacks the elaborate swimming apparel with which Victorian ladies conceal their bodies” (Knoepflmacher, *George* 344). The princess accepts the prince's request for a “fall” in the lake, but as she is undecided at first, “I do not know. Perhaps it would not be proper,” she becomes defiant later, “But I don't care. At all events, as we have fallen in, let us have a swim together” (27). The prince's and the princess's state of undress could thus be viewed as a condition of carnivalesque freedom from societal restrictions, or even a rebellion against them. The narrator's commentary illuminates his untroubled view of the children's liberating behaviour: “The condition of her dress, increasing her usual difficulty in walking, compelled her to cling to him; and he could hardly persuade himself

that he was not in a delightful dream, notwithstanding the torrent of musical abuse with which she overwhelmed him” (27). She instructs the prince:

You see where that green light is burning? That is the window of my room. Now if you would just swim there with me very quietly, and when we are all but under the balcony, give me such a push — up you call it — as you did a little while ago, I should be able to catch hold of the balcony, and get in at the window; and then they may look for me till to-morrow morning! (28)

Urging her to keep their encounters a secret, the prince cautions the princess: “Don’t tell” (28), a narrative event of ideological significance. Deborah Gorham writes that “In polite Victorian discourse, the idea that a young girl could have any sexual thoughts at all was simply bypassed. It was part of the Victorian belief system that girls were not only innocent of sensuality, they were ignorant of it” (54). Mostly expressed in secret, the children’s behaviour transgresses middle-class values.

MacDonald’s eroticisation of the swimming episodes annoyed some prudish moralists of the age. Ruskin, as noted previously, criticised the story’s content as being detrimental to young readers, who, according to Ruskin, should not be exposed to eroticism in the manner in which it is depicted in the story. Comparing MacDonald to Ruskin, Knoepflmacher argues that “On sexual matters,” MacDonald was “the greater iconoclast” (*Ventures* 140). This is partly due to his refusal to “desexualize” the story (139), overlooking Ruskin’s criticism of the detrimental impact it could have upon children. Knoepflmacher quotes Ruskin’s 22 July 1863 letter to MacDonald as evidence of this attitude toward the story:

it is too amorous through out — and to some temperaments would be quite mischievous. You are too pure minded yourself to feel this — but I assure you the swimming scenes and love scenes would be to many children seriously harmful. — Not that they would have to be cut out — but to be done in a simpler and less telling way. We will chat over this. Pardon my positive way of stating these things — it is my inferiority to you in many noble things which enables *me* to feel them and prevents *you*. (qtd in Knoepflmacher, *Ventures* 140)

The swimming episodes clearly express an ideological intent, MacDonald’s interrogation of middle-class socialisation that enforces inhibition and fear. Ruskin’s assumption that MacDonald does not realise how erotic he is being (of course he does), misses the point that what MacDonald is really doing is attacking what he sees as prurient oppression of sexuality in children, which happens in the context of a “time-out.” The constraints the characters are dealing with are the same as those in the readers’ real world. If anything, what seems significant is that nothing sexual actually happens in the erotic encounters between the characters. The prince and the princess remain chaste, both trusting and trustworthy of each other. As John Patrick Pazdziora writes:

Like [MacDonald’s] ‘Cross Purposes’ or ‘The Day Boy and the Night Girl,’ *The*

*Light Princess* might be best understood as the story of two individuals learning to love and respect one another by crossing into liminality and the borders of the otherworld. In this context, the true fairy-tale hero is not the prince at all; it is the princess. The story is hers. The prince's sacrifice and courage serve only to awaken within her simultaneous knowledge of love and death. (269)

For MacDonald, all the constraints are therefore unnecessary, and get in the way of children's natural development.

## **Intertextuality as Parody of Gender Role**

As noted previously, MacDonald employs parody as a carnivalesque strategy with an ideological function, in the sense that the carnivalesque mode, according to Stephens, "is intertextual since it proceeds by parodying and mocking recognizable social forms and structures and literary genres and texts" (116-7). The story, Jack Zipes argues, "is a parody of "Sleeping Beauty" and "Rapunzel," and, for that matter, it reflects MacDonald's disrespectful attitude toward traditional folktales and fairy tales" (*Fairy Tales* 113). William Raeper similarly writes that the story draws upon imagery and motifs of traditional narratives such *The Sleeping Beauty* (George 314).

MacDonald complicates the narrative structure of his story, creating space for thematic contrasts with the traditional narratives through which he parodies the middle-class Victorian image of girls. Carnavalesque texts, of which *The Light Princess* exemplifies various elements, frequently provoke a complex reader response, therefore inviting a variety of subject positions that "discourage simple identification with the subject position of one or more of the characters within the text" (Stephens 124). The reader's identification with the main character "may shift amongst such positions as empathy, delight, superiority, criticism, outrage, revulsion, and so on, and may even combine two or more in one response" (124). The ending of *The Light Princess* clearly demonstrates this "shift." The narrator's frequent comments on the princess being mistreated by her father, Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck, for instance, evoke the reader's "empathy" with her character and her action:

But so anxious was the king that the suggestion [of burying the princess alive] should have a fair trial, that he put himself in a rage one day, and, rushing up to her room, gave her an awful whipping. Yet not a tear would flow. She looked grave, and her laughing sounded uncommonly like screaming — that was all. The good old tyrant, though he put on his best gold spectacles to look, could not discover the smallest cloud in the serene blue of her eyes. (23)

The reader, however, is displaced from a simple identification with the princess. During the prince's sacrificial act the princess appears "apparently asleep" (45), indifferent and

unsympathetic to his situation, a narrative event that invites the reader to adopt a subject position of “outrage” and “revulsion” against her behaviour. While the water rises, almost drowning him, the prince asks the princess for a kiss, which she grants, but only as a “sweet, cold kiss” (46). Knoepfmacher notes the importance of this characterisation and its effect on the reader: “When, with the water nearing his neck, he begs for a kiss, she grants one that is long and sweet but also very cold. The prince’s discomfort resembles the reader’s. What are we to make of the princess’s continued treatment of him, not as a type of Christ, but as a silly sentimentalist who warbles an endless song before the rising waters finally cover his lips?” (144). The reader is an active producer of meaning:

At last he could bear it no longer.

“Princess!” said he.

But at the moment up started the princess, crying,—

“I’m afloat! I’m afloat!”

And the little boat bumped against the stone.

“Princess!” repeated the prince, encouraged by seeing her wide awake and looking eagerly at the water.

“Well?” said she, without looking round.

“Your papa promised that you should look at me, and you haven’t looked at me once.”

“Did he? Then I suppose I must. But I am so sleepy!”

“Sleep then, darling, and don’t mind me,” said the poor prince.

“Really, you are very good,” replied the princess. “I think I will go to sleep again.”

“Just give me a glass of wine and a biscuit first,” said the prince, very humbly.

“With all my heart,” said the princess, and gaped as she said it. She got the wine and the biscuit, however, and leaning over the side of the boat towards him, was compelled to look at him. (45)

The princess’s cathartic transformation invites the readers to admire her act of heroism when she saves the prince. 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” (46-7). Suspense here is evocative, inviting readers to infer what may happen next: “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” (47). Narrative speed increases and duration approaches zero: “His head fell back; the water closed over it, and the bubbles of his last breath bubbled up through the water” (47). The narrative then loosens, “The princess gave a shriek, and sprang into the lake ... She got hold of him, and held his head above the water” (47), symbolising a change in the princess’s emotional and physical states, and inviting the reader to adopt a different opinion from the one caused by the princess’s lack of compassion.

Nikolajeva argues that in this episode MacDonald enforces middle-class gender stereotypes, remarking that the true hero is the prince, not the princess:

As the story progresses, the male rescuer — much like in traditional folktales — supersedes the female protagonist, sacrificing his life and becoming the hero. The Christian connotations of the sacrifice are obvious and have been repeatedly observed; and while some elements of parody are evident as well, the story turns out as a conventional female coming-of-age narrative in which the bewitched female has only to wait for the right male to save her. (“Voice” 98)

The princess's acts of heroism, however, transgress traditional gender roles. The princess feels repentant for her passivity and lack of compassion, a narrative event that allows for a carnivalesque space expressed through the parodic inversion of *The Sleeping Beauty*, in which the princess awaits the prince's kiss to awaken her from a deep sleep. *The Light Princess* thus does not conform to traditional narrative conventions such as those in *The Sleeping Beauty* that underline the heroism of male characters. The reversal of roles here is constructed oppositionally, illuminating MacDonald's interrogation of middle-class image of girls as the epitome of passivity. The prince could have drowned had he not received help from the princess, whose self-discovery serves to position readers to the empowerment of the children over the king and queen, who were “fast asleep” (47) during their daughter's transformation, failing to understand that the experience of love, kindness and social interaction can cure the princess of the loss of physicality and sensibility:

Love and water brought back all her strength. She got under the water, and pulled and pulled [the prince] with her whole might, till at last she got one leg out. The other easily followed ... Coming to herself, she seized the oars, kept herself steady as best she could, and rowed and rowed, though she had never rowed before. Round rocks, and over shallows, and through mud she rowed, till she got to the landing - stairs of the palace. By this time her people were on the shore, for they had heard her shriek. She made them carry the prince to her own room, and lay him in her bed, and light a fire, and send for the doctors. (47)

This episode does not display the princess as an embodiment of traditional female passivity, as Nikolajeva implies. Rather, it is the princess's cathartic transformation that MacDonald wishes to portray, but one in which that the prince's sacrifice and bravery, to use Pazdziora's phrase, “serve only to awaken within her simultaneous knowledge of love and death” (269). In brief, the relationship between narrative dynamics and affect in this episode creates space for a thematic difference with *The Sleeping Beauty* through which MacDonald transgresses established values of gender roles in favour of complementarity between the sexes as a means of social reform.

### **The Return to Normality: Critique and Complicity**

As noted previously, MacDonald calls for moral and spiritual reform, but not structural or

institutional social reform. The prince and the princess return to normality outside the pastoral world of the lake. Their return does not, however, cancel their carnival. Rather, it expresses MacDonald's tendency to subvert, even invert, the official culture of adults and empower the unofficial culture of children. Jordana Hall argues that the return of the time-out carnivalesque in children's literature

is a necessary element of the carnival cycle as a temporary reprieve from the demands placed upon children by adults. Yet this return often works against the subversive effects of the cycle. In a truly subversive text, the child hero or heroine remains empowered upon their return to the official order as a result of their experience, but the order of hierarchical authority remains unchanged. (82)

The ending of the story demonstrates this feature. The children's carnival achieves a transformative effect in their return-to-normality stage in such a way that it does not call for a radical change of the existing social structure, but rather suggests changes within the official culture of adults. MacDonald uses carnivalesque strategies as a source of critique (and complicity) in three respects.

First, the story constructs the children rather than the parents as a source of change. Makemnoit's revenge against the country and the people, for instance, causes degradation and decay of the natural cycle: "Thereupon every spring in the country ceased to throb and bubble, dying away like the pulse of a dying man. The next day there was no sound of falling water to be heard along the borders of the lake" (37). The sacrifice of the prince and the purgative transformation of the princess subdue the witch's gruesome scheme. At the end of the story, her house is flooded by the waters, drowning her. The land becomes moist and fertile, and the lake never sinks again. Regeneration is therefore restored, offering a sense of a transformation — an expression of life and renewal:

The sun shone all the time, and the great drops, which fell straight to the earth, shone likewise. The palace was in the heart of a rainbow. It was a rain of rubies, and sapphires, and emeralds, and topazes. The torrents poured from the mountains like molten gold; and if it had not been for its subterraneous outlet, the lake would have overflowed and inundated the country. It was full from shore to shore. (49)

Second, the children are no more subjected; rather, they are able to be self-regulating, in the sense of ceasing to be the objects of adult power, and become active agents of their own fates. The pastoral world of the lake frees them from the social constraints of the official culture in such a way that they are no longer hesitant to express their love openly in their return-to-normality stage. The prince's and princess's pleasure in the corporeal body is therefore no longer suppressed:

"Is this the gravity you used to make so much of?" said she one day to the prince, as he raised her from the floor.



“For my part, I was a great deal more comfortable without it.”

“No, no, that’s not it. This is it,” replied the prince, as he took her up, and carried her about like a baby, kissing her all the time. “This is gravity.”

“That’s better,” said she. “I don’t mind that so much.” (50)

The parents play a minor role at the end of the story, however. The king “divided the money in his box, and she the honey in her pot among all the children” when the land becomes fertile again and the princess and the prince are “betrothed” (50). Such a role is suggestive, indicating that the king and queen accede to the children’s freedom of choice and of action. As a result of their experience, the prince and the princess are socially empowered, and their empowerment allows them to put their love into practice. Finally, the ending can be viewed as a celebration of fecundity, of which the king and queen have been deprived. The prince and the princess “lived and were happy; and had crowns of gold, and clothes of cloth, and shoes of leather, and children of boys and girls” (50-1). MacDonald thus gives power and fertility to the children in the return-to-normality stage. The prince and the princess are carnivalesque heroes whose time-out allows them to go through an initiatory process towards physical, sexual and emotional maturation.

MacDonald’s transformation of the existing power structure is liberating. This does not imply, however, that he wants to reverse such a structure, or to advocate children’s disobedience. Rather, he keeps the hierarchical authority in the story unchanged. He was a reformist socialist, rather than a revolutionary one, as Zipes asserts:

Of course, one can argue that MacDonald leaves the aristocratic social structure unchanged — a system that harbors authoritarianism — and that the princess seems to achieve her gravity or identity through the male hero. These were clearly his ideological preferences and weaknesses from a political point of view. I should point out, however, that MacDonald was more interested in the reformation of social character and was convinced that all social change emanated from the development of personal integrity not necessarily through political restructuring and upheaval. (*Fairy Tales* 114)

MacDonald wants to comply with the status-quo but in such a way as to suggest a gradual reform of society through cultivating the inner goodness of the individual by means of social interaction, kindness and compassion — qualities that the parents, Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck fail to provide.

MacDonald’s vision of the moral liberty of the child drives or motivates the mode of carnivalisation. Hayden White, in “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” speaks about “narrative immanence.” The end of a story, White asserts, inflects retrospectively every event within that story with the moral force of its finality (26-7). This assertion is similar to what Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative* (1984) calls “retrodiction” — reading or projecting meaning backwards. The child’s point of view triumphant at the end of *The Light Princess* therefore informs the carnivalising vision of the whole. In other

words, the moral force of the story's ending is immanent within all of the earlier episodes, so that the moral liberty of the child becomes, retroactively, the driver or motivating spirit of the mode of carnivalisation.

## Conclusion

The relationship between the story's narrative dynamics, affect and MacDonald's ideas of social reform allows MacDonald to convey his ideas in an imaginative tale without being didactic. MacDonald uses carnivalesque motifs and images including punning, disguise, laughter and parody to challenge the existing social order and structure. He employs the princess's levity, physical and emotional, for instance, as a narrative device through which he invites mockery of, or even provokes laughter at, existing norms and hierarchy. By directing laughter at an exalted authority and entrenched ideologies of the age, and by assigning power to the children rather than to the parents, the carnivalesque mode which Bakhtin praises as liberating creates space for MacDonald to parody social and religious beliefs in such a way as to suggest alternative ideals as a means of social reform.

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