



A review of
**George MacDonald:
Divine Carelessness and
Fairytale Levity**

Colin Manlove

What Dr Gabelman initially wishes to prove in this fascinating but mishandled book is that there is a large comic element in MacDonald's fantasy that most critics have ignored for his more serious themes. This comic element is not frequently comic in the way that we understand the term. Indeed the aspect of comedy as laughter is set aside for a notion of it as spiritual joy.

This is done by use of the term 'levity', which Dr Gabelman interprets as lightness and expansion of heart into ecstasy. Such levity he brilliantly finds for instance at the heart of Dante's aptly named *Commedia*, where after moving downwards to Satan at the centre of the world we move progressively upwards and outwards for the rest of the work as the weight of sin is removed, until we meet the ultimate levity and ecstasy at the centre of heaven.

That Dr Gabelman is intelligent is certain. No less certain is his wide knowledge of theology. Nevertheless, in a study of George MacDonald's fantasy works rather too much space is given to theology – to accounts of the views of St Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas or Dante, and the relevance of MacDonald's ideas to the work of recent theologians such as Karl Barth or Jurgen Moltmann.

The book is almost half-done by the time we reach MacDonald. In the interim Dr Gabelman gradually focuses inwards to his subject. He traces levity in the angels, in Ecclesiastes, Christ's life and parables and in some elements of the medieval Catholic Church. Then he pursues its opposite in post-medieval history, where he finds that the Reformation and Newton's discovery of gravity together effectively exiled levity from both religion and culture until the Romantics and their brief revolution against reason. The Victorian period then saw a return to gravity, with comedy a mere escape from the dominant culture. Here MacDonald stands as a happy exception.

Even here, however, Dr Gabelman is still moving inwards, for he treats the context of MacDonald's novel *Adela Cathcart* (1864), in which only three of his fairy tales appeared, before actually getting down to the tales themselves. It perhaps would have been more appropriate to the expansive and joyous nature of levity had he moved

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from the tales outwards. As it is, by the time he reaches his subject he has so full a toolbag of concepts that they get in the way of the work he is investigating. And this approach also means that the concepts are fitted onto the texts rather than developing naturally out of them.

In the investigation of MacDonald's fairy tales Dr Gabelman tells us that 'Critics often see what they set out to find' and that 'Any method that reduces the fairytale to its sociological, psychological or ideological content – what the story is "about" or what it "means" – is in a crucial sense missing the point' (98). Unfortunately, making it serve overtly Christian purpose is no different, even if that purpose may be the mysterious and the ecstatically mobile. MacDonald's own point in his essay on 'The Fantastic Imagination' is that the fairy tale cannot help having a meaning, indeed maybe as many meanings as there are readers.

As Dr Gabelman investigates MacDonald's fairy tales, the concept of divine levity which he saw as key to their understanding is rather subsumed or even lost in other Christian concepts. At first we deal with associated ideas, such as Christmas and festivity in MacDonald's fairy tales, which indeed imply the lightness of joy – though not necessarily divine ecstasy (Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, for instance). Joy indeed ends all the tales, as princesses are delivered from curses, children are brought out of imprisonment or even enter heaven. But the 'happy ending' is a fairy-tale convention: there is only occasionally the pressure to read it in deeper terms. Levity itself is actually criticised in *The Light Princess*, where it is a curse to be removed from the princess by giving her back her sense of gravity. Of course there are answers to this, such as that the princess needs lightness and gravity together, as she and the prince find in swimming. But it is not the obvious meaning of the story, and not one Dr Gabelman uses. Nevertheless his analysis of this tale is very illuminating.

Later associations with levity are much looser, such as work and play, christening, twilight, 'already but not yet', hope, the 'home centre', unknowing, selflessness, isolation from one's familiars, 'awful singleness', ready relationship with others, making room for oneself, transformation. The effect of all these is that the fairy tales are being seen not through one pair of spectacles but many. And gradually we see the signs of a too remorseless conversion of the tales to a Christian vision. Of the story 'Photogen and Nycteris' we learn that in Nycteris's desire to escape from underground darkness, 'Ecstasy leads to greater ecstasy as "the desire to go out grew irresistible"' (158). But actually Nycteris is terrified of the darkness now that she thinks it has put out her lamp. Dr Gabelman wants to make the story an image of growing Christian ecstasy, but it does not fit.

More widely, what is most unfortunate about this book is that Dr Gabelman has confined his study to MacDonald's shorter fairy tales and *The Wise Woman*. Having rebuked those who consider MacDonald as serious rather than comic, he then

excludes consideration of both of his major works, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, on just these grounds. He also largely ignores MacDonald's longer fairy tales for children – *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*. Even within the limited compass of the eight shorter fairy tales he sets aside one that cannot be made to fit – 'The Giant's Heart'. These omissions are all the more unfortunate because the reader of Dr Gabelman's book is continually stimulated to think of ways in which these other works actually answer to many of his ideas.

For all these criticisms of Dr Gabelman's book, it remains a fascinating and at times illuminating attempt to trace an unexplored area of MacDonald's vision in his fairy tales; and even if what it intends is blurred or a little forced, the book retains enough persuasive power to make it a new venture in MacDonald Studies, which deserve further development.

Author: Daniel Gabelman. Editor: Stephen Prickett.
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Colin Manlove



A review of **Once Upon a Time**

Martine Hennard
Dutheil de la Rochère

Dame Marina Warner knows the Fairy Way of Writing. In *Once upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (2014), the cultural historian, fairy-tale scholar, novelist and short-story writer takes us on a breezy journey through the fairy-tale tradition in nine wonder-filled chapters and an epilogue, complete with Further Reading and Index. This lovely little volume sheds light on familiar stories, from Baba Yaga to Cinderella, Sinbad to Snow White. But its aim and ambition is to tell the tale of those beloved tales, and that is quite a challenge for a pocketsize book. Warner

unravels the fascinating history of a genre that uncannily brings the faraway past into the present: because 'Enchantment ... has its own changing history, its own tides and currents, from medieval faerie to Romantic possession and hauntedness, from sceptical magic entertainment to the contemporary technological uncanny' (20), the storyteller-scholar traces the connections of fairy tales with myth, fables and fantasy, but also comments on their social roles and association with the culture of childhood, the poetics and politics of the genre ('the politics of the bedchamber', 94), as well as its worldwide travels and transformations.

The format of the book and its evocative cover already play with the idea of the power of words: the book is an enchanted material object, and reading a journey toward knowledge and wisdom. A delicate artwork by Su Blackwell shows an open fairy-tale book sprouting a forest of print-paper trees huddled around a tiny woodcutter shed that casts a mysterious light in the gloom. The light beckons and invites us to follow our guide and use our imagination: 'You have a sketch map and a rough guide', says Warner in the prologue, 'the lights are lit in the windows of that house in the deep of the dark forest ahead of us. We can begin to move in ...' (xxiv).

She establishes an immediate intimacy with her reader with the artful simplicity of the born storyteller. Though wide-ranging and packed with information and references, the study remains eminently readable for specialist and lay audiences alike, sprinkled with anecdotes, vivid metaphors and a few well-chosen illustrations (a pity they are not in colour). At once erudite and accessible, this short history retains an essential quality of lightness (a quality Warner praises in Italo Calvino). It unfolds almost like a fanciful adventure story from *The Thousand and One Nights*: 'Imagine', the prologue begins, 'the history of fairy tale as a map ...'. And as in *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils Holgersson*, the 'mind-voyaging' (98) begins, from East to West and South to North across the famed Ocean of Story, in a fluid, panoramic, magic carpet fashion. Just like the stories themselves which, Warner aptly notes, 'slipped across frontiers of culture and language as freely as birds in the air as soon as they began appearing' (xv). Although she uses the language of fancy to transport her reader, the cultural historian is careful not to lapse into generalisations about the genre and prefers to unravel the richness and diversity of the fairy-tale tradition. Thus the 'thorny question' of defining the genre (she identifies six main characteristics) and the debate about the difference between folk and literary tales ends in a recognition of their 'inextricable and fruitful entanglement' (xvii).

This short history of fairy tale is organised in thematic chapters, starting with faery as a world 'far away and down below', each chapter conceived like a miniature essay. The book covers magic and metamorphosis, voices on the page, the worldliness of wonder tales, picture-books and child audiences, as well as the modern critical reception of the genre, from psychology and psychoanalysis to feminist responses

(including a moving homage to Angela Carter), followed by an important chapter on the 'double vision' of the tales (which always mean more than they say), and a final one on stage and screen productions. In the course of her journey, Warner gives Basile, Perrault, Grimm and Andersen their due, but she also mentions Apuleius, Straparola, Beaumont, Calvino, Carroll, Borges, and Kafka among others. She acknowledges the role of collectors and editors such as Lang, Jacobs or Afanasyev, and to illustrators whose images have shaped our perception of the stories, including Doré, Rackham, Dulac and David Hockney. But Warner also celebrates the anonymous storytellers, translators, actors and musicians who have kept the genre alive at home, on the page, and on the stage (panto, ballet, opera, puppet show). Alert to the interplay of creative and critical responses to the genre, modern authors, filmmakers, performers and artists recreating it anew today are also saluted, from Anne Sexton to Jeanette Winterson, Lotte Reiniger and Paula Rego, Catherine Breillat's French *Barbe-bleue* (not 'Geneviève' as it says on pp. 62 and 93) and the Spanish *Blancanieves* (2012). The study maintains a fine balance between the sweeping panorama and the singular, specific, time-bound detail and reference. Warner has a knack for striking formulas and metaphors ('a story is an archive, packed with history', 77; 'You could say that the fairy tale grew up in 1979', 141), an eye for memorable quotes, an ear for ditty/sing-song rhythms ('Pins, Lies, Mice and Want', 74), and she uses all to good effect to weave the strands of her own story. As she notes herself, her long exposure to the fairy tale has taught her that 'it is often more compelling to translate experience through metaphor and fantasy than to put it plainly' (95). To give only one example, she borrows from Carter the wonderful image of 'house-training the ego' to discuss the psychological subtext of the familiar stories, but also comes up with many of her own: thus, like unruly children, fairy tales 'do not keep still' (160).

Marina Warner certainly knows how to make a long story short, and packs her encyclopaedic knowledge in a nutshell for easy travel, in true fairy-tale fashion, for our instruction and delight. We remember that upon visiting the Beast's mansion, Beauty is pleased to discover a room prepared just for her, complete with musical instruments and fairy-tale books. *Once Upon a Time* will find its place among them and 'inspire, enlighten, and entertain' (131) the curious reader.

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