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Notes & Queries

A Royal Pain: The Comic Spirit in George MacDonald's "The Light Princess"

Greg Levonian

George MacDonald's humorous fairy tale "The Light Princess" elicited some reproach from MacDonald's friend John Ruskin. MacDonald, according to Ruskin, sees "too deeply into things to be able to laugh nicely." Ruskin also objected to the "amorous" components of the story, which he believed would be detrimental to young readers (Reaper 222). Ruskin, then, found that MacDonald's analytical capacity and the erotic qualities were incompatible with easy laughter, thereby jeopardizing the tale's artistic merit.

However, while the story does possess conspicuous romantic elements, to "laugh nicely" is largely contrary to the design of comedy, which is grounded in both darkness and incongruity. Freud, who acknowledged the difficulty in assessing comic theory, asserts that our laughter "expresses a pleasurable sense of the superiority which we feel in relation" to the comic subject (255). Hence, any congeniality is outside the comic equation, and the tale's primary characters reflect grief, anger, and sobriety. The princess herself, with her carefree disposition and wild fits of laughter (if joyless), is a foil for characters with darker temperments. Her antagonists, including her evil aunt Makemnoit, who casts the spell that removes the princess' gravity, leaving her literally floating about, as well as the over-serious Metaphysicians and even the Princess' father, the king, are killjoys; their tunnel-visioned mentalities are, in effect, "something mechanical encrusted upon something living," as Henri Bergson interprets comedy. And the princess' laughter really amounts to a sorrowful "corrective" as Bergson again would have it. Through comedy, MacDonald possesses a means to convey his rich (and deep) content—notably marital relationships and the "happily-ever-after" resolution—without falling into excessive didacticism, which would certainly subvert the work's aesthetic quality.

MacDonald immediately formulates comic tension through the king and queen's interaction in chapter one. Jealous that other royal families have heirs, the king makes "up his mind to be cross with his wife" (15) because he

has no children:

“Why don’t you have any daughters, at least?” said he. “I don’t say sons; that might be too much to expect.”

“I am sure, dear king, I am very sorry,” said the queen.

“So you ought to be,” retorted the king; “you are not going to make a virtue of that, surely.” (15)

The queen, however, smiles and pretends “to take it all as a joke,” which clashes with the king’s serious-minded complaint, which is also an officious “affair of state” (15). In good humor, the queen apologizes for being unable to instantly accommodate the king (15). Hence, MacDonald creates the comic dichotomy: a sober, single-minded consciousness meets a smiling one.

MacDonald introduces the chief comic antagonist following the birth of the princess. Forgotten at the time of the christening, the Princess Makemnoit, the king’s ill-tempered sister, seeks her revenge by casting a spell that removes the little princess’ gravity. Makemnoit’s “odd” look reflects her inner ugliness: protruding forehead, cross-hatched wrinkles, and “angry” eyes: sometimes blue, sometimes yellow and green, depending on anger or hatred (16). Consistent with comic villains, she is unloved by all except herself and is “awfully clever,” which corresponds to her classification as a witch (16). Makemnoit’s name also hints at her hostility, as “noit” resembles “nuit,” which is French for “night.” The evil aunt, then, is making night, or darkness, for the poor princess.

More sober characters enter: the Metaphysicians, Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck, philosophers intent on curing the princess. True to their names, both reveal themselves as dullards antithetical to “light” living. Kopy-Keck prescribes—“by the sternest compulsion”—an education in “the earth as the earth” (27). The princess “must study every department of its history”: vegetable, mineral, social, moral, political, scientific, literary, musical, artistic, and “above all, its metaphysical history. She must begin with the Chinese dynasty and end with Japan” (27). Geology, “and especially the history of the extinct races of animals—their natures, their habits, their loves, their hates, their revenges” is also a necessity (27). While Kopy-Keck advocates a tedious study of the dead, Hum-Drum curiously diagnoses a physical abnormality and recommends a surgery that would result in an actual bleak death (28). Hum-Drum sees the up-side, however, stating that the princess “would yet die in doing our duty” (28). The king and queen, though, spare their daughter from the “unscrupulous philosophers” (28).

The king, Makemnoit, and the philosophers are comic embodiments

of “something mechanical encrusted on something living.” Bergson maintains in “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic”:

The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter. (101)

Hence, the king’s on-going, inelastic seriousness; Makemnoit’s automaton-like discontent; and the philosophers’ unidimensional outlooks fall into the comic realm and clash with the princess’ outward levity.

The princess herself is an interesting study in comedy. Her lightness is, of course, a spirit bereft of serious, somber gravity—the central irony of the book; she simply floats above it all. She laughs at “everybody and everything that came in her way,” including the massacre of troops and the invasion of the enemy (23). She could not “be brought to see the serious side of anything.” Admonishment by her parents, including the queen’s tears and the king’s rage, is just another form of entertainment. When her parents converse about their daughter, they meet “outbursts of laughter over their heads . . . whence she regarded them with the most comical appreciation” (23). Moreover, the princess is unfamiliar with disgust as well as shyness, as she will happily hold a toad and kiss a page.

However, while the princess laughs “like the very spirit of fun . . . in her laugh something was missing” (24). The narrator cites “a certain tone, depending upon the possibility of sorrow, *morbidezza*, perhaps. She never smiled” (29). In a rare moment of composure, the princess discloses that she feels “like nothing at all,” but has “a curious feeling sometimes, as if I were the only person that had any sense in the whole world” (25). Her remarks are followed by her customary hysterics, only this time she possesses “an ecstasy of enjoyment” (25). The princess’ sincerity produces a hint of meaningful pleasure. She is alone at the top—feeling sad and isolated in both her philosophical point-of-view as well as her physical predicament. Her laughter, then, amounts to a “corrective,” as Bergson would suggest. With morbidity at the root of things, her only response is laughter. She indeed absorbs the death of the General and his troops, but perhaps is baffled by war, a clear contrast to a sensible, “light” existence. Laughter, then, is a proxy for tears, with the slaughter of the troops and the potential loss of her kingdom too acute for conventional grief.

The lake, the princess' sole relief, indirectly resolves her distress. The water provides both physical and emotional gravity for the princess, who can swim leisurely and be "more sedate than usual. Perhaps that was because a great pleasure spoils laughing" (29). The lake, then, is the princess' source for meaningful enjoyment rather than "corrective" laughter. When the prince sacrifices himself to save the lake and the kingdom from Makemnoit's spell, the princess discovers true love and regains her gravity. Here, seemingly, the laughter dies.

Through the comic elements, MacDonald can indeed "see deeply into things" without comprising literary integrity. Significantly, the comedy also qualifies his fairy tale's "happily-ever-after." Just as the king and queen have their differences—the queen smiles at the king's grievances, so too will the newlyweds; although the princess finally "smiled the sweetest, loveliest smile in the prince's face," she only offers "one little kiss in return for all his" (52). Moreover, the princess frequently complains about her gravity. Her new pain on the ground may simply be replacing her old pain in the air. Both can be signs of future marital difficulty, or, perhaps for MacDonald, normality, which is what we are left with: "So the prince and princess lived and were happy; and had crowns of gold, and clothes of cloth, and shoes of leather, and children of boys and girls" (53). This existence is, in effect, somewhat "mechanical." Thus, if MacDonald suggests that normality is the fairy tale, then a "corrective" is required here—and not just laughter, but a sober, realistic outlook on human relationships.

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