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The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story: A Critique of Victorian Parenting

Osama Jarrar

1. Introduction

George MacDonald's view of childhood was inherently Romantic. He viewed childhood as an embodiment of innocence, purity and imaginative potential, an exemplary state from which adults declined: "He who will be a man, and will not be a child, must — he cannot help himself — become a little man, that is a dwarf" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 10). MacDonald therefore emphasized in his sermons and adult fiction, and especially in his children's literature, the responsibility of parents to instill moral values of trust, love and honesty in their children by cultivating their inner goodness. Parents' failure to fulfill such a responsibility, according to MacDonald, will harm the moral and emotional being of their children: "Many parents hold words unsaid which would lift hundred-weights from the hearts of their children, yea, make them leap for joy. A stern father and a silent mother make mournful, or, which is far worse, hard children" (*Gospel* 99). In chapter XXXIX of *The Vicar's Daughter* (1872), MacDonald also emphasizes such an image of childhood as a stage of virtue and sacredness. Ethelwyn, the heroine and narrator of the story, speaks of her father's "most practical" guide to the proper treatment of children (318-320). The guide calls for instilling in children the values of Christian goodness that nurture their moral and emotional nature. There were, however, limitations to MacDonald's views on socializing children. MacDonald's son and first biographer, Greville MacDonald, for example, wrote that his father reverted to punishment when gentleness failed:

My father, in the education of his children, put duty before everything. In spite of his repudiation of Calvinism, he upheld passive obedience as essential in training the young . . . It made me look upon my father with some fear. He stood for the Inexorable. So that when appeal to an undeveloped moral sense failed, corporal punishment, sometimes severe, was inevitable.
(Cited by Naomi J. Wood 113)

MacDonald, however, cautions parents against excessive, willful, arbitrary or merely angry punishment not motivated by wisdom and love. MacDonald's

views of punishment had their origin in his Calvinist roots. Obedience to God and the fear of His punishment were central in the patriarchal Christianity which MacDonald was brought up to believe. His dissent from his Calvinist roots influenced his perception of God as loving and forgiving. According to MacDonald, people can attain God's forgiveness through testing and repentance. Punishment for MacDonald was therefore an expression of love, not of anger or of hatred.

The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story (1874-1875) expresses MacDonald's distaste for Victorian norms of child raising, with his vision grounded on "gentleness" and "punishment" as means of social reform. The story is comprised of two worlds: an ordinary world and a fantastic world. The ordinary world is the realm of two couples — a King and a Queen, a shepherd and a shepherdess — who neglect and mismanage their children by raising them unwisely to be selfish, spoiled and unpleasant. The Princess Rosamond becomes ill-tempered and moody, the shepherdess Agnes conceited and self-complacent. The fantastic world is about a mysterious "Wise Woman" who is summoned by the King and the Queen from her cottage in the woods to help them reform their daughter. The Wise Woman takes Rosamond, and later Agnes, to her cottage to discipline them so that they will become obedient and good-natured. To achieve her purpose, the Wise Woman subjects the girls must to tests of varying severity, depending on their nature and progress. In the course of their education, the girls must find their way in a room with framed pictures, to one of which each girl is drawn. The pictures show the girls each other's homeland, and they are lured to leave the Wise Woman's cottage and to go to the new place. They eventually switch places: Rosamond finds herself in Agnes's parents' hut, treated unkindly as a housemaid, and Agnes in Rosamond's parents' palace, mistreated cruelly as a scullery maid. Even though the two girls are taken to the Wise Woman's cottage and are subjected to a variety of healing methods, they do not meet until later in the story.

The crossing from the ordinary setting to the realm of fantasy is expressed in a fantastic transition through the Wise Woman's cloak, the portal through which the girls enter a new world of magic and enchantment. The extradiegetic narrator's comments mediate this transition for the child reader. At the end of Chapter One Rosamond, for example, suddenly disappears, creating suspense for the reader and creating a gap in the narrative. The narrator in the first sentence of Chapter Two fills in this gap with his comments: "The fact, as is plain, was that the princess had disappeared in

the folds of the wise woman's cloak. When she [Rosamond] rushed from the room, the wise woman caught her to her bosom and flung the black garment around her" (10). Speaking of Agnes's crossing into the fantasy realm the narrator relates that the Wise Woman "suddenly lapped her in the folds of her cloak. When the mother again lifted her eyes, she [Agnes] had vanished" (37). The way out of the fantastic realm of the Wise Woman's cottage is also conveyed to the reader in a fantastic transition through picture frames into one of which each girl steps to reach the ordinary world. Commenting on the ways Rosamond "frees" herself from the Wise Woman's cottage, the narrator directly addresses the readers, allaying their doubts about the enchanting power of the Wise Woman: "Now, if I am asked how this could be, I can only answer, that it was a result of the interaction of things outside and things inside, of the wise woman's skill, and the silly child's folly. If this does not satisfy my questioner, I can only add, that the wise woman was able to do far more wonderful things than this" (32). Similarly, Agnes, the narrator recounts, "ran up to the frame, stepped over it, felt the wind blow upon her cheek, heard the sound of a closing door behind her, and was free. *Free* was she with that creature inside her?" (46-47). The cloak and the picture frames are therefore portal devices that mark the boundaries between the realm of magic and the realm of the ordinary, and have ideological implications.

Ideologically, MacDonald uses the fantasy realm in the story as a narrative device that allows him to comment on the Victorian norms of parenting and to emphasize an alternative model based on the Christian virtues of love, trust and obedience. Therefore, the fantasy mode is used as a metaphor for reality with an ideological function. In a different vein, Melba N. Battin reads the story as a Christian "parable" that concerns the "spiritual education" of the two girls. MacDonald, according to Battin, reconciles the apparently different aspects of the characters to emphasize the value of "spiritual growth" for the individual that dismisses "the intellectual, the psychological, the physical, the socioeconomic dimensions" of the story:

Also, in the final paragraph MacDonald invites the reader to find his or her niche among the characters who now form a spiritual hierarchical arrangement. Thus in this final insight, as in Rosamond's previous instant of recognition, all the characters spin out of their places of duality and realign themselves on a continuum — a continuum which pays little attention to the intellectual, the psychological, the physical, the socioeconomic dimensions, but focuses all upon the "truth spiritual."

(“Duality” 217)

Humphrey Carpenter, by contrast, argues that by the time he wrote the story, MacDonald had become increasingly pessimistic about his spiritual vision:

The Wise Woman . . . is a very unpleasant book. Where there should be lightness of touch in the story in the Wise Woman’s handling of the two selfish girls, there is something closer to horror. She abducts them both without telling their parents what has happened to them, and subjects them to treatment which is not fully frightening and unpleasant, but keeps failing to cure them. Finally she blinds two of the parents and puts a third into a coma. If this is a parable about God, as clearly it is, then MacDonald’s view of the Creator seems to have become black and despairing. (83)

Roderick McGillis similarly asserts that the value of this story as children’s literature resides in its theme of “adventure,” dismissing it as overtly didactic: “Now, only an insensitive reader would attempt to defend this book as completely successful, but it does offer a remarkably clear instance of MacDonald’s belief in adventure . . . One point in this relentlessly pointless book is that whether you live in a cottage or in a castle you are still susceptible to complacency, to a settled belief in the rightness of things as perceived by the mind habituated to the familiar” (“Fantasy” 21). C. N. Manlove also argues that the story is “heavily didactic, with frequent and ponderous authorial intrusions designed to force the significance of each episode on the reader . . . the whole of the story is fixed on the spiritual tuition of [the] two girls” (82). The general critical consensus, therefore, either dismisses the story as “unpleasant,” “pointless,” and “didactic,” or embraces it as a mere “parable,” devoid of any subversive ideological potential.

MacDonald believed in punishment as a necessary condition for the reform of the individual. There are few “unpleasant” references to the ways the Wise Woman treats the children. MacDonald, however, cautions parents against arbitrary punishment not motivated by love. Ideologically, the story points to MacDonald’s belief in punishment as an expression of love and a precondition for repentance. According to Gillian Avery, MacDonald “did not escape the Victorian preoccupation with punishment. Indeed, because of the force of his writing the two children whom he pillories in *The Wise Woman* are among the most disagreeable of their kind, though both, as he admits himself, are the victims of the besotted parents” (*George* 133). Importantly,

Greville MacDonald wrote that in raising children, his father's vision was grounded on a combination of gentleness and punishment: "Sufficient discipline ruled the home. A look of displeasure from the beloved father was punishment for any sin, while his rebuke was awful indeed. Any complaints against their wild escapades, unless involving disobedience, he would smile at, though he might warn and restrict" (54). The modern criticisms to which I have referred therefore overlook MacDonald's socio-cultural-religious ideology toward parenting and the biblical origins of his ideology. On the one hand, the Wise Woman is "kind," "tender," and "loving" (21) to the girls, while on the other she reverts to "wise punishment" (39) to discipline them, reflecting MacDonald's vision of the need for both aspects of socializing children.

In this chapter I discuss MacDonald's ideology of parenting in three respects. First, MacDonald shuns Victorian parenting practices that fostered selfishness, vanity and disobedience in children, evidenced by the ways the parents treat Rosamond and Agnes. Second, MacDonald uses the character of the Wise Woman as an iconoclastic gesture, interrogating middle-class ideologies of parenting. MacDonald's alternative ideology, however, is not a simple moralistic vision, as modern critics claim; rather, it is reflected through various textual components of narrative between story, discourse and thematic significance or function deduced from a text. The textual features of narrative include, among others, narrative voice, suspense, intertextuality, mode, characterization and narrative closure. In a few aspects, MacDonald's ideology is an explicit element in the story with a didactic intent. Finally, the narrative voice plays a central role in facilitating the reader's textual subjection to the ideology in the story. The narrator, for example, mediates the Wise Woman's healing methods for the reader through commentary and intervention, inviting ideologically-charged evaluations about MacDonald's ideas of parenting. Therefore, the authorial intrusions are not, to use Manlove's phrase, "designed to force" the ideology upon the reader. Rather, they are used to facilitate the reader's interpellation by the ideology in the text.

2. Narrative Privilege and MacDonald's Criticism of Parenting

Ideologically, the story of *The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story* conveys MacDonald's criticism of Victorian parenting practices.

The ideology of the text emerges as a juxtaposition of established norms and assumptions and MacDonald's alternative ideology grounded on trust,

honesty and love. Even though the title suggests a narrative of a double story, there is an unequal structural aspect relating to the Wise Woman's education of the two girls. The narrative structure is entwined with the trials of the two girls, such that the child reader goes back and forth between the story of Rosamond and that of Agnes. Nine chapters of the story — I, II, III, IV, V, IX, XI, XII and XIII — concern Rosamond's entwined experiences in the Wise Woman's cottage and in the shepherd's and shepherdess's hut. Rosamond finally succeeds with the Wise Woman's tests, genuinely repents her misbehavior, and becomes compassionate and obedient, acting as a redeemer for her parents. In contrast, four chapters of the story — VI, VII, VIII and X — concern Agnes's experience in the Wise Woman's cottage and the King's and Queen's palace. Unlike Rosamond, who is given a second opportunity to enter the fantasy realm to be healed of selfishness, Agnes is deprived of such an opportunity after she leaves the Wise Woman's cottage unhealed of her self-complacency. Agnes does not succeed in the Wise Woman's tests and remains conceited, disobedient and objectionable, with only a hint that the Wise Woman's education will one day make her feel repentant. The story concludes with the parents being punished by the Wise Woman for the maltreatment of their children. The King and the Queen are blinded and will "one day" (85) have their eyes opened, while Agnes's mother will have to live with the "crime" she has committed against her daughter:

You [the shepherdess] coaxed when you ought to have compelled; you praised when you ought to have been silent; you fondled when you ought to have punished; you threatened when you ought to have inflicted — and there she [Agnes] stands, the full grown result of your foolishness! She is your crime and punishment. Take her home with you, and live hour after hour with the pale-hearted disgrace you call your daughter.

What she is, the worm at the heart has begun to teach her. (85)

Such a structural imbalance carries with it ideologically-charged evaluations about MacDonald's ideas of parenting, and is linked to the unpredictable closure of the story. Agnes's father is taken by the Wise Woman to her cottage, a narrative event that arouses curiosity of the reader to ask about the Wise Woman's "unfair" decision against the father even though he is "kinder than his wife" (48) and is sympathetic and loving to Rosamond when she stays in their hut. John Stephens writes that "the desire for *closure* is characteristically a desire for fixed meanings, and is apparent in the socializing, didactic purposes of much children's literature. There is a need

that young children require (that is, both ‘demand’ and ‘need’) certainties about life rather than indeterminacies or uncertainties or unfixed boundaries” (41). In this story MacDonald, however, is far from being too “didactic.” There are frequent references that point to the significance of the story’s unequal “doubleness,” the unexpected narrative closure and MacDonald’s ideology of punishment.

For MacDonald, vanity and anger are barriers to moral awareness. “What is there to choose between a face distorted to hideousness by anger, and the one distorted by self-complacency? True, there is more hope of helping the angry child out of her form of selfishness than the conceited child out of hers” (35):

Now as the least atom of conceit is a thing to be ashamed of, you may fancy what she [Agnes] was like with such a quantity of it inside her! . . . For some smiles are like the ruddiness of certain apples, which is owing to a centipede, or other creeping thing, coiled up at her heart of them. Only her worm had a face and shape the very image of her own; and she looked so simpering, and mawkish, and self-conscious, and silly . . . as time went on, this disease of self-conceit went on too, gradually devouring the good that was in her . . . Agnes was not by nature a greedy girl . . . but self-conceit, has repeatedly shown itself as the deep feeling in the heart of horrible murderers. (34-36)

Apparently Agnes is better than Rosamond. However, vanity corrupts Agnes’s soul. The use of the conjunction “but” points to Agnes’s vanity as a central problem and puts this trait in parallel with her being a “horrible murderer.” In a letter to his father on 11 April 1847, MacDonald wrote: “I fear myself. I have so much vanity — so much pride, and have made so little progress in the life of faith” (Sadler 17). In *The Hope of the Gospel* (1892) MacDonald also points out similar thoughts:

The race in which evil — that is, corruption, is at work, needs, as the one means for its rescue, subjection to vanity; it is the one hope against the supremacy of corruption; and the whole encircling, harboring, and helping creation must, for the sake of man, its head, and for its own further sake too, share in this subjection to vanity with its hope of deliverance. Corruption brings in vanity, causes empty aching gaps in vitality. This aching is what most people regard as evil: it is the unpleasant cure of evil. It takes all shapes of suffering — of the body, of

the mind, of the heart, of the spirit. (118-119)

MacDonald therefore emphasizes the dangers of vanity as a root cause of evil that corrupts the moral development of the individual. Consequently, he cautions parents against instilling vanity in their children. Unlike the King, the Queen and the shepherdess, who are punished for their maltreatment of their children, the shepherd remains kind and loving to his daughter as well as to Rosamond, making him indifferent to the girls' disobedience. The narrator reminds us later that the shepherd is responsible for his daughter's maltreatment, and the Wise Woman takes him to her cottage to punish him for failing in his parental duties. Here, MacDonald points to the central role of a father in raising children:

The Wise Woman took the shepherd by the hand, and led him away. And that is all my double story. How double it is, if you care to know, you must find out. If you think it is not finished — I never knew a story that was. I could tell you a great deal more concerning them all, but I have already told more than is good for those who read but with their foreheads, and enough for those whom it has made look a little solemn, and sigh as they close the book. (86)

Therefore, the “fracture” in the narrative sequence, coming in the form of the unexpected narrative closure, conveys one of the story's central themes — vanity is the worst trait that parents can instill in their children, for which parents deserve punishment.

The first chapter of the story is narrated with suspense, reflecting MacDonald's aim to criticize the parents for the maltreatment of their children. Suspense is expressed through the narrative voice, descriptive mode and gaps in the narrative. The first chapter starts with the narrator's general remarks about the “country of uncertainties,” introducing the reader to the sudden and unexpected events that prevail in it. The narrator employs the descriptive mode to point out the peculiarity of the landscape when one day in the midst of a rain shower the sun appears and, shining as its light falls, changes the water drops into different colors. The narrator arouses curiosity through questions that come in the form of direct address, such as “what do you think?” and rhetorical questions such as “would you believe it?” (5). The reader's curiosity is intensified by the statement that “something happened” in the country:

While the rain was thus falling, and the leaves, and the flowers, and the sheep, and the cattle, and the hedgehog, were all busily

receiving the golden rain, something happened. It was not a great battle, nor an earthquake, nor a coronation, but something more important than all those put together. *A baby-girl was born; and her father was a king; and her mother was a queen.*(4)

To add more intensity to the narrative, something else happens: “another little girl was born, whom the shepherd her father, and shepherdess her mother” (5) — narrative events that arouse curiosity of the reader to ask about the merit of the birth of the two girls. Overjoyed at the birth of their daughters, the King and the Queen, the shepherd and the shepherdess raise their children unwisely, so that they become spoiled, disobedient and moody:

It was, indeed, a peculiar country, very different from ours — so different, that my reader must not be too much surprised when I add the amazing fact, that most of its inhabitants, instead of enjoying the things they had, were always wanting the things they had not, often even the things it was least likely they ever could have. The grown men and women being like this, there is no reason to be further astonished that the Princess Rosamond — the name her parents gave her because it means Rose of the World — should grow up like them, wanting every thing she could and every thing she couldn’t have. The things she could have were a great many too many, for her foolish parents always gave her what they could; but still there remained a few things they couldn’t give her, for they were only a common king and queen. (5-6)

Through the narrator’s commentary the reader, therefore, learns that the two girls are not blamed for their disobedience and selfishness, for which their parents are fully responsible. The shepherd and the shepherdess “were not a bit wiser than the king and the queen . . . for they too, one and all, so constantly taught the little woman that she was Somebody” (5). MacDonald’s criticism of parenting is expressed through an important narrative feature of the plot — intertextuality.

3. Narrative Structure and MacDonald’s Criticism of Parenting

Intertextuality can function as a critique of norms and assumptions. As Stephens points out, “intertextuality encourages self-conscious subjectivity because it is structurally similar to intersubjectivity, because it keeps visible the process of narrative discourse and representation, and because of its play of differences functions as a critique of social values” (6). Intertextual

references to the “White Rabbit” in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and the “ogress” in *Hansel and Gretel* (1812) function as a critique of parenting practices in the Victorian era. When Rosamond grows fretful, covetous, spiteful and ill-tempered, her fluctuating mood is expressed through her changing feelings towards animals. She is sometimes kind to her white rabbit, and at other times cruel and unkind to it. The King and the Queen blame each other for Rosamond’s unstable mood: “Before their altercation was over, for it lasted till the early morning, in rushed Rosamond, clutching in her hand a poor little white rabbit, of which she was very fond, and from which, only because it would not come to her when she called it, she was pulling handfuls of fur in the attempt to tear the squealing, pink-eared, red-eyed thing to pieces” (9). An intertextual parallel to the white rabbit, thrown on glass and breaking the glass into pieces, resonates with *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and has an ideological function.

Such a function disrupts the narrative series and temporality, creating a kind of space for moral reflection. Alice’s mood, like Rosamond’s, is constantly changing. Alice is kind and grateful to the White Rabbit for directing her to different rooms in the wonderland. Still, Alice has a negative judgment of his verses and she later becomes unkind to him when he has mistaken her for his maidservant, ordering Alice to bring him the Duchess’s gloves. Once Alice gets inside the house to find the gloves she starts growling, forcefully pushing the White Rabbit on glass and inflicting terrible pain on him:

After waiting till she fancied she heard the Rabbit just under the window, she suddenly spread out her hand, and made a snatch in the air. She did not get hold of anything, but she heard a little shriek and a fall, a crash of broken glass . . . next came an angry voice . . . ‘Here! come and help me out of *this!*’ (Sounds of more broken glass) . . . There was a long silence after this, and Alice could only hear whispers now and then; such as ‘Sure, I don’t like it, yer honour, at all, at all!’ Do as I tell you, you coward!’ and at last she spread out her arm again, and made another snatch in the air. This time there were *two* little shrieks, and more sounds of broken glass. (Green, 34-35)

Rosamond, in contrast, intends to “tear” the rabbit into “pieces,” making the act even crueller than Alice’s. Rosamond then flings the rabbit in her mother’s face. The understanding conveyed to the reader is therefore that Rosamond is cruel and that her cruelty is abhorrent.

To obliterate any doubt that may arise in the reader's mind that Rosamond is innately cruel, another intertextual allusion is made to an ogress, who is present in traditional fairytale discourse such as *Hansel and Gretel*. The intention is to blame the King and the Queen for Rosamond's cruelty:

When at length the wise woman again stopped and set her down, she saw around her a bright moonlit night, on a wide heath, solitary and houseless. Here she felt more frightened than before; nor was her terror assuaged when, looking up, she saw a stern, immovable countenance, with cold eyes fixedly regarding her. All she knew of the world being derived from nursery-tales, she concluded that the wise woman was an ogress, carrying her home to eat her. (11)

In both stories, parents are cruel to their children. The reference to Rosamond's knowledge of her surroundings, which is only derived from "nursery-tales" and coupled with the reference to the "ogress" as well as the registers "fatten" and "eat," evoke the familiar story of *Hansel and Gretel*. Hansel and Gretel are the children of a poor farmer and his abusive second wife. When famine grips the land, the wife convinces her husband that the children will consume the food in the house. Therefore, she suggests that the children should be abandoned on their own in the woods to fend for themselves. The husband finally gives in to his wife's plan. After several trials, Hansel and Gretel manage to make their way out of the woods and reach their home, from which they are soon sent to the woods to die of hunger and cold. They encounter a witch who plans to keep them in her house, fatten them and eat them. Hansel learns that the witch tries to trick him into testing an oven, but by his courage and cunning he manages to outwit the witch, pushing her into the oven and escaping with his sister from the witch's imprisonment. They take with them the witch's treasure which she has hidden in her home.

Like Hansel's and Gretel's parents, who are responsible for the abandonment of their children, Rosamond's parents are blamed for their daughter's ill-temper and fretful action. The parents in both stories are responsible for what happens to their children, inviting evaluations about MacDonald's criticism of parenting. Stephens maintains, "the implication for audiences of literary fictions is that they will, as part of the reading process, invoke an 'appropriate' subject position from past experience, which may correspond to a lesser or greater degree with experiences described in the

text, or else they will either be inscribed as a subject position from materials to hand in the text” (55). Being familiar with *Hansel and Gretel*, the reader is positioned by this intertextual allusion, inferring that the parents are unkind to their children. The reader learns that like Hansel and Gretel, Rosamond is victimized, and her parents are assumed to be responsible for her poor upbringing:

So the princess is not to be blamed that she was very much frightened. She is hardly to be blamed either that, assured the wise woman was an ogress carrying her to her castle to eat her up, she began again to kick and scream violently, as those of my readers who are of the same sort as herself will consider the right and natural thing to do. The wrong in her was this — that she had led such a bad life, that she did not know a good woman when she saw her; took her for one like herself, even after she had slept in her arms. (15)

The rationalization of such an assumption, using the conjunction “so,” followed by the narrator’s direct address of the child reader emphasized by the pronoun “my,” followed by explicitly stating the reason behind Rosamond’s maltreatment using the pronoun “this,” all direct the reader to the ideology in the text: Rosamond “had led such a bad life” due to her parent’s ill-treatment.

The story can therefore function as a parody of *Hansel and Gretel*. Stephens writes that “intertextuality 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). Rosamond is in doubt about the good nature of the Wise Woman: is she a good Wise Woman, or a cruel, wicked witch? The narrator’s characterization of the Wise Woman as a “good woman” and the statement that Rosamond “slept in her arms,” obliterates such doubts. The Wise Woman is loving, nurturing and protecting: “The Wise Woman kissed her and stroked her hair, set her down by the fire, and gave her a bowl of bread and milk” (65). But Rosamond still believes that the Wise Woman is an ogress who wants to eat her. Jack Zipes points out that MacDonald “is a pioneer in experimenting with the traditional motifs and schemes of well-known tales such as “Sleeping Beauty” and “Rapunzel,” successfully mocking them” (Norton 222). In other words, the Wise Woman’s kindness to Rosamond is contrasted with the ogress’s cruelty to Hansel and Gretel. MacDonald uses the character of the Wise Woman as an “iconoclastic gesture” to parody the

traditional fairytale discourse of *Hansel and Gretel*, for example, with its themes of violence and abandonment.

The story, therefore, provides the reader with a variety of interpretive evaluations. The shepherd's and the shepherdess's poor upbringing of Agnes is not different from the King's and the Queen's treatment of Rosamond. Agnes is "neither covetous nor avaricious . . . neither was she greedy after nice things, but content, as well she might be, with the homely food provided for her. Nor was she self-willed or disobedient; she generally did what her father and mother wished, and believed what they told her" (33). Apparently Agnes is an ideal girl and her parents are understanding and loving. The narrator's characterization of Agnes is expressed through the correlative conjunctions "neither, nor" and the subordinating conjunction "but," evoking trust in the child readers and directing them to contrast Agnes and her parents with Rosamond and her parents. That is, the characterization of Agnes and her parents early on is contradictory to their characterization later on, until moments later the child reader learns that:

But by degrees they had spoiled her; and this was the way: they were so proud of her that they always repeated every thing she said, and told every thing she did, even when she was present; and so full of admiration of their child were they, that they wondered and laughed at and praised things in her which in another child would never have struck them as the least remarkable, and some things even which would in another have disgusted them altogether. Impertinent and rude things done by *their* child they thought *so* clever! . . . she became most immoderately conceited. (33-34)

The narrator therefore provides overtly didactic comments on the root cause of Agnes's behavior. One comment relates to flattery, evidenced by the behavior of her parents, who "would even say sometimes that she ought not to hear her own praises for fear it should make her vain, and then whisper them behind their hands but so loud that she could not fail to hear every word" (34). A second comment relates to her parent's preaching on good manners without following up on their wisdom: "all their wisdom goes off in talking, and there is none left for doing what they have themselves said" (47). The narrator's commentary directs the reader to the ideology in the text: Agnes's parents offer her little guidance and are therefore fully responsible for her vanity and self-complacency.

MacDonald approves the right kind of punishment combined with

love: he is therefore not condemning punishment per se. He condemns angry, willful punishment. Rosamond and Agnes are both physically abused by each others' parents, who judge them by their shabby clothes and pale looks. The shepherdess, for example, mocks Rosamond and views her as an "ill-bred tramp" wearing ugly "rags" (48-49), in response to Rosamond's claim to being a princess. Rosamond grows angry, but her anger is curbed by corporal punishment of the shepherdess, "whose hand was already raised to deal her [Rosamond] a sound box on the ear, when a better appointed minister of vengeance [her dog] suddenly showed himself and flew at the princess, knocked her down, and commenced shaking her so violently as to tear her miserable clothes to pieces" (49). Similarly, Agnes is harshly treated by the King and the Queen, in part because of her "vulgar-looking" appearance. The King writes a proclamation stating that every lost child should be brought before him in the hope of one day thus finding Rosamond. The porter finds Agnes and brings her for the King and the Queen to review her:

The moment they cast their eyes upon Agnes, the Queen threw back her head, threw up her hands, and cried, "What a miserable, conceited, white-faced little ape!" and the King turned upon the soldier in wrath, and cried, forgetting his own decree, "What do you mean by bringing such a dirty, vulgar-looking, pert creature into my palace? The dullest soldier in my army could never for a moment imagine a child like *that*, one hair's-breadth like the lovely angel we lost!" "I humbly beg your Majesty's pardon," said the soldier, "but what was I to do? There stands your Majesty's proclamation in gold letters on the brazen gates of the palace." (56)

MacDonald therefore shuns corporal punishment of children based on socioeconomic standards. The King and the Queen order the porter to take Agnes to work as a scullery maid. While working, she is physically abused by the servants, who "drove her about, boxed her ears on the smallest provocation, laid every thing to her charge, called her all manner of contemptuous names, jeered and scoffed at her awkwardnesses, and made her life so miserable" (57). The King gives instructions to torture Agnes and her parents upon sensing that they are hiding the truth about Rosamond's location: "Hold them asunder," shouted the king. "Here is more villainy! What! have I a scullery-maid in my house born of such parents? The parents of such a child must be capable of any thing. Take all three of them to the rack. Stretch them till their joints are torn asunder, and give them no water.

Away with them!” (82-83). The child reader is then interpellated by the ideology in the text by comparing Agnes’s parents’ treatment of Rosamond with Rosamond’s parents’ treatment of Agnes, inferring that the adult world is unjust and harsh to children. By contrast, the fantastic world provides expressions of MacDonald’s vision of proper parenting evidenced by the ways the Wise Woman treats the girls. Even though the healing methods carry with them punishment, their purpose is to make the girls good natured, loving and most importantly, obedient. The fantastic realm is therefore used as a narrative device with an ideological function.

4. “Gentleness” and “Punishment”: MacDonald’s Ideology of Proper Parenting

According to MacDonald, parents should know their rights and duties towards their children. Parents may look at the faults of their children in different ways: where one sees something minor and unimportant, another may consider it extremely serious, a sign of greater moral faults that will come in the future if the problem is not corrected. But just as God’s ways are so much higher than ours, MacDonald maintains, God wants for a child more good things than even a jealous mother could want for her child: God wants the child to be free of any fear, unhappiness, anger, unfairness, or greed, and to be kind to everyone else at all times. Put differently, however much we ask of our children, God asks more of us. MacDonald points this out in one of his sermons:

Anything in you, which, in your own child, would make you feel him not so pleasant as you would have him, is something wrong. This may mean much to one, little or nothing to another. Things in a child which to one parent would not seem worth minding, would fill another with horror. After his moral development, where the one parent would smile, the other would look aghast, perceiving both the present evil, and the serpent-brood to follow. But as the love of him who is love, transcends ours as the heavens are higher than the earth, so must he desire in his child infinitely more than the most jealous love of the best mother can desire in hers. He would have him rid of all discontent, all fear, all grudging, all bitterness in word or thought, all gauging and measuring of his own with a different rod from that he would apply to another’s. He will have no curling of the lip; no indifference in him to the man

whose service in any form he uses; no desire to excel another, no contentment at gaining by his loss. He will not have him receive the smallest service without gratitude; would not hear from him a tone to jar the heart of another, a word to make it ache, be the ache ever so transient. (*Gospel* 10-11)

MacDonald's vision of childhood therefore constitutes a partial disintegration of the conventional Victorian image of children as submissive. Despite fostering emotional identity and self-determination in boys and girls by cultivating their inner goodness, and despite his belief in the Romantic vision of the child as a savior of the adult world, MacDonald emphasized children's obedience, compliance and submission to their parents. In chapter XXXIX of *The Vicar's Daughter*, Ethelwyn's father, speaking by extension for MacDonald, tells her of the most practical advice for raising her child: "never give in to disobedience; and never threaten what you are not prepared to carry out" (318). Similarly, in *The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story* the narrator comments that the shepherdess "had never carried out one of her threats of punishment. If the wise woman had but pinched her [Agnes]" (39). MacDonald's ideology is evidenced in one of his sermons, disclosing his vision of obedience as the "most precious" aspect of proper parenting that nurtures children emotionally and morally:

Obedience is the grandest thing in the world to begin with. Yes, and we shall end with it too. I do not think the time will ever come when we shall not have something to do, because we are told to do it without knowing why. Those parents act most foolishly who wish to explain everything to their children — most foolishly. No; teach your child to obey, and you give him the most precious lesson that can be given to a child. Let him come to that before you have had him long, to do what he is told, and you have given him the plainest, first, and best lesson that you can give him. If he never goes to school at all he had better have that lesson than all the schooling in the world. (*Dish* 228)

In raising children, MacDonald therefore believes that all virtues follow from obedience.

In the story, MacDonald employs mirror imagery to expose the disobedient nature of the two girls, inviting child readers for ideologically-charged evaluations concerning his ideas of proper parenting. Battin asserts that "The orb into which Agnes is placed functions in the same way that the

moon and the mirror had previously functioned for Rosamond: revealing spiritual emptiness in each” (214). Therefore, the mirror is used as a narrative device with an ideological function: it exposes the girls’ unpleasant nature and hints at the need for “gentleness” and “punishment” as a means of reform:

Ere it [Agnes’s mind] had time to sink down again, the wise woman caught up the little mirror, and held it before her: Agnes saw her Somebody — the very embodiment of miserable conceit and ugly ill-temper. She gave such a scream of horror that the wise woman pitied her, and laying aside the mirror, took her upon her knees, and talked to her most kindly and solemnly; in particular about the necessity of destroying the ugly things that come out of the heart — so ugly that they make the very face over them ugly also. Then the wise woman laid her gently down upon the heather bed. (45-46)

Narrative voice is therefore central in conveying such a function to the child reader in two respects. First, the narrator’s direct question to the child reader using rhetorical questions, such as “And what was Agnes doing all the time the wise woman was talking to her? Would you believe it?” and his answer “instead of thinking how to kill the ugly things in her heart, she was with all her might resolving to be careful of her face . . . she was resolving to be a hypocrite as well as a self-worshipper” (46) illuminate for the child reader other aspects of Agnes’s personality — hypocrisy and complacency. Second, the narrator’s characterization of the Wise Woman through direct presentation of her action, exemplified by the verb phrases “pitied her,” “took her upon her knees,” talk . . . kindly” and “laid gently,” point to the gentle nature of the Wise Woman. The contrast between Rosamond’s egotism with the Wise Woman’s altruism is also emphasized by mirror imagery:

As she [Rosamond] spoke, suddenly she [the Wise Woman] held up before the princess a tiny mirror, so clear that nobody looking into it could tell what it was made of, or even see it at all — only the thing reflected in it. Rosamond saw a child with dirty fat cheeks, greedy mouth, cowardly eyes — which, not daring to look forward, seemed trying to hide behind an impertinent nose — stooping shoulders, tangled hair, tattered clothes, and smears and stains everywhere. That was what she had made herself. She dashed the glass out of the wise woman’s hand, and there it lay, broken into a thousand pieces! Without

a word, the wise woman stooped, and gathered the fragments.
(28)

The Wise Woman's gentleness has limitations, however. In raising children, MacDonald believed that "punishment" should be used when "gentleness" failed. "The Wise Woman had an awful punishment, but she remembered that the Princess had been very ill brought up, and therefore wished to try her gentleness first" (23). The tests the girls go through are necessary to induce change in their behavior. As Roderick McGillis writes, "The Wise Woman's function is to break up the ice of fixed ideas and expectations, for she knows without conflict, without the piquancy of fear, there will be no progression" ("Fantasy" 21). She therefore uses her "wise punishment" (39) with her vision grounded on righteousness and goodness as an effective means for the "progression" of the two girls. Here, MacDonald does not condemn punishment in itself, but approves the right kind of punishment combined with wisdom. MacDonald's ideological concerns regarding the proper socialization of children are expressed in various textual features of the narrative such as intertextuality, narrative voice and juxtaposition. In frequent instances, however, MacDonald's ideology appears as overtly didactic.

Intertextuality in the story functions as a narrative technique with ideological implications, inviting the child reader to engage with a variety of "interpretive positions" regarding the parents, the Wise Woman and Rosamond. As Stephens writes, "The relationship between a reader and a text is dialectical, a negotiation of meaning between a subject's multi-faceted sense of self and the many interpretive positions which a text may make possible" (47). The "ogress" in *Hansel and Gretel*, the "White Rabbit" in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the episode of the "drowning Prince" at the end of MacDonald's *The Light Princess* (1864) provide useful examples to comment on such a variety of positions. Rosamond, for example, suspects that the Wise Woman is an ogress who plans to eat her despite the Wise Woman's acts of kindness. Rosamond is terribly scared: "Oh, don't eat me! don't eat me!" (11). The narrator comments that Rosamond's reaction is because "severity had greater influence over her than kindness" and directly addresses the child reader, "Think of it — to kick at kindness, and kneel from terror" (11). These remarks expose the "terror" of the King and the Queen and emphasize the "kindness" of the Wise Woman. Rosamond has slightly changed and "the idea of being an ogress vanished utterly" from her mind (19). The allusion to the ogress then evokes a contrast between the parents and the Wise Woman, exposing the harmful methods of the parents and

emphasizing the healing punishment of the Wise Woman.

The change in Rosamond's mood is, however, transient. For MacDonald, trust is central in the spiritual growth of the individual. Rosamond distrusts the Wise Woman and still thinks that she is "an ogress, after all" who wants to fatten and eat her (20). When Rosamond stops eating, the Wise Woman knows what Rosamond thinks of her — an ogress:

It was a single bare little room, with a white deal table, and a few old wooden chairs, a fire of fir-wood on the hearth, the smoke of which smelt sweet, and a patch of thick-growing heath in one corner. Poor as it was, compared to the grand place Rosamond had left, she felt no little satisfaction as she shut the door, and looked around her. And what with the sufferings and terrors she had left outside, the new kind of tears she had shed, the love she had begun to feel for her parents, and the trust she had begun to place in the Wise Woman, it seemed to her as if her soul had grown larger of a sudden, and she had left the days of her childishness and naughtiness far behind her. People are so ready to think themselves changed when it is only their mood that is changed! (19-20)

The juxtaposition of Rosamond's parent's "grand" palace with the Wise Woman's "poor" cottage presents a paradox for the child reader concerning the ideal place for Rosamond to be raised: is it the "grand" palace, or the "poor" cottage? The child reader resolves this paradox upon learning that the fantasy realm of the Wise Woman's cottage of enchantment and mystery is a source of order and rehabilitation for the girls, while the ordinary world of the King's and the Queen's palace is a source of disorder and parental neglect. Similarly, the hut where the shepherd and the shepherdess live in the countryside also conveys this idea of a lack of family solidarity and of cruelty towards the children, expressed in a second paradox through a descriptive mode:

A blue summer sky, with white fleecy clouds floating beneath it, hung over a hill green to the very top, and alive with streams darting down its sides toward the valley below. On the face of the hill strayed a flock of sheep feeding, attended by a shepherd and two dogs. A little way apart, a girl stood with bare feet in a brook, building across it a bridge of rough stones. The wind was blowing her hair back from her rosy face. A lamb was feeding close beside her; and a sheepdog was trying to reach her hand to

lick it. (32)

The descriptive words and vivid language — similes and metaphors — used to describe the beauty of the countryside suspend the child reader's realization of the good place for Agnes to be raised. As Zipes points out, "In the fairy tales, abandoned children do not always meet a witch — but they do encounter a dangerous character who threatens their lives, and they must use their wits to find their way home. In part because it celebrates the patriarchal home as haven, in the nineteenth century "Hansel and Gretel" became one of the most beloved of the Grimm's tales" (Norton 209). The child reader is therefore subjected to the ideology these paradoxes suggest: the fantastic world informs a reality that is harsh, unjust and unsafe for children.

Similarly, the allusion to the White Rabbit in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* exposes the harmful methods of the parents and focuses upon the positive change that happens to Rosamond due to the Wise Woman's healing methods. The Wise Woman understands that Rosamond "would require time" (22) to behave and subjects her to more tests. In each one Rosamond stays in a room in the gallery of pictures that work upon her mood. The purpose of the trials is to instill in her the values of goodness and discipline by overcoming her moody nature. In the first test, Rosamond "found herself in her old nursery. Her little white rabbit came to meet her in a lumping canter as if his back were going to tumble over his head . . . her nurse did not seem at all surprised to see her, any more than if the Princess had but just gone from the room and returned again" (67). Oblivious to her present conditions, Rosamond reverts to her moody, cruel nature, becoming malicious to the nurse and to her white rabbit: "She caught up the rabbit in a rage, and, crying, "It is all your fault [that she fell on the ground], you ugly old wretch!" threw it with violence in her nurse's face" (68). Moved by feelings of discontentment with her reaction, Rosamond feels repentant and admits her cruelty: "overcome with shame, Rosamond ran to her [the Wise Woman], fell down on her knees, and hid her face in her dress" (68). Put differently, this allusion functions as an analepsis that invites the child reader to contrast Rosamond's indifference to the pain she inflicts upon the rabbit *early on*, with her feelings of repentance when she tortures the rabbit *later*. Rosamond asks for a second chance, to which the Wise Woman makes no objection, reflecting MacDonald's vision that reforming children requires time, persistence and discipline.

Such a vision is also conveyed through the allusion to the "drowning Prince" at the end of MacDonald's *The Light Princess*, offering more

ideological, interpretive positions for the child reader. The story 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 of their daughter, but the King forgets to invite his sister Princess Makemnoit, who out of spite and envy casts a spell over the Princess and deprives her of gravity. Love only can bring her weight back. The Princess floats in the air and learns that she retains her gravity when she swims in water. A Prince from the neighboring country sets off to find a wife for himself. He comes upon the Princess in the water, and thinking that she is drowning, rushes into the water. He finally finds out about the Princess's problem of weightlessness. Upon learning that the Prince has fallen in love with the Princess, Princess Makemnoit uses a slithering snake to drain the lake. The Prince sacrifices himself for the sake of the Princess by using his body to block the hole from which the water is flowing. The Princess sits in a boat near the Prince while the water rises, almost drowning him. He asks her for a kiss before he drowns, to which she gives in, and retains her gravity: "Love and water brought back all her strength. She got under the water, and pulled and pulled with her whole might, till at last she got one leg out. The other easily followed," the narrator comments (47). "Here self-discovery occurs through compassion and social interaction" (Zipes; Norton 222). The Princess changes from a self-conceited girl to a compassionate, loving woman and marries the Prince.

Unlike the Princess, Rosamond does not sacrifice herself for the sake of the drowning boy whom she encounters in a "beautiful garden" in her third test:

A lake was in the middle of it [the garden], with a tiny boat . . . Presently came the shout of a child, merry and glad, and from a clump of tulip trees rushed a lovely little boy, with his arms stretched out to her . . . But the moment she set him down he ran from her towards the lake, looking back as he ran, and crying "Come, come." . . . Then he caught up the little boathook, and pushed away from the shore: there was a great white flower floating a few yards off, and that was the little fellow's goal. But, alas! no sooner had Rosamond caught sight of it, huge and glowing as a harvest moon, than she felt a great desire to have it herself. The boy, however, was in the bows of the boat, and caught it first. It had a long stem, reaching down to the bottom of the water, and for a moment he tugged at it in vain, but at last it gave way so suddenly, that he tumbled back

with the flower into the bottom of the boat . . . When the boy got up, and saw the ruin his companion had occasioned [tearing the flower], he burst into tears, and having the long stalk of the flower still in his hand, struck her with it across the face. It did not hurt her much, for he was a very little fellow, but it was wet and slimy. She tumbled rather than rushed at him, seized him in her arms, tore him from his frightened grasp, and flung him into the water. (68-70)

The intertextual parallel therefore has an ideological function: it exposes Rosamond's moody and uncompassionate nature, and points to her awareness of her anger and egotism. She, for example, "wept and wailed" (70) at her failure to save the drowning boy and asks the Wise Woman for a final test. In that test she becomes conscious of her weaknesses, genuinely repents her wrongdoings and is finally redeemed. She runs to a picture in the picture gallery, steps over its frame and crosses from the fantasy world to the ordinary world to act as a redeemer for her parents. The Wise Woman tells her: "Meanwhile you must be their servants, as I have been yours" (85). The child readers are therefore inscribed as subject positions: the Wise Woman has a punishing and forgiving nature; the parents are punished for the mismanagement of the children and Rosamond will act as a redeemer of the adult world. Through the character of the Wise Woman (and Rosamond) MacDonald, therefore, casts a critical eye on the existing ideology of parenting.

5. Conclusion

The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story expresses MacDonald's belief in God as loving, forgiving but also punishing. Rosamond asks the Wise Woman: "Will you forgive *all* my naughtiness, and *all* the trouble I have given you?" to which the Wise Woman responds, "If I had not forgiven you, I would never have taken the trouble to punish you. If I had not loved you, do you think I would have carried you away in my cloak?" (77). Brought up in a congregational church with an ambiance of Calvinism, MacDonald imbibed the orthodox authoritarian doctrines with which he later broke in a way that would have a profound influence on his life and work. C. S. Lewis writes: "George MacDonald's family (though hardly his father) were of course Calvinists. On the intellectual side his history is largely a history of escape from the theology in which he had been brought up" (11). David L. Neuhouseer, in "George MacDonald and

Universalism,” writes that MacDonald “believed that God’s love is a tough love. He did not believe that God would not care what we did and just wants us to be happy. He did believe that God would keep working and do whatever was necessary to get us to repent no matter how long it would take for us to repent” (83). Punishment for MacDonald was therefore an expression of love, not of anger or of hatred, and in consequence he did not approve willful, angry punishment not motivated by wisdom and love.

In raising children, MacDonald believed that children’s obedience to their parents is an expression of their obedience to God. Therefore, he called for parents to “teach” their children values of obedience and submission. Thus, MacDonald cautions parents against instilling vanity, pride and self-complacency in their children, whose inner goodness they have a responsibility to cultivate. MacDonald knew that his ideology of parenting would be tedious if constantly sermonized: the fantastic mode therefore gives space for MacDonald to comment on parenting practices and to emphasize his ideas in a language that was suited for readers of children’s literature. The ideology in this story emerges as a juxtaposition of established norms and assumptions and MacDonald’s alternative ideology grounded on honesty and obedience. MacDonald then uses the fantasy realm as a metaphor for reality, a way to point out the urgency of reform.

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