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Jessica D. Dooley

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Jessica D. Dooley

A comparison of how fairyland is employed in the fiction of G. K. Chesterton and George MacDonald, and the role fairyland plays in the moral development of their fictional characters, reveals more parallels than divergences between the two writers' philosophies. Their treatments of fairyland share the context of fixed moral standards that are clearly understood by fairyland's habitants and visitors, and disclose the authors' views of the relationship between personal responsibility and consequences. Fairyland, with its mysterious, imperative rules, and glorious generosity of rewards, provides a framework for explication with startling clarity the dangerous immediacy of the consequences of moral choice.

"We are all under the same mental calamity; we have all forgotten our names. We have all forgotten what we really are. All that we call common sense and rationality and practicality and positivism only means that for certain dead levels of our life we forget that we have forgotten. All that we call spirit and art and ecstasy only means that for one awful instant we remember that we forget."

- Chesterton: *Orthodoxy*, Ch IV:
"The Ethics of Elfland"

MacDonald and Chesterton both use fairyland in their fiction as a device to help us remember what we have

forgotten: that we are moral beings in a process of development, with a positive responsibility for our own moral development, and that this character-building process is not occasional or isolated, but is the common business of our lives.

The first point on which both authors agree is, that fairyland has laws, and these laws are the laws of the moral universe. They are fixed from the beginning of the universe, and do not change with time or imagination. MacDonald describes this in his essay "The Fantastic Imagination" (found in both *A Dish of Orts*, and as his preface to the American edition of his *Fairy Tales*). He had just described how imaginative fiction was an appropriate place for inventing new physical laws. Then he writes:

"In the moral world it is different: there a man may clothe in new forms, and for this employ his imagination freely, but he must invent nothing. He may not, for any purpose, turn its laws upside down. He must not meddle with the relations of live souls. The laws of the spirit of man must hold, alike in this world and in any world he may invent. It were no offence to suppose a world in which everything repelled instead of attracted the things around it; it would be wicked to write a tale representing a man it called good as

always doing bad things, or a man it called bad as always doing good things: the notion itself is absolutely lawless. In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey--and take their laws with him into his invented world as well."

- MacDonald,
"The Fantastic Imagination,"
preface to American Edition
of his fairytales

It is wonderful how closely Chesterton parallels this conviction in the chapter of *Orthodoxy* titled "The Ethics of Elfland." He condemns the modern materialism that casts natural order as empirical law, and presents as the alternative the moral law of fairyland as a true law.

"In fairyland there had been a real law; a law that could be broken, for the definition of a law is something that can be broken."

- Chesterton: *Orthodoxy*, Ch
IV: "The Ethics of Elfland"

The description of moral law as something that can be broken suggests the second point they have in common. The moral laws of fairyland are fixed, but characters visiting fairyland are not static. They must interact with moral laws by choosing to pursue good, or evil. Both are active choices, but only one requires a definite consciousness of choice.

However, their presentation of fairyland differs significantly. In MacDonald's stories, fairyland represents the literal nature of reality, especially spiritual reality, made tangible and fully apparent to the senses, with all its real, immediate, and permanent moral dangers and consequences. In his fiction, the danger a character experiences in fairyland is always real, and represents moral peril, with the chance of dangerous failure, with real, if not always

irremediable, consequences, to both the self, and others.

Chesterton described this quality of MacDonald's fiction, in his introduction to Greville MacDonald's biography of his parents:

"There is – something not only imaginative but intimately true about the idea of the goblins being below the house and capable of besieging it from the cellars. When the evil things besieging us do appear, they do not appear outside but inside.

"But George MacDonald did really believe that people were princesses and goblins and good fairies, and he dressed them up as ordinary men and women. The fairy-tale was the inside of the ordinary story and not the outside. One result of this is that all the inanimate objects that are the stage properties of the story retain that nameless glamour which they have in a literal fairy-tale."

- From Chesterton's Introduction to
George MacDonald and His Wife
(Greville M. MacDonald, 1924)

The stories in which Chesterton invokes fairyland are usually set in a practical environment, which suddenly takes on a strange and unexpected visage, staggering the character's confidence in his own understanding of the reality around him. The phrase "it was as if," evoking perception, commonly prefaces his fairy-like descriptions. His fairyland continually erupts from the apparently quotidian. In Chesterton, fairyland is blended with and emerges imperceptibly from external life. Fairyland appears when a character becomes aware of a moral or spiritual phenomenon. The key to fairyland in Chesterton is that it lives in the perceptions of his characters.

In Chesterton's fiction, fairyland often represents what his protagonists fear to be the nature of reality, rather

than its actual nature. In Chesterton's depictions of fairy, there is frequently a sense of that quality which is called "fey," a sense in which fairyland, its logic, and its perceptions, is mad – or induces madness in mortals. From "The Sins of Prince Saradine:"

"By Jove!" said Flambeau, "it's like being in fairyland."

Father Brown sat bolt upright in the boat and crossed himself. His movement was so abrupt that his friend asked him, with a mild stare, what was the matter.

"The people who wrote the mediaeval ballads," answered the priest, "knew more about fairies than you do. It isn't only nice things that happen in fairyland."

And presently, Father Brown reiterates this idea of fairyland as a dangerous place:

"I never said it was always wrong to enter fairyland. I only said it was always dangerous."

- "Sins of Prince Saradine,"
The Innocence of Father Brown

When Chesterton's characters encounter fairyland, it inspires, or is accompanied by, a sense of danger or dread, a consciousness of the unknown and the not-altogether benevolent. His fairylike settings feel like the breathless stillness that precedes a thunderstorm: an atmosphere that portends the unfolding of a fact. Most often, his characters' brief mental foray into fairyland is the atmosphere that precedes the understanding of a truth.

In both Chesterton and MacDonald, the character venturing through fairyland needs a guide to help them navigate truly and emerge without harm, and this guide is wisdom. This is the third thing their fairytales often have in common: the presence of wisdom

embodied as a person, to assist the character visiting fairyland to make the right moral choices. The fundamentally distilled examples are wisdom personified as the Wise Woman in MacDonald, and as Father Brown in Chesterton. But this dynamic between the sojourner in fairyland and the agent of wisdom appears consistently through the fiction of both authors.

(Sidenote: The Proverbs, which consist entirely of short statements about wisdom, foolishness, and individual responsibility for one's own moral condition through choices, presents Wisdom embodied in a personal form, who dialogues and reasons with the reader, urging him to choose the right.)

Both authors agree on the source of the moral struggle in which their characters are engaged: the source of sin is within the human heart.

"Anybody can be wicked – as wicked as he chooses. We can direct our moral wills," says Father Brown.

- "The Strange Crime
of John Boulnois,"
in *The Wisdom of Father Brown*

A character in moral peril in "The Hammer of God" (The Innocence of Father Brown), asks Father Brown:

"How do you know all this?" he cried. "Are you a devil?"

I am a man," answered Father Brown gravely, "and therefore have all devils in my heart."

- Chesterton,
"The Hammer of God,"
The Innocence of Father Brown

Indeed, this moral conviction guides all Father Brown's investigations. He describes his conviction fully (and reluctantly) in "The Secret of Father Brown."

“You see, I had murdered them all myself... I had planned out each of the crimes very carefully. I had thought out exactly how a thing like that could be done, and in what style or state of mind a man could really do it. And when I was quite sure that I felt exactly like the murderer myself, of course I knew who he was. ... If you try to talk about a truth that’s merely moral, people always think it’s merely metaphysical. ... I mean that I really did see myself, and my real self, committing the murders. I didn’t actually kill the men by material means; but that’s not the point. Any brick or bit of machinery might have killed them by material means. I mean that I thought and thought about how a man might come to be like that, until I realized that I really was like that, in everything except actual final consent to the action.”

- Chesterton,
“The Secret of Father Brown,”
The Secret of Father Brown

In the human heart lies sin, and a course directed by sin leads to madness, and death. Chesterton and MacDonald both portray this in their depictions of fairyland. But the pursuit of wisdom, or allowing one’s course to be guided by wisdom, leads to an increasingly clear vision of reality, a sanity and understanding – in short, to interpreting the world astutely, in accordance with truth.

Wisdom, and its clarity of understanding, also encompasses self-knowledge. The individual’s primary area of responsibility is over the self. Those still bound by, or actively pursuing, sin, increasingly lack self-knowledge, the ability to rightly evaluate their own moral condition, choices, and development. These are those excluded from fairyland, from a consciousness of the moral universe, its choices and its imperatives.

In Chesterton, these are often hearty, bluff, apparently sane individuals – who are truly less sane than the character who feels he is tottering on the brink of madness, in fairyland.

Consider what Father Brown has to say about self-knowledge:

“No man’s really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be; till he’s realized exactly how much right he has to all this snobbery, and sneering, and talking about ‘criminals,’ as if they were apes in a forest ten thousand miles away; till he’s got rid of all the dirty self-deception of talking about low types and deficient skulls; till he’s squeezed out of his soul the last drop of the oil of the Pharisees; till his only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal, and kept him safe and sane under his own hat.”

- Chesterton,
The Secret of Father Brown

Compare this with the trials of MacDonald’s character Rosamond, the spoiled “Lost Princess” who comes under the tutelage of *The Wise Woman*. The Wise Woman sets a course of trials for Rosamond, to help her reform her character, from her petty, self-centered hysteria, by developing self-control, and no longer thinking of herself as more important than everything else. Before she can change, she must learn to revile her former conduct, and she does learn this, over the course of two trials; but to merely hate her own foolish conduct is not enough, for she fails the test of each of her first trials. To succeed, she must also voluntarily desire wisdom.

As she undertakes her first two trials, she is certain that her own willpower will be sufficient, but she fails miserably. But before embarking on her

third trial, she asks the Wise Woman to help her.

“Couldn’t you help me?” said Rosamond piteously.

“Perhaps I could, now you ask me,” answered the wise woman. “When you are ready to try again, we shall see.”

“I am very tired of myself,” said the princess. “But I can’t rest till I try again.”

“That is the only way to get rid of your weary, shadowy self, and find your strong, true self. Come, my child; I will help you all I can, for now I *can* help you.”

- MacDonald,
The Wise Woman, Ch XIII

In Chesterton’s fiction, we glimpse fairyland through the viewpoint of a character whose development is in process, or who is immersed in a dynamic situation. For this reason, their ability to perceive reality clearly is predicated on their maturity in moral development. Even to mature characters, like Father Brown, visions from fairyland appear which are more terrible or distorted than the actual. He, however, has the wisdom to interpret his impressions through the screen of reality. At that initial moment of horror, when reality seems to rock on its foundation, we see with Chesterton’s protagonist, and are astounded.

In contrast, MacDonald treats his readers as outside observers, and presents to us moral facts, represented by fairy actors, as direct expressions of a clear moral dilemma. We read, and see clearly the actual and projected consequences of a character’s choices, even as the character is in the process of development. However, MacDonald is often subtly layering two potential protagonists: the character who interacts with fairies, and the reader who interacts with the fairytale. His explicit statement

of the conditions and assumptions of the reality of fairyland, or rather the moral choices and conditions it describes, are intended as model to his readers, to spur their own development, and to prompt their own reflection and choices. In his essay “The Fantastic Imagination,” MacDonald says the message in his fairytales “is there not so much to convey a meaning as to wake a meaning.”

Chesterton presents the person in moral process, confronted unexpectedly with a vision, a fairy-like interpretation of reality, which is overlaid on external circumstances or events. In Chesterton’s essays, fairyland describes a region of joy, of youthful intuitive wisdom.

“For we have sinned and grown old,
and our Father is younger than we.”

- Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*,
Ch IV: “The Ethics of Elfland”

But in his fiction, the vision of fairyland is like the yawning of an abyss. His protagonists, in their visions of fairyland, experience a revelation of hidden horrors that they find they had always dreaded were there, concealed behind the silent faces of the physical things, and they both fear and suspect this revelation to be true. But the joy and hope in Chesterton is that they are not true. The face of an impossible horror, momentarily dreaded to be all-too-possible, is revealed to be the face of a friend. A thing seen and dreaded as being blacker than hell is suddenly revealed to be lighter than fairydust. A man apparently in the last excess of madness is revealed to be the only man acting sanely. (Two wonderful examples of this last, both of which involve Colonels with remarkably similar names, and an element of salad, are “The Salad of Colonel Cray,” from *The Wisdom of Father Brown*, and “The Unpresentable Appearance of Colonel Crane,” from *Tales of the Long Bow*.) It is the individual’s

perception, rather than reality itself, that cannot be trusted. This image of reality suggests the ineffable grace of God, which is able to protect the individual person and carry them safely through their spiritual development, in spite of the dangers of spiritual reality. This Providence, this persevering grace of God, and the individual's obliviousness to its action until some level of wisdom is achieved, are what Chesterton emphasizes in his treatment of fairyland.

Chesterton and MacDonald's approaches to fairyland share something with the fiction of Charles Williams, who in *Descent Into Hell* exhibits the same characteristics in his use of the fantastic: an apparent horror, unbearable and inescapable; an individual undergoes a spiritual trial, and develops more wisdom; and finally, the perceived horror is revealed to be literally a friend, and a mercy from God. It was the character's perception of reality, and fear that evil would triumph, that made the horror.

Another parallel is Williams' depiction of the madness caused by a dogged pursuit of sin, and an active rejection of wisdom. Compare the moral progress (or rather regress) of the child Agnes, in MacDonald's *The Wise Woman*, with Williams' character Laurence Wentworth, in *Descent Into Hell*. Williams spends careful detail on describing the title "descent," through the progressively accumulating choices of Wentworth, who refuses to act on the gentle prompts of opportunities for kindness, self-denial, charity, and humility, and instead actively decides to feel pride, anger, self-importance, and hatred toward all who do not contribute directly to his self-love. By definition, this ends up including every person other than himself. This depiction of an active choosing of sin, and rejection of wisdom, parallels closely MacDonald's depiction of the self-important child Agnes in *The Wise Woman*, who actively rejects the Wise Woman's invitation to abandon her self-regard, and relapses

into self-approval, "growing worse than before."

Consequences correspond with choices, and choices have appropriate consequences. The only option that is not available is to avoid making a choice; such avoidance constitutes a choice, in itself. A refusal to confront a moral choice inexorably funnels an individual into a choice, and its consequences – but without his active consent. Chesterton writes,

"I do not believe in a fate that falls on men however they act; but I do believe in a fate that falls on them unless they act."

- *Illustrated London News*
(29 April 1922)

The moral fate Chesterton and MacDonald (and Williams – and the Proverbs) depict for those characters who refuse to act, is moral stupidity – the inability to see the choice any longer.

The character presented with a moral test, in fairyland, may choose the course of wisdom, or of foolishness; but he must always choose. He cannot avoid the dilemma by ignoring it. In "The Ethics of Elfland," Ch IV of *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton called this ever-present moral choice "the Doctrine of Conditional Joy." He also speaks of all physical reality as having an inherent "quality of choice," as if it had just that moment been decided that leaves would be green, when they might have been quite different. If the world itself has the quality of choice, is it so surprising that its inhabitants must also participate by choice in their moral development?

It is this moral development that Chesterton and MacDonald primarily address through their use of fairyland. Fairyland, in the fiction of each, acts as a concrete framework within which to represent the individual's moral condition and development, the choices to pursue wisdom or reject it, as choices

between two concrete, observable alternatives with immediate and eternal results.

MacDonald and Chesterton both use fairyland to depict spiritual realities as visible, physical realities, to better make clear their characters' spiritual choices. The device of fairyland allows them to embody a character's ephemeral struggle with their moral condition, so that it takes on a dramatic immediacy and a dangerous reality. It is dangerous to ignore an imminent physical peril. Luckily, it is also difficult to ignore. The greatest moral danger is to ignore the peril of failing to choose the right. Ignoring moral choices prevents the individual from actively making a choice, and leads to self-deception, and eventually to madness and death.

Both Chesterton and MacDonald wish to express the urgent imminence of moral struggle, the way it bursts forth to take precedence over the apparent physical realities of people's lives. Their aim is to burst through the subtle sleep that would tempt us to be blind to spiritual dynamism of everyday life. To be blind to our moral choices is to lose the capacity to participate in our own moral development. Chesterton and MacDonald's representation of the moral condition as external realities, embodied in the fantastic faces of fairyland, allows them to present the immediacy, urgency, and importance of the moral choices that confront their characters. These moral crises must be confronted, willing or no, and their consequences have both immediate and eternal significance. Their message is that to become aware of the moral confrontation with an active opponent, the enemy of our souls, the devil, is the first, vital step to participating in our own spiritual destiny.