

George MacDonald *on Princes*  
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INTRODUCTION

In a previous session, Ms. Bauder discussed theories of fairy tales and fairyiness. According to Northrop Frye, all stories are in reality one story which is either a quest or romance. Each story has a someone who does something in order to resolve the literary conflict. On that basis, Frye concludes that “[f]iction, therefore, may be classified, not morally, but by the hero’s power of action” (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 33). Although Frye suggests five possible kinds of heroes, only one is pertinent to this essay. The hero is “superior in *degree* to other men.” That is to say, he is human as opposed to god-like, but his actions are marvelous, or extraordinary. According to Frye, “prodigies of courage and endurance ... are natural to him.” In this essay, I wish to examine further this outside prince in light of George MacDonald’s views on fairy tales and Truth. Why is it that courage and endurance are natural to Frye’s hero? MacDonald’s answer, I believe, is that the hero is *truly* human.

THE LAWS OF FAIRYLAND

In “The Fantastic Imagination,” MacDonald sets forth two laws which are essential to fairy tales. The first law is coherence. The writer of a fairy tale may make up any laws he wishes. Animals may talk, for example, or witches may cast spells. In MacDonald’s, “The Golden Key,” one may easily reach the end of the rainbow because “the rainbow of Fairyland is not dependent upon the sun as ours is.” In regard to these unnatural laws, MacDonald requires the author an internal obedience within the story. If at any time the laws of the story are broken, the story itself becomes chimerical.

The second law which is essential to fairy tales can be summed up in the phrase “moral law.” That which is a moral law in this world must hold true in fairy land. MacDonald is dogmatic on this point, “In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey” (xxiii). Fairy tales teach a truth about the moral universe. They distinguish right actions from wrong actions. These morals may or may not be explicit in the story itself. An author may not be attempting to teach a particular moral in his story. To destroy the moral fabric of fairy land, however, is to destroy the moral imagination of the reader. In MacDonald’s view, to destroy the moral imagination of a man is to destroy the man himself.

TRUTH

The final point from MacDonald I wish to raise is his notion of Truth. A number of MacDonald’s sermons and essays have been collected in a book titled, *The Truth in Jesus: The Nature of Truth and How We Come to Know it*. In the first essay, “The Truth,” MacDonald defines, or perhaps better, describes what truth is and what it is not. As MacDonald battled against the rise of philosophical modernism, he distinguished between fact and truth. Science called empirical phenomena truth. Scientists equated facts with truth, making them one and the same. MacDonald, viewing the world from a pre-modern perspective, believed Truth was a step higher than the facts. We can use science to describe how something works, but it does not tell us why it works, or why God made it work in such a way. In MacDonald’s words, then, a fact “cannot be to us a truth until we discern the reason of its existence, its relation to mind and intent, yea to self-existence. Tell us why it *must* be so, and you state the truth” (17).

In MacDonald’s argument, truths about the world and truth about man are on different levels. When man comes in contact with truth, and that truth affects his “sense of duty”, that truth “becomes a thing of far nobler import” (25). Truth is inherently an issue of morality, and issues of morality cause a man to choose between being a true man or a false man. The man who perfectly obeys the moral law is to that extent a true man. It follows for MacDonald, that as a man obeys the moral law, his ability to know Truth is increased. His spiritual sensibilities are sharpened, as it were.

An even higher plane of truth is discovered when man comes in contact with another man. The matter of truth becomes complicated as two people come to know one another. Both of them understand truths in varying ways and to varying degrees. They also have been affected by those truths. Plus, both of them are to some degree, true or false men. As they come in contact with each other, they must obey the moral laws which relate to mankind, thus each changing himself and affecting the other simultaneously. Knowing a person, therefore, is the greatest level of knowledge.

## PRINCES

We return now to Northrop's handsome hero. Is he merely an outsider with a good amount of luck on his side? Did he receive an extra portion of bravery in order that he may accomplish heroic acts? Or, should there be more to our hero than a sharp sword, a mighty steed, and double shot of gusto? Taking Northrop's hero and adding MacDonald's two laws of Fairy Land and his notion of truth all together, I have chosen "Little Daylight" as a foil for MacDonald's fairy stories. I want to particularly examine the prince, his relationships, his obedience, and his reward.

The prince in "Little Daylight" is unnamed. MacDonald ambiguously relates to the reader that the prince is from a neighboring kingdom. Due to unforeseen circumstances, he must flee his father's kingdom dressed as a peasant. Other than these facts, the reader knows nothing of the history of the prince, nor of his character. Thus, the reader encounters the prince as he first enters Daylight's realm. As the prince happens to find his way into the kingdom of Daylight's father, he meets and speaks with three particular characters: 1) the good fairy; 2) the castle cook; and 3) Princess Daylight.

The first character whom the prince meets is a good fairy, and supposedly one of the good fairies who was at Daylight's christening. As the story progresses, he spends a couple evenings at her home, and speaks with her on those occasions. During the first occasion, the good fairy pleads with the prince, that if he should remain in the kingdom to return and to stay in her home once again. This statement is not in a dialogue, nor is it a direct command she makes of the prince. It is important nonetheless, for the prince does stay in the area, and he does return to the good fairy's home.

On their second encounter, the fairy and the prince enjoy a longer discourse, and they discuss the princess. They introduce themselves as who they are: the good fairy as a fairy and the prince as a prince. In this discussion, the reader learns that there is more than one prince who could potentially rescue the princess. MacDonald says of the princess that "however much the princess might desire to be set free, she was dreadfully afraid of the wrong prince" (390). This notion of multiple princes, placed together with the notion of a potentially wrong prince, could imply the potentiality of a one and right prince.

The third character whom the prince meets is a good natured cook at the palace. He has a brief meal, and a brief conversation with her before leaving. The cook knows the fairy, and she exhorts the prince to behave himself around her because she will make him repent of any ill-doing. The prince demonstrates his character in his response, "if you wish to do anything wrong, the best thing for you is to be made to repent of it" (386). This statement reveals much in light of MacDonald's view of truth. If the prince be a true man, then he will do what is right.

The second character whom the prince sees is little Daylight. Though he never speaks to her, nor does she see him during the first encounter, he will never be the same. As he watches her dance around the glade for a second time, a storm begins to brew. Finally, after a flash of lightening, the prince sees the princess lying on the ground. Afraid for her safety, he rushes to her, and not only finds her well, but also reveals himself.

They have a conversation, and the manner in which he behaves himself is as a true prince. The princess at first dismisses him. When the prince begins to leave in obedience, she calls him back and says, "I like you. You do what you are told" (388). Later, she deduces that he is a prince, and her reasons two: 1) he obeys, and 2) he speaks the truth. His character, according to the princess, is indelibly attached to truth. Yet, she can only know this because she is a true princess.

## CONCLUSION

This prince must be the right prince because he is a true man, and he is a true prince. Because he is a true man, he knows how to follow truth and how to obey the moral law. It is because he knows truth, and because he does truth, that he has earned the right to the reward, namely the princess. In accordance with Frye's evaluation, the reader is given the sense that the prince in "Little Daylight" possesses something extra. Simultaneously, the reader knows that that extra something is not courage, bravery, or endurance. The extra something MacDonald gives to his prince is a sense of truth. On this point, MacDonald does not agree with Frye. To MacDonald, fairy tales are more moral than anything else. What he adds to fairy tales, then, is a picture of what man ought to be if he wish to be a true man.