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Imagining the Abject in Kingsley, MacDonald, and Carroll: Disrupting Dominant Values and Cultural Identity in Children's Literature

Ruth Y. Jenkins

... abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what t[h]reatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (1982)

“Who are you?” the large blue, hookah-smoking caterpillar demands of Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Shyly, she responds: “I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then” (AWL 49). When the caterpillar insists that Alice “explain” herself, she cannot because she “is not [her]self” (AWL 49). Alice’s uncertain sense of self was not unique to this fictional character or her historical counterparts. The cultural transformations experienced by Victorian England remain unprecedented, disrupting and destabilizing economic, religious, educational, scientific, and social discourses. Efforts to stabilize Victorian identity took many forms—from rigorously re-inscribed cultural scripts for gender and class to applied Utilitarian philosophies. In short, the defining features of the era—transition and change—haunted its desires to construct a stable Victorian identity.

Educational, economic, and religious institutions reinforced cultural efforts to clarify boundaries to distinguish what was valued from what was not. Such divisions were layered and varied; class, gender, and religion reinforced distinctions that extended progressively beyond the cultural center. Socially dominant scripts articulated values most consistent with core

values. The further from Britain's social center individuals were located, the more marginalized they became, and the greater the threat they presented to the ideal of stable identity desired by their culture's symbolic order.¹

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection proves useful in understanding the relationship between the governing scripts and those that threaten a secure Victorian symbolic order. In her important application of Kristevan theory to adolescent literature, *Giant Despair Meets Hopeful*, Martha Westwater describes this openness as creating the "possibility of transforming the present by exposing potentialities that have been ostracized and repressed" (24). Literature written for and read by children and adolescents, then, provides especially powerful opportunities for exploring the relationship between cultural scripts and the abject energies that threaten to subvert them.

A useful way to illustrate this dynamic relationship is with the fiction of the Victorian authors Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, and Lewis Carroll. These authors' works illustrate a disruptive presence of abjection in the symbolic order. Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863) includes both the realistic world of the dominant culture and the fantastical world of the water-babies. Following Tom's transformation into a water-baby, the novel progresses from culturally readable and recognizable experiences to those that counter or challenge the privileged values and assumptions that inform those experiences. With this development, *The Water-Babies* offers readers a depiction of the binary relationship between culture and that which it rejects. George MacDonald's Princess books (1872, 1883) provide a more complex relationship between the privileged and marginalized values than Kingsley's novel. MacDonald's Princess books depict worlds of integrated values and offer readers the possibility of a more inclusive environment. Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories (1865, 1871), in contrast, reveal increasingly uncontrolled abjection that undermines any cultural stability, inclusive or not. Read in this way, these texts expose the energies most frightening to Victorians as they attempted to construct a cultural identity. Kingsley, MacDonald, and Carroll all construct instances where the abject successfully transgresses culturally established boundaries. All create aspects of abjection that demand recognition and refuse repression or exile. And all elevate what had been defined as abject, redefining the other as indispensable in culture.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva identifies the abject as that which the dominant culture must expel or repress to sustain its symbolic order; it is the "defilement" that must be "jettisoned from the symbolic system" (*Horror* 65). What is significant in Kristeva's theory, however, is that the symbolic order cannot fully rid itself of the abject; rather, the symbolic remains haunted by the abject's presence (*Horror* 9). Abjection is thus a failure of boundaries that continually threatens the reshaping of the sym-

bolic (Robinson 396). Consequently, the abject threatens the symbolic order doubly—both as energy contrary to dominant values and as evidence that a fixed, exclusionary construct of order cannot be maintained. Indeterminate and ambiguous, the abject defies tidy positionality and instead represents a fear of “generative power” as well as a “sign of an impossible object, a boundary and limit” (*Horror* 77, 154). The abject, associated with the feminine in Kristeva’s work, “defines a pre-oedipal space and self-conception: it is the space between subject and object, but repulsive and attractive,” so it “threatens to draw the subject and its objects toward it” as a “space of simultaneous pleasure and danger” (Gross 93, 94). In response to this seductive threat of the abject, the symbolic order produces exaggerated social scripts to reinforce values and secure boundaries. Kristeva describes this reaction as an “unshakable adherence” to religious or secular prohibitions and dictates in an effort to limit the “perverse interspace of abjection” (*Horror* 16). The greater the threat of the abject, the greater the efforts to restrict or subdue those energies.

The abject may be regulated productively, however, by channeling its energies into literature, whereby the author sublimates the “pre-nominal, the pre-object” energy that culture names deviant (Gross 93). Kristeva suggests that this sublimation of abjection “becomes a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred, at the limits of social and subjective identity” (*Horror* 26). Unlike the sacred, however, which is legitimized by religious institutions, the redirected abject is a “sublimation without consecration” (*Horror* 26). Literature illustrates an “ultimate coding of our crises” (*Horror* 208), registering and recording the very energies culture proscribes.² Revealing the tension between a culture’s symbolic order and the energies that threaten that order, literature provides readers with alternative constructs of order and meaning that seductively challenge them to reconsider definitions of moral value as well as the validity of their culture’s dominant scripts.³

Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* is “often regarded as a landmark text in British children’s literature, the first book of the first ‘golden age’ of children’s literature, when children’s imaginations were liberated” (Hunt 164).⁴ Written for his son, *The Water-Babies* is a fantastic tour-de-force of life in the context of Victorian science and morality. Tracing the story of young chimney sweep Tom, *The Water-Babies* elevates what has been regarded as abject, redefines what should be so named, and proposes a superior space with values that challenge dominant culture.

Literally and culturally illiterate, Tom is constructed as abject. Reduced to one who “could not read nor write” and did not “care to do either,” he is further diminished by having “never been taught to say his prayers” or “heard of God, or of Christ” (5). Tom is unable to interpret social or religious signs, so he can only make sense of the picture of Jesus’ crucifixion hanging on

Ellie's wall as some "kinsman of hers . . . murdered by the savages in foreign parts" (19). What little familiarity he has with sacred scripts is not endorsed by culture; he only recognizes the names of "God" or "Christ" as expletives (13). Despite his young age, Tom has already been to prison twice (7). There should be no question: Tom is a law-breaker—social, sacred, and symbolic.

As a result, his culture must devalue Tom to maintain its symbolic order. He is dehumanized and read in animalistic terms. Falsely accused of burglary at the Harthover estate, Tom escapes into the wilds of the countryside, and the Squire chases him "as if he were a hunted fox" (22). In pursuit of his prey, Squire Harthover tells the Vendale widow that he is "hunting . . . strange game" (44). Tom will also be described as a "small black gorilla fleeing," who can bound down cliffs "as if he had been born a jolly black ape" (22, 33). Contextualized by Kingsley's playful parody of the evolutionary debates consuming his fellow Victorians, this depiction of Tom as ape is especially interesting for a discussion of abjection. At the heart of much Victorian anxiety over evolutionary theory was the question of humankind's relative place in the world. Within a sacred order establishing firm boundaries between humans and beasts, humanity was assured of a privileged and secure place. If, however, humans evolved from "lesser" beings, then the boundaries between self and other were weakened or even dissolved. Tom blurs those boundaries and calls them into question. The more his abjection is perceived, the more anxiety he provokes. Whether at the Harthover estate or at the schoolhouse in Vendale, Tom horrifies and must either be rejected or transformed.

The association of the abject with uncleanness offers readers of *The Water-Babies* a metaphor by which to measure how Kingsley's text challenges the symbolic order. Emerging from the maze of chimneys into Ellie's bedroom, Tom wonders "whether she were a real live person," given the disparity between her purity and all the basins and soaps there (19). Seeing "a little ugly, black, ragged figure, with bleared eyes and grinning white teeth" in Ellie's mirror, he does not even recognize himself (20). Tom can neither "read" himself nor understand the signs of cleanliness. Indeed, included in Tom's cultural failures is that he "never washed himself" (5), even the fact that "there was no water up the court where he lived," does not mitigate his uncleanness. Tom's confrontation with his reflection, seeing himself as culture views him, introduces him to his own abjection: "Tom, for the first time in his life, found out that he was dirty; and burst into tears with shame and anger" (20). Tom's literal mirror stage reveals he is separate from culture. Despite being culturally illiterate, Tom feels shame at this identity. The combination of "shame and anger" speaks to the threat the abject poses to the symbolic order. At the same time, Tom's anger suggests the resistance of

the abject toward total expulsion. Tom challenges the boundaries created by the symbolic order; his anger is a disturbing reminder of the insecure control dominant culture has over disruptive energies.

Defined as defilement, Tom cannot be integrated into his culture's symbolic order. In "Soiled Fairy: *The Water-Babies* in Its Time," Valentine Cunningham illustrates how Kingsley combines the Cinderella/ash-child fairy tale with mid-Victorian perceptions of "human soot" to criticize his culture's marginalization of the poor and helpless (125, 129). For instance, even the compassionate Vendale widow, recognizing that Tom is ill and exhausted when he arrives, relegates the filthy boy to an outhouse to rest, reflecting that if he "wer[e] a bit cleaner I'd put [him] in my own bed" (36). He must be cleaned or purified if he is to be welcomed even into this more generous order. Only when Tom is no longer abject can he be successfully written into some aspect of the culture's dominant script.⁵

The metaphor of bathing is not unique to Kingsley but particularly apt for this discussion. How he develops this conceit, however, complicates a simple reading of cleanliness. In *The Water-Babies* water as transformative may build upon the culturally-consistent idea of baptism, but in this narrative, Tom's purification is anything but orthodox. Understood in the context of Kristeva's description of the dynamic process between the symbolic order and the pre-symbolic semiotic, baptism illustrates a return to the semiotic state for Tom. In *The Water-Babies*, the symbolic is evident in the cultural articulations of value and order, the world of Harthover and social and religious laws that control and judge the community. The result of Tom's cleansing and transposition back to the semiotic reverses the privileged order and relative value of the symbolic and the pre-symbolic state. Rather than functioning as a means to remove what his culture deems abject, thus allowing Tom a recognized space in the symbolic order, his cleansing reinterprets the symbolism of baptism. Rather than a process by which Tom gains access to culture, this act serves as a rite that reverses the privileging of the symbolic over the semiotic. The semiotic, what would have been named as marginal or unsignifiable, is now constructed as desirable and moral. The world of the water-babies evokes associations with the semiotic: literally fluid and filled with fluid identities (233–34), rhythmic lists (60, 107–111, 127), and questions of truth and pretense (54). Tom's transformation relocates him in a space that challenges meaning and authority in his culture's symbolic order. Tom is now "clean"—something he could never achieve before (59), "quite amphibious"—a polyvalent position (58), and capable of learning to "understand" the "water talk," which is "not such a language as ours" (58). In short, what was determined foul, fixed, and fluent is now devalued for the definitions and values endorsed by Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby. Just prior

to his transposition, Tom also begins to enact qualities linked to the semiotic. Exhausted in the widow's outbuilding, Tom becomes delirious, and with the boundaries of sanity and insensibility so permeable for Tom at this point, the symbolic order deteriorates. It is in this more semiotic state, that he hears the Irishwoman voicing adages of cleanliness and spiritual purity, telling him: "Those that wish to be clean, clean they will be" (37). Tom's ability to maintain his sense diminishes; he alone hears church bells. Tom decides to "go to the river and wash first" before seeking the church bells and their sanctuary (37). His consciousness dissolving, Tom now finds this sanctuary in a space unreadable or denied by his culture. Leaving his horrid life behind, Tom is now immersed in the fluid world of the water-babies, and the narrator proclaims that this is the "most wonderful part of this wonderful story" (44).

It is at this point that the narrative of *The Water-Babies* evolves into the fantastical "fairy tale" its subtitle promises; through a culturally undervalued genre the location of the tale is redirected from a recognizable symbolic order to a space dismissed as unreal by Tom's culture. Those in their culture's "real" world find only a "black thing in the water," which is determined to be Tom's body and evidence that he has drowned (51). The extant dominant cultural order continues to read Tom as defilement, describing him as that "black thing" (55).⁶ By this point in the narrative, however, Kingsley has begun to shift to the alternative script. The reader has been told that "the fairies had turned him into a water baby"; the reader learns this before the dominant culture pronounces Tom "dead" (45). By including more than one version of what has happened to Tom, Kingsley undercuts the authority and primacy of the symbolic order. A competing script for understanding what has happened to Tom is available for the reader, so when the cultural voices identify the "black thing" as Tom, his identity has already been destabilized. Despite the edict of Tom's drowning, the narrator tells the reader, "They were utterly mistaken," because "Tom was quite alive; and cleaner, and merrier, than he ever had been" (51). What has happened to Tom is that "The fairies had washed him . . . so thoroughly, that not only his dirt, but his whole husk and shell had been washed quite off him, and the pretty little real Tom was washed out of the inside of it, and swam away" (51). This split-subject of Tom—dead to the symbolic order but a subject-in-process in the semiotic—becomes valued for his potential, what was at the heart of Tom—the "pretty little real Tom"—was neither acknowledged nor recognized by culture.

This description of Tom's separated husk and his real self illustrates a key concept of Kristeva's theory of abjection. To claim a position in the symbolic order, one must structure and make meaningful the "inside and outside of body, the spaces between the subject and object, and the self and other" (Gross 86). To be "constituted as a unified whole," these pairs must be "oppositionally

coded" to enable "subjectivity to be definitively tied to the body's form and limits"; these binaries are the "conditions" under which one "may claim the body as its own, and thus also the conditions under which one gains a place as a speaking being and point of enunciation" (Gross 86). Although Tom fails to achieve this place as an authorized speaking subject in his culture's symbolic order, he succeeds in the alternative world Kingsley creates. His body husk, the external marker of life in his culture's symbolic order, remains in that space, but the "real Tom" is embraced—literally and figuratively—in the alternative order of the water-babies and queen of the fairies.

Even abjection is redefined in the world of the water-babies. Kingsley has prepared the reader, in part, by providing Tom with contradictory appellations. Tom is labeled thief or barbarous animal or prey, but he is also named a "brave English lad" and likened to a "brave, determined, little English bulldog, who never knew when he was beaten" (35, 170, 86). Despite cultural efforts to secure Tom as an othered being, he reverberates with conflicting identities. The values privileged in the Squire's world are reversed in this alternative space. Here Tom is clean and will no longer be "savage" (39). Here Tom learns to evolve morally as well as physically (58–59). Although a cursory reading of the world of water-babies may seem to make Victorian culture morally whole and consistent with the sacred order, the water-babies' world represents an alternative order with its own morality. Even as he learns how to participate in this new world, Tom is embraced and understood as a being in process.

Playful yet pointed, *The Water-Babies* challenges stable identities and social interpretations of value and posits an alternative space where what was named abject is elevated. *The Water-Babies* achieves this, in part, by integrating competing models of signification into the narrative. For the culturally determined symbolic, Tom represents a threat, but in the alternative world of the water-babies, his "devolution" represents instead the potential of a moral evolution. The alternative world celebrates the semiotic fluidity of experience where the prime authorities are female and Mother Carey is located at Other-End-of-Nowhere. It is also worth noting that Kingsley devotes the larger portion of the book to the water-baby world and values. Consistent with Kristeva's contention that the abject can never be fully jettisoned from the symbolic order, Tom remains a presence, even if only his "husk" is left in his first world. He marks nature, his path toward the world of water-babies described as a "great black smudge all down the crag" that has been there "ever since" (33). There are also "more black beetles in Vendale," which is "owing to Tom's having blacked the original pap of them all" (33).

Kingsley concludes *The Water-Babies* by admonishing his son to "thank God" for "plenty of cold water to wash in" as well as to "stick to hard work and cold water" like a "true Englishman" (214). After we learn of Tom's

transformation, the purpose of this water and hard work are less absolute than they might previously have been. Kingsley's reiterated value of water in which to wash offers his reader another opportunity to celebrate scripts alternative to their culture's symbolic order. Although presumably reinforcing in his son the desire to clean himself of that which is considered stained or abject in their culture, the praise of water also evokes the world of the water-babies and complicates what may have earlier been a simple edict. Cleansing, physically or spiritually, no longer carries a singular, culturally recognized meaning; in the context of the water-babies and Tom's physical transformations and spiritual growth, cleansing connotes polyvalence and the semiotic. His final direction to his son, "not to believe a word" of the tale, "even if it is true," reiterates this, dismantling a simple hierarchy of value. Throughout *The Water-Babies*, Kingsley has both enhanced and undermined the correlation between science and faith, fact and fantasy. Although when grown, Tom appears to operate within the symbolic order—he is a "great man of science, and can plan railroads, and steam-engines"—his ability to function in this way is specifically attributed to "what he learnt when he was a water-baby" (212). Without discarding his culture's symbolic, Kingsley nonetheless hints at the idea of polyvalent meanings, competing values, and the instability of culture's symbolic order.

Whereas Kingsley creates an alternative space for the abject that competes with the symbolic, George MacDonald constructs texts that weave the fluid relationship between the symbolic and abject into the social order. In the worlds of *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*, the permeability of the boundaries between the symbolic order and the abject is eventually honored rather than feared. In these imaginative places, cultural identity and value remain fluid. Although at the beginning those deemed abject by culture are expelled or hidden, by the conclusion, MacDonald has reconstructed the established culture to incorporate aspects of the abject into that space. He achieves this by creating a world that evolves and devolves as a result of a morality that celebrates much that the symbolic order has repressed. Rather than the juxtaposed binary relationship of the symbolic and semiotic dynamic found in *The Water-Babies*, MacDonald's Princess books can be read as allegories depicting interdependent energies and their relative revaluation.⁷ Whereas the narrative of *The Water-Babies* shifts focus from the culturally recognized world of Victorian England to the submerged, but thriving world of the water-babies, MacDonald's Princess books integrate the potential evolutionary/devolutionary features throughout both narratives in a complete but imaginary world.

For this to occur, for the abject to emerge into the symbolic, a breach of the boundaries between these energies must result. Because the abject is

perpetually threatening the symbolic order, a fragile filter restricts or prevents it from erupting into the symbolic. Kristeva names this filter the *thetic*, and it is this *thetic* filter that provides the conditions for signification (*Revolution* 43). In other words, the *thetic* filter may function as either a “rupture” or a “boundary” (*Revolution* 43). From the position of the symbolic order, this filter is successful when it transposes pre-symbolic energy into signs readable by culture, when both a “denotation” and an “enunciation” result (*Revolution* 54). That is, provisional, indeterminate articulations are transposed through the *thetic* filter from the semiotic phase to readable, understandable symbols recognized by the symbolic order (*Revolution* 25). That which is not transposed is redirected and returned to the pre-symbolic, which contains energies that attract and repulse the subject, continually haunting any stable construct of the symbolic.

MacDonald responds to his culture's efforts for symbolic stability in his Princess books through his depiction of the dynamic relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic, revising the value of the erupting energies to read them as much as sublime as abject.⁸ The Princess books narrate the King's daughter Irene's adventures, which enable her self-discovery and secure their castle from attack by subterranean goblins. As she crosses the castle's boundaries and risks the danger of twilight, Irene befriends a young miner, Curdie, who helps her defeat the goblins in the first book and restore the kingdom in the second. In these novels MacDonald creates a spectrum of characters whose abjection ranges from forced expulsion to historical repression. At one extreme are the goblins. These socially banished creatures encompass much of what culture determines to be repulsive and threatening; like the abject expelled by the symbolic, then, the goblins face their expulsion from the King's world. The goblins once “lived above ground” but were driven underground as a “refuge” from the imposition of stricter and more severe laws (*PG* 2, 4). They only come out at night, and although they are not so “far removed from the human,” generations and time have greatly altered them (*PG* 4). “Absolutely hideous, or ludicrously grotesque both in face and form,” these goblins “grew misshapen,” “grew in cunning,” and “grew in mischief” and found “great delight” when they could “annoy” humans (*PG* 4). Enacting one aspect of abjection—the hideous other—the goblins direct their energies toward the destruction of the human social order that dominates them.

At the other end of the spectrum of abjection is Irene's grandmother. Although equally threatening to an androcentric symbolic order, the grandmother's abject function is also repressed, but sequestered away at the top of ancient stairways in hidden passageways—up, rather than down, as the goblins are. Located through the music of her spinning and indistinct from

moonlight (*PG* 86), the grandmother embodies a pre-symbolic fluidity. Pre-transposed, she serves as a contrast to those energies filtered during the thetic phase and understood in the symbolic order. The grandmother exists in a state that differs from the symbolic in that she cannot be fixed or contained. Fluid, able to transform herself into different states and beings, she presents herself as co-existent with the culture, despite efforts to repress or deny her.⁹ The repression of Grandmother Irene denies a vital perspective and value in culture. Her presence is not so much an alternative valuation for culture as an aspect that should be interwoven into that order in her non-symbolic state; her repression, her absence, leaves the culture vulnerable to the truly dangerous. This is important for two reasons. When the abject is not faced, its power of horror intensifies (*Westwater* 86), and failing to acknowledge it excludes the potential generative power, also contained within it, from transposition (*Horror* 77). Abjection reveals both fear and possibility; it is, as Kristeva suggests, edged with the sublime (*Horror* 11). By the conclusion of the second book, the Grandmother with her pre-symbolic aspects is embraced as part of the kingdom's royalty; the reader is told that "Queen Irene . . . was thereafter seldom long absent from the palace," but when she was, she would often be with her now dear "Uglies," the goblins' former creatures, in the wood (*PC* 254).

Despite their eventual victory over the goblins and transposition into this new symbolic order, Irene and Curdie begin their stories in various degrees of abjection. Irene, although the King's beloved daughter, faces restrictions; this results in part because she is young and in part because she is female. Both age and sex disqualify her from participating in the symbolic order. Irene's attempts to explain her experiences with her grandmother are discounted, rejected as fabrications, even by Lootie, who, as servant, is herself marginalized by class. Echoing Kingsley's concluding meditation on the believability of truth, Irene finds herself confronted with what seems an arbitrary authority to determine what is false and what is not. Dismayed by the disbelief of her nursemaid, Irene laments: "When I tell you the truth, Lootie . . . you say to me 'Don't tell stories': it seems I must tell stories before you will believe me" (*PG* 195). Even Curdie resists her explanation of rescuing him: he "did not believe more than half of it" (*PG* 167).

Curdie, although male, is also barred from the symbolic order because of his social class. Confounding the unified identity desired by this order, Curdie, like Irene's grandmother, represents both temporal and positional abjection: just as she embodies multiple forms, Curdie performs multiple identities. Such fluid positionality makes it more challenging to expel or reject the abject from the symbolic order. Curdie is both the miner boy and the future King Conrad, not just temporally but simultaneously as the King continues to call

him "Curdie, or my miner boy" long after he has married Irene (PC 252). At the beginning of *The Princess and Curdie*, he is described as "gradually changing into a commonplace man" (PC 12). Curdie receives much of the same disdain as Irene when he tries to be understood by those representing the symbolic order. His social position limits his access to the castle and respect by the palace guards. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, Curdie warns of the goblins' scheme to kidnap Irene, but his words are discounted by the guards who "concluded that Curdie was only raving" and as a result humor him without heeding his warning (PG 204). Restricted from full participation in the symbolic order by class, Curdie cannot convince the guards of the goblins' plan to attack, so it is perceived as only gibberish. He functions as an unreadable semiotic energy in the symbolic world.

Culturally abject, Irene and Curdie cannot be understood fully by the extant symbolic order. For both characters, the moments of confrontation, moments that might be read as the abject attempting to emerge and be transposed into the symbolic, involve the interpretation of meaning and the apparently arbitrary nature in which this is achieved. At issue are the validity of truth and the possible incomprehensibility of experience or language because it exists outside of socially constructed reality. With this MacDonald problematizes the validity of the symbolic order and lays the foundation for integrated cultural orders. If "true" experience is understood as false, what is abject must also be revalued. When what is abject is questioned, the boundaries of the symbolic order dissolve or become reinscribed, and the filtering process or phase is recalibrated.

Over the course of the two Princess books, Curdie evolves from a marginal and abject character to one that personifies the thetic phase in the dynamic relationship between the symbolic order and the semiotic. Serving Queen Irene, he must learn to look beyond physical appearance to the spiritual reality it may hide: Queen Irene herself may appear in seemingly degraded forms, ugly and monstrous creatures are souls on the mend, and ordinary people may be sheltering the soul of a snake or ape. She instructs him to decipher her essence, telling him that signs may obfuscate what they represent, so to "know the sign" is not necessarily to "know me myself" (PC 58). Queen Irene also trains him to use his hands to determine who is evolving and who is devolving. With hands purified from the Queen's rose fire, Curdie, "so knowing and wise," will "feel" the essence of an individual because "you can never know" by appearance alone (PC 73, 72). This difference between appearance and essence echoes the distinction Kristeva makes between the *phenotext* (the symbolic articulation of meaning) and the *genotext* (the engendered meaning).¹⁰ Curdie needs to distinguish between "two people [who] may be at the same spot in manners and behaviour, and yet one may

be getting better and the other worse" (*PC* 72)—not by symbolic labels but by comprehending their essential being, what was for *The Water-Babies* Tom his "pretty little real" self. Curdie thus embodies Kristeva's thetic filter; he enables desire to be transposed into symbolic enunciation or redirects that energy into the semiotic space. The apparent difference between perceived appearance and the "real" self suggests a failed reading of cultural signs, which is rectified by Curdie. His reading of individuals re-categorizes them, provides a competing signifier of value. By using the grandmother to instruct Curdie, MacDonald confers worth to the values she embodies—connection and compassion—and embraces meaning previously repressed when she was secreted in the tower. Consequently MacDonald constructs a world in which the initial symbolic order is replaced by one that includes female aspects that had been repressed or named abject. Privileging understanding, trust, imagination, and connection, MacDonald re-determines what is culturally valued. Although not gaining full access to the new, more inclusive symbolic order that Queen Irene does, even the goblins and their former creatures are revalued and tended to. Read in this way, the *Princess* books suggest that for humanity to progress, the unitary nature of the symbolic order and the cultural constructions of the abject must be challenged.

If there is doubt concerning the fundamental need for the replaced symbolic order, MacDonald concludes *The Princess and Curdie* with the distressing account of Gwyntystorm's crash: leaving no heirs, Irene and Curdie are succeeded by a nameless king, who is consumed with greed. Encouraged by the people's increasing wickedness, miners destroy the city's pillars for pails of gold, and Gwyntystorm, no longer stable, collapses—a fate recapitulating the goblins' origins when they were forced into subterranean lives and devolved into the grotesque creatures who frighten the little princess. Perverting values from the symbolic order Curdie helped construct, the new order possesses no mitigating values, so the result is no symbolic order at all; "a great silence" results and "the very name of Gwyntystorm . . . ceased from the lips of men" (*PC* 256). While Irene and Curdie reign, MacDonald illustrates a culture that incorporates portions of the semiotic and acknowledges multiple constructions of meaning, but without a continued relationship between the symbolic order and the semiotic, articulation fails. The symbolic depends upon the semiotic's generable potential; with no such source, with no possibility for the danger or the sublime of the abject, the symbolic order deconstructs. With a productively inclusive symbolic and semiotic dynamic, a healthy relationship between the symbolic order and the abject can be maintained; without this, the symbolic collapses.

Rather than offer his readers the re-imagined, potentially inclusive world that MacDonald constructs, Lewis Carroll's fantastical forays into spaces where the abject infiltrates the symbolic order challenge each other rather than become

transposed. Instead of fortifying a new construct, Carroll's abject undermines any stability. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* have long been recognized as turning points in children's literature and Carroll regarded as the greatest writer from the golden age of children's literature (Hunt 240; Lurie 5). It is no surprise, then, that interpretations abound concerning the purpose, value, and effect of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Readings range from understanding the narratives as opportunities to assuage children's fears of death to lessons about controlling dangerous emotions and the need for socialized behavior.¹¹ The Alice narratives, however, do more than focus on individual concerns or gendered instruction. Instead, they illustrate the fragile boundaries of the symbolic order. In the worlds of Wonderland and the other side of the looking-glass, the abject threatens order through the destabilization of identity, its flagrant ambiguity of meaning, and the often violent competition between symbolic orders. In both narratives, Alice transgresses the borders of the symbolic and confronts the indeterminacy of truth. In both, Alice confounds efforts to distinguish the culturally privileged values from the abject, partly because she often inhabits both positions simultaneously. Consequently, Carroll's companion stories of Alice's adventures reveal extreme anxieties of the Victorian era's efforts to secure its cultural boundaries.

In whatever world Alice inhabits, she enacts abjection. Simply being herself, James Kincaid notes, is "threatening" in Wonderland (97). Although Alison Lurie describes Alice as the "only wholly decent and sensible person" in the book, she acknowledges that Alice is nonetheless "unconventional," "by no means a good little girl in mid-Victorian terms" (Lurie 6, 7). Alice is not "gentle, timid, and docile" but "active, brave, and impatient"; in fact, she is "highly critical of her surroundings and of the adults she meets" (Lurie 7). Literally and figuratively, Alice does not know her place. She refuses to perform appropriate girl qualities, and she refuses to remain in the margins of her culture. Carroll exaggerates this out-of-place aspect of Alice by having her change size and position frequently and rapidly: she finds herself opening and shutting like a telescope; she grows to more than nine feet tall and then shrinks smaller than two feet (AWL 24, 26, 27, 29). Who Alice is can be neither contained nor fixed.

Alice's indeterminate identity, however, is more than her physical transformations. Her ability to name or define herself is also frustrated. In part, as James Kincaid notes, Alice is child and adult, the adolescent searching for her sense of self (93). She cannot maintain a stable sense of who she is, and with multiple identities, she threatens the symbolic order. The reader is told that "this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people," but finds it is "no use now . . . to pretend to be two people!" when "there's hardly enough of [her] left to make *one* respectable person!" (AWL 25). Not

much later, Alice questions if in fact she is “Ada” or “Mabel” and concludes that she will respond to someone only if they first tell her who she is (AWL 28–29). Concerned by her inability to fix her own identity, Alice asks, “Who in the world am I?” (AWL 28). When asked the same question by the blue Caterpillar, Alice can only respond: “I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then . . . I can’t explain *myself* . . . because I’m not myself” (AWL 49). Alice is accused of being a serpent by a pigeon, and her efforts to respond simply complicate her identity; she cannot finish the sentence “I’m a—I’m a—” because she admits to eating eggs, the very trait that the pigeon has used to identify her as a serpent. Perplexed, the pigeon then demands, “*What* are you?” (56). In Wonderland, Alice defies classification; labels prove inadequate.

Just as Wonderland cannot make sense of Alice, she cannot comprehend the symbolic order that regulates Wonderland. She resorts to applying familiar scripts to what she discovers there. When she cannot communicate with a mouse swimming in her pool of tears, she recalls her brother’s Latin grammar and ventures, “A mouse—of a mouse—to a mouse—a mouse—O mouse!” (30). She tries to locate the appropriate perspective or relationship from which communication might occur. Unsuccessful, she wonders if this is a French mouse, so she recalls the first line of her French lesson-book, only to ask the mouse about her cat (AWL 30). Her attempt to make sense of Wonderland by applying cultural scripts she knows proves futile. Pondering her body’s ability to shift size and form, she turns to fairy tales to understand this phenomenon: “When I used to read fairy tales,” she reflects, “I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one!” (AWL 42). Alice has no means to transpose herself into this symbolic order.

Wonderland is an unstable, unknowable place built upon rules and assumptions that Alice finds arbitrary and nonsensical. Although she is told by the Cheshire-Cat fairly early in her adventure that “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad” (AWL 65), Alice tries to conceptualize this place, to determine its symbolic order. In time, Alice finds herself questioned as to the meanings of Wonderland; the Duchess asks for the moral informing the relationship between seasonings and temperament. When Alice offers the possibility that a story might not have a moral, the indignant Duchess insists, “Everything’s got a moral, if only you can find it” (AWL 86). The Duchess reminds Alice that her inability to name that moral order does not negate its existence, and Alice’s desire to make sense of Wonderland and its meanings remains unfulfilled.¹²

Despite Alice’s frustrated efforts to understand what Wonderland privileges and what it rejects, she is returned eventually to the world in which she has learned her place and the rules that ensure her participation (at least to some

degree) in its symbolic order. By the conclusion of the narrative, the majority of the "ambivalence" is gone, James Kincaid notes, with Alice constructed as an adult (94). Jennifer Geer, however, has analyzed the final pages of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, persuasively positing that this ending serves to "reassert domestic order and intergenerational harmony so they must contain Alice's rebellion and bring her back into willing submission to loving adult figures" (10). Geer has also shown how the revisions Carroll makes to his manuscript for publication moderate the "aggressive and unsettling aspects," which makes the "contrast between tale and frames disappear" (5). Whatever alternative construct shapes Wonderland's symbolic order, whatever alternative definitions of abjection she might encounter there, Alice is securely removed from that world. The dream within a dream provides a double barrier between the two worlds: whether it is Alice's world securing its borders from the chaotic energies found in Wonderland or Wonderland securing its borders from Alice, the two constructions of order remain distinct. Whatever abjection demands—in Wonderland or Victorian England—is repressed or denied.

With *Through the Looking-Glass*, however, Carroll constructs a more aggressively hostile assault on Victorian England's symbolic order. The looking-glass world presents a symbolic order that does not simply compete with Alice's own; rather it seems to negate that order. Whether read as depicting an idealization of a domesticated childhood or expressing the melancholy of growing up,¹³ *Looking-Glass* provides an intriguing companion to *Wonderland*, one that pushes further the questions of determinant order and value, suggesting more forcefully the arbitrary nature of both.

Tumbling down the rabbit-hole in *Wonderland*, Alice journeys into a subterranean world that may anticipate the goblins' world in MacDonald's Princess books; passing through the mirror in *Looking-Glass*, however, she transgresses into a reversed, contrary world to that in which she lives. "The glass was beginning to melt away," Alice reports, likening it to a "bright silvery mist" (LG 131). Alice emerges on the other side of the mirror. Traversing the mirror from one space to another, Alice's movement exemplifies how semiotic energy emerges into the symbolic. The mirror, anticipating Kristeva's thetic filter, repositions Alice into a world with a different order. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, however, the two orders compete, not simply with the dynamic of the abject's insistence upon a residual presence in the symbolic but also for the claim of being the symbolic.

This looking-glass world is neither as neat nor as predictable as that on the other side of the mirror. Alice almost immediately notices that "They don't keep this room so tidy as the other" (LG 133). The orderliness she has learned to understand in her world is missing, but she soon discovers that this disorderliness is less the result of a character flaw than a result of a world

with a competing symbolic order to her own. This is a world where mannerly flowers talk as well as Alice and “a great deal louder,” and the Red Queen introduces Alice to her upcoming courses, the mutton leg and pudding (LG 140, 230). This is also a world where existence is fluid and material objects defy stable positions. Despite her effort to focus on the merchandise shelved in the Sheep’s store, the products “flow about” so “whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty” (LG 178). Earlier, the Red Queen challenges her right to be in the looking-glass world, demanding that Alice explain where she came from and where she is going (LG 144). When Alice responds, “your way,” the Queen disputes this: “I don’t know what you mean by *your* way . . . all the ways about here belong to *me*,” even asking “why did you come out here at all?” (LG 144). Her confrontation with Alice continues, insisting that she “Look up, speak nicely,” instructing that she not “twiddle your fingers all the time” and “Curtsey while you’re thinking what to say” (LG 144). James Kincaid posits that the “rudeness” Alice experiences in Wonderland is “richly deserved,” describing her adventures as “consistently” those of an “invader disrupting a warm and happy world” (94, 97). This suggests, however, that Alice, as agent of abject energies, necessitates an aggressive response by those enacting this world’s symbolic order. This condoned hostility toward the abject illustrates that regardless of symbolic order, the abject must be expelled. Whatever Alice has learned about proper behavior on the other side of the looking-glass, it either does not apply here, or she is perceived to be untrained in this world’s symbolic values.

In this reversed world, Alice finds that what she *believes* to be absolute is arbitrary. In the looking-glass world the symbolic order of her world and its scripts provide no help; in fact, the symbolic order of her world is completely dismantled. Nothing is as it appears. Humpty Dumpty tells her, “When *I* use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less” (LG 188). Alice wonders if he “*can* make words mean so many different things,” but he corrects her question rather than answering: “The question is . . . which is to be master—that’s all” (LG 188). In the looking-glass world, the symbolic representations have no stable meaning; Humpty Dumpty applies this to Alice, disappointing her by denying that he will know her in the future. “You’re so exactly like the other people,” he explains (LG 194). Here, Alice herself is neither unique nor fixed. This lack of stability is developed further when the Unicorn, pausing from his fight with the Lion, notices her. He asks the messenger Haigha, “What—is—this?” in reference to her (LG 201). The exchange between the Unicorn and Haigha that follows suggests not simply the tenuousness of Alice’s existence in this world but also the arbitrary nature of meaning and control. Haigha tells the Unicorn that she is

"a child. . . . found . . . to-day. It's as large as life, and twice as natural" (LG 201). Astonished, the Unicorn replies: "I always thought they were fabulous monsters! . . . Is it alive?" (LG 201). Alice's presence is such an oddity that the Lion joins in the effort to determine what Alice is, asking if she is "animal—or vegetable—or mineral?" (LG 202–203). The Unicorn insists, though, that she is a "fabulous monster" (LG 203). As a fabulous creature, Alice is beyond the symbolic order of the looking-glass world; she is the other, the intriguing but potentially dangerously abject in this place.

Alice cannot secure her gaze on the various aspects of this world; she cannot predict what to expect, and, perhaps most frightening, she cannot insure her own existence. In *Wonderland* she had contemplated, "what I should be like" if she went out like a candle (AWL 24). Here, however, this threat is much more than a fancy. In the looking-glass world, Alice spends much of her adventure demanding acknowledgment of her existence. In the woods, even Alice has difficulty remembering her name, and when she encounters the sleeping King, Tweedledee asks if she knows what he is dreaming. When she insists that "Nobody can guess that," Tweedledee insists that the King is dreaming about her (LG 167). Tweedledee does not stop there, adding, "And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be? . . . You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream," he contends, and "If that there King was to wake . . . you'd go out—bang!—just like a candle!" (LG 167). Tweedledee's insistence that Alice is not real and that she knows it drives her to tears, the reality of which is also called into question (LG 167, 168).

The looking-glass world becomes increasingly frenetic and incomprehensible to Alice, and she witnesses such chaos that her symbolic order is totally violated. The bottles take plates; the forks gain legs and fly, and the Queen disappears into the soup (LG 233). Alice "can't stand this any longer!" and violently repositions herself in the world on the other side of the mirror (LG 233). What might seem a return to a predictable world, however, is really a transposition into yet another uncertain space. Although Alice asks her kitten to decide whose dream—hers or the King's—the looking-glass world was, the narrative itself concludes with the question, "Which do *you* think it was?" (LG 239). Rather than providing the reader with a comfortable closure that secures Alice in her world, Carroll creates an ending that offers the reader a puzzle to resolve. It seems that the return to order in *Through the Looking-Glass* is dangerously more tenuous than that in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Geer 16). The puzzle of this narrative threatens the symbolic order of Alice's—and Carroll's—worlds. The danger that the order beyond the looking-glass presents to the symbolic order is more menacing and less containable than that of *Wonderland*, and what may be worse, it continues to haunt Alice's world.

Meaning remains arbitrary. No closure is achieved, and it is precisely this—the inability to securely divest itself of the abject—that the symbolic order most fears. What these analyses of Victorian children’s texts reveal is that despite concerted cultural efforts to stabilize its identity, to construct a secure boundary between the dominant and the rejected energies of society, the anxiety of failing to rid culture of abjection pervaded culture—including the literature written for children. Rather than construct texts that served as road-maps toward appropriate gender and class positions, Kingsley, MacDonald, and Carroll offered their readers alternatives: opportunities to test and question, experience and wonder. Readers encounter alternatives that might and maybe even should exist in contrast to or in combination with their culture’s privileged values. These authors revealed fanciful worlds that competed with the social scripts their culture expected readers would follow. Read in light of Kristeva’s theory of abjection, these remarkable texts offer insight into the tensions of Victorian culture as well as opportunities for readers to revel in differing visions and spaces. Whether these imaginative spaces frightened or consoled, these worlds enabled their readers to ask themselves “who are you?” and embrace the possibilities.

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Notes

¹ See Linda Colley’s *Britons* on Britain’s emergent common cultural identity.

² Kristeva’s theories can also clarify the value of texts that focus on abjection for adolescent readers. Describing young readers as having “open-psychic structures,” Kristeva suggests that the adolescent “opens itself to the repressed at the same time that it initiates a psychic reorganization of the individual” (“Adolescent” 8). Unified identities are impossible, so Kristeva offers the phrase “subject in process” as a more precise description. The adolescent personality with an open psychic structure represents an especially threatening subject-in-process to the symbolic order. The ability of adolescents to reject the regulating order of dominant culture or to embrace alternative constructs of value makes them particularly vulnerable to alternative values in the literature. With psychic openness, young readers imaginatively engage in narratives that construct symbolic orders and values different from those maintained by their dominant culture.

³ Analyzing the pamphlets of Céline, Julia Kristeva illustrates how literature can “rage against the Symbolic” as well as “attempt to substitute another Law” for the extant symbolic order (*Horror* 178).

⁴ *The Water-Babies* has elicited a range of responses since its publication: whether reading the novel as a call to reform, a treatise on religion, evolution, and science, or an invitation to explore gender and identity, scholars continue to find substance in Kingsley's text. See, for instance, Jonathan Padley's "Marginal(ized) Demarcator," Jessica Straley's "Of Beasts and Boys," Lila Marz Harper's "Children's Literature," and Naomi Wood's "(Em)Bracing Icy Mothers."

⁵ Elizabeth Gross considers the relationship between the "clean and proper body" in Kristeva's theories and the ability to acquire a "sexual and psychical identity" in the symbolic order (86).

⁶ Although Tom's "husk and shell" is buried in the Vendale churchyard, this act is associated with the female characters—"my lady," the old "dame" (56)—and thus associated with the semiotic and abjection with the maternal (*Horror* 54). His body may be buried in a consecrated churchyard, but the associations challenge a complete sanctification of Tom.

⁷ MacDonald's writing has enjoyed a lengthy history of critical response ranging from philosophical to religious interpretations, his contribution to myth and fantasy, and his texts' applicability to post-modern theory: See, for instance, Stephen Prickett's "Two Worlds," Roderick McGillis' *For the Childlike*, Fernando Soto's "Kore Motifs," and Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson's "Curdie's Intertextual Dialogue."

⁸ See Deborah Thacker's "Feminine Language and the Politics of Children's Literature" for a thoughtful discussion of the semiotic in MacDonald's novels for adolescent readers.

⁹ In "The Two Worlds of George MacDonald," Stephen Prickett offers an interesting study of how the grandmother resonates as the romantic imagination (21). *For the Childlike*, the collection that contains this essay, also offers the reader numerous positions from which to understand MacDonald's ability to embrace multiple perspectives, including the influence of geography, history, philosophy, religion, and psychology.

¹⁰ In my "'I am spinning this for you, my child': Voice and Identity Formation in George MacDonald's *Princess Books*," I analyze the relationship between MacDonald's concept of the imagination and Kristeva's notions of the emergent genotext and its relationship to the imagination and the adolescent reader.

¹¹ For instance, see Carole Rother's "Lewis Carroll's Lesson," Joseph L Zornado's *Inventing the Child*, and Jennifer Geer's "All sorts of pitfalls."

¹² James Kincaid suggests that Wonderland is less frightening than it seems because its extensive structures limit potential disorder (92). Although I agree with Kincaid, I am more interested in how those structures present an alternative symbolic order to Alice.

¹³ See, for instance, Geer's "'All sorts of pitfalls'" and Kincaid's "Alice's Invasion."

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