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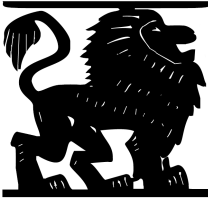
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## **"I am spinning this for you, my child": Voice and Identity Formation in George MacDonald's Princess Books**

**Ruth Y. Jenkins**

George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1882) have long captivated readers of both children's literature and adult fantasy. Equally fascinated, scholars continue to direct critical attention toward these narratives from spiritual to folkloric, literary to linguistic perspectives.<sup>1</sup> Recently William N. Gray, in "George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva, and the Black Sun," and Deborah Thacker, in "Feminine Language and the Politics of Children's Literature," have reexamined MacDonald's texts using current psychoanalytic theories of language and identity.<sup>2</sup> Both apply the concepts of Julia Kristeva to his texts, but whereas Gray shows how *Phantastes* (1858) illustrates individual transformation from an object-relations perspective, Thacker reconsiders the Princess books through feminist reworkings of Lacanian theory. Although Gray and Thacker produce fresh readings of MacDonald's texts, neither sufficiently articulates the extent to which Kristeva's theories illuminate the richness of the Princess books in the context of his spiritual beliefs and identity formation.

Kristeva's description of the dynamic relationship between the semiotic (noncommunicative articulations) and symbolic (signification) is useful for understanding the signifying process as it relates to identity formation. Like a thin membrane through which the semiotic permeates, the thetic phase functions as a "threshold" of language and organizes semiotic energy into the symbolic (*Revolution* 45); energy that cannot yet be so organized remains semiotic. The tic phase posits the signifiable object, the deepest structure of possibility (*Revolution* 54; *Moi* 99). Named "transposition" by Kristeva, this process highlights the passage from one sign system to another, a passage that involves an "altering of

the thetic position—the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one” (59).<sup>3</sup> Transposition, then, produces the “plural, shattered” quality of the object of enunciation, and consequently, “polysemy can also be seen as the result of a semiotic polyvalence—an adherence to different sign systems” (59–60).

Understanding the polyvalence that occurs in transposition is central to recognizing the value of texts such as MacDonald’s for the adolescent reader and even their significance as textual constructions. Although Gray does not consider *Phantastes* in the context of an adolescent audience, his reading of that text has implications for analyzing the relationship between those readers and the texts. Gray points to the failure of MacDonald “to follow through Kristeva’s dialectic of the semiotic and symbolic” at the conclusion of *Phantastes*, a failure that results in a “precariousness of the subject-position” (891). I would like to suggest, however, that this “precariousness of subject-position” is key to understanding both MacDonald’s vision and the value of his texts for adolescent readers. Kristeva posits that the “thetic originates in the ‘mirror stage’ and is completed . . . in puberty” (*Revolution* 62), psychological stages central to identity formation. Adolescents, at their own threshold to adulthood, negotiate various energies and drives—verbal, emotional, and physical—in their efforts to transition into socially functioning adults. Consequently, analyzing how MacDonald’s Princess books illustrate the thetic phase may demonstrate their continued significance as adolescent literature.

Kristeva compares the dialectical interplay between the semiotic and symbolic to weaving, yet she emphasizes that unlike finished cloth, this dynamic is not static (*Revolution* 5).<sup>4</sup> The “threads” spun by semiotic drives produce the genotext, which creates poetic language; the “threads” from social, cultural, syntactic, and grammatical forces are the phenotext, which insures communication (5). Consequently, the genotext is the “advent” of the symbolic and organizes “a space in which the subject is not yet a split unity that will become blurred” (86). Rather, the genotext organizes space in which “the subject will be *generated* as such by a process of facilitations and marks within the constraints of the biological and social structure” (86).<sup>5</sup> The genotext, then, is the subject *in construction*.

Nearly a century earlier, MacDonald explored similar dynamics between imagination and symbol. As a “belated” Romantic, MacDonald acknowledged Coleridge’s influence on his belief in the imagination as the agent through which one perceives divine truth.<sup>6</sup> Inseparable from his spiritual beliefs, the imagination, for MacDonald, nonetheless anticipates much of Kristeva’s notions of the interplay between the semiotic and the

symbolic, where the semiotic creates the poetic. The "imagination," MacDonald writes in "The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Cultures," is that "faculty which gives form to thought—not necessarily uttered form, but form capable of being uttered in shape or in sound, or in any mode upon which the sense can lay hold" (*Orts* 2). The imagination, then, creates space for voices not transposed—or not fully transposed—into the symbolic or cultural signification. As Colin Manlove asserts in "MacDonald and Kingsley," MacDonald believes that reason—the "normal filters of the imagination"—must be "suspended" in order that a "divine voice can be heard" (145). Manlove writes that, for MacDonald, God lived in the deepest parts of the unconscious imagination (*Scottish Fantasy* 65). Poetic truth for MacDonald, McGillis reminds us, is "intentionally elusive; it maintains the primacy of possibility" ("*Princess Books*" 156). In this context, the *Princess* books can be read as narratives that value both cultural themes and contrapuntal melodies.<sup>7</sup> This privileging of imaginative energies in MacDonald's *Princess* books enables the reader to participate in the imaginative process, to recognize resonance with voices not culturally understood or valued. That is, MacDonald's *Princess* books illustrate the energies and possibilities contained in what Kristeva identifies as the genotext as well as the dynamic between the genotext, the thetic, and the phenotext.

MacDonald's incorporation of such alternative voices and privileging of process can best be understood as contrapuntal and illustrated by analyzing his use of spinning and weaving imagery—both as literal and figurative devices.<sup>8</sup> Key to both MacDonald's concept of the imagination and Kristeva's notions of the emergent genotext is song. The recursive dynamic of song and spinning illustrates the process of transposition and gives voice to enunciations not yet fully symbolized. Thacker does note that "Kristeva's notion of the 'sound without sense' or musicality of poetic language is exemplified by MacDonald's frequent use of nonsense rhyme and song" (10–11), specifically referring to the verse that Curdie uses to frighten the goblins, which serves as his "chief defence against them . . . for they hated verse of every kind, and some kinds they could not endure at all" (*Goblin* 49). But MacDonald incorporates this musicality much more extensively than Thacker suggests, and as a result demonstrates the complexities of the process of identity and textual construction.

MacDonald's *Princess* books create companion tales that narrate first young Princess Irene's triumph over goblins by partnering her with the young miner Curdie, then Curdie's triumph over an animalistic devolution and community greed by acting as an agent for Queen Irene. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, the reader is first exposed to the musicality of

spinning along with Princess Irene who, bored one rainy day, “began to hear a curious humming sound,” and wonders, “Could it be the rain?” but she concludes that “It was much more gentle, and even more monotonous than the sound of rain” (10). We are told that as Irene nears her great-great-grandmother, “The low sweet humming sound went on, sometimes stopping for a little while and then beginning again” (10); for her subsequent visits, Irene follows the “hum of the spinning wheel” to direct her to her great-great-grandmother (85). In *The Princess and Curdie*, Curdie also hears a spinning wheel but recognizes its sound because “his mother’s spinning wheel had been his governess long ago, and still taught him things” (21). This connection between the song of spinning and the making of meaning is further reinforced when Curdie reveals that “It was the spinning wheel that first taught him to make verses, and to sing, and to think whether all was right inside him; or at least it had helped him in all these things,” so “it was no wonder he should know a spinning wheel when he heard it sing” (21). It is through the spinning song that Curdie learns the mission on which the great-great-grandmother Princess intends to send him. He experiences a “sort of reverie” (26), is “entranced” by the song of the wheel, “which went on and on, spinning in his brain songs and tales and rhymes, till he was almost asleep as well as dreaming” (21). MacDonald likens the song of the wheel to Romantic imagery of the imagination, writing that “the lady began to sing, and her wheel spun an accompaniment to her song, and the music of the wheel was like the music of an Aeolian harp blown upon by the wind that bloweth where it listeth” (66). Comprehending the meaning occurs when “All at once,” Curdie realizes that “a light seemed to break in upon his mind, and he woke up and there was the withered little atomy of the old lady on the other side of the moonlight, and there was the spinning wheel singing on and on in the middle of it!” (26). Curdie now “understands” and responds, “Thank you, ma’am, for spinning it into me with your wheel” (26). Later, she will instruct Curdie to “Listen to the wheel” because the tone is “precious.” She tells him it is “singing” and asks: “shall I tell you again what I told my wheel, and my wheel told you, and you have just told me without knowing it?” (66). Curdie comprehends meaning through the song of spinning, participating in the musicality of the nonsymbolic; he may not be able to articulate on a symbolic level the song of the wheel, but he understands it nonetheless, and in doing so validates an alternative voice.

Like Curdie, even the narrator, who successfully participates in symbolic language by constructing the narratives of both Irene’s and Curdie’s stories, cannot successfully transpose the song into communi-

cable symbol. Curdie's experience with the wheel's song, however, is pleasurable and enlightening, but when one cannot transpose knowledge into symbolic articulations, communication fails. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, Curdie's attempts to inform the palace guards about the goblins' plans to abduct Irene end in failure as he swoons (202). Even if precipitated by pain or injury, the swoon functions to redirect his energies away from a cultural application, just as the thetic can return semiotic energies that cannot be symbolized. The guards observe him and "concluded that Curdie was only raving still and tried to coax him into holding his tongue," humoring him because "there could be no doubt that he was raving" (204). Curdie's effort to communicate information that the guards cannot understand is perceived as gibberish. Curdie, however, is not alone in experiencing such a failure of communication despite attempted transposition of semiotic energies. Earlier in the novel, Irene's attempts to explain to her nursemaid, Lootie, her encounters with the goblin creatures and how she came to be under the clothes also fail. Accused by Lootie of fabricating tales, Irene becomes frustrated and insists: "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" (195). Irene's response to Lootie problematizes the tensions between subjectivity and interpretation, constructing truth and successful communication. MacDonald returns to this conflict in *The Princess and Curdie*; there an honest chambermaid is accused of lying because she attempts to warn the corrupt court to repent and restore their loyalties to the king. She laments to Curdie, "it is hard not to be believed just because one speaks the truth" (175). In this way, MacDonald illustrates the resistance and tension between song and communicable symbolic. The musical, nonsyntactic quality of song exists as a counterpoint to symbolic discourse. Untransposed, the semiotic enunciations cannot be comprehended in the symbolic domain. In "Childhood and Growth," McGillis notes that for MacDonald, "language at its most powerful has nothing to do with words as we know them; instead it is immediate communication" (164). Perhaps it is this insistence on the privileging of the symbolic, rather than the dynamic weaving together of the semiotic with the symbolic, that results in the loss of connection with the imagination—divine truth as MacDonald understands it. Such discord may well contribute to the social and communal collapse that occurs at the end of *The Princess and Curdie*.

MacDonald further illustrates the contrapuntal energies of the genotext in composition with the phenotext in his Princess novels by incorporating literal weaving imagery into the narratives. In *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production*, Kathryn Sullivan

Kruger explores this relationship between weaving and the dynamic semiotic and symbolic tensions, proposing that the process of being woven represents the thetic phase, the place wherein the symbolic is established (43). This process of being woven, of negotiating one's relationship between the semiotic and symbolic, is central to both textual and identity construction.

Certainly spinning and weaving have long been part of the thematic content of children's stories—from Rapunzel to Sleeping Beauty. In addition to integrating this traditional imagery into his plot, MacDonald creates characters who can be understood to be the shuttle of the weaver's loom. The device that literally weaves thread through the warp (the set of yarns placed lengthwise on the loom) and carries the weft threads, the shuttle weaves the yarns into fabric. Both Irene and Curdie function in this way, traversing their respective weft threads, weaving themselves through the public and domestic warp to redesign their respective social fabrics and construct new patterns. When Irene is awakened to frightening noises in *The Princess and the Goblin*, she "found her grandmother's thread" and follows it even though it "led her straight up the mountain" (151), a place from which she has been previously restricted. Although "the thread was actually taking her into the hole out of which the stream ran," Irene does "not hesitate" (153). She weaves her way through openings and tunnels, despite established prohibitions and her own fears. Earlier in the novel, the reader learns that Curdie uses a "huge ball of fine string" to prevent himself from getting lost in the subterranean paths, "having learned the trick from Hop-o'-my-Thumb, whose history his mother had often told him" (94). Although Irene's thread is as light as "gossamer" (152) and Curdie's is a more common thread, both serve as conduits for these characters. Through this "weaving" Curdie is connected to female experience of the text: not only does he learn the technique from stories told to him by his mother, but it is also his mother who readies the yarn for his forays into the mines. Each night, upon returning from the mines, Curdie's "string, for lack of time to wind it up as he 'dodged the cobs', would be in what seemed most hopeless entanglement," yet when he awakens the next morning "he always found his mother had got it right again. There it was, wound in a most respectable ball, ready for use the moment he should want it!" Curdie wonders how his mother does this; she says, "I follow the thread . . . just as you do in the mine" (95).

Certainly one can read these two threads as representing MacDonald's weaving together of a spiritual (Irene's) and physical (Curdie's) vision through the power of faith (Pennington 139, 143). Although MacDonald

would not distinguish between secular and sacred identities, to do so solely as modern readers misses the important ways in which MacDonald's narratives illustrate identity formation beyond spiritual contexts. Both Irene and Curdie weave in *and* out of the traditionally gendered spheres of activity, suggesting the dynamic quality that identifies with the presymbolic (Kristeva, *Revolution* 5). Irene must leave the relative security and familiarity of domesticated space to journey up the mountain and into the mines. Curdie must leave the mines and venture into the domestic space of the castle. Both transgress their "assigned" spheres, and each does so in order to rescue the other. As active agent of recovery, Irene challenges the increasingly rigid gender roles that Victorian England established for young girls; Curdie enacts behavior associated with the female—swooning and babbling—first in the palace garden, and subsequently when held captive in the palace itself.

Continuing the weaving imagery, MacDonald has his characters rescue and find one another at the heart of the story by connection rather than by violence, securing each other by weaving themselves through hostile space. As early as the stories of Penelope, Arachne, and Ariadne, Western literary culture has associated weaving and spinning with women, women's space, and feminine traits.<sup>9</sup> Such domestic and creative activities fell within the sanctioned roles given women in androcentric societies; as Stephanie B. Pafenberg writes in "The Spindle and the Sword," spinning was associated with humility and weaving with loyalty, as well as with later explicit biblical models of the virtuous woman who spins.<sup>10</sup> Equally early, women's weaving and spinning served them in their attempts to subvert androcentric cultures.<sup>11</sup> Pafenberg analyzes this tension, writing that "spinning, sewing, and weaving were the only productive activities for women sanctioned in the most conservative medieval texts," activities that keep "women out of politics and romance" (107). What results, Pafenberg clarifies, is separate spheres for the spindle and the sword as well as distinctly gendered spheres of action. She also notes that the shift from physical to indirect control in power relationships reflects the movement from a warrior to a courtly culture. Although Curdie does violently attack the goblins in defense of the castle and Irene, he also participates as shuttle to weave together the various worlds of public and private, masculine and feminine. Rather than be emasculated by his association with the distaff tradition, Curdie is empowered by gaining additional avenues of discovery and progress.<sup>12</sup>

The threads with which Irene and Curdie weave their experiences are literal, not abstract. Yet these threads also suggest the presymbolic, prearticulation, in their near invisibility. Irene's great-great-grandmother

asks her early in their encounters if Irene knows what she is spinning (*Goblin* 86). With Irene unable to identify the fine thread, the narrator attempts to describe it for the reader, noting that there was a “good bunch of it on the distaff attached to the spinning-wheel” (87).<sup>13</sup> Fastening the thread on the end of the ring she gives Irene, the great-great-grandmother instructs her to “feel—a little way from the ring” (119). When Irene admits she cannot see the thread, her great-great-grandmother confirms: “You can only feel it” (119). Yet even the narrator finds himself unable to produce a stable description, writing that “in the moonlight it shone like—what shall I say it was like? It was not white enough for silver—yet, it was like silver, but shone grey rather than white, and glittered only a little,” concluding that “the thread the old lady drew out from it was so fine that Irene could hardly see it” (87). Despite Curdie’s familiarity with the song of the spinning wheel, he can understand but cannot articulate what the wheel conveys. We are told: “for the voice that sang through it all, about that I have no words to tell” (*Curdie* 67). This literal yet invisible thread guides by touch; the thread does not function as a communicable symbol or representation.

For both Curdie and Irene, following the thread requires accepting the unseen and traversing into unexpected space. Irene first rescues Curdie from his entombment by the Goblins, telling him, “My grandmother sent me after her thread” (*Goblin* 158). Despite acknowledging that she does indeed save him by proclaiming, “You’ve saved my life, Irene!” (161), Curdie questions this process (160). He cannot see the thread and so has difficulty understanding Irene’s insistence that “I must follow my thread. . . whatever I do” (160), that “this is the way my thread goes, and I must follow it” (162), even though it leads him counter to his “knowledge” of the mines. In the subsequent battle with the goblins, the thread saves Irene, and this time even Curdie can *feel* its existence: “It was the slightest touch, and when he looked he could see nothing. Feeling and peering about in the grey of the dawn, his fingers came upon a tight thread” (218). And with this experience, “It flashed upon him that this must be the princess’s thread,” and “if the thread were indeed the grandmother’s messenger, it should have led the princess, as she supposed” (218). Finding Irene with his mother, Curdie tells her that “I got hold of your thread, and it brought me here” (219–20). Experience has allowed Curdie to learn to recognize the thread by touch and not be solely dependent on sight to determine reality. Curdie admits a nonsymbolic energy into his consciousness; doing so, he begins to appreciate knowledge as polyvalent.

Another way in which MacDonald produces a contrapuntal voice to dominant symbolism is by creating characters such as Curdie who need to relinquish dependence upon the symbolic—the readily communicable abstract sign. Curdie must relinquish exclusive dependence on the symbolic because, as MacDonald writes in “Browning’s Christmas Eve,” truth is often “unintelligible . . . a thing of disorder, obscurity, and sadness” (*Orts* 195). Irene is instructed by her great-great-grandmother to “lay your forefinger, the same that wore the ring, upon the thread, and follow the thread wherever it leads you” whenever she might find herself in danger, adding, “You must not doubt the thread. Of one thing you may be sure, that while you hold it, I hold it too” (*Goblin* 119). Despite this preparation, Irene feels “forsaken” when the thread leads her into a “horrible cavern, and there left her!” (155). Realizing that she can only move forward (the thread vanishes when she retreats), Irene fingers the thread while crying and eventually realizes that she can move the stones (156–57); “she uncovered a turn of the thread; instead of lying loose upon the stones, it tightened up; this made her sure that her grandmother was at the end of it somewhere” (158). MacDonald again explores this idea in his companion novel, *The Princess and Curdie*, when the king reminisces about visiting his grandmother’s home and is now “compelled to believe many things [he] could not and [does] not yet understand” (191). MacDonald returns to this idea in *A Dish of Orts*, where he links this ability to a “wise imagination” and associates imagination with divine spirit. “It is not the things we see the most clearly that influence us the most powerfully,” he writes, but those “undefined, yet vivid visions of something beyond, something which eye has not seen nor ear heard,” that “have far more influence than any logical sequences whereby the same things may be demonstrated to the intellect”; he concludes that “It is the nature of the thing, not the clearness of its outline that determines its operation. We live by faith, and not by sight” (28). We are sustained, he posits, by the unarticulated, not by logical symbols.

Embracing the nonsymbolic, though, is made more difficult by the general association of logic and communication with culture and power. If faith, not sight, sustains, its opposite—doubt—demands the articulated proof. Doubt, challenging the semiotic, serves as the thetic to filter, to assess emergent enunciations. Curdie, for instance, is unable to believe in what he cannot see when Irene rescues him. He decides that although she speaks “nonsense,” he “must follow her . . . and see that she comes to no harm,” and concludes that “She will soon find she can’t get out that way, and then she will come with me” (*Goblin* 162). Irene asks him to feel the thread himself, but he feels “nothing at all”; Irene challenges him,

asking: “what *can* be the matter with your finger? I feel it perfectly” (168). Telling Irene that he cannot see anything, Curdie receives her sharp retort: “Then you must believe without seeing . . . for you can’t deny it has brought us out of the mountain.” Curdie concedes, “I can’t deny we *are* out of the mountain, and I should be very ungrateful indeed to deny that *you* have brought *me* out of it” (170), yet he persists in challenging her belief in her great-great-grandmother, again describing her explanation as “nonsense” because he doesn’t “know” what she means. Once more she challenges his response, insisting, “Then if you don’t know what I mean what right have you to call it nonsense?” (165). In this culture of doubt, Curdie cannot see her great-great-grandmother, and Irene cannot hear the spinning wheel (173). Curdie clarifies that he does not doubt that *she* believes it, just that *he* does not (171): “He could not believe that she was deliberately telling stories, and the only conclusion he could come to was that Lootie had been playing the child tricks, inventing no end of lies to frighten her for her own purposes” (167). Curdie’s mother, however, chastises him for not believing Irene: “why not a thread as well as a rope, or anything else?” she asks him (183). Irene’s great-great-grandmother tries to explain Curdie’s difficulty in believing in what he cannot see: “Curdie is not yet able to believe some things. Seeing is not believing—it is only seeing,” adding that “We are all very anxious to be understood, and it is very hard not to be. But there is one thing much more necessary,” she adds, “To understand other people” (177). In *The Princess and Curdie*, the young Chambermaid has a similar encounter, but this time, it is not Curdie, but the disloyal palace staff who reject her construction of experience. She tells Curdie, “It is hard not to be believed just *because* one speaks the truth” (175). In this way, MacDonald problematizes the relationship between belief and understanding; by creating characters whose experience is doubted despite its validity, he constructs a space in which the doubted can find a voice, and the absolute hierarchical value of symbol over semiotic is challenged. A truth exists even if it cannot be transposed into the symbolic.

This desire for understanding, to be believed, and for expression to communicate, is in part the dynamic that propels the semiotic into and possibly through the thetic phase as transposed articulations. MacDonald explores this idea of the tension between essence and substance in *The Princess and Curdie*. When Curdie asks the Princess—here Irene’s great-great-grandmother—to give him a “sign” by which to recognize her in the future, she responds, “that would be to keep you from knowing me. You must know me in quite another way from that,” adding that it would

"be but to know the sign of me—not to know me myself" (58). MacDonald continues in *The Princess and Curdie*, adapting Darwinian ideas to illustrate the difference between appearance and substance, between the figurative and the literal. With purified hands "so knowing and wise" (73), Curdie will "feel" the essence of an individual because "*you can never know*" by appearance alone. Curdie needs to decipher when "two people may be at the same spot in manners and behavior, and yet one may be getting better and the other worse" (72). The difference between appearance and essence suggests a false stability of sign. MacDonald suggests an intrinsic, presymbolic essence may not be contained in symbolic form. Kristeva explores a similar difference between the figurative and the literal: the thetic phase, she writes, is the "deepest structure" of the "possibility of enunciation" (*Revolution* 44). Possibility counters stability; identity and voice may be in process, not fixed. This runs counter to the desired communication where the more stable the symbol, the greater the success of communication.

The dynamic of spinning and weaving, of the transposing process, can also be seen in the multiple and consequently unstable identities recurrent throughout both *Princess* books. Irene and her great-great-grandmother share the same first name and title "Princess," yet experience different spatial, social, and temporal spaces. The great-great-grandmother also embodies various shapes, from the "very old lady who sat spinning" (*Goblin* 11) whom Irene sees on her first encounter to a "woman of three-and-twenty" (112) whom she sees when she follows the spun thread back to her compartment, as well as the "small withered creature, so old that no age would have seemed too great to write under her picture" that Curdie sees when he returns her wounded pigeon (*Curdie* 23). When Curdie meets with her to purify his hands for his mission, he cannot fix her form: "whether an old woman as thin as a skeleton leaf, or a glorious lady as young as perfection, he could not tell for the turning and flashing of the wheel" (66). The narrator prepares the reader for this earlier in *The Princess and Curdie* by revealing the various names the miners and their families give her, from "Old Mother Wotherwop" by the women (39) to a "witch, an old hating witch, whose delight was to do mischief" by the men (40).<sup>14</sup> The great-great-grandmother responds to Curdie's desire to be able to fix her, to recognize her in the future, telling him that she "could give you twenty names more to call me, Curdie, and not one of them would be a false one" (59). Continuing, she asks him, "What does it matter how many names if the person is one? . . . Shapes are only dresses, Curdie, and dresses are only names. That which is inside is the same all the time" (55). More than

various distinct embodiments, the great-great-grandmother is multiple forms and identities. Although traditionally read in the romantic context as a reconciliation of oppositions,<sup>15</sup> I would suggest that the great-great-grandmother embodies a multiplicity of identities, not necessarily synthesized, but multivalent. The great-great-grandmother represents a semiotic fluidity; pretransposed, she resists the need to escape through the thetic phase in symbolic for *stable* meaning. She resonates as the romantic imagination that can comprehend disparate objects (Prickett, "Two Worlds" 21).

MacDonald extends this fluidity of identity beyond the great-great-grandmother to many of the characters in *The Princess and Curdie*. 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 (252). Curdie is also described at the novel's beginning as "gradually changing into a commonplace man" (12). Yet Curdie is not alone in this: the great-great-grandmother educates him about Darwinian adaptations of individual growth—that one can devolve as well as evolve (72), that one cannot know in which direction the individual is moving at any given moment (73). So in addition to the process of evolution as disruptive to stable meaning, MacDonald suggests such processes extend even into adulthood, that identity evolves even after adolescence.

This unstable identity that defies linear synthesis can also be seen in the narrative structure. MacDonald creates a double narrative, the story first of the princess and the goblin, the second of the princess and Curdie. These companion tales create a nonlinear yet temporally based narrative, lines of development consistent with MacDonald's belief in the spiral rather than linear movement of life.<sup>16</sup> The multiplicity of voice is emphasized when the King learns his own history through the voices of Curdie and his daughter. In the second Princess book, the reader is reminded of Irene's first encounter with the goblins—not at the narrative's beginning, but near the end. The King is reminded of "When he came to finding the princess and her nurse overtaken by the twilight on the mountain," and the reader is told, "thus keeping the hoop of the story running straight." The King continues to listen with "wondering and delighted ears, astonished to find what he could so ill comprehend, yet fitting so well together from the lips of two narrators" (*Curdie* 191). This textual moment simultaneously weaves together the past and the present narratives, the recursive and linear stories.

Feminist theories prove useful in clarifying the significance of these layered stories. In "Nesting: Embedded Narrative as Maternal Discourse

in *Children's Novels*," Roberta Seelinger Trites posits that embedded texts question linearity by presenting reality as a "series of frames" which could be understood to parallel pregnant bodies and emphasize interconnected relationships (165). In *Ariadne's Thread*, J. Hillis Miller notes that Victorian novels break linearity with illustrations and publication in serialized numbers and multiple volumes (5), but one recognizes that there is still a temporal quality of linearity. Kristeva writes of pregnancy as illustrating the split subject; identity is destabilized in this generative process (*Desire* 238–39). Considered in this way, embedded and nonlinear narratives produce experiences for the reader that reinforce the fluidity of identity construction and resist insistence on stable, fixed subject positions.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate how MacDonald produces the genotext as a contrapuntal voice is by considering his short story "The Little Girl that Had No Tongue." The title character, Elsie, has no tongue, cannot speak a single word, even the shortest or simplest. "All day long she had to be silent" (47). Determined to find a voice, Elsie sets off one spring day hoping to "hear some grand new sound, perhaps . . . fill her so full, that she would be obliged to speak" (47). Instead, she discovers a dungeon filled with captives. Elsie decides that "they *must* get out," and so "She thought no more now about looking for a voice" (48–49). Unable to stand their captivity any longer, Elsie concludes she must go down into the dungeon herself (49). Successful in her endeavors, Elsie accompanies the freed people through a space described as "strange" because "whoever went through those waters, which were known in that country by the name of Peace, always had a wish to sing" (53). Upon hearing church bells, Elsie also hears

Just then, soft, and very close to her, someone said, "Rejoice!" It was not one of the three boys, for they were singing on in front; it was not a little tomtit that had forgotten to go to bed, or a starling that was out late at night. No, the word was said far too plainly for that. Neither was it someone hidden behind the hedge; it was much too near and close. There it was again! "Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!" What could it be? How very near it seemed to Elsie; it almost seemed to be in her. Why it was in her; it was her!" (Girl 53)

Amazed, she pronounces, "It's me! It's me! She cried. . . . I said rejoice. Elsie can speak, Elsie has found a tongue" (53). The boys ask, "What was this speaking and finding tongues? They certainly had never heard the little girl say anything before," but they conclude that she is "not quite 'canny'; not exactly like themselves." Elsie gains her voice not by a direct path, but by indirection, by being in the midst of "their singing." It

is the musicality, the nonsymbolic, that enables Elsie's voice. Once found, Elsie "had to tell her story a great many times; over and over again." Despite Elsie's success, she stresses the *individual* aspect of her experiences: "She did not know whether any one else could find a voice as she had done; she only knew it was when she had forgotten all about it, that it came to her" (54).

What is important about this story is how MacDonald illustrates the process of Elsie finding her voice. She liberates the submerged captives and in doing so gains a voice. One could read this as a reversal and rejection of the syntactic privilege of the phenotext. Elsie gains a voice—and an understandable one—by redirecting her desires to buried and captive experience. Yet rather than dismiss the phenotext, this story celebrates it in counterpoint with the genotext through song and the recurrent retelling of the experience. This is further clarified when one considers the relationship that MacDonald suggests between "harmony," the simultaneous combination of tones, and the imagination. "For the end of imagination," MacDonald writes, "is *harmony*. A right imagination, being the reflex of the creation, will fall in with the divine order of things as the highest form of its own operation" (*Orts* 35). Imagination functions beyond a symbolic stability. Manlove notes that "musical analogies imply that the reader responds involuntarily" rather than through the "intellect" (*Modern* 66). Thus the unseen and the unconscious are elevated. For MacDonald, McGillis clarifies, "everything is rooted in the unseen" ("Childhood" 161).

Harmony, contrapuntality, transposition—all evoke musicality, all imply multiple enunciations. Such multiplicity of language and process is crucial for adolescents as they construct their selves, their identities. Significantly, in the essay "A Sketch of Individual Development" contained within his *Dish of Orts*, MacDonald explores what he identifies as four stages of individual development, a process that though charged with spiritual connotations echoes Wordsworthian views of childhood. Equally significant for this study is that the stages that MacDonald identifies can be read as parallel to those periods now recognized as normal to adolescent development, even in secular contexts.

In "High Fantasy, Rites of Passage, and Cultural Value," Jeanne Murray Walker writes of the relationship between experience and identity formation in the context of culturally consistent options:

Rites of passage dramatize the transformations that individuals undergo from one status to another . . . . But the ritual symbolically presents an idealized and abstract summary of what an individual's culture says life is (description) and must be (prescription). The particular ways in which the

ritual is patterned in action—the artifice of the ritual—implants in the initiates a vision. Only through experience can they realize that it is a vision of life as culture knows it. (112)

This is in contrast to what may be authentic to their own knowledge and experiences. All readers, including children and adolescents, are “subject to the power relations within language,” as Thacker reminds her readers (7). Consequently, narratives such as MacDonald's Princess books may provide adolescent readers with alternative descriptions and opportunities for nonconventional experience. In transition themselves from child to adult, adolescent readers can celebrate such fluidity, presenting characters with permeable, evolving ego boundaries. The child, MacDonald believed, is the individual most able to connect to imaginative language (McGillis, “Childhood” 161); consequently, MacDonald privileges childhood as the condition to which one need aspire (McGillis, “Childhood” 152)

In his Princess books, George MacDonald celebrates the harmonies of imagination, enabling and replicating the process of identity formation rather than simply articulating culturally prescribed spaces for fixed identity. Manlove adds that MacDonald is unique in the privilege he gives the unconscious mind (*Scottish Fantasy* 83). Yet, he does more than just provide an opportunity for his reader to participate in the process of the making of meaning through his contrapuntal narrative, which sings of Curdie's and Irene's gender transgressions of sphere and action. MacDonald also illustrates the result of denying the genotext, the semiotic as a part of identity and voice. Although Curdie and Irene marry, they remain childless. Although they rule the kingdom with wisdom, their successors do not. In the linear end, the community devolves and eventually dies, collapsing into the earth to be buried. Like the great-great-grandmother, MacDonald spins these tales for his young readers, providing a space for voices in counterpoint, for voices emerging into adulthood.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Willis, “Born Again,” which argues that the novel is about resurrection, with Curdie's actions paralleling those of Lazarus, and Irene's

transforming her from a spectator to an actor in the mysteries surrounding her; Gonzalez Davies, "A Spiritual Presence in Fairyland," which analyzes the grandmother in the context of folklore, archetypes, and classical mythology; Hayward, "The Mystical Sophia"; and Moss, "Sacred and Secular Visions of Imagination." For analyses that consider MacDonald in the context of fairy tale and folklore, see Bottigheimer as well as Zipes, *Fairy Tales*. For studies that consider MacDonald within literary traditions, see Prickett, "Fictions and Metafictions," "George MacDonald and the European Literary Tradition," and *Victorian Fantasy*. For linguistic analyses, see Knowles and Malmkjaer, *Language and Control in Children's Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> Patterson, "Kore Motifs in *The Princess and the Goblin*" and McGillis, "Childhood and Growth" are also valuable analyses of psychological aspects in MacDonald's writings.

<sup>3</sup> Doing so, Kristeva identifies a third process beyond the two that Freud posits as fundamental "processes" in the work of the unconscious (displacement and condensation), or the two that structural linguistics Kruszewski and Jakobson adapt from him (metonymy and metaphor) (*Revolution* 59).

<sup>4</sup> Many theorists have likened the making of meaning to weaving. For instance, in *Ariadne's Thread*, J. Hillis Miller analyzes the implication of considering a manuscript as both a labyrinth and as a thread through that labyrinth (5, 19). Nancy Miller complicates this argument by suggesting a less linear process; instead, she describes texts as "perpetual interweaving" (270) to challenge the privileging by theorists like Miller, Barthes, and even Freud of the text over the creator of that text, a position that demonstrates what Spivak calls a double displacement (270).

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva further clarifies the difference between the geno- and phenotexts, writing that "[if] genotext and phenotext . . . could be translated into a metalanguage that would convey the difference between them, one might say that the genotext is a matter of topology whereas the phenotext is one of algebra" (*Revolution* 87). Interestingly, MacDonald anticipates this distinction, writing in a note that a "mathematical friend, a lecturer at one of the universities" "had lately guessed that a certain algebraic process could be shortened exceedingly if the method which his imagination suggested should prove to be a true one—that is an algebraic law. He put it to the test of experiment—committed the verification, that is, into the hands of his intellect—and found the method true. It has since been accepted by the Royal Society" (*Orts* 13).

<sup>6</sup> For extensive analyses of MacDonald's romantic inheritance, see McGillis, "Childhood and Growth" (150); Manlove, "MacDonald and Kingsley" (143); and Prickett, "Romantics and Victorians" (206).

<sup>7</sup> In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said develops the idea of contrapuntal readings; adapting the musical term for narrative analysis, Said applies this term to the counternarratives present in texts that reveal colonial and postcolonial implications (18). My use of the term consciously reflects and returns Said's application to a consideration of language with specific musical implications.

<sup>8</sup> From a family of Scot weavers, MacDonald occupies an interesting space in British literature and children's writing. Marginalized both by nationality and genre, his use of weaving imagery is charged. In "To Spin a Yarn," Karen Rowe writes that a "semiotic woman is a weaver" (55). Jack Zipes ("Spinning with Fate") and Ruth Bottigheimer explore the historical appropriation of weaving by men (Zipes 47) as well as the way in which fairy and folktales create texts counter to cultural values (Bottigheimer 150).

<sup>9</sup> See Patterson for an insightful analysis of these connections.

<sup>10</sup> See Pafenberg for a more detailed discussion on the virtuous woman in the last chapter of Proverbs.

<sup>11</sup> See Geoffrey H. Hartman's important chapter, "The Voice of the Shuttle" in his *Beyond Formalism* for a history of the association of the shuttle with the female voice. In exploring the relationship between the shuttle and language, Hartman suggests that this device functions as synecdoche (338). I would like to problematize this, however, and suggest that the shuttle may be better understood through the literary idea of metaphor. Rather than replace a part of the loom, Curdie and Irene function as its equivalent. Nonetheless, they are not a fixed abstract equivalent but reflective of continuously multiple identities; their process is not linear but recursive, so even simple metaphor cannot contain their presence. See also David Buchbinder's "Weaving Her Version" for a discussion of Penelope's manipulation of circumstance to gain a "temporary but nonetheless satisfying resolution of the conflicts of gender politics" as a model for Margaret Atwood's poetry (138). Ruth Bottigheimer examines the female space of the *Spinnstube*, where women gathered in the evening, told tales, and spun (143).

<sup>12</sup> Stephanie Pafenberg analyzes the oppositional symbols of the sword and the spindle, suggesting that masculinity enjoys privilege through the segregation of sexes and genders. In warrior culture, she writes, control in power relationships—both personal and political—is determined and sustained through direct physical control; however in courtly culture, power is attained and maintained increasingly through indirect means.

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that Irene does not recognize what would be a distaff tradition (*Goblin* 13). MacDonald consequently reempowers Irene by introducing her to this historically female space and activity.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Gonzalez Davies argues that the grandmother is of both the natural and supernatural worlds (60), representative of the great mother archetype (61) and associated with the elements of air, water, fire, earth, and life (65).

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, McGillis, "Princess Books: High Seriousness" (149, 152) and "If you call me Grandmother, That Will Do" (27) for discussions of how the great-great-grandmother reconciles oppositions.

<sup>16</sup> For discussions of this spiral development in MacDonald's philosophy, see Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature* (100), and McGillis, "Childhood and Growth" (156).

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