"Seldom Like Yesterday": Situating the Novel and Film Adaptation of *The Princess and the Goblin**

Caroline LaPlue

ABSTRACT

While much Victorian literature has been adapted into films that carry an appeal for a modern audience, the 1994 adaptation of George MacDonald's 1872 novel *The Princess and the Goblin* cannot claim the same popular triumph as other successful Victorian children's adaptations over the past century such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Black Beauty*, or *Treasure Island*. Though interest in MacDonald's work fell off dramatically after his death in 1905 and his writing has received criticism for being long-winded and didactic (though he is certainly not the only Victorian to share those characteristics), many of his stories contain delightful elements found regularly in popular children's stories: princesses, goblins, absent fathers, magic, heroism, family, and a transferrable moral or lesson. Here, I look at József Gémes's film alongside MacDonald's original novel and use comparative methodology to explain why it did not live up to its potential. I argue that MacDonald's imaginative world retains potential for success in a new, well-funded and well-produced film adaptation, given the necessary time, money, and motivation.

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Introduction

Despite being largely forgotten by the general populace and ignored by critics after his death in 1905, Victorian author George MacDonald's literary contributions helped to lay groundwork for much of the development of both literary fantasy and children's literature. The Scottish poet was an important part of the "Golden Age" of children's literature, publishing alongside such authors Lewis Carroll and Robert Louis Stevenson. His more artistic, fantastic publications left a much longer-lasting footprint on the literary community in his influence on authors who would come to far outstrip his renown, such as J.M. Barrie and C.S. Lewis, as well as more recent authors such as Madeline L'Engle and Neil Gaiman. Much Victorian literature has been adapted into successful films that carry an appeal for a modern audience, but MacDonald's work has been cinematically neglected, with few recorded adaptations attempts, and those adaptations that exist restricted by limited resources. Perhaps one of MacDonald's most naturally adaptable novels, though, is *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and in the early 1990s, Jozsef Gemes set out to do just that.

The Princess and the Goblin tells the story of a princess named Irene who lives in a castle with a magical invisible grandmother and a loving (if pre-occupied) widower father, the king. As the tale develops, young Irene must join forces with a local miner boy, Curdie, to save the kingdom from the encroaching forces of small-minded goblins who live in the depths of the earth and want nothing more than to be rid of the "sun people." Warding off the goblin invasion and saving the people from a torrential flood caused by the machinations of the scheming goblins, Irene and Curdie (with assistance from her grandmother's magic) ultimately protect the kingdom, and the goblins are finally vanquished by their own folly.

Princesses, goblins, and magic are all fantastic and imagination-friendly elements that are common to children's stories and suggest potential for a smashing box office success for a film adaptation. Potential for success notwithstanding, the 1994 animated film adaptation was a spectacular financial failure. My goal is to analyze József Gémes's film alongside MacDonald's original novel using comparative methodology in order to understand why it did not live up to expectations.

The Novel and Its Reception

From 1870-1872, George MacDonald served as editor for the new children's magazine *Good Words for the Young*, and there he first released *The Princess and the Goblin* in serial form (MacDonald, Greville 377). By all accounts, the story was met with enthusiasm in both the United Kingdom and the United States, with reviewers calling the story "genius" and "charmingly told" alongside claims "that all the little folks are

going wild over" it ("Periodicals, &c.," "Christmas Gift Books," "New Magazines"). In 1874, after the novel's complete publication, the Sheffield and Rotherham Independent newspaper even included a letter to the editor from a parent who described his child's distress upon receiving an edition of *Good Words for the Young*: "Oh, the naughty man," the girl purportedly exclaimed, "There is nothing about The Princess and the Goblin and he promised it. Papa, I wish you would write and tell him [Alexander Strahan] to put in The Princess and the Goblin" ("Spectator in Hallamshire"). *Godey's Lady's Book* wrote in 1872 that "this book would be sufficient to gain [Mr. MacDonald more] popularity as a writer" and that it was "a book young and old will read with equal delight" ("Literary Notices" 383). The novel was successful and, coming on the heels of *At the Back of the North Wind*—which had also been serialized in the magazine—only served to more firmly establish MacDonald's name and influence in Victorian children's literature.

MacDonald's novel does indeed have a tone that "charms old and young by his delicate yet penetrating touch," and his writing style—while certainly outdated or even antiquated by modern standards—demonstrates his effort to connect with his child-audience in an appealing manner and his care for their wellbeing, occasionally manifested in tips for how to live well while *mostly* avoiding outright condescension ("Periodicals, &c.").

As was the custom with much Victorian literature, narration plays a significant part in MacDonald's novels, and *The Princess and the Goblin* is no exception. This story stands out, however, as MacDonald writes not only *for* a child audience, but also directly *to* a child audience. In the beginning, the end, and occasionally throughout the rest of the text, there are short "discussion" breaks from the particular storyline, written as dialogic conversations with a child, as in the following excerpt from the first chapter:

> *"But please, Mr. Author, why do you always write about princesses?"*
> *"Because every little girl is a princess."*
> *"You will make them vain if you tell them that."*
> *"Not if they understand what I mean."*
> *"What do you mean by a princess?"* (1)

These moments—italicized in the text to set them apart from the narrative—illustrate MacDonald's apparent attempt to connect with children and engage directly with the questions and concerns—perhaps even voiced by his own children—that he anticipates his audience to have throughout the story. They also provide an opportunity for him to explain his creative choices and considerations in a

manageable, child-friendly manner that does not require dry academic criticism or interruptive footnotes.

MacDonald continues a similar trend throughout the rest of the novel, sprinkling comments throughout the text where his narrator speaks directly to the audience or acknowledges his position as narrator. Occasionally, MacDonald includes rhetorical storytelling techniques more commonly associated with oral storytelling, such as, "What do you think she saw?" and "I wish I could describe the king, so that you could see him in your mind" (11, 83). At other times, he uses commentary that is characteristic of omniscient narrators, such as "as you shall hear" and "as we shall see by and by" (12, 5). Still other times, MacDonald's narrator conveys the opposite, indicating that he is working within a data set nearly as limited as his audience's. These instances are often accompanied by narrative speculation about what may be the case, as in, "The princess ran through passage after passage, and could not find the stair of the tower. My own suspicion is that she had not gone up high enough, and was searching on the second instead of the third floor," or, similarly, "I can't tell you how he came to know. [. . .] Someone about the palace must have seen them, after all" (30, 87). The tone MacDonald uses for his narrator throughout the story suggests a concerted effort on his part to connect with and appeal to his child audience, and the reviews and stories following its publication indicate that his efforts were met with success.

Since its inception, much of children's literature (arguably, much of literature in general) and Victorian children's literature in particular has featured didactic elements, designed to edify as well as entertain its audience, and MacDonald most obviously follows this trend with periodic moralistic commentary on the events in the story and his characters' responding behaviors. MacDonald sets his story apart from many of his contemporaries, though, by conferring a sense of royalty on his audience, describing his characters—both the paupers and the affluent—as "princes" and "princesses" rather than mere "good children."[1] Remarks like "for a real princess cannot tell a lie," and "for a real princess is never rude—even if she does well to be offended" appear frequently throughout the story (24). The concept of a royalty that reflects morality, kindness, and good behavior rather than high birth is articulated the most dramatically when MacDonald extends his definition of royalty beyond the person of Princess Irene to Curdie, the kind-hearted miner boy who befriends her:

> Here I should like to remark, for the sake of princes and princesses in general, that it is a low and contemptible thing to refuse to confess a fault, or even an

1. A similar idea is later evoked by C.S. Lewis with the Pevensie children in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

> error. If a true princess has done wrong, she is always uneasy until she has had an opportunity of throwing the wrongness away from her by saying: 'I did it; and I wish I had not; and I am sorry for having done it.' So you see there is some ground for supposing that Curdie was not a miner only, but a prince as well. Many such instances have been known in the world's history. (219)

In this passage, MacDonald does not describe Curdie as an exception for being a prince, but by referring to the "[m]any instances [. . .] in the world's history," he implies that such royalty transcends socioeconomic status or bloodline and is attainable by anyone. This rhetoric used by MacDonald exemplifies the manner of didacticism that he employs throughout his work, but which, during his life, did not appear to dramatically put off his substantial audience.

The Princess and the Goblin has been well-loved. In its own day, Princess Irene and Curdie's heroic adventures with the goblins captivated children's attention and the story fit well among its imaginative contemporaries, such as Edward Lear's nonsense poems and Lewis Carroll's other-worldly adventures. The novel has also been reprinted and republished repeatedly around the world by distinguished publishers like Random House, Puffin Classics, and Everyman's Library, attesting to its continued appeal to modern audiences. In 1967, poet W.H. Auden even stated that "George MacDonald's most extraordinary, and precious, gift is his ability, in all his stories, to create an atmosphere of goodness about which there is nothing phone [*sic*] or moralistic. Nothing is rarer in literature"—especially, I would argue, literature designed with children in mind (347). The team tackling the film adaptation and promotion, with substantial promising material, nonetheless failed to achieve its potential through an unfortunate series of stylistic and budgetary choices.

The Film and Its Reception

Produced with a substantial $10 million budget in Wales with a largely Hungarian and Welsh production team and directed by József Gémes, the international endeavor first aired in 1991 on Welsh television station S4C (*The Princess and the Goblin [IMDb]*). In 1994, the Hemdale Film Corporation attempted to capitalize on the film's favorable qualities and picked it up for distribution in North America. At first glance, the components necessary for success appeared to be present: $10 million is not a shabby budget, it was released to 795 cinemas across the country (barely 200 fewer than *The Little Mermaid*'s 994), and the captivating story seems to fit within the genre of popular children's film of the day ("The Princess and the Goblin (1994)," "The Little Mermaid (1989)"). But after its early summer release, it grossed a mere $2.1 million—thoroughly and effectively "bombing" (*The Princess and the Goblin [IMDb]*).

The failure of the film was repeatedly explained (and likely exacerbated) by critics who labeled it as "mildly diverting children's fare" and called attention to its "uninvolving story" and "substandard animation" (Holden; Rodriguez). One review described child viewers of the film as "victims" while another predicted that elementary-aged children would likely "make a big display of letting you know it was a little young for them" (Rodriguez; McCormick). The comments about the limited age range and or that "[p]arents will be bored" contrast noticeably with nineteenth century reviews that reference the book's appeal to audiences of every age, but the brief critical reviews still do not plumb the depths of the artistic and stylistic difficulties with the film (Rodriguez; "Literary notices"). From the sound design and the animation to the characterization and failure to adapt the more antiquated Victorian elements for a twentieth-century audience, *The Princess and the Goblin* falls short again and again.

Perhaps the earliest noticeable—and one of the most egregious—weaknesses in the film is its animation. A *New York Times* reviewer observed the most obvious aspects of the "disappointing" animation, saying that, "[e]ven to the unpracticed eye, there appear to be missing pieces in the action, especially as the characters walk or run. And mouths don't always move in sync with the words" (McCormick). These inconsistencies are not only noticeable but distracting and negatively affect the viewing experience. The animation of Curdie, an important supporting character who carries much of the plot, is just one indicator that effective character modeling precision was lacking during production. As one critic put it, the "look and coloring are solid, but coin-saving lack of detail and of inbetweening [see below] results in jerky motion" (Elley). Not only do Curdie's spoken lines crudely correspond to his mouth movements, but his facial expression remains largely vapid and unemotive throughout the film. Further, his face has an inconsistent structure (Fig. 1) and, though difficult to observe in still frames, any movement by his character has awkwardly contorting effects on his body (Fig. 2), sometimes causing him to look like a marionette and sometimes as though he has no bones.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Part of the awkwardness of the animation can be attributed to the fact that the film is animated on twos and fours. Slowing down the film frame-by-frame reveals that the animation does not change much within a given shot and there is very little inbetweening (a filmmaker's term for the purposefully blurry frames that suggest motion between character positions). Most films, including animation, have twenty-four frames per second (fps). Animated films, either as an artistic choice or to save money, will often only animate alternating frames, and sometimes only one in four frames (hence the name "twos and fours"). These animation choices lead to stilted, unnatural movement, which is on display throughout *The Princess and the Goblin*.

All of this awkwardness is compounded by the use of xerography (Gémes). Xerography is the animation technique of copying static backgrounds so that intentional movement is the only aspect of a new frame that needs to be repeatedly drawn, rather than entire scenes drawn again and again with vivid and dynamic

backgrounds. Disney's notorious use of xerography throughout the '60s, '70s, and '80s in films like *Oliver and Company*, *The Aristocats*, and *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* contributed to what has been termed Disney's "Dark Age"—a time when the Disney animation studio twice nearly shut down altogether, prior to the "Disney Renaissance" ("What Made the Disney Renaissance Era so Special? Part 1"). Xerography saved countless hours of animation, and therefore massive amounts of time and money, but caused animated films to feel rather more like flannelgraphs than living stories, and *The Princess and the Goblin* is no different.

The sound in the film similarly reflects poor design and budget constraints, from the stilted dialogue, to the unconvincing foley work, to the spare musical score. Curdie is introduced to viewers when he marches through the forest wielding a lantern and chasing the goblin's pets back into their holes with his edifying song "A Spark Inside Us:"

> There's a spark inside us that we cannot ignite,
> and all that's dark inside us will flicker into light.
> There's a power in every breath.
> [. . .]
> And when it sails up through the air,
> more beautiful than any prayer,
> this power can right all wrong, (5:15)

the lyrics of which prompted one critic to describe it, "as aggressively uplifting as it is humorless" (Holden). The only lyrical song in the film, it is repeated frequently throughout the story because, as Curdie explains, "If there's one thing [the goblins] can't stand, it's a song. They hate music," illustrating one critic's critique, that the "characters are not sharply focused visually or verbally" (7:08; Holden). Additional medieval-sounding music is occasionally piped in during the 82-minute film, but there are long stretches, especially during conversations and active conflict with the goblins, where the noticeable lack of music leads to a flat, non-immersive experience. Given the role of music in the story as a defensive weapon with the power to rout the goblins, the argument could be made that scenes of conflict between the humans and the goblins are purposefully non-musical when the goblins are gaining the upper hand, which would be a valid and thoughtful approach. Artistic choice or not, it nonetheless results in a strangely empty sounding film.

Foley artistry ("in-scene" sounds included to give more realistic direct sound to the events on the screen) is equally sparce, with some events perplexingly quiet, such as Curdie's muted tumble down a cave rock face (40:06). Other actions are

accompanied by disconcertingly hollow sounds that should have had resounding and echoing thuds and bangs, such as Curdie's staving off the goblins and their stone shields with his solid stone club (40:53).

The characters in *The Princess and the Goblin* are more dynamic and varied than the music and animation, but only to a limited degree. The most interesting characters in terms of both personality and animation are the queen and crown prince of the goblin kingdom. While the king of the goblins exhibits common character tropes of being weak (characterized by regular sniffles and debilitating sneezes), indecisive (he passively follows along with all the queen's ideas), and dominated and victimized by his wife, it is the goblin queen who develops a spiteful plan for destroying the sun-people and insists on wearing sharp stone shoes to bed despite the king's pathetic appeal on behalf of his sensitive feet (23:16; 50:00).

While the goblins in general have been criticized for not being "really scary villains" and "ineffectual and unmenacing even when they are on the warpath," the queen and her son, Prince Froglip, are no less interesting for all that, especially when compared to other animated villains of the early '90s (Elley; Holden). MacDonald's only description of his written goblins is that they were "absolutely hideous," "misshapen," and "not so far removed from the human" form, so from an authorial perspective, the designers had almost full rein to create goblins of their choosing, and their creative choices situated their villains neatly within other animated villains of the time (4). Prince Froglip and the queen stand out among the goblins, including the king, for a number of reasons: they demonstrate the strongest resentment towards the sun-people for instigating the goblins' removal to the caves so long ago; they both demonstrate strong capabilities for deriving sadistic joy in causing pain and destruction; and they both generally look and behave effeminately, ultimately conforming to the negative representation of queer-coded characters that was prevalent at the time.

Queer coding—the act in art of borrowing characteristics stereotypically associated with the queer community—has happened both intentionally and inadvertently in film and television for decades, with both positive and negative queer representations. A major manifestation of queer coding is the use of stereotypically queer characteristics on villainous characters to connote immorality and emphasize a sense of "otherness," and this happened particularly noticeably throughout Disney's "Renaissance" period at the end of the '80s and throughout the '90s. From Jafar's (*Aladdin*, 1992) heavy makeup and effeminate mannerisms to John Ratcliffe's (*Pocahontas*, 1995) pink clothes, bows, and sissy dog, animated villains—particularly

Disney animated villains—marked a clear association of queerness with evil and disruption. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, Prince Froglip and his mother are not only the evilest of the characters in the film, but they also demonstrate by far the most characteristics associated with queerness: they both have long, sharp, painted fingernails; they dress far "nicer" (for goblins) and use accessories (bracelets and brooches), while most of the goblin horde wears simple tunics or loincloths in shades of brown and gray.

Figure 3

The goblin queen's appearance specifically appears directly inspired by conventions of drag, and her dress, body, and attitude all suggest that she would make a convincing drag queen—a quintessentially queer association. She shares many physical characteristics with Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989), who was the most recent Disney pop villain when Gémes's film was in production in 1990 and, furthermore, who was modeled directly after the popular drag queen Divine (Sells 182). In the film, the goblin queen's buxom bosom is particularly highlighted with her strapless, fur-lined dress featuring a large ambiguous green splatter on each breast (Fig. 3). She and Prince Froglip both regularly use limp wrists to gesture, and Prince Froglip speaks with a lisp, spits a lot, and exhibits petulant, whiny behavior, all of which are common queer stereotypes (Fig. 3). Dion Sheridan McLeod points out that, when filmmakers follow this "queer as evil" stereotype, one result is that they (and this is the case with *The Princess and the Goblin*) "perpetuate heterosexism because of the alignment of villainy with queerness and the narrative elimination of the [queer villain]," referencing the death or destruction of the queer-coded characters as "happily ever after" conclusions to these children's films (McLeod 2). By subtly associating queer characteristics with evil and celebrating their ultimate demise, *The Princess and the Goblin* thematically fit in right alongside Disney's animated summer blockbusters by perpetuating the same harmful stereotypes found throughout films of the Disney Renaissance.

Outside of queer coding, though, the rest of the more "natural-looking" cast of characters has limited characteristics worth remembering once the film is over. Criticized for her "little girl voice" and for "crying 'oooh' and sobbing 'We'll never find our way out of here' in a trembly voice," Princess Irene shows very little dynamism or development throughout the film (Holden, McCormick). Her greatest demonstration of gained confidence comes when she rescues Curdie from the goblins and confidently leads him through the maze of underground tunnels to safety despite his doubt and arguments, but the rest of her choices and reactions demonstrate little character beyond that of an obedient princess—"not someone with whom children today will readily identify" (51:45; Holden). In MacDonald's novel, though still no Katniss Everdeen, Irene experiences observable growth and an increase of her own agency that directly results from her experiences under the mentorship of her grandmother and her challenges with the goblins, which gives her the courage to speak confidently to the adult castle servants about things that need to be done (MacDonald 215).

Other supporting characters add interest to the adaptation of MacDonald's story, but few except for Irene's magical great-grandmother have much effect on her life and choices. Irene's father the King provides a voice-over at the beginning and end of the tale, suggesting that he is important in the events of the story, or perhaps emphasizing his effect on his daughter, or even implying that he saved the kingdom, but when none of that plays out, it is left unclear why he was given the honor of introducing and concluding the story instead of someone who was at least around for the action. Irene's great grandmother, however, is a different story: when the princess, missing both of her parents, is surrounded by short-sighted guards and servants, she still has the resource of a grandmother who spins spiderwebs into invisible guiding thread, creates rose petal fires out of nothing, and can heal wounds with her white hair. Irene's grandmother successfully improves the film by adding an air of mystery to the events,

But Curdie functions as merely a pawn in the film—a main character who moves almost robotically from place to place, and whose unique personality is only expressed in the rare sigh and one brief, "Typical," when compelled to guide Irene back home at the beginning of the story (7:30). In the novel, Curdie's character exhibits much more dynamism, personality, and growth. He writes his own nonsense poems to deter the goblins, rather than relying on "the syrupy, half-baked tripe [song] over and over again," and regularly engages in thoughtful conversations with his parents (only peripheral characters in the film) who gently encourage him to live generously and give the benefit of the doubt when he is skeptical of Irene's truthfulness (Rodriguez;

MacDonald 45-46; 203-07). With those elements missing, Curdie's character is less sympathetic and fails to provide a sense of relatability that children can appreciate and connect with as they watch the film.

It is interesting to note that the film cast has a variety of unsurprising British accents: Irene uses a polished, RP (received pronunciation) accent, while Lootie the nurse's accent hints of Yorkshire, as would make sense for a domestic servant. Curdie and his parents, however, all use American accents. While the fairy tale does not have an explicit location, thus there can be no true critique of "right" or "wrong" accents, using a Yorkshire accent for house help is an unsurprising choice that can be seen reflected in many other television adaptations (*Downton Abbey* comes to mind). The use of American accents for the mining family seems to set them even farther apart from the residents of the castle, and arguably positions them even lower than the servant, depicting them and the goblins as "other." With these stylistic choices, Gemes is consistent with the book in emphasizing the thematic challenge of socioeconomic divisions.

Conclusion

In his article "Conservative Austen, radical Austen: *Sense and Sensibility* from text to screen," Julian North explores theories of film adaptation within the specific context of nineteenth-century values. Using the 1995 film adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* and comparing it to Austen's 1811 novel of the same title, North points out the areas where the ideology of Austen's novel would have been entirely appropriate for her nineteenth-century audience, but would not work as well with a twenty-first-century crowd. Nonetheless, adaptations of Austen novels continue to be made and remade, with each new adaptation bringing a slightly new take, appreciation, or (as Linda Cahir insightfully labels an adaptation) a new *translation* (33). Linda Hutcheon similarly defines adaptation as "repetition without replication" (149). Both theorists capitalize on the idea that effective film adaptations are more than carbon copies of books, saying that it is an essential role of directors and producers to update old novels in a way that can connect with a new audience.

George MacDonald's novels—sprinkled throughout with didactic moralizing and narrative commentary on living well—have not been represented well on the silver screen, and while it may be tempting to blame the story or the author's Victorian storytelling, the countless adaptations of novels by Austen, Dickens, Tolstoy, Carroll (and the list continues) makes it clear that nineteenth-century values are definitively translatable for a contemporary audience. MacDonald's imaginative world of goblins, princesses, absentee fathers, and magical grandmothers has the potential for great

success in a new, well-funded and well-produced adaptation. We just need to find someone to do it.

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