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Marie K. Hammond

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What's in a Name?

*Clues to Understanding MacDonald's Fairy Story
"Cross Purposes"*

Marie K. Hammond

Abstract:

"Cross Purposes," one of George MacDonald's earliest fairy tales for children, tells of a girl and a boy who are lured into Fairyland. Alice, the good-natured but snobbish daughter of a squire, does not wish to associate with Richard, son of a poor widow. Yet, when the children are maltreated by residents of Fairyland and when they have difficulty finding their way home, she comes to rely on him.

Names chosen by the author for the characters (both human and imaginary) have interesting associations in literature. These names and the title of the story offer clues to understanding what MacDonald was trying to impart, "where more is meant than meets the ear."

What's in a Name? Clues to Understanding MacDonald's Fairy Story "Cross Purposes"

In many of his fantasy works, George MacDonald chooses names for characters that suggest certain qualities or circumstances. Names such as Mossy and Tangle, Diamond, or Vane can enhance a reader's appreciation and offer clues to understanding a story's themes. One of MacDonald's earliest fairy stories for children is a dreamy tale called "Cross Purposes." The names of characters and indeed the title of the story reveal much about what was, in all likelihood, going through the author's mind as he wrote it.

The first character mentioned by name in "Cross Purposes" is Peaseblossom, daughter of the prime minister of Fairyland. When the Queen of Fairyland is looking for amusement, Peaseblossom volunteers to bring a mortal child into her court. The charming and distinctive name "Peaseblossom" must immediately suggest to English readers another fairy of the same name, one who appears in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The reference is, I believe, no accident. To gently reinforce the association with Shakespeare's play, MacDonald next introduces a goblin named Toadstool. While no one in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is called by this name, other fairies in the play are identified with common plants and creatures of the wild, such as Moth and Mustardseed.

Why should MacDonald wish to bring to mind one of Shakespeare's plays? George MacDonald was a great admirer of William Shakespeare. He toured England and Scotland (as well as America) giving lectures on various works of literature, and among his favorite topics were Shakespeare's plays. Indeed there is evidence that he spoke about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on at least one occasion.¹ Therefore it is reasonable to suppose that MacDonald's choice of the name Peaseblossom is in fact a reference to the play.

Further evidence of a connection with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be found in the second scene of "Cross Purposes." The action takes place in a country village where Peaseblossom goes to find a child. "One rosy summer evening" a little girl lies on her bed and feels "as if she were reading a story-book." (p.143) Fantastic things begin to happen, much like a dream sequence with tenuous links between events but no logical progression. From then on, the reader has the sense of being caught up in a (summer night's) dream.

Shakespeare's play is filled with dreams, magic, and flights of the imagination. Much of the action takes place in a mysterious wood inhabited by fairies. While "real people" cannot see the fairies, human characters in the play are nevertheless controlled and transformed through interactions with these supernatural beings. Shakespeare wants us to think about the relationship between dreams and wakeful perceptions, between imagination and reality, between artistic ideas and life. These are also some of George MacDonald's favorite themes. His epigram to *Dealings with the Fairies*, a collection of fairy tales (including "Cross Purposes") published in 1867, reads, "Where more is meant than meets the ear."² Many of MacDonald's fantasy and fairy stories are concerned with spiritual life and its relation to everyday life.

Another notable name in "Cross Purposes" belongs to the little girl whom Peaseblossom lures into Fairyland. Her name is Alice. As she lies dreaming on her bed, the tiny fairy speaks to her, and when Alice attempts to rise, she finds herself shrunk to the fairy's size. The tufts on her bedspread become bushes, and her bedroom is transformed into a hilly country where strange things occur. Alice asks if the country is a "dreamland." When she inquires how far she is from

home, Peaseblossom responds cryptically, “The farther you go, the nearer home you are,” (p.146) perhaps describing a journey deep into the imagination.

Anyone who has read this story and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* will notice certain striking similarities in the experiences of the two Alices. Are we to conclude that George MacDonald borrowed from Lewis Carroll, or perhaps vice versa? Plagiarism or improper borrowing seems highly unlikely, for three reasons. First, the two men were good friends who respected each other’s work. Carroll (Charles Dodgson) was a frequent visitor in the MacDonald household, and he tried out his “Alice” manuscript on the MacDonald children before it was published.³ Second, each of the men had a vivid imagination that needed no help from the outside, though it is certainly possible they exchanged ideas with each other on occasion. Finally, the dates and circumstances of publication would indicate that the authors worked independently, with entirely distinct motivation for their works. MacDonald first published “Cross Purposes” in a periodical, *Beeton’s Christmas Annual*, of 1862.⁴ Carroll’s book was published three years later. His character Alice evidently was named after one of the Liddell children for whom he often produced and narrated whimsical tales. The coincidence of names appears to be just that, a coincidence, albeit a very interesting one. It is possible the two authors had a common source, or perhaps each of them considered Alice to be a name that sounded as if it belonged in an imaginary world.

The second child brought into Fairyland is named Richard. Described as shy and awkward, he is nevertheless the hero of the story. He faithfully waits upon his poor, widowed mother, and he is an avid reader of books. Even though Alice does not at first wish to be associated with someone of his low social standing, Richard rescues her from the hazards of Fairyland and eventually brings her home. The name Richard might be randomly chosen; nevertheless, it could suggest to readers either poverty or courage, through association with Poor Richard or Richard the Lion-hearted.

Both Alice and Richard fall asleep in Fairyland, leaving open the possibility that their adventures are merely a dream or a romp through the imagination. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* again comes to mind.

The fairy tale itself has a significant name. Cross-purposes, or opposing intentions, are evident between various groups and individuals in the story. All the residents of Fairyland whom the children meet (especially the old man) try to frustrate their efforts to find a way home. Richard and Alice themselves work at cross-purposes, as Richard wants to be helpful and Alice spurns his help. From the beginning, the Queen of Fairyland and her emissaries Peaseblossom and Toadstool have conflicting ideas about how the children should be treated. As a consequence of their foolish actions, the Queen finally banishes Peaseblossom and Toadstool from her court.

MacDonald invests more meaning in the title as he describes Alice’s behavior toward Richard: “But she had always been so *cross* to him when he had spoken . . .” (p.161, italics added). Her disposition in Fairyland is deeply affected by her disgruntlement at being thrown together with this poor boy, an association she regards as beneath her dignity. Her mean and snobbish attempts at self-sufficiency finally make her miserable. “[B]y degrees the horror of silence grew upon her, and she felt at last as if there was no one in the universe but herself. . . . the silence grew so intense that it seemed on the point of taking shape. At last she could bear it no longer.” (p.161) Alice runs to Richard and touches his arm, and everything changes. Her crossness vanishes.

Once they have touched, Alice’s fear is transformed into dependency, which soon begins to resemble love for Richard. When she calls him “dear Richard,” he instantly falls in love with

her. As a consequence his eyes give off light to protect her and show her the way. Soon her eyes acquire the same power, and she is able to light his path and to see him (literally and figuratively) in an entirely new light. The light from their eyes is not self-serving; rather it crosses over to illumine the other person's path. At the same time, it allows each to have a new vision of the other, perhaps a beatifying vision. Now "cross" purposes signify the self-giving love between a man and a woman, compared in Scripture to the love Christ has for his Church, a love so deep that he is willing to die on the cross for her sake.

In the end, as a reward for their courage, the children are permitted by the Queen to visit Fairyland any time they like. She decrees that no goblin or fairy shall interfere with them again. The Queen, the children, and the residents of Fairyland no longer work at cross-purposes. Richard and Alice have been fully reconciled to each other as well, although MacDonald does not tell us whether their friendship continues in the "real world." Nevertheless, each has had the redeeming experience of having been led into the land of the imagination, and now both are free to cross into this land whenever it suits their purposes.

Notes

¹ In her literary detective work, Barbara Amell has uncovered notes by James Furnivall indicating that he attended a series of lectures by George MacDonald in London in 1874. Topics for these lectures included *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Henry V*, *As You Like It*, and *Othello*. See page 22 of *A Solemn Glory*.

² Rolland Hein, in his excellent biography of George MacDonald, misquotes the epigram as “Where more is meant than meets the *eye*” (page 187, italics added). However Raphael Shaberman’s bibliographic study lists the motto “Where more is meant than meets the ear” (page 30, credited to Milton) in the 1867 edition of *Dealings with the Fairies*. I was able to examine a copy of the 1867 edition (Alexander Strahan, Publisher). The epigram on the title page reads “Where more is meant than meets the ear.” This same quotation also appears twice in *Adela Cathcart*, once on page 57 in a passage quoting Milton (from his poem “Il Penseroso”) and again on page 272 in a statement by Henry Armstrong, Adela’s physician, giving his definition of a parable.

³ The MacDonald children gave their enthusiastic approval to the story after hearing it read, probably by one of their parents. See page 173 of Raeper’s biography.

⁴ Shaberman, page 16.

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