

*The Doubtful Marriage:  
A Critical Fantasy*

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The inhabitants of a faraway country known for its ivory towers and for its export of literary monographs were forever quarreling over who might best represent them. One day, two tiny factions decided to join forces: the adherents of the Princess Childlit and the followers of Prince Psychian, the great-great-grandson of the Empress Psyche. Both groups had for a long time felt themselves unduly spurned, even ostracized, by the powerful Board of Canonizers who had ruled Arkademia for over a century. Might not a wedding between the two claimants strengthen their status? Accordingly, Princess Childlit, chaperoned by her great-aunt Dorothea, was introduced to Prince Psychian, accompanied by his uncle Bruno. The meeting took place near the Sigmund-Platz in Urstadt, the sleepy old provincial town bordered by the half-wild, half-tended groves of the Märchenwald. The result was pleasing to both parties. As one interested observer noted, "there definitely was some chemistry there." A courtship followed, but just as the engagement was to be announced, the whole affair was abruptly called off. What had happened? Princess Childlit and Prince Psychian had liked each other well enough. The trouble lay elsewhere. Their cohorts had begun to quarrel most bitterly with each other. Who *was* Childlit, the prince's party wanted to know? Was she not simply the simpering idiot-child the canonizers had always made her out to be? Surely the prince would be far better off wooing an eligible heiress from the post-modernist elite in the Duchy of Durrheim. The princess's followers were outraged. They pointed out how divided the prince's own partisans had always been. Sweet Princess Childlit would at last have brought some respectability to a prince unable to control the factions in his own camp, all of whom professed fealty to him as the descendant of Empress Psyche, yet none of whom could agree on how to present him best, or, for that matter, how

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to present themselves. The wedding did not take place. Soon the Board of Canonizers issued an edict pronouncing both groups to be out of the system. Hereafter, their passports would be stamped with the word "MARGINAL" in red Gothic print.

If fantasies express anxieties, I suppose this little parable expresses my own fear that the union between children's literature and psychoanalytic criticism may never come about as long as we remain unsure of what is being wedded and why. We may rightly disparage the insufficiency of "Bettelheimian assumptions" that lay readers have somehow come to regard as the best way to talk about a literature of enchantment; we may propose less fallible alternatives by turning to sociological models or by insisting that this or that children's classic illustrates—*mirabile dictu*—the theoretical validity of the claims made by Winnicott or Chodorow or whoever. Still, in the process of dis-affiliating and re-affiliating we incur the risk of unduly rigidifying texts notable for their fluidity and rich multiformity of meaning.

To avoid the condescension shown toward the literary study of children's books by the "canonizers" of our own times, we must make the most of that fluidity and multiformity by adopting a stance that retains multiple perspectives. Children's books are written by members of that hybrid species of ex-children called adults. And these hybrids are noted for never having quite forgotten the child or adolescent they once were. Lewis Carroll's *Mock-Turtle*, drawn by John Tenniel as a composite creature that combines the vulnerability of the young (a calf) with the self-protectiveness of the adult (a turtle's shell), is a fitting emblem, not just for Carroll himself, but also for his adult readers and would-be critics. If children's books differ from "adult" texts by being addressed to an implied readership that is multi-leveled, then we need as critics to remember that we too contain a multitude of selves at different age groups to which the text we are interpreting may simultaneously appeal. A small child who finds pictures more interesting than words, an older child interested in verbal mastery, a pre-adolescent, and an adolescent may coincide in some of their wishes and fears, yet these wishes and fears have different roots and different manifestations.

If a psychological or psychoanalytic approach to children's literature is to succeed, we must recognize first and foremost the dynamic interaction of these various levels of psycho-social develop-

ment within many a single text. Kipling's *Just So Stories*, for example, offers tales that, by their increasing complication and sophistication, replicate the stages of a child's psycho-social development. But such multiple reader positions can just as easily be found in books that are not a collection of different tales. The affective powers of *Charlotte's Web* stem from the fluid exchanges and collapses among seeming binaries: parent and child, maturation and regression, the feminine and the masculine, the giving and receiving of nurturance, irony and naïveté, the constructions of art and the rhythms of nature. To do justice to such a metamorphic text we cannot align ourselves with a single reader position—or with a single mode of psychoanalytic explanation. Our hermeneutics must remain flexible. Which of the several children lurking in the adult psyches of author and literary critic are being appealed to and at what point of the story? We certainly need to know something about the author's childhood and adult life to help us understand what the writing of the fantasy may have activated. But even more important, we need to remember the phases and moments of our own childhoods and adolescences before we can settle whether Freud or Jung, Melanie Klein or Anna Freud, Lacan or Kristeva might best suit our analytical aims.

Different texts demand different analytical coordinates; some may even demand different coordinates for different parts. A George MacDonald who relies on archetypal emblems in ridding female protagonists of what he calls a "weary shadowy self" (in "The Wise Woman") may well prove a better candidate to be wedded to Jung than a Sendak who so astutely (and whimsically) knows his Freud. Above all, however, theories should be put into the service of texts and not the other way around. Here I differ from post-structuralists in allowing a text the integrity of its voices. Steven V. Daniels convincingly shows in this volume how *The Velveteen Rabbit* can elucidate Klein's theories about the early foundations of our fantasy lives. Yet the emphasis also needs to be reversed. We should pay attention to who wrote what, for whom, when, and why; if Klein can help explain the dynamics of a fantasy and locate it in a particular stage of development, her theories are of interest to the expositor of Bianco or of books with similar psychological materials. Indeed, a Kleinian-Winnicottian approach may help a critic establish connections among texts not normally linked in our current modes of arrangement by genre, historical period, or mere

thematics. *The Velveteen Rabbit*, with its object-splitting and gender-blurring, may find itself in the company of, say, John Ruskin's *King of the Golden River* and Tana Hoban's recent *Marzipan Pig*. On the other hand, Hoban's *Mouse and His Child* may fit surprisingly well with the kind of texts Jerry Phillips and Ian Wojcik-Andrews postulate for their Marxist critical perspective.

Whether applied to children's classics or to so-called adult texts, psychoanalytic criticism has, in recent years, often betrayed psychoanalysis by denying its main contribution: the discovery of the unconscious. It is the coming to consciousness of unconscious and semi-conscious materials embedded in a regressive or progressive text that connects the psychologies of reader and writer. Yet the text's energies tease us because they remain partially hidden, elusive, animated by the never-ending play of imagination in which the reader joins the author.

The ever-oral Wilbur had to grow up before he could transport Charlotte's 514 spider-daughters into a safe corner. Perhaps we need to nurture 514 little princesses before Childlit can enter the palace of Prince Psychian and re-establish there the ascendancy of her great-aunt Dorothea Viehmann, the ancient *Märchenfrau*.