Grotesqueness and Cruelty in George MacDonald’s The Princess and the Goblin

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Introduction

The Princess and the Goblin was published in 1872, eleven years before its sequel, The Princess and Curdie. Although these two books are often called “The ‘Princess’ Books” by many critics, Colin Manlove calls them “the ‘Curdie’ books” in his essay, Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present.¹ This is noteworthy because it suggests that Curdie, not just the Princess Irene, has a significant role, even in the first book, whose title does not bear his name. In fact, it was Curdie, not Princess Irene, who eliminated the evil creatures, the goblins.

The Princess Irene, an eight-year-old girl, lives in a large house near a mountain, inside of which the goblins live, underground. The goblins plot a scheme to abduct Irene to welcome her as the goblin prince’s wife; if this is foiled, they also plan to flood the mine and drown the miners in order to take revenge on the people aboveground, because they disregard and mock the goblins as degenerate creatures. A miner boy, Curdie, succeeds in destroying the goblins’ scheme and a flood washes away the goblins, with the help of the great-great-grandmother, who lives in the top floor of Irene’s house, but whom no-one except Irene can meet or even see. Although his name is not included in the title as in The Princess and Curdie, Curdie seems to be important enough to be discussed, because it was he who was concerned

¹ Joseph Sigman named his article “The Diamond in the Ashes: A Jungian Reading of the ‘Princess’ Books.”
Manlove, 172.
Manlove, however, also calls them ‘the “Princess” books’, so he might not yet have reached his definition.
with the goblins – the evil creatures in this work – the most.

In *The Princess and the Goblin*, MacDonald consigns readers to a position of uncertainty; for instance, readers never know whether or not the protagonists, Irene and Curdie, experience the main events which are subsequently talked about as dreams, and furthermore, even when evidence tells them that the protagonists are awake, readers still question whether they are dreaming. The fact that the goblins, which have disturbingly soft feet and inhumanly hard heads, are quelled by music and verse – forms of communication outside the rational – and the puzzling nature of the great-great-grandmother’s conversation, also suggest that these experiences take place in an in-between state and place. Moreover, the text does not offer sufficient clues to solve these mysteries, leaving readers in an ambiguous state while reading. Great-great-grandmother even says to Irene, “Seeing is not believing” (177), which would mean that people normally try to find some scientific evidence supported by rational or objective facts when they judge the validity of something, but it seems that rational facts are not necessary for MacDonald and he tries to suggest an alternative way of believing. Therefore, it could be said that he works to transcend the rational by deliberately inviting readers into the ambiguous realm which lies between the conscious and the unconscious, or the rational and the irrational.

MacDonald employs several strategies to transcend the rational in this work: dreams, nonsense, and his original creatures, goblins. Among them, the goblins and the excessive cruelty of Curdie towards the goblins will be investigated in this thesis, in relation to Julia Kristeva’s concept of Abjection. Although many critics have focused on the irrational state, few of them have centred on the goblins. Joseph Sigman has read *The Princess and the Goblin* using a Jungian approach and successfully assured the significance of MacDonald’s psychological insight and mythological imagination in it; however, as for the goblins, he only mentions them as “projections of the shadow of Victorian society, an externalization of its inner deformity – its materialism, cruelty, skepticism, and megalomania” (185) though
there is nothing more about them in his argument. Nancy-Lou Patterson has realised
the uncanniness of the death of the goblin queen who wears shoes like other human
beings while the other goblins do not, saying that “There is something oddly pitiable
in this poor vanity about the part of herself most in touch with humanity” (179); but
the goblin queen is not discussed in any further detail. However, I would argue, the
goblins are worth discussing in this work because MacDonald created his original
cast of goblins and he put an emphasis on them, as will be discussed in detail later.
Moreover, Curdie becomes cruel only towards the goblins, and the degree of his
cruelty can be regarded as excessive. Evil characters often exist in MacDonald’s
works, as in any other fairy tales, but William Raeper observes that: “In his
[MacDonald’s] tales punishment is always a form of purification and evil usually
turns to good in the end. [. . .] Though evil and cruelty exist in MacDonald’s tales,
his view of the world is ultimately benevolent” (314). However, whether
MacDonald is indeed always so benevolent and whether, when the goblins are
attacked, we can observe this as “benevolent” as Raeper suggests should be
questioned. In fact, some of the goblins who escape from the flood in this tale, in
which most of them are killed, “grew milder in character, and indeed became very
much like the Scotch Brownies. Their skulls became softer as well as their hearts,
and their feet grew harder, and by degrees they became friendly with the inhabitants
of the mountain and even with the miners” (241). Manlove also notes that “the
hideous and vicious dog Lina and the monsters” in *The Princess and Curdie* are the
goblins in *The Princess and The Goblin* “transmuted to benevolent use” (PAG and
PAC 12). MacDonald’s treatment of the evil creatures could be seen as “benevolent”
to some extent because MacDonald gives them a new kind of place or way to
continue to live, rather than eliminating them altogether. However, when Curdie
attacks the goblins, his painstakingly planned cruelty is far from the word
“benevolent” because he knows that the weak points of the goblins are their soft feet
and that they also hate rhymes; thus, he armed his shoes with nails and he “rushed
amongst them, shouting [. . .] and with every rhyme he came down a great stamp
upon a foot, cutting at the same time their faces – executing, indeed, a sword dance
of the wildest description” (211). Then he continues to attack harshly, as if his cruelty metamorphoses even his appearance into another creature: “Curdie burst in dancing and gyrating and stamping and singing like a small incarnate whirlwind” (212). Curdie’s attacks could be said to be excessively cruel, and the reasons the goblins are rejected and excluded in such a horrid way should be explored; this also suggests that MacDonald’s view of the world is not always “ultimately benevolent” as Raeper claims, because MacDonald sometimes brings cruelty and harshness to bear upon the evil characters. Furthermore, MacDonald’s emphasis on the uncanny creatures can be linked to the concept of abjection which was developed by Kristeva in the twentieth century based on Lacanian theory because both focused on the irrational state. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to explore the goblins, especially their grotesque appearance, and the cruel assault of Curdie towards the goblins in relation to Kristeva’s abjection.

II The Goblins - Kristeva’s Abjection
The goblins play an important role in this story – but they are not entirely new to fairy tales. They represent traditional fairy tales; indeed Manlove notes that The Princess and the Goblin is “based on the traditional notion of fairy people trying to kidnap women, and also ultimately stems from myths of subterranean beings stealing people of the surface for their own—notably in the story of Pluto and Proserpina” (PAG and PAC 1). The goblins moved from the aboveground to underground and their appearance is changed into the grotesque, which seems to be a frequent motif in Victorian children’s fantasy, as Manlove states in another essay. However, what is unique to MacDonald is that he created extremely grotesque goblins which have strangely soft feet and made Curdie attack them very harshly. In fact, the grotesqueness of the goblins is depicted frequently and minutely by

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2 Manlove, The Fantasy 173. Manlove states that metamorphosis is recurrent in Victorian children’s fantasy especially between 1840-80, because “The theme in part reflects the evolutionary theories of Lyell, Chambers and Darwin, and contains the sense that the human form is no longer absolute”.

MacDonald; for example, the goblin queen is one of the key characters because she has toes and wears shoes as the above people do, while other goblins are toeless and never wear shoes, and her appearance is described in great detail.

Her nose was certainly broader at the end than its extreme length, and her eyes, instead of being horizontal, were set up like two perpendicular eggs, one on the broad, the other on the small end. Her mouth was no bigger than a small buttonhole until she laughed, when it stretched from ear to ear – only to be sure, her ears were very nearly in the middle of her cheeks. (135-36)

Moreover, the goblins have soft feet which are their weak point, and the goblin queen’s toes are depicted as “six horrible toes” (164). The recurrence and minuteness of the description shows that MacDonald places emphasis on the grotesqueness of the goblins.

The grotesqueness of the body and the repulsion towards it can be related to abjection, which Julia Kristeva discusses in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) and this helps to investigate the goblins’ grotesqueness and the cruelty of Curdie. For Kristeva, abjection is a strong feeling when faced something which is neither subject nor object: “Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing” (2). This definition greatly helps to understand the nature of the goblins because, even though the characters feel repulsion towards the goblins, they cannot just ignore the goblins as objects, since the text suggests that the goblins used to be human beings: “There was a legend current in the country that at one time they lived above ground, and were very like other people” (2). In fact, in this book, the characters and the goblins cannot be completely separated from each other but are somehow bound up together, as Manlove notes from the narrative of the visits to the two areas, which are the one of the great-great-grandmother and the one of the goblins in this story: “sections with Curdie and the goblins alternate continually with sections on Irene and her grandmother. Here the effect is of an interweaving of the two, and the suggestion is that they are somehow bound up with each other” (*PAG and PAC* 3). In other words,
for the characters in this book, the goblins are neither subject nor object. It could be said that the grotesqueness of the goblins reflects the people’s discomfort, which is caused by the ambiguity between self and object. Therefore, it is revealed that Curdie is attacking the uneasiness in his mind, which is provoked by the goblins, when he attacks the goblins.

Moreover, Kristeva’s abjection explains better the reason Curdie, as well as any other characters, or the readers, feel uneasy in front of the goblins; it is because they are aware of the possibility that they could also become goblins. Kristeva indicated that food loathing is a basic form of abjection and explained it by the example of skin on the surface of hot milk:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail parting – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. (2-3)

We do understand what the milk is, but its surface confuses us because it was milk but is not milk now, even not just liquid anymore; thus something unfamiliar and indescribable could be abjection. Furthermore, it is sticky and adhesive, so this might remind us of the inside of the womb. Although the image of the womb might indicate calmness within the mother, this also suggests regression in terms of our development, because we have already passed there many years ago. We might want to oppose the regression; therefore, this would cause abjection inside of us. Kristeva also defines the corpse as being “the utmost of abjection”: “It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (4). This means that human beings feel the utmost abjection in front of a corpse because they know they will die in the future and then their bodies will be corpses. Contrary to the example of the surface of milk, the corpse makes people imagine the possible change of their body in the future;
however, both examples suggest that we feel abjection in front of their possible transmutation which we usually defend ourselves from if possible or fear. Likewise, the abjection caused by the goblins could be related to the fact that they used to be human beings and Curdie could be beckoned or engulfed by the “imaginary uncanniness”, which is the possibility that they could become goblins. Thus, MacDonald portrays the goblins as the embodiment of human beings’ possible metamorphosis, which they detest but cannot ignore and which sticks to them somehow, and Kristeva’s concept of abjection helps us to understand this attitude of MacDonald’s.

III The Cruelty of Curdie

The reasons behind the prominent grotesqueness of the goblins’ feet provide the answers to why MacDonald made Curdie attack the goblins so harshly and why the goblins were rejected by him so strongly.

The feet, for MacDonald, seem to be significant because the evil creatures in this book, the goblins, have horrible grotesque feet. In contrast, when Irene stays at the great-great-grandmother’s room for the first time, all the great-great-grandmother does for Irene is wash her feet: “[. . .] she [great-great-grandmother] got a large silver basin, and having poured some water into it made Irene sit on the chair, and washed her feet. This done, she was ready for bed” (90). Although it is such a prominent aspect of the goblins, few critics have focused on the goblins’ feet. Raeper only mentions the goblins’ feet as their “sinister side”, saying “their feet are particularly vulnerable to attack” (329). On the other hand, Sigman investigates the feet more in detail and points out the biblical allusion to them:

Any reader of the Bible would recognize the goblin’s tender feet as an allusion to the ‘great image’ with feet ‘part of iron and part of clay’ in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. The feet of the image, Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar, symbolize a divided kingdom that will be destroyed by the Lord (Daniel 2:31-45). (188)
Sigman uses the feet to reinforce his argument about the goblins as “projections of the shadow of Victorian society” (185) in Jungian reading as stated earlier, and not as the centre of the argument. However, the goblins’ feet are noteworthy, as previously stated, when investigating the difference between human beings and the goblins.

The difference between the goblins’ feet and Irene’s relates to the original function of feet: they are “the organ of locomotion” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, and also MacDonald’s theology; MacDonald posits that “everyone […] was on a road leading back to him [God]” (Raeper 243). That is to say, feet are important because they could represent the way people move, since they function to move our bodies, and for MacDonald, people are on a journey to God. Moreover, in other tales, MacDonald describes the feet of the characters whose morality is higher than that of other characters and who seem to be closer to God as beautiful. An example of this is in “The Golden Key”, where Tangle’s grandmother has “the loveliest white feet” (21) and in The Princess and Curdie, Curdie’s mother, whose evidence is depicted as “testimony” (10), which alludes to the biblical word, the testimony, the Ten Commandments, has a foot that is “as pretty a foot as any lady’s in the land” (82). Therefore, it seems that the characters who choose the right road or are already close to God have beautiful feet, while those who choose the wrong road have ugly feet in MacDonald’s works. Moreover, MacDonald applies “a tradition of houses as symbols of the mind” (PAG and PAC 6), which harks back to the sixteenth century and was epitomised by Spenser’s House of Alma in The Faerie Queen, Book IV (1593) as Manlove points out:

The landscape of The Princess and the Goblin can be seen as symbolising three areas of the mind, first the good imagination or the soul, then reason and the senses, and last the bad side, where twisted ideas and corrupt desires hold sway in the shape of the goblins and their misshapen creatures. (PAG and PAC 6)

In other words, the top floor of the house, where great-great-grandmother lives,
represents the place which is closer to God. In contrast, the underground where the goblins live is the place on the opposite side of God; that is, the place of lack of faith. It is obvious that MacDonald recommends the higher place because he impressively alludes to it as the one where we should go; when Irene reaches her great-great-grandmother’s room and is crying because she cannot find her way down, she is told “But you could find your way up” (12). Therefore, the goblins are accused by MacDonald because they choose the underground to live in, which is opposite the way to God.

The goblins’ feet could also represent their nonsense or lack of intelligence because, in spite of their softness and fragility, the goblins are reluctant to wear any shoes as “it’s not the fashion” (53). In addition, their soft feet are their renowned weak points, which Curdie aims at and stamps harshly, so they are willingly defenceless against their opponents. Moreover, Sigman states that “The goblins see their degeneration as progress” (185); they are proud of the transformation of their bodies. They regard their hard heads as “The goblin’s glory” (53) and they think the feet which “were split up into five or six thin pieces” (which means the feet with toes) are “horrid” (55). Their lack of intelligence brings their schemes to bear upon the aboveground people because they want to wreak revenge on them “in respect of their unfriendly behavior” (67), which means that the aboveground people look down on the goblins’ degeneration, and as a result, a flood sweeps the goblins themselves away, just as “Every living thing” could not board Noah’s Ark in Genesis 7:21. Their destruction might be related to their first mistake in choosing the way opposed to God owing to their lack of judgment. Therefore, MacDonald might – by making the goblins stupid or unintelligent – be emphasizing that the difference between the goblins and human beings is the fact that goblins willingly choose to go underground, while human beings do not choose to go below ground in spite of the possibility of becoming goblins. In fact, Irene is threatened by the possibility of becoming a goblin. First of all, the goblins scheme to abduct her and force her to become the queen of their kingdom. She is also followed by a long-legged cat, which is suspected to be a kind of goblin; however, unlike the goblins, she reaches
the top floor, where the great-great-grandmother lives and which is closer to God, and believes in her, instead of being captured by the cat or any other goblin.

Returning to abjection, Kristeva explains that it does not only cause repulsion but also attraction. She likens our attraction to “Prohibition” (16), describing this as “unshakable adherence” (16), which means that we are unconsciously attracted by something which we know we should not have; as Elizabeth Gross explains, it is “both repulsive and attractive, [. . .] simultaneous pleasure and danger” (94). Ruth Jenkins notes that “The greater the threat of the abject, the greater the efforts to restrict or subdue those energies” (69), the excessive harshness shows the great degree of abjection and this could be applied to the cruelty of Curdie towards the goblins. This shows the greatness of the attraction, which means that the possibility of becoming goblins is not necessarily low. In other words, the goblins need to be attacked so harshly and cruelly because otherwise human beings might not resist the attraction to this prohibited form of degeneration, which could be the way opposed to God and to which MacDonald strongly objects.

IV Conclusion
In *The Princess and the Goblin*, the goblins, one of the examples of MacDonald’s irrational representations, are accused by MacDonald because they willingly choose the way opposed to God. However, Kristeva’s concept of abjection helps to demonstrate that human beings are always threatened by the possibility of becoming goblins because the goblins used to be human beings and people are unconsciously attracted by any prohibition; therefore, the attraction has to be rejected strongly and harshly.

Abjection is a theory which was introduced by Kristeva in the twentieth century, so it is obvious that MacDonald had never heard of or deliberately applied her theory to his writing; however, interestingly, they both share the same focus of attention to the significance of the unconscious state of humans’ minds and note that the grotesqueness of the body can reflect the morality of the mind. The biggest
difference between them is, however, that for MacDonald, the unconscious mind is related to God; according to Manlove, MacDonald “usually filters them [the unconscious state, such as dreams] through his Christian vision” (PAG and PAC 2). MacDonald never concedes to the way opposed to God, but strongly objects to it. Thus, MacDonald’s life seems to be always centred around God and his work would be the same. Therefore, what MacDonald tries to represent in this work would be his “benevolent” view of human beings in which they have God to whom they may go closer, even though they are not immune to degeneration and could become goblins.

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Bibliography


