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This dissertation examines experimental Victorian fantasy novels in order to provide an alternate history for the Victorian era, one traditionally associated with the realist novel. Texts are discussed using fantasy theory, reader-response criticism, and rhetorical philosophy in order to demonstrate how literary belief influences the moral project of experimental Victorian novelists. First, a review of literature introduces the reader to the major ideas and problems of fantasy texts. Then, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is used to exemplify the relationship between the fantastic author and her reader. The first few chapters, then, explain the theory of reading fantasy that will be examined in the rest of the project. The following three chapters discuss the experimental nature of Sara Coleridge's *Phantasmion: Prince of Palmland* (1837); George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858); and Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa, the Fairy* (1869). The focus is on how these authors manipulated readers' expectations for a fairy tale in order to use the trope of childlike wonder as a reading strategy that would encourage interpretive inquiry about the unity of the fantastic and the material. The primary thesis is that these authors use theories about literary belief (derived from Romantic influences) to structure their texts and to guide readers in how to read experimental fantasy work. The dissertation concludes with a chapter that explains how critics could understand further the intersection of fantasy and realism during the nineteenth century and could begin to view them as part of a unified Victorian tradition rather than as incommensurable modes.

PONDER AND BELIEVE: INTERPRETIVE EXPERIMENTS
IN VICTORIAN LITERARY FANTASIES

by

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For Jym and the Reckoners

“Ponder and believe that what is written there, even if obscure,
is better and truer than any insights we can gain by our own efforts.”

~ St. Augustine, 2.17, *De doctrina Christiana*

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Critical studies of Victorian novels typically focus on realist texts, often marginalizing experimental literary fantasy as important only to the development of children's literature. I believe an historical gap exists in the study of nineteenth-century novels, one created by a critical preference for texts that uphold the mimetic tradition, for texts that privilege the depiction of knowable truth rather than the unreal. Though fantasy criticism has thoroughly addressed this disparity, this field still lacks many in-depth examinations of the philosophical, rhetorical, and experimental aspects of Victorian literary fantasy novels. My project explains how unexamined literary fantasies can offer critics an alternative history to the dominance of the realist mode during the Victorian era.

I believe the rise of the literary fantasy novel marks a unique historical time in which fantasy authors anticipate contemporary debates within rhetorical and reader-response philosophy. By depicting impossible circumstances, unreal worlds, and fantastic characters, fantasy novels expose the artifice of language and force the reader to confront the problems of belief inherent in any act of interpretation and communication.

In this project I define the literary fantasy novel as a genre that draws on Romantic poetic philosophy and foregrounds problems of literary interpretation and

belief. Therefore, I begin my project with an examination of the problem of literary belief expounded in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge's discussion of the "willing suspension of disbelief" needed to properly read a fantastic text affected the development of the literary fantasy novel through his modeling of belief in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." He also influenced his daughter Sara Coleridge, who wrote one of the first Victorian literary fantasy novels, *Phantasmion: Prince of Palmland* (1837). This novel develops the philosophical problems of belief and interpretation that become central to experimental Victorian novels by George MacDonald (*Phantastes* 1858) and Jean Ingelow (*Mopsa, the Fairy* 1869).

The texts I have chosen trace an engagement with and a development of the problem of literary belief through the use of the fantastic, though, of course, not all Victorian literary fantasies are part of this tradition. These experimental texts demonstrate the interesting position the reader occupies as she attempts to "make sense" out of a genre that revels in defying the very narrative structures and expectations we typically use to decipher a text. As we will see, these novels employ different techniques to direct readers' desire for textual meaning. Taken as a group, they provide us with a variety of interpretive models for the fantasy reader; and they also reveal the way in which Victorian authors who worked outside the mimetic tradition imagined their experimental novels as part of the Victorian concern with the reader's moral consciousness.

Because these writers often addressed children in their work, my project closely examines the development of children's literature, and I also discuss the separation of fantastic and realist literature in order to demonstrate why experimental novels had not

been successful with the average Victorian reader. I focus on how authors manipulated readers' expectations for a fairy tale in order to use the trope of childlike wonder as a reading strategy that would encourage interpretive inquiry about the unity of the fantastic and the material. My primary thesis is that these authors used theories about literary belief (derived from Romantic influences) to structure their texts and to guide readers in how to read experimental fantasy work. The failure of these texts (seen in contemporary reviews) indicates much about the reading preferences for the nineteenth century, both for readers of realist and fantasy literature.

I also combine rhetorical, reader-response, and fantasy criticism in order to elucidate the way nineteenth-century literary fantasies anticipate contemporary discussions on the interpretive and communicative problems that exist between author, reader, and text. I hope to expose a critical fallacy that divides nineteenth-century fantasy into extremes of either allegorical didacticism or escapist nonsense, for the literary fantasy novels I examine exist in the undefined area of Tzvetan Todorov's *fantastique*, provoking readers to interpretation through the rejection of generic expectations. These texts, then, demonstrate the problem of literary belief for the nineteenth-century fantasy author and her readers by modeling readership through complicated rhetorical techniques.

I begin this study by examining the differences and similarities in the mimetic and fantastic genres. Chapter Two gives a brief history of fantasy's development, which should provide context for the rest of my project. In it I distinguish between closed allegorical fantasy and the open literary fantasies I have chosen to examine in this

project. This chapter also gives theoretical background for my discussion of fantasy and reader-response criticism.

In Chapter Three, I examine the problems of literary belief with more specific textual and theoretical analysis by exploring the Romantic philosophies of the fantastic developed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This chapter discusses Coleridge's idea that the reader must willingly suspend disbelief in order to experience a fantastic text. I incorporate an historical overview of this philosophy, including its connection to Coleridge's understanding of the dramatic probability and textual unity needed to achieve this belief. Through Coleridge's work I develop background for a discussion of fantasy literature, which blossoms during the Victorian era due to the increased emphasis on imagination and changing perceptions of childhood fostered during the early nineteenth century. I use "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to propose a model for the reader of a fantastic text, and I argue that the relationship between the Ancient Mariner and the Wedding Guest mirrors that of the fantasy author and her reader. Finally, this poem allows me to introduce Todorov's theory of the *fantastique*, anticipated by both Coleridge and his daughter Sara.

Chapter Four transitions from Romantic poetic theory to the development of the Victorian literary fantasy by focusing on Sara Coleridge's novel *Phantasmion: Prince of Palmland*. I show how Coleridge incorporates her father's poetic theory into a longer narrative, one that subverts typical reading conventions up to that point in history. I use Coleridge's letters and essays to connect her ideas on allegory and imagination both to those her father used and to those that would come after her during the development of a

more specifically identifiable fantasy novel in the later nineteenth-century. This chapter, then, provides a bridge between Romantic theory to its development in fiction during the Victorian era. Additionally, I demonstrate how the genre of the literary fantasy novel necessitates a model for readership because it is thoroughly engaged with problems of literary belief and communication. In Coleridge's case, I claim that the hero, Phantasmion, acts as model for readers through his reaction to his fantastic experiences. This chapter also contrasts the typically didactic use of fantasy with the new literary fantasy novel that will emphasize imagination over traditional allegory. The rhetorical strategies needed to *reveal* truth, rather than overtly to teach it, also influence the use of modeling readership in later Victorian literary fantasies.

Chapter Five discusses George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. I argue that *Phantastes* focuses on the problem of communicating the unreal through the arbitrary system of language as MacDonald uses a confessional mode to address readers in a metatextual novel. MacDonald employs a confessional mode through a first-person narrative and attempts to affect readers' moral consciousness through a non-allegorical text. Specifically, he has the hero Anodos write the text we read using this confessional mode, which results in a novel that simultaneously disrupts readers' typical expectations while it also asks them to believe that the fantasy they encounter might have ramifications for them after they complete the novel, even if fantasy affects each reader differently due to the problems inherent in communication. Unlike later fantasy writers (Lewis Carroll, William Makepeace Thackeray, or Oscar Wilde, for example), MacDonald still envisions

an affective purpose for the fantastic, even as he acknowledges the complications and pluralism produced by a fantasy text.

Finally, I conclude by discussing Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa, the Fairy* in Chapter Six. I argue that this novel adds yet another layer of complexity to the project of interpretation and belief that lies at the heart of the literary fantasy. I claim that Ingelow's seemingly closed genre fantasy novel has been misread by critics. Ingelow uses intertextual strategies, specifically linking the novel to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," in order to model readership through irony. Where previous literary fantasy novels have shown how to correctly interpret themselves, this text shows what not to do through the figure of Jack, a hero who cannot interpret his experiences because he fails to recognize the unity of the fantastic and the material. Jack, as a bad reader, ironically indicates the importance of belief and perception, two themes key to all literary fantasies I discuss. The conclusion of Ingelow's novel ironically provokes readers to interpret the importance of stories through the example of Jack's failure.

These novels use a variety of rhetorical strategies to communicate with readers and to discuss the problem of interpretation and belief foregrounded by the depiction of the unreal. Each text also offers specific models for readers, who may look to the text for guidance on how to interpret what they read. In doing so, they reveal much about the reading expectations for nineteenth-century readers, both of fantasy and of more realistic texts. I hope that this study will both elucidate some of the historical influences that contribute to the development of the Victorian literary fantasy and also provide an analysis of the rhetorical techniques writers found useful to communicate with their

readers. Additionally, these novels provide a connection from Romantic poetic theory to the late-Victorian aesthetic movement of the 1890s, in which the affect of the work on the reader outweighed a text's moral importance. Victorian literary fantasy novels still assume important moral work for readers, though in a non-traditional manner, yet their emphasis on experiencing, rather than understanding, a text anticipates aesthetic theories that eventually led to twentieth-century Modernist texts.

While I do seek to fill an historical gap in Victorian studies, I also ultimately hope to question the ways in which preference for the mimetic tradition has limited critical study, marginalizing important experimental texts. I want to interrogate those reading conventions we take for granted when determining which Victorian texts should be taught and studied. While my project is historically focused on nineteenth-century texts, then, I also view it as an investigation of the way in which we, as critics who are first readers, determine the value of literary texts through biases about what literature should be and how it should be read.

Throughout this project I will use the word "belief" to indicate a literary belief that the reader must possess during the reading process. When I speak of belief, I mean the reader must assume a certain attitude while reading the fantastic, one in which the reader accepts the fantastic elements of the narrative as plausible, for the moment, in order to engage with the text. The writers I examine are specifically Victorian in their aims, for they propose that reading fantasy will be morally productive for readers. They expect their texts to awaken the reader's moral consciousness through a fantastic encounter with the Fairy world. Whether the reader accepts this role and perceives the

moral qualities of a fantastic story will not depend on the story's allegorical qualities. Rather, authors rely on the reader's willing suspension of disbelief in the fantastic, which manifests as a childlike wonder in the text's events. This wonder may affect readers aesthetically, as they marvel at the text's depiction of the *fantastique*. But, for these Victorians, this aesthetic encounter will also be morally productive, as readers should turn from the text to the world in order to recognize the way the world of Fairy fuses with material reality. Literary belief in the text, then, becomes belief about the presence of the fantastic within the material.

Readers may disagree with these writers' ideology, and they may reject a morally productive view of fantasy. Yet, as I will show, these fantasists resist allegorical and didactic lessons. Instead, they hope only to use fantasy's aesthetic encounter to awaken readers' perceptions of the fantastic; how this manifests from reader to reader does not concern these authors. For this reason they anticipate the late-Victorian aesthetic movement, though they have not fully abandoned a moral purpose for their books.

These writers try to communicate to readers, yet they recognize the fragile nature of this process. Since they choose to write a fantastic text, they must confront the problems of communication that we now acknowledge as central to rhetorical studies and literary criticism. However, they face additional challenges by working in a mode that does not purport to depict the world realistically. How can fantasy authors persuade a reader that fantasy is productive if their texts depend on elements that are not real? How would readers believe in the texts' fantastic elements if they saw fantasy as something separate from their own experiences? Contemporary rhetorical theorists now recognize

the causal nature of language, how we cannot separate language from its effects in the material world. Victorian literary fantasists understood this as well, and they wrote texts in which they fuse the theoretical with the material, proposing a worldview in which dualism collapses. Ultimately, as I will show, perception of this unity between the fantastic and the material depends on the reader's belief.

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CHAPTER II

OF OTHER WORLDS

Because the study of fantasy literature remains outside of the canonical tradition, any examination of fantasy literature begins with an explanation of why the critic has chosen fantastic, rather than mimetic, texts for consideration. Though fantasy critics have a sustained dialogue, both within their own journals and peripherally in the field of children's literature, mimetic texts continue to dominate mainstream critical inquiry, particularly that of Victorian texts.

My project begins, then, with a journey from one world into another. Like the heroes of fantasy novels, the fantasy critic leaves the known world for the borderlands, the other world of fantasy studies that intersects with the dominant tradition while still remaining, somehow, outside it. As any traveler into Fairyland quickly learns, however, the worlds of fantasy and reality closely intertwine and often contain few differences. Throughout this chapter I hope to show that these separate worlds are in fact an illusion, that only one world exists, in which fantastic and realist texts address the same issues, only using different situations to do so. In my one world of literature, we should read fantasy with Donald Davidson's idea of charity – by suspending disbelief, with a willingness to understand what may, at first, appear unfamiliar.¹

Fantasy literature seems especially suited for a discussion of texts and their readers, for as most fantasy critics agree, this genre epitomizes the nature of reading as it

calls attention to its own construction. As the relationship between signifier and signified breaks down (for there can be no true Jabberwocky, no real Wonderland), fantasy literature ultimately points back from its narrative action to the words with which it has been written. In doing so, it becomes highly rhetorical. Thus, as a genre very much concerned with the process of its own telling, its reception, and its ability to transcend the real, whether to evoke consolation or lack, fantasy inherently addresses the relationship of reader to text.

Because of fantasy's elusiveness, many critical studies examine what, exactly, constitutes fantasy literature in terms of genre. These studies often depend on establishing boundaries, both between the mimetic and fantastic traditions, as well as between the variety of sub-genres within fantasy itself. Much of the sub-genre classifications depend on separating texts based on plot structure and theme, but they also address the different rhetorical devices and structural elements authors use to depict the fantastic.

My study differs in that I will not argue for what a literary fantasy novel is, since this definition has been given in various studies (see below). Instead, I want to explore what a literary fantasy novel does. How does an author create the disruptive impulses critics claim as the defining feature of the fantastic? How does the literary fantasy novel, in particular, indicate to readers ways to interpret it, while still remaining unconventional in its defiance of typical reading expectations? How does the literary fantasy novel demonstrate the problems of belief and communication that have always been central to the study of rhetoric and literature?

As indicated in my introduction, I will focus on the development of the Victorian literary fantasy, which I claim as a descendent of the Romantic poetic tradition. As the literary fantasy novel develops, authors' concerns about the reception of texts that significantly depart from realistic conventions cause them to create models for readership within their texts. These models, I will argue, instruct the reader in a very pragmatic way, for they expose how readers should read the fantastic in a way that affects material reality.

Literary fantasies demonstrate the perilous position the reader occupies as she attempts to make sense out of a genre that revels in defying the very narrative structures and reader expectations typically used in deciphering a text. Yet these experimental texts all engage the problem of literary belief necessary in order to correctly experience the fantastic, an experience in which meaning becomes obscure or, even, impossible. In doing so, literary fantasies anticipate the late-Victorian aesthetic movement in their emphasis on the elusiveness of textual meaning. Later literary theorists thoroughly explored the problems of language, belief, communication, and representation, and an examination of these experimental Victorian texts, ones rarely given critical treatment, enriches the literary tradition by acknowledging authors who worked in an unconventional genre in which they grappled with complex philosophies about the problems of communication between reader and text.

Before I examine these important texts in greater detail, I want to provide readers with background needed to contextualize these novels within their own tradition so that their importance to the broader critical conversation becomes apparent. This Chapter

gives a review of current fantasy criticism in order to bring readers up to date on critical issues within this field. I then situate fantasy criticism alongside the more well-known mimetic tradition. Finally, I examine fantastic literature historically, by explaining how it connects to children's literature, and rhetorically, by explaining how it anticipates contemporary reader-response criticism. This chapter, then, serves as an overview of relevant criticism and theory that readers will need for the remainder of my project.

Fantasy vs. The Fantastic: Definitions of Fantasy Literature

Before we look at literary fantasies in detail, we must start by asking what distinguishes the literary fantasy novel from other fantasy literature, because one's reading expectations for fantasy directly determine the success or failure of a fantasist's work. The broad term "fantasy" has most frequently been used as the antithesis of realism, though fantasy has also been used to categorize a disparate array of literature. Rosemary Jackson explains that "[Fantasy's] association with imagination and with desire has made it an area difficult to articulate or to define" (1). Even contemporary fantasy critics often use the term "fantasy" as a catch-all word to encompass a variety of sub-genres, including "utopia, allegory, fable, myth, science fiction, the ghost story, space opera, travelogue, the Gothic, cyberpunk, [and] magic realism" (Armitt, *Fantasy Fiction*, 1).² One quickly understands that, while these types of literature may have certain elements in common, to class them all as fantasy, merely because they allude to the supernatural; provide a sense of mystery, suspense, or fear; or seem to defy realistic

literary convention, only results in confusion about what fantasy means and what its criticism entails.

For Jackson, a psychoanalytic critic, fantasy is “a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence or loss” (3). Jackson believes “the fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of a culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (4). Though fantastic texts tell of things that do not exist, Jackson believes an emphasis on desire structures the text at the level of language, where “Fantasy becomes a literature of separation, of discourse without an object, foreshadowing that explicit focus upon problems of literature’s signifying activity found in modern anti-realist texts” (40). Fantasy is therefore subversive by nature, for it focuses on breaking boundaries, representing the unspeakable, and, eventually, “attempting to transform the relations of the imaginary and the symbolic” (91).

Lucie Armitt critiques Jackson’s interchangeable use of “fantasy” and “fantastic,” arguing that these two terms refer to different things. “Fantasy,” she argues, is genre fiction, bound by the rules of genre, while the “fantastic” is a disruptive impulse that causes hesitancy in the reader. Fantasy relies on fixed reader expectations, but when our expectations are broken, then we experience the fantastic (Armitt, *Theorising*, 35). Eric S. Rabkin agrees, noting that “The truly fantastic occurs when the ground rules of a narrative are forced to make a 180 degree reversal, when prevailing perspectives are directly contradicted” (12). Rabkin believes the fantastic occurs when a reversal in the text introduces the unexpected. “We enter a narrative world with the preconceptions of our armchair world intact,” he writes, “and these preconceptions only change as the

narrative reconfigures them. . . . When the anti-expected happens, we are in the presence of the fantastic” (10). For this reason, he argues that the presence of the supernatural cannot be the only defining feature of the fantastic, for fairy tales, in particular, are not true “fantasy” (i.e., “fantastic”) since they are so predictable (Rabkin 32-33; 54-55).

To distinguish more generally between sub-genres, one usually encounters terms like “genre fantasy,” which indicates the fairy tale, science fiction, the fable, and allegory. Critics compare these to the “literary fantasy,” a term that indicates longer stories that use magical realism or supernatural/ghost narratives (Arimitt, *Fantasy Fiction* 7). The difference between these categories, Arimitt explains, lies in two points made explicit in the work of Tzvetan Todorov:

First, where genre fantasy deals in enclosed worlds, *the literary fantastic deals in disruptive impulses*. Second, where genre fantasy implies complicity on the part of the readers, *the literary fantastic actively seeks out reader hesitancy as a means of building in competing readings of the text*, typically revolving around two choices, the psychological or the supernatural (*Fantasy Fiction* 7-8, emphasis mine).

Todorov’s distinctions between genre and literary fantasies (and by extension, the reading experiences of each) are key to understanding the problems of interpretation and belief that run through Victorian literary fantasy novels. Todorov distinguishes between fantasy and the fantastic by arguing that the *fantastique*, in the original French, “is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event [within a text]” (25). If the reader discovers the source of the “apparently supernatural” is natural, she resolves the tension by turning the text into a

work of the *uncanny*. Conversely, if the source of tension produced by the text actually turns out to be supernatural, the text becomes *marvelous* (Todorov 25).

The *fantastique* occurs in the reader's moment of indecision, one that provokes interpretation of the text. Todorov describes this moment as narrative hesitancy that leads the reader to attempt belief in the text by testing alternatives for the source of tension. He writes, “‘*I nearly reached the point of believing*’: that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the *fantastique*” (31, emphasis his). Because the *fantastique* will frustrate expected reading patterns, it usually appears in *literary fantasies*, texts that are not generically formulaic and not mimetic, but instead experimentally try to break convention in narrative structure.

I will follow this division between genre fantasy and literary fantasy throughout my project. I have chosen literary fantasy novels for this project because I believe these texts address the problem of literary belief needed for a reader to interpret the fantastic. In doing so, fantasy authors intentionally disrupt the reader's expectations, seeking out hesitancy in the reader that, they hope, will lead to insight about the productive uses of fantasy and of the unification of the fantastic and the material world. The Victorian literary tradition has many examples of genre fantasy, a predominantly allegorical, closed text, typically found in children's literature.³ Literary fantasies, however, have received little critical attention, primarily because they disrupt readers' sense of convention so effectively that they become difficult to discuss or to analyze. Often, critics mistake this disruption of convention for a fault in the quality of the literature, but I believe, rather, that some experimental texts simply ask us to read and to interpret in an unexpected way.

As I will show, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Sara Coleridge, George MacDonald, and Jean Ingelow all attempt to leave their narratives in the moment of reader hesitation in order to disturb the reader into interpretation that reveals insight, not about the text's meaning, as Todorov suggests, but about how fantasy affects material reality. Though I draw on Todorov's theories to explain how these authors use textual ambiguity to aesthetically affect readers, I believe the interpretation provoked by encountering the fantastic does not end with the text's conclusion.⁴ Rather, the production and dissolution of this textual ambiguity allows these authors to experiment with modeling readership through characters that use the fantastic productively. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," his daughter Sara's novel *Phantasmion: Prince of Palmland*, as well as MacDonald's *Phantastes* and Ingelow's *Mopsa, the Fairy*, all depend on the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief and engage with the text, on the reader's willingness to be an active reader who will see in the literary fantasy novel a communication between the unreal world of literature and the real material world. As I will discuss below, not all readers may agree to suspend disbelief in order to experience the text in the ways these authors imagine. The fact that experimental literary fantasies received poor critical reviews and traditionally have not been studied actually demonstrates the way in which the reading process relies on suspend disbelief in order for the aesthetic effects to work productively on readers.

Realism has long been acknowledged as an important writing strategy for Victorian authors, yet fantastic texts remain somewhat unexamined as serious literature, even though both have their Golden Ages during the Victorian era. I believe these

different traditions essentially deal with the same issue – the ability of a text to persuade a reader to truth by using fiction, which ultimately depends on persuading the reader to literary belief in the text. Acknowledging the similar rhetorical goals of realism and fantasy will help us understand the way in which fantasists also saw themselves as concerned with the way their readers viewed reality.

Mimetic vs. Fantastic: Different Methods for a Common Goal

Mimetic and fantastic literature have a common goal of persuasion to literary belief, one we likely overlook due to the obvious difference in these genres' content. While realist authors use language to, as closely as possible, depict the material world, fantasy authors describe what lies beyond the material, the unreal. Based on this contrast, it seems that fantasy would naturally be realism's opposite, yet both genres seek to persuade readers through the text. While realist texts could persuade readers to look at the mirror of reality, fantastic texts, I argue, needed to establish models for their readers. These models provide a way for readers to interpret the texts and to discover the truth the texts claim for themselves, even though they depict events and characters that are unreal.

Realism treats content that traditionally has been accepted as more serious and therefore more worthy of critical attention than fantasy's, though it does not, of course, contain any less fiction. Armitage aligns literary realism with literary fantasy by explaining:

There is no more a genuinely direct connection between realism and the real than there is between fantasy fiction and the real...all fiction is fantasy, insofar as narrative scenarios comprise an interiorised image (one having existence only in the author's head) projected outwards onto a blank page. (*Fantasy Fiction 2*)

Studies like Kathryn Hume's *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* and Lilian R. Furst's *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* complicate realism by pointing out the way it inherently relies on fictionalization in the same way that fantasy does. Fantasy's difference comes from its apparent rejection of realistic codes, yet, it still incorporates an emphasis on rules and boundaries that marks it with a realistic structure, even when supernatural or unnatural events occur.⁵ Realism and fantasy are not, therefore, antithetical, but are often posited as opposite extremes in order to create a hierarchy of literary value.

Both realism and fantasy rely on a "belief in the power of representation" although their depicted subjects may appear antithetical (Furst 8). Realist authors tried to capture truth by reflecting reality in language. Furst explains that realist authors believed "in the power of representations which was thought to reside in the referential force of the word" (8). Ostensibly, if the reader can turn from the text and can verify its contents based on observation or experience, then the realist project has been successful. Thus, realism's test of truth lies primarily in claims for mimesis.⁶

Yet, as John Clute and John Grant note, fantasy too seeks to influence its readers' understanding of reality ("Perception" 750). But where realists metaphorically liken language to a mirror that *reflects* reality, fantasists often figure the mirror as a portal, one used by the hero (and the reader) to pass beyond the known, where language *reveals* truth, rather than represents it. A project of truth-telling and a drive to convert the reader's perception of reality underlie both genres, regardless of their complex outworkings due to how they treat their material.

Most fantasy critics object to the critical prioritization of mimetic literature due to the hierarchy of value assumed in these different genres. “If one starts with the belief that literature consists of mimesis,” Hume explains, “one has an automatic bias against manifestations of fantasy. The presence of fantasy is taken to signal a kind of failure” (26).⁷ Fantasy as a creative impulse develops simultaneously with the mimetic, and its significance in the creation of literature should not be separated from its more serious counterpart (Hume xii).

Indeed, as Clute and Grant explain, “There is no easy division between realism and the fantastical in writers before 1600 or so, and no genre of written literature, before about the early 19th century, seems to have been constituted so as deliberately to confront or contradict the 'real'” (“Fantasy” 338). Historically, one’s understanding of the individual becomes key to how one classes literature as either mimetic or fantastic. Once, when people believed in supernatural intervention in everyday life, mythic literature would have been thought of as mimetic. History changes our interpretation of the fantastic, and our current preference for mimetic literature stems from developments during the Enlightenment, especially the ensuing emphasis on the individual as a *tabula rasa* and the increasing interest in human psychology.⁸

Hume explains how critical preference for mimesis develops because of the Enlightenment-influenced assumption that knowledge is good, and “the experience gained by assimilating the story will be meaningful if only because it is new, an augmentation of the state the reader enjoyed prior to reading. Much the same validation is offered in science by gathering data” (38).⁹ Because the reader desires to interpret the

text, testing it against her own experiences to determine its truth, she finds satisfaction and pleasure in reading a mimetic text because it either confirms what she already knows or extends her knowledge of the world by “translating an unknown into a known” (Hume 38). Yet, the project of truth-telling that mimetic literature claims is a rhetorical construction, not an accurate presentation of reliable information. As Furst explains, “the truthfulness [is] dependent on the artist’s perception, which will vary according to circumstances....Once the presence of the artist’s eye and mind as reflecting intermediaries is admitted, the notion of truth as an absolute has to be abandoned” (4).

Realism claims truth for itself by persuading readers to believe in its depictions, mainly by establishing a “sound, trusting relationship between narrating voice and readers, a secure narrative contract that disposes readers to persuasion by the rhetoric” (Furst ix). Furst explains that realist novels persuade readers with claims of truth through an interplay between the novel’s textuality and its references to external reality. Thus these novels present an illusion in such a way that elicits literary belief through the reading process (Furst 12). For Furst, however, realism’s truth-test lies not in its imitation of reality, but in the novel’s credibility through “the persuasive powers of [its] created illusion” (16-17). As she explains, authors asked for the reader’s belief in their novels, but they recognized the problems of claiming truth through fiction. Claims for mimesis within the text acted as a sophisticated rhetorical technique that authors used to encourage belief in the fictional illusion (Furst 17).

Significantly, Furst argues that “to read a realist novel is to submit to an act of persuasion, the aim of which is to convert readers to the belief that ‘all is true’” (26). Yet,

she distinguishes between the type of literary belief needed for a realist text and the type needed to read a fantasy. Coleridge's theory of the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief" does not apply, she argues, because the realist novel remains so "close to ordinary experience" (29). In Chapter Three I will discuss Coleridge's theory at length, especially as it applies to the fantastic text and the reader's participation in it. It is useful to note here that, though different, both the realist and the fantastic text do actively attempt to persuade the reader into a type of belief in the text in order for its meaning to be interpreted. In this way, realism and fantasy are not separate traditions but instead use different techniques to explore the same problems of illusion, communication, truth, and literary belief.

Several historical developments, however, separate the rise of fantasy literature, making it appear distinct from realism. Coleridge, in particular, affects the definition of "fantasy" as it emerges, specifically through his exploration of the imagination in *Biographia Literaria*. He distinguishes between *phantasia* and *imaginatio*, the first translating as "fancy," the second, "imagination" (Armitt, *Fantasy Fiction*, 20-21). His well-known discussion on the difference between the two, with the preference for the latter, need not be repeated here, other than to remind readers that fancy was "'a mere dead arrangement' of 'fixities and definites,'" while imagination was "'a living power' that transformed the elements with which it dealt, shaping them into a new unity" (Prickett 9).

This distinction may confuse matters if we trace "fantasy's" evolution merely etymologically. In doing so, we would translate *phantasia* to *fantasy* and then to *fancy*.

This is what Stephen Prickett does in *Victorian Fantasy* when he notes that many readers “understand Victorian fantasy as the underside, or obverse, of the Victorian imagination” (11). Yet, as he demonstrates, Victorian fantasy cannot be seen only as the repressed side of Victorian culture, for writers were quite self-conscious about their writing and understood the symbolism and seemingly repressed allusions in their writings (40-41). Though I agree with Prickett overall, I disagree here with his definition of fantasy as a descendent of Coleridge’s *phantasia*, or fancy. The description of fancy as “a mere dead arrangement of fixities and definites,” seems aptly applied to genre fantasy, since as a closed form it does not ask for readers’ active interpretation. The imagination, by contrast, as “a living power that transforms elements” seems well-suited to the literary fantastic. Texts that actively disrupt reader expectations draw on the power of the imagination (both the writer’s and the reader’s) and therefore cannot be equated with the nineteenth-century word “fancy,” even if these texts contain elements that “came to be seen as the quality of dreams and reverie,” as Prickett suggests (9).¹⁰

Coleridge’s definitions are part of the growing interest in the imagination at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a time in which changing ideas about childhood also affect the development of fantasy literature. Fantasy does not emerge as a distinct genre until the late nineteenth century, yet, as David Sandner notes, “many critical histories of the genre begin [with the Romantic era], noting that Coleridge’s influential theories of the imagination...reveal a clear desire to employ the fantastic as a literary device” (289). The Victorian tradition of fantasy literature draws on these Romantic developments but expands and complicates these theories to deal with uniquely Victorian problems

(Prickett 12).¹¹ The turn toward new definitions of childhood, in particular, affects fantasy's development by changing the audience for fantasy literature. In fact, the frequent alignment of fantasy and children's literature develops because children were eventually considered to be a more appropriate audience for fantasy, while adults were expected to read more serious literature, a distinction that still remains today.

The literary fantasists I examine in this project frequently address children in their writing, or ostensibly write for children, for the importance of the childlike perspective in gaining the reader's belief in the fantastic affects the rhetoric of the literary fantasy. The childlike perspective, or the author's emphasis on the childlike reader, demonstrates the Romantic inheritance of the literary fantastic. As I seek to show in all of my chapters, childhood functions as a rhetorical construct used by the fantasist to elicit wonder, and, ideally, to persuade readers to literary belief in the text. For to read with childlike wonder implies that one willingly suspends disbelief, as Coleridge suggests. In Chapter Three I examine this theory closely and argue that Coleridge models this type of reading in the relationship between the Ancient Mariner and the Wedding Guest in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Perhaps because of this influence, the connection between childlike wonder and belief has led to the close alignment of Victorian fantasy and Victorian children's literature. An examination of this association will elucidate the way in which childlike wonder functions as a rhetorical appeal for literary belief in all of the experimental Victorian fantasies I examine in this project.

Childlike Wonder: The Appropriate Audience for the Fantastic

The problem of fantasy's audience directly relates to the issues of belief that become central to the Victorian literary fantasy. Since adults primarily read experimental novels, they necessarily had to willingly maintain literary belief in a way that a child may do naturally. Interestingly, the idea that a child's perspective was best suited for fantasy was a new development in the nineteenth century. Prior to this time, readers did not recognize fantasy as a distinct literary tradition. The exploration of audience for fantastic literature can be traced back to the publication of John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, which appeared in 1693. This text profoundly influenced conceptions of childhood, especially Locke's argument that children would learn better if they could learn with pleasure. Critics generally credit Locke with the *tabula rasa* – "blank slate" – theory, which proposes that every child begins with a pure, open mind that can be written on by parents, teachers, and books (Avery 11).¹² However, because adults perceived the child's mind as so vulnerable, they believed fiction would teach immorality because it was false, the equivalent of a lie. Other than Aesop's *Fables*, adults discouraged fantasy in children's literature, which remained mainly realistic, historical, or religious in nature (Avery 12-13; 19-23). The emphasis on didactic children's literature, in particular, lasted throughout the following century, and the introduction of fables, fairy tales, and fantasy publications began in adult literature due to this bias. Fairy tales had come to England from France in 1729 when Robert Samber translated *Histories, or Tales of Past Times, Told by Mother Goose* into English (Kinnell 28). Yet these texts were mainly intended for adult entertainment, and no distinct literary fantasy novel

developed (Russell 3-6). These initial fantasy tales, even though written for adults, used allegorical interpretive strategies to instruct readers in fantasy's use, and so these texts typically did not require belief in the fantastic events as they used a closed narrative form.

Jean Jacques Rousseau's publication of *Émile* in 1762 resulted in a shift in perceptions of childhood and, by extension, towards fantasy literature. Rousseau supported the use of adventure stories like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in children's education, yet he was against reading fantasy and fairy tales to children since most were too provocative, sexual, and violent (Kinnell 43; Avery and Kinnell 65). By the end of the eighteenth century, mainly due to the enormous influence of publisher John Newbury, children's literature had become established as a legitimate business, yet fairy tales and fantasies were still typically published for adult audiences (Kinnell 34). Ironically, children became the Romantic metaphor for imaginative perspective, yet they were not encouraged to embrace their imaginations until the Victorian era when authors wrote fantasy just for them (Butts 86). Later publications emphasized nonsense and play, eschewing the moral didactic tone of earlier centuries. These children's fantasy titles did not need to experiment with problems of belief and communication since they addressed a less sophisticated audience.

The roots of experimental Victorian fantasy can be traced to late eighteenth-century developments in children's literature, particularly the decision by several women authors to include fiction in children's education. Hannah More, one of the first women to use fiction for religious teaching, wrote a series of tracts using fiction in 1795 to 1797. Anna Laetitia Barbauld's work also began to blend fiction with moral lessons in *Evenings*

at Home (1793). Mary Martha Sherwood, in particular, contributed to the Victorians' sense of fiction in children's literature when she wrote the *History of the Fairchild Family* during the Romantic era (1818-1847). This text was well-known to young Victorians as a work of religious domestic fiction (Avery and Kinnell 46-53). These developments, though small, set the stage for the turn to more obvious fantasy because they represented a subtle shift in belief about fiction's purpose. The allegorical fantasy often found in Victorian's children's literature draws on this tradition.

However, because of Rosseau's idea of natural education, writers like Maria Edgeworth still focused on "engaging the child in a reasoning dialogue with the teacher or parent" in order to teach rationality, which resulted in fiction that contained overtly didactic lessons, as in Edgeworth's *Frank* (Avery and Kinnell 55-56). Yet writers like Harriet Martineau, who wrote *Five Years of Youth; or, Sense and Sentiment* (1831), and Catherine Sinclair, who wrote *Holiday House* (1839), began to change the overall tone of children's literature. They included fictional situations, mainly realistic, to balance the search for reason with the increased interest in the imagination (Butts 83-85). The emphasis in these works marks a shift toward fantasy, though it remains didactic.

Overall, fairy tales continued to dominate the fantasy tradition during the late eighteenth century and into the Romantic era (Butts 88-89). Edited collections of fairy tales for younger readers eventually resulted in the publication of lighter poetry, like Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* (1846) (Avery and Kinnell 69-71). Even with these developments, no distinct literary fantasy novel of the type I have defined above arises. The reader watches the closed forms of fairy tales and nonsense verse unfold with little to

no active interpretation on her part (nonsense typically does not require interpretation; this is one of its pleasures). In fact, the only literary fantasies close to those I will examine are the Gothic novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Avery and Kinnell 71). Yet even these do not fully explore the problems of belief and interpretation that I claim as part of the experimental literary fantasy novel because they use traditional conventions to structure their narratives and always resolve any tension during reading into the uncanny, which provides textual closure and limits interpretive inquiry after reading concludes.

Sara Coleridge's novel, *Phantasmion: Prince of Palmland*, published in 1837, marks the official beginning of the tradition I trace, that of the experimental literary fantasy novel that engages the reader in active interpretation.¹³ As Dennis Butts remarks, *Phantasmion* is "a remarkable pioneering fantasy, and nothing like it was to appear until the work of George MacDonald" (91). As Butts rightly notes, the philosophies of Romanticism paved the way for the literary fantasies of Coleridge, MacDonald, and Jean Ingelow during the Victorian era (101).¹⁴ These novels would use Romantic philosophy about the willing suspension of disbelief and the importance of transcendent insight to engage readers through the *fantastique*. As open texts that ask for literary belief and interpretation, they contribute to a tradition independent from the typical uses of allegorical or nonsensical Victorian fantasy, and we can align them more closely with the realist tradition that engages in the problems of representation.

Readers will notice that I have intentionally omitted Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books from my exploration of literary fantasies, though a history of Victorian fantasy literature

is not complete without reference to their enormous influence. Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) typically marks the advent of the Victorian children's fantasy genre; yet, his books do not contain the qualities I have defined as the Victorian literary fantasy novel. Even though his stories definitely engage with issues of language and belief, especially the arbitrary nature of linguistic systems, Carroll's narrative remains relatively stable for the reader. Alice may experience confusion during her journey to Wonderland, but Carroll does not frustrate readers' sense of literary convention in quite the same way as the literary fantasies I discuss. In fact, rather than persuading readers to literary belief in the fantastic, Carroll's texts tend to meta-textually refer to themselves as texts in a manner that distances the reader from the experiences of the text and disrupts any potential literary belief. The dream endings of these texts, in particular, provide closure for readers and do not ask them to interpret their reading experiences.¹⁵ This closed nature of reading primarily separates Carroll's books from the other literary fantasies I examine, whose meanings, I claim, remain open-ended and provoke continual interpretation from readers.

Interestingly, the open-ended Victorian literary fantasy actually anticipates contemporary reader-response theories, in which critics examine the problems of interpretation, the indeterminacy of meaning, and how readers participate in the text. Reader-response theorists have attempted to define how, exactly, a reader interprets a text, when the text contains arbitrary signs that somehow produce meaning – often multiple meanings. These theories relate to the study of fantastic literature because of its rhetorical nature. Historicist or formalist approaches to the fantastic may neglect the

necessity of the reader's willing participation in order for them to mean anything at all, and reader-response theory allows us to examine the very problems of interpretation and belief that the novels often depict.¹⁶ Thus, reader-response and rhetorical theories provide grounds for closer examination of how the author engages the reader through the fantastic text.

The Fantastic Reader: Interpreting the Unreal

Few reader-response theorists explicitly address the fantastic in their work, yet we benefit from a review of their theories in order to place fantasy theory within the context of communication and belief. The following overview addresses a variety of interpretive strategies proposed by theorists in order to situate the problems of belief more fully within a discussion of the fantastic. In *Interpretive Conventions*, Steven Mailloux discusses many reader-response theories, beginning with a subjectivist model proposed by Norman Holland. Holland argues that through reading, we recreate ourselves in the text "by creating a meaningful unity" of it in our minds (Mailloux 25). Mailloux explains, "For Holland, meaning is the result of this interpretive synthesis, the transformation of fantasy into a unity which the reader finds coherent and satisfying" (25). Holland does not account for the similarity between subjective readers' responses, and as Mailloux describes, Stanley Fish addresses this problem by introducing the idea of "interpretive communities," a social reading theory that relies on communities of readers who share interpretive conventions. For Fish, "all informed readers have the same basic reading experience because they shared linguistic and literary competence" (Mailloux 26). In both Holland and Fish's theories, the reader controls the process of interpretation,

because “as soon as we read, we interpret; and thus our interpretative strategies create the text that we later discuss in critical exchange” (Mailloux 26). These theories become problematic when they must account for the way a text produces similar or different meanings for a wide variety of readers; one cannot ignore the text and focus only on the reader when the text obviously exerts some influence on the number of possible interpretations of it.

Wolfgang Iser and Jonathan Culler incorporate the text into their models of reading due to this problem. Like Fish, Culler argues that we interpret texts socially through “a shared system of reading conventions” (Mailloux 42). He differs from Fish in that he focuses on the literary conventions available to the author in constructing a text. He writes, “A poem presupposes conventions of reading which the author may work against, which he can transform, but which are the conditions of possibility of his discourse” (Qtd. in Mailloux 42). As Mailloux explains, this means the author will draw on these pre-existing conventions as he creates a text, and the reader will also use them in interpreting it (42). Now, instead of meaning created only by the reader, the author and reader share in the production of meaning(s) the text can produce. Readers create this meaning socially, rather than subjectively, through “established [reading] codes or cultural forms” (Mailloux 59). These reading conventions limit possible interpretations for individual readers.

Iser proposes a theory similar to Culler’s. He suggests the text contains strategies, or instructions, for the reader, guiding the production of meaning (Mailloux 42). He believes “meanings in literary texts are mainly generated in the act of reading; they are

the product of a rather difficult interaction between the text and reader and not qualities hidden in the text” (Qtd. in Mailloux 44). The reader will interpret the text’s meaning by occupying the shifting perspectives (narrator, characters, plot, etc) the author has created, and the text’s meaning will “emerge during the reading process” as the reader traces the connections between the variety of perspectives the text contains (Mailloux 45). The author creates “gaps” or “blanks” in the text for the reader to fill in, so that different meanings emerge from the text as individual readers select certain perspectives over others in the process of interpretation. Thus the reader produces meaning intersubjectively through an interaction of an individual reader’s particular experience with the guidance of a text the author has constructed (Mailloux 46).¹⁷

Interestingly, Iser also argues that “the structure of the text allows for different ways of fulfillment” (Qtd. in Mailloux 53). There is no one correct meaning or one possible interpretation, yet the text will also be constructed so as to limit the possible meanings available (Mailloux 53-54). The text, then, works as a set of instructions for the reading process, and as the reader shifts perspectives in the text, she “fills the blanks between perspectives,” which leads her to an interpretation of the text’s meaning (Mailloux 54).¹⁸

Significantly, Iser imagines the reading process as “dynamic interaction” with an “active reader [who] is constantly responding to the meanings he produces in this interaction” with the text (Mailloux 48). As Mailloux explains, the reader does not receive passively a text’s meaning but the reading experience affects her after it ends. Because the text asks the reader to inhabit a variety of perspectives, it “forces the reader

to locate and resolve deficiencies in the reader's own structuring of experience" (Mailloux 48). Thus, "A reader open to the text and its effects will have to reformulate his system of norms in order to accommodate the meaning the text has led him to assemble," (Mailloux 48) or, as Iser puts it, reading literature requires the reader to "constitute himself by constituting a reality hitherto unfamiliar" (Qtd. in Mailloux 48). In doing so, Mailloux concludes, literature can change readers (48).¹⁹

These theories depend on the reader's response to a text that draws on her pre-existing experiences of literature. What happens, then, when she encounters a text that asks her to interpret in a completely new way? What happens when, suddenly, the fantastic intrudes on the reading experience, and she must actively work to make sense of the unfamiliar? If an author purposely composes a text that frustrates conventions (or manipulates Iser's "perspectives"), yet still asks the reader to suspend disbelief while reading, then the reader's response may be confusion and frustration. Perhaps she also experiences the text aesthetically, as an emotional reaction to the fantastic, but she may not extract a meaning from the text. What happens to belief and meaning, then, when we abandon most known literary conventions, or instructions, which means we can no longer read intertextually or within our communities?

Conclusion

I believe the development of the fantastic engages this problem, first in Coleridge's work, and then later in the experimental Victorian fantasy novel. First, authors use unreal or fantastic content in their narratives, which requires a reader's willing suspension of disbelief. Then, they disrupt the reader's interpretive expectations

through experiments with storytelling. Readers experience this disruption as an aesthetic effect of the text, which may affect them beyond the reading experience itself. I argue that this disruption, in turn, forces readers into interpretive action, which may use their literary belief about the text to change beliefs about their material reality. Fantastic texts may give us a variety of perspectives as we read, as Iser suggests, but they will be different perspectives than we typically encounter. And as we “reconstitute ourselves by constituting a reality hitherto unfamiliar” we incorporate the fantastic into the material, which changes the way we view reality (Qtd. in Mailloux 48). In this sense, much as MacDonald describes, fantastic texts “wake a meaning” in readers. These texts may not contain one meaning – or even meanings – about themselves, but they propose to awaken the reader’s desire for meaning in the material world.²⁰

We may think that interpretive action of such experimental novels ultimately will fail. Yet the experimental novels of Coleridge, MacDonald, and Ingelow do contain strategies for how to read the fantastic. As Iser says, an author can use a text to guide its own interpretation, but in the case of these texts, I believe the authors instruct readers in how to encounter the fantastic, rather than how to interpret the actual text. The fantastic poem or novel may remain uninterpreted, with no conclusive meaning of the textual action; yet the text may still affect readers and provoke them into critical interpretive action of *reality*, rather than specifically literary interpretive activity. Therefore the models within experimental literary fantasies function as a set of instructions on what to do with the fantastic encounter, rather than as instructions on what to think about the text’s meaning.

Experimental literary fantasies share many of the same concerns with traditional Victorian realist novels. Like realist texts, they were addressed to adults and engaged the problems of communication and literary belief through fiction. Literary fantasies differ in genre, but they also differ from conventional fantastic literature because they use the hesitation of the reader as part of the novel's structure in order to provoke the reader into interpretation about the text's meaning – which may affect the reader after the novel concludes. In doing so, they require the reader's literary belief, and the novels I examine create this belief through a variety of interpretive strategies. Literary fantasies of the Victorian era ask readers to participate in the text in order to receive insight, yet they simultaneously disrupt the reading experience in order to provoke interpretation. I claim this tension as the defining feature of the literary fantasy novel, and its resolution lies in the complex experiments found in the novels I will examine at length below.

The ability of an author to create the willing suspension of disbelief necessary to this reading experience relies on an understanding of Coleridge's philosophies articulated during the writing of *Lyrical Ballads*, which he recorded in *Biographia Literaria*.²¹ We will best understand the project of the experimental Victorian literary fantasist if we first examine Coleridge's theory in more detail. In the next chapter I discuss the wide variety of theories that have attempted to make sense of how we participate in a literary text and create this suspension of disbelief. Coleridge, however, did not just write about a general literary belief needed in order to understand the fantastic. He provides us with an example. The Wedding Guest, after listening to the Ancient Mariner's fantastic tale,

shows us how fantasy can wake a meaning for us, transforming our perspectives of the material world.

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CHAPTER III

ONLY NOT TO DISBELIEVE

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, fantasy was often criticized as a genre of nonsense, pure escapism or entertainment, always juxtaposed with more realistic fiction. When authors wrote fantasy with an affective purpose, they typically wrote allegorically to convey an idea related to instruction or education. Often they appended these lessons as morals in fairy tales. Critics deemed any works of fantasy that did not conform to these standards as unfit for audiences, and especially for children. Reviews published in 1773 and even as late as 1817 warn against “works of fancy” (Avery and Kinnell 69).

Significantly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge did not share this view of fantasy, and he would soon become one of the most prominent influences on a new tradition of fantasy literature, one which would have its Golden Age during the Victorian era. Coleridge, and other Romantics like William Blake and William Wordsworth, affected the development of nineteenth-century fantasy literature through their views on the imagination and the importance of childhood. Coleridge’s interest in fantasy can be seen in much of his work, for he believed supernatural and fantastic tales opened up the imagination and allowed readers to perceive the unity and harmony of the universe; judgment and rationality, he felt, focused only on the universe’s parts (Sandner, *The Fantastic Sublime*, 33). His interest in fantasy leads him to examine its theory, specifically that participation in art

requires the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief." This well-known phrase forms the basis of a new theory of fantasy, one that would move beyond the overtly didactic to the experimental literary fantasy novels of the Victorian era.

In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge records that his role in the composition of *Lyrical Ballads* was to explore the supernatural, to "procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (II.6). Fantasy critics often cite Coleridge's work as an origin in the development of a distinct genre of literature that privileges fantasy over realism (Sander, "Theorising," 289). This theory of the willing suspension of disbelief, I argue, ultimately demonstrates a crucial tension for the fantasy author, who must work on readers to persuade them to suspend disbelief even while readers must meet him halfway and be willing to believe in the supernatural tale. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the most famous of his fantasy texts, explores this problem through the relationship between the Mariner as author and the Wedding Guest as reader. I believe this relationship provides a model of readership for fantasy texts, one in which the reader suspends disbelief and allows the fantastic to transform the material after the story ends. Working forward from Coleridge, I will show that Victorian literary fantasies often incorporate reading models in order to instruct readers in how to receive and to interpret the fantastic content they depict. These models become necessary as readers navigate the competing projects of interpretation (How will I make sense of the unknown?) and literary belief (Will the text produce meaning?).

Like the fantastic, a genre that tends to elide one, concrete definition, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” has become notorious for the variety of its criticism. Writers have frequently noted “the impossibility of containing the poem’s meaning in a single interpretation” (Davies 259). As Lindsay Davies explains, “From the beginning the poem posed difficulties for those who strove to find in it a coherent relation of the parts to the whole” (259). This problem has led many critics to discuss the poem in terms of its interpretive paradoxes. Yet none have noted the role of the fantastic as it relates to fantasy literature and criticism, or how the poem depicts a model for the reader of a fantastic text. While the poem obviously demonstrates problems of interpretation, the presence of the supernatural in the Ancient Mariner’s tale requires a different type of interpretive context. Because Coleridge introduces the fantastic into his poem he therefore faces the problem of reconciling the reader’s desire to interpret the unreal and the necessary literary belief in the text the reader needs in order to participate in the fantastic. I argue that all fantasy authors confront this tension when they write the fantastic, and we can read “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” as an early example of this tension between interpretation and literary belief.

The problem of suspending disbelief is germane to all the experimental literary fantasy novels my project addresses, and this chapter primarily focuses on the viability of this theory in regard to reading fantasy. Since I interpret “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” as a model for the fantastic reader, I am primarily concerned with how Coleridge’s theory of the willing suspension of disbelief engages in problems of reading.

This chapter explores the implications of this theory, though I do examine the poem and tie it both to its criticism and to later Victorian literary fantasy novels.

The Affective Fantastic: The Wedding Guest as Fantastic Reader

Since I want to propose a theory for the experimental literary fantasy novel, history will not be my sole focus, yet it may interest readers to know the background of Coleridge's love of the fantastic, one that does affect his writing of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Before he collaborated with Wordsworth on *Lyrical Ballads*, he had developed this interest particularly through reading fairy tales during his youth. As David Sandner explains, these early fantastic influences "had a profound effect on him and his work" (*The Fantastic Sublime* 32).²² At the end of the eighteenth century both Coleridge and Wordsworth supported the emerging genre of fairy tales, arguing for them in their letters. Jeannie Watson writes that for Coleridge, the Faery realm

becomes a symbolic metaphor for Spirit/God/the One Life, and the tale of Faery shows forth that Reality. Within this context, the tale of Faery may be more profoundly 'moral' than the moral tale because it leads to the spiritual truths upon which morality is based. (15)

The world of Faery was central to Coleridge's aesthetic, and it "also makes a strong contribution to [his] other well-known poems," like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Watson 14). This interest in fantasy appears in much of Coleridge's later work, both through his exploration of fantastic elements in poetry ("Kubla Khan" and "Christabel," in particular), but also in his discussion of how the imagination functions. Most importantly, he concludes that a fairy tale can hold spiritual truth – one not allegorically

conveyed (Watson 15). In doing so, he distinguishes between a literary fantasy and a typical didactic tale. This new type of literary fantasy may provide a moral for readers but does not pointedly ask them to examine the source of that morality.

Importantly for the reader of fantasy, if the world of Faery could reveal truth, then the fantastic has transformative potential available through the reading process. Later fantasy critics agree, for as Sandner explains, “Fantastic stories, in and of themselves, fail unless they suggest something more, something greater beyond the text” (36). Accessing this world of Faery depends on the reader’s ability to suspend disbelief in the text when encountering events that contradict material reality, for yielding to the world of fantasy opens doors both to pleasure and to transformation. But the goal of the fantasy writer takes on new complexity when he makes claims for truth through a typically subjective genre. Here, the fantastic writer abandons allegory or overt didacticism and instead must transform the reader through the imagination. By forgetting the rational self, the reader opens possibilities for spiritual encounters that reveal imaginative, moral truth – moral truth that moves the spirit, not the mind. This type of affective project differs significantly from that of the traditional moralist, for writers must discard logical rationalism and claims to absolute truth in the fantastic world of supernatural experience.

Authors of experimental literary fantasies must contend with two conflicting projects: the choice to write in the subjective fantastic genre and the desire to reveal some type of truth that transcends the text and affects the material world. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” enacts this problem through the Wedding Guest’s behavior as he hears the Mariner’s tale. The Mariner, portrayed as an author, transmits his fantastic story to

the Wedding Guest, who, as reader, must suspend disbelief in order to be affected by it. Of course, later versions of the poem also introduce another reader into the text through the figure of the gloss. As I will show below, the presence of the gloss as an example of the rational reader who has not suspended disbelief reinforces the importance of the Wedding Guest's response to the fantastic. For now I will focus primarily on the 1798 version of the poem, without the gloss, since I am most interested in the affective nature of the fantastic modeled in the relationship between the Mariner and the Wedding Guest.

The poem begins with the Mariner, as author, actively working to gain the Wedding Guest's attention. He disputes for it in several places, for he must persuade the Guest to listen rather than to attend the wedding banquet. The Guest, much like the rational reader, initially resists hearing the Mariner's tale. For example, when the Mariner approaches the Guest, the latter quickly demands, "By thy long grey beard and thy glittering eye / Now wherefore stoppest me?" (l. 2-3).²³ The Mariner twice tries to begin his tale, but each time the Guest refuses to listen. Next, the narrator mentions that the Mariner's "glittering eye" holds the Guest, and the eye will function throughout the poem as a symbol of the Mariner's authority over the Guest. Like the threat of the adult's watchful eye on a child's behavior, the authoritative eye intimidates the Guest so much so that he sits down and "cannot chuse but hear," (l. 22) for the Mariner has transfixed him. The Guest, though he will dispute further, eventually hears the Mariner's tale through.

The Wedding Guest becomes engrossed in the Mariner's tale, and the narrator mentions that he "listens like a three-years' child" (l.19). We should note that the Guest's subsequent behavior does, in fact, model a childlike deference to the Mariner's authority.

The childlike wonder the Guest portrays demonstrates that literary belief in the fantastic has been established. Of course the Guest does not literally return to the innocent perspective of the child, but he acts childlike in his belief in the authority of the Mariner's tale. The return to childhood, then, does not mean an impossible return to innocence, but acquiescence to authority – an obedience, or suspension of the will, that submits to the authority of the author during the course of the tale.²⁴ However, as I will explain below, submission to storytelling does not mean an unthinking acceptance of ideology.

Coleridge claimed we should have a willing suspension of disbelief *for the moment*, in order to engage with the fantastic text's depiction of the unreal. After the tale concludes, we should, like the Wedding Guest, be provoked into reflection and interpretation about our experiences of the fantastic.

Like this poem, experimental literary fantasy novels model readership by asking for the reader's childlike wonder in the text's events. Yet, also like the poem, the novels remain open-ended so that subjective meaning takes precedence over a concrete truth the text could reveal. This emphasis on the childlike perspective, or, the reader's need to remain in a condition of wonder when interpreting the fantastic, relies on the nineteenth-century adult's new perspective on the importance of childhood.

The Romantic idealization of childhood had created a widespread cultural fantasy for adults. Romantics often felt that children were untarnished by cynicism and had more direct access to imagination than adults did. A child could perceive the world unimpeded by logic, and though adults could not literally become children again, Romantic poetry, in particular, attempts to recover for readers this perfect state of human perception. As

Sandner explains, “For the Romantics, the sacred innocence and imagination of childhood offered redemption to fallen adulthood” (6). The child represented a primitive state of imagination and was therefore endowed with the Romantic adult’s feelings of loss and desire. James Holt McGavran, Jr. emphasizes the Romantic “adults’ simultaneous idealization of the child and lament over the loss of their own childlike innocence” and explains how the Romantic adult may overlook actual problems in childhood, such as labor and poverty, in his attempt to use the figure of the child to recapture his own lost sense of innocence (2; 7). Naturally, not every writer or reader views childhood in the same way. As Andrew O’Malley notes, there is a vast difference between Wordsworth’s depiction of childhood and that seen in poems by Blake (128-129). Regardless of how a particular writer or reader feels about childhood, it nevertheless functions as a discourse within literature and therefore becomes ideologically imbued. In fact, Fiona McCulloch argues that childhood is “a cultural construction conforming to ideological desire in which any sense of ‘real children’ is erased/replaced by idealised innocence” (3).

Childhood, then, is itself a form of adult fantasy, and nineteenth-century writers that create fantastic texts may evoke this cultural fantasy, drawing on both their and their readers’ desires for lost childhood. While a writer’s depiction or a reader’s preconceived notions of childhood may influence how successful the fantastic project becomes, childhood still functions as a place of adult fantasy in which both writers and readers can gather through the fantastic text.

Coleridge does not explicitly state the role of childhood in helping the reader receive truth through fantasy, but he does remark on the importance of “carrying on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood” and calls the “privilege of genius” the ability to view the material world with a childlike sense of wonder (*Biographia Literaria*, I. 80-81).²⁵ Though Coleridge’s discussion concerns the role of the author/Poet, rather than the reader, his entire theory of the willing suspension of disbelief relies on both an author who has this wonder himself and can convey it to a reader who submits to the tale.

In “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” Coleridge demonstrates the childlike reader when the Guest sits on a stone (l. 21) and remains relatively still throughout the rest of the tale. His posture recalls the obedient child who takes on a position of passivity in relation to the more authoritative, adult figure of the Mariner, who wields authority based on his possession of story. Though the Guest still resists the tale somewhat, he does not leave his position as listener and quickly becomes involved in the Mariner’s narrative.

The next time the Guest speaks, just before the Mariner confesses he shot the albatross, he does not argue with the Mariner or plead with him to attend the wedding; instead, he asks for more detail about the story, saying, ““God save thee, ancient Marinere! / From the fiends that plague thee thus – / Why look’st thou so?””(l. 77-79). At this point in the tale, the Mariner has not mentioned any supernatural activity, so the Guest’s willing suspension of disbelief has not been truly tested. His interest in the story lies in the Mariner’s authority, his visible distress in the tale he tells. Charles A. Owen, Jr., notes, “The Mariner’s hold on the Wedding Guest depends on his presence, his ability to project even before he can express it, the overwhelming quality of what he has lived

through” (262). This emotional appeal gives the Mariner authenticity and persuades the Guest to listen.

Similarly, the experimental fantasy author claims authority through the tale he relates, and the reader decides to submit to the tale based on her perception of the story’s authenticity – or, for Coleridge, her perception of the author’s ability to give the story “psychological truth and probability” (Patterson 125). An author may persuade a skeptical adult reader into this position by introducing a supernatural tale with elements of realism, especially psychological realism, as Coleridge noted in his discussion of Shakespeare. These elements of realism demonstrate an underlying unity to the tale, even though fantastic elements may occur (Patterson 125). Thus the Mariner’s tale remains rooted in realism until the moment of his transgression. Once he kills the albatross, the story moves into the realm of the supernatural as the Mariner suffers repercussions for his actions.

In addition to psychological truth and probability, an author’s use of the fantastic encourages the adult reader’s nostalgia for childlike imagination, which in turn begins to overcome rational cynicism and allows the reader to willingly suspend his disbelief. The fantastic text evokes the discourse of lost childhood through its utter difference from adult rationalism. As Sandner explains, we may compare reading fantasy to an encounter with the sublime, for both require “a grasping beyond the actual, beyond what is known...a reach exceeding grasp which promises the transcendent beyond” (51). As the reader longs for the world of the imagination and spirit, he forgets his rational self; fantasy overwhelms the senses, which, for Sandner and for Coleridge, makes possible the

perception of unity (Sandner 54-55). The self-transcendence the reader experiences as he apprehends unity affects him on a spiritual level, beyond the text that enabled this sublime encounter. Sandner concludes:

The fantastic sublime must move the reader to glimpse beyond the printed page, because the sublime does not lie in the text at all, but reveals, beyond it, Joy, with a capital J. The fantastic sublime, like the natural sublime, requires a visionary to arouse wonder and desire, fear of loss of identity and a sudden rising above that is “poignant as grief.” Only a certain kind of reader, bringing longing and a shaping spirit of imagination, will find the sublime in the fantastic text at all. (56-57)

While Sandner’s model explains philosophically how a fantastic text may work on readers, he does not show what the author actually does to enable self-forgetting or the perception of unity, beyond producing nostalgia. His model therefore provides only a beginning structure for those interested in an analysis of reading experimental literary fantasies. In addition to his claim that “only a certain kind of reader” can properly experience the fantastic text, I believe that only certain authors could enable the proper literary belief necessary to the fantastic reading experience. In order for the reader to read with belief, she must first encounter a text that persuades her that when she relinquishes her rational stance, she will not be left wandering in a world of nonsense. Rhetorical cues left by the author allow the reader to let go of her rational position, to read with faith, and to experience the sublime transformation Sandner describes.

In Coleridge’s poem the Ancient Mariner gives these assurances to the Wedding Guest in order to solidify his imaginative participation in the tale. For after the Mariner confesses to shooting the albatross, the tale quickly becomes implausible for a listener who does not willingly suspend disbelief. The crew’s becalming and subsequent suffering

in the heat, relatively realistic events, are followed by the appearance of Death and Life-in-Death, completely fantastic characters. As he explains these events, the Mariner calls for the Guest's attention as he relates his crew's untimely death. At this point, the Guest not only believes the realistic elements of the Mariner's tale, but he also accepts the supernatural events that follow. Importantly, the Guest responds with fear, not for the crew, but that the Mariner is actually a ghost. The Mariner reassures his listener "this body dropt not down" (l. 223) and continues to speak. But the Guest's exclamation at this point allows Coleridge to model a listener that has thoroughly suspended disbelief. As such, the Guest's outcry also allows Coleridge to interject reassurance into his own tale and to guide his own readers in understanding that the supernatural elements of the story do have limits – the Mariner is not a spirit or demon.

For the rest of the poem the Guest models truly suspended disbelief, even in all the fantastic elements of the Mariner's tale. In fact, when he speaks again, he reassures the Mariner of his investment in the fantastic story. The Mariner explains the reanimation of his dead crew and cries, "Listen, O listen, thou Wedding-guest!" and the Guest replies, "Marinere! thou hast thy will:/ For that, which comes out of thine eye, doth make/ My body and soul to be still" (l. 362-365). In doing so, he reconfirms the Mariner's authority (again, the watchful eye functions as a symbol of the story's power). This prompts the Mariner to assure him that the fantastic tale will produce moral value at its conclusion: "Sadder and wiser thou wedding-guest! / Thou'lt rise to morrow morn," he predicts (l. 368-369). At this point the Mariner no longer relies on emotional authority or realism, but promises that somehow the Guest will be forever changed by the tale if he

continues to listen with belief. This promise allows the Guest to continue suspending disbelief, for he understands that in doing so he may receive insight from the Mariner. Thus he does not question all the supernatural events of the story but continues to listen with faith that the resolution will provide clarity, knowledge, and affect his understanding.

This poem, then, attempts to use impossible events to affect material reality by transforming the listener's perspective after the tale concludes. The Mariner explains the moral purpose of his story by claiming, "I know the man that must hear me; / To him my tale I teach" (l. 622-623). His use of the word "teach" implies that the fantastic tale should produce knowledge of some sort. The Mariner does conclude his tale with a seeming moral when he cries,

He prayeth well who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best who loveth best,
All things both great and small:
For the dear God, who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (l. 645-650)

But this moral cannot contain all the fantastic elements of the tale. The Wedding Guest's response, to go "like one that hath been stunn'd / And is of sense forlorn" (l. 655-656) provides even less closure for the poem's readers, as we, like the Guest, try to interpret the tale we hear. Since the Wedding Guest does not speak again, we never discover what the true meaning of the Mariner's tale is, for the Guest's reaction shows only that he has been affected by the fantastic. The poem demonstrates that the imaginative truth of the

fantastic does not mean the story will conclude allegorically in order to provide objective meaning. Rather, the Mariner's tale teaches the Guest by waking his moral consciousness to the reality of the fantastic, causing his reaction to the material world to change from one of jubilation (at the poem's beginning) to one of sober reflection.

The Guest hears the fantastic tale to its conclusion because he believes that the fantastic elements of the tale will contain value for his material world. Significantly, this role of listening with belief mirrors the way in which adults imagine a child receives knowledge, and it further emphasizes the necessity of the adult reader's acceptance of the childlike position when listening to a fantastic tale. By allowing the author to assume authority, by trusting in the process of storytelling, the reader proceeds through the story with belief that the supernatural or fantastic elements introduced will eventually be explained and produce knowledge that benefits him beyond the story. The authority the Mariner possesses, then, depends on an adult reader who *willingly* accepts this role. Just as Coleridge understood, the fantastic experience exists in the medium between the author's ability to persuade and the audience's willingness not to disbelieve. The reader willingly submits for the moment, as Coleridge rightly says, suspending disbelief until the tale concludes. Then, affected by the fantastic, he must incorporate this new experience into his understanding of the everyday.

The Willing Suspension of Disbelief: A Viable Theory?

This model of reading fantasy functions only if readers would actually suspend disbelief in the fantastic long enough to be affected by it, or if they could accept the lack of closure the fantastic experience may exhibit. I want to discuss the willing suspension

of disbelief as it applies specifically to fantastic literature, for it seems to contain several paradoxes that must be addressed if we are to take it seriously as a theory of reading. Coleridge explains that the suspension of disbelief can occur when a work of art demonstrates sufficient unity and harmony; the author must create a work in which all parts complement one another and absorb the audience without causing distraction (*Biographia Literaria* II. 15-16).²⁶ He writes, “a specific *dramatic* probability may be raised by a true poet, if the whole of his work be in harmony; a *dramatic* probability, sufficient for dramatic pleasure, even when the component characters and incidents border on impossibility” (II.218, italics his). The audience’s literary belief in the probability of the artistic work depends on the artist’s ability to bring all the various parts of his work into harmony with one another; all parts must be in harmony so that the unity reflected reveals imaginative truth. As the artist does so, Coleridge argues, he

does not require us to be awake and believe; he solicits us only to yield ourselves to a dream; and this too with our eyes open, and with our judgment *perdue* behind the curtain, ready to awaken us at the first motion of our will: and meantime, only, not to *disbelieve*. (II.218)²⁷

The audience must yield to fantasy by withholding judgment; to “be awake and believe” implies a scrutiny that does not submit to the author’s storytelling authority. Instead, the audience relinquishes judgment of what may, at first, seem impossible. In doing so, they give the artist room to create a work that can give them deep pleasure.

Coleridge understood that the reader could not be completely deluded by the text, nor would she remain completely judgmental. He writes:

...in sleep we pass at once by sudden collapse into this suspension of the will and the comparative power; whereas in an interesting play, read or represented, we are brought up to this point, as far as it is requisite or desirable, gradually, by the art of the poet and actors; and with the consent and positive abidance of our will. We choose to be deceived. (*Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. I, 126-132)

Here we encounter the first paradox of the suspension of disbelief as a viable reading theory. How can the author gradually lead the reader at the same time that the reader chooses to be led? I believe that the reader's literary belief in the text, within the parameters of conventional generic expectations, rests on her ability to revert to a childlike perspective. This perspective, itself a pre-existing cultural fantasy that each reader brings to the fictional experience, allows the reader to participate in the fantastic tale, to suspend judgment, and to be persuaded by the imaginative truth of the experiences the author will present.

Though the author may overcome judgment about the fantastic tale, there yet remains some distance between enjoying fantasy for the pleasure it brings and experiencing a transformation akin to the one had by Coleridge's *Wedding Guest*. We still wonder if an audience truly can suspend disbelief? Here lies a second paradox: if we, as readers or as audience members at a performance or film, completely believe in what we read and/or view, would we not be so affected by the depictions that they would cause us to act in the world? We do not, as H.H. Price points out in *Belief*, "rush out of the theatre and ring up the police" when something disastrous happens during the course of a play (Qtd. in Hanfling 241). We certainly have emotions about fictional characters and

events, yet we still implicitly understand that they are not real, so disbelief remains despite our emotional involvement.²⁸

The resolution of this paradox has yet to be conclusively determined. Eva Schaper suggests that the paradox does not matter, since we hold beliefs about the nature of the text or the performance that supersede those we hold about the actions in them (38). She argues that our beliefs about fiction (that we know it is false) are essential to our emotional response to a text or performance. By understanding the nature of fiction, we can suspend judgment about what we read or see and allow our emotions to become involved in the characters' stories (Schaper 39). Though she does not discuss the implications, Schaper's argument assumes that an author and her audience both participate in the process of creating literary belief, for the author must work on the audience's expectations (Schaper's "first-order beliefs") within established generic parameters so that the audience members recognize the structure and feel confident in relinquishing their judgment to the unfolding events. Authors must, in fact, use certain rhetorical strategies to persuade their audiences into this willing suspension.

Coleridge did elucidate his philosophy, discussing it most often in terms of dramatic illusion related to theatrical performances. Charles I. Patterson, writing about Coleridge's reaction to novels, notes that his theory of dramatic illusion depended on a balance of "psychological truth and probability" (125). Coleridge understood that the reader/viewer could not be completely deluded by the text, nor would he/she remain completely judgmental; instead, as Patterson explains, Coleridge thought of dramatic illusion as a dream, one in the course of which we choose to be deceived through a return

to our imaginative childlike perspective (126). While the author must bring the text into unity, giving psychological probability and writing within generic parameters, the audience must be willing to take on the position of the child and to listen with faith. As we saw within “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the Mariner’s emotional authenticity works as a balance to the Guest’s submission to the tale. Like the Guest, a reader must reach this childlike perspective through the use of her will, even when confronting events or characters that border on impossibility. Coleridge’s philosophy does not merely ask the audience to suspend disbelief, but to do so *willingly*, or with effort.²⁹

Sarah E. Worth, however, argues that “we do not have the ability to will, or to decide consciously, what we do and do not believe” (334). She explains that we cannot control our reactions to fiction, because we do not “willingly or consciously approach fictions thinking it is now time to willingly disbelieve what we are about to experience” (334). Instead, she agrees with Noel Carroll’s argument for “thought theory,” in which we do not have to believe (outside the fictional experience) that the fiction is true. Instead, we entertain it as a thought, which has no real basis in material reality. Therefore, we can still be moved by it, but we do not actually believe it (Worth 334-335).

Interestingly, Worth connects her argument to Aristotle’s, and she explains that according to him, “one does not need belief in order to have emotive responses to the mimetic accounts conveyed through poetry. Belief *is* required of rhetoric in order to perform its task” (335, italics hers). Worth continues: “The poetic process of *poesis-mimesis-catharsis* can in no way be confused with the rhetorical process of *rhetoric-*

proof-persuasion. Beliefs need not be altered with the first, but such alteration is a requirement of the latter” (335).

Aristotle’s distinction rests on the difference between impressions (*phantasia*) and beliefs (*doxa*). We may experience emotions based on our impressions, but we do not change our beliefs unless we are rationally persuaded through rhetoric (Worth 337). Worth’s analysis focuses mainly on the problem of emotional response to fictional situations, and she does not address the problem of didactic literature; here, whatever the genre, the author does in fact intend to change the reader/viewer’s actual beliefs about material reality beyond the text. The catharsis of literature then fuses with a rhetorical project as the author uses the reader’s *phantasia* to transform her *doxa*. While, as Worth puts it, “belief is not a precondition to perceiving and responding to something emotively” (337) neither does the fictional experience exclude ones in which the author aims not merely for catharsis, but, instead, for conversion.

Aristotle “praises imitations [fictions] as vehicles of learning, and notes that as such they are pleasurable. It is not entirely clear, however,” Worth argues, “how they really do affect the soul” (336). Yet literature often changes the reader’s beliefs. Through the *phantasia*, the reader may submit to a childlike perspective, suspend disbelief, receive imaginative truth, and emerge from the fictional experience transformed by the power of story. In fact, I find this model of readership in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”³⁰ This poem depicts the problems of reading fantasy and suggests that a subjective experience of the fantastic can still be morally productive, even if the fantastic tale resists an objective meaning. Importantly, the problem of reading Coleridge’s poem, with its

multiple interpretations and resistance to closure, exactly mirrors the problem of reading later experimental Victorian literary fantasy novels.

The Problem of Reading: “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and its Criticism

Coleridge’s comments on the composition of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” recorded in *Biographia Literaria*, remind us that he and Wordsworth began *Lyrical Ballads* as a project that would tackle two themes:

In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them to be real....For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life. (II.6)

Coleridge focuses his efforts on the supernatural as dramatic truth, and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” functions as an experiment in which the supernatural tale draws attention to the “truth of such emotions”; this truth, as noted in Coleridge’s comments above, can be transformative to readers’ beliefs after they experience the tale.

I believe the poem reflects the reader’s encounter with the fantastic and prefigures the problems of interpretation and belief that arise in later Victorian literary fantasy novels. The relationship between the Ancient Mariner and the Wedding Guest enacts the relationship of the author and reader; the author depicts an unreal story, and the reader must willingly suspend disbelief, attempt to interpret the story, and may be affected by this experience – significantly, however, she may be affected by the experience of desiring meaning and not by actually uncovering it.

The idea that the relationship between the Mariner and the Guest may be like that of an author and a reader has been noted before (see below), though not in terms of the fantastic or its connection to suspending belief and reading with childlike wonder. Regardless of differences in how the poem may or may not model readership, many critics agree that the poem's meaning eludes actual readers, and therefore the poem engages problems of hermeneutics. This theory seems sound and helps explain the wide variety of critical interpretations of the poem. As David Perkins explains:

Depending on the interpreter, ["The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"] expresses Coleridge's personal life or psychoanalytic case, his poetic theories, religious beliefs, pantheist metaphysics, biblical hermeneutics, belatedness in literary history, or feelings about Western maritime expansion, about slavery, or about politics generally. The albatross is nature, Coleridge himself, Sarah Coleridge, a human being, Christ, the Divine immanent in nature, or fresh meat as an antiscorbutic. The world of the poem is providential, existential, morally incoherent, or dreamily irrelevant. (425)³¹

The multiple interpretations demonstrate the poem's complexity and resistance to a singular meaning. My argument falls in line with those critics who view the poem as modeling interpretive method, yet I differ from them significantly in that I view the poem as specifically about the affective nature of the *fantastic* tale, and not just about reading any type of text.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," however, actually contains two readers. The Mariner tells his fantastic story to the Wedding Guest, but the gloss of the poem also tells its own story, acting as a commentary on the narrative action of the poem. While I am primarily concerned with the 1798 version of the poem, a full understanding of the

poem's relationship to interpretation and literary belief must account for the later addition of the gloss, which introduces another type of reading into the text.

As Jerome McGann explains, "From its first appearance in *Lyrical Ballads*, the 'Rime' was an arresting, if problematic work. Though well known to readers during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, no early consensus about the meaning or value of the poem was reached."³² McGann's article, called "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner," tries to eliminate the poem's multiple interpretations by reading the poem's structure from "Coleridge's viewpoint," in which "the 'Rime' is a poem which illustrates a special theory of the historical interpretation of texts" (50). McGann's complex argument lays the groundwork for later critics who read the poem as indicative of hermeneutic theory. McGann equates the suspension of disbelief with an acceptance of ideology suggesting that "what Coleridge re-presents in the 'Rime' is a historically and culturally limited set of ideas" (57). One should resist a willing suspension of disbelief, then, for to participate in the text "is necessarily to reify the Romantic concept of the creative imagination" (McGann 65). The best type of reader, McGann suggests, will not be like the Wedding Guest, but will instead reject the controlling influence of the Ancient Mariner (and Coleridge's) historically-situated ideology.

Yet, as John T. Netland explains, submission to storytelling does not mean complicity with an author's agenda:

We are not told that the Wedding-Guest has validated the Mariner's story, much less that he has converted in any sense [...]. We are merely shown that he has been so deeply affected that he cannot resume his normal activities. [...] The poem also invites us as belated reader to enter the hermeneutic circle, to follow

the example of the Wedding-Guest and hence discover for ourselves the dramatic power of the tale. (54-55)

He explains the poem's connections to Coleridge's interest in Biblical hermeneutics, implying that the Wedding Guest's affective response indicates a model of reading of which Coleridge himself would approve (44). Netland bases this argument on the difference between the Wedding Guest as reader and the reader implied by the presence of the gloss.

The introduction of the gloss into the text of the poem causes tension for readers and becomes problematic for an argument that the poem models any one type of interpretive method. Some critics argue that we cannot even participate in the text due to the tension the gloss introduces into the reading process. Davies, for example, claims that the poem can produce meaning only when the reader identifies with a particular role in the poem (261).³³ She claims that "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" uses three different "subjectivities," with which the reader could identify: 1) the Poet/Balladeer; 2) The author of the Gloss and 3) the Ancient Mariner. Yet, the different perspectives result in a conflict for readers, who, Davies claims, cannot identify with anyone. She concludes, "Denied a place where meaning coheres and appears obvious, the reader is forced to know herself and identify herself as a critic, or interpreter of the text" (261). The gloss, then, reflects the reader's role as critic, mimicking the reader's own struggle to interpret the action of the poem (262).³⁴

Interestingly, Davies notes that the main action of the tale "demands that the reader 'suspend disbelief,' be mesmerized and enthralled, both sharing the urgency of the

mariner's tale and being affected, like the Wedding Guest, by the burden of its message" (265). In this way, the Wedding Guest does act as a model for readers. Yet, she argues, the gloss prevents complete identification with this narrative and undermines the reader's ability to model herself on the Wedding Guest's reaction. Instead, the gloss "forces the reader to adopt a position in which she must participate in distanced and knowing interpretation of the poem" (265). For Davies, the poem's meaning matters less than that the poem causes readers to become critics, who know themselves through the new discourse they produce as they interpret the poem (265-266).³⁵

Davies's argument, while sound, does not include the role of the fantastic in its interpretation of the poem's affective nature. I think the point of the poem is not to know the meaning of the Mariner's tale, but to watch the reaction of the Wedding Guest. He is, as Davies shows, a model for readers. He has been affected by the Mariner's tale; on this point most critics can agree.³⁶ But the Mariner's tale contains fantastic, supernatural elements. Importantly, these elements are the primary reason why rational meaning escapes readers, because they expect an objective interpretation of the tale, even though it contains events that defy a rational perspective. Rather than provoke a reader into critical interpretation, which relies on a return to the text of the poem, I believe the Wedding Guest models a reader-reaction that shows the affective nature of the fantastic. He goes away "sadder and wiser," because his material reality has been transformed by the Mariner's tale. Again, it does not matter what the tale *means*, so much as what it *does*. The poem's elusive meaning, then, is precisely the point. The multiplicity of subjective experiences the poem produces result from an encounter with the fantastic that affects

readers, causing them – not only to become critics of texts, as Davies claims – but to desire meaning from material reality (for critics, this may include a return to the poem’s text, but for general readers, meaning may cohere in other ways). Through literary belief the fantastic tale affects the reader’s material world, manifesting as a desire for meaning or as interpretive inquiry about the presence of the supernatural.

The *Wedding Guest*, then, shows readers that an encounter with the fantastic relies on suspending disbelief and receiving a tale with wonder. But what of the gloss? Why would Coleridge revise the poem to provide a more stable, logical interpretation of the poem, if he wanted readers to experience the fantastic in the same way the *Wedding Guest* does? As Netland explains, the gloss tries to control the Mariner’s supernatural narrative because it functions as another example of a reader in the poem; in this case, the gloss portrays the “rational reader,” one who “in the written record of his reading, demonstrates a sympathetic, scholarly interest as he seeks to explain and interpret the tale, but who never shares the *Wedding-Guest*’s affective response” (39).³⁷ As Netland persuasively argues, the gloss-writer epitomizes the type of reader that “is so intent upon knowing what transpired that he fails to experience the pathos of the tale in the way that the *Wedding-Guest* does [...because he] simply ignores that which lies beyond his imagination” (40).³⁸ Netland reminds us that

Coleridge urges the reader to approach a text with a receptive attitude, capable of suspending both a disbelief in mystery and an unthinking acquiescence to the incomprehensibility of mystery (*Lay Sermons* 44-47); and [...] Coleridge believes the hermeneutic encounter must not be reduced merely to classification, categorization, dissection, and other such analytical activities of the Understanding (*Lay Sermons* 77-78). Reading is always morally purposive. One is to seek insight in order to be moved, affected, changed. (47)

As Netland shows, the gloss-writer cannot suspend disbelief, and he therefore cannot experience or relate to the Wedding Guest's response. The gloss, then, ironically indicates a model for a *bad* reader, one who remains in a logical, disbelieving perspective as he reads (Netland 47). The Wedding Guest, by contrast, reacts in a way that is "far more consistent with Coleridgean hermeneutical imperatives than is the editor's cool detachment" (Netland 53).³⁹

I agree with Netland's interpretation of the gloss's function, though I view the tension between the good reading of the Wedding Guest and the gloss-writer's bad reading as dependent on the presence of the fantastic, the same elements that would later manifest more specifically in Victorian literary fantasies. As I will argue, suspending disbelief in realistic fiction does not require the same type of engagement with a text as the fantastic does. The gloss-writer does seek to contain the supernatural elements of the tale, to render them uncanny, rather than marvelous, and to eliminate their affective nature. And the Wedding Guest's affective response does indicate a "model of hermeneutical openness," which Netland claims (55). Yet the model of the affected reader of fantasy that the Wedding Guest presents marks a new type of reader, one who submits to a tale with childlike wonder. The role of the childlike reading, in particular, differs from the adult rationalist perspective the gloss contains.

To read with childlike wonder would become a theme in later Victorian fantasy novels, and I believe "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" models the necessity of wonder and the suspension of disbelief needed in order for fantasy literature to accomplish its

affective goal of “waking a meaning” in readers. Coleridge’s interest in the transformative potential of the fantastic influences his depiction of the Wedding Guest’s response, and this model addresses the problems of later literary fantasy novels that ask readers to suspend disbelief, but still expect them to find some sort of meaning after the tale concludes. But the lack of definite closure often found in fantastic literature further contributes to the author’s challenges when constructing an experimental text.

Disbelief and the *Fantastique*: Aesthetics and the Problem of Subjective Meaning

While any genre may ask the reader to suspend disbelief in fictional events, the fantasy genre tests the reader by claiming truth through the presentation of what may border on nonsense. The reader of realism need not read with belief in quite the same way, since realism ostensibly depicts a stable, recognizable world. The imaginative truth Coleridge proposes for the fantastic differs from Wordsworth’s “real life” poetry in that it asks readers to believe in events that would not occur normally. This belief in the fantastic requires more faith in the poet’s authority, because it asks readers to leave behind adult trappings of rationality and realism. Acceptance of the unfamiliar may be uncomfortable, even frustrating, for the reader who cannot suspend rational judgment and believe that fantastic and supernatural events can still produce knowledge relevant to material experience.⁴⁰

Tension arises when reading the fantastic because the potentially subjective experience allows room for multiple truths or even for the reader to miss the author’s meaning altogether. Here there cannot be a definite moral purpose, because the very

nature of the fantastic experience relies on the impossible. Coleridge seemed to understand this tension, for though he argues that the “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”’s moral was too explicit, the poem’s meaning still remains under debate.⁴¹ The Guest seems dismayed, rather than inspired, by the obliquely Christian lesson, yet he is, in fact, transformed by the tale and goes away “sadder and wiser.” This ambiguous ending implicitly suggests the perilous potential of the fantastic tale: in aiming for objective truth the author may lose his reader in the realm of fantasy.

K.M. Wheeler also acknowledges the affective nature of the Mariner’s tale, yet she categorizes the Wedding Guest’s reaction in terms of the aesthetic, rather than the fantastic. She claims that the Wedding Guest framework of the poem acts “as a ‘recipe’ for reading and aesthetic response” because the structure mirrors actual readers’ reading of the poem (45). Wheeler argues that the poem represents a theory of art, one in which “art does not correspond to reality: it creates a new reality, or offers a rival account of reality to the account given by memory and understanding” (46). She continues, “The reader, analogically, is instructed to see the narrative not as an end in itself [...]. The narrative is rather a threshold, not an end, where the reader must remain poised” (46). Since the Wedding Guest is the “ideal reader” of the Mariner’s tale, then “his position on the threshold would also be a description of the appropriate reading and response to art” (46). Interestingly, she describes the reader’s position as one “poised or balanced on the boundary of two worlds,” and maintaining this aesthetic reaction relies on the difference between the reader’s use of imagination, rather than her understanding (46).⁴² The

imagination becomes aroused by the poem's imagery, leaving the reader (like the Wedding Guest) in a state of silence (Wheeler 55).⁴³

Wheeler provides a persuasive description of an aesthetic reading model. Yet, though she distinguishes between the type of reader needed to respond to art (i.e. the Mariner's tale), she does not address the way this response differs depending on the content the art portrays. As we will see below, her definition of aesthetic response echoes fantastic theory, in which the reader's position on the threshold of two worlds results from his encounter with the *fantastique*. A critical reading of the poem in light of theories about fantasy exposes the way this aesthetic response to the Mariner's tale relies more on the presence of the fantastic and the evocation of the child's perspective of wonder and belief than it does a generalized reaction to any work of art. The presence of the supernatural and the disruption of the familiar are preconditions for an encounter with the *fantastique*, and the threshold experience Wheeler describes occurs primarily with non-realistic texts. This distinction between mere aesthetic response and the presence of the *fantastique* will be made clear below, where I will argue that the author uses the "threshold" moment to provoke interpretive inquiry about the presence of the fantastic in the material.

The Wedding Guest's reaction, while inconclusive in revealing the moral of the Mariner's tale to actual readers, provides an exact model of what Tzevtan Todorov would, years later, claim as the essence of the *fantastique*. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the *fantastique* manifests as reader hesitation as she tries to discover the source of fantastic occurrences within a narrative. She hesitates between two choices: the uncanny,

which resolves the fantastic into a natural event (as in Gothic novels); and the marvelous, which resolves the fantastic into a completely supernatural event (as in fairy tales). The Guest's unresolved confusion, and implicitly the reader's reaction to the poem's ambiguity, leaves the Mariner's tale squarely in the *fantastique*, where a natural or supernatural explanation would have resolved this tension by pushing the tale out of the *fantastique* and into the uncanny or the marvelous, respectively.⁴⁴ Instead, the poem leaves the Wedding Guest and the poem's readers in an unresolved position. It escapes the closure typically found in narrative structures, whose teleological constructions predetermine a drive to the conclusion. Unlike Wheeler's aesthetic explanation, fantasy theory demonstrates that this lack of resolution results from the reader's need to decipher the origin of the supernatural events of the text (a desire demonstrated by Coleridge's addition of the gloss). If the source of the fantastic remains unresolved, Todorov suggests, the reader remains in the *fantastique*, the condition Wheeler ascribes to the aesthetic threshold.

Importantly, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" demonstrates the disruptive potential of fantastic discourse that would later emerge within longer experimental fantasy narratives. Yet, even Todorov's theories can be supplemented by connecting his fantasy theory to reader-response criticism, which allows us to better understand the model of reading presented in Coleridge's poem. Christine Brooke-Rose complicates Todorov's theory of the *fantastique* by connecting its open-ended nature to the work of Roland Barthes, specifically to his hermeneutic code (38-41).⁴⁵ She claims textual ambiguity occurs for readers when an author under-determines the hermeneutic code,

which results in more mystery for the reader (63-65).⁴⁶ If the author reveals too much, the reader becomes bored; if he reveals too little, the reader is confused (Brooke-Rose 116). The pure *fantastique*, she suggests, results from an under-determination of the hermeneutic code that requires the reader to become hypercritical as she searches for “clues” left by the author in order to interpret the text’s meaning.

Yet authors of experimental fantasies like Coleridge’s seem more concerned with the reader’s experience of the text, rather than with leading the reader to a single textual meaning. I believe an hermeneutic under-determining in the text could also occur in order to create an aesthetic effect intended to affect the reader’s material reality. In this case, the fantasy author who uses the *fantastique* does *not* want the reader to become hypercritical.⁴⁷ Rather than creating a hypercritical reader, who searches for meaning during the course of reading, I believe the fantastic text asks for a reader who will suspend this hypercritical impulse in order to experience the fantastic tale fully. The experience of encountering the *fantastique* will provoke the reader to interpretation of the fantastic *experience*, rather than of the fantastic *text*.

As we saw above, the Wedding Guest does not respond to the fantastic tale by asking the Ancient Mariner for clarification about his meaning. Rather, he goes away “sadder and wiser” to consider his experiences. The difference, then, is that the aesthetic moment produces a fantastic encounter that provokes readers into reflection about their experiences of external reality, regardless of what meaning they garner from the fantastic text. This seemingly didactic motive vastly differs from any type of affective literature that had been attempted through traditional allegory, for it does not rely on conveying

one meaning through the text, but instead allows for subjective interpretations that carry weight on an individual (rather than an objective) level. Coleridge's poem anticipates later experimental Victorian fantasists that would use this theory as a way to affect their readers' moral consciousness through the process of encountering the fantastic in a non-allegorical text.

Throughout the development of the literary fantasy novel, authors had to contend with the competing tensions produced by the pure *fantastique*; if an author wished to affect readers with the imaginative power of fantasy, she had to consider how to disorient the reader's typical reading expectations (which generally relied on mimesis or allegorical fantasy) while also providing a way for the reader to experience an imaginative perception of truth. If the reader chose to resolve the *fantastique* by refusing to believe in the supernatural events, then the work becomes merely the uncanny, which disrupts for the moment but remains in the material. Yet if the reader resolved the *fantastique* by believing completely in the supernatural events, assigning them to the context of the story, then the work becomes merely marvelous, a text primarily of entertainment with little value beyond the moment of reading. By modeling readership within texts, authors like Coleridge were able to demonstrate a reader affected by the truth of fantasy, and often, as in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," they chose never to resolve the *fantastique* as disruptive discourse. This lack of resolution enabled the reader to move from reading the text into an act of interpretation rooted in aesthetic experience, one that might penetrate everyday reality with imaginative perception.

Conclusion

I will argue throughout this project that the movement from interpretation to reader-reaction, often unexamined in fantasy criticism, relies on Romantic philosophies like the return to the child's perspective as a reader. In fact, Victorian fantasy authors seemed to understand implicitly the need for readers to take on the willing suspension of disbelief through the child's perspective, as they often address their texts (ostensibly or otherwise) to children. Thus children's literature and the Victorian literary fantasy are often conflated, because they both rely on the reader's willing submission to the author's authority in order to participate in a fantastic world.

My next chapter, quite fittingly, discusses the way that Coleridge literally passed on his philosophy of fantasy's transformative potential directly to his own child, Sara. After his death Sara meticulously gathered her father's papers and served as editor for various volumes of his work, most notably for *Biographia Literaria* (Mudge 3). As Bradford Keyes Mudge explains, Coleridge became the most influential intellectual presence in Sara's life, as she edited his work, argued for his reputation, and helped to define his role as a philosophical Romantic writer (24). Significantly, in her essay on Wordsworth's "Lines Left on a Yew-tree Seat," she argues that a reader will discover the meaning of a work by "resigning himself completely to the will of his author" (Qtd. in Mudge 78). But where Coleridge's exploration of the transcendent potential of fantasy remained in his poetry, Sara provides a link between these poetic philosophies and the development of the experimental literary fantasy novel that has garnered so little attention in criticism of the Victorian Golden Age of fantasy. Her novel, *Phantasmion: Prince of*

Palmland, deals even more specifically with the problem of presenting fantasy without explicit allegory, and my next chapter will examine this problem and the implications for the *fantastique*, as well as for later Victorian literary fantasies, in greater detail.

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CHAPTER IV

A TISSUE OF UNREALITIES

In 1874, the publishers at H.S. King and Company reissued Sara Coleridge's literary fantasy novel *Phantasmion: Prince of Palmland*, originally published in 1837. The novel had initially received little notice, and *The London Society* quickly pointed out that it "was not a success on first publication" ("New Books Received" 559). Classing it with other "literary failures" that try for broader audiences, the editors predicted the public would not appreciate it any more in 1874 than it did in 1837.⁴⁸ They were right.

Of the positive reviews *Phantasmion* received in 1837, that of the *Gentleman's Magazine* exemplifies the kinder reactions to the novel. The editors called it "a charming tale of fairy fiction," full of "simplicity" and "sweetness" ("Phantasmion" 276).⁴⁹ They praise the story's construction, especially its truthfulness, but instead of giving examples from the novel's prose, they extract a poem for readers to appreciate. Readers best remembered Coleridge as her father's editor and as a children's poet. Her *Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children* (1834) was quite popular and went to five editions. Yet when critics later mention Coleridge's work, they often remark on her editorial achievement, occasionally mention her poems, and contrast these endeavors with the failure of her only novel.⁵⁰ In a review of an edition of her father's poems, for example, the *Athenaeum* praises her editorial skills but regrets her own lack of success as a writer:

Possibly the great amount of antique and classical learning which she had stored up, and the profound metaphysical training to which she had been subjected, may have somewhat overlaid and clouded the rich gifts of imagination with which also she had been endowed by Nature. Her faëry tale 'Phantasmion,' though full of the most beautiful images and suggestions, wants a design appreciable by even the readers of what is remote, dreamy, and difficult. ("The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge" 841)

This critical consensus prevailed, and when the *Edinburgh Review* assessed *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge* in 1874, they agree with the poor reaction the public had to *Phantasmion*, claiming "the story has no backbone: no definite plan or purpose" ("Art II: Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge" 54).

Perhaps *Phantasmion* may still be perceived as an experimental failure, yet an examination of Coleridge's goals as a fantasy writer enables us to chart the development of later, more successful, literary fantasies. The mixed critical reviews the novel received reflect the reading preferences for nineteenth-century fantasy literature at the time of the novel's publication. These expectations structured readers' experience of the novel and influenced the novel's reception. The lack of a direct moral or allegory, in particular, contributed to readers' sense of meaninglessness in the text. Herbert Wilson of *The Examiner* complained, "It has barely a plot, barely a distinct character, barely an exciting episode....[It is] a fairy tale without allegory, without humor, with meagre [sic] fancy and imagery, and still more meagre wonders and excitement" (Qtd. in Low 139).⁵¹ Wilson's comments reveal the average reader's expectations for a fairy tale and demonstrate how Coleridge's novel resists these generic categorizations.

Readers did not understand that Coleridge consciously avoided the typical didactic use of fantasy in order to generate a novel that would affect their moral consciousness through belief in the fantastic. Her experiment with fantasy that lacks allegory contributes to the development of the Victorian literary fantasy novel and changes the way fantasy was used to communicate moral meaning. Dennis Butts explains that Romantic poetry “emphasized the value of the imaginative exploration of the unreal and fantastic [...]. In doing so, it pointed the way to the works of Sara Coleridge [...].” (101). Indeed, like her father Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Sara valued the power of the imagination to reveal truth and agreed that fantasy and fairy tales could develop a reader’s sense of morality through pleasure. When writing *Phantasmion* she draws on Romantic philosophy that she absorbed from her father as she edited his work for publication. Yet, when she focuses on writing a novel that abandons the clear interpretive paradigms her contemporaries had established, she confronts the crucial tension of writing the literary fantastic. Authors of literary fantasies intentionally resist explanations or limitations that would constrain the unreal, and in doing so they disrupt readers’ expectations. But they also ask readers to believe that a literary fantasy can be morally productive, even without the text conveying one, objective meaning. A text, they felt, could have meaning for material reality without presenting clear moral guidelines and without explaining to readers how they should interpret the stories.

As Coleridge’s letters show, she consciously chose to abandon allegory, and she knew her readers might become frustrated. Her decision to omit didacticism within a fantastic text results in confusion for readers and exposes both past and contemporary

readers' expectations about the way fantasy should be written and read. *Phantasmion*, then, exemplifies the problems of interpretation and literary belief central to experimental fantasy novels. Ultimately, Coleridge's novel marks the shift in literary fantasy from teaching truth overtly through allegory or fable, as had predominantly been the case during the eighteenth century, to the Victorian emphasis on affecting the reader's moral consciousness through the aesthetic experience of the fantastic.

One cannot quickly summarize *Phantasmion*'s narrative, but a brief attempt seems necessary here since most readers will be unfamiliar with the text. The overall plot follows the adventures of Phantasmion, the novel's hero, as he tries to prevent an invasion of his land after his parents' deaths. He also tries to win the heart of the Princess Iarine through the help and hindrance of various female spirits. Several subplots involve the pairing of different women with appropriate lovers, and Coleridge uses many scenes of enchantment and disguise as Phantasmion travels through the different realms of his world. The novel concludes with what seems to be a predictably happy ending with justice served and love triumphant. Yet this overly simplistic summary masks the difficulty of the novel, for Coleridge's resistance to a direct plot or complex characterization makes the 387-page, two-volume fairy tale a struggle to understand.

By contemporary standards, *Phantasmion* would not be considered a fairy tale so much as a literary fantasy novel, but this distinction did not exist at the time of publication. *Phantasmion*'s difference from other fairy tales can be demonstrated best by comparing it to more typical, allegorical stories. Prior to Coleridge's writing, oral fairy stories had become literary fairy tales mainly due to the influence of the French

aristocracy. As Jack Zipes explains, “By the mid-seventeenth century, aristocratic women had established literary salons and were promoting a type of parlor game that incorporated the use of folk motifs and narrative conventions” (“Fairy Tales: Introduction” 176).⁵² These salons were extremely popular and lasted into the early eighteenth century. Attendees, many of them women like Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, began to collect their tales and use them within longer novels or publish them separately as editions. Charles Perrault, the author of the “Tales of Mother Goose,” frequently attended the literary salons. His tales were translated into English in 1729 and enormously influenced the structure of English fairy tales, as did the publication of *German Popular Stories* by the Brothers Grimm, translated into English by Edgar Taylor in 1823 (Zipes, “Fairy Tales: Introduction,” 176).⁵³ Authors, even Perrault, wrote early fairy tales for adults and intended to both “amuse the listeners but also to establish the conventions of a discourse on manners and *civilité*, with an implicit code that corresponded to the standards of propriety” (Zipes, “Fairy Tales: Introduction,” 177).⁵⁴ Thus an overt didactic intent remained, even when tales were told for amusement.

In Chapter Two I defined genre fantasy, including fairy tales, as a closed form, and the fantastic, including novels like Coleridge’s, as an open, disruptive form. Lucie Armitt reminds us that the difference between these two types of literature primarily lies with the reader’s response to and participation in the text:

First, where genre fantasy deals in enclosed worlds, *the literary fantastic deals in disruptive impulses*. Second, where genre fantasy implies complicity on the part of the readers, *the literary fantastic actively seeks out reader hesitancy as a means of building in competing readings of the text*. (7-8, emphasis mine)

This is not to say that fairy tales, as genre fantasy, cannot be subversive or that they only support dominant cultural ideologies.⁵⁵ As Zipes has shown, authors wrote fairy tales that supported and critiqued cultural practices.⁵⁶ Traditional fairy tales differ from Coleridge's literary fantasy in how they ask readers to uncover meaning. Typical fairy tales may raise questions for readers about particular social practices, but they do so in an obvious manner, in which they do not ask readers to investigate the story in order to determine how its events may connect to the real. When Victorian writers like Charles Dickens or John Ruskin used fairy tales to critique the industrial revolution, for example, they explicitly embedded their critiques within the stories' action, typically through allegory (Zipes, *When Dreams Came True*, 115-118). In fact, Zipes remarks that "almost all the fairy tales of the 1840s and 1850s use allegorical forms to make a statement about Christian goodness in contrast to the greed and materialism that are apparently the most dangerous vices in English society" (*When Dreams Came True* 119). Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald's fairy tales that use playfulness and textual destabilization (1850s-1860s) have often been recognized as the beginning of a more subversive fairy tale tradition, yet Coleridge's novel anticipates these works by nearly 30 years.

We can observe the difference of Coleridge's work by comparing the closed nature of a fairy tale by Perrault with *Phantasmion's* open narrative. Perrault's well-known story of "The Master Cat; or, Puss in Boots," for example, uses the supernatural to structure the adventures of a young boy who receives only a cat for his inheritance when his father dies. He fears he will starve to death, but the cat assures him that his "share of the inheritance is not as bad as [he] believes" (Perrault 186). The characters of the story

take the cat's speech and his subsequent actions on behalf of his master at face-value within the story. The young man shows no surprise, and neither do any of the other characters with whom the cat interacts.

In these terms the reader can clearly follow the narrative action and can watch it unfold with little active participation in the text. The reader finds pleasure in the formula of the story, the clearly defined parameters between the "good" young man, the craftiness of the Puss in Boots, and the way in which the two secure the young man's fortune by manipulating the other characters in the story. The reader, told in advance that the cat's actions are all successful, never wonders about the narrative outcome or experiences any frustration in determining the text's meaning, and within the story the supernatural does not disrupt the reading experience. The brief tale concludes favorably for the young man, but to be sure that readers understand the lesson of the tale, Perrault appends two morals:

Moral

Although the advantage may be great
When one inherits a grand estate
Passed on from father to son,
Young men often find their industry,
Combined with ingenuity,
Leads to greater prosperity.

Another Moral

Though the miller's son did quickly gain
The heart of a princess whose eyes he tamed,
As he charmed her in a natural way,
It's due to good manners, looks, and dress
That inspired her deepest tenderness
And always help to win the day. (189)

Both morals clarify the story's meaning for readers and dispel any doubt the fantastic elements may have introduced. The story is not about a magical cat. It is about hard work, good manners, and the importance of wealth. This type of closed form practically guarantees that every reader of the tale will extract the same meaning from it.⁵⁷

When authors translated fairy tales like these into English in 1729, they highly influenced the development of fantasy in British literature. Sarah Fielding, for example, wrote *The Governess: or, Little Female Academy* in 1749 and created “a larger frame tale of schooling to hold stories that illustrate lessons of morals and manners” (Zipes, “Fairy Tales: Introduction,” 177). At this point fairy tale authors began to address younger audiences, but many still feared that fantasy would corrupt children.⁵⁸ Zipes explains that “Fielding had read and loved fairy tales during her youth, and she included two in *The Governess*, [but she] felt that she had to apologize for and justify their inclusion” (“Sarah Fielding” 189). Characters within her frame story tell fairy tales, but they also reassure readers that “all sorts of supernatural Assistances in a Story are introduced only to amuse and divert. [...] Therefore by no means let the Notion of Giants or Magic dwell upon your Minds” (Qtd. in Zipes, “Sarah Fielding,” 190). Though Fielding did not append clear morals to her fairy tales, as Perrault did, she includes narration about the proper use of fantasy and instructs readers directly in how to decipher the text, again dispelling any doubt about the story's meaning. Additionally, “The Story of the Cruel Giant Barbarico, The Good Giant Benefico, and The Little Pretty Dwarf Mignon” still concludes with a clear lesson for readers:

Peace, Harmony and Love reigned in every Bosom; Dissension, Discord, and Hatred were banished from this friendly Dwelling; and that Happiness, which is the natural Consequence of Goodness, appeared in every chearful [sic] Countenance throughout the castle of the good Benefico. (Fielding 199)

The closure this ending provides diffuses any disruptive potential of the fantastic and constrains the story's meaning in an allegory.

Clearly, authors used fantasy within strict narrative conventions in order to avoid any pluralism the use of the supernatural may introduce. Readers could not test the truth of the fantastic because it exceeded their own experiences of reality. Authors worried that readers would take all fantasy elements as truth, simply because they were presented in a relatively realistic manner within the text. To contain the potential for misreading or falsehood, they used allegory to illustrate an objective truth that readers would easily recognize.

Even with these clear guidelines, however, later authors still worried that the use of any fantasy would confuse readers, especially children. In 1824 Mary Martha Sherwood edited and rewrote Fielding's *The Governess* and removed the fairy tales from the text (Zipes, "Sarah Fielding," 190). In fact, during the 1820s through the 1850s, "the majority of fairy-tale writers [...] emphasized lessons to be learned in keeping with the principles of the Protestant ethic. These were industriousness, honesty, cleanliness, diligence, virtuousness – and male supremacy" (Zipes, "Fairy Tales: Introduction," 179).⁵⁹ When Sara Coleridge wrote *Phantasmion*, then, her readers had very distinct expectations about what a fairy tale should be and do. The novel fails because she avoids allegory and resists conventional expectations, overturning interpretive strategies readers

would have used to decipher the text. Later Victorian fairy tale authors, like Carroll, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Oscar Wilde would subvert typical generic expectations more successfully, but Coleridge's early attempt to do so proved too unfamiliar for audiences used to clear didactic conventions.

Even before the reviews were published, Coleridge knew *Phantasmion* might not be well received. She expressed hesitation about writing the novel when she sent a copy of it to Arabella Brooke on July 29, 1837. In the accompanying letter she explains her feelings about her fairy tale publication:

In these days, too, to print a Fairy Tale is the very way to be *not read*, but shoved aside with contempt. I wish, however, I were only as sure that *my* fairy tale is worth printing, as I am that works of this class are wholesome food, by way of variety, for the childish mind. It is curious that on this point Sir Walter Scott, and Charles Lamb, my father, my Uncle Southey, and Mr. Wordsworth, were all agreed. (*Memoir and Letters* 136-137, emphasis hers)⁶⁰

In choosing to write a fairy tale that relied less on allegory and more on the power of the reader's imagination, Coleridge embraces a philosophy she learned from her Romantic predecessors. Bradford Keyes Mudge has discussed S.T. Coleridge's influence on his daughter's work, and I do not intend to trace this history, which has already been well-established by Mudge and Dennis Low.⁶¹ Instead, I want to examine how Coleridge enacts these ideas and changes the reader's relationship to the fantastic.

As Low argues, *Phantasmion* reflects the way Coleridge absorbed S.T. Coleridge's ideas as she edited and rewrote his work for publication. Low describes how Coleridge's editorship of her father's papers contributed to the particular style of writing in *Phantasmion* that produces reader frustration. Chronologically, she worked on both

during the same period, and Low believes she writes the novel as a “phantasmagoric allegory,” a genre S.T. Coleridge professed interest in, but never completed himself (137). S.T. Coleridge wrote:

The prominent characters of the phantasmagoric Allegory are its’ breadth, or amplifitude, [sic] & its’ rapid Auroraborealis-like Shifting & thorough flushing of its Cones & Pyramids – yet still within a loosely predetermined Sphere, and with a unity of direction ... The Allegoric does not exclude the Liberal, nor the one Allegory another. The solution is given in the name, phantasmagoric – Inconsistency is prevented by Motion – the Columns shift. (Qtd. in Low 137)⁶²

This definition seems too vague to be practicable, but Low’s point is well-taken. He establishes Coleridge’s self-conscious decision to incorporate her father’s philosophical and poetic interests into a new genre that privileges the power of imagination. Whether or not Sara wrote *Phantasmion* as a connection to this particular idea, the novel transmits new poetic philosophies into the fantasy genre, which, as stated above, typically used overt didacticism to give fantasy a moral function.

Coleridge’s choice to write the novel combines her interest in experimenting with the “phantasmagoric allegory,” and S.T. Coleridge’s philosophical inquiry into the relationship between the fantastic writer and her reader. Specifically, as explained in Chapter Three, this relationship involves the reader’s willing submission to the authority of the author as they meet in the experience of the fantastic text. Coleridge supports this philosophy in an analysis of William Wordsworth’s “Lines Left on a Yew Tree Seat” that she wrote in 1835. She argues that a reader will discover the meaning of a work by “resigning himself completely to the will of his author” (Qtd. in Mudge 78). Like her father, she believed the imagination “can be a vehicle of revelations more profound than

those achieved by the understanding” (Mudge 79). As I wrote in Chapter Three, the relationship between the fantasy author and reader may enact that of the adult and child during storytelling. The reader will suspend disbelief and allow herself childlike wonder in the events the text depicts, even when the text frustrates her expectations. In suspending disbelief she uncovers meaning by believing the text can affect material reality. The reader, spiritually moved by the aesthetic pleasure of the fantastic, investigates the source of that pleasure in the material world. Meaning emerges as the reader perceives the presence of imaginative, spiritual truth at work in the material, although the text itself may lack closure.

Zipes claims that traditional fairy tales, he calls them “wonder tales,” also induce wonder in readers:

In an oral wonder tale, we are to wonder about the workings of the universe where anything can happen at any time, and these happy or fortuitous events are never to be explained. Nor do the characters demand an explanation. [...] The tales seek to awaken our regard for the miraculous condition of life and to evoke in a religious sense profound feelings of awe and respect for life as a miraculous process, which can be altered and changed to compensate for the lack of power, wealth, and pleasure that most people experience. (*When Dreams Came True* 5)

He locates the listener’s wonder in the way “in which a narrator/author arranges known functions of a tale aesthetically and ideologically to induce wonder” as he transmits the tale (*When Dreams Came True* 7). The variety and creatively an author demonstrates in creating a fairy tale can, indeed, produce wonder in readers. However, I distinguish this wonder from that of the literary fantasy. As Vladimir Propp has shown (and as Zipes acknowledges), authors construct fairy tales from “thirty-one basic functions that

constitute the formation of a paradigm” (*When Dreams Came True* 3). An author may produce wonder by varying the formula readers expect, but the story’s aesthetic pleasure occurs because of the strict formula that guides these variations. The childlike wonder I identify as a needed part of suspending disbelief in the literary fantastic differs from this pleasure. We experience wonder as we read about supernatural events and as we take on a childlike perspective in believing, for the moment, in the text. However, if the tale upsets our expectations, as is often the case in literary fantasies, we must sustain this childlike wonder through our *willing* suspension of disbelief. Even when the text does not give us pleasure, we maintain belief that it can still produce meaning if we work to interpret the text beyond traditional paradigms. In this case, readers will experience wonder and pleasure as a result of interpretive inquiry, rather than as a result of novelty within a closed system.

Coleridge consciously tried to create this sense of wonder through fantasy in order to awaken her readers to imaginative truth. In a letter to her brother Derwent she writes:

If you ask me ...what advantage a young person could possibly derive from such a tissue of unrealities, I should say that every work of fancy in its degree, and according to the merit of its execution, feeds and expands the mind; whenever the poetical beauty of things is vividly displayed, truth is exhibited, and thus the imagination of the youthful reader is stimulated to find truth for itself. (Qtd. in Mudge 96)⁶³

A text reveals poetical beauty through fantasy that remains open and non-allegorical. In this type of text the author uses “incidents and agents [that] were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such

situations, supposing them to be real” (S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, II.6).

Coleridge incorporates her father’s poetic philosophy into a book-length text in order to reveal the same kind of imaginative truth he had hoped for in his own poems. She creates *Phantasmion* as a prose experiment of a poetic philosophy, and though she continues to call her novel a fairy tale, *Phantasmion* purposely works against these categories in order to actively confront them and change the reader’s relationship with the fantastic text.

The difficulty of *Phantasmion*, then, only reinforces its experimental nature. It was not, as readers assumed, a typical fairy tale, and therefore it resists generic expectations when readers approach it with certain beliefs about what a fairy tale should be. Coleridge anticipated some of the negative reaction to the novel because she was aware of the way in which it broke conventions. In a letter to her husband, she defends *Phantasmion*’s difference and distinguishes her use of fantasy from her contemporaries:

In regard to “Phantasmion’s” want of general purpose and meaning, I can only say that it does not belong to that class of fictions in which a single truth or moral is to be illustrated by a sequence of events, of which Miss Edgeworth’s and Miss Martineau’s tales are instances ...[and where] the character and descriptions are all for the sake of an allegory.... It belongs to that class of fictions...where the ostensible moral, even if there be one, is not the author’s chief end and aim, which rather consists in cultivating the imagination, and innocently gratifying the curiosity of the reader, by exhibiting the general and abstract beauty of things through the vehicle of a story.... (*Memoirs and Letters* 146-147)⁶⁴

The criticisms *Phantasmion* received (and would receive again on reissue) emerge when readers try to read with conventional interpretive strategies. When they cannot find the allegory they expect, they call the novel a failure. I argue, rather, that readers did not recognize the different way in which Coleridge wrote, because she subverted their

expectations. Readers unprepared for this type of encounter cannot interpret the text in a way that produces the closure they desire. The novel as text fails for these readers because they do not believe that the text as written can communicate truth or produce meaning. They cannot, in other words, suspend disbelief in Phantasmion's story; they do not submit to Coleridge's storytelling authority because she does not allow them the comfort of morals and an allegory.

Yet Coleridge did attempt to guide readers to textual meaning, and a closer examination of the novel reveals those strategies she put in place. The novel begins with Phantasmion's childhood. He encounters the fairy Potentilla in his garden, and she delights him by demonstrating her power over the insect world. Potentilla's visit, however, also introduces the reader to a different use of fantasy than she had encountered previously. Potentilla tells Phantasmion,

...thou needest no fairy now to work wonders for thee, being yet so young that all thou beholdest is new and marvelous in thine eyes. But the day will come when this happiness will fade away....[then] I will appear before thee, and exert all my power to renew the delights and wonders of thy childhood. (Coleridge 3)⁶⁵

This passage implies that fantasy does not exist merely to enchant children or to teach them lessons. Rather, it works once children have lost the wonders of their youth and need it in order to recover joy. This time comes quickly for Phantasmion. In the next chapter his mother mysteriously dies. He does not understand death until a tragic accident in his garden, in which a young child is killed. As he looks on the child's corpse, he shrieks and runs away – directly into his own mother's funeral procession. In just a few short pages, Phantasmion's father also mysteriously dies, leaving Phantasmion King of

Palmland. Then, scorpions suddenly sting his friend Dariel to death, and Phantasmion, perhaps rightfully so, begins “to think that all persons and things connected with himself were doomed to misfortune” (Coleridge 9). He falls into a depression, only recovering when he calls on Potentilla to save him.

Coleridge does not make her meaning explicit, but Phantasmion’s use of fantasy models a type of reader-response that gives the text meaning. Phantasmion fears his encounter with the physicality of the dead, emphasized by Coleridge’s descriptions of the corpses’ “pale swollen cheeks, covered with purple spots,” the “slack limbs and glazed eye,” and the “blue tinge” that marks “decay” (6-9). These images provide a stark reality for the young hero and reveal his own mortality. In doing so, they also initiate the desire for the lost joy of innocent childhood, a time when death was unknown. Coleridge links the desire for the supernatural to the desire to escape death. The return to innocence through fantasy allows the hero to use the supernatural as a way back to a place of comfort, an escape from the realities of aging. Phantasmion models a potential reader-response, for his encounter with death mirrors a very human struggle with impending mortality. Death as a marker of the “real,” the inescapable Fact of life, propels the reader into an encounter with fantasy through the desire to escape, even momentarily, into the world of the text.⁶⁶ Phantasmion’s first use of fantasy, for comfort and escapism, enacts the reader’s desire for the fantastic experience.

Because he initially views fantasy only as a place of comfort and escape, Phantasmion hides from his new responsibilities as King by playing with the supernatural. Potentilla gives him the gift of feet “like those of flies, which climb up the

mirrors or walk over the roof,” and he uses his new power to pass the time “gliding along the walls and over the vaulted ceilings of his palace” (Coleridge 17; 18). Here fantasy provides consolation by merely giving him entertainment. Yet, the next day, his use of the powers turns to a much more meaningful purpose. He accidentally discovers a young child that has been stolen by an eagle and rescues it. In doing so, he meets the Princess Iarine, whom he will pursue throughout the rest of the novel. But he also sees “companies of soldiers clad in mail [exercising] themselves in a mock battle” (Coleridge 23). This revelation, seemingly insignificant in the moment, later provides useful knowledge for Phantasmion when his counselor disappears. He begins to realize that there are those in his kingdom that “wished their youthful sovereign to remain ignorant and careless of all that pertained to the government of the realm” (Coleridge 25).

This episode demonstrates the simultaneous movement of the fantastic experience that Coleridge’s text uniquely displays. While fantasy ostensibly provides escape and consolation to one who uses it, it can also reveal knowledge and truth that would have been impossible to discover without its use. The novel suggests that escapism through fantasy can only be temporary. Coleridge implies that fantasy should reveal knowledge, and so we see Phantasmion make the transition from using fantasy to avoid his duties to using it to enact them.⁶⁷ Had Potentilla not given Phantasmion feet like flies, he would never have been able to scale the mountains and discover the neighboring army preparing for battle. And yet, nowhere in the novel does the reader feel the “feet like flies” to be anything more than just what they are in the context of the story. Unlike Perrault’s “Puss in Boots,” Coleridge never tells the reader that these magical gifts correspond to

“industry,” “duty,” or any other allegorical quality. Instead, the reader must decipher any moral by watching the progress of Phantasmion’s story, since Coleridge does not embed overt instruction within the narrative, appended any lessons to chapters, or create allegorical constructions to guide reader interpretation. To produce meaning from the text, then, the reader must willingly suspend disbelief in Phantasmion’s experiences and read with wonder in the fantastic events the texts depicts. Rather than searching for the text’s one “meaning,” or analyzing Phantasmion’s experiences in terms of typical reading conventions, readers must submit to Coleridge’s storytelling authority and experience the fantastic through Phantasmion’s perspective.

Traditional fairy tales often clearly define the hero’s path, and readers rarely experience doubt about the story’s outcome due to clearly defined roles between “good” and “evil” characters. Phantasmion’s journey, however, does not go smoothly. In his world, anyone may use fantasy for her own purposes. Thus, a variety of spirits provide powers to different humans based on their own motives and allegiances. For example, the wicked Queen Maudra asks the fairy Seshelma to help secure her power in the Land of Rocks. Seshelma initially refuses. Even though she is also a “bad” character, she does not automatically align herself with the other evil characters in the novel. She has her own plans and desires. Once she agrees to help the Queen, she does so only within terms that benefit herself. The narrative does not make clear whether either (or both) of these characters will be successful or will be punished (Coleridge 16). This lack of clarity provides narrative suspense about whether or not Phantasmion’s quest will be productive, but it also complicates the nature of fantasy for readers. Coleridge’s story does not, then,

provide a clear-cut allegorical reading that readers desire, for we cannot align fantasy as merely “good” or its lack as “bad.” Rather, characters use it for good or bad depending on their changing allegiances and motivations.

Because Coleridge tries to avoid a didactic tone, audiences assumed the novel had no purpose whatsoever. Ironically, both Coleridge and her father suffered the same criticisms about the lack of moral to their writing. In an 1830 entry in *Table Talk* S.T. Coleridge records that Anna Barbauld disliked “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” for two reasons: “it was improbable, and had no moral” (S.T. Coleridge 91).⁶⁸ S.T. Coleridge agrees that the poem’s probability could be questioned, but he argues that its chief problem was rather too much than too little moral. In fact, he regretted “the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination” (S.T. Coleridge 91).⁶⁹ He wished instead that it “had no more moral than the Arabian Nights’ tale of the Merchant and the Demon” (S.T. Coleridge 91).⁷⁰ Her father’s regrets about the poem may have influenced Sara’s stylistic choices in *Phantasmion*. Low argues that “In writing *Phantasmion*, Sara Coleridge attempts to sidestep the ‘obtrusion of the moral sentiment,’ which, in her father’s eyes, crippled the ‘Ancient Mariner’” (137). Sara, in the same letter to Derwent quoted above, explains:

Now I fairly admit that [Phantasmion] was written to illustrate no one general truth: I thought it sufficient for the soul and individuality of the piece that there should be upon the whole a unity of conception and feeling throughout...though the story was not written to illustrate one moral in particular...yet there are plenty of morals in the several parts of it...but thinking as I do that an ostensible or predeterminate moral would quench the spirit of a Fairy tale I cannot wish that I had done more in this line. (Qtd. in Low 139-140)⁷¹

Coleridge purposely avoids a distinct moral in her novel in order to leave room for “the spirit of a Fairy tale.” In Coleridge’s version of the fairy tale, the story reveals poetical beauty by creating the aesthetic effect of poetry through the fantastic; poetry moves the spirit, not just the mind, so the poetical beauty she describes will not manifest allegorically. This aesthetic, however, can still be morally productive for readers. Readers can still discover “plenty of morals in several parts of it,” but the text itself would not force these morals on readers by inhibiting individual interpretation of the text. Rather, the novel would resist one interpretation and aim for cultivating readers’ imaginations instead.

The fantastic, however, will still be productive to material reality. The hero does not experience fantasy as a dream, which would imply to readers that the fantastic remains separate from material reality. Rather, Coleridge’s fantasy allows the hero to gain knowledge about the material world that transforms his fortune and perspective (but again, in a manner different from a hero like Perrault’s in “Puss in Boots”). In order to interpret the fantastic, the reader must recognize that an encounter with fantasy may affect his own material reality, even if the text may not indicate how, exactly, this will happen. As we will see, Coleridge’s fairy tale depicts how fantasy should awaken the reader’s imagination and produce an affect beyond the text in his material world.

Phantasmion models how fantasy can be used productively when he decides to travel through the neighboring countries in disguise, “for the sake of making observations relative to war, and still more from a hope of meeting with [Princess Iarine]” (Coleridge 39). Potentilla grants him the power to travel quickly and cross great distances by leaping

like a grasshopper, and the prince sets out on a quest for knowledge and love. He learns that the townspeople assume ““our captains will march up to King Phantasmion’s palace next, and see what can be made prize of there”” (Coleridge 31). Phantasmion, shocked by this discovery, retires to the forest to think about what he has heard. He wonders, ““How have I been living like an animal in its winter burrow, wrapped in luxury, without hearing or seeing aught of what went on around me?”” (Coleridge 32). He decides to pursue his quest for more knowledge, rather than returning home so soon, so that he can ““survey this injurious, this faithless country, as an eagle eyes the flock on which he means to descend....[then] I will return to my own kingdom, and be a monarch indeed”” (Coleridge 32). His use of the fantastic, through this ability to travel in disguise and observe Rockland, causes him to grow and mature in his duty as King of Palmland. His newfound awareness of the state of his own kingdom gives him insight into his role as King and causes him to begin to use the supernatural in order to produce more wisdom and preparation for the future. The fantastic affects the material and gives him an advantage as he makes observations about reality. No longer does the fantastic merely provide consolation and escapism from that world; instead, it gives him a vantage point from which he can more clearly understand his environment.

Phantasmion’s use of fantasy does not always go exactly as planned, though eventually it does provide maturity that he lacked. He uncovers history about the relationship between his own kingdom and neighboring countries, and he returns to Palmland in disguise, surprising his court by ascending the throne:

Thence he addressed the council, relating all he had learned during his absence which concerned the welfare of his country, and appearing no more like him who til [sic] then had been called the sovereign of Palmland, than a tree full robed in leaf and blossom resembles the same tree ere a bud is unfolded; for he was clothed with majesty, and spoke like one who desired and deserved to be a king. (Coleridge 132)

Though Phantasmion will continue to use supernatural powers in order to achieve his goals, his personal transformation is complete, further signaled by the fact that this passage closes Volume One of the novel. Though the volume does not close with a moral or with distinct instructions for readers, Phantasmion's use of fantasy to produce knowledge and wisdom models a type of fantasy reader. The story still contains a moral, then, but the text emphasizes imagination rather than allegorical interpretation. If this section contains any explicit moral, it would be that fantasy provides both escapism from adult fears and anxieties while it also produces wisdom and maturity when properly used. Yet Coleridge forces readers to glean this moral from a close examination of Phantasmion's use of the fantastic, rather than from an obvious commentary.

Coleridge's interest in the moral work of fantasy directly connects to the religious views she inherited from her father. In writing to Miss Morris in 1848, she explains that S.T. Coleridge's "theory of faith pre-eminently appeals to the heart, to the moral and spiritual being. He never supposed that the inspiration of Scripture, a spiritual subject, could be known or apprehended by mere intelligence" (*Memoir and Letters* 339).⁷² She reminds Morris that her father claimed that reason and intelligence help us understand the spiritual, and that the spiritual can only "subsist by the co-inherence of the intelligential" (*Memoir and Letters* 339).⁷³ These two sides exist in union, but the spirit must be moved,

and with the help of the mind, one can comprehend moral truth.⁷⁴ Likewise, the moral consciousness of readers must be awakened before they can comprehend any truth the fantastic tale contains. Therefore, the literary fantasy does not explicitly teach readers or transmit allegorical lessons that would be interpreted only by the Reason. Instead, readers will encounter fantasy by assuming a childlike perspective of wonder during the tale. Rather than reading only for allegorical or didactic interpretive cues, they experience the text on a spiritual level, which in turn encourages them to search for the source of spiritual pleasure by moving from the spiritual (aesthetic) feelings produced by the text into the use of their rational understanding.

The turn from the fantastic tale to reflection in the material world, also seen at the conclusion of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” demonstrates the moral power of the fantasy tale. The spiritual awakening fantasy causes should produce growth and maturity for readers, though not in the same way that an allegory would. Coleridge articulates the unity of this movement between perception of the spiritual and use of the intellect in a letter to Edward Quillinan late in her life:

What I said to you the other day about the inseparability of faith from reason was only an attempt to express a characteristic doctrine of my father’s, which has planted itself firmly in my mind. I spoke of reason, not as the faculty of *reasoning*, of reflecting, weighing, judging, comparing, but as the organ of spiritual truth, the eye of the mind, which perceives the substantial ideas and verities of religion as the bodily eye sees colors and shapes. [...] Our saving faith consists, I think, in a spiritual beholding, a perception of truth of the highest order which purifies the heart, and changes the soul from glory to glory, while it gazes on the image of the divine perfections. (*Memoir and Letters* 460-461, emphasis hers)⁷⁵

Later in the same letter, Coleridge compares ways of knowing, both through the rational understanding and felt within the spirit. The tenets of the Christian faith, she writes, are founded as “doctrines of reason, which may be spiritually discerned.” We learn basic moral principles and beliefs about religion, she explains, but in order for these to hold, they must be felt within the spirit:

We are early *told* that the Bible is the Word of God, and believe it implicitly. But if we did not find and feel it to be divine, as our minds unfold and we begin to inquire and seek a reason for our beliefs, surely this early faith would fall from us as the seed-leaves from the growing plant, the husk from the blossom and fruit. (*Memoir and Letters* 460-461, emphasis hers)⁷⁶

Coleridge’s personal belief about the balance between spiritual feeling and rational truth influences the way in which she writes her fantasy novel. Where previous fairy tales appealed only to the reader’s reason, Coleridge appeals to the reader’s spiritual faculty. In doing so, she does not need to provide one, concrete meaning for the tale. For, as she understood, “we may perceive truth in a thousand different ways and degrees, but [we] can really perceive none at all except by the mirror of heaven within us” (*Memoir and Letters* 512).⁷⁷

There is a fine distinction between *revealing* knowledge and truth for readers through fantasy and *teaching* it directly through allegory, but this difference, though slight, is the major characteristic that distinguishes the literary fantasy from other forms at use during the Victorian era. An allegorical text rarely asks the reader to suspend disbelief in the events described, to transcend the self or to perceive the unity that only imagination can display. Coleridge’s combination may allow the reader to learn, so the

novel is not merely escapism, yet she leaves that learning to the reader's ability to decipher his encounter with the fantastic. A purely allegorical reading would explicitly teach an identifiable, specific moral lesson.

Even though unrecognized in its own time, *Phantasmion* anticipates and complicates contemporary fantasy theory as Coleridge destabilizes the text on a structural level in order to create a novel that resists one meaning. In doing so, she produces reader hesitation, not about the source of the fantastic, but about the form her fairy tale takes. I find four ways that Coleridge undermines the reader's search for allegory throughout the novel, and these methods also exemplify current fantasy theory about the subversive nature of fantastic discourse. First, Coleridge limits our perspective to Phantasmion's throughout much of the novel. Since he often eavesdrops on other characters, this forces the reader to know only as much about the narrative action as Phantasmion can learn himself. Yet Coleridge also limits readers' access to Phantasmion's psychology. In doing so, she does not allow Phantasmion to provide readers with an interpretation of the text's meaning that might give closure to the events. On a structural level, Coleridge disrupts our reading by including poems within the text, which ask us to interpret them in order to understand how they relate to the plot of the novel. Finally, she destabilizes sentence structure by shifting verb tenses throughout the novel. These four narrative resistances all contribute to readers' hesitation and force readers to use new interpretive strategies in order to glean meaning from the text. These resistances also produce readers' discomfort and likely contribute to the novel's failure, yet they demonstrate how Coleridge was able

to create a novel that abandoned allegory but still relied on the moral power of imagination to create meaning.

Coleridge tells the story in third-person, so we are not bound to Phantasmion's "I" perspective, yet she often limits his position to only what he can discover through the act of listening. The reader largely aligns herself with Phantasmion's perspective and desires because the novel primarily unfolds from his point of view. Interestingly, he does not always demonstrate those active characteristics usually associated with a hero in quest of maturity and purpose. Phantasmion typically exhibits what would be considered "feminine" characteristics, for he lacks knowledge about his circumstances, always faints, and rarely triumphs on his own. In fact, he receives much of his information about other characters and events by listening in secret to other people's conversations, soliloquies, and songs, and he discovers important information by listening to women. Throughout the novel he relies heavily on other people to tell him stories or give him information in order to guide him.

Phantasmion, the hero positioned as listener, needs others to move him to action, to give him information, and to help him understand his circumstances, and the reader too must attempt to decipher the text from this perspective in order to understand it.

Contemporary theorist of fantasy Tzvetan Todorov identified the presence of the *fantastique* through reader hesitation that seems similar to that which Coleridge creates.

The *fantastique* depends on the reader's hesitation as she interprets a text in which appearances of the supernatural occur. As the reader works to uncover the source of the supernatural, her uncertainty drives the narrative forward. Thus, the pure *fantastique*

occurs in the moment of ambiguity, doubt, and hesitation experienced by the reader as she reacts to a non-realistic text (Todorov 60). Coleridge's novel, in these terms, would primarily be categorized as "marvelous," rather than *fantastique*, since the reader never questions the presence of the supernatural.⁷⁸

Yet the process of reading this novel produces narrative doubt and hesitation because Coleridge refuses to provide a completely stable narrative. Coleridge's resistance to allegory changes the reader's expectations about reading fantasy and actually anticipates Todorov's discussion of why allegory cannot be equated with the presence of the *fantastique*. He explains how allegory negates the *fantastique* because "If what we read describes a supernatural event, yet we take the words not in their literal meaning but in another sense which refers to nothing supernatural, there is no longer any space in which the *fantastique* can exist" (63-64). Todorov notes:

Fairy tales, which habitually include supernatural elements, sometimes approach fable, [the genre that comes closest to pure allegory]. Here allegorical meaning is made explicit to an extreme degree: we find it summarized, in the form of a few lines of verse, at the end of each tale. (64)

Not all stories state allegory directly, and the fairy tale reader can resist the allegorical reading and focus on other aspects of the text. But a story that asks for an allegorical reading shuts down a reader's active participation and may not lead to reflection beyond the text. Coleridge transforms the expected use of fantasy because her lack of a direct allegory or moral enables her novel to escape generic conventions, which moves it into the realm of the *fantastique* on a formal level, even though the supernatural elements remain obvious.

This novel challenges Todorov's definition by producing reader hesitation through its form and narrative structure, rather than through the reader's sense of doubt about the text's supernatural elements. Coleridge complicates Todorov's model by using a limited third-person perspective throughout the novel. Todorov writes, "In stories of the *fantastique*, the narrator habitually says 'I.' This is an empirical fact...the exceptions are almost always texts which, from several other points of view, withdraw from the *fantastique*" (82).

When a text uses a narrator that says "I," Todorov claims, his discourse remains outside of the test of truth, but he can lie, which means that the reader can experience doubt about the perspective from which the novel unfolds. If a non-represented narrator (third person omniscient) were used, any reference to a supernatural event would place the text in the realm of the marvelous, where the source of the *fantastique* is already explained. Since, he argues, "the *fantastique* confronts us with a dilemma: to believe or not to believe?" then the first-person narrator must be used because he "most readily permits the reader to identify with the character...thus we enter as directly as possible into the universe of the fantastic" (84).

Todorov's insistence on the reader's confusion about the source of the supernatural as the main component of the *fantastique* results in a narrow definition that can seem to exclude texts like Coleridge's in which she used third-person limited narration. Phantasmion never says "I," yet Coleridge never intrudes into the narrative and rarely presents information outside of his perspective. By limiting the reader's perspective to Phantasmion, Coleridge allows for reader hesitation and doubt – not about

the source of the supernatural, but about the reading experience itself as a process of encountering a text that resists expectations. Here the *fantastique* becomes form, rather than strictly a form of narrative hesitation, because the textual structure leads to the very reader hesitation and ambiguity that Todorov uses to define the pure *fantastique*. The reader must ask, not “to what source does the *fantastique* belong,” but “in what form am I encountering the *fantastique*”?

In aligning herself with Phantasmion, the reader relies on the same sources within the text to navigate the reading experience of it; she must listen to the songs and stories of the women in the text in order to understand it. She must discover events as they unfold for Phantasmion before she can understand the connections that exist throughout the novel. Despite Todorov’s assumptions, the *fantastique* does not come only from a first-person narrator, since the author constructs this narrator in order to limit the reader’s perspective. In fact, the author can also construct a third-person limited-perspective hero which also forces the reader to decipher the text in an unpredictable way that upsets traditional patterns of reading.

Coleridge further resists readers when she refuses to give us direct access to all of Phantasmion’s thoughts, even within his limited perspective. Often the narration only tells readers that “Phantasmion stood motionless, while swift thoughts were passing and repassing through his mind” or that “keen thoughts stimulated his mind till [sic] sleep suppressed them with imperceptible hand” (Coleridge 41; 79). Fairy tales were rarely psychologically complex, but when Coleridge does not allow readers access to Phantasmion’s mind, she forces them to become more active interpreters of the

information they do receive. Readers cannot rely on Phantasmion to decipher the text's meaning, so they ultimately have to participate actively in the text by uncovering the ways it can produce meaning, even when it upsets conventional interpretive strategies.

In addition to the hesitation she creates by limiting readers' perspectives, Coleridge has Phantasmion eavesdrop on people who sing to themselves, thinking they are alone. These songs take the form of poems that Coleridge embeds into the text, and the poems often provide insight into characters' motivations and feelings. But the poems also disrupt expected conventions of reading. Though it was not unusual for writers to include poems within a longer text, Coleridge forces the reader into the eavesdropping position Phantasmion occupies, which produces hesitation and doubt about the story's direction. For example, Phantasmion hears "a soft melancholy voice" and "unable to catch a glimpse of the singer" overhears the words of her song:

Tho' I be young – ah! Well-a-day!
 I cannot love these opening flowers;
 For they have each a kindly spray
 To shelter them from suns and showers;
 But I may pine, oppressed with grief,
 Robbed of my dear protecting leaf.

Since thou art gone, my mother sweet,
 I weep to see the fledging doves
 Close nesting in a happy seat,
 Each beside the breast it loves;
 While I, uncared for, sink to rest,
 Far, far from my fond mother's breast. (Coleridge 33-34)

The embedded poem continues for five more stanzas, and readers do not learn who the speaker is, or what the song means, until Phantasmion does. The inclusion of this song

produces hesitation for readers, who must treat the poem almost like a riddle within the text: Who is the “I” of the poem? Who is the “dear protecting leaf?” What happened to the speaker’s mother? The poems, then, raise questions for readers and initiate interpretation and openness, unlike more allegorical texts that would use rhymes (like concluding morals) to simplify meaning for readers. Phantasmion’s limited perspective on these embedded songs forces the reader to take an active, inquisitive position as the novel unfolds.

Finally, Coleridge also disrupts the reader’s expectations through her use of shifting verb tenses. The story begins in past tense, but at certain points within the novel the narration shifts into present tense. Perhaps Coleridge used this technique in order to make the action seem more immediate to readers, so that they moved from being observers of to participants in the text. For example, note the shifting verb tenses in the passage below, in which Phantasmion (now equipped with legs like grasshoppers, in order to leap long distances during his travels) accidentally crashes into a market that sells porcelain and destroys some of the merchandise:

The owners all stood aghast while he endeavoured to glide away; but, soon recovering from their amazement, the whole crowd bustled after him [...]. They hem round the prince, the ring grows smaller and smaller; still each man waits for his neighbour to seize the mysterious culprit, and ere the circle has closed upon him, Phantasmion has sprung away, and, having cleared many a lofty edifice, he is now alighting in another quarter of the town. (Coleridge 29-30)

The narration then switches back to past tense and the story continues. The shift from past to present tense may give readers a literal pause, as they have to re-read sentences several times in order to comprehend such a small difference in structure. Yet a reader

may not register this subtle change in narration as anything other than a vague feeling that something is “off” or strange during this section. These moments, embedded on the structural level, destabilize the reading experience and disrupt the reader’s sense of security about how the text functions. Even a minor moment, such as a switch in verb tenses, enacts the larger structural complications of Coleridge’s novel. This literary fantasy does not allow readers the comfort of consistency.

The novel resolves with an apparently closed ending. Phantasmion succeeds, and he wins Iarine’s love. All mysteries are answered, and the narrative seems to stabilize. Yet, judging from the reviews, readers still wanted more meaning than the narrative provided. In fact, even though the text seems to end “happily ever after,” just as a conventional fairy tale might, the text still resists this simple closure somewhat. In the final paragraph, Phantasmion “looked round in momentary dread” (Coleridge 387); he fears that Iarine will vanish and that all his experiences will have been a dream. Though Coleridge writes that “all he hoped for was *not* to fade like a dream,” (387, emphasis mine), the mention of dread and the introduction of instability into the concluding sentence undermines the happy ending the text seems to achieve. In doing so, the text maintains narrative closure on a formal level, but it resists simplistic moralism. Readers remain unsure about Phantasmion’s future – will everything remain “happily ever after,” or will instability return? This instability leaves the narrative in the realm of the *fantastique*, where meaning eludes readers as they cannot discover it through a simple allegory.

Precisely because it resists generic, rather than narrative closure, *Phantasmion: Prince of Palmland* explodes preconceived notions of what a fairy tale should do for readers. The novel has a significant place in the historical development of fantasy because it provides a bridge from the poetic philosophy of the willing suspension of disbelief articulated by S.T. Coleridge to Victorian novels that would embrace this philosophy within more accepted interpretive conventions. This text demonstrates a poetic theory in the process of becoming a narrative discourse, before the literary fantasy becomes codified by distinctions of fantasy as genre, which would return the fantastic to a mode primarily used allegorically.

Yet, when S.T. Coleridge writes that we should suspend our disbelief “for the moment,” this raises the question of how long one can inhabit Fairyland with suspended disbelief before the rational necessarily intrudes. How long can we put by the conventions we use to decipher a text before we lose interest or become frustrated? At what point do the aesthetics of childlike wonder require a recognizable model of reading? The public, it seems, did not appreciate a journey into Fairyland that did not include an allegory or didactic instructions in what such a journey should mean. *Phantasmion* anticipates the critical problem authors face when they want to disrupt reading conventions but still hope to convey meaning through their texts. Unlike later Victorian literary fantasies by Lewis Carroll (who provides stability by dispelling fantasy through an “it’s all just a dream” conclusion), *Phantasmion* resists closure. In doing so, it sacrifices the audience’s pleasure in favor of structural experimentation. This novel engages the problems of interpretation and belief by asking readers to use fantasy

productively; but in withholding a distinct moral lesson, *Phantasmion* loses readers, who cannot suspend disbelief in a book-length narrative without the guarantee of conclusive insight provided by the text.

Perhaps it can be argued that a novel fails when it cannot be understood because it loses any efficacy the author wished to impart. I concede this probability, but I also want to propose that reading novels like *Phantasmion* can be productive. Ideally readers would experience textual hesitation and disruption as an aesthetic affect – one that may produce pleasure, discomfort, or even both. The feelings produced by the text, even negative ones, should initiate interpretive action. Even if readers reacted negatively, they should ask why the text resists them and assess their reading strategies, rather than abandoning interpretive inquiry altogether. *Phantasmion*'s contemporary readers missed this moment of imaginative participation and self-reflection by rejecting a text they did not recognize.

Critical examination of texts like Coleridge's allows us to assess our own reading strategies and values and allow us to question our biases for such subjective categories as "taste" and what makes a novel "good." We may return from Fairyland convinced more than ever of our preference for more obviously coherent novels, yet encountering the fantastic should leave us changed as readers. A novel like *Phantasmion* challenges us to read and interpret in unexpected ways, and in doing so, it provokes us into an interpretive action about ourselves as readers and critics.

This interpretive movement, from fantastic text to reflection about the self in material reality, encompasses the philosophy of the experimental literary fantasy novel. In my next chapter I explore how George MacDonald enables this movement from text to

self by using a confessional model in *Phantastes*. His novel, also considered a failure by readers, continues the experimental nature of the literary fantasy begun by Sara Coleridge.

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CHAPTER V

WAKING A MEANING

The preference for allegorical fantasy would change drastically in the latter half of the Victorian era as writers like Charles Dickens debated the appropriate audience for fairy tales and fantasy during the late 1840s and early 1850s. Dickens's "Frauds on the Fairies," (1853) for example, denounced the moralism of George Cruikshank's edition of didactic stories, and this essay signals a shift in reading preferences for fairy tales (Briggs and Butts 138).⁷⁹ Though fantasy continued to have a moral use, readers' familiarity with literary fantasy meant that authors could begin to parody, satirize, and play with the audience's conventional expectations (Briggs and Butts 139). Hans Christian Andersen's *Wonderful Stories* (1846), for example, "inaugurated a new era in child literature" by targeting children more explicitly, downplaying his tales' moralism in favor of amusement (Briggs and Butts 137). Eric S. Rabkin reminds us that an audience's familiarity with a genre forces authors to push its conventions further in order to provide novelty for readers (164-167). This need for novelty, combined with a shift in perceptions of childhood introduced during the Romantic era, resulted in the development of new interpretive strategies within fantastic texts.⁸⁰ When Lewis Carroll introduced *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) to the public, he forever changed the direction of fantasy literature through his commercial success. Carroll successfully navigated the competing problems of interpretation and belief by expelling fantasy through a dream-

narrative structure, parodying fantasy's didactic use through nonsense. Many writers would follow Carroll's example, yet writers who satirize or parody didactic fantasy still work within the paradigm that they subvert; in order for audiences to understand and appreciate the reversal of conventions, writers draw on those recognizable structures and therefore still remain somewhat traditional in their portrayal of the fantastic.

Perhaps Carroll learned how to create his commercial success by watching the failure of his good friend George MacDonald. Carroll's Alice books appeared seven years after MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858) had failed to garner any critical or commercial interest. Fantasy was changing during the 1840s and 1850s, but the reading public still expected authors to provide clear indications of how to interpret the fantastic. *Phantastes* was MacDonald's first fantasy work, and he would learn this lesson about staying within conventions through the negative reaction the public had to his novel. In later publications, like *The Light Princess* (1864), *The Golden Key* (1867), and *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), he successfully employed and subverted recognizable conventions like the allegory to create fairy tales that have remained popular into contemporary times. With *Phantastes*, however, he strayed beyond the English tradition, drawing on the German *Märchen* to write an experimental literary fantasy that he hoped would affect readers' moral consciousness through the imagination, much like Sara Coleridge's *Phantasmion*. In doing so, he rejected the audience's expectations for a stable narrative with clear indications of how the story would cohere. The conventions he used in order to disrupt the familiar proved too novel for readers, and the fairy tale received a

“savaging by the critics” (Raeper 154).⁸¹ Interestingly, they complained about the novel’s lack of allegory.⁸²

Unlike Coleridge’s novel, in which the hero encounters the supernatural as part of his everyday reality, MacDonald depicts Fairyland as a separate place into which the hero travels. The novel follows a loose plot based on this journey, which begins on the morning after the hero’s twenty-first birthday. Anodos receives the keys to his father’s desk as a present, and when he opens it and investigates its contents, a fairy-woman appears, claiming to be his great-grandmother. She tells him he will go to Fairyland the next day. Indeed, when he awakes the following morning, his bedroom begins to transform into an outdoor scene: “A stream of clear water was running over the carpet, all the length of the room, finding its outlet I knew not where” (MacDonald 9).⁸³ The organic patterns on his curtains come to life; ivy covers his dressing table; and then Anodos leaves his known reality behind and takes the path to Fairyland.

Anodos’s adventures unfold in an episodic structure that frustrates readers’ desires for a traditional narrative. As William Raeper remarks, “Anodos’ quest is not [deliberate]; indeed his path is haphazard and only ever followed intuitively” (148).⁸⁴ C.N. Manlove agrees, noting that Anodos begins the novel in a dream-like state, wandering without purpose (as his name implies), until the second half of the novel in which his “actions emerge from rather more sustained desires and sequences of motive and act” (“The Circle of Imagination” 62). Since most readers may be unfamiliar with the novel, I will recount some of the most important moments that form the basic narrative structure. First, an Ash-tree follows Anodos and represents a source of evil in Fairyland.

Next, he encounters a marble woman, whom he awakens by singing, but she flees from him and he pursues her throughout much of the novel. Then, a tree spirit called the Alder-
 maiden pretends to be the marble woman and seduces Anodos before he enters the
 Church of Darkness and discovers his shadow. This literal figure has a life of its own, but
 it attaches itself to Anodos and everywhere dispels the wonder of the fantastic. Anodos
 next travels to a Fairy Palace and reads fairy stories (which he embeds into the text). He
 briefly finds the marble lady, only to quickly lose her again, which sends him out of the
 Palace and, eventually, to a cottage inhabited by a wise woman. He makes several trips to
 and from her home, battles giants, and eventually is killed when he upsets an idol at a
 religious ceremony. But Anodos continues to live spiritually, even after his physical
 death, and he can see and hear the marble lady as she finds his grave and weeps for him.
 Suddenly he returns to his material reality, only to discover that he has been gone for
 twenty-one days. The story concludes with Anodos's confusion about his experiences as
 he wonders what his new purpose will be and if he will ever return to Fairyland.
 Throughout the novel Anodos often comments on the difficulty of recounting his
 experiences for readers. In doing so he calls attention to the novel as text by trying to
 transcribe fairy stories and then explaining why he cannot do so sufficiently. The novel
 remains open-ended for readers too, as they work to interpret the narrative's meaning.

As I have argued throughout this project, the tension between interpretation and
 belief informs the rhetoric of the nineteenth-century literary fantasy novel. Sara Coleridge
 used *Phantasmion* to experiment with a non-allegorical fantasy, and MacDonald's
Phantastes follows this tradition. Like Coleridge (and unlike Carroll), MacDonald

assumes moral work for his fairy tales. He believed fantasy could affect readers through the power of imagination, much like his Romantic predecessors.⁸⁵ MacDonald rejects traditional didactic paradigms, however, including the allegory, and he resists the alternative interpretive strategies of nonsense and parody which were being developed by Dickens, Carroll, and William Makepeace Thackeray. In doing so he hopes *Phantastes* will wake readers' moral consciousness through the aesthetic tension produced as they search for textual meaning. However, MacDonald further complicates the problems of interpretation and literary belief when he foregrounds the issue of communication about a fantastic experience through the arbitrary system of language. Anodos struggles to explain his experiences in Fairyland, implicitly investigating how a writer can communicate truth in the unreal. How can a writer induce belief in a fantastic text, the novel asks, if the events of the text are mimetically untrue and language itself cannot be perceived as real within the material world?

The rhetorical nature of fantasy has been part of its appeal for many writers. Carroll, for example, called attention to the playfulness and arbitrary nature of language in his Alice books, just as Edward Lear had delighted readers with his nonsense poetry (*A Book of Nonsense* 1846). But MacDonald uses *Phantastes* to pose a problem for readers as he exposes the incommunicable relationship between text and reader through Anodos's journey into Fairyland. The hero's inability to articulate his experiences, contrasted with his need to tell, anticipates contemporary analysis in rhetorical theory in which communication may break down between reader and writer as mediated by the text. Additionally, the writer cannot communicate one, objective meaning, when

language can yield a variety of meanings, a problem further complicated when he introduces supernatural events that must be described using a linguistic system meant to depict the material. Yet MacDonald does not despair of the plurality produced by language. Instead, he hopes to “wake a meaning” in readers through Anodos’s experiences, even if the meaning of the text shifts from reader to reader. This goal aligns him with Coleridge’s interpretive experiments in *Phantasmion* and distinguishes *Phantastes* from more traditional Victorian literary fantasies.

Phantastes’s complexity has continued to puzzle both readers and critics who attempt to unravel its symbols and rambling plot in pursuit of an elusive, underlying meaning. Readers may struggle when they try to make sense of its complex symbolism, even if they suspend disbelief in the hero’s supernatural encounters. As Raeper explains, “A novel tells a story about certain characters in given situations, but *Phantastes* has no such comforting stability; there is merely a series of encounters, as in a night of dreams, and the question lingers – what does it all mean?” (145). Stephen Prickett, Manlove, and Adrian Gunther decipher the text by explaining the generic and historical influences on MacDonald’s *Phantastes*. Their criticism often includes an analysis of the novel’s narrative structure, yet they overlook the way MacDonald confronts the problem of interpretation and belief through the specifically confessional relationship of the narrator/author Anodos to his readers.

I argue that MacDonald has Anodos write the text using a confessional mode in order to elicit readers’ belief in the text and to involve the reader in self-examination initiated by interpretive desire. Though Sara Coleridge also experimented with using

fantasy to awaken readers' moral consciousness, MacDonald's novel differs in its narrative perspective and its treatment of Fairyland as a place separate from the material world. First, and most importantly, Anodos narrates his adventures, but we learn that he also writes the text we read.⁸⁶ This narrative perspective enables MacDonald to privilege the subjective nature of language and the problems of literary belief as Anodos tries to explain his experiences to readers who will automatically be skeptical about his journey since it contains supernatural elements. Through the confessional mode, MacDonald can still abandon obvious allegory and didacticism as Coleridge did, but he also solves the problem of literary belief and interpretation in a less traditional manner than later satires, parodies, or even his own more allegorical texts.

Additionally, MacDonald depicts Fairyland as separate from the material world. Many Victorian fantasies employ this motif to further distinguish the way fantasy and nonsense differ from the real, yet MacDonald's Fairyland still exists as part of the material, for Anodos does not dream it, as Alice does. The fact the Fairyland exists, that Anodos literally goes there and returns to recount his experiences, places the reader in the position of one who can confirm or deny Anodos's truth through the text. The tension between literary belief in the text and Anodos's bizarre encounters undermine the text as a source of authority, which in turn pushes readers beyond the text in their search for meaning. MacDonald does not need to mock reading conventions or dispel the power of fantasy through a dream-structure; rather, the novel demonstrates that the fantastic remains a powerful, transformative force that affects readers' moral consciousness, even in the moment of undermining its own textual stability. The complexity of the novel,

including its open-endedness, its meta-textuality, and MacDonald's theological interests all cohere through his use of a confessional narrative.

I believe MacDonald consciously constructed *Phantastes* to reflect his ideas about the transformative potential of fantasy. In an essay called "The Fantastic Imagination," he describes how fairy tales can be meaningful for readers. He argues that a true work of art need not "convey a meaning" so much as "wake a meaning," and therefore a true fairy tale "is not an allegory," for "He must be an artist indeed who can, in any mode, produce a strict allegory that is not a weariness to the spirit" (67).⁸⁷ We hear echoes of Sara Coleridge here, in that a fairy tale does not teach through obvious didacticism but reveals imaginative truth through the process of story, waking a meaning by enabling the reader to think things for himself. Similarly, MacDonald acknowledges that fantasy cannot convey absolute or objective truth. "Everyone, however, who feels the story," he writes, "will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another" (66). It does not trouble MacDonald that readers may misunderstand a tale or not agree about its meaning, for "it may be better that you should read your meaning into it. That may be a higher operation of your intellect than, the mere reading of mine out of it: your meaning may be superior to mine" (66).

MacDonald concludes:

If a writer's aim be logical conviction, he must spare no logical pains, not merely to be understood, but to escape being misunderstood; where his object is to move by suggestion, to cause to imagine, then let him assail the soul of his reader as the wind assails an Aeolian harp. (69)

He calls *Phantastes* a fairy tale, and under this definition we understand that the novel will not provide a logical interpretive structure, since he does not fear misunderstanding.⁸⁸ Anodos's confession functions as a model of spiritual development and belief, but it only demonstrates how *one* person responds to the fantastic experience. The reader's encounter provides the impetus for her own journey into "the fairyland of the soul"; thus, the novel is not a blueprint for spiritual development but merely the catalyst for interpretation.

MacDonald's reference to the Aeolian harp recalls his Romantic predecessors, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, who both had an enormous influence on his literary and religious philosophies (Raeper 241).⁸⁹ Coleridge, in particular, influenced MacDonald's conception of the spiritual work accomplished by literature. MacDonald admired Coleridge as one "who combined philosophy, poetry and theology drawing on the ancient tradition that stemmed from Plato and Plotinus," and Raeper describes MacDonald as Coleridge's "devoted disciple" because of his interest in the latter's theory of the imagination (110-111). Coleridge believed that "the soul was forever developing and grasping after spiritual truth," that "there was a transcendent element in nature which found a living response in the heart of every man whether he was a believer or not" (Raeper 238). This theological perspective led Coleridge to the idea that "two things apparently contradictory, even opposite, could be simultaneously true," as in metaphor, in poetry, and, for MacDonald, in fantasy literature that depicted unreal events that seemed to contradict the material but could still reveal spiritual truth (Raeper 239). Raeper notes that MacDonald "eschewed any defined theological system" and

believed, rather, that followers should have “an intuitive response to God and Christ” that emerged through a “quickenings” of their spirits as they read the Bible and looked to nature (242).⁹⁰ This theology directly influenced MacDonald’s literary goals, for he felt that God was immanent (in all of creation), which meant that “literature outside of the Bible was in some profound way Christian” (Raeper 244). MacDonald thought that when people enjoyed literature, including his work, they did so because they responded to its implicit spiritual truth, even if the work did not contain overt moralism (Raeper 244). Thus, in a text like *Phantastes*, readers could disagree about the meaning of the novel as a whole. Anodos may not provide closure for his experiences, but the confessional rhetoric he adopts could urge readers into spiritual interpretive action, even when the text never cohered.

I believe the key to affecting the reader, the key to creating belief in the text necessary to waking a reader’s consciousness, lies in Anodos’s confession as he writes the text. Anodos reconstructs his narrative to help readers interpret it, just as he had to interpret the actual experiences as they occurred. The confessional tone Anodos adopts functions rhetorically to draw the reader into his fantastic exploration. In doing so, the text forces the reader into a similar self-examination, giving the novel a moral function even though it evades overt didacticism or claims to absolute truth. This self-development, however, can only occur through the reader’s belief in Anodos’s experiences, which include the fantastic. MacDonald uses the confessional mode to alleviate the problem of belief and interpretation for readers as they encounter a spiritual confession that relies on fantasy instead of mimesis.

Though we most often think of confession in terms of guilt, whether one confesses to a judge or to a priest, Terrence Doody explains that confession does not involve guilt so much as the need to understand the self: “most of the confessions in literature and in life,” he claims, “come from an individual who must confess himself, not because he has done anything wrong, but simply because he no longer understands himself fully and has to talk himself out” (21).⁹¹ Importantly, Doody believes the rhetoric of confession in novels draws the reader into an act of community; when the reader finishes the text, she will see herself in a new way based on the confession she has heard (36).

Confessional narratives involve the reader in the text through the narrator’s use of the power of disclosure: by claiming that he will relate secret knowledge through his confession, the narrator can set the reader to work in an act of interpretation driven by the need to uncover the secret or to hear the confession out to its conclusion (Foster 2-3). Dennis A. Foster best explains the relationship between confessor, reader, and the text when he argues that confession engenders interpretation. “By calling on the listeners’ need to understand,” he writes, “[confessional narratives] evoke in them a sense of loss that is experienced as a desire for truth” (3). Foster distinguishes between a ritual confession, in which the confessor merely relates a conventional pattern of sin and redemption, and book-length confessional narratives, in which convention cannot contain the breadth of the speaker/writer’s experiences. The longer narratives, Foster claims, “say the truth is hard to tell and you must work to understand” (3). In this case, confession induces belief in the listener/reader that the confession itself contains some unexpressed

truth that must be discovered through interpretation (Foster 11). This need to uncover the truth drives the narrative forward, but engagement with the narrator in his attempt to depict the self in language puts the listener/reader in a complicated position, one, in fact, that Samuel Taylor Coleridge had explored in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

Perhaps MacDonald’s interest in the confessional narrator arose from his study of Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”; Raeper claims MacDonald was “obsessed” with the poem (111). *Phantastes* and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” do seem to share a similar narrative perspective, though they differ in that MacDonald removes the frame of the Wedding Guest and instead has Anodos recount his supernatural tale directly to readers. Like the Ancient Mariner, Anodos does not give readers an overt moral or provide closure to his experiences, nor does his confession seem to alleviate his need to understand his supernatural encounter. But by placing the reader in the position that Coleridge’s Wedding Guest occupied, MacDonald forces readers to experience the supernatural tale and to attempt an interpretation of Anodos’s adventures. Anodos’s need to tell, combined with the rhetorical problems of language’s inability to accurately convey the fantastic, foregrounds the interpretive paradoxes that Coleridge’s poem also creates. MacDonald’s novel, however, destabilizes the reader by placing her in an interesting position as she listens to Anodos’s confession; like the Wedding Guest, she must assume a child-like faith in the narrative by willingly suspending disbelief.

One who listens to a confession must navigate the tension between the desire to produce meaning from the confession she hears and the challenges to rationality a

confession, especially one that uses the fantastic, will present to her rationality (Foster 5). In the same way that a fantasy reader must suspend disbelief in the fantastic, in order to perceive any truth the story (or poem) may present, so too must the reader of a confession willingly submit to the confessor's rhetoric in order to engage in interpretation. When she believes with childlike wonder, then, the reader allows the confessor a position of storytelling authority; however, the authority claimed by confession's rhetoric does not always result in persuasion to the speaker's point of view.

Doody identifies confession's rhetorical problem as the narrator's need for community. He explains that confession and community are irrevocably linked, and the confessor's desire for acceptance from the community also defines the way in which he confesses: confession cannot but be a self-conscious act designed to evoke a particular response in the listener/reader (10).⁹² According to Doody we often overlook the rhetoric of confession because "our immediate appetite is for information rather than form" (16).

Because any confession occurs through language, the act of confession (like any act of communication) is fraught with the problem of interpretation and belief. Doody solves this problem by arguing that confession relies on the speaker's desire to persuade the listener in order to receive acceptance. Foster, however, explains, "The issue is not persuasion, for there is no urging of a position; it is seduction" (4). He continues, "The writer and reader meet in a discourse, less in a generous desire to share than in contention: the writer attempting to perpetuate his discourse, the reader attempting to appropriate it to his own uses" (4). Foster's argument relies on the tension between the reader's desire for meaning through interpretation and the writer's challenge to the

reader's rationality (5). This conflict, I have argued, is also central to the literary fantasy novel.

Though MacDonald may not have intended to model *Phantastes* on a confessional narrative, the parallels allow us to observe how the novel's rhetoric aligns with MacDonald's definition of the spiritual work a fairy tale should do. Foster's explanation of how confession functions will help expose *Phantastes*'s mode. Foster claims that confessional narrators desire self-representation in language in order to purge themselves of a sin or crisis they have experienced. In doing so, they seek a return to innocence or self-understanding. Using the work of Paul Ricoeur, Foster explains how the confessor tries to return to innocence but in doing so must "re-enact in the language of confession the loss he feels"; essentially, he must re-experience his sin or crisis, speaking of the disunity of the self in his search for unity (Foster 16). The listener/reader follows this re-enactment through her need to understand the narrator's crisis, but in doing so, she "experiences herself the alienation motivating the speaker, and thereby [is] thrust onto confession's long detour back to a primal state of innocence" (Foster 17). The listener/reader, then, embarks on her own journey into the self. MacDonald's use of this mode allows his readers to engage with the text as they seek interpretation of Anodos's confession. But, ideally, the text will not produce meaning, which will encourage readers to seek meaning beyond the text.

The confessional mode can be broken down into three stages, all of which occur in *Phantastes*.⁹³ In the first stage, before the narrative is written or the confession undertaken, the speaker experiences a crisis or sin. This moment produces the need for

confession. In *Phantastes*, Anodos experiences a crisis at the beginning of the text when his “grandmother” appears to him and tells him he will soon go to Fairyland. Anodos claims “my surprise was by no means of so overpowering a degree as such an apparition might naturally be expected to excite,” but as he interacts with the fairy woman, he experiences confusion (MacDonald 4-5). He is “drawn towards her by an attraction irresistible as incomprehensible,” and when he looks into her eyes, he experiences “an unknown longing” (MacDonald 6; 7). This new knowledge of an alternate world disrupts Anodos’s stable sense of self and his understanding of reality. Anodos, of course, tells readers of this moment in retrospect through the writing of his confessional narrative, but his expressions of confusion and surprise depicted within the text indicate that his grandmother’s revelations have upset his traditional ways of knowing the world. Later, the novel ends with little closure for Anodos, who cannot understand completely why he went to Fairyland or what he should learn from his visit. His interaction with the supernatural has disrupted his stable sense of self. He claims, “Even yet, I often find myself looking round sometimes with anxiety” and “I have a strange feeling sometimes, that I am a ghost, sent into this world to minister to my fellow-men, or, rather, to repair the wrongs I have already done” (MacDonald 321). This crisis of the self provides the need to write a confessional narrative in order to make sense of his experiences, and the novel’s text ostensibly acts as evidence of this confessional drive.

Anodos’s confusion about his experiences, the characters he meets, and the purpose of his journey mirror the confessional narrative that retraces the self’s disconnection from reality in order to attempt a return to the original state of innocence or

self-unity. This is the second stage of the confessional narrative, in which the speaker re-experiences his original crisis through the telling of the confession in order to overcome the confusion the event has caused. Anodos attempts to find the self-unity he lost through the re-creation of his adventures as a written text, but re-tracing his experiences only emphasizes the self-crisis that initiated his need to tell. In the novel's beginning, for example, Anodos tells readers that he "felt some anxiety as to how I should fare among the elves and other children of the night who wake when mortals dream," and he repeatedly describes himself as anxious and fearful throughout his time in Fairyland (MacDonald 14). Fairyland continually undermines his position as a rational adult, destabilizing his traditional ways of knowing and interpreting his experiences. As he journeys, followed by the Ash tree, he cannot convey to readers his feelings about his experiences. He frequently uses negative phrases, to emphasize his lack of knowledge and understanding, phrases like "What I feared I could not tell" and "in a state of vaguest uncertainty" and claims he feels only horror and a "vague though powerful fear" (MacDonald 40). Anodos needs to tell readers about his experiences in order to contextualize them and try to interpret their meaning. But language cannot contain the fantastic, and the problems of language as a system undermine his communicative desires. Anodos calls attention to this issue, and it becomes a theme throughout the novel, emphasizing the novel's connection to its confessional mode. When he tries to describe the Ash tree, for example, he writes:

Just as one cannot translate a horrible odour, or a ghastly pain, or a fearful sound, into words, so I cannot describe this new form of awful hideousness. I can only

try to describe something that is not it, but seems somewhat parallel to it; or at least suggested by it. (MacDonald 43)

Later, when he tries to write down the things he reads in the Fairy Palace, in order to help readers (and himself) understand how Fairyland functions, he cannot accurately recreate either the texts or his adventures. In reliving the disunity of his experiences, Anodos can reach no truth, and thus he also can not provide any meaning or conclusions for readers. His re-telling merely repeats the confusion and disunity he initially experienced.

Yet, the final stage of confession may be productive, for the reader if not the speaker. In the third stage, confession fails to cohere, moving the listener/reader beyond the initial confession (in this case, the text) to self-examination. Through the need to understand the speaker, the story draws the listener in as she seeks an interpretation of the experiences she reads. MacDonald has Anodos initiate this movement from text to self by destabilizing the reading experience. In his confession Anodos expresses desire for more than material reality can reveal. “Why are all reflections lovelier than what we call the reality?” Anodos asks his readers. He continues:

All mirrors are magic mirrors. The commonest room is a room in a poem when I turn to the glass....In whatever way it may be accounted for, of one thing we may be sure, that this feeling is no cheat; for there is no cheating in nature and the simple unsought feelings of the soul. There must be truth involved in it, though we may but in part lay hold of the meaning.... (MacDonald 83)

In Fairyland Anodos realizes that mirrors do not reflect the real, a traditionally mimetic use. Instead, they reveal a new perspective on the material, transforming the world. In realistic literature, the writer uses language to “reflect” reality and often figures the text

as a mirror. Anodos invokes this interpretive context, only to subvert it by transforming the test of truth into a supernatural lens, one that defies a stable, realistic perspective. The text, written in language, should reflect the material, but this new type of mirror, the fantasy text, will not provide such stability, even though “there must be truth involved in it.” Language cannot ultimately represent the transcendent longing key to a real journey of the soul. Anodos confession will not provide the closure he desires, then, but as the text fails, the reader should be drawn beyond it, transcending it at the moment she can no longer rationally interpret it.

To summarize, then, the reader of Anodos’s confession in *Phantastes* will (ideally) attempt to understand his experiences and try to make sense of all the random events, characters, and complex symbols he depicts. Since his adventures contain supernatural events, she must willingly suspend disbelief in order to interpret the narrative. The need to interpret forces the reader to experience the speaker’s disunity in herself; she desires to understand Anodos’s confession and cannot do so, because he cannot explain his experiences accurately in language. The narrative remains open-ended, and as the text fails, the reader’s interpretive desire shifts from the text toward self-examination beyond the confession she originally read. Her inability to determine a definite meaning results in (again, ideally), her own exploration of the self.⁹⁴

The narrative movement from the confessional cycle creates the equivalent aesthetic effect of the *fantastique* that I have discussed in previous chapters. Anodos’s confession simultaneously evokes and frustrates the reader’s literary belief. Readers may experience pleasure or desire through Anodos’s descriptions through the way the

confessional rhetoric persuades them into interpretive community. But, as Anodos laments, he cannot reproduce his supernatural experiences, and this leads to his own frustration – as well as his readers. The tension between literary belief, desire, and frustrated interpretive inquiry manifest as an aesthetic moment of open-endedness (the *fantastique*) that, ideally, draws the reader beyond the text into inquiry about the material world.

The confessional mode, then, enables MacDonald, through Anodos, to involve the reader in a complex interaction with a text that encourages interpretation and belief. Yet readers may miss this rhetorical cue to move from text to self without the guidance of the confessor. Doody explains that writers of confessional narratives often use themselves as models for readers, since they realize the potential to affect the reader through this cycle of confession, interpretation, and belief (14). In this case, Anodos as “writer” and hero becomes very important to the overall structure of the novel. As confessional writer, he will also model himself as an active reader in order to demonstrate for readers how to interpret the confession productively.

Anodos’s confession encourages a move from text to self through the way the text points to the limitations of language. Gunther explains how Anodos repeatedly represents “trance-like insights into other times and other places [that] are always conveyed in terms of a direct experience defying expression in language” (“The Multiple Realms” 179). Anodos acts as a model for the reader through his constant reference to reading and through his comparisons of his experiences to other books. Each chapter contains quotations and references to other works of literature, calling attention to its construction

as text, which in turn asks the reader to engage with the text in an act of interpretation.⁹⁵

Unlike genre fantasy or traditional fairy tales, which provide escape through repetition and predictably anticipated narrative structures (closed forms that do not disrupt the reading experience),⁹⁶ *Phantastes* engages the audience by modeling the hero as an active reader who leads actual readers through the text without giving them a final, overt explanation of what to do or how to act after the reading experience ends (thus, the open-ended nature of the novel, which I will discuss at length below).

Prickett claims that the variety of quotations used to open each chapter create a text both “meta-fictional and intertextual in its mode of operation” (“Fictions and Metafictions” 113). For Prickett, these epigraphs function as a way for MacDonald (and not Anodos) to create textual unity that leads readers to an awareness of its allegorical quality. Because I define an allegory as a closed form that does not typically involve the reader in active interpretation, I think, rather, that these epigraphs emphasize *Anodos*’s awareness of his text’s need for an interpretive context. Rather than direct the reader in an allegorical response, then, the epigraphs actually cause tension in the reader as she engages with Anodos’s tale, for his use of them acts as a claim to legitimacy for his experiences. His awareness of literary history and convention implies that he constructs his text to fall in line with this tradition and that he understands his audience’s expectations, even if the majority of his experiences will not cohere in a traditional manner.

Anodos, as writer and confessor, tells his story in first-person and often depicts himself as a reader, mirroring the actual reader’s role in responding to the fantastic.

Interestingly, Manlove claims that Anodos's ultimate journey is "one into the interior, to discover some hint of the root of his true being" ("The Circle of Imagination" 74). In fact, Anodos's first real act in Fairyland is to read a book of fairy tales. After wandering through the woods in which he finds himself upon entering Fairyland, he discovers a cottage. He discusses the nature of Fairyland with the residents, and then he spends hours sitting in the cottage reading fairy tales. Traditionally, a hero would not begin his journey in a strange land with an afternoon of reading, as this passivity would seem to negate any active characteristics we typically associate with the protagonist of a novel. Yet Anodos's reading actually informs nearly all his activity in Fairyland, and his knowledge of books and story conventions affect his ability to understand his experiences. In depicting himself as a reader, he enacts the very activity of his own readers, who can then view their own action of reading as a dynamic and important act regardless of the variety of meanings stories may produce.

Anodos, as "author" of *Phantastes*, acts as a guide to readers, both through his experiences and as a model reader of the fantastic text. Importantly, Gunther notes, "MacDonald believed [that] all great artists function as spiritual guides helping us to break through barriers [to comprehending transcendent Truth], to experience deeper and deeper levels of meaning [in the text]" ("The Structure" 54).⁹⁷ By depicting himself primarily as a reader, Anodos anticipates his own audience's role in reading his confession. He models the reader in his use of epigraphs, his self-conscious references to fairy tales and genre, and to scenes in which he reads and reacts to fantastic texts. This allows actual readers to engage in the interpretive act of reading that will ideally produce

spiritual growth. As the reader listens to Anodos's confession and watches him model a type of readership, she may feel a spiritual longing for truth and thus transcend the text in her search for meaning.⁹⁸

As lack of critical consensus about the text proves, the meta-textual references and inter-textual clues do not provide unity, in terms of clarifying the text's meaning, but noticing the confessional mode of the novel begins to solve some of the interpretive paradoxes produced by the meta- and inter- textual parts of the narrative. The meta-textual nature of Anodos's confession, for example, allows MacDonald to navigate that crucial tension of the fantastic text – how to create an innovative, complex work that draws on fairy tale conventions while also providing a way to encourage interpretation of a text with which readers will be frustrated, confused, and certainly unfamiliar.

MacDonald seems to explain this problem through Anodos, when the latter decides to reproduce for his readers one of the stories he reads while in the Fairy Palace.⁹⁹ First, Anodos describes his own reading experiences: "Mine was the whole story," he writes, "for I took the place of the character who was most like myself, and his story was mine; until...I would awake, with a sudden bewilderment...and find I joyed or sorrowed only in a book" (MacDonald 95). Then, he attempts to recreate one of these stories for readers, but he acknowledges the difficulty of doing so:

It is like trying to reconstruct a forest out of broken branches and withered leaves. In the fairy book, everything was just as it should be, though whether in words or something else, I cannot tell. It glowed and flashed the thoughts upon the soul, with such a power that the medium disappeared from the consciousness, and it was occupied only with the things themselves....Of course, while I read it, I was Cosmo, and his history was mine. Yet, all the time, I seemed to have a kind of double consciousness, and the story a double meaning. (MacDonald 106)

Anodos does not mean to imply that the story is allegorical when he claims it has a double meaning. Rather, as he explains in the next paragraph, he believes the fairy story reveals connections between Fairyland and his own reality that would otherwise be unknown. This connection between the material and the supernatural aligns with MacDonald's theological interests and his philosophy about the spiritual potential of fantasy literature.

Interestingly, especially in light of his later, more successful fairy tales, MacDonald also agreed with Romantics on the importance of the child's perspective, particularly childlike wonder. "Childhood," Raeper writes, "was an important symbol [for MacDonald] in theological terms as well as emotional and poetic" (305). MacDonald explained that he did "not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 67). As readers respond to fantasy with childlike wonder and belief, they may perceive spiritual truth within the text. I have noted in earlier chapters the importance of childlike belief and wonder in suspending disbelief in the fantastic, in order for readers to perceive fully the non-objective meaning the text may convey. In the same way *Phantastes* encompasses these Romantic ideas by deploying a confessional mode in which Anodos must take on the position of a child, even as he struggles to understand the way in which his journey into Fairyland may change his adult perspective.

Significantly, in light of MacDonald's Romantic influences, Anodos's response to Fairyland after he reads evokes the wonder of a child who believes his experiences will

produce meaning, even when he does not understand them initially. He frames his own narrative in the context of an unfolding story, with his “unfinished story urging him on” (MacDonald 37). Yet, he depicts himself not as an active hero with a focused purpose, but as one who begins to accept his fantastic experiences in the same way that a child accepts a fairy tale. “It is no use trying to account for things in Fairy Land,” he tells readers, “and one who travels there soon learns to forget the very idea of doing so, and takes everything as it comes; like a child, who, being in a chronic condition of wonder, is surprised at nothing” (MacDonald 37). Anodos’s journey moves him away from the world of adult rationalism as he embraces a childlike perspective of belief in the fantastic. In doing so, he also hints at a type of reader for the literary fantasy novel. Anodos shows that the reader should accept the fantastic with the belief and wonder of a childlike perspective, which will enable the reader to follow and experience an inward transformation.¹⁰⁰

The emphasis on the hero (and by proxy, the reader) as a child runs throughout the novel. Though the text begins on the morning after Anodos’s twenty-first birthday, which marks his transition into adulthood, his passage into Fairyland seems to undo any emphasis on the developing adult. Instead, the people of Fairyland typically refer to him as a boy, a youth, a baby, and a child.¹⁰¹ At one point “a kind-looking, matronly woman” calls him a boy, and Anodos writes, “I should have ill endured, the day before, to be called *boy*; but now the motherly kindness of the word went to my heart; and, like a boy indeed, I burst into tears” (MacDonald 58).

Significantly, the scene that follows introduces the “rational adult” figure of the woman’s husband, a farmer, who laughs at his wife’s belief in fairy tales. Anodos begins to doubt his experiences in Fairyland through the farmer’s influence, for the sound of his voice and the grasp of his hand “produced such a reaction in me, that, for a moment, I could barely believe that there was a Fairy Land” (MacDonald 60). Yet, as soon as Anodos sees a young girl sitting in the corner, reading a book, he believes again (MacDonald 61). The contrast between the adult and the child, between their corollaries of rationalism and imagination, present alternative patterns of readership for Anodos’s audience.

Anodos next depicts a conversation between himself and the farmer, which demonstrates the importance of the childlike perspective while encountering the fantastic. The farmer and Anodos discuss whether or not to believe in the fantastic, and when Anodos downplays his own recent excursions, the farmer significantly calls him a “sensible *man*” (MacDonald 61, emphasis mine). The farmer explains that his wife “believes every fairy-tale that ever was written,” and when Anodos asks why he cannot “treat her belief with something of respect, though you cannot share in it,” the farmer replies: “Yes, that is all very well in theory; but when you come to live every day in the midst of absurdity, it is far less easy to behave respectfully to it” (MacDonald 60-61). The perspective shakes Anodos’s belief in his own experiences, and he only regains some conviction about the truth of his adventures by talking to the young girl and going to her room to look out her window onto Fairyland. The child’s alignment with belief in the fantastic, with the reading of fairy tales, and with reading as activity underscores the type

of reader Anodos himself models. Though he is tempted toward adult rationalism, the hero must follow the correct path back toward childlike faith and wonder. As Manlove notes, “[MacDonald] was absolute and uncompromising in his rejection of rationalist or empiricist approaches to the world and in his advocacy of the unconscious imagination as the source of truth” (“The Circle of Imagination” 55).¹⁰² Anodos’s actions direct MacDonald’s readers to undertake their own inward journey, rejecting the adult perspective and to become readers that “take everything as it comes; like a child, who, being in a chronic condition of wonder, is surprised at nothing” (MacDonald 27).¹⁰³

Read meta-textually, Anodos clearly indicates to readers that his own story should reveal connections between Fairyland and their reality which will become apparent through the process of reading. Gunther explains how “Initially, Anodos does remind us at key points that he is in ‘the Fairy-country’ and that things are different there, although many of these comments tend to have ironic undertones suggesting that actually it is *not* so different” (“The Structure” 47, emphasis his). This blending of fantasy and reality functions as a way to point to the purpose of the text and to guide readers in an interpretation of what they, too, should begin to notice during their own reading experiences. For example, as he describes the fairy story of Cosmos to readers, Anodos, in the voice of Cosmos, writes:

But is it not rather that art rescues nature from the weary and sated regards of our senses, and the degrading injustice of our anxious everyday life, and, appealing to the imagination, which dwells apart, reveals Nature in some degree as she really is, and as she represents herself to the eye of the child, whose everyday life, fearless and unambitious, meets the true import of the wonder-teeming world around him, and rejoices therein without questioning? (MacDonald 113)

Here we read the most explicit meta-textual comment yet on the purpose and goal of a literary fantasy. Through the use of imagination, the fantastic text *reveals* truth about our own reality that we would not recognize through a traditional mimetic depiction. Thus, MacDonald implies, our reading experience should position us as children in our wonder and amazement at the fantastic occurrences depicted, but our reading should also enable us to transcend the text through our rediscovery of imaginative truths analogous to our own experiences in reality. Anodos acts as our spiritual guide in order to demonstrate the way to read a fantastic text that clearly anticipated its own complex problems of reading.

Most confessional narratives remain open-ended because the writer cannot resolve his experiences by re-telling (and thus re-experiencing) them. In the same way, when Anodos returns home, he first feels insecure about what he has experienced in Fairyland. He asks,

Could I translate the experience of my travels into common life? This was the question. Or must I live it all over again, and learn it all over again, in the other forms that belong to the world of men, whose experience yet runs parallel to that of Fairy Land? These questions I cannot yet answer. But I fear. (MacDonald 236)

The hero's own lack of resolution prefigures the probable reaction of the novel's reader and also exhibits the open-ended nature of the confessional mode, which can never provide the unity the speaker desires.

Foster claims confessional narratives produce pathos as the reader's desire for meaning becomes frustrated by the inability of language (as a system) to contain meaning (9). He bases this drive to pathos on Jacques Lacan's analysis of the self and other in

language, particularly that “whatever can be announced in language (the demand) is always inadequate to the need” (9). For Lacan, the speaker understands his own identity through conversation with the Other, as he can recognize his own expectations for himself and his listener through his address. The Other also responds to the Word of the speaker and must reassess herself in light of how the speaker addresses her. The speaker, then, must always anticipate the use of the Word, how he will define his audience, and how his address to them will contain expectations and elicit a particular response. Importantly, when one speaks, his use of the Word can transform another’s reality when he calls the Other by a certain name (in Lacan’s example, “You are my wife.”), but authentic communication breaks down when we acknowledge that language, as a closed system, cannot provide authentic discourse or convey truth between the speaker and listener (Lacan 62-64). Thus, for Foster, confession functions when “The failure of speech to be adequate to its subject calls for exegesis; confession engenders interpretation, drawing the listener into the production of meaning,” even though this attempt to discover meaning ultimately will be frustrated by the problems inherent in language (10).¹⁰⁴

“The advantage of conceiving of narrative as confession rather than expression,” Foster writes, “is that it allows us to see the pathos of the simultaneous pursuit and evasion of meaning in narrative” (10). Yet the pathos Foster claims for confessional narratives does not always have to exist. In *Phantastes*, for example, MacDonald turns this problem into a positive experience for both the writer and the reader. Rather than despair at the inability to achieve authentic communication, MacDonald feels confident

that the text can still have meanings for readers, even though it will not be a single, concrete meaning; the work of active interpretation will be productive, regardless of differing results.

For MacDonald, the production of meaning through interpretation is not a futile act, even if the text demonstrates that language cannot contain all the meaning readers desire. The confessional mode allows him to produce an aesthetic effect through the tension between the desire for meaning and the inability of language to contain experience. In fact, the very moment that readers recognize the inability of language to contain their desire for truth and meaning, they become open to self-examination and the spiritual possibilities MacDonald saw as implicit in the fantastic experience. The novel lacks true closure and exists in the moment of the *fantastique* in order to encourage readers to move from inquiry about the text to inquiry about the feelings the text evokes.

As Raeper explains, “MacDonald happily invited an imaginative participation in the meaning of his stories. Such openness is a marked difference from the intrusive adult voices intent on laying down the law in the Victorian nursery” (313). MacDonald’s use of confession through Anodos ensures an open-ended conclusion so that “everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another” (MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” 66). Anodos confesses his experiences to readers, and our hero becomes our guide by modeling himself as a childlike reader. But, inevitably, in the fantastic experience each reader’s journey will be her own.

After *Phantastes*'s failure MacDonald turned toward more obviously allegorical fiction and directed his fantasy stories to children. Raeper explains that "The commercial failure of *Phantastes* persuaded his main energies away from fantastic writing," and though he did publish a few fairy tales, these were published specifically for children and written in a more conventional manner (310). Julia Briggs and Dennis Butts describe how MacDonald's editorship of *Good Words for the Young*, begun in 1869, provided "pressure to fill its pages" and "produced MacDonald's best writing for children [after] *Phantastes* previously failed to sell" (146). The difference in tone used by his contemporaries also provided MacDonald with other examples of more successful fairy tales. As mentioned above, writers like Dickens ("The Magic Fishbone," 1868) and Thackeray (*The Rose and the Ring*, 1855) had begun using comic effects in their fairy tales, and this "parodic treatment" became quite familiar to readers by the end of the century, since audiences recognized fairy tale conventions (Briggs and Butts 138-139). Carroll developed this playful and skeptical tone in more depth throughout his Alice books, pointing out "the arbitrary nature of social and linguistic rules" and parodying social practice (Briggs and Butts 142). Carroll's ability to clearly indicate how he would overturn the fairy tale conventions he invokes throughout the text made his novel a commercial success and permanently changed the direction of fantasy and fairy tales.

MacDonald, however, maintained his interest in German and Romantic influences and still believed a fairy tale could "bring to consciousness something which had until then remained firmly in the unconscious" (Raeper 312). He blended his interest in mysticism and symbolism with more recognizable fairy tale conventions in order to make

them more marketable, but he rarely took up the satiric or parodic tone of his contemporaries. For this reason, many of his tales can seem overly sentimental, and he has sometimes been criticized for drawing his characters too thinly.¹⁰⁵ Most of his fairy tales show “the progress of his characters from immaturity to maturity” and “the theme of rebirth is never far distant” (Raeper 313). Yet these later fairy tales differ from *Phantastes* more in style than in purpose or tone.

MacDonald still does not explain all events or translate all meanings in his works for children. He maintains symbolic openness and “allowed children to think for themselves while reading his tales,” even if he included more obvious allegorical parallels about growth and maturity (Raeper 313). In *The Light Princess*, for example, the princess cares only for her own happiness and literally floats everywhere. Only when she learns compassion does she regain her “gravity,” both morally and literally. These simpler allegorical elements help readers interpret the tale’s meaning, but MacDonald’s use of complex symbolism often gives his tales more depth and complexity than a traditional allegory.

Consider the scene in *The Golden Key*, in which Mossy and Tangle follow a fish through the forest until it leads them to a woman’s cottage. The fish jumps into her cooking pot, where it dies. The children eat it, but somehow when the woman looks into the cooking pot again, the fish has been reborn as an angel. MacDonald does not directly explain what this scene means, and readers are left to themselves as they try to decipher its symbolism within the context of the story (Raeper 313). MacDonald valued this

openness and hoped readers would work to uncover meaning that would affect them after the tales concluded.

Importantly, as Raeper explains, MacDonald expected his fairy tales and longer fantasy novels to affect readers' relationship to material reality (321). Both Carroll and MacDonald wanted readers to examine their relationship to the real through the lens of fantasy, which could take the real and turn it upside down. *Phantastes's* legacy can be observed in later, more traditional Victorian fantasy novels like the Alice books, but MacDonald's interest in blending the fantastic and the material has another clear descendent in the work of Jean Ingelow. Where the supernatural and material remain somewhat incommunicable in MacDonald, even when he uses this difference for transcendent purposes, Ingelow imagines a world where the separation between fantasy and material collapses. Unlike Carroll's Wonderland, Ingelow's Fairyland will not be all a dream. And though allegory will be present, its subversion means Ingelow can also overturn our traditional depictions of reality in order to show that language does not operate separately from experience, just as the supernatural also coheres with the material.

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CHAPTER VI

THAT'S ALL

By the time Jean Ingelow wrote *Mopsa, the Fairy* in 1869, a new era of fantasy literature had begun. The fantasy tale had changed in audience and tone through subtle shifts in reading taste initiated during the early nineteenth century. Authors addressing adults preferred to use their stories to focus on Victorian social problems through realism, and fantasy had been relegated to the nursery where children were now allowed to learn with pleasure, rather than through heavy didacticism. Because fantasy seemed to deal with nonsense, the unreal, or to provide an escape from the growing industrialization of Victorian life, it became aligned with less serious topics and a less mature audience.

Publishing literature for children, however, became a very profitable business (MacLeod 129).¹⁰⁶ Authors had developed more subtle literary techniques designed to give pleasure to both children and the adults who read fantasy to them. Rather than contain fantasy within obvious allegory, writers like Lewis Carroll subverted traditionally didactic techniques, mocking conventional expectations through playfulness and nonsense, as Carroll did in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Experimental fantasies like Sara Coleridge's *Phantasmion* and George MacDonald's *Phantastes* had met with such resistance that it did not seem profitable to risk a literary experiment when there was money to be made. Stable narratives with secure authorial voices reigned, and though they did provide some wonder and surprise for readers, these texts typically did

not engage readers in active interpretation through narrative destabilization. Rather, writers often worked to satisfy reading expectations instead of provoking them into philosophical reflection about fantasy's moral use.

Tastes had changed, and authors who wanted to publish successful fantasy novels now had plenty of examples to follow. Due to the boom in children's and fantasy publishing during the mid-to-late Victorian era, we may easily overlook authors who employed traditional interpretive strategies but also subverted them. In *Mopsa* Ingelow certainly uses obvious didacticism, playfulness, and even a bit of nonsense, just as her contemporaries did. Her literary fantasy also seems more coherent and readable than Coleridge's or MacDonald's. She does not destabilize the reading process, and *Mopsa* therefore seems more conventional and could easily be classed as either "a wholly escapist fairy story" or as a failed copy of Carroll's *Alice* stories, both of which critics now claim (Avery 69; 135).

Yet, when examined closely, the novel demonstrates characteristics that link it to the experimental literary fantasies I have been tracing in this project. Ingelow does not disrupt her text on a structural level in order to provoke the reader into interpretation or active reading, which separates her from Coleridge and MacDonald's literary experiments. Instead, the experimental nature of her fantasy novel occurs through the unified vision she proposes through it, one that blends the mythic, the scientific, the historic, and the religious, collapsing the separation of the fantastic and the material through the lens of storytelling. Through inter-textual allusions and irony she creates a negative model of readership through the story's hero, Jack. His example functions to

wake readers' moral consciousness, just as Coleridge and MacDonald hoped, but in a different manner than her predecessors had envisioned. Ingelow employs rhetorical cues that suggest a complicated philosophy, one that argues for the power of story and the way the fantastic story, in particular, can unify disparate, contradictory perspectives.

Coleridge and MacDonald had experimented with narrative technique in order to create an aesthetic affect that ideally would lead to readers' self-reflection, but Ingelow's novel uses more conventional Victorian interpretive strategies while still deploying an unusual and experimental vision that aligns her purposes with her predecessors.

Ingelow wrote *Mopsa, the Fairy* after Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* had achieved critical and commercial success, and critics like Gillian Avery believe Carroll influenced Ingelow's story (135). Instead of referring only to this recent influence, I trace the novel's history back to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and align it with the development of the literary fantasy novel.

Ingelow's frequent and obvious allusions to the Ancient Mariner poem throughout the novel show her awareness of the Romantic tradition in which the reader's belief in the fantastic is at stake. Ingelow uses Jack as an anti-hero for the reader, one who, *unlike* Coleridge's Wedding Guest, does not go away from his encounter with the fantastic "sadder and wiser."

In fact, Ingelow inverts the Mariner's story of transgression and confession in the figure of Jack, who quickly forgets his experiences in Fairyland as soon as they end. Critical readings have taken Jack's perspective at face value, assuming that Ingelow endorses his rejection of the fantastic.¹⁰⁷ I believe, rather, that Ingelow critiques this

position through pervasive irony and instead argues for an active reader that will use the lessons of fantasy to inform everyday experiences beyond the text, much in the same way that Sara Coleridge and MacDonald had envisioned. Ingelow's novel does contain various didactic moments, and its Evangelical undertones have garnered it little distinction among critics. Yet it provides nothing less than a revolutionary proposition for a unified vision of scientific, material, religious, and historic interpretations of human experience. This novel is far from a stereotypical Sunday-school lesson disguised as fantasy, and I will argue that, even given Ingelow's conservative perspective, its theory of the unity of fantasy and reality explodes traditional depictions of the fantastic, especially during the Victorian period.

The novel begins with Jack's journey to Fairyland through a hole he discovers in a tree. He finds a nest of fairies who encourage him to call for an albatross, Jenny, who then carries him on her back to Fairyland. Jenny entrusts the fairies to Jack, and the story's main narrative involves one of these fairies, Mopsa, whom Jack kisses, causing her to grow in size and to eventually become a Fairy Queen. Jack explores the various countries within Fairyland, rescues the reigning Fairy Queen, and accompanies Mopsa on a journey to her new kingdom. The novel, however, ends on an almost mournful note, with the last chapter titled "Failure." Jack, replaced by a Fairy prince who changes to look exactly like him, is expelled from Fairyland and must return home. Mopsa becomes a Fairy Queen, rescuing her subjects and beginning a new life without him. He returns to the material world and hears a story before having a snack and falling asleep, forgetting his journey as the novel concludes.

Because Mopsa's development into a Fairy Queen becomes central to the novel, many critics interpret the story as "a female *Bildungsroman*," or as representative of "a concern for separate, gendered fiction for girls and boys found in mid-century children's literature in general." (Auerbach and Knoepfelmacher 208; Vallone 289). Typically, critics discuss the novel in terms of its gender politics, with Mopsa's journey to become a Fairy Queen as the primary value of the novel,¹⁰⁸ and they often assume the conclusion limits, rather than opens, possibilities for readers. Nina Auerbach and U.C. Knoepfelmacher, for example, read the novel's last words – "That's all" – as indicative of Ingelow's need to soothe readers after Jack's return (209). They argue that Jack, like readers, easily forgets his experiences in the feminine domain of Fairyland, and that "there can be no return to the imaginative worlds Jack has now altogether forgotten" (209).

I believe, rather, that the novel remains open-ended, and I align it with the tradition of the literary fantasy novel that I have been developing in this project. Once read within the history of this genre's engagement with the problems of belief and interpretation, we can recognize how *Mopsa* complicates the typical children's fantasy novel for which critics often mistake it. I will show that Ingelow's novel resists closure and instead poses questions to readers, asking them to engage in active investigation of what is known and knowable about their world. In fact, Ingelow's vision anticipates contemporary rhetorical philosophy, particularly that of Donald Davidson, that addresses the problem of belief through the proposal of a unified perspective that relies on charity. Specifically, when Ingelow depicts a Fairyland that blends history, religious story,

science, and fable, she asks that the reader reject ontological dualism and acknowledge a unified perspective that joins the subjective and the objective in one world through belief.

Unlike Coleridge and MacDonald before her, Ingelow's rather direct narrative contains more obvious didactic and allegorical moments, and she remains somewhat traditional in her use of the fantastic, which can mask the novel's more revolutionary proposition about the unity of fantasy and reality. For example, on his journey into the heart of Fairyland, Jack discovers a country in which people help rehabilitate mistreated horses. One of the women explains how the horses come to Fairyland after they die, and "We take care of them, and gradually bring them up to be young and happy again" (Ingelow 32). The women then go on to list the atrocities men do to horses, making this scene obviously moralistic. There are other allegorical scenes like this, yet the overall vision of the novel escapes one easy lesson, even though Ingelow's own religious perspective definitely influences the novel's tone.

The anonymous writer of *Some Recollections of Jean Ingelow* explains that Ingelow's parents were "pronounced Evangelicals," and in childhood Jean supported the missionary work undertaken in Africa during colonialization (17). Ingelow wrote for *Youth's Magazine* (later called *Bible Class Magazine*), an Evangelical periodical to which she submitted many of her first stories and which she later edited (*Some Recollections* 65). Ingelow published these early tales anonymously in 1860 as *Tales of Orris*, and Maureen Peters explains that these stories were "heavily moral, for it was still considered that the fun in a children's tale merely supplied the jam around the educational pill" (56).

But Peters distinguishes Ingelow's moral work as "gentle" and notes that she sympathized with, rather than judged, her young readers (56).

The tone of Ingelow's early stories manifests later in the poems for which she became so famous. Ingelow was well-known during her adult life as a poetess and was so famous, in fact, that American admirers nominated her for the post of Poet Laureate after Alfred Lord Tennyson's death in 1892 (*Some Recollections* 117). Due to changes in taste since Ingelow's time, her poetry has gone out of fashion and may now seem overly patriotic, sentimental, or moralistic. But Ingelow's popularity as a poet arose from her ability to express the feelings and sentiments of many of her contemporaries. Peters explains that Ingelow's books were part of "two out of three literate households" at this time because she "embodied the aims and ideals of respectable Victorians" (103). Ingelow's didactic poetic tone, in particular, may have emerged from the fact that "she felt it was her duty to expound the virtues of Christian charity and forgiveness," a traditional Victorian aim (Peters 71). Yet, as Peters notes, she often complicated typical Christian poetry with her own imaginative embellishments and, at times, obscure symbolism (71).

For example, in her nine-part prose poem, "The Story of Doom," Ingelow interjects personal interpretation into Noah's commission to build the ark, exploring the moments between God's summons until the first drops of rain fall. She tells the story from Noah's wife's perspective, and Ingelow juxtaposes Noah's religious summons to build the ark with his wife's own ghostly visions (*Poems* 361). The characters compare themselves to Adam and Eve, retelling the Fall, in which Ingelow imagines Adam as

knowing and thoughtful, not blindly tempted by Eve, when he chooses to eat the forbidden fruit (*Poems* 364). The characters discuss giants as if they existed, and the poem often philosophically reflects on the nature and reality of God, blending the fantastic and the religious. The poem's complexity belies one, easy explanation of Ingelow's religious or philosophical beliefs, even though she draws on Christian symbolism and story. Thus, while the majority of her poetry, and even *Mopsa*, may contain certain conservative points of view, Ingelow evidently used her writing to explore, rather than transmit, a particular perspective. I believe her tendency to blend a personal imaginative perspective with her received religious traditions manifests more prominently in *Mopsa*, where the fantasy mode allows for even more exploration of how the imagination contributes to one's belief and understanding of story.

As I will show, Ingelow's Fairyland functions as a way to draw together several contradictory philosophical perspectives, and in *Mopsa* she envisions an ideal world of unity where all tensions disappear through the combination of the fantastic and the material. Ingelow resolves contradictions between conflicting "stories" about reality by imagining that Fairyland is actually the *same place* as human reality. It does not exist as a separate world (or only as a dream) but instead becomes a state of prehistory available through the imagination. *Mopsa's* didactic moments may cause readers to miss Ingelow's more subtle use of inter-textual and ironic interpretive cues that create a subtext within the fantastic, one that she uses to propose a more revolutionary, less traditional, and, perhaps, controversial, ontological philosophy.

At the novel's beginning, Jack passes into Fairyland with little confusion and almost no surprise, unlike most previous heroes/heroines, who at least demonstrate some sense of wonder.¹⁰⁹ Yet, perhaps Jack recognizes little difference between Fairyland and his own world because Fairyland, like the material world, follows rules and operates with little nonsense, though fantastic elements do exist. Knoepfmacher reads this insistence on reliability as evidence of the way Ingelow establishes a hierarchy in which reality trumps fantasy. He argues that though she is "a latter-day Romantic," she revises fantasy novels like Carroll's *Alice* books and MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* because her Evangelical theology would not endorse "a boy's dreamy enchantment" (301-303). Perhaps because his reading of *Mopsa* relies strictly on its relationship to these recent works, Knoepfmacher fails to consider what the novel itself has to say about the worlds of reality and fantasy.¹¹⁰

Jack's lack of surprise does not endorse reality so much as indicate to readers how familiar fantasy should be. The first clue to this depiction of Fairyland as his own land comes in the opening poem to Chapter One:

"And can this be my own world?
 'Tis all gold and snow,
 Save where scarlet waves are hurled
 Down yon gulf below."
 "'Tis thy world, 'tis my world,
 City, mead, and shore,
 For he that hath his own world
 Hath many worlds more." (Ingelow 1)¹¹¹

The dialogue of this poem poses and answers a question about the world of fantasy. The first speaker questions the unfamiliar and wonders at how different it seems. But the

second speaker reassures the first that the alien world should not seem so. As the novel begins, Ingelow establishes parameters for her readers by instructing them to recognize the strange and the unfamiliar as part of their own experiences. Throughout *Mopsa* she continually reinforces this initial idea of a unified perspective that depends primarily on belief; if we believe that the unfamiliar world is “my own world,” then we open the possibility for “many worlds more.” Contradictory perspectives unify through belief that differences can cohere in one world that contains many.

Because fantasy and reality are the same place, Ingelow crafts a Fairyland built on solid rules and parameters. For example, Jack’s adventures begin when he realizes that he cannot escape from the tree trunk in which he discovers the fairies’ nest. Rather than offering nonsensical advice, the fairies advise him to whistle. He does so, and an albatross immediately aids him by lifting both him and the fairies to safety through the top of the tree (Ingelow 7-9). The scene does not contain any real threat of danger or confusion, and Jack never appears distressed. Likewise, the narrative stability Ingelow employs allows readers to proceed without hesitation through the actions without probing the text for deeper meaning or significance. But that stability only reinforces the fact that fantasy is no different than the material. Importantly, the confidence Jack displays here and throughout the rest of the book undermines any potential threat to his happiness. Yet, Jack is shut out from Mopsa’s kingdom once she becomes a Fairy Queen, and the novel’s last chapter, ominously titled “Failure,” suggests that Jack’s adventure has not been an entirely successful one.

I view Jack's presence in the novel as Ingelow's main philosophical plot, one easily overlooked if we take Jack's experiences at face value. The novel will endorse a unified vision of Fairyland, one that Jack "misreads," because of his inability to interpret his surroundings and his general lack of belief in his experiences. This "Failure" on his part ironically functions to indicate the importance of a unified perspective that blends the material and the fantastic.

Jack's inability to interpret unfamiliar experiences can be compared to rhetorical theories that insist on a dualist view of reality, in which language and experience operate under separate conditions. As Stephen Yarbrough explains, post-modern language theorists like Stanley Fish and Gregory Ulmer insist on this separation and in doing so must abandon rationality and knowable truth: "To many postmodernists," Yarbrough writes,

little we do can improve and nothing can ensure our chances of knowing the world except by the terms with which we already know the world. If the world is a text, what we get out of that text is what we read into it, unless chance or force intervene. (29)

He contrasts these theories with those of St. Augustine and Donald Davidson, both of whom argue that "in order to communicate at all, we must assume there is but one world and that our beliefs about it are ultimately unifiable through discursive invention" (31).

While I feel confident claiming a Romantic influence on Ingelow's work, I do not intend to argue that she purposely incorporated St. Augustine's philosophy into her literary fantasy novel. Yet the novel displays an obvious concern with storytelling, communication, and belief that I think engages with the same issues that both Augustine

and Davidson explore. These writers are concerned with the incommensurability of experience and language, and Ingelow too depicts the problems of interpreting reality, when one cannot actively “read,” and therefore cannot decipher the points of communication between the material and the fantastic. While my application of these theories is not completely analogous, I hope that the similarities between these theories and Ingelow’s vision will reveal the philosophical complexity of the novel.

Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation relies on his claim that “meaning and belief are interdependent” (Yarbrough 33). As Yarbrough explains, in order to interpret a speaker’s words, the listener must possess a theory that also addresses the speaker’s intentions and beliefs. Rather than relying on the notion of shared convention, which separates language from reality (it becomes a “system” of “signs”), and which implies that our different languages and cultures constitute different, incommensurable worlds, Davidson claims “there is at most one world” (Qtd. in Yarbrough 36). To communicate with anyone, for the world to make sense, we have to assume that “knowledge is a question of the coherence of belief” (Yarbrough 36). Yarbrough writes:

Yet for both [Augustine and Davidson], the first principle is that one must believe that everything can hang together, that everything ultimately can connect with everything else. In Davidson’s version, if there is but one world, for anything to make sense, it will make sense in terms of other things that make sense. This is epistemological holism. (36)

Essentially, epistemological holism relies on a formation of language as causal: “to mean is to cause something to happen, something that one intended to have happen as a result of one’s speaking” (Yarbrough 37). An interpreter can only understand the speaker if he

can predict what the speaker will do next in order to achieve her communicative aim; to do this, he must understand what caused her to speak as she did, or, put another way, what she intends and believes (Yarbrough 37).

The connection between meaning, intention, and belief relies on what Davidson calls the rule of charity. To believe communication is possible, we must believe that all things will cohere; “we cannot understand anyone we do not, at least initially believe” (Yarbrough 41). And, importantly for Ingelow’s novel, not only is this belief necessary to understand a particular speaker, but it is also necessary to understand reality. When we extend charity to a speaker, “we are presuming that what they say, if we were to understand it, could be as true for us as it is for them...” (Yarbrough 42). Ultimately, for Davidson and for Yarbrough, “words cannot be separated from the world they describe,” because a person’s choice of words is linked to her intentions to affect reality (42). When we interpret with charity, believing, even when we initially do not understand, that a speaker attempts to communicate with truth, we must also believe that “everything coheres with everything within the world” that the speaker and listener share (Yarbrough 44).

Within these terms Davidson’s theory of charity evokes Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief,” a Romantic, and for Ingelow a more contemporary, philosopher who explored how texts and readers interact. Throughout this project I have argued that literary fantasies engage a tension Coleridge identified as central to the fantastic – how authors depict the unreal but still ask readers to have momentary belief in the events in order to understand the story. Sara Coleridge and

MacDonald both imagine the fantastic as a place in which this problem of belief coheres with an imaginative project of waking a reader's moral consciousness through aesthetic effect, much like S.T. Coleridge. Ingelow, however, anticipates a more Davidson-ian theory when she conceives of Fairyland, material reality, history, myth, and religious story as "one world," where everything will cohere if an interpreter believes in the unity of this perspective. Throughout *Mopsa, the Fairy*, Ingelow depicts a unified world in which fantasy and reality combine. She also envisions a world in which communication has causal power and discursive agency; the Fairy Queens are known for their storytelling ability, which literally affect characters' actions. Jack, however, cannot interpret the communicative actions of characters in Fairyland, and he fails to interpret his experiences with "charity." Ingelow reinforces her philosophy about the agency of storytelling and the unification of the fantastic and the material through Jack's failure to acknowledge "one world." Through this lesson Ingelow asks readers to extend charity to her own novel as they begin to interpret their world beyond the text with a unified perspective.

Interestingly, though Ingelow does not draw on S. T. Coleridge's philosophy in quite the same way that Sara Coleridge or George MacDonald did, she initially positions her fantasy novel in relationship to his most famous poem. Peters explains that Ingelow had read widely, including Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott, her future friend Tennyson, and, importantly, the Romantic poets (23). In fact, we can begin to decipher the novel's philosophy by examining Ingelow's allusions to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in its opening. After Coleridge's use of the albatross in his poem, Ingelow could expect the

image to resonate with readers. Through obvious allusions to Coleridge's poem, a tale in which the Mariner asks for belief in the fantastic, Ingelow links these two works intertextually and marks the novel as an heir to the literary fantasy, a genre thoroughly engaged in the problems of belief. The presence of fantastic experiences foregrounds the problem of belief and communication, and *Mopsa, the Fairy* has a pervasive emphasis on storytelling and belief that aligns it with this tradition.

Ingelow's use of Jenny the albatross, who introduces Jack to Fairyland, invokes "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" through Coleridge's famous bird. Then, after Jack and Jenny arrive in Fairyland, she takes him to a sea "covered with ships" (Ingelow 15). But, as Jack notices, the ships have "all their sails set, but they cannot sail because there is no wind" (Ingelow 15). Jenny explains that their becalming is a punishment for ships and men who went out on evil errands; this allusion to the punishment endured by the crew of the Mariner's vessel after he kills the albatross continues to link the novel to Coleridge's poem, and it also allows Ingelow to introduce a moment in the text where Jack's characterization becomes key to the novel's overall philosophy about the fantastic and belief.

Ingelow characterizes Jack as very inattentive to his experiences in Fairyland and as a poor interpreter of the stories he hears. I read Jack's inability to interpret as Ingelow's reversal of the active reader needed to believe and subsequently to perceive in Fairyland. For example, just after the scene above, Jenny instructs Jack about how to call for her when he needs help, but the narrator notes, "but he was not attending, because there was so much to be seen" (Ingelow 12). After Jenny chooses a boat to carry Jack up

the river to the center of Fairyland, she asks him again if he remembers her name, which is the only way he can find his way home. “‘Oh yes,’ he says,” but the narrator makes sure to point out that “he was not attending – he was thinking what a fine thing it was to have such a curious boat all to himself” (Ingelow 17). The repetition of Jack’s inattentiveness ironically points to the importance of perception, and, later, belief.

Throughout most of the novel Ingelow demonstrates the “one world” of fantasy and reality through the irony of Jack’s inability to interpret his experiences. Jack’s inattentiveness does not occur only when he receives directions, but most of his adventures in Fairyland involve the power of storytelling – a type of discourse that asks him to interpret with charity and attempt belief. Jack’s visit to the marketplace, for example, recalls Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” and provides another inter-textual moment for Ingelow’s novel.¹¹² The gypsy fairy tries to cloud his mind by singing a song much reminiscent of Rossetti’s poem, but the potential implications for gender and economics are relatively absent. The gypsy obscures Jack’s mind and makes him feel “as if he was covered all over with cobwebs” (Ingelow 64). This scene foreshadows the Fairy Queen’s storytelling and its potentially dangerous consequences. Unlike Rossetti’s poem, in which commodities play a central role, Ingelow uses this market scene to emphasize the power of story within Fairyland. The gypsy sings a song that supernaturally affects Jack’s perception, an event that indicates storytelling’s nature as a discourse that affects reality. This vision of communication as causal anticipates Davidson’s theory that there is no separation between the speaker’s beliefs and the words she chooses to use to affect her

listener. Ingelow's depiction makes this a literal problem, where one's words have grave implications.

Later, in the same way, but with far more seriousness, the Fairy Queen tells stories as if she were in a trance: "Jack looked, and saw the Queen coming slowly towards them, with her hands held out before her, as if it was dark. She felt her way, yet her eyes were wide open, and she was telling her stories all the time" (Ingelow 130). The apple-woman explains how these stories are powerful and tries to keep Jack from hearing them, yet when he does overhear some, she encourages him as he tries to interpret them.

Significantly, she tells Jack to discount parts of the stories he has heard, saying "I don't think much of that part of the story," simply because its descriptions (of "reeds and rushes") do not match up to her knowledge of Fairyland (Ingelow 133). We later learn these stories foreshadow Mopsa's development into a rival Fairy Queen and Jack's return, and the reeds and rushes are indeed part of Fairyland, even though the apple-woman had never seen them before. The apple-woman does not interpret the story with charity, assuming that what is communicated could be true, if she only understood it. This scene demonstrates the way listeners can misunderstand a truth about the world when they do not interpret with charity and belief. Importantly, the apple-woman foreshadows Jack's ultimate "Failure" at the novel's end.

This scene, then, also reinforces the novel's argument about the power of storytelling. The Fairy Queen's trance-like state, and the powerful affect of her stories on listeners, recalls Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* again, though in a context that emphasizes the casual nature of language. Yet Ingelow allusion is not analogous, for she meta-

textually proposes that a unified world between fantasy and reality apply both to her characters and to her readers. The inter-textual allusions function to draw readers' attention to a tradition of literary history with which she aligns her novel. Invoking the figure of the Ancient Mariner through the Fairy Queen, for example, asks readers to consider the similarity between these characters – particularly their use of language. If, as the novel shows, storytelling has an active power over listeners, and if our reality and this fantasy are the same world (see below), then the implications for storytelling in Fairyland also apply to our *own* world (material reality, beyond the book we read). The novel meta-textually suggests that our own stories contain provocative and potentially life-changing powers should we listen carefully to them and interpret them with charity.

When we read Jack's adventures in Fairyland, then, we should pay close attention to what the novel says about our own world and about our stories. One of the most important sections addressing these topics occurs in the center of the book, just after Jack frees the Fairy Queen and enters her kingdom. At this point, Mopsa begins to grow, and she steadily does so, both in stature and in importance in the novel. As noted above, critics tend to see this as evidence that *Mopsa, the Fairy* is primarily concerned with gender, especially the female imagination and feminine development (Auerbach and Knoepfmacher 208), but I believe Ingelow also addresses philosophical concerns. Though Mopsa's story does structure the remainder of the novel, the narrator continually emphasizes Jack's perspective. Jack, however, does not stand merely for the male child-hero, but for the reader, either male or female, who encounters stories and must interpret them.

As Mopsa grows, she becomes the oracle through which Ingelow addresses her readers. For example, the chapter “Mopsa Learns Her Letters” ostensibly refers to sJack’s desire to teach Mopsa, but Mopsa actually does most of the instructing. Ingelow’s reversal of the typical teacher-student paradigm, in which the older, male student instructs the younger, innocent (female) child, should signal to us that her entire philosophy will be more subversive than a cursory reading may reveal. Here, the child instructs both Jack and the reader about the origins of both Fairyland and their own reality. Jack tells Mopsa that he has many questions about Fairyland, and she explains, “‘It’s the same world you call yours’” (Ingelow 136). When Jack doesn’t understand, she explains that he can’t recognize the two worlds as one because, “‘you’ve got something in your world that you call TIME’” (Ingelow 136). She continues, “‘your people say there was a time when there were none of them in the world – a time before they were made. Well, THIS is that time. This is long ago’” (Ingelow 137). At this point, Jack has been warned about listening to the Fairy Queen’s stories, because, “‘if you listen, you’ll be obliged to go to sleep, and sleep nobody knows how long’” (Ingelow 124). As he listens to Mopsa’s explanations, he “‘felt that a sleep was coming over him, and he could not hold up his head’” (Ingelow 137-138). His reaction signals Mopsa’s growing power as a future Fairy Queen, but the story also moves Jack to yet another fantasy world – that of dreams.

In keeping with the novel’s emphasis on the unity of fantasy and reality, Jack’s dream world mirrors the Fairyland he has just left behind. The only difference – and a very significant difference indeed – is that now Jack begins to understand and believe in the unity of fantasy and reality. Ingelow writes: “he had this dream. He thought that

Mopsa came running up to him, as he stood by the river, and that he said to her, ‘Oh, Mopsa, how old we are! We have lived back to the times before Adam and Eve!’” (138). Jack dreams of a time of pre-history, in which giant “hairy elephants” roam the banks of the river and do battle with “river-horses” (Ingelow 141).

Here Jack’s dream alludes meta-textually to material reality and recent discoveries in Victorian culture about the age of the earth and the limitations of human stories about history. Charles Darwin had published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, and Ingelow, an avid reader, knew this work. Peters claims that “[Ingelow’s] own thoughts were seriously disturbed by the implications of the theories in *The Origin of Species*” (57). As Peters shows, Ingelow even wrote a poem questioning, if the Garden “must go,” and Peters uses this as evidence of Ingelow’s resistance to new scientific theories, going so far as to suggest Ingelow had “mental limitations” that caused her to “cling to the security of her religious beliefs” (57-58).¹¹³ Undoubtedly, Ingelow’s worldview was shaped by her Evangelical Christian background, yet this scene in *Mopsa* offers a stark contrast to Peters’s depiction of Ingelow as unable to cope with new ideas. That Jack dreams this world into existence may imply a subtle critique of the theories of evolution Darwin introduced, but Jack does acknowledge that he and Mopsa have “lived back to the times before Adam and Eve.” Peters herself claims Ingelow had a deep sense of history, and that “all her life she was to know the exquisite duality of being both part of a gigantic human tapestry, and an individual with ideas and emotions unlike anybody else on earth” (11). I believe Ingelow incorporates this expansive sense of history into a

unified Fairyland that encompasses both Christian tradition *and* theories of ancient history and evolution.

Indeed, Jack's dream is consistent with Ingelow's depiction of Fairyland, in that it exists as part of reality. In the same way that Jack cannot interpret events in his "real" life, or during his adventures in Fairyland, he also has trouble within his dream. Mopsa encourages him to dream of something else, once the creatures "fought with horn and tusk, and fell on one another, lashing the water into whirlpools" (Ingelow 141). Things become so chaotic that Mopsa decides to rescue them by calling the Craken. Ingelow describes the Craken as "an enormous serpent" and says Jack "felt extremely glad that this was a dream, and [that the Craken was] only a fabled monster" (142-143). But immediately after he thinks this, Mopsa quickly corrects him, saying, "'No, [the Craken] is only a fable *to these times*'" (Ingelow 143, emphasis mine).

Ingelow insists that the mythological and prehistoric creatures of which Jack dreams actually existed. They have become fables only because Time has passed. Time obscures the unity of the prehistoric, the mythic, the fantastic, and even the supernatural, making it appear as if those things cannot cohere in one narrative. Ingelow shows that stories, like the one that put Jack to sleep so that he could enter the world of dreams, give readers access to the fantastic which has been separated from them due to Time.

As if to reinforce the fact that Jack's dream was not an illusion but an actual way for him to enter the time of prehistory, the narrator tells us that when Jack woke up, he "felt very tired indeed – as much tired as if he had really been out all day on the river, and gliding under the soft coils of the Craken" (Ingelow 146). Jack's dream affects him once

he wakes because it provides access to another part of the real; sleep here is no time of rest, no escape from the present. Instead, stories put listeners to sleep only to give them access to the imagination.

The applewoman carefully delays any further storytelling after Jack wakes. Her warnings about the power of stories demonstrate the stakes for Ingelow's characters. Stories are provocative; they are dangerous. As Davidson claims, language works causally, not separately from reality but as seamlessly interconnected with it. For Ingelow, stories have the potential to transport us, not just imaginatively, but in Fairyland, literally in Time. The novel contains a unique vision of the unity between the fantastic and the material, for it asks readers to interpret with charity in order to test the unity of historical and mythical "fables" as part of their own lives. A unified one world could be true, it implies, if we only knew how to interpret conflicting ideas within a holistic perspective on reality.

Perhaps we may think Ingelow uses these scenes as a warning to readers about the perils of leaving the confines of our own reality for the world of fantasy. Knoepfmacher, in particular, argues that *Mopsa* acts as a cautionary tale against the world of female imagination and fantasy (310-311). Yet Ingelow's theology supports the affective power of storytelling. Time separates followers from Christ's world, and the Bible, a book of fantastic stories, calls for belief from those who have not seen the actual events take place. Knoepfmacher's insistence that Ingelow's material concerns in the novel outweigh the spiritual does not align with the practices he says dictate her skepticism of the fantastic.¹¹⁴ If the novel warns against anything, it rather cautions readers about

ignoring the stories of fantasy they have received, which Time and skepticism have caused them to overlook or to believe only as fables.¹¹⁵

In *Mopsa, the Fairy* belief in the power of story becomes a hope for communication. Though there continue to be inter-textual allusions throughout the rest of the novel (especially to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,”) ¹¹⁶ I want to turn my discussion to irony, Ingelow’s other interpretive strategy. Jack’s example, I will argue, ironically works as a lesson in “what not to do.” The heroes of Coleridge’s *Phantasmion: Prince of Palmland* and MacDonald’s *Phantastes* acted as guides for readers through an aesthetically disruptive text. In *Mopsa*, however, Jack functions as an anti-hero, as a model for readers to avoid since he does not keep belief in fantasy and focuses only on the material world. Instead, as the final chapter implies, we as readers should learn from Jack’s “Failure” and use his example in order to avoid a failure to interpret the communication between stories and our reality.

As Davidson shows, to enter the world of communication at all, we must suspend our disbelief and act with charity toward the speaker as we attempt to interpret her words. In entering story, we must also silence those objectionable voices in our conscience that would tell us that what we read could not or would not really happen. We must, as Coleridge said, willingly suspend our disbelief *for the moment*. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, suspended disbelief in the fantastic, or in Ingelow’s vision of a unification of fantasy and the material, need not be maintained beyond interpretive inquiry. For Coleridge as for Davidson, suspended disbelief works, for the moment, in order to extend charity to a speaker (or story). Belief does not mean acceptance of

ideology – of Ingelow’s Evangelicalism or of her fantasy theory – but an attempt to understand the speaker in a world in which language affects reality.¹¹⁷

As I have argued throughout this project, the author helps us suspend disbelief by creating a world with its own logic, and we enter the world of fantasy, in particular, with the belief of a child. When we read with charity, we agree to interpret an author’s fantasy tale not as something “other,” separated from the material world and irreconcilable with actual experiences. Instead, we read with a holistic perspective that asks us to transcend the material world and take part in the world of imagination, to be transformed by the power of the stories we read. Belief can be exhilarating, but when we fail to believe, we no longer perceive the unity of the material and the fantastic. We return to the material, as Jack does. For Ingelow, this return is Failure itself.

The novel’s conclusion foregrounds this failure of belief in the final chapters. Mopsa tells her last story as she searches for the kingdom’s banished men, who have been hidden in a cave until the Queen comes to free them. The narrator notes, “Mopsa, after the manner of fairy queens...was beginning to tell a story....It did not begin at the beginning: their stories never do” (Ingelow 214). Her story begins by repeating her origin – Jack’s kiss transformed her from an ordinary fairy into one who could think. She tells of Jenny’s promise to come rescue Jack when he needs to go home, and of how ““Over the highest of the birds is the place where angels float and gather the children’s souls as they are set free”” (Ingelow 215). After this vision of heaven, she tells the story of her new kingdom’s curse, how the people were selfish and wasteful and turned out fairy after fairy that came to offer them guidance. Finally, the fairies cursed them and transformed

them into deer until that time when a new Queen would come to them against her will. Mopsa's flight from Mother Fate brought her to these people against her will, even though Mother Fate had already destined her to set them free. Mopsa's disobedience actually fulfilled the divine will, and with Jack's help, she quickly frees the rest of her subjects.

However, Ingelow calls the novel's final chapter "Failure," for the story, so full of Mopsa's development, still rests on Jack's ultimate failure. Mopsa now reigns in a happy new kingdom, yet she is filled with sadness because she knows Jack must depart. Though Ingelow does not explicitly explain what the "Failure" is, the final chapter opens with a poem that offers significant commentary on the novel's whole philosophy. Ingelow writes:

We are much bound to them that do succeed;
 But, in a more pathetic sense, are bound
 To such as fail. They all our loss expound;
 They comfort us for work that will not speed,
 And life – itself a failure. Ay, his deed,
 Sweetest in story, who the dusk profound
 Of Hades flooded with entrancing sound,
 Music's own tears, was failure. Doth it read
 Therefore the worse? Ah, no! So much to dare,
 He fronts the regnant Darkness on its throne. –
 So much to do; impetuous even there,
 He pours out love's disconsolate sweet moan –
 He wins; but few for that his deed recall:
 Its power is in the look which costs him all. (222)¹¹⁸

Ingelow uses the classical story of Eurydice and Orpheus to explain how failure often provides a better story than success does. Those who fail, she explains, "all our loss expound"; those failures provide examples for us so that we can sympathize with the

failure but also learn from it. Ingelow calls “life – itself a failure,” a rather dark line to open a chapter that should end a happy fairy tale. Why would she propose that life is a failure? Perhaps here her Evangelical beliefs also come into play, for she may have alluded to teachings in which Christians view life as temporary, a striving after, but an inevitable failure, especially without God’s grace. But, she implies, those very failures that separate us from God – or, in Jack’s case, from Fairyland and his desires – those failures do have elements of beauty, and we remember them because they instruct us.

The author of *Some Recollections* explains that Ingelow’s philosophy of life was one of optimism, even in the midst of failure. Interestingly, her poetry reinforces the perspective put forth at the conclusion of *Mopsa*. In “Consolation,” for example, she writes:

One launched a ship, but she was wrecked at sea;
 He built a bridge, but floods have bourne it down;
 He meant much good; none came, strange destiny!
 His corn lies sunk; his bridge bears none to town,
 Yet good he had not meant became his crown,
 For once, at work, when even as Nature was free
 From thought of good he was, or of renown,
 God took the work for good, and let good be. (*Poems* 637-638)

The author of *Some Recollections* interprets this stanza as an example of Ingelow’s philosophy, one embodied by her life and literature: “While our conscious efforts to do great things or good things so often end in piteous failure or disappointment, yet God gives our existence its due value and purpose in ways of which we do not dream, and possibly just because we cannot dream them” (67). This poem and its commentary have interesting parallels for *Mopsa*’s conclusion, for if the author was right, if Ingelow saw

failure as instructive, then Jack's return to the material world may be her way to show readers that more exists, even if they cannot dream it.

Significantly, Ingelow's poetic example of failure in *Mopsa* involves a failure of belief. Orpheus traveled to the Underworld and successfully won Eurydice's freedom, but his failure to believe that she was behind him, or to believe that he could wait to see her until they left, destroyed his success and his happiness. Had he been steadfast in his belief, they would have escaped together. This poem instructs readers on how to interpret Jack's failure at the novel's end. His failure, though, should not be forgotten, just as Orpheus's has not been. Instead, readers should remember it as a lesson about the importance of belief and how it will help overcome the separation of the material and the fantastic.

In the novel's final chapter, then, Jack demonstrates this failure of belief. After *Mopsa* becomes a new Fairy Queen, Jack calls to Jenny and asks to be taken home again. The further he gets from Fairyland, the more Jack feels "as if this had all happened a good while ago" (Ingelow 241). As Jack returns to his own yard and his own home, he looks in his window and watches his mother reading to his father. He thinks "that this was not in the least like anything that he had seen in Fairyland, nor the reading like anything that he had heard," and he begins "to forget the boy-king, and the applewoman, and even his little *Mopsa*" (Ingelow 243). Jack's return to the material world causes him to forget about the reality of his experiences in Fairyland. Jack did, after all, actually go to Fairyland. Unlike Alice, he does not dream his adventures, and Ingelow repeatedly emphasizes how Jack has traveled in time, not between worlds. Jack's lack of belief,

then, is his failure. He may think that the material world has no connection to what he saw in Fairyland, but the novel proposes that he is mistaken.

As Jack enters his home, he curls up on his father's lap and begins (in a very adult manner) to rationalize how silly his experiences in Fairyland must seem if he were to tell them: he "wondered what he would think if he should be told about the fairies in somebody else's waistcoat pocket" (Ingelow 243). Jack's growing disbelief in his experiences allows him to rationalize the failure of his care of the fairies (he allows one of them to be killed before Mopsa begins to grow). Next he comforts himself with thinking of "what a great thing a man was; he had never seen anything so large in Fairyland, nor so important" (Ingelow 244). By giving his father, and by extension himself, priority over Fairyland's inhabitants, he relieves himself of his feelings of shame and failure.¹¹⁹

Ingelow, however, is not content to let Jack's failure go so easily. The remaining three pages of the chapter demonstrate a subversive thrust to the novel, one in which Ingelow challenges readers to avoid Jack's failure and interpret her novel with charity. This challenge comes in the form of yet another story. Jack's mother, who has been reading since his entrance, looks up from her reading and does not seem "in the least surprised; or more glad to see him than usual" (Ingelow 244). She turns the pages of her book and begins to read a poem on *The Shepherd Lady*. Ingelow's poem, written in three parts, charts the changing position of a "dear white lady in yon high tower," who begins the poem asleep (Ingelow 244). The shepherd plays his pipes and tends the sheep, and he sends out his thoughts to the lady, asking her to come down. She does, and immediately

asks him what she can do for him (Ingelow 244-245). The shepherd here is obviously a Christ figure, the first and only one the novel proposes. The lady's move from sleeping to waking enacts a conversion scene in which she both becomes aware of the shepherd and seeks to do his will.

In the poem's second part, the shepherd answers the lady's question by charging her with the care of the sheep, invoking Jack's own earlier failure to care for the fairies. In part three of the poem, the lady becomes The Shepherd Lady through this command, and she tends the flock, looking ever for the shepherd's return. The Shepherd Lady's faithfulness that the shepherd will return also ironically points to Jack's failure to believe in the experiences he had in Fairyland; he does not remain steadfast in belief.

Where Jack sees no connection between this domestic scene of storytelling and the events of Fairyland, readers should recognize the obvious link of the importance of stories in both places. Stories in Fairyland were provocative and often dangerous, telling the future, and powerfully putting listeners to sleep and releasing their imaginations. Whatever the effect, storytelling meant transformation and knowledge. Stories were real, and as Mopsa told Jack, stories often were true in a way people in the material world no longer recognized due to their own separation from the circumstances of the story.

The novel's final chapter proposes that the story of Christ, in particular, has become just that – only a bedtime story for those who eschew the fantastic and fail to believe in the unity of the fantastic and the material. Jack's failure to interpret this unity, Ingelow implies, is analogous to the way in which readers may view a religious story (or even a mythological one, in the case of the Craken) as separate from reality. The unity of

Fairyland and the material world reflects the unity of a Christian history with a growing secular world, and Ingelow demonstrates this by uniting the two worlds through their reliance on story. Belief in the fantastic depends on the belief in received stories, and during a time in which belief in religious stories was waning, Ingelow's novel critiques readers' failure to recognize truth in stories, their failure to believe that stories can cohere with the modern world if readers would willingly read with charity.

The end of the novel, then, becomes much more subversive than one might expect. Jack, still expecting some kind of admonition from his parents, finds only comfort and a bedtime snack. He runs to his room, says his prayers, and "comfortably fell asleep. That's all" (Ingelow 248). As I mentioned above, I do not believe Ingelow expects that we will be content with a "That's all" so neatly concluded. Instead, I think the novel asks, "That's [not] all, [is it]?" Jack's failure to understand the story of the Shepherd Lady and his own connection to it further demonstrates the novel's challenge to readers. Will they too fail to believe? Will they too comfortably fall "asleep" and consider stories of the fantastic and supernatural only stories? *Will* that be all? The novel suggests that we should read stories charitably, even those that seem more and more like fables to the modern world, because they can contain truth that has only been separated from us by time. Jack's failure distinguishes his story, because we can learn from him. His failure instructs us in the unity of fantasy and reality through Ingelow's vision of "one world" bound together by belief.

Mopsa, the Fairy, then, does not tell a simple escapist fairy tale. It proposes a rather radical vision of storytelling and a philosophy of belief that confronts a growing

secular Victorian world. Ingelow asks readers to consider their origins and proposes a worldview in which stories must be privileged. In doing so, she claims a place for her own story as one of truth and revelation, for her novel suggests that the fantastic text can contain as much truth as one that focuses on the material world should readers learn to read with charity and recognize the unity of these two perspectives.

Ingelow's novel brings my project full circle by ironizing Coleridge's Wedding Guest through Jack. Where the Ancient Mariner changes the Wedding Guest through the fantastic, Jack remains unaffected. Where the Guest submits to the power of storytelling and perceives (some kind) of truth through his encounter with the fantastic, Jack the child remains inattentive and fails to believe. In both cases, as well as in *Phantasmion* and *Phantastes*, the literary fantasy privileges the problems of the unreal, interpretation, and literary belief. And in all cases fantasy works to affect readers, asking them to consider the implications of reading and storytelling after the tales conclude. Through a variety of rhetorical techniques, experimental Victorian fantasists explored the power of fantasy to wake readers' moral consciousnesses. These unique interpretive experiments allow us to observe how writers used the fantastic to explore philosophy, theology, and rhetoric just as fantasy entered its Golden Age.

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CHAPTER VII

ON FAIRY STORIES

The close of the nineteenth century signaled another shift in taste for fantasy. Separated from adult audiences as the “inverse” of realism, fantasy was written primarily for children even though “explicit moral lessons were rapidly becoming outmoded and the insistent moralizing of Victorian fiction for children had... become a standing joke and an obvious target for parody” (Briggs 172). The cultural attitude about the importance of imaginative play for children meant that fantasy addressed to them would celebrate pleasure and lightness rather than teaching moral lessons (Briggs 173). This difference led to the further separation of fantasy from the adult domain of reading, turning it into something “other” as “childhood came to be seen as a state distinct from and potentially opposed to being ‘grown up’” (Briggs 168). Fantasy tales took on a nostalgic tone as their writers looked back to childhood as something distant and irrecoverable. For example, Julia Briggs explains how Kenneth Grahame (*The Golden Age* 1895; *The Wind in the Willows* 1908) was “painfully aware of the distance between himself as a child and adult,” a stance that makes itself felt on the narrative level of his fantasies (174).

Not all fantasy authors wrote directly to children, however, even when they emphasized childlike imagination. E. Nesbit, for example, used a “double point of view” in her narratives (*Nine Unlikely Tales for Children* 1901) that addressed both children

and adult readers through the use of implied and omniscient narration (Briggs 175). As Briggs explains, “the more sophisticated reader can distinguish different landscapes [in Nesbit’s work], and this double point of view...adds richly ironic depths” (175). The use of parody, nostalgia, and irony, however, eventually moved fantasy from a mode that could open inquiry for readers to one that provided an idealistic retreat from encroaching modernism. Twentieth-century fantasy, in particular, became a “place of retreat for adults and of protection for children” as “war, change, and the threat of war and change made nostalgia and retreat even more attractive and urgent than before” (Hunt 195). Yet, the early experiments of the Victorian literary fantasists would not be lost permanently. In the twentieth century literary belief as a theory of both reading and writing fantasy returned in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. In “On Fairy Stories” (1938-39) Tolkien re-examined the purpose of writing fantasy by theorizing about how an author writes the fantastic in order to elicit literary belief in readers that creates desire.

Tolkien and his friend and contemporary C.S. Lewis both explored fantasy’s theory through their writing, though in different ways. Lewis relied more on allegory in most of his work (*The Chronicles of Narnia*, 1950-56, and *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 1933, for example), and he experimented with the science-fiction genre in his space trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, *That Hideous Strength*, 1938-1945). Allegory had not completely disappeared in fantasy, even if it had a more minor role than during the nineteenth century, and Lewis’s use of it in his own texts demonstrates a re-engagement with early interpretive strategies for structuring fantasy that he expected to affect his readers’ moral consciousness. Though Lewis did not practice the more experimental

interpretive strategies I have described in this project, he certainly felt their effects. Famously, he read MacDonald's *Phantastes* while an atheist and claimed it "fills for me the place of a devotional book" (Lewis 179).¹²⁰ Lewis, who would go on to become most well-known as a Christian apologist, recognized MacDonald as one of his primary influences later in his career. His response to MacDonald's fantasy was one he hoped to reproduce through his own work, though he chose more conventional interpretive strategies that eventually garnered him more criticism than praise due to changes in reading tastes; twentieth-century readers did not always appreciate obvious religious allegories.

Tolkien also saw the potential of fantasy to affect readers, though in a less obvious manner, much like the Victorian literary fantasists I have discussed in this project. He describes the process in detail in "On Fairy Stories," and this essay marks the conclusion of my examination of the theory of literary belief in the fantastic and the interpretive experiments authors employed in order to elicit this belief. I believe Tolkien demonstrates the way in which fantasy authors were quite conscious of the sophisticated interpretive strategies they used in order to affect readers. Additionally, his argument about the devaluing of the fantastic becomes especially important to my claim for a re-examination of texts marginalized by traditional criticism.

First, Tolkien distinguishes between two types of fantasies: those that need belief and those that do not. "It is at any rate essential," he writes, "to a genuine fairy-story as distinct from the employment of this form for lesser or debased purposes, that it should be presented as 'true'" (14). The best type of fairy-story must not end with the idea that

all has been an illusion or a dream, he claims, citing Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories as an example of what *not* to do when writing this type of fantasy (14-15). Yet Tolkien explains that the belief needed by readers does not mean credulity, but rather a literary belief in the world presented (37).

As I have claimed throughout this project, Victorian fantasists drew on Romantic philosophy articulated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in order to create experimental fantasies that engaged the problem of novelty and literary belief. I traced different interpretive strategies through Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" in order to test this theory as a viable reading and writing strategy as it manifests in experimental Victorian novels. Tolkien, however, further expands on Coleridge's definition of the "suspension of disbelief" to redefine fantasy's purpose within a more explicitly religious context.

While the writers I examined shared a common concern for waking their readers' moral consciousness through fantasy, Tolkien imagines this process as specifically related to the connection between Story (myth) and the creative act facilitated by the author's relationship to God. Rather than create a "willing suspension of disbelief," then, the author instead becomes a "sub-creator," one that reenacts God's original creativity by inventing a fantasy world: "[The author] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (37). Tolkien describes the need for internal truth and probability, or coherence and unity, for which Coleridge also argued (and which I discussed at length in Chapter Three). Through internal coherence, the

author makes possible a reader's literary belief in order for her to participate imaginatively in the fantasy he creates. For Tolkien, this occurs because the author participates in a divine act where he emulates God's creative impulse.

The author's spiritual role directly influences the way in which the fantastic affects readers. Tolkien explains how literary belief in the fantastic initiates a reader's desire for spiritual joy. "Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility," he writes, "but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded" (40-41, emphasis his). For Tolkien, this desire occurs as an author makes possible a combination of escape, consolation, and hope. He claims fantasy may restore hope to readers through the moment of *eucaastrophe* – the pivotal turn in the narrative where the reader realizes that the hope he thought was lost has been restored (68-69). He practices this philosophy in his *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1937-1949), in minor moments like when Strider is revealed as heir to Gondor's throne; and in more explicit turns for the better, such as the destruction of the ring in the midst of great suffering. These moments are not directly allegorical, but they contain the *eucaastrophe*, in which the narrative "turn" provides hope for readers, which should, ideally, awaken joy and desire.

Like his Victorian predecessors, Tolkien imagines fantasy as affecting the reader spiritually through her encounter with the unreal. Tolkien does not explicitly discuss how the author makes this joy possible, other than in terms of the *eucaastrophe*. As I have shown throughout this project, Victorian fantasists employed a variety of experimental interpretive strategies in order affect their readers, much in the way Tolkien describes.

These authors composed their texts aesthetically and structurally to initiate desire within readers, and this desire should transcend the text, affecting readers' moral consciousness.

For Tolkien, this encounter has a specifically Christian parallel, as a narrative that elicits hope and desire in readers does so because it mirrors the "Story" of creation and Christ's own *eucaastrophe*, the Resurrection (72-73). Fantasy, then, does not depart from realism if the real contains the supernatural already. In this way, Tolkien argues that fantasy will affect readers' moral consciousness, for the joy they experience at the story's *eucaastrophe* should cause them to seek this joy in the material world. Victorian writers also imagined this type of important moral work for their fantasy novels, though their narrative experiments often made them less coherent, and less successful, than Tolkien's own fantasies. Additionally, they often welcomed interpretive pluralism in their stories, even when drawing on personal Christian philosophy in their writing. For these Victorian writers, it mattered less what meaning the text produced than that it initiated inquiry. Any spiritual work begun by the text would not be completed by the author. Victorian fantasists would agree with Tolkien that the fantastic had a moral use, even if they valued pluralism in a way that he would later eliminate through an allegorical philosophy of writing.

In addition to articulating a philosophy for fantasy, Tolkien also includes an argument against what was already becoming a critical trend – the devaluing of fantastic literature as less serious, and therefore less important, than realism. "Many people dislike meddling with the Primary World," he claims, because readers prefer a recognizable depiction of the world due to its comforting stability (48). Those that align the fantastic

with irrationality, with madness, with dreaming, or with nonsense do not recognize its difficulty and its artistic qualities, he says (48). Tolkien argues for fantasy's importance on an artistic level, explaining that fantasy's "inner consistency of reality is more difficult to produce" than that of realism (48). Because fantasy has been misdirected to children, written poorly or "only half-seriously," he says, it has gained a reputation as being sub-par, when, in fact, it complements the real and reveals another dimension to human imagination (49). He concludes:

Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will make it. (55)

Like Tolkien, I believe fantasy has been devalued by readers that have a critical preference for Enlightenment-influenced texts, especially the mimetic, which leads to misreading of experimental fantasy work. These reading biases also influence the type of texts that are valued within the canon and determine what texts should be studied and how they should be read. Tolkien's conclusions about the importance of fantasy – and its difficulty – echo the concerns of experimental Victorian writers who imagined the fantastic as a place of important moral work much in the same way that their realist counterparts did, and recognition of their texts complicates our understanding of categories like "Romanticism," "Victorian," "realist" and "fantasy."

Throughout this project I have argued for a re-examination of experimental Victorian fantasy novels in order to demonstrate the way in which reading expectations have structured audience response, leading to a devaluing of texts that do not meet

predetermined criteria about what texts should do and how they should speak to readers. I believe texts like Sara Coleridge's *Phantasmion: Prince of Palmland*; George MacDonald's *Phantastes*; and Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa, the Fairy* have been overlooked by critics and marginalized within canonical studies simply because their authors decided to eschew traditional interpretive strategies and experiment with the way language could affect readers. Nevertheless, these texts can inform mainstream literary studies because they provide an alternate history to Victorian literature, one in which the realist tradition was not the only way that authors chose to show readers what was "real" about their world. Rather than view realism and fantasy as separate, or as opposite, literary modes, like Tolkien I find they function as complements to one another, as authors pursue similar goals of persuasion and belief through different interpretive strategies.

Victorian literary criticism traditionally focuses on realist texts, following a lineage established during the nineteenth century, when critics and readers aligned the use of fantasy with escapism and nonsense. Yet, as this project has shown, authors' choice to employ the fantastic as mode did not mean they assumed their texts would not remain philosophical or sophisticated. Rather, these authors imagined that the fantastic would expose textual artifice, guiding the reader toward a moral encounter that transcended the reading experience, leading to inquiry about the material world, even if this inquiry was produced through fantasy.

As the nineteenth century came to an end, realism itself gave way to an aesthetic movement that rejected conventional claims to knowable truth. Authors like Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde introduced readers to books without morals, philosophizing about texts

that would provide pleasure for readers, without the constraints of moralism or convention. If realists tried to establish a knowable, familiar world for readers, aestheticists removed the guiding moral action of this world in order to indulge the readers' desire for pleasure. Though realism and aestheticism often share the solidity of the "real" in their depiction of the world, their aims drastically differ.

Experimental Victorian fantasy bridges the gap between these two movements. Victorian literary fantasies of the kind this project describes use a different mode to awaken readers' moral consciousnesses; in doing so, they remain concerned with their readers' attitudes about the world, even though they choose to remove the reader from the real in order to more fully instruct her in how to perceive it. In this way, fantasists and realists share a common goal. They both recognize the problems inherent in communicating "truth" to readers through a subjective text. They differ in method, but they agree in aim.

Fantasists and aestheticists, though, also find points of agreement. Both use the aesthetic experience of reading (through pleasure or through discomfort) to affect their audiences. Fantasists recognize the way reading, on a structural level, can be manipulated to produce an aesthetic that destabilizes the text in order to produce the moral work they desire. While aestheticists would relinquish this moral drive, they shared with fantasists an interest in the way reading affects an audience.

A study of the way Victorian literary fantasies intersect with the more well-known realist and aesthetic traditions enriches our understanding of literary history. It also exposes the way in which fantasy texts have become devalued due to their mode. Fantasy

literature is drastically underrepresented within canonical literary studies, a point easily seen when examining standard anthologies. The absence of fantastic texts, or, the inclusion of texts that represent fantasy as nonsense or suitable only for children, obscures important experimental literary work that complicates our understanding of more canonical literary traditions, especially the way in which the distinction between the Romantic's focus on the imagination and the Victorian's sense of duty breaks down in the world of fantasy.

We can still observe the fantastic impulse in the detective novels of Wilkie Collins, in Charles Dickens's fairy tale *A Christmas Carol* (1843), in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1854) or in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). These works all draw on a tradition of suspended disbelief used to create reader participation in the text, a structural element explored by Coleridge, MacDonald, and Ingelow. Scrooge's discussion with Marlow, for example, about whether or not the ghost is real or "just a bit of mustard" evokes the problems of belief and communication with the unreal, though in a more traditional (less experimental) narrative framework. Dickens's tone, his stable narrative, and his incredible commercial success in both fantasy and realism make his story more acceptable for canonical studies, but this story employs the fantastic emphasis on belief, resulting in both Scrooge's – and, ostensibly, the reader's – moral development. In this way, the text echoes fantastic theory developed by its predecessors. By recognizing how central belief is to fantastic stories, we may re-examine more canonical texts like Dickens's in order to expose the way discourse about belief in the fantastic becomes central to the progress of story.

Yet experimental fantasies do not speak only to the tradition of literary criticism. Rhetorical philosophy can also benefit from an examination of how these authors imagine the way that language functions. In depicting and privileging the unreal, these texts emphasize the problems of communication between speaker and listener. The structural “flaws” of *Phantasmion*, the confessional mode of *Phantastes*, and the depiction of the need for charity in communication in *Mopsa* all prefigure contemporary rhetorical theories. The experimental nature of these texts, in fact, allows authors to use the world of fantasy to explore the problems of language well before contemporary post-modern theorists would articulate them.

The interpretive experiments of Victorian literary fantasists, then, do not exist as a separate tradition of Victorian literature. They are not the “underside,” the “repressed,” or the “other” world of Victorian experience. Rather, they are evidence of sophisticated experiments by authors that used their texts as a place to explore the ways in which an author might communicate the Victorian concern with the reader’s moral duty through a subjective, pluralistic mode. They understood that reading could affect readers, transforming them through an aesthetic encounter in which meaning within the text eluded them. Rather than despair at language’s plurality, at fantasy’s subjectivity, or at the failure of audiences to understand their interpretive experiments, these authors instead believed that the multiplicity of individual responses to their novels enhanced the readers’ literary experience. While they hoped for a moral response to the aesthetic encounter, these authors left the interpretive experience of reading up to the individual, and in doing so, they enriched the literary tradition by providing evidence of experimental work that

links Romantic, Victorian, Aesthetic, and even post-modern philosophies. It is my hope that situating these experimental literary fantasies as part of the conversation on the intersection of literature and theory may lead to other like studies, where experimental works may be re-examined in an interpretive context that redefines their value.

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NOTES

¹ See Davidson, Donald. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. His argument is about language and communication in general, not about fantasy texts or fantasy criticism.

² See also Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, page 3: "Any reader who makes even the most tentative of inroads into the vast body of critical material on fantasy literature will discover that, at least historically, by far the majority of this work concerns itself solely with issues of classification and categorization and the manner in which the generic limits which define and confine texts can be continually tightened and made ever more absolute."

³ I will say more about the connection between Victorian fantasy and children's literature below.

⁴ Of course, texts that do not use the fantastic also employ textual ambiguity to great effect. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is one of the most well-known examples. Christine Brooke-Rose argues that ambiguity of this sort is still connected to Todorov's *fantastique* and claims that the absence of clear fantastic elements results in displaced instances of the *fantastique* within more traditionally realist texts. See Brooke-Rose pages 63-65 for a discussion of how this occurs structurally, and see my Chapter Three for a discussion of my disagreement with Brooke-Rose about textual ambiguity and the production of textual meaning.

⁵ Armitt also notes this emphasis on boundaries. See *Fantasy Fiction* pages 51-52. I will also discuss this emphasis on internal unity in Chapter Three, in connection to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's theory of dramatic probability.

⁶ I want to be clear that Furst thoroughly complicates this claim by examining the fissures in the realist project. My explanation focuses on realists' goals in the historical moment of textual construction, rather than current critical analysis of the genre. For more information on how realists made persuasive claims to truth about reality, see George Levine's *The Realistic Imagination*, where he argues that the realists viewed reality in different ways as the nineteenth century progressed.

⁷ See also Sandner's "Theorizing the Fantastic": "Plato banishes poetry from his ideal Republic and dismisses anything resembling the fantastic as the worst sort of poetry, both unimportant and absurd, setting the tone for mainstream literary criticism ever after" (285).

⁸ This paragraph relies heavily on Hume's argument on pgs. 32-37.

⁹ She continues, "In its most crudely scientific formation, the [mimetic] novel is a social experiment; the author sets up a situation and lets his characters develop logically, and we watch their responses [as in scientific observation]" (38).

¹⁰ I admire Prickett's book, and I follow much of his work, especially on George MacDonald. I differ with him here on how he applies the terms "fantasy" and "imagination" more so than on his theories as a whole.

¹¹ Prickett argues that Gothicism and Romanticism influenced late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture so much that fantasy became internalized and gave rise to a literary counter-tradition to realism.

¹² Avery does not emphasize Locke's influence but disputes that he was seminal in childhood theory, arguing instead that he was only a "reflection of changing attitudes" (12). She locates changing attitudes in children's education as early as the 1670s.

¹³ Eleanor Sleath's novel *Glenowen or the Fairy Palace*, published in 1815, is considered the first sustained fantasy narrative according to Dennis Butts. I have been unable to obtain a copy of this novel at this point, since it is out of print and few copies exist in the United States. Those libraries that carry the novel do not let it circulate.

¹⁴ Butts does not mention Ingelow, but I add her to his list of those influenced by Romantic philosophy based on the argument of my project.

¹⁵ See also J.R.R. Tolkien's argument against the Alice books as "true" fantasy, in "On Fairy Stories."

¹⁶ See Mailloux 71.

¹⁷ I have not taken up the difference between Fish's "informed" reader vs. Iser's "implied" reader as Mailloux examines these closely. Readers who wish a further treatment of the differences in reader-response theory should read all of Mailloux's excellent overview.

¹⁸ Mailloux points out that Iser's theory relies on the notion of an independent text, much like New Criticism, even though his emphasis is ultimately on the reader's response to this text, and not on the text itself. See page 55.

¹⁹ In this project I will discuss narrative change in terms of how an author may use the fantastic to affect readers' moral consciousness. Doing so invokes narrative theories of ethics like those of James Phelan. I will not discuss Phelan's work in this project, primarily because Phelan focuses on realist literature, and he also claims that unstable narratives (like those I will examine) are limited in how they can convey an ethical perspective (see page 155). Importantly, he claims a "...narrative's capacity to explore the realm of ethics depends on its concrete particularity," which he aligns with realism (155). There are, however, interesting implications for ethical narrative theory that could be applied to fantasy theory, though this is beyond the scope of my present project, especially when he notes that open-ended narratives leave room for ethical choice, though, again, he focuses on realist texts (60).

²⁰ This theory of reading can be compared to Roland Barthes "expectation-disappointment" structure, also shared by Fish and Iser. In this structure, the author is assumed to "encourage expectations in his reader so that he can later disappoint them and use that disappointment to educate the reader's perceptions" (Mailloux 70). I believe the literary fantasy differs because the use of the fantastic in nineteenth-century literature was unprecedented, and therefore readers could have no expectations that the author could hope to disappoint.

²¹ See Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. II, p. 6.

²² All further references from Sander come from *The Fantastic Sublime*.

²³ All Coleridge quotations are from the poem unless otherwise noted.

²⁴ Netland also notes the submissive position the reader inhabits, though he does not connect it to the child-like. He says "the suspension of disbelief involves a submission to the text, yet this submission is not absolute, nor does it demand complete acquiescence to textual ideology. Rather, it demonstrates a willingness to engage with the text, to encounter the human presence in the narrative, to share in the dramatic experience though not necessarily to endorse everything in the text" (47). He is primarily arguing against Jerome McGann's claim that to believe in the poem implies complicity with its Christian ideology. See also McGann's "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner." *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 35-67.

²⁵ Quoted by Coleridge from his *The Friend*.

²⁶ Further Coleridge quotations are from *Biographia Literaria* unless otherwise noted.

²⁷ See also Vol. II, pgs. 133-134.

²⁸ J.L. Austin sees no paradox in the moment of performance, because, he argues, we only suspend our disbelief about the causal nature of language while viewing a play. We do not believe in the play's actual events, but we do not react to them as if they were real, because the only belief we have suspended is that the language enacted on the stage is being used to affect our reality. See Austin's *How to Do Things With Words*, pg. 22. My thanks to Stephen Yarbrough for directing me to Austin's work.

²⁹ Dorothy Morrill explains that this theory combines "...the idea that the mind may become so completely absorbed in the objects working upon it that the powers of comparison and subsequent judgment are suspended" with "...the idea that we are brought into this condition of mind by an act of the will" (Morrill 443). We should also not mistake Coleridge's emphasis on textual unity for a type of formalism. The author should aim for unity, but the text's success depends on the audience's perception of it – so this interaction is intersubjective, not objective.

³⁰ Before fully discussing the model Coleridge uses, I want to provide an interesting side-note by mentioning research done by Norman Holland, as he provides a neuro-psychological explanation for what occurs as readers experience a text. In "The Willing Suspension of Disbelief: A Neuro-Psychoanalytic View," Holland explains how the effect Coleridge describes actually occurs because of the way the brain functions when reading or watching a film. He divides our aesthetic reaction into four parts, all of which occur when we suspend disbelief in a literary text:

1. We no longer perceive our bodies;
2. We no longer perceive our environment;
3. We no longer judge probability or reality-test;
4. We respond emotionally to the fiction as though it were real. (2)

Holland goes on to explain in great detail how the different parts of the brain function during this process of suspending disbelief. First, and most importantly for the purposes of my thesis, he notes that our descriptions of this feeling of total immersion in an artwork signal "...a regression to the stage in infancy when, according to psychoanalytic theory, the child feels the boundaries between itself and mother as blurred, uncertain, and permeable" (2). In addition to this psychological regression, we also experience what Holland calls "habituation." His example is precise and worth quoting in full. He writes:

When you put your shoes on, they are a novel stimulus, and the neurons that carry information about the state of your feet up your spinal cord start firing rapidly: "Something new is happening down here." But as the stimulus continues unchanged, the neurons slow down to their normal firing rate, and no new information goes up to the brain. You simply become unaware of your shoes unless and until something new happens.

In the same way, when you sit in your armchair reading or in a theater seat watching, your body is giving you no new signals. All the novel stimuli are coming from the page or stage or screen in front of you. You therefore pay attention to the literary work, and you cease to be aware of your body. (3)

Your brain, in effect, shuts down that part of itself that is disposed to act in the real world. Holland believes, "We don't act as a result of art...We don't plan to do anything in the world as a result of what we are reading or watching" (3). He argues that the brain's primary purpose is "to move a body" (3), and the artistic experience asks us to remain physically still. When we do so, our concentration on the literary work allows us to become immersed in it as we forget our physical bodies in the act of perceiving. We suspend disbelief, however, only until we plan to move again. For, "as soon as we do plan to move...we lose our concentration. We are no longer at one with the book or drama....We have broken the willing suspension of disbelief" (Holland 3).

Because using our judgment in reality also involves moving our physical bodies through our environment, Holland believes that our lack of movement also suspends our need to test the reality of what we see. Therefore, we can enter the fictional world of the artistic work readily, as our brain does not engage that portion of itself that tests reality (4). Finally, he explains how we have real emotions for fictional characters and situations by noting that our brain works with two different systems, each one independent of the other. Although the “reality-testing” portion of the brain is at rest, the “emotion” portion remains responsive; the combination allows us to react emotionally to something we consciously understand to be fiction (4-5).

Significantly, Holland calls our reaction to art a regression. “The willing suspension of disbelief,” he explains, “takes us back to a time when our limbic [emotional] systems had begun to function, infancy, but our prefrontal cortices [reality-testing] had not...” (5). Suspension of disbelief may effectively and literally turn us into children again on a neuro-psychological level.

Holland, quoting Immanuel Kant’s theory of *Interesselosigkeit*, or “disinterestedness,” insists, “We may cry or laugh in response to what we are reading or watching, but we don’t plan to act on the world outside the work of art” (3). Yet, and this is key, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and their Romantic contemporaries staunchly declared that literature, poetry, in particular, had the power to transform readers’ souls. As audience members, we may not plan to act when we initially encounter an artwork, yet artists like Coleridge often created works intending that we would do just that.

³¹ See also Schulz, Max. “Samuel Taylor Coleridge,” listed in the Works Cited, which provides a bibliography of criticism on Coleridge.

³² McGann 35.

³³ Davies’s argument seems to rely on Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theory, in which he claims the reader must navigate shifting perspectives in the text in order to create meaning, though she does not refer to Iser in her article.

³⁴ She also cites Lawrence Lipking’s essay “The Marginal Gloss” to explain how the gloss acts as interpreter of the poem. Following his work, she claims, “The gloss frequently makes explicit what the narrative of the poem only infers” (262).

³⁵ She claims that through re-writing the text – in Roland Barthes’s terms of “writerly texts,” we become critics that can transform the text by creating meaning from it through our own interpretive activity.

³⁶ See Netland, for example: “we often forget that the poem is, at least on one level, about understanding – and responding to – an extraordinary tale” (39).

³⁷ He relies on Huntington Brown’s article in which he introduced the idea that there was a “gloss-writer,” a type of scholarly editor. See Brown, Huntington. “The Gloss of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.” *Modern Language Quarterly* 6 (1945): 319-24. See also Vincent Newy’s claim that “The gloss offers, in other words, a grounded perspective, favoring conceptual explanation and design – and also, in spite of the appeal to the supernatural, rationalization, for the supernatural agents are seen, not as the inexplicable, but as components of a knowable system...” (168) and K.M. Wheeler, who argues that the gloss is an ironic example of a bad reader. I will discuss Wheeler in more depth below.

³⁸ Netland claims that Coleridge’s own response to texts show a “vigorous engagement with the text” and that Coleridge’s lectures on literature emphasized “the affective power of literature (both as written discourse and dramatic performance), [and] anticipate some contemporary trends in reader-oriented hermeneutics.” His discussion of Coleridge’s own hermeneutical strategies aligns well with the role of the fantastic in literature, though Netland does not note this connection.

³⁹ He goes on to describe how these different readers model Coleridge's theory of Biblical hermeneutics, a persuasive argument.

⁴⁰ Perhaps we could also question if fantasy is therefore more hierarchal a mode than realism, if readers must "submit" to the author's storytelling authority in order to experience the tale. As mentioned above, I agree with Netland that submission to storytelling authority should not be equated with submission to ideology. As I have argued, the suspension of disbelief relies on returning to the perspective of the child – for the moment. We are always free to reject the fantastic should it ever lack psychological truth and probability; or should we ever feel that the author's own agenda destroys the unity of the fantasy. I view the power relations between author and reader as more benign, especially (as I will argue throughout this project) because many fantasy authors did not try to control textual meaning in a way that would imply control of the reader.

⁴¹ Anna Barbauld famously critiqued the poem for its lack of moral, and Coleridge responded that he felt the moral protruded too much. See Coleridge "May 31, 1830" in *Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. London: Routledge and Sons, 1884. 91.

⁴² She goes on to argue that the gloss represents a bad type of reader, one that undermines the aesthetic experience of art by reducing it to "happenings" and "things." See pgs. 51-64.

⁴³ The gloss, by contrast, tries to draw conclusions and present information about the poem's meaning, "thereby stripping the sensuous imagery of its mysterious power of arousing the mind."

⁴⁴ See Todorov 41.

⁴⁵ She also discusses M.M. Bakhtin, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida in her description of how texts become ambiguous for readers. Citing Bakhtin's research, she writes, "The dialogical text is essentially an ambiguous text, leaving characters and their ideologies open-ended. The monological novel, on the other hand, however complex...is essentially delimited by the author's controlling power...giving the reader a finished picture, letting him absorb it passively" (44). She notes how Lacan and Derrida focus on the way language produces the illusion of meaning. Since language is only a system of signs, in which meaning is constantly delayed, we can find no authority for interpretation. This introduces the problems of indeterminacy and pluralism. Ultimately, Brooke-Rose agrees with these theories, because she argues that the meaninglessness of the real is the reason why we use fantasy; it is another system, like language, that we use to try to create meaning. See pgs. 44-48. Since I believe that language does change readers and/or listeners, I disagree with Brooke-Rose (and these theorists) at a fundamental level that excludes their theories from my discussion, though I will address this problem of language as "separate" from reality in Chapter Six.

⁴⁶ She goes on to critique Todorov's pure *fantastique* because she claims the presence of the supernatural cannot be its primary quality. Instead, she suggests that an author produces textual ambiguity through the hermeneutic code, and he can do so in texts that do not contain the supernatural. Brooke-Rose argues that modernist texts (she focuses on Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*) often do not contain explicitly supernatural occurrences, but the ambiguity they create is the same as the *fantastique* Todorov describes. I will dispute this claim in the following paragraph.

⁴⁷ I think my difference with Brooke-Rose arises since I focus on fantasy texts while she uses Todorov's theories to discover displaced instances of the *fantastique* in non-fantasy texts See Brooke-Rose 65.

⁴⁸ "New Books Received" 559. See also the Preface to the 1874 edition, in which Henry Coleridge introduces the novel by describing it as "a kind of composition old-fashioned, out of date, and entirely at odds with the spirit and temper of the time we live in" (iv).

⁴⁹ See also “Phantasmion” in *Quarterly Review*.

⁵⁰ See, for example, an article called “Novelists as Poets” in *The Academy*: “...the best of [Sara Coleridge’s] poetic outcome is embedded in her romance, *Phantasmion*, where one alights unawares upon some really graceful numbers” (640).

⁵¹ *Examiner*, April 11, 1874.

⁵² See also Zipes’s “Spells of Enchantment: An Overview of the History of Fairy Tales” in *When Dreams Came True* for a complete treatment of the evolution of the oral fairy tale into published collections.

⁵³ See also Zipes *When Dreams Came True* 116.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the political and ideological implications of fairy tales, see Zipes’s *When Dreams Came True*.

⁵⁵ See also Lynette Hunter’s discussion of how allegory functions in *Modern Allegory and Fantasy*.

⁵⁶ See Zipes’s “The Flowering of the Fairy Tale in Victorian England” in *When Dreams Came True*.

⁵⁷ Of course we cannot equate allegory or the appended morals with complete sincerity. Readers may find satire within some fairy tales (though “Puss in Boots,” while humorous, is not satirical). But overall the conventions of the genre were solidified in such a way that readers knew exactly what to expect, and some reviewers even remarked on the interchangeability of their plots and characters. See “Fairy Tales as Literature” pgs. 48-49.

⁵⁸ See my Chapter Two, *Of Other Worlds*, for more information on the changing definitions of childhood that influence the development of fantasy and its audience.

⁵⁹ See also Zipes, “Catherine Sinclair,” 559. Catherine Sinclair used fantasy within a more realistic frame story in *Holiday House*, published two years after *Phantasmion* in 1839. Even though the fantasy she includes may be read more ironically than didactically, she still uses clear allegorical structures for readers, including character names like “Master No-book” and “Fairy Do-nothing.”

⁶⁰ “To Miss Arabella Brooke, July 29, 1837.”

⁶¹ See Mudge 14; 78, for example. This is one of Mudge’s general arguments that runs throughout his book.

⁶² ST Coleridge’s Notebook, No. 42, 4 September 1829.

⁶³ “16 August 1837.”

⁶⁴ “29 September 1837.”

⁶⁵ All references to Coleridge from here on are to Sara, unless otherwise noted, and all references to *Phantasmion* are from the 1837 edition.

⁶⁶ Though I do not use the psychoanalytic perspective, many critics like Lucie Armitt and Rosemary Jackson focus on how literary fantasies construct desire and how this demonstrates the author’s and/or reader’s encounter with desire and expression of it through the use of fantasy.

⁶⁷ We might also note the connection between the Fairy Potentilla's name and that which she reveals in Phantasmion: his use of fantasy helps him recognize his Potential.

⁶⁸ "May 31, 1830."

⁶⁹ "May 31, 1830."

⁷⁰ "May 31, 1830." As I explained in Chapter Three, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" lacks the typical closure found in truly didactic or moralizing tales. Even if S.T. Coleridge found the moral too obvious, the variety of criticism on the poem suggests that it resists closure and instead provokes interpretation.

⁷¹ "16 August 1837."

⁷² "To Miss Morris, 1848."

⁷³ "To Miss Morris, 1848."

⁷⁴ See, for example, where ST Coleridge writes "Evidences of Christianity! I am weary of the word. Make a man feel the want of it; rouse him, if you can, to the self-knowledge of the need of it, and you may safely trust it to its own evidence..."(272). *Aids to Reflection*, London: George Bell, 1884.

⁷⁵ "To Edward Quillinan, Esq." Sept. 10, 1850.

⁷⁶ "To Edward Quillinan, Esq." Sept. 10, 1850.

⁷⁷ "To Mr. Ellis Yarnall." August 28, 1851. See also, "To Aubrey de Vere, Esq." October 19, 1851: "But I do not pretend to maintain any particular reformed system as the very truth. I believe we have but approximations to absolute truth" (526).

⁷⁸ See Todorov 41.

⁷⁹ Dickens writes, "In an utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected....To preserve them in their usefulness, they must be as much preserved in their simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance, as if they were actual fact" (57). The essay is concerned with critiquing Cruikshank for adding in his own version of obvious didacticism to the classical tales, destroying (in Dickens's view) the original story. The very fact that Dickens was concerned with eliminating overt moralism signals a shift in reading taste.

⁸⁰ John Ruskin's essay "Fairy Stories" (1868) demonstrates the Romantic influence on Victorian perceptions of childhood. Ruskin writes, "A child should not need to choose between right and wrong. It should not be capable of wrong; it should not conceive of wrong....Children so trained have no need of moral fairy tales" (61).

⁸¹ All references by Raeper are to *George MacDonald* unless otherwise noted.

⁸² See *Athenaeum* where the editors claim MacDonald "seems to have lost hold of all reality" and that "One mistake is said to be permitted to every writer of books: Mr. MacDonald has made his." They also spend a long time explaining how allegory works and why MacDonald's work fails because it does not follow the rules of this mode.

⁸³ All MacDonald references are to *Phantastes* unless otherwise noted.

⁸⁴ The following summary draws on parts of Raeper's summary in his chapter on *Phantastes*.

⁸⁵ See MacDonald's "The Fantastic Imagination," which I will discuss below. I will also explain MacDonald's connection to Romanticism below.

⁸⁶ See MacDonald *Phantastes* 32.

⁸⁷ All quotes in this sentence are from this page, though they are taken from two different paragraphs.

⁸⁸ See Raeper's chapter on *Phantastes* in *George MacDonald*, in which MacDonald's wife tells an admirer of the novel that MacDonald "bade me tell you that he has no key to his little work but he is sure that in your appreciation of it, you must have felt some meaning and he has always told his friends to take any meaning they themselves see in it" (Qtd. in Raeper 145-146).

⁸⁹ Raeper describes how MacDonald "immersed himself both in the English and the German romantics – in Wordsworth and in Coleridge, in Goethe and in Schiller – and in Novalis who, above all, was his touchstone" (107).

⁹⁰ Raeper explains that MacDonald learned these philosophies through his own studies of the Romantics but also through his mentor F.D. Maurice. See pg. 240.

⁹¹ Francis R. Hart also defines confession as "personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self" (491).

⁹² Though Doody argues that confession does not depend on the speaker's guilt, his insistence on the speaker's overwhelming need to be accepted by the community to which he speaks limits the types of confessional narratives that he examines. I believe a narrator can make use of this confessional mode, as MacDonald does, but without the expectation that the listener must accept him in a communal relationship. Instead, because the confession is made through language, the speaker can recognize the possibility of being misunderstood while still attempting to induce belief in his listeners. Doody does acknowledge that the medium of language is "the common ground of confessions," but his focus is not on the problem of belief, but on the construction of the speaker in relationship to the listener. See page 13. He does also explain that the speaker may be unsuccessful in communicating with the listener. See pg. 36-37.

⁹³ Foster does not divide the confessional narrative arc into stages. These are my own divisions made for the ease of providing parallels to *Phantastes*.

⁹⁴ Prickett convincingly argues that MacDonald presents "a whole way of structuring experience, part fantasy, part realism, which go to make up the origins of the German *Bildungsroman*" ("Fictions and Metafictions" 117). He explains that one typically defines the *Bildungsroman* as "the novel of self-cultivation," one that depicts a hero who undergoes formative experiences that result in his maturity and (conventionally) his submission to a place within an established order ("Fictions and Metafictions" 117). Interestingly, Prickett notes that the original definition of the genre, proposed in the 1820s, "had been more subtly reflexive....the term should apply not merely to the *Bildung* of the hero, *but also to that of the reader*, whose personal 'formation' and self-development is fostered through involvement with the text" ("Fictions and Metafictions" 117, italics mine). Prickett, however, does not take up the development of the reader extensively and examines how MacDonald's novel fits within the more realistic *Bildungsroman* tradition. He also does not discuss confession.

⁹⁵ These epigraphs could also be read as a type of gloss on the novel's action, since many of them comment on the action in the chapters that follow. In Chapter Three I argued that the gloss in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" provides a model of the rational reader, compared to the Wedding Guest as a reader that

has suspended disbelief in the fantastic. In *Phantastes* the epigraphs do not cohere into a narrative perspective (or persona) that directly corresponds to that of the gloss in Coleridge's poem; however, they do invoke a larger inter-textual perspective for readers, who are asked to compare Anodos's experiences to a broader literary tradition. In this case, the epigraphs reinforce the artifice of the text, which asks readers who try to interpret his story to do so with wonder at the fantastic, but also to move beyond the text (as text) and into more personal self-examination (i.e. non-literary). See Prickett's "Fictions and Meta-fictions" for a longer treatment of the importance of the epigraphs.

⁹⁶ See Rabkin 32-33 and 54-55.

⁹⁷ Gunther emphasizes how the meta-textual references of the narrative enable its transcendent quality, but I find the confessional mode reinforces this drive toward textual transcendence. See page 58 and Gunther's "The Multiple Realms," where he discusses the purpose of Anodos's experiences: "The purpose is always the same: to gain understanding of present experiences, an understanding which then gives direction to the transcendence of those experiences" (183).

⁹⁸ For more on the spiritual longing produced by the text, see Manlove's *Modern Fantasy*. Manlove discusses *Sehnsucht* in "The Circle of Imagination," and *Modern Fantasy*. Also, Gunther does mention Anodos's shifting role from narrator to author to character in a story, but he does not discuss how Anodos may be a model for readers. See Gunther's "The Multiple Realms" 187.

⁹⁹ Again, we should note that one of his main activities in the Palace was to spend days in the library reading – an unlikely activity for a traditional protagonist.

¹⁰⁰ Manlove in "The Circle of Imagination," also notes the connection between Anodos and the childlike perspective, but he argues that Anodos must "learn how to unite childlikeness with true consciousness," and he does not discuss the implications for readers in Anodos's childlike construction of himself. See pg. 61.

¹⁰¹ MacDonald 5, 14, 34, and 59, respectively, though there are many examples. Manlove's "The Circle of Imagination" also points out that Anodos's childlike position is emphasized by his dependence on "mother-figures." Where Manlove argues that Anodos must move away from this position, I would argue that continuing in this childlike position is essential in depicting a model for readers to follow as they attempt to understand and participate in his experiences. See pg. 65-67 for Manlove's argument about maternity and maturity, and pgs. 67-68 for his argument that MacDonald's narrative structure is, like Blake's, a spiral form: "one must move from innocence to experience...but thence to a higher innocence which is a return at a different level to the childlike state."

¹⁰² He goes on to argue that, unlike many Romantics, MacDonald believed in the importance of the imagination because he saw it as "the dwelling-place of God in men, and hence the fount of absolute rather than possibly subjective truth." See pg. 56.

¹⁰³ Gunther also discusses this scene in "The Structure," but his focus is on how the discussion of fairy tales marks the text as generically self-conscious. He does note: "In fact whether we inhabit Fairy Land or 'normal reality' depends on what we are....This is as true for us the readers as it is for Anodos on his journey. The reading of the text can open us to sacred energy or function on the level of gross materialism." See pgs. 48-49. Gunther's focus is on explicating the underlying narrative structure of the novel, so this comment, central to my argument, is only an aside in his larger discussion of the blending of fantasy and 'reality' in the novel.

¹⁰⁴ Aligning himself with deconstructionist criticism, Foster reads confession as primarily a reaction to the alienation we may experience when attempting to express the self in language. He believes, "the act of

confession provides a compensation in the power it establishes over another” (11). Writers who use a confessional mode expose a reader’s ignorance in order to induce a desire for truth. In doing so, they gain the reader’s complicity in the drive toward Truth in the text. Foster explains:

In the activity of interpretation, a reader will almost inevitably find the text to be a confirmation of his own thoughts, both happy and fearful (or an almost personal attack on him, which amounts to the same thing). If the activity of the writer is motivated by a desire to confess his own sense of loss and desire, the reader will find himself engaged in the same motivations, though he may not recognize that the history he strives to comprehend becomes increasingly his own, not the writer’s. The writer’s work, in short, becomes the field on which the reader attempts to realize himself; or, as Hegel writes, ‘to obtain through their action the consciousness of their unity with reality.’ (12-13; Hegel 234)

Foster goes on to make fascinating claims about the resistance readers have to finding themselves already in texts, a threat that he claims “requires readers to become complicit with the motivations of the writer” (13). His argument has interesting implications for MacDonald’s project that are beyond my current project.

¹⁰⁵ See Raeper 321: Diamond, from *At the Back of the North Wind*, “emerges as a stained-glass Victorian emblem of perfection.”

¹⁰⁶ The article is on American children’s literature, but MacLeod explains: “Children’s books were always a reliable source of income for publishers, the more so as fiction became increasingly acceptable in the children’s markets” (129).

¹⁰⁷ See Knoepflmacher, in particular.

¹⁰⁸ See also Jennifer Greer.

¹⁰⁹ U. C. Knoepflmacher also notes this difference in “Sundering Women from Boys: Ingelow’s *Mopsa the Fairy*” in *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity*.” See page 293.

¹¹⁰ Knoepflmacher comes closest to understanding Ingelow when he notes that she “...prefers to recombine opposites” and “...she can simultaneously identify herself with both fantasy and anti-fantasy...” (301), though he insists on her division of the two worlds.

¹¹¹ Greer also notes that the poem indicates the fantastic’s familiarity. See page 176.

¹¹² Ingelow and Rossetti were friends during their lifetime and Ingelow certainly knew Rossetti’s poem. See Peters 67.

¹¹³ Readers interested in the ways Ingelow made light, somewhat, of her Evangelical beliefs can also look at Peters’s description of Ingelow’s reaction to a “friend’s strict Puritanism [which she found] slightly ridiculous” (26). Likewise, the writer of *Some Recollections of Jean Ingelow* mentions that though Ingelow followed her strict Christian upbringing, she had many friendships with people who did not share her views, including John Ruskin, Christiana Rossetti, and Alfred Tennyson (74). I mention these in order to show that Ingelow’s views should not be used as evidence of a limitation in her writing, and that *Mopsa*, in particular, depicts a writer willing to explore new ideas, rather than retreat from them.

¹¹⁴ See his discussion of Jack’s need for the stability of the material world, pgs. 303-304.

¹¹⁵ See, for example, the apple-woman’s comment that “humans call their history fable” (133).

¹¹⁶ See, for example, Jack's encounter with the Ravens and water snakes on page 46. The water snakes also reappear at times during Jack's journey with Mopsa to her new kingdom.

¹¹⁷ For more on the difference between the "willing suspension of disbelief" versus submission to ideology, see my Chapter Three: Only Not to Disbelieve, especially the discussion of John T. Netland's article.

¹¹⁸ The use of poems to open all the chapters, much like those in *Phantastes*, could be read as a type of gloss on the narrative, acting as yet another meta-textual allusion to Coleridge's poem, though, as in *Phantastes*, the epigraphs do not cohere into a narrative persona as Coleridge's gloss does.

¹¹⁹ See Ingelow 242: After Jenny leaves Jack outside his home, Ingelow describes how Jack feels "shy and ashamed." I would argue this is because he does not understand how to interpret the two seemingly disparate "worlds" of the fantastic and material into one world in which each makes sense together.

¹²⁰ Diary Entry dated 11 January 1923.