

Making Wishes Innocent: *Peter Pan*

John Griffith

Peter Davies, the boy whose name suggested "Peter" for James Barrie's hero, knew first-hand what went into the making of *Peter Pan*. He had watched the shy, moody and oddly aggressive Barrie befriend him and his brothers more out of a need for playmates than for sons, and he had seen the story of Peter Pan emerge from Barrie's obsession with youth, play, and brittle, airy fantasy. Thus aware of both the charm and the emotional sources of Barrie's work, Davies called it a "terrible masterpiece."¹

The work quickly came to be regarded as a classic, and this has meant, among other things, that most people have lost sight of what is terrible about it. Assisted by Walt Disney's movie-makers and uncounted editors, abridgers and illustrators, the story of Peter Pan has been enshrined as a cheerful, whimsical celebration of childhood, a story about flying and swordflights and other adventures, with a little puppy-love interest thrown in on the side. But in the form Barrie himself gave to the story, it is more than that; it is a work of classic fantasy which insists on its very unreality and reveals the psychological sources from which such a deliberately insubstantial fantasy springs.

Barrie's fantasy world, "the Neverland," is first presented as part of "the map of a person's mind,"² created from the welter of conscious and unconscious material stored there. It is an ambiguous place: one part of the psyche desires and therefore creates it; another part denies and retreats from it, insisting it is only make-believe, when it threatens to become too real. The conflict of desire and fear which Barrie's characters feel may appear to be the classic dilemma of children's literature: the conflict between staying home and running away. And the adventures of the Darling family may seem similar to those of Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island* or the children in the Narnia Chronicles. But the Neverland is, in a

subtle way, much more dangerous. The worlds of Treasure Island and Narnia do not threaten or lure the characters in quite the same way. The Neverland is more disturbing in a sense because it is too desirable. And therefore Barrie must deny it all the more emphatically.

For, in Barrie's mind, the issue of whether to fly away or stay at home was really settled before the story ever began. Any biography of him shows that the idea of ever really detaching himself from his home and mother would have been unbearable. His imagination had committed itself absolutely to the image of the faithful child who would remain a child. Therefore the departures had to remain sheerest game and make-believe. Moreover, Barrie undercut the fantasy because he apparently could not bear its implications. For in the Neverland there exists for him a mother-wife figure whom he can't, even there, embrace and a villain of a father he can slay. Such visions were very likely too frightening for him to stand by, so that as soon as he hinted at them he had to repudiate them. And since he could neither fulfill them nor get rid of them, he was immobilized.

That is why the fantasy of flying to the Neverland takes the form it does in *Peter Pan*. Barrie was plagued all his life, and quite consciously, by an excessive concern for his mother's affection. When he was six years old, his thirteen-year-old brother David, his mother's acknowledged favorite among her ten children, died in an ice-skating accident, and as a result his mother suffered a nervous collapse. James set himself the impossible task of replacing his dead brother in her affections—by way of “playing physician,” as he put it, to heal her of her debilitating grief. From his seventh year on, his whole life resolved itself—again, quite consciously—into a prolonged campaign for his mother's love; the desire to please and amuse her was the first commandment of his existence. “Wait till I'm a man,” he recalled crying to her, “and you'll lie on feathers.”¹

She enthralled his imagination. The stories she told him about herself as a girl became the obsessive subject of his fan-

tasies and his writing. In *Margaret Ogilvy*, the biography he wrote of her after her death, Barrie frankly admitted, "The reason my books deal with the past instead of the tale I myself have known is simply this, that I soon grow tired of writing tales unless I can see a little girl, of whom my mother has told me, wandering confidently through the pages. Such a grip has her memory of her girlhood had upon me since I was a boy of six."⁴ He joked sadly about his utter inability to create any major female character in his fiction who did not directly resemble her. All his life, the women he liked best were young mothers with children. But the omnipresent image of his mother prevented his achieving adult sexuality and parenthood himself. His own marriage ended in divorce after fifteen childless years; his wife revealed to friends that Barrie was impotent and that their marriage had never been consummated.

Barrie's excessive attachment to his mother comes as no surprise to anyone who has read *Peter Pan*, with its rhapsodic effusions on the glory of mother love.⁵ The same exaggerated concern for his mother which generated those passages generated the fantasy of the Neverland—and generated, too, the need to insist that the Neverland is not real. For, on the one hand, the Neverland is the product of a half-hearted wish for a world away from the tempting, guilt-producing influence of a mother about whom one cares too much. In a fundamental way, it is conceived as a world without mothers; its basic business goes on without them: exploring, fighting, running risks—things which boys do away from home. Peter has come there to escape his own mother; the Darling children come as an elaborate way of teasing their mother by their absence. But, on the other hand, the fantasy of a motherless world is ultimately impossible for Barrie. Appealing as it might be to project an island free from the tensions of his relationship with mother, his attachment for her is still the greatest principle of his thinking and wishing. A world without the mother on whom his deepest desires are fixed is miserably incomplete; it is no fun at all. In short, a mother must be imported; and Peter immediately fetches one. Thus the primary intention of the

Neverland—to be a world free from the anxieties of the mother-fixation—is immediately compromised, since Barrie’s imagination is so thoroughly infused by that fixation.

Peter’s own attitude toward mothers is a clear expression of this simultaneous wish to be free of their bothersome presence, and to have their unlimited devotion. “Now, if Peter had ever quite had a mother, he no longer missed her,” says Barrie. “He could do very well without one. He had thought them out, and remembered only their bad points” (p. 142). When he meets Mrs. Darling at the beginning of the story, he gnashes his teeth at her; when he finds Wendy grown up and a mother at the end of the story, he gives “a cry of pain” and “[draws] back sharply” (p. 215). Yet at the same time he inarticulately craves a mother. He brings Wendy back with him in the first place to mother him and the lost boys; when he returns in the last chapter, he announces, “I came back for my mother, to take her back to the Neverland.” “He does so need a mother,” the new little girl Jane says. “‘Yes, I know,’ Wendy admitted rather forlornly; ‘no one knows it so well as I’” (p. 219).

The little girls Peter takes back to the Neverland are, of course, always to be his make-believe mothers, not his real one; that is important to Peter and to Barrie. Why this should be so is easy to understand. It is not simply that a real mother can boss you around and force you to grow up, as Peter says; in his very running off to the Neverland Peter has shown that real mothers don’t have that kind of authority over him. There are differences more important than this between real and make-believe mothers; and Barrie makes it clear that they have something to do with sexual desire.

Sex is bound to be a worrisome subject for a person emotionally overburdened by the love of his mother. He faces the terrifying possibility that his passionate feeling for her will shade toward erotic desire—and that is absolutely taboo. He knows he must not feel what he is afraid he does feel. Barrie’s fantasy handles this precarious wish/fear with great ingenuity. He has Peter choose for his mothers a series of girls, not quite women themselves but on the verge of becoming so. He brings

them back to the Neverland to be his mother—but, once there, they play house, with Peter taking the part of the husband. All along, Barrie reminds us that this is all in play; the girl is not really Peter's mother, nor is she really his wife. Hence the incest-taboo is not really being broken. Barrie's fantasy does include a degree of eroticism, but it is assigned only to the girl/woman, never to the boy. *His* innocence is preserved, immaculate. Consider this exchange between Peter and Wendy, which occurs while they are pretending to be the parents of John, Michael and the lost boys. Peter suddenly draws himself up.

He looked at her uncomfortably; blinking, you know, like one not sure whether he was awake or asleep.

'Peter, what is it?'

'I was just thinking,' he said, a little scared. 'It is only make-believe, isn't it, that I am their father?'

'Oh, yes,' said Wendy primly.

'You see,' he continued apologetically, 'it would make me seem so old to be their real father.'

'But they are ours, Peter, yours and mine.'

'But not really, Wendy?' he asked anxiously.

'Not if you don't wish it,' she replied; and she distinctly heard his sigh of relief. 'Peter,' she asked, trying to speak firmly, 'what are your exact feelings for me?'

'Those of a devoted son, Wendy.'

'I thought so,' she said, and went and sat by herself at the extreme end of the room.

'You are so queer,' he said, frankly puzzled, 'and Tiger Lily is the same. There is something she wants to be to me, but she ways it is not my mother.'

'No, indeed, it is not,' Wendy replied with frightful emphasis. (p. 133)

Peter and Wendy's dual relationship as son-and-mother and husband-and-wife is not the only one that needs to be safely insulated in make-believe. Peter's relationship with Captain Hook is another. The climactic event of the Neverland adven-

ture, of course, is that Peter brings their ancient conflict to an end by killing Hook. On the face of it, there isn't anything especially taboo about a hero's killing a storybook villain like Hook. But if one observes how Barrie has imagined him, one sees that Hook's death at Peter's hands is indeed an event which must be kept make-believe.

For Barrie establishes a clear connection between Hook, that wicked, unfamilied man who "has no little children to love him," and Mr. Darling, Wendy's father, the only other man with any prominence in the story. Barrie stipulated that the same actor should play both Hook and Darling on the stage, and the two characters are crucially alike. In the first place, neither of them is really grown up. Darling "might have passed for a boy again if he had been able to take his baldness off" (p. 195); and when Hook goes to his death in the duel with Peter, he is mentally a schoolboy still; in his mind he is "slouching in the playing fields of long ago" (p. 190). And not only are they boys, but they are bad boys—cheaters and sulks who lack good form and who try, by unfair means, to steal attention and respect. Darling is obsessed with having the good opinion of his neighbors, his children, and his wife, but he does nothing to deserve it. He throws a tantrum when he cannot tie his tie, he cheats in the medicine-taking treaty with Michael, he uses his remorse over the children's absence to get attention for himself by moving into the kennel. Hook, too, cheats and sulks (he calls it brooding) and behaves like a petulant child. In one episode, just after Peter has made the noble gesture of giving Hook a hand up so they can fight on the same level, Hook bites him. In another, he violates the "unwritten laws" of romantic warfare by attacking the redskins rather than waiting for them to attack him. Like Darling, he struts and fumes in an effort to make people look up to him, he postures, dresses splendidly, and he lords it over his crew. But all his concern for good form is vain—for "was it not bad form to think about good form?" (p. 169)

Whimsically but insistently, Barrie emphasizes that these men compete with the boys for the mothers' favor. Darling

rivals the children bumblingly and indirectly, pretending not to, revealing his jealousy only in sporadic outbursts; he wheedles and whines for the motherly attention that Mrs. Darling gives spontaneously to her children. Hook, who hates the boys openly and nakedly, tries to kill them, attempting to steal Wendy to be his own mother. And it is a great satisfaction in Barrie's fantasy to see Peter put the men's ridiculous aspirations to rout. Hook, of course, he kills, rescuing Wendy from his clutches and then spurning him with his foot. He registers his victory over Mr. Darling when he casually takes "the sweet, mocking kiss" from Mrs. Darling's lips, a kiss which Mr. Darling had tried and tried in vain to get.

Obviously Barrie is not as nervous about the fantasy of a boy killing the father-like rival as he is about the boy's becoming the mother's husband; he feels no need to render Hook's death doubly make-believe as he has done with the marriage of Peter and Wendy. It is sufficient that Hook dies in the Neverland. (Barrie does emphasize the unreality of his death by mentioning that, within a year of its happening, Peter has forgotten all about it.) The saving power of make-believe does its work. The boy may freely perform the deeds in the Neverland which would destroy him in the real world—because in the real world he would have to face the forbidden nature of his desires, and feel guilty about them. That is the great magic of the Neverland: it is a place for people who are "gay and innocent and heartless"—that is, free of guilt.

What Barrie's Neverland demonstrates, then, is one of the primary values of make-believe. Make-believe is the power of the mind to create its own psychologically insulated place—"for the Neverland is always more or less an island" (p. 19)—in which one can act out, symbolically and therefore recklessly, the desires which the real world denies him. There is no penalty to pay, because make-believe actions don't count.

To call this an escape from the real world is accurate enough, in one sense; but in another it is exactly wrong, since ultimately those very concerns from which the mind most eagerly desires to free itself become the preoccupations of the fantasy-world

itself. In his eagerness to create a pleasing fiction, this kind of fantasist creates a mirror-image of the real world—the real world, that is, as it appears in his own mind.

Not all fantasy is of this sort, of course; the fantasy I am discussing is the kind produced by writers—like Barrie, Carroll and Andersen—who create out of a discernible need to arrogate the fantasy-rights of children as a way of expressing, in sportive modes, their own troubled thoughts. For this purpose, the sportiveness is of special importance, since it is the means by which disturbing feelings can be made pleasurable. Such fantasy asks at every point *not* to be taken seriously, *not* to be believed in. It emphasizes the absurdity or the arbitrariness or the insubstantiality of its surface details—and thereby muffles its deeper meanings. In introducing a chapter on the mermaids' lagoon in the Neverland, for instance, Barrie writes:

If you shut your eyes and are a lucky one, you may see at times a shapeless pool of lovely pale colours suspended in the darkness; then if you squeeze your eyes tighter, the pool begins to take shape, and the colours become so vivid that with another squeeze they must go on fire. But just before they go on fire you see the lagoon. This is the nearest you ever get to it on the mainland, just one heavenly moment; if there could be two moments you might see the surf and hear the mermaids singing. (p. 107)

Literally, this means that the lagoon is an optical illusion, but what Barrie is doing here is describing the quality of evanescence. All through his story, incidental details have the same qualities, which serve to make things diminutive and insubstantial. The mermaids play rugby with “bubbles made in rainbow water”; the lost boys wear animal skins “in which they are so round and furry that when they fall they roll”; the chimney of Wendy's house is made by knocking the bottom of John's hat out and clapping the hat on the roof; even Hook smokes two cigars at once “in a holder of his own contrivance.” These and a hundred other minutiae emphasize how unserious, and therefore inconsequential, and therefore in-

nocent, the events of the story are.

It is ironic that this kind of whimsy should be considered especially appropriate to children's literature, when children generally show less appreciation for it than adults. It is the rhetoric of lovers, stage magicians and jolly uncles. Children don't indulge in it themselves very much, and they don't particularly seek it out in books. The most popular kids' fiction—like the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series', the Tarzan books and so on—are notable for their rather ponderous seriousness, their avoidance of Barrie's arch "Let us now kill a pirate, to show Hook's method" kind of narrative. All the canny modernizers, abridgers and popularizers of *Peter Pan* recognize this. They leave out the whimsical trimmings—the addresses to the reader, the entirely ornamental details—and keep the plot: the buffoonery and humiliation of Mr. Darling; Peter's taking Wendy to the Neverland to play at being wife and mother; the children's learning to fly; the feud with Captain Hook and his defeat; the children's triumphant return at last to Mrs. Darling's waiting arms. It seems that ordinary readers share enough of Barrie's interest in the fantasy of a child who defeats the father and plays house with the mother to be attracted by his story; but they don't need the camouflage Barrie provides. Barrie sensed the "wickedness" of his fantasy much more strongly than most of his readers do, and instinctively took steps to render the story exaggeratedly innocent. In *Peter Pan*, whimsy, wit and fantasy are put to one of their most important psychological uses—rendering the unthinkable harmless.

Barrie's notorious remark that "Nothing that happens to us after the age of twelve matters very much" also means that everything that happens to us after the age of twelve matters too much. What made childhood so attractive to him was that children are permitted to make-believe. Done in the spirit of play, what they do doesn't have to matter at all. They need not be guilty. They are only playing.

NOTES

¹Davies' phrase is in a commentary he wrote on a private collection of Barrie's letters; see Janet Dunbar, *J. M. Barrie: The Man Behind the Image* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), p. 165.

²*Peter Pan* (1911; rpt. Harmondsworth: Puffin-Penguin, 1968), p. 19. Subsequent quotations from the story will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³*Margaret Ogilvy*, (New York: Scribner's, 1897), p. 207.

⁴*Margaret Ogilvy*, p. 25.

⁵Three psychological interpretations of *Peter Pan* which are worth consulting but which offer emphases different from mine are Harry M. Geduld, *Sir James Barrie* (New York: Twayne, 1971), pp. 53-70; M. Karpe, "The Origins of Peter Pan," *Psychoanalytic Review* 43 (1956), 104-110; and Penelope Schott Starkey, "The Many Mothers of Peter Pan: An Explanation and Lamentation," *Research Studies* 42 (1974), 1-10.

John Griffith is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Washington. His primary field of specialization is American literature. He has published a number of studies on children's classics and is now compiling an anthology of children's classics to be published by Macmillan in 1980.