FOREVER AT PLAY IN J.M. BARRIE'S *PETER PAN*

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Abstract

Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on carnival are the framework of an analysis of two Peter Pan texts by J.M Barrie, the 1904 play *Peter Pan* and its first novelisation in 1911, *Peter and Wendy*. This paper highlights carnivalesque elements in the two texts, with emphasis on the deployment of textual play and on the intricate treatment of the subject of game-playing for adults and children alike.

Keywords: carnival, Peter Pan, games, narrative play, textual play.

"Peter Pan" is a famous hero of children bedtime stories and abridged books, we know that! Disney has rendered him in animation and imprinted his cartoon image onto the minds of audiences worldwide. Hollywood has made a number of films about him, privileging his antagonist in the 1991 production, *Hook* (directed by Steven Spielberg), *Tinker Bell* in the Disney Fairies series started in 2008, or romanticising Peter and Wendy's relationship in P.J Hogan's 2003 *Peter Pan* production. I will go back to the original play and novel to trace carnivalesque aspects in the author's treatment of form and content, in view of exposing the writer's means of deferring closure and securing the text's resilience for future generations.

In 1904, at York's Theatre in London, the tree-act play *Peter Pan or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* was performed to its first audience. Four years later, J.M. Barrie added *An Afterthought* to the play, later to be published as *When Wendy Grew Up*. In 1911, Barrie's novelized version of the play, *Peter and Wendy*, was published. According to White and Tarr, "the title *Peter and Wendy* was changed to *Peter Pan and Wendy* in 1924 and later became simply *Peter Pan*, thus usurping the title of the play" (2006:x). The introduction of a narrator adds a dimension to the story of the play, as well as foregrounds details which are only to be found in the stage directions in the play script.

The present paper will refer to the 1928 published play as *Peter Pan* and to Barrie's 1911 novelized version as *Peter and Wendy*. Where my discussion considers both texts, they will be referred to as "the Peter Pan texts". A reading of Barrie's play script and novel soon reveals nuances, and even defining features, that have been pushed to the background in some of the most popular representations of the story. The main characters being mostly children, the existence of Tinker Bell and other fairies, and the prevalence of make-believe seem quite enough to relegate the texts to the category of children's literature. Yet, the texts deal with contentious matters, and in particular engage with aspects of a developing modernity, in ways that go far beyond the range of children.

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In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, *Rabelais and His World* and some of his other works, M. Bakhtin explores the evolution and transformation of the carnival spirit. He significantly demonstrates how the energies of a form of popular culture, one that has nothing to do with writing, can be distilled and channelled into a literary vessel, particularly, according to Bakhtin, into "the novel". He calls this "transposition of carnival into the language of literature the carnivalization of literature" (Bahktin 1984:122), "that is, the determining influence of carnival on literature and more precise on literary genre" (1984:122).
In ancient Rome, the main type of carnival was the saturnalia (Bakhtin 1984:129) while in the Christian tradition, carnival refers to the "few weeks of festivity that precede Lent" (Dentith 1995:65). The practical concern of preventing wastage, along with the completion of harvesting after a laborious season, provided the incentives for a carnival as a period of consumption and merry-making. The commoners would engage in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the "dualistic ambivalent ritual" (1984:124) of "mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king" (1984:124), electing a fool, clown, beggar or any other figure inept for power to be the carnival king, under the licence of a holiday relaxation of normal rules. By mocking and parodying figures of authority, the carnival king delivered judgment on them, and was in this way a subversive voice of the people, but a voice contained within the limits of carnival.

1. **Formal twists**

I will argue that the Peter Pan texts are carnivalesque in terms of form, illustrating the way the play *Peter Pan* plays with the conventions of theatre. In 1904, when it was first staged, it was surreal and unconventional in that it had characters fly across the stage in harnesses, challenging the limits of theatrical space. It featured an anthropomorphic dog at a time when realist, sedate drawing room comedies were in vogue. Moreover, the play breaks with the realist illusion and does away with the fourth wall, inviting the audience to join in the process of artistic production by having Peter ask the audience to clap their hands if they believe in fairies, to save Tinker Bell from dying. This is a step towards how "In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act" (Bahktin 1984:122). In being invited to clap, audience members young and old display child-like behaviour. This is an assault on realism and the conventions of realist theatre as the breakdown of the fourth wall shows the artificiality of the play (to remind the audience that they are witnessing a drama in a theatre anticipates the Brechtian A-effect), while at the same time inviting them to respond to its characters as though they were real – really capable of dying, for example – as a child might do. The audience become involved in the performance, in as much as the fate of Tinker Bell seems now to depend on the extent to which they are willing to assume the role of children. It is a thoroughly carnivalesque moment of extravagant play with, and exposure of, the conventions of theatrical mimesis.

Furthermore, Barrie can be seen to have been deviating from mainstream theatre by trying his hand at pantomime. The play becomes carnivalesque in the sense that it draws on the popular-cultural phenomenon of the pantomime by borrowing elements from it, thus

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bringing closer together theatrical subgenres – mainstream theatre and pantomime for the masses. This tends towards the way "Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" (Bahktin 1984:123). Like the disguise and pretence in carnival, the role of Principal Boy in pantomimes would be "adept at disguise and mimicry" (White and Tarr 2006:xiv), much like Peter, who impersonates Hook and disguises himself as Wendy at different points in the story, also similar to pantomime's Principal Boy who has always been played by an actress, not an actor.

2. **Tricks of narrative voice**

The narrator in Peter and Wendy is one "who emphasizes the text's fictionality by drawing attention to her own role as creator and commentator" (Stephens 1992:128). This contributes to the carnivalesque quality of the novel by pushing the text into dialogue with narrative comments and asides, giving the text a resemblance to the dialogic quality of carnival shows, as well as the polyphonic sense of the carnival scene. In this way, there is a cultivation of inconsistency, both in terms of characterisation and narration. In the nineteenth-century realist novel, characterisation meant above all making the characters consistent. In carnivalesque texts like the Peter Pan texts, the "behaviour, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life" (Bakhtin 1984:123), exposing the constructed nature of the hierarchical categories. Furthermore, like the anti-realist exaggeration in carnival, the narrator holds up the artificiality of the story for all to see. At one point in the story, the narrator breaks the realist "fictive illusion" (Stephens 1992:152) in one of its defamiliarising "overt self-reflexive moments" (1992:153), listing out the different adventures, he/she could give an account of. This is congruent with the Russian Formalists. contention that part of the literariness of literary writing is that it shows itself to be artificial. In another instance, the narrator says, "Let us pretend to lie here among the sugarcane and watch them as they steal by in single file, each with his hand on his dagger" (Barrie, P&W 2004:47). Here, the text is "laying bare the device" in a move that "flaunts its textuality in order to preclude reader empathy" (Stephens 1992:152), in a way that anticipates the Russian Formalists'modernist assault on realism.

As Dentith puts it, "carnivalized writing" (1995:65) is "writing which has taken the carnival spirit into itself and thus reproduces, within its own structures and by its own practice, the characteristic inversions, parodies and discrownings of carnival proper" (1995:65). The Peter Pan texts, then, can at various points be seen to be engaging in a discrowning of realism as the hegemonic nineteenth-century novel form, crowning in its place an anti-realism that is nonetheless inseparable from and which includes within itself the thing it negates.

The stage version of Peter Pan is crammed with theatrical tricks and devices and improbabilities that gleefully draw attention to the artifice of dramatic production. In Peter and Wendy too, the frame of realism is broken, there is no pretence that the story has an

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independent life in reality, and the narrator plays with and runs a self-referential metacommentary on the conventions of storytelling and narration. The narrator is of the kind that remains "in evidence, explicitly or implicitly, in order to remind the reader that in telling the story they are really playing a game" (1999:88), as Dieter Petzold illustrates in his essay, "Taking Games Seriously: Romantic Irony in Modern Fantasy for Children of All Ages". Petzold argues that "instead of concealing the rules of this game, the self-conscious authors/narrators actually foreground them" (1999:88). To illustrate, the narrator plays with his/her position in the story, and through this play foregrounds and explores the role of the narrator in a story. At one point, the narrator crabbily says, "That is all we are, lookers-on. Nobody really wants us. So let us watch and say jaggy things, in the hope that some of them will hurt" (Barrie, P&W, 2004:136). Here, the narrator characterizes him/herself as an alienated spectator of the story, but at another point in the narration, s/he displays agency in determining the events of the story, elevating his position from spectator to player, making choices that determine what is to happen next. By making him/herself visible, the narrator reminds the audience that s/he is not recounting actual events, but constructing the artifice of story. In another instance, the narrator shows storytelling as a form of make-believe by asking the reader to "pretend to lie here among the sugarcane and watch them" (Barrie, P&W 47) with him/her.

Similarly, in his stage directions to Act I of Peter Pan, Barrie demands that "All the characters, whether grown-ups or babes, must wear a child's outlook as their only important adornment" (Barrie, PP 1995:I.I.68-69). In the final analysis, this demand might be extended to the reader as well. Peter and Wendy can be read as using the modality of children's play and games to explore various themes, such as that of childhood, domesticity, and empire. Weaving the extended metaphor of games and play throughout various themes and characters in the narrative is, paradoxically, a sophisticated move in its artifice, making the text a grown-up one.

3. Playing games

In *Peter and Wendy*, both the grown-ups and children play at domesticity, and life is reduced to a children's game of race and chase, a straightforward, unapologetic demonstration of getting what one wants. On one level, the representation makes adult behaviour easier to understand for children, but behind this lies the idea that all adult life is a game played by people who remain children even while posing as adults. Mrs. Darling (and often Mr. Darling too) play house at home, while Wendy plays house on the Neverland. Mrs. Darling "almost gleefully" (Barrie, P&W, 2004:6) treats quotidian household bookkeeping, "as if it were a game" (ibid.), including the most minute details like single Brussels sprouts.

In her essay, "Playing at House and Playing at Home: The Domestic Discourse of Games in Edwardian Fictions of Childhood" (2009), Michelle Heath gives a range of examples, including "Knitting Game" and "Taking Father's Tea", the purpose of which was likely to induct children to activities of domesticity through make-believe and play-acting. However,

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the Darling parents, make-believe goes further than this. For them, the world around them expands in accordance to their make-believe. Mr. Darling says, "Mind you, I am not sure that we have a drawing-room, but we pretend we have, and it's all the same " (Barrie, P&W 2004:143) They seem to lead a charmed life, surviving by providence or magic, with financial problems looming in the background but never quite coming to the fore.

Peter and Wendy also takes the nuclear family, commonly regarded as the basis of society, and portrays a distorted version of that in Neverland, a parodying recreation of domestic rituals. To illustrate, Wendy squishes Michael into the role of baby by insisting he sleeps in the cradle even though he is too big "I must have somebody in a cradle, and you are the littlest. A cradle is such a nice homely thing to have about a house." (Barrie, P&W 2004:90) This illustration of her being hilariously unreasonable and silly draws attention to her playacting, or her attempt to build a family on the Neverland. It shows her modelling it on her notions of what a family ought to be –no doubt the structure of her birth family, which is probably the extent of society she knows, divided horizontally by gender and vertically by generation.

Peter Pan's brand of play in the story is different from both the Darling parents' make-believe and Wendy' s role-playing. He can be viewed as a carnivalesque figure, the King of Misrule in the children's adventure, at the same time the enduring figure of authority in Neverland. On the way to the Neverland, the children play "Follow my Leader" (Barrie, P&W, 2004:38), an elementary playground game that seems innocent enough upon first consideration. However, Peter's version of the game is dangerous and life-threatening, for he "would fly close to the water and touch each shark's tail in passing" (Barrie, P&W, 2004:38). "Leadership" is a significant parameter in the ideology of many adventure narratives, especially imperial ones, and here the play setting serves as a stage for Peter to exhibit his competitive capabilities, to put down others and to elevate himself. The qualities and skills that fit him for leadership also seriously disqualify him from it.

Peter also plays make-believe on the Neverland, but he conflates make-believe and reality, to the extent that "make-believe and true were exactly the same thing" (Barrie, P&W, 2004:61). In its depiction of Peter's attitude towards and identification with play, the narration poses the question of how far one can blur the line between actuality and play. At first glance, the depiction of Peter's relations with the "Picanninies" appears to propagate the racialist hierarchies of colonialist discourse, as the redskins "called Peter the Great White Father, prostrating themselves before him" (Barrie, P&W, 2004:88). However, the narrator immediately jumps in to undercut the elevation of Peter's status with the comment "and he liked this tremendously" (Barrie, P&W, 2004:88), making Peter sound like a child feeling what it is like to be worshipped, rather than a dignified higher being. The narrator also adds, "so that it was not really good for him" (Barrie, P&W, 2004:88), further relegating Peter to the status of a child who does not know what is good for him. Peter also speaks of himself in the third person like a god or king, the narrator pointing out that this is done "in a very lordly manner" (Barrie, P&W, 2004:88). This reduces Peter's interactions with the redskins to the level of child's play, in which Peter enjoys "lording it" over the

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others. In this case, the colonialist categories of master and slave, white and coloured, parent and child, are called to attention. The narrator then offers commentary that modifies the situation, diffusing colonialist tensions into play and humour, and on the whole giving an infantilizing caricature of colonial relations.

Through an ongoing process of adaptation, the general effect on the Peter Pan story has been one of smoothing its rough edges, so that its problematic parts tend to be washed out of the narrative in abridged or retold versions. In becoming a familiar and beloved story for children, the radical quality and the extraordinary originality that confronted that first audience of adults have been lost. The narrative frame, the narrative voice and various types of game-playing are some of the striking carnivalesque elements in these two texts. The multiple revisions that Barrie made to his play through the years, during rehearsals and even during actual runs, also reflect the sense of renewal that Bakhtin associates with carnival, foregrounding the provisional nature of the Peter Pan texts, making them anti-authorial, open texts. Although eternal play on the Neverland and growing up on the mainland are mutually exclusive in the story, Barrie has found that in artistic form, play and sophistication are not only reconcilable, but complementary.

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