"A Kind of Magic": Reading and Imagination in Dinah Mulock Craik's *The Little Lame Prince* and Frances Hogdson Burnett's *A Little Princess*

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> "It has nothing to do with what you look like, or what you have.
> It has only to do with what you think of, and what you do."
> (Burnett 45)

Dinah Mulock Craik's 1875 children's novel *The Little Lame Prince* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*—first serialized in Saint Nicholas in 1888 and then published as an expanded version in 1905—both adopt common fairy tale plots: each novel tells the story of a well-loved orphan's fall from grace as he or she endures banishment to a tower by a villain. Both Craik and Burnett's protagonists remain righteous despite their hardships and are rescued in time to retrieve their respective places on a throne, whether literal or figurative. But Prince Dolor and Sara Crewe have more than a storyline in common; the two characters share a love for books, a passion that gives birth to the real hero of these stories: imagination. *The Little Lame Prince* and *A Little Princess* not only display but also actively promote reading as a way to cultivate imagination in order to overcome difficult situations, fulfil personal potential, observe proprieties, and develop empathy.

Craik and Burnett explicitly portray their protagonists as avid readers, and this pastime greatly influences their imaginations. This influence is most obvious in Sara: books not only inspire her to "always invent… stories… and tell… them to herself" and others (Burnett 7), but they also directly infuse her fantasies. For example, Sara loses herself "in a harrowing picture of the prisoners in the Bastille" while reading about the French Revolution (46), and this knowledge significantly alters her later experience in the attic.

While Dolor's fascination with reading is evident, his imagination conceals itself in metaphor. Craik's narrator provides clues hinting that Dolor's godmother represents his imagination, but encourages readers to

employ their own imaginations as she "leave[s them] to guess" at the godmother's significance and at a "meaning in this story [that is] deeper than that of an ordinary fairy tale" (Craik 110, 53). Dolor's godmother—whom some refer to as "stuff and nonsense" (49)—can only appear upon his request. Unable to modify his situation, she can only help him tolerate it by bestowing upon him "the most valuable thing imaginable": a travelling cloak that "will take [him] wherever [he] want[s] to go, and show [him] all that [he] wish[es] to see" (47, 41). Dolor's godmother explains that, while few people are blessed with such a gift, it is the "one thing in the world which nobody can steal," as it is "of no use to anybody but its owner" (52). When Dolor travels on his cloak, his nurse remains oblivious to his absence because his image lingers, and he appears engrossed in reading or drawing (59). This lingering image is Dolor's body, while his mind takes flight.

Because books "inform [Dolor] of everything in the outside world, and [also] fill him with an intense longing to see it" (Craik 35), his experiences on the travelling cloak expand upon his readings. Soaring through the sky, Dolor observes flowers and birds that he has read about, and perhaps readers can assume that like Sara, learning about the French Revolution inspires Dolor's imagination. He reads about "kings and princes and governments of different countries and events that happened there," which leads him to witness the death of a King and a revolution in the streets of Nomansland (79).

Sara and Dolor's ripe imaginations greatly benefit their lives as well as the lives of people around them. Both characters face confinement within towers that represent their oppressive situations: Sara encounters restrictions because she loses her wealth, and Dolor is held captive within a disabled body. Although physically captive, Sara and Dolor employ their imaginations as a means of escape. Sara believes "what [she] has to do with [her] mind, when [her] body is miserable, is to make it think of something else" (Burnett 117), so she alters her surroundings; whether she imagines her attic room as a banquet hall or a Bastille cell, Sara finds

"great comfort" in temporary escape from Miss Minchin's seminary (79). Not only does Sara change her surroundings in order to cope with her situation, but she also reconstructs her self perception: she "think[s] as hard as ever [she] can of being a princess... [so that] nothing can hurt [her] or make [her] uncomfortable" (117). While Sara mentally redecorates the servant's quarters she lives in, Dolor rejects captivity altogether: he uses his imagination to flee the tower and explore the world, and his adventures make him "almost forget his lameness" (Craik 111).

The protagonists' closest companions are their imaginations. Dolor's imagination appears in various forms, but it consistently eases his loneliness. His godmother and Mag keep his company, and even his cloak takes on motherly qualities: it "rock[s him] gently to and fro, with a soothing kind of motion, as if he [is] in somebody's arms" (Craik 74). Sara alleviates her loneliness by forging imaginary friendships; she bestows an attic rat with a name and persona, and although she knows Emily is only a doll, Sara "*pretend*[s to] believe" Emily is alive in order to have a friend (Burnett 24). She also befriends Ram Dass and the Carmichael family in her mind long before she meets them, because, as she tells Ermengarde, "you can [befriend] people you never speak to at all. You can just watch them, and think about them… until they seem almost like relations" (109).

Reading and imagination also elicit empathy in Sara and Dolor. Through her exposure to various people and experiences in books, Sara determines that "there is a soul hidden in everything" (Burnett 85). She recognizes the universality of human experience and finds comfort in aligning herself with others who have struggled. When Sara faces adversity, she "think[s of] what soldiers bear" (25) and imagines herself a Bastille prisoner in order to feel less isolated. Sara's empathy not only eases her own misery but is also advantageous to other characters: she consistently acknowledges others' perspectives and treats them with compassion. Before she becomes poor, Sara considers herself "just the same" as Becky and befriends her despite their class difference (41). She ignores her hunger, feeds a young beggar, and even cares for Melchisedec because she

imagines that the rat "gets hungry and frightened just as [people] do" (88). Donald Carmichael's character further emphasizes the connection between reading and empathy in *A Little Princess*. The young boy is "affected to tears… by reading… a story" about poor children (92), which inspires him to give Sara his sixpence.

Although readers have less opportunity to witness Dolor's compassion because he associates with fewer characters than Sara, his relationship with his "grim nurse" exposes his empathetic quality (Craik 51). After travelling on his cloak, he feels "kindly and gently toward her", acknowledges the "possib[ility that she] did not mean to be cruel" to him, and decides that he "won't judge her" (99).

Sara and Dolor discover entertainment and historical knowledge through reading, but the pastime also provides them with a social education that initiates possibilities for their futures. Books take on a parental role for Sara and Dolor when the two characters model themselves after royal figures in literature. Both protagonists seem especially charmed and influenced by noble propriety: Dolor "tr[ies] to speak politely, as princes always did in books" (Craik 38), and Sara "pretend[s she is] a princess so that [she] can try and behave like one" (Burnett 48). Sara and Dolor's dignified behaviour not only prepares them for their future noble positions but also allows these positions to materialize. Just as Sara's imagined bedroom manifests in reality overnight, Sara and Dolor not only imitate but also *become* royal figures through the power of imagination, and soon others recognize this. Miss Minchin and her students begin to believe that Sara is special, and Mr. Carrisford's—quite literal—recognition of the young girl he has been searching for all along is what restores her privileged lifestyle. Dolor acquires a place on the throne, and soon people look beyond his disability, perceive his kingly nature, and accept him as their leader.

A Little Princess and *The Little Lame Prince* share the theme that reading can nourish a child's imagination and play an important role in his or her development. These stories demonstrate that books can help readers overcome adversity, acquire empathy, and fulfill their potential—but these

texts go beyond showing and themselves offer readers the opportunity to achieve these things. Like any story, these novels allow readers to temporarily escape their lives and perhaps find solace or a sense of companionship through Sara and Dolor. They may provide comfort to those who can relate or encourage empathy by providing insight into lives of ostracized characters. Readers meet a disabled boy and peer into the world of child labourers. Although Sara and Becky have no money or status, they are, like Dolor, rich in a humanity exposed through their relatable and equalizing qualities—vulnerability, friendship, fear, and perseverance—as they endure and overcome hardships. These books grant readers an opportunity that they may not find otherwise: to encounter diverse characters that evoke a realization like Sara's that "we are just the same… [and] it's just an accident that I am not you, and you are not me" (Burnett 41).

For the reader, these narratives expand the realm of possibility and show that faith—in oneself and in the magic of stories—can result in happy endings. But they also provide a social education that prepares young readers to realize their own potential. Just as Sara and Dolor learn from royal role models, children can learn moral and dignified behaviour from these protagonists and thus gain access to a greater scope of opportunity. A young reader may emulate Sara's feminine stoicism, her "perfect… manners," "amiability," and "generosity" or be inspired to "get out in the world and fight for… rights" like Dolor and live and "die courageously, like a prince and a king" (Burnett 55; Craik 83, 103).

Intertextuality plays a major role in the novels' promotion of reading. The story lines are familiar and seem to "deftly [shift] from one fairy tale analogue to another" (Knoepflmacher x). Imprisoned in towers like Rapunzel, Sara and Dolor experience Cinderella-esque rags-to-riches stories. Reminiscent of *Sleeping Beauty*'s protagonist, they are accompanied by a seemingly magical helper as they endure situations dealt by surrogate parents: Dolor's uncle and Miss Minchin share qualities with Snow White's wicked stepmother. Sara and Dolor's stories, like these fairytales, end with the oppressed protagonists taking the throne.

In his introduction to *A Little Princess*, U. C. Knoepflmacher identifies allusions to various other literary works throughout the novel, including William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and short stories by Rudyard Kipling. Hodgson also subtly alludes to authors from whom she draws inspiration. For example, she names her characters after the Brontës: Emily, Charlotte (Lottie), Anne, and Maria (Knoepflmacher 239). These types of allusions are significant not only because they show that authors gain imaginative inspiration from reading, but also because they encourage readers to continue on and read other books in order to make the same connections. More explicitly, both *A Little Princess* and *A Little Lame Prince* provide a list of suggested readings within the texts; they promote titles such as *The Babes in the Wood*, *Blue Beard*, *Don Quixote*, and *Arabian Nights* as well as non-fiction literature (Craik 27, 53, 65). Craik's narrator addresses readers directly when she urges them to "read in books about what are called revolutions" and when she encourages them to employ imagination beyond her novel's pages: "if anybody knows [the history of Nomansland] perhaps he or she will kindly write it all down in another book" (94, 110).

The Little Lame Prince and *A Little Princess* correlate reading with imagination and promote both. Although Sara and Dolor encounter limitations, books and imagination allow them to alter their perspectives. They temporarily escape their lives, construct friendships, learn empathy, and improve themselves. The towers they occupy no longer seem oppressive, but instead offer a unique vantage point: "as high up—as if [in] …another world" (Burnett 82), Sara and Dolor are able to "watch the sky above and the ground below" (Craik 34). These two stories enable readers to share this elevated perspective. They provide lessons in compassion and propriety as well as knowledge about the significance of reading and imagination: these tools allow people to change their perspectives and their lives, and "anyone who has not done this does not know what a different world" awaits them (Burnett 82).

I am a third year English Honours student and I have always been most drawn to the Romantic poets. Recently however, I have developed a great interest in not only what literature says but also what it does to and for readers, particularly child readers. While I know that literature can affect people of any age, I believe children are most likely to be fundamentally shaped by what they read. This interest inspired me to write "'A Kind of Magic': Reading and Imagination in Dinah Mulock Craik's The Little Lame Prince *and Frances Hodgson Burnett's* A Little Princess*."*

I read Craik and Burnett's novels for Dr. Lisa Surridge's class on Victorian Children's Literature (English 385), and I was reminded of—or even re-experienced—the magic of children's stories. That sounds like a cliché, but to read a children's book feels like stepping into a (refreshing) world of wonder, possibility, and absolute faith in happy endings.

Writing this paper—as well as reading these novels as an adult—gave me the opportunity to explore the lessons behind the lessons; I was able to look beyond the stories' characters and plots and consider their greater purpose and meaning. What did I learn from this experience? Most significantly, I think, that this is indeed exactly where I want to be.

-Deborah Ogilvie

Works Cited

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