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J. M. Barrie: His Search for a Mother Figure

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Abstract

J.M. Barrie's works collectively have a theme of children being overwhelmed by the struggles of the real world. His characters flee to fairytale lands to preserve their innocence for as long as possible. The most common example of this is in *Peter Pan*. Peter flies to "Neverland" where he can never grow up. Similarly, the title character of *Mary Rose* disappears on a fishing island and reappears without aging a day, thus also keeping her youth and innocence. By examining Barrie's characters, one finds parallels between them and Barrie's mother, Margaret Ogilvy. Her childhood was short since she rose to a matriarch position of her family following her mother's death. Even as an adult Ogilvy still wished to be a child again. By the same token, Barrie's sister Jane Ann, had a brief childhood since she also needed to assume an interim role as a mother to her siblings. Barrie was transparent about his inspiration for his stories coming from his family. However, there's dispute about whether characters are based off of his mother or his sister. In this essay, the examination of his plays finds that maybe Barrie was just looking for a mother figure in an emotionally fragile time.

Introduction

“Nothing that happens after we are twelve matters very much” (Barrie, *Margaret Ogilvy* 42). James Matthew Barrie’s childhood life greatly influenced who he was as a writer and inspired the plots of his most famous stories. Barrie wrote plays around characters that would never grow old like the titular characters of *Peter Pan* and *Mary Rose*. *Peter Pan* is about a boy named Peter who flies around Earth looking for a girl who can read him stories and perform motherly duties. When meeting Wendy and her brothers, he finds Wendy as a suitable mother figure, and they all fly to Neverland where Wendy’s brothers join Peter’s group, The Lost Boys, and Wendy takes over the role of mother for the group. An adventure ensues where the group spends their time fighting pirates until it’s time for Wendy and her brothers to fly back home. Barrie’s more mature play *Mary Rose* is about a girl named Mary who mysteriously disappears while spending time on a small island in the middle of a lake her father goes fishing on. While she’s gone she doesn’t age and when she returns she doesn’t remember ever disappearing, which makes it difficult for her to recognize her son who comes to her as an adult when she only remembers him as a baby before she vanished.

Although Barrie focused on characters who never aged and were timeless in their own unique ways, he gathered his inspiration for these characters from the people closest to him. The stories Barrie’s mother, Margaret Ogilvy, told six-year-old Barrie of her own childhood molded the kinds of characters he would write. She may be the inspiration for characters like Peter Pan and Mary Rose. On the other hand, Barrie’s older sister Jane Ann acted as the matriarch of the family briefly which may have

inspired Barrie's character Wendy in *Peter Pan*. Through the examination of his early life, it is evident that Barrie was heavily influenced by his mother and sister in the construction of the major characters in *Peter Pan* and *Mary Rose*.

Background: Historical Context

James Matthew Barrie was the ninth child of ten children born into the Barrie family. Before his birth, Barrie had two older brothers, Alexander and David, and two older sisters, Mary and Jane Ann. He would have had four older sisters, but two of his sisters passed in infancy. Susan Aller in *J.M. Barrie: The Magic behind Peter Pan*, observes that his mother thought of her newborn baby as "just another mouth to feed" (13), but James was not the final "mouth to feed." The last daughter, Margaret, was the baby of the family.

Although James was the last-born son, his family's admirable reputation preceded him. His oldest brother, Alexander, was eighteen years old at the time of James' birth and a scholar studying at Aberdeen University. The second oldest brother, David, was seven years old at the time of James' birth, and "the most promising of all the Barrie children ... he was a handsome, fun-loving boy who would become a minister in the church if [his mother] could have her way" (Aller 16). Sadly, Margaret would never see her son as a minister because the night before David's fourteenth birthday, he was struck in a skating accident and passed away when James was six years old. Aller explained, "He understood that David was dead. He and his little sister, Margaret, had played quietly under the draped table where David's coffin lay in his house. But even after the coffin was buried in the cemetery on the hill above the town, his mother would

still not come out of her room” (17). David was a known favorite of Margaret Ogilvy’s, and his death hit her the hardest.

Margaret Ogilvy was known to be “a small, neat person who skillfully managed her house and large family. She had a strong personality and got her own way, but she saw the funny side of most things and would often double up with laughter” (Aller 15-16). Following David’s death, however, she became deeply depressed. Margaret spent her time mourning in her bedroom and seldom left. James was encouraged to make his mother the “merry mother she used to be,” and was told that if he could not do it nobody could; thus he was eager to try (Barrie, *Margaret Ogilvy* 15-16). Unsure how to help, he learned his brother’s mannerisms in an attempt to cheer Margaret’s spirits:

“One day after I had learned his whistle ... I secretly put on a suit of his clothes ... I stood still until she saw me, and then – how it must have hurt her! ‘Listen!’ I cried in a glow of triumph, and I stretched my legs wide apart and plunged my hands into the pockets of my knickerbockers, and began to whistle” (Barrie, *Margaret Ogilvy* 17).

Needless to say, James’ efforts to cheer his mother up with impersonating his brother made her miss her deceased son the more, but she also appreciated and recognized James’ efforts. What really cheered her spirit was talking about her childhood. “Margaret Ogilvy loved to tell stories, and [James] was an eager listener. As she recovered from her grief ... she began to tell [James] stories about her childhood with her own brother David” (Aller 21).

Margaret Ogilvy’s deep depression deprived the children of a maternal presence. According to Andrew Birkin, in *J.M. Barrie and the Lost Boys: The Real Story Behind*

Peter Pan, Ogilvy “was the driving force of the family” (3). Without her attention, the family was in need of a caregiver, and Barrie’s older sister stepped into the role. Aller observes that “life went on as best it could for the rest of the family, and Jane Ann, now [twenty years old], took charge of the house” (17). Jane Ann had cared for the family on a regular basis. While she was thirteen and going to school, “she spent much of her time helping their mother with the house and younger children” (Aller 16). When their brother, David, passed, she was almost twenty and not afraid to continue looking after James and their sisters. In fact, she pushed James to talk to their mother while she was in her depressive state: “[My sister] told me to go to my mother and say to her that she still had another boy” (Barrie, *Margaret Ogilvy* 12).

Jane’s responsibilities to her family parallel her mother’s childhood. Barrie explains that when Margaret was only eight years old, her mother passed away, making “her mistress of the house and mother to her little brother, and from that time she scrubbed and mended and baked and sewed, ... then [rushed] out in a fit of childishness to play dumps or palaulays [hop-scotch] with others her age” (qtd in Birkin 6). Although Jane’s mother was not dead, she was estranged from everyone except James, with whom she would tell and read stories. “[James] and his mother read many stories together. Her favorite subject was biography—especially of ‘men who had been good to their mothers’” (Aller 21-22). She would also reminisce to James about her fleeting childhood. Significantly, she found peace in the fact that David would not have to grow old, would stay a child forever.

Children are very impressionable at a young age. Six-year-old James never truly forgot these years under the care of Margaret Ogilvy and his sister Jane Ann. Growing

up, James essentially had two mother figures in his life. They inspired his most successful and arguably best play, *Peter Pan*, as well as his later play *Mary Rose*.

Assessment

The stories Margaret Ogilvy told James left an imprint on him. Jackie Wullschläger in “J. M. Barrie: The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up,” observes that Barrie’s fixations on boyhood and mothers had free reign in *Peter Pan*, and in 1922 when Barrie was sixty-two years old, he admitted that he had drawn himself in *Peter Pan* (131). With parallels to Barrie’s own life, *Peter Pan* insists on remaining young but also takes on the responsibility of finding a mother. Even children who never grow up still need a mother. *Peter Pan* is the leader of the Lost Boys on their island of Neverland. He temporarily left the lost boys in search of a mother. When his shadow disconnects and finds shelter in the Darling children’s bedroom, Wendy, the oldest of the Darling children, meets Peter and sews his shadow back on his feet. Seeing how maternal Wendy has acted, Peter acknowledges the potential in Wendy to be the mother for whom he has been searching. He is quick to bring her and her brothers to Neverland to meet the Lost Boys.

“Oh what pleasure she’ll bring to us
Make us pockets and sing to us
Tell us stories we’ve been longing to hear
Over and over
She’ll be waiting at the door
We won’t be lonely any more
Since Wendy, lovely Wendy’s here to stay”
“We have a mother
At last we have a mother”. (Barrie, *Peter Pan* 25)

The character Wendy is around the age of thirteen and is expected to take care of a group of younger children. Helena Winnicka, in her master's thesis *Women in the Life and Works of J.M. Barrie*, notes: "This image of the child as substitute mother occurs frequently in Barrie's works" (9). Considering the parallels to Barrie's own life, Wendy can be compared to his sister Jane Ann. When Margaret Ogilvy retreated to her room in grief, she left her children unattended and in need of a mother. Jane Ann stepped in to be the interim caretaker for her three younger sisters and James. From James' young perspective, his mother figure at the age of six was his sister. Although she was not his mother, having Jane as a substitute mother was still better than a group of lost children like the Lost Boys.

Alternatively, since Jane Ann and Margaret Ogilvy were both forced into maternal roles for the sake of their siblings, Winnicka speculates that the character of Wendy is actually inspired by Margaret Ogilvy. "The best-known example [of a substitute mother] is Wendy in *Peter Pan* (1904). Peter Pan has been listening at the nursery window to Mrs. Darling telling stories to her children and when Wendy says she knows lots of stories Peter asks her to return with him to the [Neverland]. The stage directions tells us that, like the journalist Barrie, Peter 'would like to rip those stories out of her'" (9). Peter's fascination to Wendy's stories is reminiscent of the strong connection Barrie had with his mother's storytelling. Additionally, at the end of the play, Wendy grows old and has a daughter named Jane (seemingly named after Barrie's sister), who takes her mother's place to fly to Neverland with Peter.

Although Margaret Ogilvy and Wendy share a knowledge of stories, Wendy passes the stories about Peter and Jane down to her daughter.

“I came to take my mother – back to Neverland.”

“Yes I know. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes. Will you teach me how to fly?”

“Do you know any stories?”

“I know lots of stories.”

“Will you tuck me in at night and mend my pockets for me?”

“Oh yes Peter! Take me with you.” (Barrie, *Peter Pan* 63)

It can be speculated that Margaret Ogilvy had also passed down stories to entertain Jane Ann when she was younger. It can also be assumed that Peter Pan is not solely interested in his prospective mother as a storyteller. He asks if Jane can sew and tuck him in, which Wendy had also done for him and the Lost Boys, just as Jane Ann had done for Barrie.

It is obvious that Jane had made a deep impression on Barrie, when considering that fact that he incorporated her name into the story. In contrast with Jane Ann’s understanding that growing up is a necessity, much like Wendy, Margaret Oglilvy’s hesitance to grow up and resistance to the loss of her childhood more closely matches the temperament of Peter Pan. By examining the close relation Barrie makes between the titular characters of *Peter Pan* and *Mary Rose*, it may be more apparent that he drew inspiration for them from his mother.

Discussion

Wullschläger observes that “Barrie lived more than thirty years after *Peter Pan*, but he never produced anything as successful again. In 1911 he rewrote the play as a novel; there followed minor works, but nothing important until the play *Mary Rose* in 1920” (133). Barrie was inspired by one of his favorite books written by Robert Michael Ballantyne, *Coral Island*, and even wrote in the introduction of the book’s 1913 publication: “To be born is to be wrecked on an island” (qtd in Wullschläger 126, 131). Barrie often uses islands in his writing as a symbol for loneliness because they can be seen as a place of exile but also escape. “Loneliness was a condition of his life and of his major characters” (Wullschläger, 131). Neverland is an island that Peter Pan uses to escape from the horrors of growing older. Similarly, the title heroine of *Mary Rose* uses an island to escape and find peace, but it ultimately leads to her exile as she disappears and spends the rest of her existence alone, eternally haunting her old home as the young woman she was when she disappeared.

The story of *Mary Rose* follows the family and loved ones of the titular character after she physically disappears while on an island. Mary’s father recounts his and Mary’s fishing routine for the past ten years to Mary’s husband, Simon. He would leave Mary on a very small island to draw, while he went fishing nearby, always making sure to keep her in his line of sight. On one fishing trip, everything appeared to be normal, but when he rowed over to get her, she had disappeared without a trace. Mary was gone for twenty days, and when she returned, she was on the island in the same spot her father had left her, with no memory of ever leaving. Time stopped for Mary as the world around her moved forward. Her mother then explains they never told her what

happened. “We had her back again, Simon; that was the great thing ... In the end we decided never to tell her” (Barrie, *Mary Rose*, 566-567).

Following the conversation Mary’s mother and father have with her husband, he and Mary voyage to the island for a picnic lunch. On the island, their boat helmsman, Mr. Cameron, tells them stories about those who had mysteriously disappeared on the island. These stories seem to mean nothing to Mary Rose. When finishing lunch, Simon puts out the fire, Mr. Cameron packs up the boat, and Mary becomes distant. She hears whispers of her name in a familiar calling: “*the call has come for Mary Rose. It is at first as soft and furtive as whisperings from holes in the ground, ‘Mary Rose, Mary Rose.’ Then in a fury as of storm and whistling winds that might be an unholy organ it rushes upon the island, raking every bush for her*” (Barrie, *Mary Rose* 588). Through all the noise and wind, Mary Rose is taken off stage. When everything has settled, Simon and Mr. Cameron have heard nothing, but now cannot find Mary Rose. Winnicka has proposed that “when the ‘call’ comes to Mary Rose ... Barrie has captured the spirit ... and the vision of two worlds. Like Peter Pan, Mary Rose represents youth and timelessness” (Winnicka 38). As previously discussed by Mary’s father, time stops for Mary while she’s gone. As a result, she does not physically age, which is identical to Peter Pan while he remains in Neverland.

Since Barry’s introduction of Neverland in *Peter Pan*, Barry reuses the idea of a place his main characters can physically escape and never grow up. When noted in *Mary Rose*, it’s seen as “skillfully dramatic ... and full of insights into Barrie’s battle with the idea of youth and age” (Wullschläger 138). Barrie’s battle with youth and age stems from the stories his mother would tell him of her childhood and how she wanted to

preserve them. “The reason my books deal with the past instead of with the life 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” (Barrie, *Margaret Ogilvy* 25). His mother was very fond of her childhood memories and did not want to lose her youth associated with growing older. Barrie does an excellent job playing with these anxieties in *Mary Rose* as he marries the timeless past with the ongoing present to create a sense of the girl growing up but never growing old. As Wullschläger states: “[Mary Rose] never properly matures and when she marries, becomes a girl-wife in the mould [sic] of Wendy. Her terror is that she and her husband will grow old and that her baby son must grow up” (138-139).

Mary’s son, Harry, visits the old estate he grew up in. He is wary of a cellar door that seems to open or hold shut on its own. In the final act, the ghost of Mary Rose enters through the cellar door, and Harry confronts his mother. Mary, still the young lady she was when she disappeared, is confused by the adult Harry, who claims to be her son, because she remembers her son as just a baby. In Christopher Wixson’s “Media Matters in J. M. Barrie’s *Mary Rose*,” he quotes Marjorie Garber, author of “*Profiling Shakespeare*,” as saying “[The ghost] is the sign of something missing, something omitted, something undone ... a reminder of loss” (205). Mary struggles to cope with the fact that she has lost time with her son. When she disappeared, he was just a baby, but now he’s a full-grown adult standing in front of her. She knows she’s a ghost searching for someone, but she can’t remember who:

“Give him back to me.”

“I wish I could. But I’m doubting he is gone beyond recall.”

“Who is he?”

“Do you mean you have forgotten who it is you are searching for?”

“I knew once. It is such a long time ago. I am so tired; please can I go away and play now?”
(Barrie, Mary Rose 607)

Harry believes she is looking for her son, but since he’s no longer a baby, he can’t help her the way she wants. Mary begs him to help her. Harry persists in feeding Mary clues for her to recognize him.

(She thinks his power is great) Please, I don’t want to be a ghost anymore.

“As far as I can see, if you wasn’t a ghost there you made yourself one by coming back. But it’s no use your [sic] expecting me to be able to help you ... Come to me, ghostie; I wish you would.”

“Certainly not.”

“If you come, I’ll try to help you”

(She goes at once and sits on his knee.)

“... I seemed to hear you as you once were saying that some day when he was a man you would like to sit on you Harry’s knee.”

“The loveliest time of all will be when he is a man and take me on his knee instead of my taking him on mine”.

“Do you see who I am now?”

“Nice man.” (Barrie, Mary Rose 608)

Harry reminds Mary of a tuft that would stand straight up on the back of Simon’s head, and she remembers. Harry says he has the same tuft. He also reminds her that his name is Harry like her son’s, but it’s useless since Mary doesn’t know him as her Harry. They have lost so much time together, he is unrecognizable.

Mary is not the only mother who has lost time with her son. As noted above, following her son David’s death, Margaret became bed ridden with grief and dissociated from her family. Barrie describes her room as eerily dark and almost haunted, because his mother hopes her son James is actually David’s ghost.

I went ben [sic] excitedly, but the room was dark, and when I heard the door shut and no sound come from the bed I was afraid, and I stood still ... after a time I heard a listless voice that have never been listless before say "Is that you?" ... I thought it was the dead boy she was speaking to, and I said in a little lonely voice, "No it's not him, it's just me." Then I heard a cry, and my mother turned in bed, and though it was dark I knew that she was holding out her arms. (Barrie, Margaret Ogilvy 12-13)

While not exactly disappearing like Mary did, Margaret's inability to get out of bed isolated her from the day-to-day activities of her children. In a way, she became a ghost in her own home and in her children's lives.

Even after her bedridden stage, the still grief-stricken Margaret Ogilvy would continue to wish for David's presence.

Many a time [Margaret Ogilvy] fell asleep speaking to him, and even while she slept her lips moved and she smiled as if he had come back to her, and when she woke he might vanish so suddenly that she started up bewildered and looked about her, and then said slowly, 'My David's dead!' or perhaps he remained long enough to whisper why he must leave her now, and then she lay silent with filmy eyes. When I became a man... he was still a boy of thirteen. (Barrie, Margaret Ogilvy 18-19)

As in *Mary Rose*, everyone else's lives in the Barrie household continued moving forward, but the ghost's did not. In return for trying to entertain her mother, she began opening up to Barrie with stories of her childhood. Slowly she began resuming her role

as the matriarch of the family. Just as Harry attempted to help his mother, Barrie attempted to help his own.

Conclusions

Children are impressionable. Barrie had two mother figures in his life that inspired two of his female characters. Jane Ann, his sister, was forced into acting like a mother to Barrie for a short time. Similarly, Wendy also acted like a mother to her brothers John and Michael, as well as to the rest of the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan*. Margaret Ogilvy was a strong mother figure, who became a ghost in her family's lives for a period of time in a way that Mary Rose did to her family. The stories Barrie's mother shared with him may have had a lasting impression on him regarding the creation of his plays. Additionally, the two maternal figures in Barrie's life shaped the central characters of his plays *Peter Pan* and *Mary Rose*.

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