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**KINGS, QUEENS, AND COMPANY:
THE (R)EVOLUTIONARY SCENARIO OF FRANK
STOCKTON'S FAIRY TALES**

Introduction

Frank Stockton's reputation as a pioneer of American fairy stories rests on some twenty volumes of fanciful tales, as he used to call them, which were first published in children's periodicals between 1867 and 1890. A prolific author of fiction for children as well as adults, Stockton was regarded during his lifetime as one of the country's leading men of letters; William Dean Howells rated his contribution to American literature second only to Mark Twain (Trosky 1992: 431). Remnants of this admiration surface in the first biography of Stockton, published in 1939, in which Martin Griffin takes a due notice of Stockton's fairy tales, even though his remarks seem apologetic rather than analytical. The gradual loss of popularity had begun before Stockton's death in 1902. Toward the end of his life Stockton felt out of step with contemporary concerns; he was becoming too quaint for the American public (Zipes 1990:427). Ignored in the first edition of Cornelia Meigs's influential *Critical History of Children's Literature* (1953), Frank Stockton became nevertheless an inspiration to the illustrator Maurice Sendak, who in the 1960s made two of Stockton's long-forgotten tales into splendid picture story books (Townsend 1983:312), and thus revived interest in this, once very popular, author.

Critical responses to Stockton's work until the late 1980s – few and far between as they were – seem to have taken their cue from Bruno Bettelheim (1976), and represent the psychoanalytical approach to fairy tales. The emphasis on psychological aspects of Stockton's narratives led Michael Patrick Hearn, for example, to claim that there is nothing self-consciously American about Stockton's stories (1988:550). Suzanne Rahn, however, who in her paper focuses on the cultural context and literary antecedents of Stockton's fairy tales makes an observation which contradicts Hearn's statement. Comparing

Stockton and L. Frank Baum, she argues: *For both authors, fairyland is more than a little American, being multi-ethnic and, despite the kings and queens, democratic; there is little of the bickering over status and power that goes on constantly in Carroll's worlds* (1988:227). Although in 1981 Henry L. Golemba published a monograph in which he addressed psychological as well as political aspects of Stockton's oeuvre, it was only in 1990 that Jack Zipes – as if in response to Rahn's plea (1988:238) – not only published a collection of Stockton's fairy tales, but also recommended in the afterword a historical and political approach to them. In his brief overview, reprinted later in *When Dreams Came True*, Zipes draws analogies between Stockton's and Twain's criticism of American materialism and greed, and presents Stockton as an author who in his fairy tales showed concern with social issues after the Civil War. Avoiding heavy didacticism, Stockton ridiculed in his tales the abuse of power. The present paper seeks to elaborate some of the points raised by Zipes and Rahn, and while doing so, disprove Hearn's claim that there is nothing self-consciously American in Stockton's work.

The two fairy tales analysed in this paper may well be read as companion pieces. Both give an account of a major government crisis and attempts to solve it. Both savour of lessons in democracy. In both Stockton envisions complementariness of male and female rule, distributing foibles equally among representatives of opposite sexes. Since the tension between democracy and monarchy is in both tales interlocked with competition between the male and the female ruler, whose outcome differs widely from one tale to the other, the order of reading and presentation of the tales is inevitably political. It may be a coincidence that *The Banished King* was the first to be written and published in *St. Nicholas* in December 1882, whereas *The Queen's Museum* appeared in the same periodical two years later. It is no coincidence, however, that the latter tale was given greater prominence in book collections of Stockton's tales published in 1887 and 1906, or that it precedes *The Banished King* in Zipes's edition. With the exception of Rahn's paper, which gives a helpful overview of Stockton's fairy tales, as well as a careful analysis of *The Griffin and the Minor Canon*, critical appraisals of individual fairy tales by Frank Stockton hardly ever exceed a few sentences of general commentary (Griffin 1965, Golemba 1981, Hearn 1988). Hence, my analysis is to a large extent a critical monologue. I acknowledge with gratitude, however, the theoretical buttresses that I found in Jack Zipes's (1992) and Leo Vygotsky's (1971) seminal works.

The Queen's Museum

There was once a queen who founded, in her capital city, a grand museum. This institution was the pride of her heart, and she devoted nearly all her time to overseeing the collection of objects for it, and their arrangement in the spacious halls. This museum was intended to elevate

the intelligence of her people, but the result was quite disappointing to the Queen. For some reason – and what it was she could not imagine – the people were not interested in her museum. She considered it the most delightful place in the world, and spent hours every day in examining and studying the thousands of objects it contained. But although here and there in the city there was a person who cared to visit the collection, the great body of the people found it impossible to feel the slightest interest in it. At first this grieved the Queen, and she tried to make her museum better. But as this did no good, she became very angry, and she issued a decree that all persons of mature age who were not interested in her museum should be sent to prison (Stockton 1990:49).

People flock into the museum, but since the condition imposed by the Queen is not merely to visit, but to become interested in the collection, the wide majority of the Queen's subjects end up in prison. The effaced narrator does not explain at this point who and by what yardstick estimates the degree of interest. This sketchy treatment of the point of *guilt* reflects the atmosphere of mystification that surrounds any autocratic rule. The ordinary prisons are soon filled to the utmost of their capacity, and temporary ones need to be erected *in various parts of the city*. Thus the capital turns into one huge jail. The state of deadlock is reached in which both the subjects and the Queen suffer; the prisoners are estranged from their families, the Queen is left without servants and workers. Although she has the political means of solving this problem – the prisoners come out in the daytime on parole and work – she realises the failure of her efforts to do something for the people.

The initiative to change this deplorable state of affairs comes from the outside world, from *a stranger who enter[s] the city one day and is surprised at seeing so many prisons* (49). He hears two typical and heart-rending stories three to four sentences each: one by a *respectable-looking* male prisoner and the other by a woman who is on the point of leaving her children and going to prison. The first words the Stranger actually utters in the fairy tale are a private comment: *'It is too bad! too bad!'* he said to himself (50). The status of a stranger is an advantage; it allows him to approach the Queen with the intention of speaking on behalf of the people. Since there is no revolutionary spirit among the Queen's subjects, the Stranger resorts to diplomacy. Obsessed with the idea of her museum, the Queen begins with the question: *Have you visited my museum yet?* (50). She uses flattery to entice him to visit her museum right away: *You have a high forehead and an intelligent expression, and I have no doubt that it will interest you greatly* (50). The Stranger, however, knows that the moment he entered the museum, he would come under her jurisdiction and be as punishable for lack of interest as all other subjects. To avoid this, he offers instead to fetch and *contribute to the collection some objects which shall be interesting to every one* (50–51). In spite of the dignified reluctance to admit her own failure, the Queen takes him at his word, and insists on prompt delivery of the promised items. When the Stranger leaves the city and begins to soliloquise, the reader learns that the promise was a bluff to gain time. The desperate Stranger realises

that he is not equal to the task, and yet resolves to find things that would interest all people:

I have certainly undertaken a very difficult enterprise. Where I am to find anything that will interest all the people in that city I am sure I do not know; but my heart is so filled with pity for the great number of unfortunate persons who are torn from their homes and shut up in prisons, that I am determined to do something for them, if I possibly can (51).

While walking through a forest, the Stranger meets an aged hermit, and addressing him with deep reverence, appeals for help. The Hermit, however, chills the Stranger's enthusiasm: *I am afraid you are looking for what you will not find [...]. Most people are too silly to be truly interested in anything (51).* There may be a grain of truth in this statement, but the rest of the Hermit's argument reveals his own obsession with the idea of secluded life: *There are now on this mountain-side many commodious and comfortable caves, all of which would be tenanted if people only knew how improving and interesting it is to live apart from their fellow-men (51–52).* Given the Queen's power, the Hermit may have evolved into another despot who seeks to impose on others his own preferences. The only favour he can grant the Stranger is the company of his inquisitive Pupil, who loves fishing and playing truant, and gladly joins the hero on his mission. The Hermit's lively Pupil soon leads the Stranger into a high and spacious cavern which turns out to be a robber's den. Mesmerised by the wealth and variety of booty, the Hermit's Pupil procrastinates, and when the robbers return, it is too late to take flight. The Stranger's physiognomy again comes to his rescue. The Captain of the band trusts him because of the Stranger's *truthful features and [...] honest expression (54).* The two intruders become members of the band: the Pupil willingly, the Stranger reluctantly.

When the Stranger learns that the Queen's Museum is to be robbed by the band, he refuses to participate in the expedition on the grounds that it would be dishonourable to rob the institution he has promised to enrich (55). As a man of honour, the Captain understands the Stranger's reasons and exempts him from this task. The band robs the Queen's museum by moonlight, sweeping all objects into bags without as much as looking at them. Only on arrival in their own den do the robbers unpack the booty and realise that *there is nothing in the whole collection that [they] care for (56).* Then the sympathetic Captain resolves to assist the Stranger in finding object, which *will interest every one (57),* and takes the band to the castle of the great magician Alfarmadj. The magician resents the unscrupulous intrusion and freezes the whole band. For the third time, the Stranger's facial features help him in difficulty. The magician notices his *intelligent brow and truthful expression* and hears his story (58). Willing to help the Stranger, he asks the basic question: *In what class of objects does the people of the city take the most interest? (58).* The Stranger does not know the answer, which surprises the intellectual magician,

who sends the whole band back to the city and promises to help once they know what they are looking for.

It is the Pupil who comes up with the idea that the band should steal into people's homes as well as prisons at night and ask all inhabitants of the city about their preferences. The narrator focuses on the Pupil's nightly exploit and in doing so exposes his penchant for despotism. In the last home he visits, the Pupil threatens two boys to admit that the thing they like most is fishing tackle (59–60). The Stranger, who waits for the robbers outside the city on account of his inability to climb walls, dutifully writes down the results of the unusual questionnaire conducted by the band of robbers. The magician obligingly furnishes the requested objects and at night the robbers bring them with the help of the magician's servants into the Queen's museum.

When the Stranger meets the Queen again, she is still mourning the loss of her collection. She doubts that the new collection can compensate for that which has been stolen, but allows her subjects to see it. On receiving the news that the new collection is a success among her people, who take so much interest that no one is sent to prison again, the Queen summons the Stranger to find out how he achieved his aim? Treating him as an equal for the first time, she recalls nostalgically her superb collection and reveals what kind of objects it consisted of: buttonholes. The Stranger listens patiently, only to respond with a lesson that *we cannot make other people like a thing simply because we like it ourselves* (62), which the Queen receives with surprising humility. She looks at the Stranger with admiration and asks *are you a king in disguise?* To which he answers simply *I am* (62). No explanation follows this plain announcement, no extensive genealogy, and no personal history. The generic names *stranger* and *queen* are not replaced by proper nouns. When the Queen admits that the Stranger is *far better able to govern this kingdom*, and offers to resign it to him, the Stranger gallantly suggests sharing the royal position. The Queen reacts with the business-like agility, *that will answer very well*, and immediately turns to the attendant to give orders *that preparations should be made for their marriage on the following day* (63).

Only one political problem remains to be solved after the marriage of the Stranger and the Queen. The Hermit's Pupil becomes so involved in the activities of the band that he resolves to change places with the Captain. The new King's gratitude to the ex-Pupil for his recent services is tempered by the fear that he may do a lot of harm to the people. The two meet and reach a compromise; the new Captain may pursue his career if he agrees to rob robbers. Thus all of the property ever stolen is soon returned by the new energetic leader to the lawful owners, or else given to the poor. Although the King offers to send for the Queen's lost collection, she keeps postponing its reestablishment, and prefers to study the new collection.

The Queen's Museum is a political tale in the sense that it relates to the concept of government, i.e. authoritative direction or control, exercise of authority, policy making. Assuming that her own intellect is superior to all others, the Queen shares her collection in an attempt to *elevate the intelligence of her people*. Her museum, which is an instrument of political control, functions as the repository of values which the Queen deems worthy of preserving and propagating. A hasty feminist reader might be tempted to argue that the stereotyped image of the Queen's silly feminine attention to ornamental details proves Stockton's misogyny, as well as a connection between literary and social mistreatment of women. There is no doubt that the Queen commits an error of judgement, which consists in abstracting buttonholes from their everyday use and aestheticising them in an absurd fashion. And yet, Stockton shows that men are prone to similar errors of judgement, and display a similar tendency to impose their fascinations on others. For example, during the nightly survey, the Hermit's Pupil forces two boys to say that they take interest in fishing equipment just because it is his own hobby. Similarly, the Hermit imposes on his Pupil the idea of secluded life.

Instead of harping on female foibles, Stockton seems to aim at defining the role and responsibility of those who exert power. The figure of a female ruler seems to reinforce the ancient etymology of the noun *museum*, which refers to *a home or seat of the Muses* (Evans 1993:739). Kopaliński explains that originally ancient mythology mentioned only one Muse (Kopaliński 1996:196, 1980:653), and it seems that Stockton's fairy tale captures the moment when the single narrow-minded Muse acquires other interests. Like the ancient Muse, the Queen is female, and her role consists in inspiring and serving, not the poets, however, but the people. Envisioning the political project as analogous to the running of a museum, Stockton defines the role of those who govern as an effort to connect the past and the present, and satisfy the interests of all people. The museum in Stockton's fairy tale is not the gift from the monarch to the people, but a common enterprise, whose results may offer a welcome diversion to the monarch and people alike in the monotony of general felicity, or *eudaimonia*, which, according to Aristotle, *constitutes the end of politics* (Calinescu 1982:126).

Stockton finds a subtle way of detracting from the ostensible victory of the male over the female ruler. It is true that the Stranger gives a lesson to the Queen, but before he can do so, he has to learn the lesson himself. The Queen and the Stranger have many common traits, which blurs the dividing line between their gender identities. On one hand, they are both sensitive and emotional in the feminine way. The range of emotions they experience is the same: from grief to anger. Both are guided by the dictates of heart, rather than reason. Furthermore, the Stranger is effeminate in his inability to climb walls. On the other hand, both take initiative in the masculine fashion. The Queen builds a museum as the repository of wisdom – a surrogate king – for the sake of her

people. The Stranger resolves to reorganise the museum, but he can only achieve this aim with the help of others. Thus in Stockton's fairy tale, the Stranger's domination does not amount to reinstatement of patriarchal rule.

The Banished King

There was once a kingdom in which everything seemed to go wrong. Everybody knew this, and everybody talked about it, especially the King. The bad state of affairs troubled him more than it did any one else, but he could think of no way to make it better (Stockton 1990:65).

The exposition to *The Banished King* is much shorter and much more enigmatic than the opening paragraph of *The Queen's Museum*. The specific symptoms of the social malady are obscured by the all-enveloping pronoun *everything*. Savouring of exaggeration, this blanket judgement may well signify the tendency to abuse freedom of speech (which is completely denied in *The Queen's Museum*), but the King takes the public opinion very seriously, and discusses his strategy with the Queen and his chief councillors. He wishes to improve matters by imitating the best models of government in other kingdoms.

Intent on gathering his own ideas, rather than second-hand reports of other travellers, the King resolves to spend an extended period of time in foreign countries. To preclude the danger of being called back from his research expedition, he insists on being banished from his kingdom for a year. Leaving his kingdom *on foot, entirely unattended* (65), he chooses to view the world from the perspective of a common man. And yet, the King does not wish to cut off all communication between himself and his kingdom. Hence, he makes an arrangement to have one of the officers of the court to walk behind him at an easy shouting distance, and another officer to follow the second, and so on. Thus there is always *a line of men extending from the King to his palace* (66), and passing messages to and from the King. When all the officers of the court have been used up, the under government officers are sent from the kingdom *to keep the line perfect* (66).

The first creature the King meets outside his dominions is a sphinx. Well-read in Greek mythology, the King not only recognises the creature, but also takes precautions while responding to the Sphinx's questions. Whenever the Sphinx, whom the narrator deprives of gender identity by consistently employing the pronoun *it*, poses a question, the King first exclaims *give it up!* and then uses the formula: *I don't mind telling you [...] of my own free will, and not in answer to any question, that [...]* (67, 69). When the King reveals that he wishes to discover what is faulty about his kingdom, the Sphinx, who takes pleasure in solving puzzles, offers to accompany him. The Sphinx first leads the King to the country governed by a king of mingled sentiments and inhabited by all kinds of creatures, including giants, dwarfs, fairies, and gnomes. Choosing the most

winding routes through the city, the Sphinx exposes to the banished King the instability of its institutions and the fickleness of its inhabitants. The banished King is amazed to see a blacksmith turn into a painter, or the king change his mind overnight. The Sphinx explains that this pattern of behaviour was set by the king of the country, who *first began to mingle his sentiments [...] because he always desired to think and feel exactly right. He did not wish his feelings to run too much one way or the other* (69). The banished King disapproves of this model of government, and formulates his own positive resolution: *I want to be one thing or the other* (69). Translated into the late twentieth-century terms, the vignette illustrates the danger of opportunism and insincere political correctness.

The Sphinx then leads the banished King to the country of the dwarfs called Gaumers, and explains their system of government. The country of the Gaumers is divided into clusters of houses. Each cluster has its own king who is elected from among the very best of Gaumers. The kings are all anxious to please their subjects because their election and sustenance depends on popularity. The banished King's astonishment reveals his deeply ingrained tendency toward despotism, his strong belief that there ought to be one king, and that the people *ought to try to please their sovereign* (70). The banished King, who appeared concerned about the well-being of his kingdom at the outset of the tale, proves to be a despot who disdains the democratic institutions of the Gaumers in a high and mighty fashion. He is about to resume his journey when a desperate message from the Queen reaches him:

[...] he must either stop where he [is] or come home: his constantly lengthening line of communication ha[s] used up all the chief officers of the government, all the clerks in the departments, and all the officials of every grade, excepting the few who [are] actually needed to carry on the government, and if any more men went into the line it would be necessary to call upon the laborers and other persons who could not be spared (71).

The implication of this message is clear enough, and parallels the unpalatable lesson of the Gaumers; the King and his highest officials can be spared, whereas the common people are indispensable. It is precisely at this moment of implicit revelation that the King dispenses with the pretence of searching for truth, and asserts his political power. He sends *the order that his edict of banishment be revoked* (71), and as soon as his wish becomes law, he commands that *the procession return home, tail-end foremost* (71). When the King returns home, accompanied by the inquisitive Sphinx, he finds to his surprise that the affairs of his dominions, which have been governed by the Queen and a few of the best officials, are *in the most admirable condition* (72). The King is honest enough to reach the conclusion that *the main thing which had been wrong in his kingdom was himself* (72), and to share this discovery with the Sphinx. Advised by the Sphinx to give up, the King turns into a traveller and explorer, and leaves the country, while His Queen continues to govern. Her next

political step is to order *all the men who had made up his line to follow the King's example and to go into some good business, in order that, not being bothered with so many officers, she would be able to get along quite easily* (72). The King finds his new pursuits very rewarding, and the Sphinx resolves to retire now that the puzzle has been solved.

The conclusion of *The Banished King* can please a feminist reader. The King does not learn anything by observing foreign kingdoms because, although he sets out on foot as a common man, he tends to view things from above: *from a high hill* (67), *from the edge of a high bluff* (70). His wife in the meantime successfully manages the affairs of the country. What is more, hers is the only country ruled by a woman. The King's followers are all men, and so are the rulers of both countries the King visits. The superiority of female characters is also suggested by the figure of Sphinx, who has a female face, a pleasant voice, and nothing savage about it (66). In *The Banished King* the last word and thus supreme power seem to belong to the Queen and to the quasi-female Sphinx. And yet, the tale is a parable on the relation between those who govern and those who are governed, rather than a debate on the rival merits of female and male rule.

Revolution by degrees

The message of *The Banished King* is clearer and more radical than the message of *The Queen's Museum*. The former tale ends in the overthrow of patriarchal rule, while the latter combines, equates, and obscures male and female component in government. And yet, female domination at the end of *The Banished King* remains ambiguous. Although the King who has banished himself leaves the political power all to his wife, His Queen, for all her virtues, remains a distant, marginal character. Thus *The Banished King*, as well as the other tale, seems to insist on the subservient role of monarchs in relation to the people, instead of proving superiority of male or female rule.

It is characteristic of these and other fairy tales by Frank Stockton to construct a discourse which is an alternative to history books. For one thing, Stockton creates an essence of history, rather than a mere allegory with potentially recoverable topical allusions. Thus, his tales lend themselves to a variety of historical readings. *The Queen's Museum*, for example, may be read as a critical American's comment on the rule of Queen Victoria in England, or a sympathetic Northerner's appraisal of the Post-Civil-War Reconstruction in the South, or else a conscious citizen's view of executive power at any level and in any country. For another, unlike historians, who refer to kings and queens by proper names and use generic nouns to describe masses of people, Stockton insists on his kings' and queens' namelessness. Only two proper nouns are used

in the tales discussed in this paper: the magician Alfrarmedj in *The Queen's Museum* and the Gaumers in *The Banished King*. Their strange names are difficult to explain and reduce to an idea or emblem, but there is something the magician and the nation have in common: the magician propounds, whereas the nation exemplifies democratic rule.

The two tales recount the process of attaining democracy gradually and by common effort. The scenario is similar in both tales; the Queen of *The Queen's Museum* and the banished King endeavour to improve matters in their dominions. The former resolves to elevate the people by establishing for their sake a repository of values, her museum. When the subjects show reluctance to share her interests, she resorts to the enforcement of her whim. The banished King seems far more open-minded at first. Admitting criticism, he seeks to improve the system by imitating foreign models of government. It is only his reaction to the two countries he visits in the middle part of the tale (which is a clear parable) that reveals his dyed-in-the-wool despotism. His rejection of the model represented by the country of mingled sentiments may be justified, and yet it reveals his lack of political flexibility. The devolution of power practised by the Gaumers provokes an even stronger opposition on his part, and exposes his penchant for absolutism. Thus the monarchs in both tales are equally despotic, even though the banished King masks his tendencies more effectively.

In both tales ambivalent figures from the realm of fantasy control the development of events. Although the magician in *The Queen's Museum* and the Sphinx in *The Banished King* wield absolute power to perform good or evil deeds, they promote or assist democratic tendencies elsewhere. The magician gives advice to the Stranger and supplies the new exhibits. By encouraging the banished King and his followers to take the most winding routes, the Sphinx indirectly purges the country of redundant officials. It is the Sphinx, and not the Queen, who suggests that the King should resign. The Sphinx with its female face and the magician, whose gender identity remains irrelevant, illustrate the androgynous quality of political power whose legitimacy derives from its wisdom.

Both the Queen of *The Queen's Museum* and the banished King are complemented and eventually replaced by the ruler of the opposite sex who teaches them a lesson. The political messages conveyed by the two tales may be summed up in two commands: ask the people and reduce the number of officials, respectively. The two monarchs learn the lesson, only to withdraw from politics and turn into students or explorers; the Queen devotes the rest of her life to studying the new exhibits, the banished King travels *to find out things that might be useful to his own nation* (Stockton 1990:72). Their energy is thus channelled into scholarly pursuits. In both tales the monarch who takes over is ostensibly of the opposite sex, but it seems that femininity is the shared characteristics of the Queen in *The Banished King* and the Stranger in *The Queen's Museum*. Although

called *King* at the end of the story, the Stranger appears effeminate in his despair, sympathetic attitude, appeals for help, or inability to climb walls. The shift of power appears evolutionary: one monarch replaces another, the new monarch is the other's spouse. It is the final monarch's affiliation with femininity that has revolutionary implications. Instead of preaching the superiority of female rulers, Stockton associates feminine rule with unobtrusive rule that respects the people's will. The fairy tale convention requires that the government be *by* a monarch, but in Stockton's fairy tales the ideal government is clearly *for* the people.

The two tales may be adequately labelled as entertaining lessons in democracy. While recreating the story of the American Revolution – the overthrow of monarchy and the establishment of democracy – they reaffirm the idea of the American political system. And yet, Stockton's tales are far from congratulatory. They show that human beings – those who govern and those who are governed – are imperfect, prone to lapse into despotism, and hence in need of incessant corrective education. While reminding Americans of their lofty ideals, Stockton comments on the contemporary state of affairs, which the historian Henry Steele Commager thus outlines in his *American Mind*:

By the 1890s the constitutional and political machinery was creaking at the joints, its inadequacies palpable and troublesome. That government which had long been regarded as the best on earth was apparently incompetent to cope with the most elementary problems of modern economy. Yet the basic assumptions of democracy remained unimpaired, and there was the greatest reluctance to admit any imperfections in the constitutional system. It was far easier to fall back on what might be called the devil theory of politics – to explain away the imperfections as fortuitous and ascribe the breakdown of the political machinery to the incompetence or the depravity of those who operated it (Commager 1950:316–317).

The namelessness of Stockton's monarchs proves that he does not subscribe to the *devil theory of politics*; instead of blaming individual people, he argues with the system of government which reflects human weaknesses. The absence of villains in either tale explains Stockton's lack of popularity with the audiences that prefer strong polarisation to subtle abstract distinctions. The banished King and the Stranger's wife are in fact likeable, even if flawed, characters. Far from envisioning the political change as a revolution with embittered struggle and bloodshed, Stockton outlines a peaceful and business-like process aimed at utmost efficiency and satisfaction of popular demand. Unlike traditional folk tales analysed by Jack Zipes from the political point of view (Zipes 1992:20–40), Stockton's fairy tales are inhabited by labouring classes, as well as kings and queens. In Stockton's fairy tales might does not make right, no magic is needed to effect a political change, and the potential class conflict is solved by those who govern.

Although written primarily for juvenile audience, Stockton's fairy tales seem to look back to the ancient tradition of the fable which functioned as a political pamphlet and a weapon in public debate. Gotthold Lessing's definition of fable

as an illustration of general ideas and Alexander Potebnya's view of fable as *one of the means of apprehending human relations, the character of people, and [...] anything that relates to the moral aspects of human life* (Vygotsky 1971:90) hold true for Stockton's fairy tales. Rich in political meanings, Stockton's narratives are no flat allegories, and yet they lend themselves to historical readings. Although Stockton does not introduce animal characters, he employs strategies that help him achieve the effect sought in the beast fable; his characters are, like animal characters, types rather than individuals and thus do not provoke strong emotions on the reader's part. Illustrating in his tales political principles, Stockton seems to know that strong emotions disrupt the cognitive process (Vygotsky 1971:102). Very much in keeping with the best models of a prose fable, his narratives are practically devoid of embellishments. What may seem a mere flourish, e.g. the pun on the command *Give it up!* in *The Banished King*, proves to be a crucial narrative component. His characters are not quite reduced to mere chess-pieces, as Vygotsky would have it (1971:105), but their main function is to act, rather than represent intricacies of characterisation. Finally, like classical fables, Stockton's fairy tales contain a moral which coincides with the climax.

Vygotsky's theory that the action of all fables develops in two opposite directions and the clash comes at the moment of climax (1971:142) applies to Stockton's fairy tales as well. And so does Vygotsky's argument that the climax of a fable resembles the catastrophe in a tragedy; in both cases triumph coincides with final disaster (1971:136). For both the Queen of *The Queen's Museum* and the banished King, the complete success and the total failure come simultaneously. When the banished King finds the answer to his question about the sources of evil in his country, the only honest and reasonable conclusion is his own resignation. The Queen's museum eventually becomes popular, but it is no longer *her* museum. The revolution is thus a mental process and happens in the King's or the Queen's mind. By contrast, all outward changes have the appearance of evolution. Thus Stockton presents a serene world in which monarchs are rational human beings who, far from being infatuated with political power, seek to improve their minds.

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