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The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up: Sexuality, Irresponsibility, and Political Economics in Niall McNeil and Marcus Youssef's *Peter Panties*

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ABSTRACT

Niall McNeil and Marcus Youssef's play *Peter Panties* (2011) adapts J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (both the 1904 play and the 1911 novel), but unlike Barrie's almost asexual Peter, McNeil and Youssef create a sexually obsessive, if immature, version of the boy who refuses to grow up. Both Peters are narcissistic and capriciously demand that his/their own needs and desires be met while shirking any responsibility to others—exemplifying what psychoanalyst Dan Kiley termed Peter Pan Syndrome. McNeil and Youssef shift from Barrie's Edwardian industrial capitalist context to a twenty-first century neoliberal capitalist context, and this shift is deeply tied to Peter's distinct psychology in *Peter Panties*. This adaptation critiques late capitalism's culture of enjoyment and the negative consequences, both social and psychological, that come with the inability to renounce or delay gratification of desire in an economy dependent on continual consumption.

KEYWORDS
Niall McNeil, Marcus Youssef, *Peter Panties*, J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*, neoliberalism, psychoanalysis, sexuality.

Introduction

Peter Pan tells Wendy Darling, "Let's take off our green pants and skirts" (McNeil and Youssef 111) before symbolically impregnating her. The pregnancy is played out by inflating a balloon at Wendy's belly until it pops and a baby comes from between Wendy's legs (112 -113). Peter Pan is now a father. If this scene doesn't sound familiar from J.M. Barrie's 1904 play or 1911 novel, don't worry. This scene comes from Niall McNeil and Marcus Youssef's 2011 *Peter Panties*, an absurdist, postmodern, and deeply intertextual adaptation that draws out issues of Peter's sexuality and the family politics introduced by Barrie's versions and re-conceptualizes those issues for the cultural politics of late capitalism. Like Barrie's rendering of Peter, McNeil and Youssef create a narcissistic protagonist who capriciously demands that his own needs and desires be met—though unlike Barrie's almost asexual Peter, McNeil and Youssef create a sexually obsessive, if immature, version of the boy who refuses to grow up. The later play also shifts from Barrie's Edwardian industrial capitalist context to a twenty-first century neoliberal context, and this shift is deeply tied to Peter's distinct psychology in *Peter Panties*. This adaptation critiques late capitalism's culture of enjoyment and the negative consequences that come with the inability to renounce or delay gratification of desire.

Before getting to the main argument, this paper briefly addresses *Peter Panties* as a work of disability theatre. While this essay focuses more on political economics, psychology, and the cultural politics of late capitalism, McNeil is an important figure in the Canadian disability arts movement. Recognizing the importance of disability in McNeil and Youssef's creative process illuminates some of the choices made in *Peter Panties*. Further, many disability advocates argue for the importance of acknowledging the creativity and productivity of artists with disabilities—though another line of advocacy work asserts that the art of creators with disabilities should be approached as art in its own right, rather than ghettoized as "disability art" exclusively. This essay falls more into the latter category by focusing on McNeil and Youssef's play as a work of art with significant cultural commentary, which happens to have been collaboratively created by an artist with Down syndrome.

Following that brief discussion, the argument shifts to a focus on Peter's sexual desires, comparing and contrasting Barrie's sexually naïve Peter with McNeil and Youssef's sexually obsessive Peter. These different characterizations reflect the ethos of their different cultural contexts: Barrie's industrial capitalist society that demanded the renunciation of enjoyment for the sake of duty, in contrast to the contemporary neoliberal context—this became the dominant political economic force in Canada and much of the west in the 1970s—that exhorts subjects to consume as much and continually as possible. As the essay subsequently demonstrates, these differences shape Peter's individual psychology and the politics of family life, which play out

around questions of marriage, sexual fidelity, parenthood, and interpersonal relationships generally. The essay concludes by tying all of these elements together to show that McNeil and Youssef's Peter reflects a distillation of the cultural politics of enjoyment under late capitalism.

Disability Theatre

As an artist with Down syndrome, McNeil has been very active in Canada's disability arts and theatre scenes. According to Canadian disability theatre scholar Kristy Johnston, disability theatre is "a specific kind of artistic practice connected to the disability arts and culture movement. As such, it involves artists with disabilities who pursue an activist perspective, dismantling stereotypes, challenging stigma, and re-imaging disability as a valued human condition" (*Stage Turns* 5).[1] However, Johnston does distinguish between *disability artists* and *artists with disabilities*—a division largely based on how focused the artistic work is on disability rights, activism, and/or concerns (*Stage Turns* 5). These categories are obviously not mutually exclusive, with many artists with disabilities producing both disability art and art not focused on disability advocacy. For instance, in their 2017 adaptation *King Arthur's Night*, McNeil and Youssef promote opportunities for artists with disabilities more actively than they do in *Peter Panties*.[2]

King Arthur's Night foregrounds disability advocacy both through its content and through the casting of the original production run, which cast in prominent roles four actors whose lives include Down syndrome. During the performance at Toronto's Berkeley Street Theatre, McNeil played King Arthur, Tiffany King played Guinevere, Matthew Tom-Wing played Magwitch, and Andrew Gordon played Saxon—all central roles performed by actors affected by Down syndrome. This casting challenges common assumptions about the relative abilities of the characters, and it undermines links between the characters' perceived abilities and the actor's body. Indeed, apart from one line in which Arthur warns Lancelot, "She [Guinevere] has Down syndrome. Keep your lips off of her!" the play draws no overt attention to distinctions between neurotypical performers and actors with disabilities (21). Casting artists with disabilities for non-disabled characters is a form of disability theatre advocacy which normalizes seeing *people* who happen to have disabilities, rather than seeing disability as a person's defining characteristic.

In addition to the casting, the play subtly but importantly emphasizes the creativity that McNeil, as an artist with Down syndrome, brought to the creation of the show. Both *Peter Panties* and *King Arthur's Night* were written collaboratively, with many of the ideas being

[1] For more on disability theatre, see, for instance, Johnston's *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama* or *Stage Turns*, or Petra Kuppers' *Theatre & Disability*.
[2] For more on McNeil's disability advocacy, see, for instance, "Niall McNeill Discusses Deaf and Disability Arts" or "Writing Across Difference at Canadian Association for Theatre Research 2018—Wed 30 May 2018."

developed by McNeil, while Youssef wrote them down and helped polish the plays into their final forms.[3] Merlin, played by Youssef in the original run, alludes to this process in the Prologue, when he explains:

> this "kingdom" may be somewhat different than is natural for you to expect. It is guided by different rules. It demands somewhat unorthodox methods. (*referring to someone offstage*) Because the king is powerful. He offers us access to worlds we can't normally perceive. Or perhaps choose not to. I ask only that you pay attention. That you slow down…But here I am talking again. (*gesturing offstage*) Chatterbox, that's what the king calls me. And these are my words. In this kingdom, my words – very little consequence. The story of this kingdom is written almost entirely from his words. The king's words. My job, well my job is mostly to transcribe and translate, to negotiate and mitigate – (7-8)

This section—drawn from two speeches in the Prologue—is revelatory, both in terms of the power it assigns to McNeil as world builder and imaginative creator, and in how direct it is about the collaborative process that went into creating *King Arthur's Night*. In the early portion, prior to the ellipses, Merlin asserts the unique and creative powers of Arthur—this , of course, is Youssef telling the audience that they are about to experience McNeil's take on the Arthurian legend. And in the latter portion, when Merlin talks about the relative power of their words, Youssef essentially describes the process through which he and McNeil wrote both *King Arthur's Night* and *Peter Panties*, with McNeil generating the original material and Youssef refining it. This Prologue, in other words, draws audience members' attention directly to the generative role that McNeil played in the show, foregrounding his artistic abilities.

Whereas *King Arthur's Night* foregrounds disability advocacy, *Peter Panties* has at best minor references to disability concerns. The one-handed Captain James Hook is obviously a disabled character from Barrie's original play and novel, and he shows up in McNeil and Youssef's play, though his conflict with Peter seems more incidental here, rather than a driving force of the plot. There is one minor incident in which Hook's status as a disabled character is made overt: in Chapter Six—both of McNeil and Youssef's plays are divided by *chapters* rather than *scenes*—Hook accidentally hits himself in the face with his sword and puts on an eye patch, pointing up how disability shapes Hook's life (104). The other instance when disability concerns are made overt is during Chapter Three, when Mrs. Darling asks Peter how to tell when one is getting old. Peter replies, "Well, for one, a cane. Or a wheelchair. You can't fly. *You can't fly with those handicaps*" (98, emphasis added). That one can't fly/succeed/imagine with handicaps

[3] "For more about this process, see Youssef's "Writing Together" in which he describes how their collaboration worked.

is almost certainly an idea McNeil has been exposed to throughout his life, both personally and professionally. However, as disability theatre theorists like Johnston and Petra Kuppers would point out, the very fact that McNeil has become a successful playwright, director, and actor is itself evidence that people with disabilities can function in the theatre (and outside it).

Another characteristic of disability theatre at work in *Peter Panties* (and *King Arthur's Night*) is the Brechtian alienation meant to disrupt any illusions the audience might harbor about the identification between the actor's body and the character's body. Kupperswrites, "one of the ways that creative imaginations can appear in disability land: connections, appreciations, mixed languages, remembered fragments, new constellations. Culture works through remixing and hybridization" (75). *Peter Panties*—which is already an adaptation from Barrie—certainly shows extensive evidence of theatrical and multimedia hybridity, drawing from different plays and TV shows, and incorporating live music, video, and audio technology into the production. The Prologue begins with the actors processing onto the stage singing the song "Desperate Prayer" with a live band playing (85), then there are audio recordings and video projected from McNeil and Youssef's sessions drafting the play (86-88).[4] The rest of the play features several intertextual elements. Wendy refers to Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (93), then later Mrs. Darling reads a passage from that play (119). When Wendy first arrives in Neverland, the Lost Boys are watching *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (95-96), and later Gil Grissom and Catherine Willows—the main characters from *CSI*—arrive to investigate Wendy's murder (122-127). In Chapter Eight, Hook and Smee perform a scene from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, with Hook taking the lead role and Smee performing as Lady Macbeth (114-115). All of these intertextual and multimedia tools disrupt the audience's potential suspension of disbelief by breaking apart the play's narrative.[5] This kind of disruption is common in disability theatre, though it is obviously not exclusive to disability performances. In fact, many adapters use these kinds of hybrid or multimedia approaches to signal difference from the adapted work, especially when working within the same medium as the original.

Peter's Sexual Desires

In McNeil and Youssef's play, Peter Pan is sexually aware in a way that he simply isn't in Barrie's versions, though the later Peter is not yet sexually mature. Mrs. Darling asks Wendy whether Peter has ever had sex before, and Wendy admits that he has not, prompting Mrs. Darling to reflect, "This is the naive side. This is before. Something naive. I just realized that.

[4] The audio/visual elements of the Prologue are visible on Newold Theatre's *YouTube* video "Peter Panties."
[5] There is much more that could be said about these specific intertextual choices, but that exceeds the scope of this essay's argument.

This is new territory. It's unknown" (106). Mrs. Darling recognizes Peter's sexual immaturity, his naïvety characteristic of young people changing from childhood to adulthood, with all the accompanying awkwardness of that transition. And indeed, most of Peter's sexual gestures are childish and selfish, even sexually violent at times, as will be discussed more below. At times Peter's sexuality is casual, and at times capricious. He opens Chapter Three with an almost infantile statement of desire to Mrs. Darling "I want to have sex and have kids" (97). And he ends the scene by threatening, "When I grow up, I'll marry your daughter" (99). In neither of these instances does Peter express what we might call an adult approach to sexuality—that is, a romantic attraction to another person that conceptualizes them as an independent subject with their own desires and needs. Peter expresses his own wishes, without ever considering Wendy's feelings—indeed, when Peter later tells Wendy he wants to have a baby with her, she tells him "Sure thing, Peter. It's totally up to you" (111). Peter is also arbitrary in his refusal to allow Mrs. Darling to come to Neverland: "you can't go to Neverland *because I don't want you to*" (98, emphasis added). Throughout the scene, and indeed throughout the play, Peter shows little regard for anyone else's needs or desires.

These specific elements of sexual immaturity are characteristic of what psychoanalyst Dan Kiley termed Peter Pan Syndrome (PPS), which is characterized by an adult man's childish inability to develop a full adult identity; PPS is generally characterized by irresponsibility, anxiety, mood swings, narcissism, and a compromised sexual identity. The most prominent characteristics of the PPS sufferer's sexuality are chauvinism that often manifests by demanding that a partner conform to the man's ideal, sexual exploitation or violence, and treating a romantic partner as a substitute mother from whom the PPS victim can get love and approval (Kiley 12-13, 32, 77-78). *Peter Panties* most obviously demonstrates the sexual violence, or what Kiley characterizes as "rape talk." For instance, Peter suggests that he and the Lost Boys can play "little sexual games" and grope one another, including touching Wendy's breasts, though he doesn't ask her consent (96-97). And when Wendy confronts one of the mermaids, Peter tells them to strip to their underwear and "have a crotch-kicking show" (108).[6] In other words, Peter's sexual desires are tied in with violence and a narcissistic requirement for his own pleasure regardless of how it impacts others. Early in the play, sex and violence are explicitly linked

[6] Even the Lost Boys recognize that Peter is toxic, and when Peter goes into the tent where mermaids are performing a striptease, the Lost Boys try to warn Wendy away from pursuing a relationship with him:

> LOST BOY. Wendy, you can't go out with Peter.
> TOOTLES. Peter actually is an enemy.
> WENDY. He's not an enemy.
> TOOTLES. Yes he is, Wendy.
> LOST BOY. You know how Peter be like that [*sic*].
> TOOTLES. Sometimes he's ignoring [*sic*].
> WENDY. Yeah. Sad but true. (108)

when Peter comes to the Darlings' home and talks with Mrs. Darling:

> MRS. DARLING. I keep seeing aggression, and I keep seeing sex.
>
> PETER. Yeah there's sex.
>
> MRS. DARLING. Yeah and there's aggression.
>
> PETER. And kissing. Fighting. People falling in love. What do you think about that, Mrs. Darling? That I want to have kids, sex-wise? You're the mother. (98)

Although Peter claims to be twenty-eight (98), his sexual identity is stunted. His desires are linked to aggression and tied up with a desire to please the mother figure—in this case Mrs. Darling.

In Barrie's play and novel, Peter seeks a mother—a role taken on primarily by Wendy—whereas Wendy tries to develop a romantic partnership with Peter. This is a central theme. When Peter returns to Neverland with Wendy, John, and Michael —although the preposition *with* is used liberally here, because Peter actually flies away and largely leaves Wendy and her brothers to make their own way to the island—he announces, "Great news, boys, I have at last brought a mother for us all" (Barrie, *Boy Who Would Not* 2.1.223- 224). And after the Lost Boys build Wendy a house, they enjoin her to be their mother, telling her that it doesn't matter if she has no experience as a parent because "What we need is just a nice motherly person" (2.1.345-346). And so, Wendy becomes the Boys' mother figure and Peter takes on the honorific of father—these fictions shape their life in the underground house for much of the play and/or novel. However, it is also clear that this domestic arrangement is not without tension, driven at least in part from Wendy's desire for a romantic relationship with Peter, and his inability to even conceptualize what she wants:[7]

> WENDY. (*knowing she ought not to probe but driven to it by something within*) What are your exact feelings for me, Peter?
>
> PETER. (*in the class-room*) Those of a devoted son, Wendy.
>
> WENDY. (*turning away*) I thought so.
>
> PETER. You are so puzzling. Tiger Lily is just the same; there is something or other she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother.
>
> WENDY. (*with spirit*) No, indeed it isn't.
>
> PETER. Then what is it?
>
> WENDY. It isn't for a lady to tell. (4.1.120-129)

The sexual desire of McNeil and Youssef's Peter is in stark contrast to the innocence of Barrie's protagonist. McNeil and Youssef also downplay the longing for a mother figure that

[7] As Ann Wilson argues, Wendy herself seem unable to fully conceptualize what she wants from Peter, instead being constricted by middle class Edwardian sexual mores that saw women as (ideally) passive objects to be possessed by men (603-604).

characterizes the earlier versions, although at the end of their play Peter does reflect, "I don't have a mother," and the rehabilitated Hook replies, "Okay, fine, I'll share my mother with you" (127). Perhaps, though, it's more accurate to say that McNeil and Youssef transform the theme of motherhood by making Wendy actually bear Peter a child, as we saw at the beginning of this article.

Peter and Wendy's child exposes other aspects of PPS—namely, Peter's irresponsibility and narcissism. He repeatedly expresses the desire to have a child with Wendy (97, 111-113), but once the child is born, according to the stage directions, "*PETER leaves*" (113). After Peter leaves her with the baby, Wendy says, "I don't want to have any more kids" (113). This is essentially the last we see of the baby. This signifiesthat Peter has now gratified his desire for a child, but shows no interest in the responsibilities of fatherhood, even having Niall McNeil come on stage as himself at the end of the play to marry Wendy (126-131)—presumably also to be a substitute father to the baby, although this is never explicitly brought up.

Peter's resistance to being answerable for others is also grounded in Barrie's play:

PETER. (*scared*) It is only pretend, isn't it, that I am their father?

WENDY. (*drooping*) Oh yes.

(*His sigh of relief is without consideration for her feelings*)

But they are ours, Peter, yours and mine.

PETER. (*determined to get at facts, the only things that puzzle him*) But not really?

WENDY. Not if you don't wish it.

PETER. I don't. (Barrie, *Boy Who Would Not*4.1.113-119)

Of course, the major difference between Peter's refusal of paternity in Barrie's play and his abandonment of his child in McNeil and Youssef's play is that Peter is actually the biological father of Wendy's baby in the latter instance. In both versions, Peter is irresponsible and unwilling to embrace the role of father, but in Barrie's drama Pater never expresses the desire to have a child (or any awareness of sex as such). Nell Boulton claims, "For [Peter], natural sexual curiosity is impossible. Indeed, Peter's lack of curiosity does not merely relate to sexuality, but extends to an inability to understand the points of view of other people. Whether commanding the lost boys or asking Wendy to mother him, he seems to treat everyone in Neverland as narcissistic extensions of his own needs" (310). In *Peter Panties*, Peter is equally narcissistic, though he does indulge his sexual impulses. However, he does so without accepting any claim the child might have upon him. The pattern demonstrated by Peter here—fulfilling his desires without willingness to accept accountability for his actions—is the governing logic of late capitalist consumption. This ownership mentality is central to McNeil and Youssef's Peter, while Barrie's protagonist seems to have little desire to possess things or people—he is primarily

driven by the desire to have fun, though he is as capable of doing so in complete solitude and with no material possessions as he is when surrounded by people and objects.

Late Capitalism's Economy of Desire

In his book *The End of Dissatisfaction?*, Todd McGowan argues that the *nomos* of late capitalism is desire, and that desire both drives capitalist production and reshapes the human psyche. As McGowan puts it, "Rather than demanding that its members give up their individual enjoyment for the sake of the whole, the society of enjoyment commands their enjoyment—private enjoyment becomes of paramount importance" (3). Individual gratification is tied to the capitalist mode of production growth because the demands of enjoyment are played out as demands for consumption of goods and services, with a corresponding demand for continual production. McGowan explains, "Global capitalism functions by submitting all cultural life to the process of commodification, and this process can only be sustained if everyone is engaged in the endless pursuit of enjoyment" (50). Similarly, SamoTomšič writes, "the unconscious production of *jouissance* and the social production of value follow the same logic and display the same structural contradictions, tensions and deadlocks: not repression of productive potentials of sexuality, drives and desires but the insatiable demand for production" (49). In other words, both capitalism and the psychology of the late capitalist subject function under the same demand for continual expansion—there can never be *enough* goods produced, *enough* profit, or *enough* enjoyment.

However, living under the governing logic of enjoyment, rather than the industrial capitalist logic of renunciation , has reshaped the psychology of the modern subject into what McGowan terms *pathological narcissism* (34). The pathological narcissist has a psychological need not only for success, but for that success to be socially acknowledged—it is not sufficient to have financial or romantic accomplishments, but the Other must acknowledge the pathological narcissist's accomplishments. This is related to what Oliver James calls *affluenza*, which he characterizes as "placing a high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous" (vii). Narcissism is one of the central building blocks of Peter Pan Syndrome. The intense focus on the self, and particularly the pursuit of perfection, is a coping mechanism for the feelings of anxiety, insufficiency, and loneliness that constantly threaten the PPS sufferer's self-image. As Kiley puts it, "The victim of the Peter Pan Syndrome is obsessed with the pursuit of perfection. The greater his insecurities, the more vivid the critical reflections and the stronger the need to project perfection. The attack of the projected insecurities is exacerbated by the absence of close friends and confidantes. Years of anxiety and loneliness have cut him off from seeking refuge in people who really care about him" (130). In other

words, narcissism is tied in to both the PPS victim's poor self-esteem—which is hidden by an excessive and phantasmatic over-compensation—and to the victim's poor social skills or relationships. And these two elements reenforce one another: because the victim determines that he's the only one who matters, this further weakens relationships with others who become merely mirrors for reflecting back to him his own perfection.

This reflective role of others is apparent in Barrie's play and novel, and to a lesser extent in McNeil and Youssef's adaptation. In Barrie's work, Peter's narcissism is evident throughout in ways that prefigure the pathological narcissism that would become a defining psychological condition of late capitalism—apart from the constituitive desire to own things and people. When Wendy finds Peter trying to stick his shadow back on with soap, she offers to sew it on, and once she has done so, Peter exclaims:

PETER. Wendy, look, look; oh the cleverness of me!

WENDY. You conceit; of course I did nothing!

PETER. You did a little. (Barrie, *Boy Who Would Not*1.1.375-377)

Not only does Peter take the lion's share of the credit for an achievement he had nothing to do with, but this exchange shows his need not only to "accomplish" but to be acknowledged in accomplishing. When he exclaims, "Wendy, look, look" Peter is directly drawing her attention to his cleverness—or, more accurately, to force her to acknowledge his perfection, even when the actual event shows his inability to stick his shadow back on. This need to be seen and acknowledged also causes Peter and Wendy trouble, particularly in the scene where Peter taunts the pirates on Marooner's Rock. After imitating Hook's voice, the pirates play a kind of twenty questions game with Peter, and he almost gives away his identity when Hook asks if he's a wonderful boy and, to Wendy's chagrin, Peter answers yes (3.1.130-131). Following this exchange, Peter reveals his identity to mock the pirates who were unable to guess, and in the following fight he is wounded and both he and Wendy nearly drown in the rising waters.

Things are never quite so drastic or dangerous in *Peter Panties*, but McNeil and Youssef's Peter delights in external validations of his perfection, especially by Wendy. Peter seems to revel in her compliments, while rarely returning them. During the birth scene in Chapter Seven, Wendy says, "I love you. You're very sexy, Peter" and he replies, "I love *it*" (112, emphasis added). The context doesn't allow us to determine exactly what Peter means by *it* in this scene. It's possible that he means he loves that she's having his baby, or that he loves that she's in love with him, but given Peter Pan's narcissism, the most logical assumption might be that he loves the compliment. He loves the affirmation of his own perceived perfection. Noticeably, Peter does not respond, "I love *you*," so this is clearly not a declaration of affection

for Wendy as a life partner.[8] This reading is bolstered in Chapter Eleven, when Peter solicits a compliment from Wendy, asking why she would want to pick him (an ironic question, considering that by this time Wendy is in the process of marrying McNeil), and she responds "Cause you're very sexy man [*sic*]" (128).As we saw in Barrie's play, Wendy is here a mirror for reflecting back what Peter wants to see—she's an object to support his narcissism.

Both affluenza and pathological narcissism are tied to an ownership mentality, where gratification of desires is viewed almost exclusively as a matter of consuming objects—including other people, who are treated as objects. Erich Fromm diagnoses the effects of a "having mentality" on romantic relationships, writing that when partners see one another as objects instead of subjects, "the error that one can *have* love has led them to cease loving. Now, instead of loving each other, they settle for owning together what they have: money, social standing, a home, children" (34). For Fromm, this proprietary attitude toward marriage is rooted in a capitalist society that trains subjects to think always in terms of accumulating possessions (35). To be clear, though, this kind of proprietary attitude toward others is not exclusive to marriage, nor does it characterize all marriages.

Affluenza and pathological narcissism also result from this obsession with wealth, as conspicuous consumption requires a degree of financial stability and freedom. Kiley links Peter Pan Syndrome to middle- or upper-class social status because money allows the individual the freedom not to worry about problems like food or shelter, and to focus instead on building an identity through the consumption of products (28-30). PPS is, therefore, a fellow traveler with conditions like affluenza and pathological narcissism—psychological problems in which the victim is driven primarily by a need to gratify their own desires and gain the approval of others. Late capitalism has also had profound effects on the structure of and attitudes toward the family, attempting to impose an exclusively economic model on family life.

Late Capitalism and the Family

One of the defining characteristics of late capitalism has been the attempt since the 1970s to extend the logic of the market through all spheres of society, including to socio-cultural spaces previously thought inappropriate for economic logic. As Wendy Brown puts it, "neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*," or the economic human (31, original emphasis).[9] This reconceptualizing extends to the family. Neoliberal thinkers attempt to erase

[8] During the marriage scene, Peter does actually state that he loves Wendy, but the stage directions describe them as "*flirty*" (128), so it's possibly that this is not a serious declaration, and Peter only says this after Wendy agrees to marry McNeill, thereby releasing Peter from any responsibility for a declaration of love.

[9] For more on late capitalism's pervasive reach, see Lisa Duggan, Michel Foucault, David Harvey, or Phillip Zapkin.

any non-economic perspectives or functions of the family, reducing it purely to a set of market transactions. Milton Friedman, probably the most influential theorist of neoliberal economics and cultural politics, explained the parent child relationship: "*children are at one and the same time consumer goods* and potentially responsible members of society. The freedom of individuals to use their economic resources as they want includes the freedom to use them to have children—*to buy, as it were, the services of children as a particular form of consumption*" (33, emphasis added). In other words, children are seen as consumable goods, which are expected to provide a return on the parental investment—though Friedman also acknowledges that once children are born, they become rights-bearing subjects in themselves.

Gary Becker goes further than Friedman in his analysis of the economized family, trying to show market logic at work in family life. Becker's book *A Treatise on the Family* presents theoretical arguments for the thesis that individuals naturally congregate in heterosexual and patriarchal nuclear family structures due to the logic of maximizing social utility—the book doesn't really address the counterargument that for most of human history the contemporary, atomized American-style nuclear family has not been the default social organization. He writes, "I also assume that [family] members do not need to be supervised because *they willingly allocate their time and other resources to maximize the commodity output of their household*" (Becker 16, emphasis added). In other words, Becker's view of the family—which has been quite influential among late capitalist social commentators, especially those who favor cutting social safety nets —is that families organize because individuals seek maximum profit within a competitive system, rather than according to forces like love/affection, arranged marriages, patriarchal ownership of women, shotgun weddings, religious custom, etc.[10]

At this point, one might reasonably object that these theories operate largely outside McNeil and Youssef's play. Peter's narcissism, objectification of Wendy, and even his abandonment of their baby is not sufficient grounds for arguing that *Peter Panties* provides a commentary on late capitalism as such. However, the critique of capitalism becomes more apparent when we contrast Peter's pursuit of enjoyment with Mr. Darling's Edwardian style renunciation. In Chapter Nine, shortly after the birth of her baby, Wendy arrives at the bank where Mr. Darling works (McNeil and Youssef, *Peter Panties*115). Wendy tries to interact with her father on an interpersonal level, at one point telling him, "I don't want you to be upset, dad," to which he responds with a professional and detached, "How much money do you want to take out?" (116). The banker, Mr. Darling, turns away the familial connection, instead embracing fully his professional role. The renunciation of the personal is even more apparent when Wendy

[10] The limitations of Becker's theory have been noted directly by Melinda Cooper in her book *Family Values*. Authors like Brown, Duggan, and Zapkin have also challenged the neoliberal logic of the family as a naturally self-organizing and non-coercive economic space.

asks if she can hug him, and Mr. Darling replies, "This is a public place" (117). The refusal of the hug—a symbol of interpersonal intimacy—because they are in a public and professional space signifies Mr. Darling's renunciation of interpersonal relationships, a form of psychological enjoyment. Instead,this refusal aligns him with the tradition of industrial capitalism, which required subjects sacrifice their enjoyment for the good of society/the economy. Mr. Darling's professionalism is perhaps more evident with the customer who comes before Wendy—played by Tinker Bell. Tinker Bell makes several transactions, which Mr. Darling processes quickly and efficiently (115-116). Strangely, however, these financial exchanges end with Tinker Bell saying, "I love you" and Mr. Darling replying, "I love you back" (116). While this perhaps breaks the illusion of his professionalism, it also seems like an unexpectedly causal parting, functioning with no more apparent affect than if they had said goodbye. Immediately after this exchange, Tinker Bell leaves and there is no apparent interaction between the two. Mr. Darling's bourgeois detachment is a stark contrast to Peter's childish desire simply to enjoy, without an apparent willingness to take responsibility for the results of his enjoyment (i.e., Wendy's baby). Peter also wants to continue enjoying, even when that enjoyment becomes socially inappropriate, as when he continues flirting with Wendy even as she's marrying McNeill at the end of the play (128).

In Barrie's play and novel, we never see Mr. Darling at work, though we learn he is a clerk, and we see him approach family/children as a financial problem to be reasoned out. Mr. Darling—for as much as he himself seems to be a childish adult who plays juvenile games with Michael (Barrie, *Boy Who Would Not*1.1.203-260) and complains that no one coddles him (1.1.276-277)—is described as a man with a head for finance. While this might sound reminiscent of Becker's economic family, it's worth noting that Barrie creates Mr. Darling to satirize bourgeois penny-pinchers; here Becker's ideal is presented as a buffoonish figure of fun. In the novel, Barrie describes Mr. Darling as "one of those deep ones who knows about stocks and shares. Of course no one really knows, but he quite seemed to know, and he often said stocks were up and shares were down in a way that would have made any woman respect him" (Barrie, *Peter Pan2*).[11] In the play, Mr. Darling's financial projections about whether they could afford a baby are mentioned in stage directions, meaning it would be accessible to readers but not to

[11] Interestingly, this description is taken almost directly from the play *When Wendy Grew Up*, a one-act play Barrie wrote in 1908—three years before the 1911 publication of the novel. However, in *When Wendy Grew Up* the description is applied not to Mr. Darling, but to Wendy's unnamed husband. In talking to her daughter Jane, Wendy says, "Papa is very clever, and knows all about Stocks and Shares. Of course he doesn't really know about them, nobody really knows, but in the morning when he wakes up fresh he says 'Stocks are up and Shares are down' in a way that makes Mummy very, very proud of him" (Barrie, *When Wendy* 1.1.123-127). We know that the term *Papa* here refers to Wendy's husband and not her father, because in the line before she notes that they bought the house from Jane's grandfather, Wendy's father (1.1.122-123). That Barrie shifted this description from Wendy's husband to her father—despite the novel's final chapter also being entitled "When Wendy Grew Up"—raises further interesting questions about Barrie's frequent conflation of parental figures and romantic desires.

audiences seeing the performance.[12] The stage directions explain that Mr. Darling was concerned about whether or not the family could afford to have Wendy, let alone any other children (Barrie, *Boy Who Would Not* 1.1.117).[13] In the novel—which seems to me like Barrie's more natural medium, considering the amount of unstageable information he provides in the play script—these calculations are presented in more detail, and Barrie assures us it was a close shave. When Mrs. Darling gets pregnant, "Mr. Darling was frightfully proud of her, but he was very honourable, and he sat on the edge of Mrs. Darling's bed, holding her hand and calculating expenses, while she looked at him imploringly. She wanted to risk it, come what might, but that was not his way; his way was with a pencil and a piece of paper" (Barrie, *Peter Pan* 2-3). Following this passage, Barrie takes us through Mr. Darling's calculations, as he mentally moves money from place to place and takes stock of what they could do without to meet the expenses of a new baby (3).

The other financial facet of Mr. Darling is the threat of economic ruin for the family, which appears in Barrie's play and novel as well as in *Peter Panties*. Ann Wilson even goes so far as to claim that "*Peter Pan* is a fable of modernity, anxiously negotiating industrial technologies that produced a middle class predicated on instability and which encoded impossible roles for men and women" (608). In her reading, middle class Edwardian anxieties about changing work roles, social roles, and gender roles under industrial capitalism are the central tension underlying Barrie's work. As the sole breadwinner for his family, Mr. Darling's employment is critical to the family's survival, both socially and physically in terms of food and shelter. This critical role within the family unit does give Mr. Darling a great deal of coercive power to enforce his will in the home through the threat of dire consequences if his wishes aren't met. Wilson notes that Mr. Darling's ostensible power in the home is the inverse of his relative powerlessness and anonymity within the industrial capitalist structure, even though the public sphere of business is ostensibly the male world (598-599). Barrie gives us a scene in which Mr. Darling threatens to quit work if Mrs. Darling does not tie his tie for him: "I warn you, Mary, that unless this tie is around my neck we don't go out to dinner to-night, and if I don't go out to dinner to-night I never go to the office again, and if I don't go to the office again you and I starve, and our children will be thrown into the streets" (Barrie, *Boy Who Would Not*1.1.129-133). While this threat may be a comic one meant as a jest for the benefit of the children, we also see Mr. Darling later commit to an absurd penance when, at the end of the play and novel, he pledges to remain in Nana's dog kennel until the children return (Barrie, *Boy Who Would Not*

[12] While the play premiered in 1904, it wasn't published until 1928, so these stage directions weren't accessible to most audience members for the first twenty-four years.
[13] Though, ironically, at the end of the play and novel, the Darlings have not only their three biological children, but they adopt the six Lost Boys whom Wendy, John, and Michael bring back. This raises questions about Mr. Darling's math skills.

5.2.19-50; Barrie, *Peter Pan* 170-171). Clearly Mr. Darling is willing to go to extremes. In McNeil and Youssef's play, Mr. Darling's employment hinges more on his job performance, rather than a temper tantrum over his tie, but the threat of unemployment and the negative consequences thereof do show up in the song "I Work at a Bank":

I work at a bank
I have a meeting with the owner
If I come out of my office
Our children will starve to the streets (x2)
I do not see more
I have a meeting with the owner
If I come out of my office
Our children will starve to the streets (x2) (McNeil and Youssef, *Peter Panties* 94 , emphasis added).

The threat of starvation here is not tied to the necktie, but it nonetheless signifies that Mr. Darling's employment remains a matter of life or death for the children and Mrs. Darling. The play contrasts Mr. Darling—with his employment, responsibilities, and renunciation of enjoyment—against Peter Pan, who rejects responsibility for a family but demands enjoyment.

McNeil and Youssef's Peter wants continually to possess people, especially Wendy, but he is unwilling to allow any responsibilities to attach to him. Peter demands enjoyment, but refuses the responsibilities linked to Mr. Darling's acceptance of tedious employment—in some sense the ultimate renunciation of enjoyment. The most overt example of this attitude is Peter's treatment of their baby, as we've already seen. However, Peter's desire to continue enjoying remains evident through the marriage scene as he continues flirting with Wendy even as she marries Niall. By refusing to marry her, Peter rejects any claim she might make on him as the father of her child. But, simultaneously, by continuing to flirt with her and mandate that she compliment him, Peter continues to demand her focus on him, continues to demand a form of ownership. By rejecting marriage, Peter refuses the industrial capitalist model what would require he subordinate his desires to the needs of his family. This paradoxical attitude of wanting to enjoy Wendy as a lover without being bound to her also contrasts Barrie's Peter, whose ephemerality and flightiness prevents him from developing any long-term interest in another person. McNeil and Youssef's protagonist wants to possess Wendy without her possessing him in any sense; Barrie's protagonist barely remembers figures who had played a central role in his life, like Tinker Bell or Captain Hook (Barrie, *When Wendy* 74; 176-181).

Conclusion

In *Peter Panties*, Peter Pan is a posterchild for the late capitalist culture of enjoyment,

with its psychological demand for pleasure without accountability. He is sexually exploitative of Wendy and the mermaids—who at one point striptease in silhouette in a tent (McNeil and Youssef, *Peter Panties* 106)—and repeatedly states that he wants to have a baby with Wendy, but then shows no interest in raising the child or even being present. Peter's sexuality, for all that it's more overt than in Barrie's play or novel, is still adolescent. This is demonstrated in a conversation with Mrs. Darling:

> PETER. I want to have sex and have kids.
>
> MRS. DARLING. Having sex is growing up, isn't it?
>
> PETER. So?
>
> MRS. DARLING. That's not what a child wants. (97-98)

Like a child trying to gratify a desire, Peter's sexuality remains entirely about his own enjoyment—his attitude is childish even as he enters the ostensibly adult world of sexuality. We may, therefore, think of Peter as the boy who refuses to grow up, not in the sense of not experiencing or desiring sexual pleasure, but in the sense of rejecting any responsibility to others. Peter refuses to grow into a reliable adult, even as he enters into sexual maturity. For him, Wendy exists as an object to fulfill his sexual impulses, not as a subject in her own right, to whom he might have responsibilities. In this sense, McNeil and Youssef's Peter Pan reflects both the childishness of Peter Pan Syndrome and the pathological narcissism of the late capitalist society of enjoyment.

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