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George MacDonald's Sources for "The Golden Key"

Hugh P. O'Connor

The task of writing specifically for children is less fundamental to [MacDonald] than the impulse to write as truly as he can—which is the goal he always sets himself elsewhere. His junior audiences often have to take him as they find him, just as his adult readers must [. . .]

In MacDonald's case, we have an author who is constantly preoccupied with the largest issues, so it can seem inevitable that his children's writing is not just for children. Yet [. . .] his adult writing is not just for adults—it is for the child in each of them. Who, then, is MacDonald writing for? In an important sense, he is writing for himself. [. . .] Not only do his works ceaselessly explore and articulate his own, very personal set of beliefs and priorities but [. . .] they draw to an immense extent on his own memories and fantasies.
(David Robb, George MacDonald 113-14.)

The above quotation introduces us to the nature of MacDonald's fiction, although we also need to recognise, as Robb emphasises elsewhere, that in many of MacDonald's works literature is as important as life in providing his store of memories and "fantasy" images.

MacDonald was understandably irritated by a review of his faerie romance *Phantastes* (1858) in the *Athenaeum* which implied that the book was a "confusedly furnished second-hand symbol-shop" (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 296-7).¹ True symbols are not diminished through repeated use. MacDonald's shorter story of a spiritual odyssey, "The Golden Key," published in 1867 in *Dealings With the Fairies*, could never plausibly be described as "confusedly furnished" because he draws extensively upon the best-known traditional models of a spiritual journey. And one of the most striking symbols he uses, the air-fish, is in no sense "second hand," being apparently created specially for this story.

A view opposite to that of the *Athenaeum* reviewer's is expressed by W. H. Auden, who, misapplying the words Of the Old Man of the Earth in "The Golden Key," tells the reader that "the only way, to read a fairy tale" is to "throw yourself in" (85). For a child, and for anyone's first reading, this is true. But, if persisted in, this approach restricts the adult reader to his or her prior assumptions, which is the *opposite* of childlike openness (Marshall 105). Much

of MacDonald's "imaginative fiction" is exceptionally allusive, relying for most of its effect with adults upon the complex harmonies of resonances these allusions create.²

Few, if any, of MacDonald's stories better illustrate his allusive techniques than "The Golden Key." His allusions in it to other authors bring out the matters that were influencing his writing at the time. Critics like Auden who disdain to look for such allusions in this and his other "fantasy" stories must inevitably believe these stories to be disconnected, as Auden claims elsewhere (Intro, ii).

1867 saw the publication of two of MacDonald's non-fiction works exploring ideas crucial to "The Golden Key": the first volume of *Unspoken Sermons* and his essay "The Imagination: Its Functions and its Culture." The first sermon in *Unspoken Sermons I*, "The Child in the Midst," is particularly relevant (Hein 187). On the first page of this first sermon, although the text is taken from Mark, MacDonald comments that "its lesson [is] rendered yet more evident from the **[end of page 42]** record of St Matthew [18. 2-6]. 'Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven'" (1). MacDonald goes on to expand Christ's meaning: "'He that sees the essential in this child, the pure childhood, sees that which is the essence of me,' grace and truth—in a word, childlikeness. It follows not that the former is perfect as the latter, but it is the same in kind" (9).

In insisting that he writes "for the childlike,"³ MacDonald is, I think, suggesting that his stories are for those who consciously or unconsciously acknowledge childlikeness as their goal in their responses to spiritual truth in life and in art. His essay "The Imagination . ." is grounded in the assumption that spiritual growth is possible. As its sub-title indicates, it sets out both the reasons for undertaking the imaginative quest and the way it may be undertaken. "The Golden Key" illustrates this imagination in practice and depicts the spiritual path that can open up to the practitioner.⁴ It was written at about the same time as his novel *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, and Robb comments upon the closeness of the two stories (42-50). Robb stresses that: "Like Mossy and Tangle in 'The Golden Key,' Alec and Annie [the hero and heroine of the novel] age only outwardly; within themselves, where we the readers know them, they remain the young children we first encounter" (50).

The reader who will derive most from "The Golden Key" is, therefore, one who "recaptures radical innocence" (as W. B. Yeats expresses it), and who also has sufficient love and understanding for the books to which MacDonald

alludes to be able to appreciate their subtle resonances in the story. It describes spiritual reality⁵ that the childlike can recognise, and it draws upon great myths to create new myth.

Outlooks changed as the *fin de siècle* mood crept in, and MacDonald would not have expected many readers of his 1893 essay “The Fantastic Imagination” to appreciate the underlying conceptions of “The Imagination . . .” Yet critics discussing his early fairy tales choose to quote from “The Fantastic Imagination” in preference to the earlier essay. As far as his adult readership was concerned, it is scarcely an exaggeration to suggest that his desperate aim in “The Fantastic Imagination” was to find ways of giving his stories validity for a readership who did not have the knowledge of great literature almost universally possessed by educated people when he wrote “The Imagination . . .” only twenty-six years previously. He still had hope “for the childlike,” but the deep ironies associated with both the overt and the covert literary allusions in the first paragraphs of *A Rough Shaking*, published two years previously in 1891, suggest that such hope was diminishing (Docherty, “Fantasy” 48-50). The suggestions he makes in “The Fantastic Imagination” are, of course, valid and helpful for any adult reader, but they cannot compensate for an inability to comprehend his allusions, nor for a lack of childlikeness.

Mere identification of MacDonald’s sources would be worthless (except to suggest further lines of research).⁶ The approach adopted here will be to explore spiritual-quest stories known to have been important to him, examining how well they relate to “The Golden Key.” He usually seeks to ensure that the images he reuses convey most of their original meaning and much new meaning in [43] addition. They are not deeply buried, but he usually turns what he borrows upside down, and this may have contributed to most of these borrowed images being missed by critics who have assumed he was insufficiently subversive to do anything so irreverent, especially to famous Christian texts.

“The Golden Key” seems to begin as a traditional fairy tale. That the girl and boy protagonists are unnamed is not unusual in such a tale. But we do learn their (nick)names after the fairy-tale part of the story is over. This implies that these names will have positive meaning subsequently in the story. But it is evident that they are very differently relevant at the beginning of the story. “Mossy was the name [the boy’s] companions had given him, because he had a favourite stone covered with moss, on which he used to sit whole days reading; and they said the moss had begun to grow upon him too.” This tells us that he does not possess the sanguine temperament common in boys but is able to concentrate for long periods on one thing and does not waste this ability.

He has clearly read a great deal, and—given what we are told about his home circumstances—it will have been meaningful reading. Moreover, his great aunt continues the traditional oral transmission of fairy tales and, without didacticism, gently leads him towards the true meaning of her stories. As elsewhere in MacDonald's stories of Faerie, the use of "great" in this connection implies a transmitter of a profound spiritual tradition. Simple home comforts are equally important to Mossy. One day, "as he gazed into the forest he began to feel as if the trees were all waiting for him, and had something they could not go on with till he came to them. But he was hungry, and wanted his supper. So he lingered." It takes the Fairyland rainbow itself, blazing forth in glory, to draw him out of the house.

Tangle had received this name from the servants in her house "because [her] hair was so untidy. But that was their fault." Her home situation resembles that of the heroines of many traditional fairy tales in that she is neglected, with no mother and with her father: away for most of the time. Most importantly for the story, there is no wise old aunt to tell her stories and apparently hardly any reading matter in the house, or she would certainly not have "been reading the story of Silverhair all day." That fairy tale is *not* a traditional tale: MacDonald would have known it to be a perversion of a tale by Robert Southey, "The Story of the Three Bears," where the anti-heroine is a bad old woman (Jacobs 300). Nineteenth century sentimentality changed this old woman into the beautiful child heroine, first called Silverhair and later Goldilocks. Yet morally, Silverhair-Goldilocks and Southey's "bad old woman" (and the Fox of the beast epic from which Southey derived his story) are identical.⁷

As is usual with MacDonald, he is subverting contemporary distortion of spiritual-moral values, and subverting it as it manifests in the printed word. The contrasting initial situations of MacDonald's hero and heroine plainly hint that a major theme of "The Golden Key" will be the importance of good literature and the moral threat posed by misunderstandings or misrepresentations of traditional myths. This is indeed the case, but the theme is not overt. It is present as numerous covert allusions to famous stories of spiritual quests. The paucity of reading matter in Tangle's home has had the positive effect that her imagination has not been corrupted by a lot of bad stories. So when the [44] house fairies stimulate her imagination to animate the furniture in her room⁸ this simply "set[s] her laughing." In her state of innocence, contrary to what some critics maintain, she sees through the distortions of "Silverhair"—one bad story that she *does* read.⁹ Tangle's latent sense of order, when prompted by the house fairies, enables her to recognise that the neglected state of herself and

the house, although not her fault, is an affront to the image of cosy domestic bliss represented by the bears and their home in the story—a bliss she has never known, yet can recognise as essentially good. From here it is a small step to her imagining the bears present and angry with her. Her consequent escape from the house is the beginning of her quest. Innocuous re-workings of old tales, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* (1853),¹⁰ could never have achieved for her what is achieved by the downright immoral "Silverhair."

Tangle and Mossy come together in Fairyland and their story goes on far beyond where most of the traditional fairy tales end with the hero and/or heroine passing through the dark wood and coming suddenly to a realisation of the joy of living.¹¹ A few fairy tales, however, end even earlier than that, at a situation comparable to where Mossy finds the golden key (Wolff 135). The fairy-tale beginning of MacDonald's story echoes the Grimms' clearest example of this truncated type, placed as the very last of their collection of fairy tales. In that situation, its obvious implication is that the readers' or listeners' real task begins when they have read or heard the tales and must begin to put them into practice.¹² No other title would be half as apt for that final Grimm fairy tale as the one it is given—"The Golden Key."

MacDonald's most obviously likely source for allusions in "The Golden Key" is Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1864).¹³ His friend F. D. Maurice would almost certainly have told him of the serious intent behind the "seeming Tomfooleries" of that book.¹⁴ Like "The Golden Key," it is a story of two children's spiritual quests. One or two of MacDonald's allusions to it in "The Golden Key" are so close to Kingsley's text that it is obvious he is attempting to make perceptive readers aware of his source without actually naming Kingsley or his book. Moreover, in these places there is no trace of any covert adverse comment: he obviously admires the book. This is perhaps unexpected, because the first chapter of *The Water-Babies* is a brilliant critical parody of the first part of *Phantastes* (Docherty, *Literary* 103-05).¹⁵ MacDonald responds magnanimously, but—perhaps because Kingsley's story can be perceived as even more "confusedly furnished" than *Phantastes*—he avoids paralleling Kingsley's plethora of interpolated passages about anything and everything.¹⁶ This paring-away is in part what gives "The Golden Key" its exceptional austere beauty.

The principal difficulty in exploring MacDonald's allusions to *The Water-Babies* in "The Golden Key" is that some of them are not simply critical commentary on this book in itself, but also critical comment upon Kingsley's critical comments on *Phantastes*. Wherever MacDonald is clearly making an

allusion to *The Water-Babies* but the allusion seems a poor fit and unnecessarily complex, this seems to be because he is alluding primarily to Kingsley's critique of *Phantastes*. It would be difficult to do justice to both these elements in one [45] paper. As far as possible, the *Phantastes* connections will not be considered here, but they cannot wholly be ignored.

The protagonist of *Phantastes*, the Oxford-educated aesthete Anodos, at first perceives Nature from two opposite and inadequate Romantic perspectives depicted as contrasting dryads (Docherty, *Literary* 33; 37-38). Kingsley replaces this aesthete with Tom, a down-to-earth Yorkshire boy, and Ellie, the daughter of a down-to-earth Yorkshire country gentleman. After their early deaths, these two children perceive the fundamental laws of the natural world from two opposite spiritual perspectives personified in the wholly loving yet wholly down-to-earth "fairies" Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby. (As a consequence of nurture, not nature, Tom has more need to learn the natural basis of moral law than does Ellie, who apparently spends most of her time in "heaven" and the rest with the two fairies helping Tom.) "The Golden Key," by contrast, has one unified Natura figure, the green lady. MacDonald did not possess Kingsley's extensive practical knowledge of Natural History, and he looks for "the truth [...] *hidden* beneath nature" (Prickett, *Victorian* 178), but he attempts to extract the core of the moral teachings Kingsley derives from nature.

"The Golden Key" begins where Mossy is told of the rainbow's golden key. Tradition affirms that this key is found where the Fairyland (spiritual) rainbow touches the Earth. Mossy finds this rainbow, and when it fades he finds the key where it had stood. Then, as Wordsworth expresses it: "by the vision splendid / [he] is on his way attended." It is the recollection of the rainbow that is its key.¹⁷ With it, Mossy can begin his quest through earthly life. MacDonald seems to imply that the Fairyland rainbow marks the ever-fluctuating limit to which the spiritual-sphere penetrates the earth-sphere. Mossy elects to enter this spiritual sphere and gains Tangle as companion for his quest. They remain within Fairyland (the earth sphere permeated by the spiritual), so Mossy is able to keep hold of his key right through earthly life and beyond. After death he again sees the rainbow and recognises that *now* this is his way. He set out directly towards the rainbow across the ocean. Tangle journeys to it by a very different path.

For both Kingsley's Tom and MacDonald's Tangle, the early stages of their spiritual journey cannot be called a "quest" because it does not arise out of their own volition. These two children of great potential from deplorable

backgrounds are moved initially by Grace. Tom is mistaken for a thief and obliged to escape from Ellie's house, where he has been sweeping the chimneys for his master Grimes. Tangle, at the very beginning of her journey, similarly escapes from her house. Both children climb out of a window and down a plant growing against the wall. In Tom's case this plant is a magnolia in full bloom, a perfect symbol for his memory of Ellie's beauty and purity.¹⁸ In Tangle's case the plant is creeping ivy that has largely obscured her view of Fairyland. Tom then gets caught in a rhododendron thicket, beautiful outside but a tangle within. Retaining the vision of Ellie, he has not been lured into this tangle and he struggles out without much delay. Tangle, by contrast, has to be rescued from an entrapping tree on her flight. But this is one of the places where MacDonald is primarily alluding to a passage in *Phantastes* critically parodied by Kingsley, and the incident cannot be understood without exploring that connection (see below). [46]

It is when Tom encounters Kingsley's first Natura-figure, the Irishwoman, that he becomes delightedly awake to the world of nature. This initial transforming experience climaxes in his glimpse of the glory of Ellie. But the Irishwoman remains with him, with the awareness of nature she bestows, for the remaining hours of his earthly life. After death his understanding of nature continues to grow when his small size obliges him to come into close contact with the creatures in the stream where he then lives as a water baby. Mossy and Tangle are brought together by MacDonald's green lady. They become imaginatively awake to the world of living nature upon encountering her and receiving her gift of the air-fish she has nurtured.

Kingsley's Tom learns the central Christian principle of loving sacrifice for others and then applies it when he travels to the-Other-end-of-Nowhere to help Grimes. Tangle and Mossy are shown this basic principle of sacrifice operating in dramatic fashion when their air-fishes sacrifice themselves for them to eat. The green lady tells the children that this is a fundamental principle of the living world (and indeed, without the abundance of life and its continual self-sacrifice there would be no food).

It would be absurd to contract the air-fish (or any other of MacDonald's multi-dimensional symbols with their limit-less nuances of meaning) into two-dimensional allegories, but he supplies useful information about them. The furthest back that we see these fish they are degenerate variations upon the "ideal" fish form (as employed as a Christian symbol): they are "all very odd, and with exceptionally queer mouths," speaking "nonsense." At rare intervals one develops to a stage where it can be sent into the green lady's realm to

develop more rapidly as an air-fish. From the two that we see, it seems each air-fish ultimately is sent to find an individual human being who has entered Fairyland and bring that person to the green lady. The way she asks for the wisest of the air-fish to fetch Mossy hints that wisdom is not always her criterion. Subsequent events suggest that for Tangle's guide she may have asked for the bravest. The air-fish becomes visible to the person it is sent to guide at around the age of eleven, and it can be digested, in the presence of the lady, at puberty. When digested it is liberated at a more spiritual level as a being indistinguishable from the Greek image of the liberated psyche (Petzold 9). Another person of the opposite sex can share in the digestion of a person's air-fish, as Tangle does with Mossy's.

In *The Water-Babies* there is an unforgettable *devolutionary* sequence pictured in the photograph album that Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid shows to Tom and Ellie just before Tom is sent to help Grimes. It records the history of the Doasyoulikes, a human race who devolve into apes (144-49). I suspect that MacDonald, in describing the evolution of the air-fish from the degenerate fish in the care of the Old Man of the Sea, is suggesting that a devolutionary process of the kind that Kingsley describes can be reversed, with great effort, and over a very long period of time.¹⁹ This would accord with MacDonald's qualified conception of Universalism.

Although Tom is fearful of close pursuit when fleeing from Ellie's house, Harthover Hall, the invisible presence of the Irishwoman accompanying him [47] keeps him vividly aware of all nature around him as he flees over the fell and then down a great crag to what is undoubtedly Malham Cove (23-33).²⁰ There, in the wish to be clean, he washes in the stream that flows out of the tiny cave at the crag-foot. But he drowns, and the water fairies take his human husk off him (50). Tom's husk is buried, but the skins the green lady takes off the air fish she makes into a wrapper, and Tangle is covered with this wrapper when she sleeps in the cottage. Stitched together apparently from the skins of all the most evolved air-fish, the wrapper seems to parallel Kingsley's Harthover Hall, which has enclosed Ellie throughout her childhood. Kingsley describes the Hall in imagery that makes it clear he is referring to the sum total of western civilisation inherited by men like Ellie's father (14-15).

After Tom sheds his husk, the fairies change him into a water-baby. Kingsley stresses that he has become again a little child ("3-87902 inches long"). He also stresses that Tom now possesses what he calls "external gills" (43-44). These make the water babies look exactly like traditional psyche figures with little butterfly wings (see Percival Skelton's illustration of Tom

with the last of the Gairfowl). When MacDonald's air-fish lose their husks they emerge as æranths, which (as noted) likewise are essentially indistinguishable from psyches. Echoing Wordsworth, the green lady tells Tangle "I am never allowed to keep my children long." Like Mossy's brief vision of the spiritual rainbow with its ascending human forms, his and Tangle's clear adolescent perception of nature becomes another vision for them to carry through life. While still near to the lady they delight in her world, although, unlike Tom, they perceive little of its wonderful detail and draw no moral lessons from it. All too soon, however, they pass beyond this to the struggles of middle life. Tom similarly, after he has learned a little from contact with the creatures of river and sea, comes wholly under the care of the two educative principles of the natural world, Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs Doasyouwould-bedoneby and (curiously) the natural world fades into relative insignificance for him. As noted, the two great fairies are assisted by the loving care of Ellie. By contrast, Mossy and Tangle remain together loving and helping each for very many years, but after Tangle dies their paths run separately for a long time.

At the end of Mossy's earthly life, MacDonald refers to him following "his mournful, lonely way" to the Old Man of the Sea. So Tangle has apparently died first. Her journey without Mossy through a tunnel before meeting the Old Man of the Sea presumably, therefore, depicts a terminal illness, when she is more or less unconscious, like Ellie after her fatal fall at the seaside when she glimpses Tom as a water baby.²¹

Ultimately Tom matures to the stage where he can be sent to help his former master, Grimes. He comes to the Peace Pool in the far north where Mother Carey sits; perfectly still, gazing into the pool,²² creating all life. She initiates Tom into **[48]** **[Note: image not available]** The Secret of (Earthly) Life by telling him of Prometheus, Epimetheus and Pandora. Kingsley's treatment of Epimetheus much resembles that of Goethe in the dramatic fragment *Pandora*. It is possible that MacDonald picked up the Goethe connection and therefore introduced into his story another subject of Goethe's researches, the light spectrum. His account of the Fairyland rainbow certainly draws upon Goethe's researches.

Like Mother Carey, the first two Old Men whom Tangle encounters after her death are essentially passive in their work,²³ none more so than the Old Man of the Earth, who sits gazing into a pool-like mirror. It is not Mother Carey herself but a gigantic rotifer-like creature—one of the giants working for the great sea-mother—who tells Tom he must plunge straight down a volcano on the floor of the ocean (181). Tangle plunges straight down into the earth

in apparently very different circumstances, but at the end of her descent she perceives, flowing molten from the rocks, the gold and silver and copper that Tom had seen the rotifer-giant sorting out as vapours far above.

Tom's Epimethian journey through the Other-end-of-Nowhere recalls Odysseus' journey back to Ithaca where he is delayed and in great danger on numerous islands but escapes by his cunning and his charm. Tom escapes danger and delay by trusting his (dog's) intuition, but nevertheless is obliged to walk backwards across the whole of the Other-end-of-Nowhere: across the islands where people live worthless, but all-too-common, death-in-life existences and across the seas between them. Mossy crosses an ocean apparently devoid of islands, with "a shining fish" invisibly guiding him. Like Tom, however, he has to walk the whole way.

Tom eventually comes to the prison where those, like Grimes, who have chosen hell are ultimately fixed. Each is apparently in his own solitary hell, his heart freezing everything near him. But "Tom can do for Grimes what even his own mother's tears cannot, for behind him lies the divine love implicit in all creation. Yet Tom's forgiveness is intensely personal, only he can release Grimes" (Prickett, *Victorian* 169). Grimes' heart to begin to thaw and melt his prison, releasing him to purgatory in Etna (202-03).²⁴ Mossy eventually comes to what is apparently Mount Purgatory where his key unlocks a door into the mountain, then creates a stairway to the cave where Tangle is "imprisoned," and finally unlocks a door that opens to a way out of the cave and the mountain.

Tom is taken by Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid up the back stairs and reunited with Ellie, in a scene that, in part, MacDonald reproduces almost verbatim in describing Mossy's reunion with Tangle.²⁵ We learn nothing of Tangle's journey from the centre of the earth to the cave, led by the snake she has been given. Tom's journey to his reunion with Ellie is likewise kept secret, but it seems to be almost instantaneous.

All options are then open to Tom and Ellie. They can go "home" (presumably to "heaven") whenever they wish;²⁶ and Tom is able to become "a great man of science" (206-07). Kingsley, throughout his story, has been attempting to loosen our conceptions of the rigid separation of Earth and Heaven/Hell, Life and Death, and Time and Eternity. If we have not absorbed this, his ambiguous conclusion can seem utterly bewildering. MacDonald, despite striving for clarity, [49] attempts to emulate Kingsley's introduction of things beyond imagining that can only be approached by intuition. The two time scales he provides for Tangle's experiences after her death seem to be a clumsy attempt at this, and they are regularly interchanged by critics who wish to shore

up shaky interpretations. MacDonald more successfully hinted at something incomprehensible where Mossy first saw the visible part of the Fairyland rainbow and recognised it as “a small portion of a huge bow.” It is not just a Jacob’s Ladder between Earth and Heaven, as most critics have assumed.²⁷

MacDonald’s critical reworking of Kingsley’s parable of a spiritual-quest to death and beyond seems to have evoked for him three other greater accounts of a similar quest: those by Dante, Bunyan and Homer.

The experiences of Dante on his descent into the Earth are inverted with Tangle. She does not encounter tortured souls and their torturing demons: for her they do not exist. As Blake said to the angel in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* who showed him his future place in Hell: “All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics” (116). The first part of Tangle’s descent is by a spiral stair, a favourite MacDonald image. Then, like Dante on his *upward* journey, she follows the channel of a small stream, although she swims immersed in the stream. Her stream, unlike Dante’s, seems to follow a fairly direct course. She has to walk the last part of her descent where intense heat dries up the stream. After these inversions of Dante it should come as no surprise that where the heat is most intense she encounters a little naked child, nor that he confirms to her that he is the oldest man of all (John 1.1-2). The inversion of Dante’s Satan, a huge shaggy figure embedded in ice, is so striking that no doubt is possible that Tangle is at the centre of the Earth. She has encountered Christ’s purging fire opposite to where Dante encounters it at the summit of Mount Purgatory.

Dante’s descent into the Earth has always been recognised to involve a parallel descent into the microcosmic hell within the individual human being. The account of Tangle’s descent similarly hints at a parallel microcosmic descent. But MacDonald’s stress upon the elemental Old Men suggests that his primary concern is, like Dante’s, focused upon the macrocosmic aspects of the journey.²⁸

For MacDonald, Christ has harrowed Hell: He has brought the heavenly sphere right down to the earth’s core, and a soul like Tangle should find Him there. The Fairyland rainbow must itself, therefore, penetrate to the centre of the earth. From there the snake, gifted to Tangle by the Christ child, leads her upwards. This snake of wisdom (Matt. 10.16), guides her up through the vastness of rock “turning neither to the right nor the left.”

Dante’s guide Virgil is obliged to follow the devious channel of the stream Lethe up to the foot of Mount Purgatory. Tangle, led by wisdom, unsurprisingly arrives at a cave within the mountain resembling that within a *Mons Phisophorum*.²⁹ From one aspect the snake has opened up this cave for

her.

Mossy's journey after leaving the Old Man of the Sea is a less complete inversion of Dante. In the *Purgatorio*, souls bound for Purgatory have an easy boat journey halfway round the world to Mount Purgatory, guided by an angel at [50] the prow. Mossy has to walk this immense distance, with the shining fish invisible below his feet as his guide when the rainbow disappears. Yet, astonishingly, many critics claim Mossy's path from the Girl Man of the Sea to the cave of the rainbow is shorter than Tangle's.³⁰ MacDonald tries to make us aware what an arduous journey this is for Mossy, climbing every wave, even without the weight of a physical body. Dante's souls arrive at the one small cove at the foot of the otherwise precipitous Mount Purgatory. Mossy has to climb halfway up the first precipice. This climb closely reflects Tangle's climb after she has lost contact with Mossy but before her death. In both cases the climbs are a struggle to a higher level of spiritual consciousness. Mossy's journey then again inverts Dante when his key creates a way up inside the mountain for him. This leads him to Tangle in the cave through which the rainbow passes.

At the very beginning of Dante's journey, in *Inferno* Canto I, he sees a mountain close to his path that he knows he should have climbed, and, in a very real sense, this mountain is one with Mount Purgatory antipodal to him. Later philosophers saw Dante's first mountain as the *Mons Philosophorum*, to be climbed from *within*. Tangle has been able to penetrate to the Christ-child and been given the Christ-wisdom which enables her to enter the mountain without a key. Mossy has to use his key, which confirms that entering the mountain (as a *Mons Philosophorum*) is an essential step towards entering the rainbow. And in the sacred cavern the rainbow comes to meet the souls who reach there, in the sense that it becomes tangible enough to be unlocked with the key.

Dante's subsequent ascent in the *Paradiso* is directly upwards into the Empyrean. But the rainbow—even the Fairyland rainbow—is a liminal phenomenon. In Fairyland, Mossy and Tangle have, by definition, always been within the spiritual sphere, darkened though it is where it interpenetrates the earth-sphere. Now that they are moving away from the earth one might expect them, like Dante, to penetrate deeper into the spiritual sphere. Yet they ascend within the rainbow. Unlike Dante, but like Kingsley, MacDonald closes with ambiguity. His final sentence, "And by this time I think they must have got there," is like other ironic phrases employed by storytellers to close never-ending stories and prevent their sacred mood from dissolving into the light of common day.

Despite MacDonald's undoubtedly great admiration for both Bunyan and

Dante, much of his response to *The Pilgrim's Progress* resembles his response to the *Commedia* in being a "parody by omission." Just as Tangle sees no suffering souls in the region of Dante's hell, she and Mossy, unlike Bunyan's hero and heroine, see no people preparing for hell during their earthly journey. They move through life with sufficient love and trust not to need to be oppressed by symbols of damnation throughout every moment of their journey. When MacDonald wrote "The Golden Key" his life had already been much troubled by serious illness and career upsets, and the chasms and crags encountered by Mossy and Tangle indicate that he was already well aware of life's difficulties. But in "The Golden Key" he does not describe such upsets as Bunyan does. Many years later, he reluctantly joined in public performances of *The Pilgrim's Progress* organised by his wife Louisa (Greville M. 471), and these became a great source of [51] strength to him and others of the family in their sorely troubled lives. But in the 1860s he could still take a critical view of some aspects of Bunyan's story.

An evangelical critic like Kirstin Jeffrey, however, reviewing the Bunyan allusions in "The Golden Key," forces the story into the Procrustean bed of evangelical dogma. With her vision restricted by ideas of "ordinances," "justification," and so on, she cannot see that MacDonald partially inverts the responses of Bunyan's characters. She is probably correct in equating Tangle's flight from her home with Christian leaving his home and family (cf. Luke 18. 29), but she describes it as an escape from the "terrifying evil" of the three bears (70). From her all-too-common viewpoint, a pretty, bright-haired little girl like Silverhair is *ipso facto* good, while bears, as low animals, are *ipso facto* evil.

Like Mercy, Christiana and the children, Tangle (as mentioned) has an unpleasant encounter early on in her journey. In Bunyan's story this is a violation of the private space of his pilgrims and should not be thought of as merely a failed sexual assault. Tangle's experience is strikingly similar to the warning given to Anodos in *Phantastes* about an Alder tree (15). Anodos' attitude towards the Alder is the cause of his entrapment by it, and he is saved from this "tree," and from the yet-more-dangerous Ash, by his distant memory of Ins (very inadequate but nevertheless valuable) *ideal of masculinity*, the knight (67-77). Tangle becomes entangled in her tree when far younger than Anodos, but she is much the same age as is Tom when he tangles in the rhododendron thicket. Had Tangle's entrapment had a wholly external cause it is difficult to see how the air-fish could have released her. The air-fish's attack upon her tree has the opposite effect to that of Bunyan's ill-favoured men on Christiana and her party. It opens up Tangle's enclosed space, but with the positive consequence that the fish is then continually visible to her.

Tangle's bath at the green lady's house, with the new clothes she is then given, recalls the bath of Christiana and her party in the bathhouse in Interpreter's garden, as Jeffrey notes. In both cases the bath is in part intended to wash away the unpleasantness of the entrapment. But there is a strikingly sensual quality to Tangle's bath. She is restored to the positive sensuality necessary for a proper appreciation of the natural world (Anderson 90-92). The bath Bunyan describes is to assist rejection of this world.

MacDonald's description of how the green lady pulls off the feathered skin of the air-fish suggests an allusion to the sheep in Interpreter's House in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Jeffrey 73). But whereas Bunyan stresses the importance of the sheep's *suffering*, the lady (as noted) stresses to Tangle the principle of *sacrifice* as the foundation of the living world.³¹

MacDonald's other possible allusions to *The Pilgrim's Progress* likewise seem to indicate an opposition to Bunyan very different from his apparent opposition to Dante. Christian and Christiana are given their names when they take up a pilgrim's life and (as noted) we only learn the names of Mossy and Tangle when they come to the green lady's cottage and begin their pilgrimage together. But with Mossy and Tangle these names were given long before they set out from home. In their case the childhood names come to symbolise then-different responses to life; with Bunyan's pilgrims the names are intended to [52] signify preparation for the next world. Jeffrey particularly stresses the similarity between Interpreter and MacDonald's green lady. Yet the very first thing Interpreter shows to Christian is designed to bring him to the habit of "sighting and despising the things that are present" to be "sure in the world that comes next to have glory" (32). Nothing could be further from the mood of "The Golden Key."

Both MacDonald and Kingsley associate Greek myths with the deaths of their hero and heroine. Tom, as noted, becomes a psyche-like creature, and the fall that leads to Ellie's death happens just after she has passionately affirmed the imaginative reality of water nymphs in a picture of *The Triumph of Galatea*. MacDonald's allusions to Greek myth are primarily to one episode from *Odyssey XIII* connected with the Old Man of the Sea, Proteus-Phorcys. MacDonald supplements Homer's account of this episode with details he has apparently drawn from Porphyry,³² who, in his essay "On the Cave of the Nymphs," collected ancient myths connected with the place of Odysseus' return to Ithaca.

Homer describes how the Phaeacian ship which brings Odysseus home is then petrified by the always-quarrelsome Poseidon, who was attempting to

usurp Proteus and who sought to thwart every good initiative he encountered. Odysseus has been brought to the harbour of the Old Man of the Sea; and there at the head of the cove is the cave sacred to the Naiads. These, nymphs not only weave garments of flesh for descending souls, as Homer describes: Porphyry had studied the earlier myths of this and similar caves and writes of “the water which trickles, or is diffused, in caverns, over which the Naiades [. . .] preside” and he describes how the Naiads also tended the pools into which this water trickled (qtd. in Raine 1: 82). In these pools, people’s physical bodies dissolved away, permitting their souls to pass out of incarnation into the spirit world (Raine 1: 81-86). All this accords with Mossy’s and Tangle’s experiences in the home of the Old Man of the Sea.

Plato in the *Cratylus* tells us that Poseidon, the foot-fettered, is so named “from the nature of the sea restraining his course when he walks and not permitting him to proceed farther” (qtd. Raine 1: 174). This throws light upon the Old Man of the Sea’s need to comment to Mossy that his feet will no longer make holes in the water—which, after all, is to be expected when Mossy has left his physical body. MacDonald seems likely also to have associated this image with the Matthew 18.2-6 passage he quotes at the beginning of *Unspoken Sermons*. He preferred to read the Greek version of the New Testament, and the Greek text of verse 6 describes the millstone as that to which an ass is yoked and has to drag round and round on its treadmill. Moreover, the Greek does not mention the “depths” of the Authorised Version and some other translations. *Pelage* is the opposite of this—the wide expanse of the sea. Exactly the same picture of fettered movement through the sea of life is created as with Plato’s definition of “Poseidon.”³³

Homer follows Mediterranean tradition in depicting life’s journey as a sea voyage. MacDonald in “The Golden Key” employs for this journey the German Romantic imagery of a rocky landscape. But Mossy’s post-death walk, traversing what Blake calls “the sea of time and space” (qtd. Raine 1: 79), seems [53] likely to be a recapitulation of the storms and calms of his life journey. If so, this may indicate why a shining fish guides him, not his far more developed æranth.

Odysseus, returned to Ithaca, has to rescue his wife Penelope, imprisoned in her own home by suitors, who would corrupt her in every way. She has resisted them by steadfastly performing her womanly tasks. Tangle has steadfastly learned all the secrets of the earth: first from the Old Men,³⁴ then from the shake the Christ-child gave to her, and then in the cave that seems to be the cave of wisdom within the *Mons Philosophorum*. What she has learned

enables her to see Mossy as like all the Old Men. She has garnered the wisdom of the earth and, reunited with Mossy, can share it with him. They are now ready and able to leave the earth sphere and climb the rainbow.

Other accounts of spiritual quests illuminate parts of Mossy and Tangle's quest and some of these may, on close examination, be found to be as important as those explored above.³⁵ MacDonald draws upon visual art, not literature, to depict Mossy and Tangle's early life together. Their life surrounded by nature after they have met the green lady and their subsequent arduous journey through a rocky landscape seem to draw on these stages as depicted in Cycle of Life pictures by German Romantic artists.³⁶ For their subsequent journey through the vale of shadows MacDonald returns to a literary source, drawing upon Plato's famous image of the cave in *The Republic VII*. Mossy and Tangle have passed beyond the spiritual stage of entrapment in the cave and are well aware that the shadows they now see come from realities (Plato's archetypal "Ideas") in a country above them. That is to say, they have begun to recognise the heavenly essence in everything around them and are totally absorbed by this, even though it is still only shadowy to them and becomes disturbing as they approach death.

Marshall suggests that Tangle's visions underground "might be understood as the goal and purpose of the story" (107),³⁷ and MacDonald, describing them, seems to allude not only to *The Divine Comedy* but also to another work of comparable stature, Goethe's *Faust* (Wolff 145). For Faust, "*Das Ewig-Weibliche / Zieht uns hinan*": ("Eternal Womanhood leads us above") and this eternal Womanhood manifests for him as various women. Most notable of these is Helen, for whom he had earlier made his perilous descent into the bowels of the earth to encounter the Mothers. Tangle's descent is motivated wholly by her desire to be reunited with Mossy and consequently it follows the most direct route to him, becoming an ascent after her encounter with the Christ child. And in place of the terrifying Mothers, she encounters father-figures who to her are benign.

Mendelson comments that "The Golden Key" "traverses a literary route from traditional folk tale to the apocalyptic epic of salvation" (38). But with Tangle's adventures under ground a fairytale element reappears alongside MacDonald's "apocalyptic" Dante and Goethe allusions. Her quest to reunite Mossy, with its three symbolic trials and seven-year wait, powerfully reflects the mood of the "Black Bull of Norway" (Jacobs 159-62). And her reunion with Mossy, as well as recalling Ellie's reunion with Tom, also recalls the youngest daughter's reunion with the Black Bull who becomes a prince: "And she

told him all that had befallen her, and he told her all that had happened to him” (162).³⁸ [54]

The passage from Robb’s book employed as epigraph to the present paper helps us to grasp what MacDonald understood by “the childlike” as applied to his fairy tales. Only the childlike are likely to understand how these tales are addressed to the childlike, although ratiocination may facilitate recognition of their commonly recurring features.

Stephen Prickett makes clear what MacDonald is doing in “The Golden Key”:

Behind the magical beings of MacDonald’s universes lie the philosophical and theological principles of a scheme that is as carefully worked out as that of Dante— indeed, his references to Dante [. . .] make it clear that, almost unbelievably, he is inviting just such a comparison. [. . .] But it’s not, I think, conceit that makes MacDonald deliberately invite comparison with one of the world’s greatest allegorists.³⁹ It is rather that he [. . .] is seeking to establish himself within an existing literary tradition—a tradition not of folklore and primitive ritual, but of complex theological sophistication.

Moreover, the comparison is not one of genre but of content. MacDonald is attempting to open up and articulate areas of human experience that had been more or less dormant since the Renaissance. In the face of a predominantly empiricist and scientific culture concerned to rationalise and where possible demythologise the long record of man’s awareness of the numinous, MacDonald reasserts the value of myth and symbol, not as a primitive relic, nor simply as a literary device, but as a vital medium of human consciousness. Religious experience is seen not as something to be reduced to a psychological or physical term in order to be articulated, but as itself, in itself, a new kind of articulateness, a symbolic, myth-making activity that taps the very roots of human creativity. (Two Worlds 18-19).

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Notes

1. The reviewer suggests that the uncomprehending reader could create such a symbol-shop from the book, but his implication is that the book itself is like that.
2. From a Jungian perspective, Auden's approach, taken literally, leaves the reader with the basic archetypes, devoid of the accretions that have gathered around them over the centuries and constitute western culture. Auden was a cultured man, yet he seems to have forgotten that not everyone is in such a privileged position.
3. It was not until 1893 in "The Fantastic Imagination" that MacDonald introduced the famous formulation: "I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty or seventy-five"(317). The concept itself, however, is present throughout MacDonald's writings, although the phraseology is apparently borrowed from the preface to Lewis Carroll's *The Nursery Alice* of 1890.
4. Michael Mendelson suggests that "we are led to wonder Whether the journey through fairyland is best seen as an epistemological adventure in which the imagination is the actual protagonist" (39).
5. The spiritual nature of Tangle's adventures under ground is most evident where she comes to the Old Man of the Fire. She discarded her physical body in the cave of the Old Man of the Sea and has not been given another, so there is no way in which *physical* heat could touch her. When MacDonald wrote "The Golden Key," most people still believed that the warmth of human relationships was a spiritual reality, and external warmth was perceived as a lesser reality analogous to it. Just one generation later, with the coming of the *fin de siècle* mood, all this began to be turned on its head.
6. MacDonald is not an author who goes to the great supermarket of literature to obtain ready-made symbols and exotic themes that he needs only to warm up.
7. "Silverhair"- "Goldilocks" is as bad structurally as it is morally. It has neither proper closure nor an "endless ending." The story is left hanging.

8. MacDonald is not suggesting these house fairies are poltergeists, able to move furniture.

9. As MacDonald expresses the matter in the penultimate sentence of *Phantastes*: “What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good.”

10. MacDonald recognised the precious value, in their original form, of the; Greek myths that Hawthorne modernizes. He could not have been other than dismayed at how Hawthorne rewrote them “as his fancy dictated,” apparently with little understanding of their deeper meaning. “[A]s his fancy dictated” is Hawthorne’s own phrase, used in the preface to his earlier collection, *A Wonder Book* (1851). That the name “Tangle” is employed by MacDonald may not be unrelated to Hawthorne’s title *Tanglewood Tales*, particularly as “mossy” is a favourite word with Hawthorne.

11. In some fairy tales, of course, when the hero/heroine has not adequately secured the heroine/hero and the happiness she/he represents, the end is deferred and he/she has to pass through great trials. For Tangle’s post-death adventures MacDonald takes this theme and raises it to the highest possible level—of a direct encounter with Christ (see below).

12. In this context, “fairy tale” equates with “dream” in MacDonald’s favourite (Novalis) quotation: “Our life is no dream, but it ought to, and perhaps will, become one.”

13. Both Colin Manlove and Stephen Prickett have explored the similarities and differences in outlook between Kingsley and MacDonald. See in particular Prickett’s *Victorian Fantasy* and Manlove’s essay “MacDonald and Kingsley” in *The Gold Thread*.

14. Kingsley wrote to Maurice about the “seeming Tom-fooleries” of *The Water-Babies* in a letter of which a small part is quoted in his wife’s *Letters and Memories of Charles Kingsley* chapter 19. His concerns were very much wider than just with the plight of boy chimney sweeps, although the book was highly influential in that respect, arousing public awareness of the lives of chimney sweeps to the extent that the government had to introduce new regulations attempting to control their employment [57]

15. Carroll in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)—probably following Kingsley’s example—likewise critically parodies *Phantastes* (Docherty 101-238). Docherty goes on to explore some of MacDonald’s critical allusions to *Alice’s Adventures* in “The Golden Key” (239-50). As another example of a child’s spiritual quest, *Alice’s Adventures* is relevant to “The Golden Key.” But it is not so relevant as *The Water-Babies*, because it describes only an exploration of the microcosm within man. It will not, therefore, be considered in the present study.

16. Prickett points out that Kingsley’s ambiguities and apparent irrelevances reflect the apparently incoherent aspects of nature (*Victorian* 151-55). Kingsley’s

ambiguities may in part be a response to the ambiguous quotation from Novalis about the incoherent aspects of nature that prefaces *Phantastes*.

17. MacDonald seems to equate this concept of “recollection” with Coleridge’s “Primary Imagination.” From a Romantic viewpoint that MacDonald shared, even St Peter’s unlocking gold key is the Primary Imagination.

18. Tom had descended the wrong chimney and arrived in Ellie’s bedroom. Readers may miss both the erotic aspect of his vision of the sleeping Ellie and its heavenly purity. But they will not do so if they have read Kingsley’s *Hypatia*, with Raphael Aben-Ezra’s encounter with Victoria in chapter 13, which is the prototype for Tom’s encounter with Ellie (Prickett, *Origins* 232-33).

19. Despite their rainbow colours, the air-fish apparently are not associated *directly* with the rainbow. Otherwise the green lady would not ask the one she sends to Mossy: “You know where the rainbow stands?” Tangle, however, in taking these words as a question, may be misinterpreting them.

20. Kingsley calls Malham Cove “Vendale.” He repeatedly stresses the Yorkshire location of Tom’s adventures in this world. But for Tom’s subsequent experiences in the stream he draws upon his knowledge of Hampshire streams.

21. McGillis, however, (perhaps not entirely seriously) suggests that Mossy deserts Tangle (Queering 96).

22. Parts of this episode are re-used, almost verbatim, by MacDonald in chapter 9 of *At the Back of the North Wind*

23. Continuous activity and interaction is traditionally the role of the “emissaries” of the Old Men: the Elementals most famously described by Paracelsus.

24. Kingsley describes Grimes and his fellow-workers in purgatory as working for the benefit of humanity. If we cease to work out of love (anywhere at any time) we are fixed in hell or, at best, existing in its extension, the Other-end-of-Nowhere.

25. There is a time difference, however. Ellie has had to wait for Tom “many a hundred years” (206) whereas Tangle has waited only seven. And Tom and Ellie stand and look at each other without speaking or stirring for seven years.

26. At the end of MacDonald’s “Cross Purposes” the hero and heroine are similarly able to visit Fairyland whenever they wish.

27. MacDonald, in describing the shadows, has clearly implied that “heaven” is “above.” But the other “end” of a rainbow would be at (the same level as the material earth, like the realm of the Beautiful Lily in Goethe’s *Märchen*, to which a smaller rainbow is one of the bridges. In that story, alternative crossings are available by a ferryman’s boat and a giant’s shadow. But ultimately a permanent bridge is made by a Green Snake that (after eating the gold) seems to be more or less identical with the snake Tangle is given.

28. By contrast, the pubertal initiation of the hero and heroine in “Cross Purposes”—where they pass rapidly through all four elements—is a microcosmic experience.

29. In *Phantastes* chapter 5, Anodos enters the *Mons Philosophorum*. But he is not ready for the experience and soon leaves by the same way he came in.

30. As recently as 2003, McGillis (Queering) repeats the old fallacies that Mossy's way after death is "shorter in terms of distance" and Tangle's is "more arduous." He also implies that Tangle's wait in the cave in the mountain must be a bore for her (95), perhaps thinking of [58] Carroll's Alice, who in the first chapter of her Wonderland adventures believes that if she goes right through the centre of the earth to the other side she will arrive at "antipathies." Yet, for anyone seeking to gain more understanding of spiritual truth, a wait in the *Mons Philosophorum* could never be boring. To judge by the way Tangle experienced her seven years watching the Old Man of the Fire as seven hours, her wait in the cave of the rainbow probably seemed to her like little more than a day (but see below).

31. MacDonald is unlikely to have agreed with Bunyan's view of suffering inflicted upon animals by humans. As late as the writing of *The Princess and Curdie*, with his description of the Uglies, he seems to have accepted Paul's view that the whole creation, which at present groaneth and travaileth (Rom. 8.22), would be redeemed through man overcoming the lower animal aspects of his own interior nature.

32. MacDonald is likely to have come to Tom Taylor's translation of Porphyry via Blake, for whom it was very important.

33. All true leadership is service and self-sacrifice. It manifests in many forms: Mossy-Moses in life can find his feet making holes in the sea, yet Peter Peterson with his rock in *The Princess and the Goblin* (156) divides the waters (cf. Exodus 15.21).

34. As MacDonald quotes in the epigraph to chapter 3 of *Phantastes*: "All that interests a man, is man." Hence Tangle sees the elemental forces in human terms. But most of MacDonald's contemporaries would have personified them very differently. The Old Man of the Sea, although concerned equally with generation and with death, was at that time associated almost wholly with death, as he hints to Tangle; new discoveries of the immense age of the material world prevented people recognising that matter might still be in its youth; and relatively few Christians shared MacDonald's vision of Christ as child.

35. Some Biblical allusions have been noted and more are present. But they seem to be used exclusively to illuminate details of MacDonald's allusions to the above-mentioned accounts of spiritual quests. Marshall proposes more continuous allusion to Christ's parable of The Labourers in the Vineyard (100-08), but without convincing evidence.

36. See Docherty (*Literary* 245). Such pictures do not depict the questing couple encountering other people (see illustrations on page if).

37. It is in woman's nature to tangle more deeply with the earth-sphere than does the male, so we cannot expect Mossy to be privileged to encounter Christ at the earth's core. As Marshall expresses this: "it is possible [...] to view Mossy with his key as the enabling figure, allowing Tangle to achieve the visions" (107). Putting it in another way one could say that—at one level of the story—Mossy and Tangle are two aspects of one person, as with the hero and heroine in Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" and in many of the great traditional fairy tales.

38. Jacobs derives this story from an old Scottish rhyme. His version is “much Anglicised in language but otherwise unaltered.” He notes that a “reference to the ‘Black Bull o’ Norroway’ occurs in Sidney’s *Arcadia*,” one of MacDonald’s favourite books (324).

39. As is clear from other parts of Prickett’s paper (reprinted in a slightly revised version in *For the Childlike* 17-29), he is stressing that MacDonald’s mythopoeia, like Dante’s, extends far beyond ordinary allegory. **[59]**