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Katharine Bubel

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Knowing God “Other-wise”: The Wise Old Woman Archetype in George MacDonald’s *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie* and “The Golden Key”

Katharine Bubel

*“Old fables are not all a lie/That tell of wondrous birth,
Of Titan children, father Sky,/And mighty mother Earth . . .
To thee thy mother Earth is sweet,/Her face to thee is fair;
But thou, a goddess incomplete,/Must climb the starry stair. . . .
Be then thy sacred womanhood/A sign upon thee set,
A second baptism—understood--/For what thou must be yet.”*
—George MacDonald, *To My Sister*

A consistent occurrence within the narrative archetypal pattern of The Journey is the appearance of the Wise Old Woman, a seer, encourager and advisor to those who have responded to the Call to Adventure. Such a figure is featured prominently in several of George MacDonald’s writings, though the focus of this paper is on his children’s fairy tales, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie*, and “The Golden Key.” Since the Journey is a psychological one toward spiritual wholeness, for MacDonald, I borrow from Jungian theory to denote the Wise Old Woman as a form of anima, or female *imago*, who helps to develop the personality of the protagonist. But to leave things there would not encompass the sacramental particularity and universal intent of MacDonald’s fantasy: for the quest is ultimately a *sacred journey* that every person can make towards God.

As Richard Reis writes, “If in one sense [MacDonald’s] muse was mythic-archetypal-symbolic, it was, in another way, deliberately didactic and thus ‘allegorical’ in purpose if not in achievement” (124). MacDonald bemoaned the draining of Christ’s Gospel of its mystery, its beauty, and its expression of God’s unfailing love by the rigid rationalistic turn of the nineteenth century. He was determined to counter this. C.G. Jung postulates:

By giving [the archetypal image] shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. (553)

MacDonald offered the Wise Old Woman as a corrective archetypal appeal—a sacred Faerie God-Mother (McGillis 56)—to restore that which had been lost by the Christian faith of his age. I propose that she can likewise come to us in the midst of the postmodern condition of what James H. Olthuis, in *Knowing Other-wise*, calls “the crisis of reason” (Introduction 1). For she is a re-imagining of encounter with God and others, from “the space, now unbound, coded feminine, outside the logic of modernity, not made possible by its structures, and thus sacred” (247).

Before launching into his enduring vocation as a writer, MacDonald served first as a tutor, then as a Congregational minister. But, as Richard Reis notes, “The most important single event in MacDonald’s life was the loss of his pulpit. . . . [for] [s]carcely any other writer of fiction in any literature so consciously regarded his function to be that of a *teacher* and *preacher* . . .” (47, italics mine). Undaunted and unflagging in his conviction that his call was to communicate God’s love and truth to his society, MacDonald channeled the wealth of his training—literary (King’s College) and theological (Highbury College)—and his enormous imaginative energy into the “pulpit” of persuasive writing.

His means of religious persuasion through Faerie and fantasy, in particular, was as unconventional to his time and place in Victorian England as was his theology to the evangelical pietistic community in which he had been raised. Up to this point, Fairie and Christianity had met together only in Arthurian legend and medieval courtly Romance tales. It was certainly not an expected occurrence amongst the didactic religious literature of the era. Those writings that did incorporate the Gothic and fantastical were of earthly love and psycho-spiritual horror, not Dantesque union with God. However, two important factors had shaped MacDonald in his years of study: he came under the tremendous and lasting influence of German Romanticism while at King’s College, and he became increasingly estranged from many of what he judged to be the harsh and rationalistic tenets of Scottish Calvinism and sectarian evangelicalism.

In regards to the former influence, the deep love for Gaelic folklore he had held since childhood was strengthened by his encounter with German *Marchen* at King’s. The children’s literature of his place and time was “largely prosy and instructive” and devoid of the imaginative turn. Yet, fairy tales were beginning to make their way back into the cultural consciousness, and MacDonald is noted as one of those who ushered in the “Golden Age” of literature for children (and the adults that read to their children), a writer that

mingled the fantastical with moral and religious themes. William Raeper writes: “As a Scot, with his own flavor of the fairy and religious, he was able to respond imaginatively to the German and English Romantics and begin to reclaim that area of the imagination, that third way, which had been denied to children for so long” (143).

Not only denied to children, the “third way” had also been denied to faith. In his essay, “The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture,” MacDonald emphasizes that it is the imagination that awakens and leads a soul to God. This “faculty” had been neglected—even banished—by the increasingly logic-based approach to theological enquiry and exposition in post-Reformation Britain. Further, Rolland Hein explains that MacDonald’s “chief problem [with his church] was that he felt a growing consternation over the doctrines of election and the eternal punishment of the damned” (*Mythmaker* 18). Having been exposed to the concept of universal redemption while at King’s College, he also studied under John Godwin, “an Arminian among Calvinists” (*Mythmaker* 46) at Highbury, and befriended Alexander John Scott, a persuasive lecturer on literature and theology who rejected the Church of Scotland’s theology regarding the “elect.” MacDonald was eventually persuaded that God’s redemptive love and reconciliation extended toward *all* of creation.

The combination of his Romantic literary sensibilities with this particular theological understanding instilled in him a sense of the sacramental value of God’s material creation and human affinity with it—including pagan expressions of such. In one of his *Unspoken Sermons*, “The Knowing of the Son,” he writes:

No thought, human or divine, can be conveyed from man to man except through the symbolism of the creation. The heavens and the earth are around us that it may be possible for us to speak of the unseen by the seen, for the outermost husk of creation has correspondence with the deepest things of the Creator. (439)

To teachers, he advised, “No doubt, the best beginning, especially if the child be young, is an acquaintance with nature. . . . But where this association with nature is but occasionally possible, recourse must be had to literature” (“The Imagination” 32). Following his own advice, the preacher-teacher MacDonald turned to writing stories rich in natural and mythopoeic symbolism.

As Richard Reis acknowledges, MacDonald’s literary mode is not directly allegorical in the manner of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*: it is too dreamlike

and layered for such. Rather, “[i]n his imaginative fiction,” writes Reis, “his limited doctrinal ‘message’ achieves a universality, because of its suggestive expression in symbolism, which transcends time” (143). So I have not set out here to find one-to-one correspondence of meaning, but interconnected and diverse associations for the central figure of his Wise Old Woman. Such archetypes as The Journey or Quest, the Shadow, descent into the Underworld, the Wise Old Man and, in this case, the Wise Old Woman, have long been established by mythopoeic scholarship as recurrent in myths and folk tales from around the world. These are also primary features of Jungian psychoanalytic theory, but they were recognized prior to Jung by MacDonald for their psychological and—not to be bifurcated from—their *spiritual* significance. David S. Robb summarizes:

Throughout MacDonald’s long career as a writer, the same symbolic properties and actions recur: immersion in water, the discovery by a weary traveller of a cosy fireside interior with a warming fire at its centre and a grandmotherly old lady to preside over it, the unravelling and neutralising of an evil secret, the exploration of a labyrinthine interior which often possesses secret stairs and rooms as well as secrets from the past, the dream-like journey through time and over landscapes of the mind, the final resolution and salvation brought about through a combination of human courage and rectitude, and heavenly miracle. (58)

In the three stories I am considering, the plot is structured around the underlying action of the Quest for deliverance or purgation, and for spiritual enlightenment and evolution. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, both the archetypal characters of the Young Maiden (Princess Irene) and the Young Hero (Curdie) are called into the adventure of purging the house where Irene lives from the threat of destruction by the goblins (which correspond with the psychological archetype of the Shadow). In the sequel, *The Princess and Curdie*, Irene and Curdie once again work together, this time for the deliverance of the King’s castle and city from the sins (again, the Shadow) of “lying and selfishness and inhospitality and dishonesty” (200) permeating its civic leaders and society, and endangering the life of the King. In both Princess books, the protagonists themselves achieve “a higher state of moral and spiritual being through a series of related episodes” (Hein, *Harmony* 154). Such personal development in the form of a Call to Adventure is also the plot of “The Golden Key,” as Mossy and Tangle escape from a lower world where they have been kept from discovering their true selves, to journey to the place that has filled them with unrequited longing, a high

“country whence the shadows fall.” Admittedly, this is Neoplatonic language. However, I believe a close consideration of MacDonald’s spiritual vision reveals more than idealist longing for escape from the profane and embodied. His vision includes a profound respect for the sacramental beauty of the earth in all its particularity and interconnection.

Turning for a moment to the portrait of the Wise Old Woman obtained from these three stories, we note that she possesses—along with the age and wisdom denoted in her archetypal title—great beauty. Of the beautiful, philosopher Hans-George Gadamer has said: “[It] charms us, without its being immediately integrated with the whole of our orientations and evaluations. Indeed . . . the beautiful is a kind of experience that stands out like an enchantment and an adventure. . . .” (485-6). Such is the effect of the Wise Old Woman upon the protagonists of these stories. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, the grandmother is described as “an old lady . . . not only . . . beautiful, but her skin was smooth and white” (22). She has long hair, “white almost as snow” and her blue eyes “looked so wise that you could not have helped seeing she must be old” (22). Her announcement to Princess Irene that she is her “great-great-grandmother” is perplexing because she is so lovely and does not conform to the typical idea of age.

The enigmatic shift in her age-appearance which occurs throughout *The Princess and the Goblin*, and even more so in its sequel, baffles the “orientations and evaluations” of the more rationalistic boy Curdie, in particular. When Curdie first encounters her in *The Princess and Curdie*, he sees her as “a small withered creature, so old that no age would have seemed too great to write under her picture” with grey hair, grey claw-like hands, and a “crooked back bent forward over her chest” (36). This initial view of her as a grotesque crone is altered as he becomes enlightened by faith. By the end of his first conversation with her—during which he confesses and repents of his hardness of heart—she stands before him “a tall, strong woman—plainly very old, but as grand as she was old” (45) with tresses of white, silvery hair. Thus MacDonald captures in narrative form what he preached:

But if we, choosing . . . to do the right, go on so until we are enabled by doing it to see into the very loveliness and essence of the right, and know it to be altogether beautiful . . . delight with our whole souls in doing the will of God . . . we are free indeed, because we are acting like God out of the essence of our nature, knowing good and evil, and choosing the good with our whole

hearts and delighting in it. (*Proving* 43)

When Curdie next meets the grandmother, then, in the underground cavern, the integration of his head with his heart enables him to see clearly “the great old, young beautiful princess” (*Curdie* 78) who is “dark, and clothed in green, and the mother of all the light that dwells in the stones of the earth!” (75). Upon their exit from the cavern, she greets Curdie and his father in yet another form, “an old country-woman” in a cloak of dark red, evoking the vitality and flaming light hidden within her. She is later seen by Curdie in the king’s chamber, changed yet again into a tall woman, “large and strong as a Titaness” (295). Finally, after being disguised as a young girl housemaid in the King’s house, she transforms herself, resplendent “in royal purple, with a crown of diamonds and rubies, from under which her hair went flowing to the floor” (316). Thus, the beauty embodied in the Wise Old Woman is both veiled and revealed. It is revealed most gloriously to those who love and trust her, and yet, it is this revelation that compels them to love and trust her, no matter what her form. For MacDonald, obedience to God’s natural “[l]aw is the soil in which alone beauty will grow; beauty is the only stuff in which Truth can be clothed. . . .” (“The Fantastic” 315). I will return to this notion of obedience to natural law shortly.

First, let us consider more carefully the role of beauty. For MacDonald, nature’s beauty, a constantly renewed and varying “expression” of God’s face (qtd. in Hein, *Mythmaker* 39), awakens the soul’s desire, and through the imagination, continually draws it onward in its journey toward unity with God. The compelling attraction of beauty is frequently and vividly portrayed, as when, in *The Princess and the Goblin*, Irene suffers the fright of “losing herself” on the stair, or later, on the dark road. She is irresistibly drawn on both occasions to the comforting presence of her great-great-grandmother. So also, in “The Golden Key,” Tangle is mysteriously enticed into the wood of Fairyland, and led to her grandmother by a dazzling air-fish, which rescues Tangle from a malign tree. Almost identical to Irene’s grandmother in appearance (180), Tangle’s grandmother is beautiful and tender, an indication of her goodness and trustworthiness. But in both cases, she does not hold the child in a state of unending bliss or self-obliteration. This beauty is ethical, in that it upholds the particularity of the other, not absorbing the child into itself, but sending her/him out into the world to co-journey with others.

The nature motifs associated with the Wise Old Woman’s beauty in “The Golden Key”—the shining, soft dress of green she wears, the verdant tinge of her hair, the air-fish, and the flora and fauna surrounding her cottage—

combine to evoke the idea of the archetypal Earth-Mother. This mythic figure is alternately referred to as Magnus Mater, a pagan *chthonic* symbol for fertility and the creative force in all of nature. Princess Irene’s grandmother, too, raises these associations in her room full of sky and stars, her pigeons, and her “ancient chair, the legs of which were crusted with gems, [and] the upper part like a nest of daisies and moss and green grass” (Curdie 92-3). When Curdie is met by “the ancient lady” in the cavern, we read that “all he knew of the whole creation, seemed gathered in *one centre of harmony and loveliness in the person of the ancient lady* who stood before him. . . .” (68, italics mine). This is reminiscent of Paul’s hymn of creation in Colossians 1, where Christ is the centre of harmony, “having made peace through the blood of the cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself . . . whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven” (vs. 20).

MacDonald wrote that the imagination attuned to the mind of Christ is a “reflex of the creation” and its communion with the Creator: “For all is God’s; and the man who is growing into harmony with His will, is growing into harmony with himself . . . so that at last he shall be a pure microcosm, faithfully reflecting, after his manner, the mighty macrocosm” (“The Imagination” 6). Here I will pick up the notion of obedience again, for this creational “harmony” or “reflex” is the “natural law” that he exhorts us to obey—that is, to love and trust as a good, originary offer of peace, not a violation of personhood or particularity. Olthuis writes that love is “a surrender of our will to control, a giving over. . . . not forced. It is a voluntary movement of empowerment which releases to the energies alive in other people, in the world, and in God” (250).

In Proverbs, the ancient Jewish term translated as *sophia* in the Greek depicts God’s creative energy or artistry in forming the earth. It is personified as a woman who says that she is: “Rejoicing always before him;/Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth;/ And my delights were with the sons of men” (8.30-1). She is a communal, interactive figure. In biblical tradition, *sophia* is conceived of as the fount of all human knowledge, immanent in the world and the individual human heart (in the *imago Dei*).¹ This tradition was carried into the early Church, and is present in Paul’s reference to Christ as the *sophia* of God in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 (See “Logos”). However, as Barbara Newman points out in *God and the Goddesses*, though recognition of Sophia, along with other sacred feminine figures such as Natura, is present throughout the Middle Ages, in the nineteenth century context in which MacDonald was writing, this had long

faded, and “devotion to the feminine Sophia flourished chiefly . . . in theosophical and esoteric circles inspired by the work of Jacob Boehme (1575-1624). . . [I]t was Boehme who, for the first time, explicitly characterized Sophia as the medium or vessel of divine imagination. . .” (316-7). Under these influences, MacDonald appropriated *sophia* to evoke a type of knowing attuned to God’s wisdom and love-appeal to man’s imagination, not only through diverse, sensate creation, but through Christ. Thus relational and multi-dimensional wisdom stands in contrast to the hegemonic, Cartesian way of knowing against which MacDonald, akin to postmodern theorists, was reacting.

I shall now explore the way in which MacDonald aligns this *sophia* with pagan feminine symbolism within his religious aesthetic. In Greek mythology, the Earth-Mother is also identified as the Triple Goddess, whose symbol is the three aspects of the moon and womanhood: the waxing moon as The Maiden or *Kore* (Persephone) for new beginnings; the full moon as The Mother (Demeter) for the wellspring of life; and The Crone (Hecate) for experience and wisdom. In her essay, “*Kore Motifs in The Princess and the Goblin*,” Nancy-Lou Patterson identifies and explores the significance of the aspect of The Maiden, Persephone, as the equivalent of the Princess Irene. As Patterson points out, “Irene” in Greek mythology, is a goddess associated with spring and fertility, and therefore the Princess Irene parallels the *Kore*. However, recalling that the name “Irene” is given by and shared with her great-great-grandmother, and noting again the characteristic of the grandmother to change her age-appearance, we see a striking similarity between the grandmother figure and the Triple-Goddess *in all three* of her aspects together—young maiden, mother, and crone. For the purpose of this paper, I wish to focus on the link between MacDonald’s Wise Old Woman and The Crone, or Hecate.

In his *Theogony*, the Greek poet Hesiod includes a description of Hecate, the Queen of the Night and the liminal goddess of the crossroads or boundaries:

Hecate whom Zeus the son of Cronos honoured above all. He gave her splendid gifts, to have a share of the earth ad the unfruitful sea. She received honour also in starry heaven, and is honoured exceedingly by the deathless gods. For to this day, whenever any one of men on earth offers rich sacrifices and prays for favour according to custom, he calls upon Hecate. Great honour comes full easily to him whose prayers the goddess receives favourably, and she bestows wealth upon him; for the power surely

is with her. (404-52)

While she was regarded as nurse and overseer of the young, and tender-hearted, at the same time she was a chthonian goddess and as such, aligned with death as well as birth, and the underworld as with heaven. Associated with the supernatural and mysterious, she was the Queen of Fairies, as is seen in Shakespeare’s reference in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to the fairies “that do run/By the triple Hecate’s team,/From the presence of the sun,/Following darkness like a dream...” (5.1.390-3). Over time, she came to be called the “Queen of Ghosts,” of witches and magic. She also had the authority to punish and, no doubt, all of this accounts for the fact that she was greatly feared.

Similarly, in *The Princess and Curdie* the miners’ negative perception and fear of Irene’s grandmother is displayed in their epithet for her: “Old Mother Wotherwop.” They regard her as the malign influence over strange or terrible events, referring to her as “the old hating witch” (56-7). The miners have distorted and materialistically-limited logic, despite Peter’s and Curdie’s attempt to help them imagine otherwise. There is an echo of this later in the story, in the assumptions of the Gwyntystorm citizens that Derba is a witch (148) and Curdie “the devil” (149). Like Hecate, Irene’s grandmother is beautiful to those capable of loving and obeying her through faith; however, she is dangerous and offensive to those who will cling to themselves and to depraved reason. When she appears as a maid and prophet of woe to the King’s servants, they are enraged by and imprison her (237-42), blind and deaf to her warnings. In explaining her varied forms and names to Curdie, she says:

It is one thing the shape I choose to put on, and quite another the shape that foolish talk and nursery tale may please to put upon me. Also, it is one thing what you or your father may think about me, and quite another what a foolish or bad man may see in me. (76-7)

Throughout all of his writings, this is a recurring theme for MacDonald: loving comes prior to seeing, and one will see God when one lovingly trusts in God. Belief requires more than logical facts. Empirical “seeing” is not enough to perceive all the truth of God, and depended upon alone without accord to an obedient and loving heart, will actually lead away from him. MacDonald writes in “A Sketch of Individual Development”:

This is in the very nature of things: *obedience alone places a man in the position in which he can see* so as to judge that which is

above him. In respect of great truths investigation goes for little, speculation for nothing; if a man would know them, he must obey them. Their nature is such that the only door into them is obedience. (72, *italics mine*)

Such obedience is not yielding to a violent tyranny, but responding to the beckoning of love to *trust*.

Furthermore, knowledge is “as full of reason as it is of wonder,” as Curdie’s mother explains to him (*Curdie* 53). MacDonald writes in “The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture” that wonder and imagination are not exclusive of, but are needed alongside logic, in order for education to be effective for the *whole* person. He had particular impatience for the “tyranny of stupid logic over childlike intuitions” (qtd. in Hein, *Mythmaker*), especially relating to theology. Rather than allowing one to assume appropriation of truth on having obtained cold facts or abstractions, he saw the imagination as that which stirs “noble unrest, an ever renewed awakening from the dead” (“The Imagination” 1). MacDonald anticipated the kind of knowing that would re-emerge from a postmodernist critique of reason, articulated by Olthuis as “the multidimensional, embodied, gendered way human beings engage the world. . .” (Introduction 6), beyond what is traditionally thought of as “masculine” rationality. Such engagement does not settle onto fixed truths, but is “ever renewed.”

I will now explore how this way of knowing signified in the Wise Old Woman correlates to Hecate’s emblems—the moon, a torch, a key and a rope. In mythic tradition, Hecate is an equivalent to Phoebe, the Titaness who personified the moon. Curdie calls Irene’s grandmother the “Lady of the Silver Moon” (*Curdie* 74), and sees her “large and strong as a Titaness” (295), lifting the King into the fire. She has a moonbeam-like “silvery voice” and “silvery hair,” and is often pictured in the light of the moon (*Goblin* 114). Her room is “large and lofty, and dome-shaped,” studded with stars, in which hangs a “lamp as round as a ball, shining as if with the brightest moonlight” (118).

As the Queen of the Night, Hecate also correlates to the feminine figure depicted by the German Romantic, Novalis, in his poem *Hymns to the Night*. This poem, translated and eventually published by MacDonald, begins with reference to “the Mother,” “the Night”—with her “grave face,” “manifold entangled locks,” and “youthful loveliness” (4). Rolland Hein writes in *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker*:

MacDonald found in Novalis compelling expression of some ideas

that he strongly held: that *nature* is a universal metaphor of *the spirit*, a ‘garment of God’; that the *spirit of virtue* and the *spirit of poetry* are one and the same; and that true poetry is itself a means whereby people may participate in *the higher spiritual world*.

(77-8, italics mine)

Novalis’ Hecate-like figure profoundly informed MacDonald’s Wise Old Woman. In her association with the moon and night, she reflects the teaching of the Christian mystics that belief is deepened in the “cloud of unknowing,” and in St. John-of-the-Cross’s “dark night of the soul.” Contemplative monk and mystic, Thomas Merton, writes of the preliminary state prior to an awakening of spiritual consciousness, in *The Inner Experience*: “[I]t is necessary to darken and put to sleep even the discursive and rational lights with which we were familiar in meditation” (90). The daylight, then, is a symbol for what Jung would refer to as the masculine consciousness or rationalism, for dependence on what can be known empirically, as detectable in Curdie’s initial inability to see anything of the old lady, but only “a tub, and a heap of musty straw, and a withered apple, and *a ray of sunlight*. . . .” (*Goblin* 225, italics mine). The night is related to the feminine unconscious, that “unknown region” where “God sits in that chamber of our being in which the candle of our consciousness goes out in darkness, and sends forth from thence wonderful gifts into the light of that understanding which is His candle” (“The Imagination” 24-5). Analogously, MacDonald’s Wise Old Woman presides over the domain of faith in the unseen, outside of cognitive reason, in which the secret workings of beauty upon the imagination are accomplished.

Another name for Hecate is Phosphoras, the Light-Bringer, and her torch represents enlightenment, or wisdom. The grandmother’s lamp shining in the dark, which prompts Curdie to come to her after he injures her pigeon (*The Princess and Curdie* 28) and, at last, to “see” her, corresponds to this torch. MacDonald’s understanding of mystical enlightenment or knowledge, nourished by Novalis and the classic mystical writers (Reis 33), is profoundly expressed in this symbol. The sudden shining of the moon-like lamp parallels “God’s candle” and the “moment of ecstatic insight into and identification with God which all true mystics report” (40). The result of such an insight, for MacDonald, is right action—*ethical* action oriented to helping others—as is the case for Irene and Curdie upon seeing the Wise Old Woman’s light. This initiates a move from one realm of being toward a higher one, from a false, narcissistic self to a true, for-the-other self.

In one of his sermons, MacDonald expressed this liminal crossing in Neoplatonic terms:

It is no light thing to set out from the kingdom of salvation into the kingdom of God, to pass from the world of outside things with sensual appeal to the eternal, changeless, blessed religion of life and peace and obedience. (*Proving* 92)

Likewise, in the *Chaldean Oracles*,² Hecate is denoted as the governess of the border between the “sensual” material world and the intellectual or spirit realm of the Father (see “Hekate”). She is often equated in Neoplatonic thought with Sophia, the creative divine Wisdom, for her ascribed role as mediating World-Soul (e.g., Turner). The emblem of a key corresponds to her role as the gatekeeper, the one who can open the door into a wider place. In Novalis’ poem, it is she who “opening the doors to Heaven . . . steppest out to meet [men] out of ancient stories, bearing the key to the dwellings of the blessed” (5).

When Mossy finds the golden key that will launch him and Tangle on their sacred journey to another realm, he is immediately led by an air-fish with the head of an owl (owls are birds of the night associated with Hecate, and symbols of wisdom) directly to the Wise Old Woman’s cottage in the woods bordering Fairyland. Upon seeing that Mossy holds this key, she mysteriously insists on serving him, as Sophia, in the book of Proverbs, hosts and serves those who seek her. I propose that we can see the Wise Old Woman, standing like Hecate at the boundary, as a liminal opening, not of escape from some material prison, but out of the materialistic, objectifying *cogito* into the inter-subjective cosmic-community of love.

MacDonald believed that the imagination has “the duty, namely, which springs from [a man’s] immediate relation to the Father, . . . of following and finding out the divine imagination in whose image it was made” and to do so, “the man must watch its signs, its manifestations” (“The Imagination” 10). The Wise Old Woman’s “signs” and “manifestations” are the pigeons in the Princess stories and rainbow-coloured air-fish in “The Golden Key.” Like Hecate’s key, which unlocks the door into another realm, the pigeons and air-fish are as poems sent out from God’s imagination to bring human imagination into proximity with God. MacDonald describes poetry as being like “thousands of winged words, whence, like the lovely shells of by-gone ages, one is occasionally disinterred by some lover of speech, and held up to the light to show the play of colour in its manifold laminations” (“The Imagination” 9). Further, in *Diary of An Old Soul* there is yet another passage

evocative of the pigeons and the air-fish:

All winged things come from the waters first;
 . . . In dens and caves wind-loving things are nursed:--
 I lie like unhatched birds, upfolded, dumb,
 While all the air is trembling with the hum
 Of songs and beating hearts and whirring wings,
 That call my slumbering life to wake to happy things.
 (December 5)

The Wise Old Woman, signifying imagination, sends out her messengers from the depths of the unconscious as poetic keys to set one free from the tyranny of purely rationalistic consciousness.

As governess of the border, Hecate also typifies the *teacher* who nourishes the child's imagination, to whom MacDonald addresses “The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture.” Among the activities he suggests will cultivate the imagination is the teaching of history. In this, she echoes Novalis' Queen of the Night stepping out of “ancient stories,” “bearing the key,” for MacDonald tells the teacher to “encourage [the student] to read history with an eye eager *for the dawning figure of the past* . . . [for] the constant and consistent way of God, to be discovered in [the Bible,] is in fact *the key to all history*” (40, my italics). The governess holds a key, but she also bears a rope, congruent with the silver thread of Irene's grandmother. The mythic rope is associated with birth and death, and the spinning together of past, present and future by the three Fates, or Norns of Norse mythology. Thus, the silver thread signifies the inter-generational communication between old and young in *The Princess and the Goblin*. It is the “wives and mothers and grandmothers” who are the tellers of tales in *The Princess and Curdie* (55), and the great-aunt in “The Golden Key.” Further, the grandmother's spinning wheel, on which the thread is spun in the *Princess* stories, figures the spinning of stories, and the passing on of a faith-history—not as a controlling meta-narrative, such is rejected by postmodernism, but as testimony to “the constant and consistent way of God.”

This spinning wheel raises yet another association between Hecate and MacDonald's Wise Old Woman, for the *Chaldean Oracles* refers to Hecate's Wheel, or The Straphalos of Hecate (194), an enigmatic spiralling maze or spinning top. There is also correlation between this mandala-like emblem and the maze or labyrinth of stairs and tunnels found in each of the three fairy tales. According to Joseph Sigman, “Historically, the labyrinth is an ancient symbol associated with the mother goddess and the underworld. In

Jungian terms, it is a depiction of the unconscious, particularly at the time when it is first encountered at the beginning of a process of individuation” (186). In Curdie’s apocalyptic vision, he sees the grandmother’s spinning wheel as a “great wheel of fire, turning and turning, and flashing out blue lights” (Curdie 89). From this wheel there comes “sweet sounds” that conjure up in his mind images of nature and history (“ancient cities”). The words the lady sings to the music aim all of these images toward an eschatological hope, “the day when the sleepers shall arise,” a biblical allusion to the future resurrection and to “that day and hour [of which] knoweth no man” (Matthew 24:36).

The spinning wheel also conveys the concept of a unified cosmos. Under the influence of the German Romantic poets, and Novalis in particular, MacDonald’s theological understanding of this unity was contoured toward the inter-relation of all things (Hein, *Harmony* 19). For MacDonald, this was not a totalizing effacing of all difference, but a meeting together in love’s identification and mutual address. Seen in God’s light, even pagan myth, where it is a result of the fertile human imagination in search of truth, is connected with the Gospel. MacDonald saw such myth, in its lively connection to nature and imagination, as more effectively revelatory than cold, doctrinal formulations of the Divine.

This unity as harmony-in-diversity extends to gender, as well. Thus in his Wise Old Woman archetype, MacDonald is not conceptualizing the “feminine” qualities of nurture, tenderness, beauty and intuitive truth as bifurcated from or inferior to a purely masculine projection of God. He writes that in Christ “you can have One who is more than brother or sister, father or mother, husband or wife or child. . . . One from who came the love that analyzed itself into all these forms because of its infinitude” (*Proving* 19). Accordingly, he moves between feminine and masculine metaphoricality for the Divine throughout all of his writings.³

In closing, I wish to attend to the significance of the grandmother’s hearth fire (“The Golden Key”) and burning rose (the *Princess* books). Throughout MacDonald’s writings, fire depicts God’s purifying love. But fire is also a sign in Scripture of the Holy Spirit, the member of the Trinitarian community sent into the world, such as on the day of Pentecost, as a manifestation of faith and Divine inspiration. In the *Chaldean Oracles* there is a reference made to “the giver of life-bearing fire. . . [that] fills the life-producing bosom of Hecate. . . [and] instils. . . the enlivening strength of Fire Endued with might power” (55), a description that can readily be

paralleled with the Holy Spirit. Yet another evocation in the *Princess and the Goblin* of the Holy Spirit is the startling picture of the grandmother’s snow-white pigeon, which Irene calls “dovey,” settling on Irene’s head (105) just at the point when she begins to doubt. The Holy Spirit is traditionally symbolized by a white dove, and enables faith, brings visions and dreams, and gives insight and guidance in ways often contrary to the “wisdom of man.”

MacDonald once said, “The great heresy of the Church of the present day is unbelief in this Spirit” (qtd. in Dearborn 33). It is possible that MacDonald saw the feminine principle contained within ancient pagan metaphysics (such as is articulated in the *Chaldean Oracles*) as early intuitions of the Holy Spirit, which he in turn re-imagined as the Wise Old Woman. Could this be a Magnus Mater in the Trinity, alongside the Father and the Son? MacDonald had long been accused of holding unorthodox views derived from German Mysticism, which had been influenced by the *Chaldean Oracles*. Might this have been one more such belief he held?

We are without any explicit evidence of such, however, and it would be “violent” to the artist’s aesthetic to demand such a definitive allegorical reading. What is clear is that the feminine was, for MacDonald, an essential expression of the Divine and one that desperately needed to be re-integrated into the Christianity of his era. Turning once more to Olthuis’ Christian reading of postmodern thought, I propose that MacDonald was engaged through his mythopoeic art in “a rethinking of *Geist*” (Introduction 3), or Spirit, where such is not a “dialectical movement of cognition a la Hegel, but as ‘in the beginning was Love’ a la Julia Kristeva” (1). MacDonald’s Wise Old Woman is a peaceful, “other-wise” persuasion reaching across space and time—an ancient beauty who does not primarily demand rational assent, but with “the Spirit and the bride” simply says, “Come” (Revelation 22.17).

Endnotes

1. Further, the masculine term *logos*, when used in the Greek Old Testament, or *Septuagint*, to translate the original Hebrew word, *dabar*; the creative ‘word’ of God, is interchangeable with the feminine *sophia*.
2. An ancient Hellenistic mystery poem with roots in Persian-Babylonian spirituality, to which both the early Church Fathers and German Romantics such as Jacob Boehme and later Novalis, alluded in their writings.
3. For example, in the poetics of his *Diary of an Old Soul*, he utilizes several feminine metaphors for God (see December 15th entry). We also find masculine references in this poem which parallel the grandmother in the *Princess* stories and

“The Golden Key.” (see July 16 and September 27 entries)

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