

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Soto, Fernando (2007) "Unearthing Ancient Sources in MacDonald's "The Golden Key"," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 26 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol26/iss1/5>

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Unearthing Ancient Sources in MacDonald's "The Golden Key"

Fernando Soto

Background

There is nothing irrational or extraneous about the events of The Golden Key, though its symbolism is complex and puzzling. (Raeper 319)

“**T**he Golden Key” is probably George MacDonald’s best-known short fantasy story, and the one that seems to attract the most varied critical commentary. This keen interest is likely because “The Golden Key” is among the most puzzling and creative of MacDonald’s short fairy tales. In this article I will strive to present evidence of MacDonald’s use of ancient mythological material in the framing of key segments of his enigmatic tale.

Nancy Willard, in “The Goddess in the Belfry: Grandmothers and Wise Women in George MacDonald’s Books for Children,” and Nancy-Lou Patterson, in “Kore Motifs in *The Princess and the Goblin*,” provide convincing arguments for MacDonald’s use of Greek mythological material in some of his books for children. Lately, Colin Manlove, in “Not to Hide but to Show: ‘The Golden Key,’” and Hugh O’Connor, in “George MacDonald’s sources for ‘The Golden Key,’” identify two separate instances of MacDonald’s use of parts of *The Odyssey* in his story. These pioneering studies offer good starting points for the present paper.

The Old Man of the Sea

Manlove traces MacDonald’s Old Men (of the Sea, Earth, and Fire) to Proteus of Book V of *The Odyssey*. This insight, though a worthwhile and interesting connection, is left at a general level of analysis, taking up but a short paragraph of Manlove’s paper (36). O’Connor, also, identifies some Homeric characteristics of MacDonald’s Old Man of the Sea. This commentator links MacDonald’s descriptions of this Old Man and his abode to parts of Book XIII of *The Odyssey* (53).

In *The Odyssey XIII*, the Phaiakians unwittingly upset Poseidon by conveying Odysseus to Ithaca. Poseidon plans to punish those who helped his enemy by dropping a mountain on the Phaiakian city and petrifying the ship used to transport Odysseus. However, before proceeding with this destructive

scheme, Poseidon seeks permission from his powerful brother, Zeus. The king of the gods presents his unruly, resentful brother with the following plan concerning the Phaiakians and their ship:

Good brother, here is the way it seems to my mind best to do. When all the people are watching her from the city as she comes in, then turn her into a rock that looks like a fast ship, close off shore, so that all people may wonder at her. But do not hide their city under a mountain. (l. 154-8)

Poseidon wisely listens to his brother's counsel and does exactly as he is told (l. 159-63).

The above Homeric description of the petrified ship is extremely similar to the house of MacDonald's Old Man of the Sea:

Leaning on his staff, he [the Old Man of the Sea] conducted her [Tangle] along the shore to a steep rock, that looked like a petrified ship turned upside down. The door of it was the rudder of a great vessel, ages ago at the bottom of the sea. (199)

Both narratives include rocks that look like ships lying close to shore that are rooted to the bottom of the sea, and two deities of the sea. Thus, O'Connor seems to strike very close to the original Homeric source that MacDonald likely used to frame his Old Man of the Sea.

When Tangle visits the Old Man of the Sea the tide is out. But when Mossy meets him the house, like Homer's petrified Phaiakian ship, lies offshore: "The waves had surrounded the rock within which lay the Old Man's house. A deep water rolled between it and the shore . . ." (209).

The location of the old Man's house in MacDonald's story changes to better reflect the place assigned to it by Homer. By the time Mossy reaches this curious abode, it is described as a cave (209). This again recalls another part of Book XIII of *The Odyssey* (O'Connor, 53). Here Odysseus is left asleep on the Ithakan shore by the Phaiakians. When he awakens, a disguised Athena reminds him of a related Old Man of the Sea and cave:

This is the harbor of the Old Man of the Sea, Phorkys, and here at the head of the harbor is the olive tree with spreading leaves, and nearby is the cave that is shaded, and pleasant (207)

Thus, MacDonald's Old Man of the Sea, his petrified ship-house and cave seem to be directly modeled on Homer's narrative.

O'Connor further identifies MacDonald's Old Man of the Sea with Poseidon, through Plato's definition of "Poseidon" in *Cratylus* (53). Plato etymologically defines the word "Poseidon" as "the chain of the feet," and then he has Socrates explain this meaning by assuming that the inventor of the word

was stopped from continuing his walk by the "watery element." This unorthodox definition and explanation are probably in MacDonald's mind when he has the Old Man of the Sea allow Mossy to continue his walk on the sea's surface. This borrowing on the part of MacDonald is supported by the fact that Mossy's feet are the stated impediments for the sea walk, and because this episode has an overabundance of references to feet (209-11). Thus, MacDonald's Old Man of the Sea seems to partake of the characteristics of at least two separate mythological sea deities, Poseidon and Phorkys.

Iris/Rainbow

The appellation "Old Man of the Sea" is an ancient moniker shared by several sea deities, including Phorkys, Athamas, Nereus, Proteus, and perhaps Poseidon.¹ By concentrating on the mythology surrounding Athamas, MacDonald's Old Man of the Sea is further exposed. The mythographer Carl Kerényi explains some of the conflation of names while describing a particular Old Man:

Thaumas the great son of Pontus and Gaia, brother of Nereus and Phorkys, is probably only another name for the Old One of the Sea . . . The Okeanine Electra bore Thaumas the following daughters: Iris, a goddess whose name means "Rainbow," and all the harpies. All these daughters were goddesses who intervened in the affairs and destinies of mortals. (60)

This mythological Old Man of the Sea's daughter, Iris, seems to directly reflect the Old Man of the Sea's daughter in MacDonald's story. When Tangle fulfills her grandmother's request (to ask the Old Man of the Sea for more fishes), this Old Man of the Sea clearly tells Tangle that her grandmother is his daughter: "'I will go and see about those fishes for my daughter,' said the Old Man of the Sea" (200).

MacDonald provides the reader with explicit clues to suggest that Tangle's grandmother, like Iris, is a goddess. This Grandmother is thousands of years old (182), she has magical ability to change reality by the power of her words (183), and she is able to command magical creatures. The Grandmother dresses in green (184) and with a tinge of dark green in her hair (180) grows in age, but does not grow old (182), in a similar fashion as the young-old nature of the gods was understood in many ancient sources. For instance, Virgil when dealing with Charon, describes this process of aging: "a god's senility is awful / In its raw greenness" (154).

Tangle's grandmother, like the mythological Iris, is closely associated with

rainbows and messengers in MacDonald's tale (185, 187). MacDonald, in a semi-covert manner, describes her smile as a rainbow: "She smiled like the sun through a summer-shower" (183), while he refers to the rainbow as "a creature" (173). Later in the narrative, a creature resembling Iris is mentioned obliquely: "Now a wonderful form, half bird-like, half human, would float across on outspread sailing pinions" (194). MacDonald's shadow of the half bird-like, half human creature closely resemble the mythological Old Man of the Sea's daughter, Iris. Here she is depicted holding a caduceus, an implement universally associated with her male counterpart, Hermes (Fig. 1).



Figure 1

Aided by some of the above information, I will go on to evaluate facets of the curious fish owned by Tangle's grandmother. These fish appear to be emanations of Iris, incorporating her mythological fish, bird, messenger and rainbow characteristics. The fish, bird and messenger aspects are made explicit in "The Golden Key," and so these facets do not need much of an explanation here (179, 180, 185, 187, 211, etc.). The rainbow connections emerge when MacDonald describes the air-fish having "feathers of all colours" (179), and "glittering and sparkling all lovely colours" (180). As Aeranth, these creatures continue to emit "a continuous shower of sparks of all colours" (198). Sharp-eyed Mossy seems to correctly identify the rainbow aspects of the air-fish messenger sent to bring him to the Grandmother's cottage:

Just as he [Mossy] began to grow disconsolate, however, he saw something glimmering in the wood. It was a mere glimmer that he saw, but he took it for a glimmer of a rainbow, and went

towards it (176-7)

Mossy then goes to towards the air-fish the Grandmother sent to get him: “[B]ring home a young man you will find there, who does not know where to go” (187).

The conflation of the air-fish/Aeranth and rainbow continues as Mossy is making his way over the sea. Here he is guided directly by “the foot of a rainbow,” and, when the rainbow had “vanished,” indirectly by “a shining fish under the waters” (211). Mossy’s experience is mirrored and reversed by that of Tangle. Soon after her Aeranth guide “vanished,” Tangle spots the “foot of a great rainbow” (198). Thus, Mossy and Tangle are guided by only fish/Aeranth and rainbows, though never by both at the same time—as one vanishes, the other appears in its place.

It seems that once the fish are cooked and eaten by humans, they release a soul:

Tangle now remarked that the lid was on the pot. But the lady took no further notice of it till they had eaten the fish

As soon as the fish was eaten, the lady went to the fire and took the lid off the pot. A lovely little creature in human shape, with large white wings, rose out of it, and flew round and round the roof of the cottage; then dropped, fluttering, and nestled in the lap of the lady. (186)

The second instance of this process includes some subtle, yet very important differences:

She [the Grandmother] took the fish from the pot, and put the lid on as before. They sat down and ate the fish and then the winged creature rose from the pot, circled the roof, and settled on the lady’s lap. (191)

MacDonald differentiates between the two fish by means of their position either “in” or “on” the Grandmother’s lap. This is likely due to the gender of the child who eats the respective fish. In the first case Tangle (who had already been on the Grandmother’s lap) and the Grandmother—two females—eat the first fish. In the second instance Mossy—a male—also partakes of a similarly special meal, this time made up of the second fish. By ingesting separate fish, the two young people take on the abilities of their respective fish. Like her fish, Tangle will later need the Old Man of the Earth to lift the “lid” of a “pot” before she will jump head first into the water and hot air, while Mossy, like his fish, will make his way without this type of direct assistance. Similarly, Tangle will have to proceed first “overland,” then right into (Mother) Earth’s centre or “heart” (206) and “nestle” near the Old Man of the Fire’s nest, where the serpent egg is found. Mossy, however, will make his way “overland,” on the surface of the

Earth, hardly going very deeply underground. This reflects most of the ancient Greek and Roman mythological stories, where women take the “direct” way downward to Hades (i.e., to death), while a few men may take either the downward or the surface route.

The transmigration from fish to “lovely little creature in human shape, with large white wings” (186) is very similar to the ancient Greek conception of the soul. According to Lempriere, Iris, like Tangle’s grandmother, is the goddess in charge of separating the soul from the body: “Iris . . . Her office was to cut the thread which seemed to detain the soul in the body of those that were expiring” (329). This is the role Virgil assigns her as he has her cutting Dido’s “golden lock/hair” to separate the soul from the dying body (112). To better understand what was involved regarding Iris’s “office,” and the ancient conception of the nature of the soul, one needs to explore other theories about the transmigration of souls. Plato, via Socrates in *Phaedo*, presents the following theory of the soul’s journey:

The Acheronian lake: this is the lake to the shores of which the souls of the many go when they are dead, and after waiting an appointed time, which is to some longer and to some a shorter time, they are sent back to be born again as animals. (260)

While for the philosophical Plato souls could inhabit any animal or human body (*The Republic*, 10:618-20), Robert Graves mentions only one animal inhabitable by these souls (or in Grave’s terms “ghosts”), and adds a very important element necessary for transmigration: “Ghosts could become men again by entering beans, nuts, or fish, and being eaten by their respective mothers” (31:1) Mossy’s fish, prior to its ordeal in the boiling pot, its settling on the lap of the Grandmother, and its consumption, refers to her as “mother” (187). The two fish nestling in or on the Grandmother’s lap also point to new births.

While MacDonald does not follow any one of the above theories very closely, there are enough points of intersection between his story and the ancient narratives to suggest that he is borrowing directly from these mythological traditions. On the other hand, he may have other obscure theories of the soul in mind, or he may be interpreting some of the many ancient graphic depictions of bird-souls. For instance, here is an ancient depiction of winged souls emerging from a grave *pithoi* or “pot” (Fig. 2).



Figure 2

Here Hermes Psychopompos—Iris' male messenger counterpart²—is holding exactly the same type of caduceus the Iris of Figure 1 holds, as he performs a rite very similar to that of the Grandmother over a pot:

From the grave-jar the lid had been removed; out of it have escaped, fluttering upward, two winged Keres or souls, a third soul is in the act of emerging, a fourth is diving headlong back into the jar. Hermes Psychopompos, with his magic staff in his hand, is evoking, revoking the souls. (Harrison, 43)

The above depiction is reminiscent of the popular ancient Greek conception of the soul as a butterfly. The Greek term for the soul, as MacDonald well knew, was “Ψυχη,” or “psyche,” a word and meaning he uses in a novel published exactly in the same year as “The Golden Key,” *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (517), and in this latter's sequel, *The Seaboard Parish* of 1868 (413). This word in Greek is synonymous with both “soul” and “butterfly,” and these simultaneous meanings are depicted in the iconographic portrayal of Eros grieving for the dead Psyche (Fig. 3).

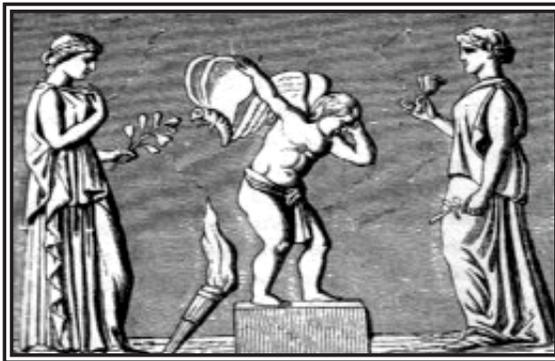


Figure 3

The above ancient verbal descriptions and graphic depictions of the soul's nature and migration may help to explain another aspect of MacDonald's tale, one that I have already mentioned. The Old Man of the Earth must raise a huge

stone from the floor to allow Tangle’s soul to willingly enter, head first, into “a great hole that went plumbdown” (204). In this hole Tangle is submerged in water and experiences great heat. This is surely the mirror reflection of the fish willingly entering head first into the Grandmother’s boiling pot. It may be recalled that the Grandmother had drawn a parallel between the “pot stage” in the migration of the soul for both fish and humans. Right after the emergence of the “lovely little creature in human shape” (186) from her pot, the Grandmother conveys to Tangle the following ominous words: “[T]hey must wait their time, like you and me too, my little Tangle” (187). Thus, when Tangle jumps into the hole with the water and great heat, her time has come to take the next step in her spiritual metamorphosis.

If we examine the works of Hesiod and Plato we find further possible clues to some of the mythological concepts underlying MacDonald’s story. When describing Hades, Hesiod states:

There lives the goddess hated by the gods,
Terrible Styx, the daughter, oldest born,
Of Ocean, who flows back upon himself.
Far from the gods she has her famous home
Roofed over with great rocks, and all around
Fixed firm with silver pillars reaching up
To heaven. Seldom does swift Iris come,
Daughter of Thaumas, over the sea’s broad back. (48)

This narrative, like MacDonald’s story, includes an underground dome supported by brilliant pillars reaching all the way to heaven. By having the reference to Iris—the messenger goddess who lives in heaven and the personification of the rainbow—going to Hades, the Greek abode of shadows, Hesiod seems to imply that it is through the silver pillars—joining heaven and hell, that she makes her journey. Plato presents a single column of light similar to that portrayed by Hesiod, at the end of *The Republic* in Socrates’ tale of Er. Er is the man who had been dead for twelve days, but returns to life to tell others about the souls’ journeys after death. The following segment of Plato’s myth is key to the understanding of MacDonald’s tale:

Now when the spirits which were in the meadow had tarried seven days, on the eighth they were obliged to proceed on their journey, and, on the fourth day after, he said that they came to a place where they could see from above a line of light, straight as a column, extending right through the whole heaven and through the earth, in colour resembling the rainbow, only brighter and purer; another day’s journey brought them to the place, and there, in the midst

of the light, they saw the ends of the chains of heaven let down
from above . . . (10:616)

This description is very similar to those found in parts of MacDonald's fairy tale, particularly those he presents near the end of "The Golden Key." As the dead Mossy is to meet Tangle, who has also died, the underground "hall" is described as

Irregular and rude in formation, but floor, sides, pillars, and vaulted roof, all one mass of shining stones of every colour that light can show. In the centre stood seven columns, ranged from red to violet. (212)

The seven columns, ranging from red to violet, not only form a rainbow, but also a single pillar of light broken up into its constituent colours. Like Hesiod, MacDonald includes references to underground halls, with vaulted roofs, shiny pillars, and Rainbow/Iris. Thus MacDonald seems to model his shiny stone pillars "of every colour that light can show" on both Plato's column of light/rainbow and Hesiod's silver pillars.

MacDonald conflates the pillars, columns, and rainbows, just as the ancients did. Because Iris is the female counterpart of Hermes, she seems to take on the aspect of a "pillar" and "conductor of souls." The name Hermes means "a pillar" (Graves 394), so MacDonald's rainbow-Iris (Hermes' female double) adopts aspects of a "pillar," as well as those of a psychopomp. MacDonald likely concludes that Hermes' female mythological counterpart should conduct souls along her own "pillars," as implied by Hesiod and Plato.

At the end of the story, Tangle assumes some of the characteristics of Iris. She is dressed exactly like her grandmother, and Mossy finds her sitting on the pedestal of one of the columns of the "shining stones" rainbow (212)—just as her grandmother had twice sat waiting on the opposite side of the fire for her (180, 189). At this point Tangle is compared directly with her grandmother: "Her face was beautiful like her grandmother's" (214). In addition to all of these similarities, MacDonald's underground pillars or rainbow columns, like Hesiod's silver pillars, and Plato's rainbow column, also reach to heaven:

It rose high into the blue heavens, but bent so little that he could not tell how high the crown of the arch must reach. It was still only a small portion of a huge bow.

. . . in each of the colours, which was as large as the column of a church, he could see beautiful forms slowly ascending as if by steps of a winding stair. (175)

Even at this early stage of the tale, each band of the rainbow is compared to a stone column.

The idea that the rainbow could serve as a type of conduit or that it could reach underground to Hades, did not originate with MacDonald. According to Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*, Iris can visit dark caves by traveling along her rainbow:

Far down, far under a Cimmerian mountain,
A cavern winds, the home of lazy Sleep,
His dwelling-place and shrine. No sunlight ever
Comes there at morning, noon, or evening, only
A dubious twilight, and the ground is dark

...

The Maiden Goddess
Entered, using her hands to part the dreams,
To clear her way, and the shining of her garments
Brightened the holy home, and the god saw her,

...

And, her instructions given, Iris left him,
For all too soon the magic spell of slumber
Was stealing through her limbs, and she soared upward
Along the rainbow arch she had descended. (277-9)

In the second similar instance provided by Ovid, Juno (Hera) takes pity on Hersilia after her husband Romulus is taken to Heaven:

His wife Hersilia, mourned for him, when Juno
Sent Iris down the archway of her rainbow
With words of consolation . . . (830-32)

Iris' journeys are very similar in nature to the method of transportation through the rainbow that MacDonald describes at the beginning and end of his story. Once again, these Ovidian narratives, in the traditions of Hesiod and Plato, are reflected too closely in "The Golden Key" for the similarities to be merely coincidental.³

In *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, MacDonald reminds his readers of some of the related religious ideas he used in "The Golden Key." In this novel he makes the reader aware of the relevant symbols and the Greek terms used to describe them:

Miss Oldcastle told me once that she could not take her eyes off a butterfly which was flitting about in the church all the time I was speaking of the resurrection of the dead. I told the people that in Greek there was one word for the soul and for a butterfly—Psyche; that I thought as the light on the rain made the natural symbol of mercy—the rainbow, so the butterfly was the type in nature, and made to the end, amongst other ends of being such a

type—of the resurrection of the body; that its name certainly expressed the hope of the Greeks in immortality, while to us it speaks likewise of a glorified body (517)

Therefore, not only does MacDonald directly link, along several dimensions, the soul/butterfly/Psyche to the rainbow, but he also appears to give a Greek meaning to both concepts. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the rainbow does not seem to be the “natural symbol of mercy.”⁴ In this tradition it is the symbol of a covenant between God and humans, a symbol of hope. It seems that it is in the Greek tradition that the rainbow can be understood as a symbol for mercy. It is through Iris/rainbow that Juno/Hera sends her merciful words to Hersilia, and it is through a merciful Iris/rainbow, linking Hades and heaven, that souls are allowed to rise to a better existence.

MacDonald's Other Old Men

The mythological echoes continue throughout MacDonald's story. Once a link is made between MacDonald's Old Man of the Sea and Poseidon, this leads to additional clues about this latter's two brethren, the Old Man of the Earth and the Old Man of the Fire. It is widely known that Poseidon, like MacDonald's Old man of the Sea, had two brothers, Hades and Zeus. Hades, the middle brother, is directly associated with the earth in the ancient stories. Out of all the Olympian deities, Hades is the only god that makes his permanent home underground, in the earth. On the other hand, Zeus is the only Olympian god who manifests himself as fire. Zeus's awesome attributes, related to fire, lightning, and flames are also common in the old stories. For instance, he appears to Aegina in the likeness of a flame of fire, while a similar fiery outburst causes the death of Semele, Dionysus' mother (Lempriere 16, 617). It is Semele who had requested to see Zeus in his true form, and this is what leads to her consumption when he manifests himself as fire/lightning. Hades' links to earth and Zeus' connections to fire are so prevalent in Greek myths that in his physical allegories, Empedocles universalizes them—Hades is identified directly with the element Earth and Zeus with Fire (1:33).

Among the ancient writers there is much discrepancy whether Poseidon or Zeus is the eldest son. For instance, Hesiod, continually calls “Zeus, [the] father of gods and men,” and also claims that this god is the “youngest” of the children of Kronos (38). In many other myths, Zeus is the youngest of the Olympian gods and Poseidon the elder of the three brothers. On the other hand, Zeus was known for his shape-changing, metamorphic powers. These two phenomena—the discrepancy in age and the ability to transform—very likely explain, as far as

the ancient imagery of MacDonald's story is concerned, the metamorphic nature of his Old Men, and the discrepancy between the appearance and the relative age of these same Old Men, particularly that of The Old Man of the Fire.

In addition to these general insights, MacDonald's story includes material of a more particular nature, material which adds weight to the above evidence and arguments. For example, MacDonald's Old Man of the Earth is depicted as the middle brother, associated with living underground and with mirrors. Most of this is reflected in what little we know of Hades. While there are very few stories of the god Hades, some of those that exist make reference to mirrors or reflecting water. The flower that helps Hades lure Persephone is the Narcissus, a flower directly associated with reflecting pools (Kerenyi 232). MacDonald's Old Man of the Earth strikes Tangle very much like the figure of Narcissus:

The moment she looked in his face, she saw that he was a youth of marvelous beauty. He sat entranced with the delight of what he beheld in a mirror of something like silver, which lay on the floor at his feet. (203)

The reader can only wonder what, apart from his own beautiful image, the Old Man of the Earth saw in his mirror. It must also be recalled that Narcissus continues to marvel at his reflected image, even underground "indeed, even after death, it is said that when his shade passed the Stygian river it leaned over the boat to catch a look in the waters" (Gayley 189). Because we possess so little literary information about Hades, it is to other related media that we must proceed. For instance, a graphic depiction of Hades shows him holding something that closely resembles a small mirror (Fig. 4).



Figure 4



Figure 5

Another resident of the underground kingdom of Hades, an Erinye, is also shown holding a mirror (Fig. 5).

Thus the mirror seems to be directly associated with Hades, both the god and the realm. These chthonic and reflective links appear to account for MacDonald's associations to the underground aspect of the Old Man of the Earth, as Hades—the middle "aged" brother of Poseidon and Zeus.

MacDonald's oldest/youngest Old Man (of the Fire) also has a prop, a set of "balls of various colours and sizes" (206). Perhaps the only myth involving a similar ball is that associated originally with the child Zeus. Apollonius of Rhodes mentions such a ball given by Aphrodite to her son, Eros:

"I will give you one of Zeus's lovely toys, the one that his fond nurse Adrasteia made for him in the Idean cave when he was still a child and liked to play. It is a perfect ball; Haephaestus himself could not make you a better toy. It is made of golden hoops laced together all the way round with double stitching; but the seams are hidden by a winding, dark blue band. When you throw it up, it will leave a fiery trail behind it like a meteor in the sky." (112-3)

This magic ball, like the one in MacDonald's story, appears to be meaningful in a metaphorical fashion. Tangle thought that "there must be an infinite meaning" associated with the balls, and the narrator claims that "flashes of meaning would now pass from them to Tangle" (206). Kerényi interprets Zeus' magical ball in a parallel fashion: "[H]er [Adrasteia's] golden gift referred to Zeus's future mastery of the world" (94).

Kerényi's scholarly interpretation is likely grounded in a Platonic reading of the Apollonius of Rhodes' ball. Plato, through Socrates, had originally referred to one of a set of similar balls in *Phaedo* "in the first place, the earth, when looked at from above, is in appearance streaked like one of those balls which have leather coverings in twelve pieces, and is decked with various colours . . ." (258). In the above literary segments there are many points of convergence, including powerful children, magic balls, caves, mastery of the earth/universe, etc. If MacDonald had these balls in mind, then the metaphorical meaning—a ball is the earth/universe—he assigns them is directly traceable to that originally supplied by Apollonius of Rhodes and Plato.

Underground Journeys: Plato's Cave and Aeneas's Golden Bough

Given that MacDonald draws from various facets of Plato's works, it is very unlikely that aspects of the Allegory of the Cave did not also influence the underground journey in "The Golden Key." Mossy and Tangle's constant wish

while they are in the cave of shades is to find their way to the land from which the shadows fall. However, before dealing with *The Republic*, Tangle's meetings with the Man of the Earth and his mirror, and later the Old Man of the Fire, seem to point in the direction of Plato's *Phaedo*.

In *Phaedo*, Plato outlines some of the "geography" of the interior of the earth. After describing what is on and above the earth's surface, Socrates proceeds to a description of the earth's interior:

Such is the nature of the whole earth, and of the things which are around the earth; and there are divers regions in the hollows on the face of the globe everywhere . . . All have numerous perforations, and there are passages broad and narrow in the interior of the earth, connecting them with one another; and there flows out of and into them, as into basins, a vast tide of water, and huge subterranean streams of perennial rivers, and springs hot and cold, and a great fire, and great rivers of fire, and streams of liquid mud, thin and thick (like the rivers of mud in Sicily, and the lava streams which follow them) . . . And there is a swinging or sea-saw in the interior of the earth which moves all this up and down . . . (111)

The geographical aspects of the above passage certainly appear to have some connection to MacDonald's tale, particularly the perforations which allow Tangle entry into the earth, the tide of water by the Old Man of the Sea's ship/home, passages that allow Tangle to visit the Old Man of the Earth, the downward spring which conveys Tangle to the Old Man of the Fire, the great fire and rivers of fire which surround the Old Man of the Fire's abode, etc.

According to Plato, the souls of good persons are conveyed upwards from Hades:

Those who have been pre-eminent for holiness of life are released from this earthly prison, and go to their pure home which is above, and dwell in the purer earth; and of these, such as have duly purified themselves with philosophy live henceforth altogether without the body, in mansions fairer still, which may not be described, and of which time would fail me to tell.

(*Phaedo* 114)

MacDonald is very secretive about Mossy and Tangle's final destination, other than to say that they were on their way "up to the country whence the shadows fell" (215). Through Plato, however, we begin to catch glimpses of this enigmatic "country."

Plato's Allegory of the Cave is dependent on the mythology associated with

Hades. For instance, when Plato considers the journey of the guardians from the cave to the surface, he puts it in these terms:

And now shall we consider what way the guardians will be produced, and how they are to be brought from darkness to light, —as some are said to have ascended from the world below to the gods? (*The Republic* VII: 521)

This passage emerges after Socrates has explained parts of the allegory to Glaucon:

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun; and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world (VII: 517)

Plato's idea that the cave is closely related to Hades is further supported by Socrates' previous mention of the knowledge of rules applicable to the "shadows," and by a dead Achilles' statement to Odysseus:

And if they were in the habit of conferring honours among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passage of shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honours and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer, "Better to be a poor servant of a poor master," and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner? (VII: 517: 516)

The above Homeric quotation comes from *The Odyssey*, Book, XI. At this point in the story, Odysseus, after his journey over the sea, is in or near Hades, when Achilles claims:

"O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying.
I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another
Man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on,
Than be a king over all the perished dead." (l. 487-91)

Thus Plato makes the connections between his cave and Hades, and heaven and the intellectual world. If MacDonald follows Plato in "The Golden Key," Mossy and Tangle's final ascent is towards both heaven and the intellectual world of Forms. The world from whence the shadows fall becomes the world of light.

The above reading is supported by Plato's ideas about the order of perceptions available to those who escape their bonds, yet return underground. This is seen in the segment of *The Republic*, Book VII, where Socrates continues

his conversation with Glaucón:

And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day? Certainly

Last of all he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is. (VII: 516)

Given the evidence that has been presented in this paper thus far, a final topic deserves consideration—that of the similarity between Virgil’s *The Aeneid* and MacDonald’s “The Golden Key.” It is by referring to *The Aeneid* that a further puzzling aspect of the “The Golden Key” may be elucidated. I will begin with the connections between rainbows and serpents, followed by the link between Iris and eggs, and comment finally on the similarities between Aeneas’ and Mossy’s adventures.

In Book IV of *The Aeneid*, a rainbow-like giant serpent emerges from and returns to its place “under the altar stone” of Anchises’ grave:

a huge serpent
 Slid over the ground, seven shining loops, surrounding
 The tomb, peacefully gliding around the altars,
 Dappled with blue and gold, such iridescence
 As rainbow gives to cloud, when the sun strikes it.
 Aeneas stood amazed; and the great serpent
 Crawled to the bowls and cups, tasted the offerings,
 And slid again, without a hint of menace,
 Under the altar stone (117)

This narrative is similar to MacDonald’s episode, where the Old Man of the Fire “turned up a great stone” to remove a snake/serpent egg (208). The Old Man places this egg in what is likely a rainbow shaped depression, a “long curbed line in the sand” (208), which seems to function like a nest for the snake’s birth. This allusion recalls the original discussion between Mossy and his aunt about the golden key being an egg in its nest at the foot of the rainbow (173). This snake/serpent leads Tangle in a similar fashion as her previous rainbow guides, the colourfull air-fish and Aeranthe, gliding and “undulating like a sea wave” (208).

In the same section of *The Aeneid*, Book IV, Iris disguises herself as an old

woman, Beroe, to convince the Trojan women to burn their ships. This is how Virgil describes part of this incident:

They crave a city,
They are tired of bearing the vast toil of sailing,
Laying aside her goddess-guise, becoming
Old Beroe, Doryclus' wife, who sometime
Had children, fame and lineage. Now Iris,
Resembling her, came down to the Trojan mothers. (133)

The name and character assumed by Iris is "Beroe," a name that according to Graves means "she who brings eggs" (384). Hence, MacDonald likely concluded that Iris/rainbow becomes Beroe, the egg bringer, who provides the egg that hatched the rainbow serpent who guides Tangle.

The connections between "The Golden Key" and *The Aenead* do not stop there. In Book VI of *The Aenead*, it is the Sibyl, prophetess of Apollo, who tells Aeneas that he must visit his father in Hades. To do this he must first search for the golden bough. This is, prima facie, very similar to the beginning of MacDonald's story, where Mossy's prophetic aunt tells him most of what he needs to know to find the golden key, which, as the aunt claims, his father was supposed to have found before him (173).

Virgil describes Aeneas' longing for that which would allow him entry into the underground realm:

As Aeneas gazed at the vast woods, it happened that he uttered a prayer: "If only the golden bough would show itself to me in so immense a forest. For the priestess told all that was true . . . At that moment as it happened, twin doves came flying from the sky under his very eyes and settled on the green ground. Then the great hero recognized his mother's birds and in his joy prayed: Be leaders, if there is some way, and direct your course to the grove where the branch rich in gold shades the fertile earth. . . . They would stop to feed and then fly ahead always permitting Aeneas as he followed to keep them in sight . . . the doves settled down together on the longed-for tree, where the tawny gleam of gold flickered through the branches (265).

This is close to MacDonald's description of Mossy's original quest:

The boy went to bed and dreamed about the golden key.
Now all that his great-aunt told the boy about the golden key would have been nonsense, had it not been that their little house stood on the borders of Fairyland. For out of Fairyland nobody ever can find where the rainbow stands. The creature takes such good care of its golden key, always flitting from place to place, lest

anyone should find it! But in Fairyland it is quite different. (172-3)

MacDonald continues by having Mossy associate the golden key with the “rainbow’s egg” and the aunt speaking about its “nest.” Mossy then begins to concentrate on finding the desired object:

One evening, in summer, he went into his own room, and stood at the lattice-window, and gazed into the forest which fringed the outskirts of Fairyland. It came up to his great-aunt’s garden, and indeed, sent some straggling trees into it. . . .

Suddenly, far among the trees, as far as the sun could shine, he saw a glorious thing. It was the end of a rainbow, large and brilliant

“The golden key!” he said to himself and darted out of the house, and into the wood. He had not gone far before the sun set. But the rainbow only glowed the brighter. For the rainbow of Fairyland is not dependent upon the sun . . . the rainbow grew larger and brighter; and at length he found himself within two trees of it. (173-4)

Next, Mossy notices that the foot of the bow is “based chiefly upon a bed of moss,” and that it is only visible below the trees (176). Aeneas noticed that the doves first landed on “the green ground” then on the golden tree, where “the branch rich in gold shades the fertile earth.” Thus in both narratives there are many similar links: two wise women generally guiding the two heroes; the heroes’ longing for a golden bough or key; the guidance of the heroes through the forest by the “creatures” of the two related goddesses, Venus and Iris; and the creatures settling on the very spot where the hero must find a golden implement associated with a “key” to Hades.

It is clear from Virgil’s account that the golden bough is likely mistletoe, and it is this magic plant that serves Aeneas as a “key” to Hades:

And at the entrance, Aeneas having sprinkled
His body with fresh water, placed the bough
Golden before the threshold. The will of the goddess
Had been performed, the proper task completed. (166)

MacDonald likely was aware of the many connections among the mistletoe, the golden bough, and “keys.” He may have been aware of the supposed magical power of mistletoe for the opening of all locks, and its efficacy in the task of finding “treasure” (Grigson 201). Mistletoe is known to be related to botanical “keys,” the name of the groupings of Mistletoe berries (*OED*) “which become deeper and deeper gold-tinged as the plant withers” (Leech and Fried 731), or those that were often substituted for the rare Mistletoe berries, Maple keys

(Grigson 203).

Conclusion

It is becoming widely accepted that George MacDonald used ancient mythology to frame his fantasy stories. In this paper I hope to have followed, and greatly expanded upon, the pioneering work of Willard, Patterson, Manlove, and O'Connor, among others. In "The Golden Key," MacDonald uses the myths surrounding Iris and the Old Men of ancient literature to formulate much of his characters' identities, attributes, and actions. The varied "Old Men of the Sea" in Greek mythology allow MacDonald to use aspects of the different deities that shared this appellation. This leads to Poseidon, who in turn leads to his two brothers, Hades—the Old Man of the Earth—and Zeus, the oldest/youngest Old Man of the Fire. By having this panoply of different gods, MacDonald can creatively rearrange them and make use of their multiple myths in "The Golden Key," much like the Old Man-Child rearranges his meaning laden magic balls. The full range of attributes and adventures of Iris/rainbow and her father Thaumás provide many of the larger foundation stones for MacDonald's story. It is by tracing their stories through the ancient myths that we may open the doors to the many disparate and enigmatic parts of "The Golden Key."

George MacDonald claims that he was interested in "literature and the history of religious development" (Greville MacDonald 518). Thus it is not surprising that much of the material used for his children's journey in "The Golden Key" is plucked from ancient sources devoted to explaining the nature of the soul's migration both into and out of Hades. For accounts of these mysterious journeys, MacDonald resorts to some of the most insightful sources in antiquity: Homer, Plato and Virgil. With these and other ancient sources at his disposal, he uses his own Golden Key of the imagination to pen his puzzling, complex, yet rational story.

Endnotes

1. As the Olympians replaced the ancient pantheon, several of the younger gods were superimposed upon their predecessors. Lempriere and Zimmerman claim that in some sources Poseidon is Thaumás' father (669 and 262 respectively). This would make Poseidon older than the Old Man of the Sea. It is widely known that there is much confusion and conflation between fathers and sons in Greek mythology. For an explanation of the close identity between Poseidon and Nereus, see Murray, 331.
2. It seems that Iris was the original psychopomp in the ancient stories, but that her role was usurped by the younger male god Hermes. MacDonald was very interested in some of the Greek mythology dealing with the usurpation of female roles by male gods in

some of his fantasy works. For some evidence of this patriarchal move, see Soto's "Chthonic Aspects of *Phantastes*: From the Rising of the Goddess to the *Anodos* of *Anodos*."

3. Having fixed the identity of the grandmother on the Iris/Rainbow of mythology, it may become easier to trace the possible identity of Mossy's aunt or "great"-aunt. First, I must clear up the discrepancy between MacDonald calling his wise woman Mossy's great-aunt and later calling the boy her nephew. I believe that in this instance the word "great" ought to be read as "Great." In *Phantastes*, MacDonald uses exactly this reversal when he refers to Anodos' "Grand Mother" as this latter's "grandmother." By this linguistic move MacDonald means to call attention to the Great Mother, or Magna Mater of ancient religions (Soto 24). It is this reading that explains why this aunt can be a great aunt. Once the "aunt" nature of this woman is secure, it is to the Greek language that we must proceed. The word for "aunt" in Greek is θεία, which is exactly the name of the titaness Theia, Iris' maternal aunt. This goddess was the personification of light (Zimmerman 262) and the moon (Rose 34). This is probably the reason MacDonald makes sure to convey to the reader that it is she who enlightens Mossy, and why this wily writer includes the otherwise extraneous information that Mossy only speaks to her in the twilight or in the evening (172-3).

4. In *Diary of an Old Soul*, MacDonald once again attempts to link the Greek rainbow and soul symbols to the Christian scheme of salvation. For instance in the poem for October 21, MacDonald writes:

And when grim Death doth take me by the throat,
Thou wilt have pity on thy handiwork;
Thou wilt not let him on my suffering gloat,
But draw my soul out--gladder than man or boy,
When thy saved creatures from the narrow ark
Rushed out, and leaped and laughed and cried for joy,
And the great rainbow strode across the dark. (280)

Gaps emerge once MacDonald assigns a Greek reading to the Noah story. For instance, in the biblical story there is no mention of a rainbow striding across the dark, nor any suggestion of the immortality of the soul.

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