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Maria Gonzalez Davies

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A Spiritual Presence in Fairyland: The Great-Great-Grandmother in the *Princess* Books

Maria Gonzalez Davies

Fairyland exists in a twilight zone between the Primary World and the Secondary.¹ There are many ways to bridge the gap between them but traditionally the grandmother figure is perhaps the best mediator. She performs this role in MacDonald's two *Princess* books. Great-great-grandmother Irene lives in a tower in Princess Irene's castle (the Primary World in the story) but really belongs to a supernatural world (the Secondary World in the story) with spiritual overtones.

In MacDonald's fantasy works the feminine figures always appear to be embodiments of the greatest of goddesses, Mother Earth. This is especially true of great-great-grandmother Irene, who comes to the rescue whenever one of the protagonists is in danger and who acts as a priestess in the initiations into adulthood of both Irene and Curdie. Evil takes different shapes in the two books. In *The Princess and the Goblin* there are the goblins, while in *The Princess and Curdie* the inhabitants of Gwyntystorm have this role. The great-great-grandmother's magical gifts uphold the folklore tradition. It is in the richness of MacDonald's symbolism that he outshines, and deserves to be called "mythmaker" by, writers such as C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Great-great-grandmother Irene appears as a magical and mystical presence throughout both *Princess* books; helping, but demanding faith in return. The symbols associated with her are exclusively feminine and spiritual. She uses a moon-like silver globe to guide the chosen, especially at night, a time of dreams and mystery. When Irene pricks her thumb then wakes with pain in the middle of the night, she sees "the moon . . . shining brightly into the room" (60).² Then she finds her way to her great-great-grandmother's room. The grand lady tells her that she does not spin every night: "only moonlit nights, and then no longer than the moon shines on my wheel" (63). Curdie repents of trying to kill a white pigeon when he sees "a great globe of light—like silver" and he realises "it must be the great old princess's moon!" (183). In chapter 3 of the second book, "The Mistress of the Silver Moon," we are told that "her grey hair mixed with the moonlight so that [Curdie] could not tell where the one began and the other ended" (187).

The integration is **[end of page 60]** complete. That she is the Great Mother archetype is made clear when she takes the place of Irene's mother. She gives Irene a ring and Irene's nurse Lottie believes the child had been given it by her mother (88).

The symbol of the moon is in correlation with that of the sun. The moon's principal characteristics are that it does not have its own light and that its shape changes. Thus it represents dependence, transformation and growth, which are traditionally considered to be feminine characteristics.

In the ancient system of correspondences the moon is related to silver and to water. The full moon brings out the wild part of a person and it is the favourite time for fairies and witches to dance. The great-great-grandmother's voice is "silvery" (78), and many of her possessions are of silver, such as the "basin" (64), "casket" (64) and "bath" (124). The bath combines all three symbols: it is oval, made of silver, and holds "clear cool water" (124). When Irene bathes in it she feels "more than happy—perfectly blissful" (124). And when she steps out of it she feels "as if she had been made over again" (125). She has participated in all the feminine elements and has emerged whole from the experience having found her true self.

In *The Princess and Curdie* the great-great-grandmother's tears are a symbol of cleansing, of purity. She cries over the king while she is curing him in chapter 31 "The Sacrifice":

And the shape that Curdie saw and could not see, wept over the king as he lay in the fire, and often she hid her face in handfuls of her shadowy hair, and from her hair the water of her weeping dropped like sunset rain in the light of the roses. (326)

The combination of long loose hair, tears, fire, and roses suggests a ceremony of purification: abandonment and beauty in her hair, purifying pain in the tears and the fire, and new life in the roses.

The rose is a well-known mystical symbol in Western tradition. The king is cured in "a fire of glowing, flaming roses, red and white" (326). The combination of red and white represents the union of passion and purity which, brought together in a purifying ceremony carried out by a priestess, symbolise the attainment of balance and perfection. Moreover, we are told that his face "shone from under the burnt roses like a diamond in the burnt ashes of a furnace" (326). Diamonds and ashes also form a balanced polarity: but a **[61]** diamond is the symbol of purity and incorruptibility (and according to European tradition it keeps away the terrors of the night); on the other hand, ashes are the symbol of death and penitence, the result of

purification through fire.

Like the moon, the *spinning-wheel and thread* are instruments which weave destinies. The spider which spins its web is an image of the same forces, and the great-great-grandmother spins silvery-grey filaments from spiders' webs brought to her by her pigeons from far-away lands. The spun thread, which will guide both Irene and Curdie towards safety, is the symbol of life and faith. Life was cut by the Roman "*fatae*" when death should arrive, but if the protagonists hold onto faith here they will achieve life eternal. One could take the symbolism further and remember that some representations of Athene depict her holding a pike—symbol of a warrior's virtues—in one hand and a spinning wheel in the other. Gwyntystorm is on the brink of destruction because it has abandoned Christianity, but the great-great-grandmother sends Curdie there with his mattock (a short-handled pike) after presenting herself to him almost as one with the spinning wheel (187). The spinning-wheel represents the passing of time, which will cease when the thread is no longer spun; the wheel also represents the world: hence the world and its time of existence are in the great-great-grandmother's hands. Finally, it is worth mentioning that, when Curdie is lost, it is the spinning-wheel that shows him the way:

As he hesitated he heard the noise of a spinning-wheel. He knew it at once because his mother's spinning-wheel had been his governess long ago, and still taught him things. It was the spinning-wheel that first taught him to make verses, and to sing, and to think whether all was right inside him. (186)

The spinning-wheel is closely related to the Mother archetype and the positive aspects of Life, all of which enable Curdie to advance towards the ideals of home, peace and security.

Great-great-grandmother Irene belongs also to the realm of Faerie, for she gives Irene and Curdie their magic aids and she can shape-shift in true fairy fashion, adopting the appearance of different types of fairy. This point is especially developed in chapter 5 of *The Princess and Curdie*, where she is [62] called Old Mother Wotherwop by the miners, who claim she can take any shape she likes. The different manifestations they describe can all be identified from traditional lore.³

Habetrot - the patroness of spinners and weavers in the Highlands, whose cloth can cure all diseases. As has been seen, the great-great-grandmother is associated with a spinning-wheel and a magic thread which heal the protagonists of the *Princess* books.

Banshee or *Bean Si* - a death spirit who wails for those who are about to die. We are told that Old Mother Wotherwop:

was a withered old woman . . . never seen except at night, and when something terrible had taken place, or was going to take place—such as the falling in of the roof of a mine, or the breaking out of water in it. (198)

Fuath - a group of evil water fairies. MacDonald combines the fuath with the deformed “hag” of Highland tradition:

She had more than once been seen . . . beside some well, sitting on the brink of it, and leaning over and stirring it with her forefinger, which was six times as long as any of the rest. And whoever for months afterward drank of that well was sure to be ill. (198)

Interestingly, though, ‘whoever in bad health drank of the well was sure to get better’ (199).

Glaistig - a water fairy who lures men with her beauty and after kills them by sucking their blood, and who is one of the many treacherous fairies who use glamour to deceive, maim or kill men. A miner claims that Mother Wotherwop:

took the shape of a young woman sometimes, as beautiful as an angel, and then was the most dangerous of all, for she struck every man who looked upon her stone-blind. (199)

The belief in “*elf-shot*,” a deformity or illness caused by an elf blow, is also mingled here.

Water-wraith - a female water spirit, usually withered and scowling, who beckons drunkards towards a ford, where she lets them drown. Fairies did not [63] seem to favour excessive drinking and neither did the great-great-grandmother under the water-wraith guise:

One [miner] went on to tell how one night when his grandfather had been having a jolly time of it with his friends . . . [s]he dragged him into a bog, and tumbled him up and down in it till he was nearly dead. (199)

Mining spirits - who guide chosen miners to a rich vein with knocking noises. The miners think Curdie “wants to make friends with [Mother Wotherwop] that she may help him to find the gangue.” (201)

Brownies - who help in the house or with the cattle in return for a bannock and milk. One miner tells how:

when [his] cow died . . . [Mother Wotherwop] was seen going

round and round the cowhouse the same night. To be sure she left a fine calf behind her . . . a far finer one than ever her mother was. (200)

If we look into the actions the great-great-grandmother carries out as each different fairy figure we see that, although she adopts some which are evil in appearance, she never acts wickedly, nor goes to the extreme of killing anyone, as some of these fairy characters are wont to do. She appears more as a figure of justice who inflicts harsh punishment upon wrongdoers, but for their own good. MacDonald puts across a pessimistic message: people would rather pay homage to the gods of mediocrity and think evil of those who do not conform to the established rules; the chosen few who see beyond the surface of things are mocked. It is the miners who commit the sins—basically drinking and narrow-mindedness—who cannot see the good that came out of the punishment. It is they who have still not “learned to cut the hazel fork” (201)—the divining rod that is a symbol of adulthood with them—and not Curdie.

Mysterious, inaccessible and awe-inspiring to those who are not prepared for her, the great-great-grandmother can be kind and gentle towards those who deserve it. She comes across as a magnificent figure, the Great Mother archetype, the ancestral Giver of Gifts, the Wise Old Woman. She is associated [64] with the four elements: air (moon, pigeons); water (bath, tears, well); fire (rose-fire); and earth (mines, spinning-wheel). She is the great moving force behind both stories, guiding Irene and Curdie towards peace and happiness and leading them so that evil is banished from their lives. In both books MacDonald has expressed masterfully the way in which folklore reflects man’s need to come to terms with Mother Earth our origin, who is a goddess in most societies and a feminine presence in fairy tales.

Endnotes

1. Tolkien coined these expressions. The Primary World is that in which we live, the Secondary is the Other World where fantasy reigns and where we enter through a “willing suspension of disbelief” (*Tree and Leaf*. London: Unwin, 1964).
2. Page references are to the Oxford UP. World’s Classics edition of *The Princess and the Goblin and The Princess and Curdie* edited by Roderick McGillis (1990).
3. Descriptions of the fairies are derived from Briggs, K. *A Dictionary of Fairies*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976. [65]