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A Study of George MacDonald and the Image of Woman
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Richard Reis

As I write this, in September 2001, this volume is no longer for sale because its preface was mistakenly attributed to me. Quite a few copies of Holbrook's study had, however, already been sold—mostly to libraries—before the error was discovered, so reviewing it is not entirely inappropriate. Furthermore, this work may go back on the market if and when the preface is replaced or correctly attributed.

That preface calls the book “an example of what might be called the psychiatric school of literary criticism,” which treats MacDonald's fantasies as “symptomatic of neurosis—as unconsciously revealing psychic imbalances in the author which amount to a mentally pathological condition, and of which the author himself was unaware” (xi). There is a certain delicious irony in the misattribution, for in my own book about MacDonald I called Robert Lee Wolff's 1961 MacDonald study *The Golden Key* “interesting doctrinaire Freudianism that should not be mistaken for literary criticism.” My dislike of amateur psychoanalysis applied to literature should have been obvious.

When George MacDonald died, his desk was found to contain, among other treasured mementoes of his mother (who died when George was eight years old), a letter to her mother-in-law. The infant George had to be weaned early, because his tubercular mother couldn't produce enough milk. She tells that her infant son “cried [*sic*] desperately a while for the first night,” though “very little since.” Holbrook claims that this childhood trauma *permanently* wounded George MacDonald's psyche, as unconsciously illustrated in the author's works, especially *Lilith* and *At the Back of the North Wind*. Further, the mother's early death supposedly compounded the damage. As results of these allegedly repressed childhood experiences, we are told, George MacDonald's “image of woman” contained a combination of attraction and fear, the latter including not only dread of emotional injury but also an association with death.

The title character in *Lilith* indeed displays these attributes, but

ascribing MacDonald's creation of this dangerous character to repressed memory of childhood trauma is at best questionable and perhaps even silly. How can one tell whether a long-dead person's unpleasant experiences have been repressed into the unconscious, without the kind of "feedback" that a psychiatrist gets when questioning a living patient? After all, MacDonald kept and apparently treasured his mother's letter, indicating full consciousness of her love and his loss. Besides, a single characterisation hardly constitutes an "image" of Woman in general. **[end of page 43]** Holbrook therefore tries to find similar combinations of attraction to and fear of Woman elsewhere in MacDonald's works. His efforts are decidedly ineffective.

Consider North Wind, for example. She is young-looking and beautiful, but a bringer of death as in the incident when a ship sinks in a storm she has created, drowning passengers and crew. Therefore Little Diamond's liking for her is, Holbrook suggests, delusory. He here misses the point, which is MacDonald's belief that sometimes death is *good*, in that it leads to more and richer life in the next world. *At the Back of the North Wind* is, in fact, an attempt on MacDonald's part to help children accept the mortality to which we are all subject. Holbrook tells us that he himself does not share the Christian belief in life after death, which he considers a wish-fulfilment delusion. But—to stress the point again—in literary criticism the question isn't what an author believes, but how well and by what devices that meaning is embodied.

The fairy tales and adult fantasies of George MacDonald abound with symbols which are capable of multiple interpretations, and this attribute further complicates matters. Holbrook characteristically "discovers" meanings which seem to fit his diagnosis of MacDonald's damaged mental condition, whereas another reader might find in the same symbol quite another implication. Here is an example. Holbrook (293-94) cites a passage from *Lilith* in which Adam is explaining to Mr Vane why the latter has some difficulty understanding his experiences in the story's Other World. Adam says, "'Thou has not yet looked the Truth in the face, hast as yet at best but seen him through a cloud. . . . But to him who has once seen even a shadow only of the truth, . . . to him the real vision, the Truth himself, will come, and depart no more.'" Holbrook remarks that "it may be that MacDonald supposed he was writing about God. It is not, however, God's face which he is seeking, but the face of the mother, and the truth he seeks is the culmination of his quest to be 'known' by her."

I have not cited this passage as an oddity, but as *typical* of

Holbrook's approach: he finds his own psychoanalytic theory everywhere in MacDonald's works. It is interesting that elsewhere in Holbrook's study (236) he remarks on an interpretation by Wolff, who sees the relation of Anodos to the knight whom Wolff calls Sir Percivale in MacDonald's *Phantastes* as symptomatic of the author's alleged Oedipus complex. Holbrook correctly observes that Anodos "does not . . . seem to see Sir Percivale [*sic*] as a father: the Freudian interpretation as Wolff admits, leaves several loose ends and unexplained details. Does this indicate that a wrong theory is being forced on the story?" It apparently never occurs to Holbrook that he himself may be guilty of similar forcing.

One more illustration. Holbrook cites a passage in *The Princess and Curdie* where Curdie shakes hands with Dr Kelman and instinctively senses that the [44] fellow is wicked, apparently feeding but actually poisoning the king. Holbrook's commentary begins as follows: "In this perplexing situation we find an ambivalence that must surely have its origins in MacDonald's weaning problem?" (136).

Note the peculiar combination of "surely" with a question-mark at the end of the sentence—a characteristic mannerism of Holbrook's which occurs dozens of times in his book.* Another mannerism of Holbrook's is the frequent use of the word "talion"—a noun meaning "retaliation" which I had to look up—as an adjective. Bad typesetting and neglected proof-reading are also characteristic of this work, where typographical errors abound and strange mistakes are frequent—"consequence" for "consequent" (141), "sop" for "so" (168), "mone" for "moment" (281), and my favourite, "debauded" for "bedaubed" (279).*

Getting back to Curdie's sensing evil in Dr Kelman, *even if Holbrook were correct* in finding the incident symptomatic of MacDonald's supposed psychological maladjustment (which I doubt), that diagnosis is irrelevant to literary criticism, which properly deals with the effect on the reader, not the cause in the writer. In this case, for instance, Curdie's sensing a poisoner behind the disguise as a nourisher is a typical example of MacDonald's peculiar gift, the capacity to evoke *multiple* resonances. One reader may be reminded of a quack dispensing a dangerous cure-all, while another may see in Dr Kelman an echo of the dangerous ideologue promising to cure a nation's ills if elected. Holbrook's work typifies a deplorable characteristic of some recent MacDonald criticism. Various critics of the MacDonald fantasies and fairy tales triumphantly claim to have discovered *the* meaning of this or that symbol, or even of an entire work and every little passage in

it, as if all earlier writers had missed the point. But a single “explanation” of such literature is downright silly. Such know-it-all “literary criticism” does a profound injustice to its subject. Holbrook—like Wolff before him—compounds that injustice by insisting that MacDonald’s powerful multiplex evocativeness is unconscious revelation of a pathological condition.

* Editor’s notes.

When I received a review copy of this book I found it difficult to believe that Richard Reis had written the preface attributed to him. I promptly contacted him to discover the explanation and found that he had no knowledge whatsoever of the book. He has asked me to comment on the two matters marked by an asterisk in his text.

I am told that in American English “surely” has retained its traditional meaning “of a surety.” But in Britain it long ago came to mean “ought to” with [45] the added implication “but probably does/will not”: for example in the line: “Surely she will come again!” in Arnold’s “The Forsaken Merman.” Holbrook, however, is idiosyncratic in using the question mark with an indirect question like this. And in disregarding the suggestion of vain hope implied in “surely” he is not merely being idiosyncratic—or, alternatively, cautious and modest—but is undermining the whole argument of his book.

The very large number of typographical errors in the book—few pages are without one or more—is *not* the fault of the publisher. The Edwin Mellen Press considers that the modern facilities available in universities should enable academic authors to take responsibility for their own proof-reading. As a consequence, typos are on average several times more abundant in Mellen books than in books published by other large academic publishers. But the number of typos in Holbrook’s book is many times the Mellen average. Unsurprisingly, some of Holbrook’s typos illustrate the element of wishful thinking which Reis recognises as pervading the book. For example, in the passage quoted by Holbrook from near the end of *Lilith*, mentioned above by Reis, where Vane is being taught by Adam, Holbrook quotes Vane asking Adam about their conversation: ““forgive me, but how am I to know surely that this also is not a part of the lovely dream in which I am now wallowing with myself?”” (293). MacDonald actually has “walking” not “wallowing.” [46]