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## Childhood and Faith in *The Princess and the Goblin*

Rebecca Long

In *The Princess and the Goblin* the concepts and acts of imagination, faith and indeed language come to inform the construction and experience of childhood and to influence the formation and maintenance of identity. The connection between childhood and faith is expressed through the actions and thoughts of two child protagonists and the way in which they struggle with the idea of belief. In much of George MacDonald's work the imagination and the act of imagining are intimately related to faith and to God. Even the word imagination itself "means an imaging or a making of likenesses" (MacDonald, "Orts" Ch 1). MacDonald states that "the end of imagination is harmony" (MacDonald, "Orts" Ch 1) implying that the symbiotic relationship between faith and imagination achieves a kind of communion with God at the point of its perfection. Throughout *The Princess and the Goblin* the action of the imagination is constantly linked with faith: faith becomes an imaginative act, a creative act that mirrors the greater template provided by the idea of God's presence in the world.

Imagination is thus defined within the text by its status as an act of creation. It is "a faculty which gives form to thought" (MacDonald, "Orts" Ch 1). This form is full of potentiality, of creative energy and as such it is a form "capable of being uttered in shape or in sound, or in any mode upon which the senses can lay hold" (MacDonald, "Orts" Ch 1).

In this context and in the context of *The Princess and the Goblin* itself, the fairy tale form facilitates a meeting of minds, "a consciousness of sympathy" (MacDonald, "Orts" Ch 14) in the communication its metaphors allow. Though for MacDonald, "a fairytale is not an allegory" (MacDonald, "Orts" Ch 14) he acknowledges that it may hold an allegory within itself: Irene pours her imagination and by association, her faith into the image and the form of the thread. So it is the light of her imagination and the power of her faith that gives the form meaning. Just as the imagination is the light and not the form, the fairy tale narrative provides a structure for the symbolic discourse MacDonald undertakes.

Within that symbolic discourse, faith engages with childhood to produce "an urging on of the motions of life" (MacDonald, "Orts" Ch 1) Irene and Curdie are literally constantly moving in the text: moving away from and back towards home, navigating the various levels of the tower, the mountain and the mine and emotionally moving away from their initial conception of their own identities, towards a more enlightened

self knowledge and experience of faith through imagination. They inhabit a constant present comprised of various states and dimensions of reality, both physical and spiritual. At no point in the text can the children know anything for certain, beyond the scope of their faith and imaginations: faith and imagination must, therefore “step into the place vacated of knowledge” (MacDonald, “Orts” Ch 14).

Even childlike emotions are linked to and become expressions of faith within the text: the children laugh and cry more than any of the other characters. Curdie is constantly laughing in the face of danger and within the larger symbolic discourse MacDonald is engaging in, his laughter becomes an expression of his faith in his own creative and imaginative powers. When Irene experiences despair or doubt she cries. Later, as her faith develops and she becomes more adept at utilising her imagination, she begins to laugh in the same way that Curdie does: for her, it is an expression of delight in having her faith restored and confirmed.

So laughter functions as both a demonstration of faith and an expression of disbelief. For Irene and Curdie their childlike laughter is an affirmation of faith. The soldiers’ laughter on the other hand bears the weight of adult experience and adult doubt: when they laugh at their companion in the garden they cause him to “doubt the testimony of his own eyes” (MacDonald, “Princess” 97), to question his faith in his own literal vision of the goblin creatures. Within the heightened and charged reality of the fairy tale MacDonald creates, even the most human of emotional responses, laughter and crying become symbolic commentaries on the ideas of faith and the possibilities of childlike imagination.

The text also functions on the connection between language and imagination and how this connection facilitates the experience of faith. “Half of our language is the work of the imagination” (MacDonald, “Orts” Ch 1): communication itself is an act of imagination, a communion of two minds through a verbal medium and within the text, is an attempt to bridge a gap that can only initially be appreciated: language alone cannot convey the idea of Irene’s Grandmother to Curdie. At that moment in the tower he is not imaginatively or faithfully invested in the transaction, in the image Irene is trying to communicate to him. Language is used to describe external reality and to articulate internal reality: this can only ever be partly an act of imagination. Irene is trying to do just that: to articulate and share the internal reality of her faith with Curdie but ultimately she cannot express that reality. MacDonald is aware of the inadequacies of language: by engaging in a symbolic discourse (Mendolsohn 31) he allows those symbols and images to articulate what language cannot.

Faith in *The Princess and the Goblin* involves seeing with the imagination which in itself is a form of belief and in some instances, of

creation. Using the fairy tale as a means of “symbolic discourse” (Tolkien 14) allows MacDonald to explore his own unique vision: his own way of seeing with his imagination.

Faith is the act of seeing truly with and through the imagination: imagination is then a form of belief. Irene—and eventually Curdie—must grow into the ability to engage in this form of belief, in order to express their faith imaginatively, in order to see truly. Belief then is not only a means of measuring spiritual and emotional growth in the text; it is in itself a form of growth: a growth into knowledge and true vision. Belief—and by necessary association, faith—is also linked to virtue, to goodness and to the innocence of childhood. Irene and Curdie as relatively inexperienced children are *capable* of true sight, of the imaginative vision necessary for faith.

Faith is thus intimately connected to childhood within the text: childhood seems to be the most natural of all stages of human existence in which to experience faith. As children, Irene and Curdie have a greater access to the power of their imaginations than the majority of the adult figures within the text: their imaginative perception allows them to engage in the symbolic discourse of faith that MacDonald sets up within the narrative.

MacDonald uses the fairy tale form to explore the childlike nature which he believes faith demands from us. For MacDonald, the fairy story itself becomes an expression of faith in the imagination, hence his engagement with the form as a narrative, as a symbolic style. In *On Fairy Stories* J.R.R. Tolkien talks about stories “reflecting in a particular way one of man’s visions of Truth” (Tolkien 14). The vision of Truth for MacDonald involves an articulation of the connection between childhood and faith and he chooses to do this through the fairy tale. For him the imagination is “the primary agent by which we perceive truth” (MacDonald, “Orts” Ch 14). This is why imagination, faith and childhood are so intimately linked within the text.

MacDonald believed that “fairy tales convey meaning through the imagination” (Marshall 19), that by their very nature they demand an imaginative engagement from the reader. This is precisely what Irene and Curdie must do in order to understand the idea of faith within the text. The connection of childhood to faith and of the childlike perception which faith demands of us is closely linked to something which fascinated MacDonald: the connection between the child and God. This idea is given “imaginative expression in the . . . fairytale” (Hein 144) through the characters of the children.

Because, as Tolkien says, fairy stories hold “the sky and the earth and all the things that are in it. . . and ourselves. . . when we are enchanted” (Tolkien 14). By placing *The Princess and the Goblin* in this context we realise that as a fairy story the narrative is open and inclusive—as well as being intimate—

enough to allow MacDonald the space he needs to explore the realities faith operates in. The children become the perfect exponents of the imaginative vision he promotes: within the wider context of MacDonald's symbolic discourse their journey to faith sees them going up stairs and down, into the mine and out onto the mountain and becomes a metaphor for the connection between childhood and the faith they are moving towards.

Irene's movement through the landscape heightens her "mental perception" (Gunn Selby 71) and her spiritual openness. The landscape itself becomes symbolically charged within MacDonald's discourse. As a child in that landscape Irene is simultaneously more and less free than the other characters who inhabit it with her—except of course—for Curdie. As a child she operates under certain constraints, including those imposed by the figures in authority who surround her. As a child princess she must uphold a prescribed standard of behaviour.

Yet as a child she also embodies MacDonald's idea of the childlike imagination and so is perceptive enough to engage with the landscape through which she is travelling and to utilise the access points it provides to experiences of heightened spiritual reality and faith. G.K. Chesterton talks of *The Princess and the Goblin* as a "picture of life" (Chesterton 10) composed of true images of journeys and sieges: a picture which is somehow truer than those images from which it is composed. This is the power of the symbolic discourse MacDonald employs: through these deeply symbolic images and motifs we are afforded the opportunity to see clearly and imaginatively how faith and childhood are connected within the narrative.

The garden, with its "hardy mountain plants . . . and pleasant garden flowers" (MacDonald, "Princess" 79) serves as an interactive space between the house and the mountain. In this "mingling of the wild mountain with the civilised garden" (MacDonald, "Princess" 79) a kind of organic order exists which informs the structure of the narrative as it progresses: characters move from one space to another, upwards and downwards, below the house and above it, into and out of sacred and profane space, yet they are united by the imaginative faith they come to share, especially Irene and Curdie, who, being children and occupying the space that childhood creates for them within the text, share an intensity of imagination. Because the "world of childhood" (Lurie iii) can be seen within the text as "more natural" (Lurie iii) than that occupied by the adults they are more open to the demands the experience of faith will place on them. Victorian authors felt that "one way to truly free the spirit was to remove [it] from the closed-in environment and have the individual transported to an open one" (Smith 151). Irene's spirit begins that journey of freedom and self discovery the moment she steps outside her nursery and embarks on her exploration of the house.

We can view the spaces the children travel through as different “dimensions of reality” (Robb 118). These different dimensions demand different responses from the children: in the mines they must display and engage in an active kind of faith. In Grandmother’s tower they must engage with that reality both creatively and imaginatively. Sally Adair Rigsbee suggests that within text “being able to see a fantasy place is the product of believing in its existence” (Adair Rigsbee 10). But Grandmother’s tower is not a fantasy space within the text: it is a spiritual dimension accessible through faith and imagination. Irene does not *see* her grandmother’s room because she believes in its existence—although as Adair Rigsbee also states she possesses the gift of “spiritual vision” (Adair Rigsbee 10). The first time she ventures up the staircase, Irene has no reason *not* to believe in the tower’s existence, any more than she has reason to doubt the reality of her own nursery. It is simply an area of the house that she has never seen before, that she has never had imaginative access to before. As the text progresses she begins to doubt and question the nature of her experiences there and her interactions with her grandmother but she never doubts that the space itself is real: its physical reality is never questioned as even when she brings Curdie up to see her grandmother the rooms themselves are physical present as part of the structure of the house, even if the lady herself appears to be absent.

As Irene begins to ascend the narrow steps up to the tower for the first time we realise that she is operating within her own fairytale: having lost her way she will now encounter a figure who will help her return home. Within the larger symbolic discourse MacDonald is engaged in, the staircase functions as a “symbol of ascent towards the spirit” (Manlove 8). The trouble Irene has in negotiating what is a seemingly straightforward set of steps becomes a metaphor for the changing and fluctuating nature of faith within the text. The text is filled with images associated with the fairy tale form. MacDonald’s discourse imbues these images with a symbolic resonance which he uses to explore his own vision: the connection between faith and childhood.

Irene tells the old lady that she has been crying because she “couldn’t find [her] way down again” (MacDonald, “Princess” 12). Her grandmother points out that she “could find [her] way up” (MacDonald, “Princess” 12). Irene agrees but says “not at first—not for a long time” (MacDonald, “Princess” 12). And this is true: the princess was lost and wandering on the corridor before she found the stairs and access to the tower space. Within the text, faith is something that must be mediated: Irene needs these interactions with her grandmother to awaken and engage her imagination. She can find her way up to the tower through trial and error but she does not understand the nature of the space yet and she cannot yet find her way back down on her own: she needs her grandmother’s guidance.

The moment the princess puts her hand in the old lady's becomes a gentle, intimate image of trust and faith. The old lady leads her down the first and second stairs "looking this way and that" (MacDonald, "Princess" 17) as though to guard against them being seen and she does not retreat back to her tower until she sees that Irene is "half-way down the third" (MacDonald, "Princess" 17). This half-descent into the reality of the house marks the old lady's devotion to the princess and illustrates the idea that faith is a two-way system of communication within the text: just as Irene can ascend the staircase, her grandmother can descend it to meet her. This scene looks forward to the moment when Irene will place her hand in Curdie's and her faith in his ability to lead her home. Irene's grandmother reconnects her to the known reality of the house she has left behind and in doing so gives her the "assurance of a path back to [that] reality" (Adair Rigsbee 10). Irene's relationship with her grandmother becomes an expression of faith and her descent from the tower is in a way a descent back into life, a new life based upon a new set of beliefs, perspectives and experiences. In an extension of MacDonald's image for the imagination the tower becomes the form and Irene's engagement with the hyper-real nature of the space an expression of imagination.

Following her first attempt to explain her visit with her grandmother to Lootie, Irene does not seek validation from any other adult figure in the text. It is significant then that when she talks about her grandmother to her father, the king "only" gazes at his daughter "with a look she [can] not understand" (MacDonald, "Princess" 78). Her imaginative perception takes over and she questions him: "you know she's there don't you?" (MacDonald, "Princess" 78). This is an instance of Irene's inability to empathise with others regarding their capacity to believe and of the clumsiness of language when it comes to addressing and articulating issues of faith. The king merely says no, "very quietly" (MacDonald, "Princess" 78). Irene has not asked him if he believes either her or her story about her grandmother: she has asked him if he *knows* her grandmother is in the tower. The king is clearly not certain and though he may have believed it once, he does not have the faith to do so now. He is not sure. But Irene takes this to mean that her grandmother is not in the attic at all and she says "then it must all be a dream... I half thought it was, but I couldn't be sure. Now I am sure of it" (MacDonald, "Princess" 78). Ironically, her father's doubt has made her secure in her own. This is the moment she denies the nature and reality of her experiences in the tower.

For Tolkien, any story that utilises "the machinery of Dream, the dreaming of actual human sleep to explain the apparent occurrence of its marvels" (Tolkien 17) cannot be classed as a fairy tale. The question of whether or not Irene is dreaming—and it is a question she asks herself

numerous times—becomes pertinent here and while the notion of the princess dreaming provides an interesting perspective through which to view the events of the text, MacDonald’s narrator never explicitly tells us that she is. In fact the manner in which the text questions the nature of the experiences she encounters encourages us to examine the way in which Irene perceives the world and how this changes through her contact with her grandmother and with Curdie. Tolkien says that “in dreams, strange powers of the mind may be unlocked” (Tolkien 17) and though Irene vacillates between believing in her grandmother and believing her to be the product of a dream, her experiences are revealed as the texts progresses to be reality within the narrative.

According to Tolkien, if the framing narrative of a fairy tale is revealed to be a dream, the primal desire which lies at the heart of the form is frustrated: “the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder” (Tolkien 17). MacDonald’s narrator is a strong and tangible presence in the text and he uses that narrative voice to communicate to his readers the authenticity of Irene’s waking experiences. The “imagined wonder” (Tolkien 18) Tolkien speaks of can be related to the idea of faith within the text and to the imaginary vision experienced by the children.

Tolkien also talks about the moment in which “disbelief arises” (Tolkien 36) and the breaking of the spell, the failure of the magic. Such a moment occurs internally in *The Princess and the Goblin*, when Curdie fails to see Irene’s grandmother after their escape from the mine. In the empty room there is nowhere to hide and both children realise that they are seeing the world in a fundamentally different way.

Irene’s journey into the heart of the mines is more than a quest to rescue Curdie. She does not even know he is trapped in the goblin city: she has no idea where the thread is leading her. It is her faith in the thread and in her grandmother’s words that lead her to Curdie. Her rescue of him is also a test of her faith. More than that, her actions constitute an affirmation of her faith: she could not have rescued him without it, without trusting in her grandmother despite her momentary lapses into doubt. Belief becomes a matter of “doing the truth rather than thinking about it” (Gunn Selby 63), of acting on faith rather than “waiting to be convinced” (Gunn Selby 63). Her heroic journey has all the more poignancy within MacDonald’s symbolic discourse precisely because of her status within the text as a child and one gifted with imaginative vision.

The initial connection between Irene and Curdie is forged when the little miner sees the princess and Lottie safely home. Curdie is the dynamic force in this scene, leading Lottie and Irene through the mountainous landscape, singing as he goes and thus creating a kind of imaginary barrier between them and the presence of the goblins. His songs have an almost

hymn-like quality to them: they are “animated, fervent . . . and yet mystic” (Von Hardenberg, 197) and the idea of Curdie using his own particular imaginative power to compose them is a powerful one. Song comes to function in a similar way to prayer within the text: Curdie’s songs are an expression of the relationships between imaginative thought and imaginative creation (Jenkins 329).

Irene is almost struck dumb during this first encounter: she tells Curdie “I want to talk to you . . . but it’s so awkward!” (MacDonald, “Princess” 38). In this unfamiliar setting, under cover of darkness she is unsure of herself and loses the power of expression. Just as language becomes an inadequate medium to in which to articulate faith, it fails in a similar fashion here as the children strive to connect with one another. It is significant then that the contact they experience is initially physical. Irene clasps Curdie’s hand and he continues to sing as though Irene’s presence lends his imagination strength. Later in the scene as the goblin presence becomes more oppressive Curdie “turn[s] back laughing” (MacDonald, “Princess” 41) and takes Irene’s hand again. The act of holding hands allows a kind of transfer of faith between the children: Curdie knows his prayers or songs and his knowledge of the landscape will enable him to see the princess safely home. Irene grasps his hand tightly but says nothing. Her silence here is indicative of the different imaginative powers the children possess: while Curdie will not be able to see her grandmother when she leads him to her, he can use his imaginative vision to create poetry and music, something Irene cannot do. Curdie can speak with his imagination whereas Irene can see with hers. It is only when she finds herself on a familiar part of the road that Irene finds herself “able to speak again” (MacDonald, “Princess” 41).

Later in the text Irene’s learning how to behave like a princess is linked to her learning how to negotiate the idea of her faith in a world prone to disbelief, in a world where her silence can sometimes speak louder than her words. MacDonald uses the fairy tale image of a princess in distress to address the twin concerns of childlike belief and visionary imagination.

Silence again becomes a kind of refuge or defence for her: she will not lie to Lootie, nor will she open herself to accusations of lying. But even then, Lootie begins to question the sanctity of that silence until Irene is forced to ask her whether it is “just as bad to say nothing at all as to tell stories?” (MacDonald 195). For a brief yet crucial moment within the text silence and lies are equated when really the former is an expression of faith and the latter are actually true accounts of imaginative visions.

When Irene declares that “I will not speak to you again until you are sorry” (MacDonald, “Princess” 195) she claims a power and an agency for herself which are intimately connected to the growth of her faith. Her childhood here is transformed from a privileged, secluded one to one imbued

with the creative potential of her imagination. Irene perceives that language is inadequate when it comes to the task of articulating her belief in her grandmother's existence and her faith in her spiritual power. She knows that the more "she went on to tell [Lootie] the less she would believe her" (MacDonald, "Princess" 196). Faith then cannot be communicated through language within the text but only through shared experiences, between imaginations which are open and receptive. Language in many ways becomes obsolete as time and again Irene is confronted with things that she will not say and things she cannot say.

But from the moment Irene and Curdie meet, though they are physically separated by the different areas of the landscape they inhabit and indeed by their respective abilities to see things imaginatively, the children are constantly thinking about each other (Hein 53). Within their relationship, physical contact negates the need for language and laughter and song become an expression of faith. The children's relationship becomes a symbol of the transformative power of faith and imagination within the text's larger discourse. This idea of connection, both physical and imaginative stays with the children as the text progresses. When Irene reconnects with Curdie in the mine their initial bond becomes infused with the power of the faith Irene has relied on in her journey. They follow the thread out together and so become bound together by it. They find each other through their connection.

On the morning of the rescue, Irene wakes in a fright and is horribly aware of the presence of goblin creatures in her room. MacDonald's narrator tells us that "the moment she came to herself" (MacDonald, "Princess" 150) she remembers something she has not thought of since her grandmother told her: what to do when she is frightened. Faith, belief and trust have become a fundamental aspect of the way in which Irene sees the world and negotiates the events which occur within it.

The fact that she wonders if she will ever get back home is a precursor to the despair and doubt she will experience when the thread seems to lead her into solid rock. It is here that she feels "for one terrible moment" (MacDonald, "Princess" 155) that her grandmother has forsaken her. But the narrator's choice of words is significant here: Irene *feels* that she has been forsaken. She does not *believe* that she has been forsaken. It is not her imaginative vision which fails her here but her emotional strength. In this despair she questions the reality of the situation she finds herself in: it is this questioning which confirms to her that it is "no dream" (MacDonald, "Princess" 155). She begins to cry: just as Curdie's laughter is an expression of the power of the imagination and of faith within the text so Irene's crying is an expression of frustration and doubt. As her despair deepens so too does the intensity of her emotional outbursts. Significantly, as if to confirm the correlation between laughter and tears as expressions of faith and despair

respectively, the moment she realises what the thread is asking of her, the princess almost laughs at herself, certain once more that “her grandmother’s thread could not have brought her there just to leave her there” (MacDonald, “Princess” 157).

Irene is emotionally as well as imaginatively perceptive: she feels “all the time” (MacDonald, “Princess” 170) during the rescue that Curdie does not believe what she is telling him. Curdie persists in his disbelief just as Irene persists in her faith. When he tells her that he does not see anything she declares that he “must believe without seeing” (MacDonald, “Princess” 170) for according to her he cannot deny that the thread he cannot see and does not believe in has led them out of the mountain. In this moment Irene demands something of Curdie that has not actually been demanded of her: absolute, unquestioning faith, faith without imaginative vision. She has seen her grandmother, indeed she has seen her spinning the thread: she believes because she has seen. As Curdie tells her that he cannot deny that she led him out of the mountain, language becomes the perfect vehicle for the expression of disbelief within the text.

As Irene leads Curdie to the little tower stair she grows “happier and happier” (MacDonald, “Princess” 173) as she ascends. She is moving towards a realm that she has previously only shared with her grandmother but her decision to invite Curdie up into the tower attic is a move towards widening this circle of spiritual experience. Just as she showed him the way up and out of the mines he thought he knew so well, here again she is leading him upwards through an unknown space.

And yet while Irene is arguably the most faithful character in the text, the one who exhibits the most gifted and visionary imagination, even she has her moments of doubt which MacDonald’s narrator does not hesitate in relating. There is no answer at her grandmother’s door “and once more her heart [sinks] within her, but only for a Moment” (MacDonald, “Princess” 173). The depth of Irene’s faith does not shield her from the experience of doubt.

As her grandmother welcomes her in and takes her on her knee in a gesture of maternal gentleness, Irene tells her that Curdie simply would not believe what she had told him and so she has brought him to the tower. We realise then that this is an attempt—and a perfectly understandable one—on Irene’s part to *prove* to Curdie that her grandmother exists. Previously, with Lootie, Irene simply accepted her nurse’s inability to believe her: with Curdie it is as though she senses within him the potential for belief.

What follows is a discussion between Irene and her grandmother on the nature of belief and the necessity of faith to which Curdie is a silent and bewildered bystander. Irene complains that it “wasn’t very good of him not to believe me when I was telling the truth” (MacDonald, “Princess” 174).

Here again the idea that Curdie is *capable* of believing what he is being told is alluded to. But Grandmother gently tells Irene that people “must believe what they can” (MacDonald, “Princess” 174) and that people such as Irene who can believe—and therefore see—more must not judge them for it. Irene agrees but she is still under the assumption that Curdie will “believe now” (MacDonald, “Princess” 174). Her grandmother is not so sure—indeed she is certain Curdie will not believe what he sees because he cannot in fact see her at all. It is implied later in the scene that this is a deliberate choice on her part, that she can choose whether or not to reveal herself according to the imaginative ability of the person in her presence. The lady points out that Irene herself might not have believed it all had she not seen some of it.

Irene asks Curdie “then what do you see?” (MacDonald, “Princess” 175) again drawing attention to the idea of vision and perception: they are both looking at the same reality in different ways, from different perspectives. Irene realises “that for her not to believe him was at least as bad as for him not to believe her” (MacDonald, “Princess” 175): she tries here to engage with him on the imaginative level that he has attained, to understand why he cannot see what she sees.

Curdie then prepares to leave, to negotiate the way down the stairs by himself: on her first visit Irene’s grandmother accompanied her to the top of the stairs as though to be sure that she found the way and her way back to the house proper safely. Later in the chapter Irene laments that she did not accompany him as she “brought him into the house, [she] ought to have seen him safe on his way home” (MacDonald, “Princess” 181) This idea of seeing to be sure of something, to be certain that something has occurred, to be believe one’s own eyes is one that runs throughout the text and is intimately linked to the experience of faith.

The moment when Curdie declares that he does not expect anyone except his mother and father to believe him recalls Lottie’s assumption about princesses and make-believe from earlier in the text. His parents will believe him because they know him, because they know he “wouldn’t tell a story” (MacDonald, “Princess” 175). Faith here is linked to knowledge, not only to self-knowledge but to the idea of others knowing one’s character, knowing what one is normally capable of. Belief is something that must be earned.

As Irene talks more and more with her grandmother in Curdie’s absence, faith is revealed as the act of understanding—or at the very least attempting to understand—other people; the act, not only of seeing with one’s own imagination but of seeing through the eyes of others.

Seeing with the imagination becomes a childlike act, an envisioning and perceiving of diverse realities that the children seem capable of engaging in better than any adult in the text. Having said that characters such as Irene’s father and Curdie’s parents are the obvious exceptions but the reason why

they are exceptions is crucial: they themselves still understand the essence of childhood and indeed are intensely and emotionally connected to the children and the power of their imaginations. Clearly in the discourse MacDonald establishes, imagination is necessary for faith to flourish. Is faith then an act of the imagination? Is faith so intimately and fundamentally linked to the power of the imaginative process because children by virtue of their relative innocence have greater access to that creative power?

The idea that Irene initially brings Curdie to see her grandmother because she truly believes that he will see her too is crucial to the discussion of the connection between faith and childhood MacDonald engages in. Irene believes that Curdie, a child like herself, is someone to be confided in, someone to be trusted. She has faith in him and in his ability to see clearly, to see imaginatively. She does not have the same kind of faith in Lottie or any of the other adults in the household. Curdie's imaginative failure to see her grandmother is the first instance in the text of Irene's faith being betrayed. While this moment when Curdie flatly denies the existence of the princess's grandmother may seem like a moment of intense vulnerability for the lady, it in fact illuminates "the limitations of [Curdie's] vision, not the limitations of her reality" (Robb 22). For MacDonald is not so much concerned with the nature of reality or whether we can inhabit different kinds or moments of reality but rather that we can perceive that reality in different ways and project our own assumptions and expectations onto it. It is our vision which changes, not the reality which we see. This relates to his ideas of how the fairytale and the sonata can be interpreted: the story or rather the fairy story remains the same. It is the meaning we glean from it which changes.

Irene's faith thus involves "transcending a dominating vision of reality" (Adair Rigsbee 11) thereby leading to the discovery of new spiritual depths to that reality, embodied by the presence of her grandmother. She opens herself up to the experience of "spiritual realities" (Adair Rigsbee 11). Irene remains steadfast: she keeps her faith. Even in the face of Curdie's disbelief and Lottie's inability to understand, she does not waver.

Imagination within the text facilitates the "gradual revelation of the true nature of Things" (Manlove 13). Irene's grandmother masks to a certain degree her true nature, especially in her dealings with Curdie. She reveals herself or as much of her true self as the children's faith can encompass as the text progresses. Similarly, Curdie and Irene do not change so much as realise their full potential by gaining access to the creative possibilities of their imaginations.

During one of her journeys into the upward reaches of the house, Irene creates a strange kind of reality for herself. She seems perfectly prepared to believe that she is awake but reassures herself that if she should lose her way she will wake and find herself in her own bed. She reasons

that if her grandmother is a dream “than I am the likelier to find her if I am dreaming” (MacDonald, “Princess” 85). By applying this logic to her situation she widens her perception and begins to engage imaginatively with the idea of her grandmother’s existence. Even if she is a dream, Irene still wishes to see her again.

In the attic, Irene questions her grandmother about her previous failed attempt to find the tower room. The old lady replies simply and directly that she did not want to be found. She tells Irene that she would have found her again sooner if she had not come to think she was a dream. She does not imply that Irene came to *believe* she was a dream, merely that she came to *think* she was. Once again the distinction between faith and thought is implicitly made.

Grandmother tells the princess that even if Lottie were to see her sitting spinning she would not believe her eyes: more than this she says she simply would not be able to. Lottie’s limited imaginative capacity would interfere with her true vision. Vision alone is not enough: one must be able to believe one’s own eyes. Comparing her conduct to Lottie’s, Irene suddenly feels very much ashamed of herself but her grandmother points out that she has come to her again, something Lottie would not have done in her place. Irene’s actions seem motivated by a kind of subconscious faith.

During another visit, though her grandmother’s voice beckons her into the room when she opens the door Irene finds only darkness and silence: her grandmother is not spinning. Does this mean then that time has somehow been suspended? Irene is frightened again, thinking that “although the room was there, the old lady might be a dream after all” (MacDonald, “Princess” 86). Her faith is constantly being shaken throughout the text: these moments of despair, while over in a flash are momentous in their impact. In this moment the darkness and the silence are tantamount to an abandonment. Irene’s fear is all the deeper as it recalls her earlier unease about the empty rooms she was passing in the corridor.

The blue walls and their silver stars challenge her perception of reality for a moment and she fancies that she is actually looking at “the sky which she had left outside” (MacDonald, “Princess” 110). Having gazed at the lamp in the tower room, Irene finds that the walls have vanished as though a veil has been lifted from her imaginative vision. It is as if she is looking out on the “dark cloudy night” (MacDonald, “Princess” 110). A moment later the clouds have parted “or rather vanished like the wall” (MacDonald, “Princess” 116) and she looks straight into the “starry herds, flashing gloriously in the dark blue” (MacDonald, “Princess” 116). It is her first proper glimpse of the stars and of the penetrating power of her imaginative vision: the power to see through to the true reality of things. This vision is “a gift born with [her]” (MacDonald, “Princess” 116) and one that must be cultivated throughout the

text.

Before she goes, the old lady tells Irene that she “must just be silent” (MacDonald, “Princess” 115) if Lottie should ask her any questions about where she has been and what she has seen. Here, by implicit direction from the old lady, silence becomes an affirmation of faith within the text.

Irene will not forget her grandmother but she will perhaps begin to question the nature of her memories, to wonder whether she is “anywhere... anything but a dream” (MacDonald, “Princess” 87). Her grandmother tells her that she will do her best to ensure that Irene keeps her promise but that ultimately “it will rest with yourself, after all” (MacDonald, “Princess” 91). Irene’s faith here can be seen as a kind of empowerment: it is her belief which will draw her back. Faith and memory are linked within the text: but memory alone is not enough, as Irene’s grandmother tells or even warns her. Memory is fallible and vulnerable to distrust, to disbelief. Irene’s memories of her grandmother and her time in the tower with her can be interpreted as dreams or dream visions: her faith in her grandmother grows as the events of the narrative unfold and her spiritual power within the text is made manifest.

The danger then is not that Irene will forget what she has seen and experienced but that she will begin to doubt the reality of the vision and the spiritual context of the experience in the more mundane or even profane world of her daily existence.

Tolkien speaks of recovery as “a re-gaining . . . of a clear view” (Tolkien 53) or a true vision such as Irene possesses. Imagination in *The Princess and the Goblin* involves a gaining of a “clear view” (Tolkien 53) a kind of growth into faith which the children experience as the text progresses. Tolkien does not risk talking about “seeing things as they are” (Tolkien 53) which MacDonald argues is a limited way of engaging with the reality around us but rather “seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them” (Tolkien 53). He speaks here, as MacDonald does of seeing things imaginatively, of gaining a clear view for oneself through to one’s faith.

By seeing “things apart from ourselves” (Tolkien 44) we are acknowledging and simultaneously engaging with that distance which MacDonald speaks of that must necessarily exist between us and the object or objects of our faith. It is that distance which prompts our faith to be proactive and which commands the creative powers of our imaginations.

Tolkien argues in *Tree and Leaf* that the term “Imagination” (Tolkien 44) has been misapplied to the “power of giving to ideal creations the inner consistency of reality” (Tolkien 45). Imagination then is not only an imaginative process: it does not only deal with the creation of imaginary and fantastical images or symbols which have no basis in reality. Instead, it is part of a larger process of *perception*, of being able to see clearly, to see truthfully and to distinguish between and recognize the meaning in the

different ways reality is manifested before us. This is arguably the function of the imaginative process in *The Princess and the Goblin*. We can argue that spaces like the mines and Grandmother's tower function symbolically within the text—because they do—but it is the manner in which Irene—and eventually Curdie—perceives these spaces that is crucial. They perceive them imaginatively and by association, faithfully. Faith can only be achieved when one sees truly or sees with the imagination. It is the “perception of the image [and] the grasp of its implications” (Tolkien 44) which both MacDonald and Tolkien are interested in and which the former relies upon within the symbolic discourse he engages in.

Tolkien also argues that the human man is capable of “forming mental images of things not actually present” (Tolkien 44). Within the context of *The Princess and the Goblin* this statement could be used to interpret Irene's experiences as dreams or as dreamlike moments: that she is dreaming of things which are not actually there. But we can also connect Tolkien's idea to one of MacDonald's symbols of imagination. Every creative process can be seen as lighting a lamp. The light is the imagination; the lamp is the image which is created. This lamp, once lit, illuminates the form which is already present, the form of God's divine imagination. By engaging with her grandmother in the tower, Irene is lighting such a lamp. Her imaginative interpretations of the space in which she finds herself and the events which occur there illuminate the physical form of the tower from within. They illuminate the form which her Grandmother's presence has created. When Irene starts to imagine within the larger form of her Grandmother's imagination she is engaging in a kind of faithful discourse with her, in much the same way that Curdie engages in a discourse of faith with his mother.

Indeed many of Mrs Petersons' actions and thoughts mirror those of Irene's grandmother. She gives Curdie a ball of string similar to the thread Irene receives and tells him to use it to “manage [his] return” (MacDonald, “Princess” 94) out of the mines. She anchors him in the domestic reality he must venture out from: she provides a way back. Curdie is amazed at her ability to untangle the string when he presents it to her having used to trace his paths through the mountain: this image of untangling the string resonates throughout MacDonald's symbolic discourse as a representation of the complexity of faith and childhood experience within the text. She tells him that she follows the thread “just as you do in the mine” (MacDonald, “Princess” 95). Following the thread, no matter how tangled or complex the path becomes a measure of faith in the narrative.

MacDonald himself states that “to hunt for symbols in a fairy tale is absolutely fatal” (MacDonald, “Princess” 71). But in *The Princess and the Goblin* there is no need for such a hunt: his language, his landscapes and even his characters are engaged in a symbolic discourse that structures the

text and the events which occur within the narrative. Symbols such as the staircase, the thread and even Irene and Curdie's own status as children help them come to terms with and understand their "inner experiences" (Raepér 313). For *The Princess and the Goblin* is about the relationship between inner and outer reality, between spiritual, imaginative experience and physical, dynamic experience. It is in the interaction between the two that faith finds its most potent reality. Because faith is not simply arrived at or achieved within the text: it is a constantly changing concept that both Irene and Curdie struggle to catch hold of and engage with, something Irene's tears testify to. Faith grows and changes as the children do. The text itself is not an attempt by MacDonald to define the idea of faith but rather an exploration of it as something to be aspired to. We are "inward beings" (Kroner 69) though our bodies belong to and interact with the external world: faith as an internal state of mind and belief must be applied to the outer reality the children find themselves in.

In the text Curdie's mother says that "it all depends on what your inside house is like" (MacDonald 226). GK Chesterton echoes her sentiments when he talks about MacDonald's work in the context of the fairy tale: it is "the inside of the ordinary story and not the outside" (Chesterton 11). The inner reality of *The Princess and the Goblin* is a fairy tale about faith, a fairy tale about two children who learn the nature of that faith by exploring the power of their imagination: by seeing with their imagination.

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