

George MacDonald and the Fairy Tales of Francis Paget and Frances Browne

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Much energy has been given to tracing George MacDonald's possible indebtednesses to German and English Romantic sources and to such earlier writers as Dante, Spenser, Milton or Blake, but little appears to have been written on what he may owe to the doubtless humbler tradition of invented children's fantasy as it appeared in England in the 1840s and 1850s. Yet it is often from contemporary writers that authors may take much of their inspiration. Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring* (1855) is probably indebted to the pantomimes of J. R. Planché; C. S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* (1936) recalls Hugh Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle* in the Moon books of 1929 and 1933 as much as H. G. Wells; and T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* and other Arthurian books (1938-41) find almost as much anticipation in John Masefield's *The Midnight Folk* (1927) as in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (c. 1470). Aside from the Grimms and Anderson, whose influence on MacDonald is apparent, the stories of two other authors stand out—Francis E. Paget's *The Hope of the Katzekopfs: or The Sorrows of Selfishness* (1844) and Frances Browne's *Granny's Wonderful Chair, and its Tales of Fairy Times* (1856).

It is quite likely that *The Hope of the Katzekopfs* provided the ground plot for MacDonald's *The Wise Woman: A Double Story* (1875). Paget's story is of a pampered little, prince called Eigenwillig (Self-will), only son of King Katzekopf and the aptly named Queen Ninnilinda, whose behaviour grows so gross that he even insults his fairy godmother Abracadabra. She determines to reform him, and after a range of comic physical tortures, including his being pulled into a string through a royal keyhole and then rolled up and kicked about as a football, leaves him in Fairy Land to the tender mercies of the parasitic dwarf Selbst (Self) and the increasingly attractive ideas of an old man called Discipline.

MacDonald's *The Wise Woman* has a similar situation, only he uses two spoiled girls, one a princess and the other a shepherd's daughter, who are removed by an old woman who doubles as Fairy Abracadabra and Discipline. The girls, different in their moral natures, are taken to a magic cottage on a heath and continually confronted with their refractory selves—the shepherd's

girl Agnes directly, in a strange sphere—but only Princess Rosamond gradually improves and controls herself. Both are returned at the end to their parents, who are seen as in need of reform themselves; this, too, is the way Paget’s story ends, but he sees their deaths and Eigenwillig’s succession as the only answer. **[end of page 17]**

Apart from the pattern of their narratives, what the two stories share is an analysis of wicked behaviour in terms of a root cause: love of self. “The one principle of hell,” MacDonald wrote, “is—‘I am my own’” (*U.S.* 495). Much fantasy of the 1840s and 1850s from Browning’s “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” (1842) to Thackeray’s *The Rose and the Ring* (1855),¹ attacked selfishness in the form of materialism, but Paget was the first to trace wickedness to an almost metaphysical absolute. In doing so it is more than likely that his work also influenced MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (1858), which is an indictment of love of self: Anodos acquires an evil shadow of himself which he must overcome, just as Eigenwillig must change to lessen the burden of Selbst. In both writers, Fairy Land is the inner landscape: Paget’s Eigenwillig finds it underground, and Anodos enters it when the solid world about him dissolves.

The idea of sending naughty children to a reformatory in fairy tale appears again in Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* (1863); Annie and E. Keary’s “Little Wanderlin” and “Mrs Calkill’s Wonderful House”—in *Little Wanderlin and Other Fairy Tales* (1865)—; Juliana Horatia Ewing’s “Amelia and the Dwarfs”—in *The Brownies, and Other Tales* (1870)—; Christina Rossetti’s *Speaking Likenesses* (1874); and Alice Corkran’s *Down the Snow Stairs* (1877). Most of these describe punishments that gradually drive out childish wickedness, but they do not portray the process of moral change itself, which is what concerns both Paget and MacDonald. Although some of the dreadful inverse imagery in Rossetti’s *Speaking Likenesses* may have seeped into *The Wise Woman*.

While MacDonald’s debt to the narrative of Paget’s *The Hope of the Katzekopfs* seems evident, what is also revealing is the way he differently shapes his own account. Paget, for instance, lingers long on Eigenwillig’s bad behaviour as a child at court: it is not till more than half-way through a long story that he is removed to Fairy Land. MacDonald, however, gives only one short chapter each to Rosamond’s and Agnes’ lives at home before the wise woman takes them away to her cottage. He is less concerned to show us the reign of evil than to portray the struggle between good and evil. Paget is less complex and more serial in his approach, and gets most of the evil

acts out of the way by the time Eigenwillig is removed, by which point we feel he can only be improved. There is back-sliding at the allegorical level when Eigenwillig submits to Selbst, but Selbst is so much viewed as preying on and tricking Eigenwillig that it is made hard for us to see Eigenwillig as giving way to something in himself. His moral evolution after his initial choice of Selbst is quite steady, and he develops an increasing loathing for his burden and a corresponding readiness to accept Discipline. In short, the refractory child has grown into a responsible adult ready for society, in more or less a straight line of evolution. At the end he has become a model king, replacing his failed father as Katzekopf the Good. [18]

But MacDonald is not concerned with making a model ruler: he is much more interested in the reform process itself, and with how far it may be successful at all. His *Double Story* invites us to compare the progress of Rosamond and Agnes. He upsets fairy-tale expectations by having the Wise Woman eventually succeed with the princess, where she fails, for the time, with the shepherd's daughter. But Rosamond's recovery has nothing to do with her being a princess, but with the kind of self-will she has, which is one that is in continual angry collision with a world that does not always agree with her wishes and moods. Agnes, by contrast, is quite prepared to deal with an obstructive world, but only to turn it to her own self-conceited purpose: she is a hypocrite, and evil is much further inside her. What MacDonald achieves in the picture of the two girls is a subtle psychological analysis that embodies two poles of evil.

Paget's story, while often morally penetrating, is largely a pattern of its closing maxims, "*Learn to live hardly; Deny yourself in things lawful; Love not comfort; Think of others first, and of yourself last.*" MacDonald's Anodos may struggle to similar lessons in *Phantastes*: "I learned that he that will be a hero, will barely be a man; that he that will be nothing but a doer of his work, is sure of his manhood" (289), but we do not often find such clear maxims in *The Wise Woman*. Since the two girls are morally different, their courses of improvement and the lessons they must learn are tailored to each, and quite individual. Where Rosamond, for example, is put in the Wise Woman's Chamber of Moods, Agnes is put in the Sphere of Self. And MacDonald is as much concerned to analyse behaviour as to teach directly:

Rosamond, as she sat warming herself by the glow of the peat fire, turning over in her mind all that had passed, and feeling how pleasant the change in her feelings was, began by degrees to think how very good she had grown, and how very good she

was to have grown good, and how extremely good she must always have been that she was able to grow so very good as she now felt she had grown; and she became so absorbed in her self-admiration as never to notice either that the fire was dying, or that a heap of fir cones lay in a corner near it. (29)

The syntax here imitates the process of sinking into complacency.

Paget's story is suggestive in its use of symbolism. When Eigenwillig, however comically, melts through the keyhole and is temporarily reconstituted as a football, this process of bodily reformation foreshadows what will also be necessary with his spirit. When he is dropped from a height by fairy Abracadabra into Fairy Land, he finds that he goes straight through the ground to a subterranean country of mocking elves, where he must serve his time helping them in fetching, carrying, digging, sweeping and cleaning before he [19] moves on to Selbst in another part of that underground country. This shows him how working people live, but it also symbolises a descent into the darkness of himself which he must clean and renew. The more Eigenwillig works at his tasks for the elves, the easier they become: but then he meets in Selbst a creature whose burden becomes greater with time, and whose service is intolerable. The section on Eigenwillig's reform thus forms a suggestive series of patterns.

MacDonald quite possibly used the idea of mocking underground elves in chapter 17 of *Phantastes* (though he himself cites the German "Kobolds"); and, as seen, the picture of Selbst may well have gone into that of Anodos' burdensome shadow. And he uses the idea of a magic subterranean world, symbolising the unconscious, in *The Princess and the Goblin* and *Lilith*, though in *The Wise Woman* the journey is more a horizontal one, an extension of what one is to a point of loathing, from poisoned home to the lonely "cottage of your heart" (107). Like Eigenwillig, however, Agnes and Rosamond have to fetch, carry and clean, and then confront themselves; and, parallel to his fall into his inner darkness, their abductions take them from the civil and apparently ordered regions of the self to the wild (symbolised by wolves) and the unpredictable.

Paget's Fairy Abracadabra, however, is a moral trainer, where the Wise Woman is that and rather more. In a sense Fairy Abracadabra and the punishments to which she submits Eigenwillig are an allegory of the workings of his conscience, but the Wise Woman is more objective, suggestive of grace itself. MacDonald's story is finally rooted in the mystical: it is possible even to view the Wise Woman as an angel. She is like Princess

Irene's great-great-grandmother in the *Curdie* books, neither old nor young, but eternal, "for hers was the old age of everlasting youth" (125), and she is as real in the aspect she at one point takes of a "goddess-child" as in that of an old cloaked woman. When she confronts Rosamond's parents at the end: "She threw her cloak open. It fell to the ground, and the radiance that flashed from her robe of snowy whiteness, from her face of awful beauty, and from her eyes that shone like pools of sunlight, smote them blind" (139).² By contrast, the changing dress and appearance of Fairy Abracadabra at the end of *The Hope of the Katzekopfs*, from a flame-coloured petticoat to one of the palest primrose, and from haggard and wrinkled old woman to dazzling youth, reflects rather the inner change in the moral nature of Eigenwillig.

MacDonald may owe much to Paget's book in *The Wise Woman* and *Phantastes*, but he seems indebted throughout his fantasy to Frances Browne's neglected nursery classic, *Granny's Wonderful Chair*, which first appeared in 1856. This book is the first truly Christian Victorian fantasy, being both mystical and moral, and shadowing divine reality through folk- and fairy-tale symbolism; and two years later it was followed by MacDonald's *Phantastes*, which works by the [20] same light.³ (None of the German Romantic writers to whom MacDonald was indebted wrote such Christian fantasy—and in England we have only Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" of 1798 before we must look right back to Bunyan and Milton.)

It is not clear whether MacDonald met the blind Donegal authoress of *Granny's Wonderful Chair*, who lived and wrote in London from 1852 till her death in 1879. The seventh child of twelve, Browne may have been blind, but her experience of Ireland and its myths made her a visionary. In London she wrote a number of novels, but her one fantasy for children is the work for which she is remembered. The book was forgotten for thirty years until Frances Hodgson Burnett, unable to find a copy, wrote out what she recalled of it; the true text was republished in 1891 and since then has been mainly in print (in contrast to *The Hope of the Katzekopfs*, which has never been republished since its sixth edition of 1885). Accounts of children's literature tend to pass by *Granny's Wonderful Chair* with benign nods, essays on it are not to be found. Yet it is arguably one of the great works of Victorian fantasy, which the magnificence of *The Rose and the Ring*, *The Water-Babies* and the *Alice* books has concealed.

Browne's story describes a girl called Snowflower who lives with her grandmother in a cottage beside a forest. One day her grandmother goes on a long visit to her aunt in the north country, and leaves Snowflower in

charge. After a while the child sets out herself, following her grandmother's path in a magic travelling chair, and eventually happens upon a king's great birthday feast for his daughter. Snowflower's chair can tell stories, and for the seven days of the feast the court hears seven different fairy tales of the human spirit, after which the melancholy King Winwealth is changed. It turns out that the stories told by the chair were actually told by a magic bird hidden in the cushion; and that this bird, which flies out drawing the greedy queen and princess after it, is in fact Winwealth's long-lost brother Wisewit who was lost in the forest and enchanted by the evil witch Fortunetta.

Several features in *Granny's Wonderful Chair* immediately suggest MacDonald. Snowflower's fourth tale, "The Story of Fairyfoot," describes a race with big feet and unpleasant tempers, to whose king and queen a son is born with "small," or what we would call well-proportioned feet: this is paralleled in the big-footed race of malicious goblins beneath the house in *The Princess and the Goblin*, goblins who by contrast wish to marry their prince to a normal-footed human (Irene) rather than cast one out. The end of *Granny's Wonderful Chair*, when queen Wantall and princess Greedalind run out of the palace and into a mine to look for gold, suggests the end of *The Princess and Curdie*, where [21] the king mines for the gold on which Gwyntystorm is founded until the city collapses in a manner reminiscent of Babylon in Revelations 18.

Then there is the marginal setting of moors, forests and cottages with fairies and enchanters, punctuated by towns, castles and royal courts: doubtless MacDonald could have got some of these from the Grimms or his own Aberdeenshire childhood, but there is a peculiar moral atmosphere in them. To the idea of the fairy godmother as seen in Paget, Browne adds the more intimate notion of the fairy grandmother, part of the family, a figure to be used in MacDonald's *Phantastes* and the *Curdie* books. Images of old women spinning are seen in both Browne and MacDonald: Browne has Dame Frostyface, Snowflower's grandmother, and the Night Spinners and Dame Dreary of "The Story of Merryminde"; MacDonald, of course, has Irene's great-great-grandmother in both *Curdie* books.

Granny's Wonderful Chair has a king learn from the stories of a peasant girl, and mixes tales of cobblers, shepherds and fishermen among those of kings and dukes. So too MacDonald's Irene learns from the miner Curdie (and he from her); Princess Rosamond and the shepherd's daughter Agnes change homes in *The Wise Woman*; and little Diamond the cab-driver's son in *At the Back of the North Wind* is the friend of the great

lady North Wind. Some of this may come from Anderson's fairy tales (translated in 1846), but few of these are about great life, and most put forward something of a socialist outlook: Browne and MacDonald stand out in the way they have the great and the lowly interrelate. Where Paget and Thackeray, for instance, are concerned in their fantasies with the training of kings, Browne and MacDonald are more interested in the openness and generosity of heart that makes an harmonious kingdom. This mixing of high and low in their fantasy makes them distinctive in their time: only Kingsley with chimney-sweep Tom in *The Water-Babies* is at all like them.

Most of all, both Browne and MacDonald make the child central to their fantasy. Nearly all children's fantasies before *Granny's Wonderful Chair* had young men or adults as protagonists—in contrast to the less “dangerously” imaginative story of real life, where child protagonists were a *sin qua non*. Browne gives us a child who transforms a court, and of whose seven stories to the court, four contain child heroes or heroines and all put forward an ideal of childlike behaviour. There are many fantasies of the 1860s and 1870s, from *Alice* to Mrs M. L. Molesworth's *The Cuckoo Clock* (1877) which have children as their central characters without taking a Romantic-religious view of childhood. Equally, MacDonald wrote several fantasies with adult protagonists—*Phantastes*, *The Princess and Curdie* and *Lilith*—without at all forfeiting his ideal of childlikeness: for his adults have to learn the vision of childhood, that of the imagination. MacDonald said that he wrote “for the childlike, whether of [22] five, or fifty, or seventy-five.” This in no way makes him a sentimentalist about children, as *The Wise Woman* shows.

Browne and MacDonald see adults as often cutting themselves off from natural behaviour, from being in harmony with life. Several of Browne's stories contain desertions or rejections of children by parents and relatives. Her three tales involving adult protagonists all contain moral divisions—Scrub and Spare the cobblers in “The Christmas Cuckoo,” Clutch and Kind the shepherds in “The Greedy Shepherd” and the two fishermen in “Sour and Civil.” It is interesting that these cover the three areas of work—town, country and sea—and that the last story, “The Story of Merry-mind,” has a child save a society analogous to the Victorian one from the drudgery of work. There is that in the rural-bred Browne that sees civilisation as a misfortune, and likens its growth to a loss of childhood. MacDonald would not go this far.

Both writers however value the old people. In Browne we have the

beautiful centenarian Lady Greensleeves of “The Lords of the White and Grey Castles” who helps the lost children find their fathers; the strange old man of “The Greedy Shepherd” who brings Clutch to his moral senses; the hundred-year-old Robin Goodfellow who befriends Fairyfoot; and the old beggar-woman who rewards Childe Charity for her kindness. And round the stories we have the tale of old Dame Frostyface and her grand-daughter Snowflower, reunited and ennobled at the end. MacDonald’s fantasy is full of great old ladies such as she of “The Golden Key,” or North Wind, or the Wise Woman; or grandmothers, such as Anodos’ in *Phantastes*, or Irene’s in the *Curdie* books. Such figures have wisdom, and their age is often married to youthfulness of both spirit and appearance.

Browne’s characters and those of MacDonald’s fantasy share another feature: they relate to one another, or travel in pairs. All previous English children’s fantasy dealt with the singular—Elizabeth Sinclair’s lazy child No-book in the fairy story “Uncle David’s Nonsensical Story of Giants and Fairies” in her *Holiday House* (1839), Ruskin’s Gluck, Dickens’ Scrooge, Paget’s Eigenwillig, Mark Lemon’s Jacob Pont in *The Enchanted Doll* (1849), the individual children in the stories in Margaret Gatty’s *The Fairy Godmothers* (1851), Thackeray’s Giglio. And this continues, in Kingsley’s Tom, Carroll’s Alice, and Lang’s *Prince Prigio* (1889), until Edith Nesbit’s magic books very decidedly change it with groups of child-protagonists. Browne’s book has the pairs of Scrub and Spare, Clutch and Kind, Sour and Civil; all but the last learning to live better together. She also has the children Loveleaves and Woodwender in “The Lords of the White and Grey Castles” and Fairyfoot and Maybloom in “Fairyfoot.” Snowflower, Childe Charity and Merry-mind are at first on their own, but they gradually make or find their own society. As for MacDonald, we have the prince [23] and princess in “The Light Princess” and “Little Daylight,” Tricksey-Wee and Buffy-Bob in “The Giant’s Heart,” Alice and Richard in “Cross Purposes,” Mossy and Tangle in “The Golden Key,” Photogen and Nycteris, in “The Day Boy and the Night Girl,” Diamond and Nanny in *At the Back of the North Wind*, Irene and Curdie in the *Curdie* books and (by comparison) Rosamond and Agnes in *The Wise Woman*.

Both Browne and MacDonald show a new preference for the feminine in their fantasy. No writer of children’s fantasy in the 1840s had put a girl at the centre, and before 1856 only Dianah Mulock (later a friend of MacDonald’s) did so in her *Alice Learmont* (1852), where a baby girl is stolen by the fairies and won back through her mother’s love. The central

figure in *Granny's Wonderful Chair* is the little girl Snowflower. Her stories are as much about boys as girls, though they do better with female help—Woodwender, Fairyfoot, Civil and Merrymind succeed only with the aid of Loveleaves and Greensleeves, Maybloom, Faith Feignless, and the Night Spinners. It is usually men who go wrong—Scrub, who chooses gold as the Christmas Cuckoo's annual gift to him; the Lords of the White and Grey Castles who leave their children to an uncertain fate; Clutch, who over-shears his sheep and thus loses them; the unloving uncle in "Childe Charity"; and the unfriendly Sour. There are evil women, particularly King Winwealth's queen Wantall and daughter Greedalind: but Winwealth is seen as to blame in having made a bad choice in the absence of Wisewit.

The values of *Granny's Wonderful Chair* can also be called feminine (if not in the modern sense) in that they embody a wise passivity and patience and the absence of an impulse to control or to seize things, whereas most other children's fantasy of the time puts emphasis on the active prosecution of virtue. Given the chance, Spare prefers gladness of heart to advancement, Kind goes with the grain of nature in only moderately shearing his sheep, and Childe Charity is endlessly generous to a beggar woman without thought of thanks. Directions and gains come unsought: the children of the two lords do not set out to find their fathers, but are told where to go: Fairyfoot does nothing to alter his condition until he is invited; Civil only accidentally happens on the place where the mer-king had said he would be rewarded for his kindness; Merrymind finds the Night Spinners by chance, and unexpectedly transforms Dame Dreary's world through his playing. As for Snowflower, teller of these tales, she sets out to follow her aunt but digresses to Winwealth's palace, and has no thought of the elevation she finally receives.

So, too, MacDonald's Anodos and Vane go wrong whenever they assert themselves or seek to possess things: Anodos meets his Shadow because of this, and his pursuit of the White Lady ends in his humiliation; Vane chooses his own way in opposition to Mr Raven/Adam's injunction to him to lie down and sleep; [24] and comes to grief with Lilith. The Light Princess, Little Daylight, Tangle, North Wind, Irene, Rosamond, Agnes, these are MacDonald's female characters; but, like Browne, he has his males behave by the best feminine lights—perhaps the exception here is the somewhat violent Buffy-Bob. Diamond goes more and more with North Wind until he dies, and is meanwhile the gentlest little boy in London; Curdie gets stuck in his efforts against the goblins, and has to be rescued by Irene

and her grandmother. Early in *The Princess and Curdie*, Curdie exhibits a masculine empiricism and cruelty that lead him to doubt the existence of Irene's grandmother, until his behaviour is burnt out of him. He is sent to Gwyntystorm to rescue the king by her direction, not his own, and she ensures that he wins the battle against the evil forces there. Men, however, later wreck the city finally by mining under it.

It is remarkable how, from around 1870 to 1890, children's fantasy is written mostly by women, and often with girl heroines. Jean Ingelow, Christina Rossetti, Mrs Ewing, Mrs Molesworth, Dinah Mulock, Mary De Morgan, Lucy Lane Clifford, Alice Corkran, these are the writers for a new generation. Perhaps this owed something to the influence of Browne, MacDonald and Carroll, though none of these later authors idealise little girls, often moralising their faults. Neither is the female sex itself Browne's and MacDonald's first concern: that concern is with what feminine behaviour is most conducive to—the breaking down of barriers between the self and the world. People often lose or put aside their high rank in *Granny's Wonderful Chair* and learn the ways of ordinary folk—the two lords reduced to foresters and their children dispossessed, Prince Fairyfoot made a shepherd's boy, Childe Charity demoted to the lowest kitchen, Faith Feignless' mother sharing the grief of a fisherwoman, Prince Wisewit enchanted to a wooden chair in a poor cottage. Those who cut themselves off from their children or from others are unnatural: Scrub, Clutch and Civil ruthlessly seek their own worldly advantage and come to grief, and Dame Dreary's valley severs itself from the rest of the kingdom in obsessive work until the curse is undone. Snowflower quits her cottage for the world, and Winwealth finds his closed heart opened to the spiritual realities of her stories. Even the stories are not simply fictions on their own, but the protagonists are actually at the court listening to their own tales. So too in *Phantastes* there are stories within stories and Anodos finds himself an actor in them.

But MacDonald's way of breaking down the barriers between his characters' selves and the world is by making them insecure and undermining their assumptions. Anodos' civil room turns into a forest glade, and Vane is cast from his great castle on to a houseless heath: each finds he can never be sure of anything in Fairy Land. Mossy and Tangle find themselves in Fairy Land; Princess Irene's house is being invaded from beneath; Irene's father is slowly [25] rendered helpless; little Diamond's bedroom is pierced by North Wind, the Wise Woman's object is to break down the selves of Rosamond and Agnes.

For both MacDonald and Browne the “world” is most often that of nature. Though traditional tales too are often set in the country, they depict it only as a place of work, not as source of spiritual refreshment. The German Romantic fairy-tale writers, if they include rural scenes, do so in connection with the imaginative rather than the pastoral; and Andersen’s fairy stories are most often set in towns. But Browne’s stories often show people leaving their homes for the forest or the heath or the sea. The idea is partly that of Paget’s Prince Eigenwillig going to Fairy Land to be reformed outside society: but the emphasis here is much more exclusively pastoral. Indeed Browne is the first English fairy tale writer of pastoral, apart from Sara Coleridge in *Phantasmion* (1837)—and hers is more a romantic setting than an ideal.⁴ Browne is no sentimentalist about nature, however, for nature makes people with big as with small feet, and within the forest there are pools which make both. Nevertheless her stories are full of the sense that living with nature can be living with joy, and this is imagined in such names as Loveleaves, Woodwender, Lady Greensleeves or Princess Maybloom. There is a seasonal movement behind the stories, in that their settings move gradually from spring to midwinter. The last story, that of Merrymind, unlocks the frozen spiritual state of Dame Dreary’s valley and starts time: so too, in the larger world beyond it, Snowflower’s tales to the court gradually thaw King Winwealth’s long-frozen heart and begin a new world. The static is the enemy in *Granny’s Wonderful Chair*; its very title concerns a seat that travels. In this respect she is like MacDonald: but so far as time is concerned, MacDonald in his fantasy is far more interested in place, in “where” rather than in “when”; dwellings, and locations, questions of where people and places are, and journeys to them, fill his fantasies.

That the landscape of woods and glades, cottages and heaths, rivers and seas is native to MacDonald’s fantasy needs little underlining. His heroes’ excursions to cities, whether to Gwyntystorm or Bulika (in *Lilith*) are unhappy. Even his city of God at the end of *Lilith* is little like the artefact of Revelation 21. He focuses on the huge river rushing through it, and its streets and palaces are scarcely distinguishable from rocks and precipices, nor the whole from the great mountain on which it is reared. MacDonald’s nature, however, is often a landscape of the mind, for many of his fantasies are explorations of the inner world, particularly *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, wherein trees and rivers, mountains, valleys and plains become pictures of conditions of the spirit. That said, MacDonald is nothing if not a lover of nature, God’s nature, in his fantasy. “What notion should we have of the unchanging and

unchangeable, without the solidity of matter? . . . What idea . . . of God without the sky?" (*U.S.* 463). [26]

The un-natural too is a theme in both writers. We see it in *Granny's Wonderful Chair*, in the frequent denial or desertion of children by their parents, in the seasonless world of dame Dreary, and in the disharmony of Winwealth's court. In the story "The Greedy Shepherd," Clutch has twisted nature by over-shearing his sheep, and a twisted nature in the form of his sheep in wolves' clothing punishes him; and in "Sour and Civil" it is the ill-natured Sour who may have become the unwilling companion of the monstrous mer-king beneath the sea. Winwealth's feast in honour of his unnatural daughter Greedalind is fuelled by the destruction of large numbers of trees in the forest.

In MacDonald's fairy tales the evil enchantment often involves a perversion of nature. The Light Princess has had her gravity removed; Little Daylight can only be her healthy and beautiful self by night; the fairies in "The Carasoy" seize a girl and a boy and stop their natural development, and another boy and girl are abducted in both "Cross Purposes" and "The Day Boy and the Night Girl"; the giant in "The Giant's Heart" has kept his heart separate from his body. The goblins and their creatures in *The Princess and the Goblin* are devolved and unnatural; and the evil citizens of Gwytystorm in *The Princess and Curdie* are human on the outside, beasts within, to the hand-clasp of a spiritual seer. But having a form other than the natural one is not necessarily a perversion for MacDonald. His most famous fairy tale, "The Golden Key," involves understanding nature's secrets as a way of ascending to divine supernature, the land "whence the shadows fall." Mossy and Tangle, both named after vegetation, ascend through a hierarchy of more-than-natural creatures and then meet three men who are a natural paradox, being older as they appear younger. Here nature's inversion is not a perversion but a liberation of its truest self: death, Mossy learns, "'is only more life'" (211). But then, the landscapes of MacDonald's fantasies are as much spiritual as natural, and may shape creatures far beyond those nature herself has shown to us. MacDonald's vision is more than a moral one, it is mystical too.

The most important debt MacDonald may have owed to Browne is the way her fairy tales symbolically embody Christian truths. Several of the stories in *Granny's Wonderful Chair* have Christian overtones—hardly surprising when one considers that Browne was writing for the Religious Tract Society at this time. Unlike almost all other children's fairy tale

writers of her day, however, she never makes the point explicit—just as, like MacDonald, she never underlines a moral in her stories; and indeed these are often far more morally complex than they appear. In “The Greedy Shepherd,” when Clutch finds the sheep he has shorn too close turned to wolves, the changed sheep express his own wolfish nature, in an image frequently used of pastoral or secular rapacity in the Bible and Christian literature. The tale also inverts the old epithet of “the wolf in [27] sheep’s clothing.” (MacDonald too uses wolves in *The Wise Woman* and *Lilith*.) The story of selfless hospitality in “Childe Charity” is a picture not of Victorian poor-box or patronising charity but of the charity that is instinctive love as described in I Corinthians 13.4: “Charity suffereth long and is kind . . . charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.” Such charity is the very breath of heaven: “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (I Cor. 13.13). The pattern of “The Lords of the White and Grey Castles,” with two enchanted lords rescued from the forest by their children and taken home, suggests man lost and spiritually frozen in his sin, saved in Christ (the children have to resist three temptations) and returned to paradise. And the last story, “The Story of Merrymind,” in which a boy turns a dreary and enslaved world to joy with a magic fiddle, is very reminiscent of Revelation.

But the Christian meaning of the stories in *Granny’s Wonderful Chair* comes more from the larger story of which they are a part: Snowflower with her chair telling these stories to King Winwealth and his court. Winwealth’s loss of Wisewit is more than analogous to the fall of man; and subsequently—expressive of the spiritual hole in his heart—he has taken a wife called Wantall, and had a daughter called Greedalind. Worldly desire has replaced spiritual peace, and his court is wracked by the dissensions of human passion. But then, out of the wilderness into the great wilderness at the court has come a child who, inspired by a hidden white bird in her chair, speaks parables that heal the spirit of the king. As each tale is told, Snowflower, the herald of spring, is given a gift of clothing and moved a place up from the lowest kitchen where (like Childe Charity) she was first placed. At the end, when Wisewit has reappeared, and Greedalind has left with her mother, Snowflower is made the king’s heir. The evil fairy Fortunetta who enchanted Wisewit in the forest has been replaced by Fairfortune, last in line and first in rank of Winwealth’s pages, who rewards Snowflower for her final story. A world misruled by evil chance has given way to one governed by good luck; and Christians have frequently seen divine grace itself as everlasting good fortune. The removal of slavery and the birth of a new spring at the end of the

seventh tale, “The Story of Merry mind,” transfer to the world of its audience outside: fiction has become truth. What was long lost is found, evil casts itself into a pit outside the palace, and Dame Frostyface comes back from her long journey away.

The imagery is suggestive of Revelation. “I am he that liveth, and was dead” (1.18) could be Wisewit; the “Woman clothed with the sun” (12.1) and the other woman who is Babylon, the materialist city, “arrayed in purple and scarlet colour” (17.4) suggest Snowflower and Queen Wantall respectively; the pit into which the dragon of Revelation is cast (20.1-3) parallels the gold mine into which the queen descends; and when Wisewit and King Winwealth meet again, [28] Winwealth like resurrected man is made king indeed. The parallels are of course between small and great and they are lightly touched. Yet nevertheless the statement of God at the beginning and end of Revelation: “I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last” (1.11; 22.13) may be shadowed in the way that Snowflower’s story surrounds the seven her chair has told. As for the chair itself, its analogy with the throne of God in Revelation 4 needs little comment; notable too is the fact that the figure on the throne holds a book with seven seals which a snow-white lamb takes and opens, one after the other (Rev. 5-8), which may relate to Snowflower’s chair with its seven tales.

MacDonald’s fantasy also sometimes works like Christian history in this way. The whole of *Phantastes* and *Lilith* together could be seen as a pattern of fall, redemption and judgement,⁵ and *Lilith* itself is certainly modelled on Revelation and the errant spiritual history of man up to judgement. “The Golden Key” is an image of man’s and woman’s journey from childhood to old age, from creation to resurrection and from garden to city, entry to which is given with the golden key suggestive of Christ’s redemption. The *Curdie* books glance at a pattern of Christian history in the way that Irene and Curdie in the first book are guarded and saved from the evil goblins by Irene’s mystic grandmother. Then Irene (“Peace”) and her father are in thrall to evil in Gwynrystorm and a final victory and judgement take place.

But both Browne and MacDonald are writing, like St. John, of visions, not present realities, and both place us very starkly back in this world. Browne’s narrator tells us that the fairy times in which the stories took place have gone; and adds that there is a rumour that King Winwealth has fallen back into his old ways, that Wisewit has become enchanted again and that Wantall and Greedalind have found gold and “begin to buy.” The

likeness to the end of *The Princess and Curdie* here suggests a direct debt. And at the end of *Lilith*, as Vane approaches the cloud-covered throne of the Most High, he is suddenly thrust back into this world and finds himself in his library with the cover of a book closing like a door behind him.

Granny's Wonderful Chair has Christian suggestiveness in other forms too. The preferred number in the stories is seven, which is also the number that runs through Revelation (seven angels, seals, candlesticks, and more). The princess who will not marry the king's son in "The Christmas Cuckoo" has seven islands for a dowry; seven months after their father's departure the children of the White and Grey Castles are supplanted by the stewards; Fairyfoot is the seventh son of the King of Stumpinghame; Childe Charity is given the old beggar-woman's dog to look after on the seventh night of her hospitality, and returns from fairyland on the seventh night after she left; the undersea gate out of the mermen's kingdom in "Sour and Civil" has not been opened for "thrice seven years"; and in [29] "The story of Merrymind" the aged giant Strongarm has carried his pannier of dust and the Night Spinners have come fruitlessly to the deserted cottage for "'seven times seven years.'" The stories themselves are seven in number, and are told on successive evenings, so that they cover a week: and at the end they suggest one, for the sixth story, "Sour and Civil," portrays a marriage, which usually happens on a Saturday; and the seventh, "The Story of Merrymind," describes how a society of unremitting toil was freed from enchantment and able to rest, which is Sunday. Then of course the first six days of the week are the six days of creation, and the stories themselves are creations.

The week is also a circle, for it ends in a new Monday: the merry mind that Spare the Cobbler gains from the cuckoo's green leaves in the first story, "The Christmas Cuckoo" reappears in the central figure Merrymind of the last, as does the almost Utopian transformation of society (24-26; 119-20). And all these stories are surrounded or circled by another story, that of Snowflower and the court, and Dame Frostyface. There are nine chapters altogether in the book, the magic number relating to the completion of a charm. When Snowflower's chair has told the last story, King Winwealth's gift is a final piece of clothing in the form of a golden girdle, which not only holds together all the clothes in which she has progressively been dressed, but symbolically binds and circles all the stories she has brought.

On the whole, MacDonald's stories do not work by patterning of this sort. It is more the imagery itself than its formal patterning that is for him suggestive. Much more than in Browne's work, the landscapes of his stories

are those of the mind, particularly of the unconscious mind, which was for him a seeming chaos. His characters and his readers are frequently lost or unable to make sense of what is happening, which is MacDonald's way of throwing them on their inner darkness and the divine mysteries there. There is one story, however, in which it has been well shown that MacDonald uses a subtle scheme of character names, particularly of minerals and precious stones, which have alchemical and biblical significance—*At the Back of the North Wind* (Willis, chs 1-3). Nearly all MacDonald's stories involve an increasing proximity to something, whether a white lady, a land whence the shadows fall or at the North Wind's back, a mystic grand-mother, a sick king, heaven itself, and this is because their primary interest is mystical, in closing the gap between man and divine reality. The Christian experience of MacDonald's work is less a recognition and a naming than an increasing yearning.

Browne's main concern is with this world *sub specie æternitatis*, with recording men's ordinary lives in a magical context which, so far, symbolises grace or evil in nature. Her characters inhabit a mortal world subject to time and the seasons,⁶ and at the end she tells us her story could no longer happen:

[30]

Good boys and girls who may chance to read it—that time is long ago. Great wars, work and learning have passed over the world since then and altered all its fashions. Kings make no seven-day feasts for all comers now. Queens and princesses, however greedy, do not mine for gold. Chairs tell no tales. Wells work no wonders; and there are no such doings on hills and forests, for the fairies dance no more. Some say it was the hum of the schools—some think it was the din of factories that frightened them: but nobody has been known to have seen them for many a year.

But MacDonald's world is the plastic region of the god-based mind, where all change is spiritually rather than temporally based, and where the characters journey through landscapes impervious to an aeon of weather, yet evanescent before a flicker of the will.

Despite these and other difficulties it is clear that MacDonald's fantasy is indebted to *The Hope of the Katzekopfs* and *Granny's Wonderful Chair* more than to any other children's fantasy of the time. While it cannot be demonstrated that each likeness between Browne's and MacDonald's work always proves indebtedness, the sheer number and uniqueness in their

time of many of their similarities—child characters and love of childhood, double protagonists, mixing of high and low, liking for the feminine, love of nature, values of openness of heart and self-surrender, use of “metafictional” techniques, and above all, the use of the fairy tale to symbolise Christian realities—all these make a compelling case that Browne opened a path that MacDonald then further explored.

Notes

1. The list would also include Thomas Hood’s “Miss Kilmansegg and her Precious Leg” (1841), John Ruskin’s *The King of the Golden River* (written 1841, published 1851), Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Clara de Chatelain’s *The Silver Swan* (1847), Douglas Jerrold’s *A Man Made of Money* (1849) and Mark Lemon’s *The Enchanted Doll* (1849).
2. MacDonald may owe his picture of blinding supernatural revelation to that of the Great Fairies at the end of *The Water-Babies*.
3. After this came Norman Macleod’s rather Bunyanesque *The Gold Thread* in 1861, followed in 1863 by *The Water-Babies*. Most of the main writers of symbolic Christian fantasy in the nineteenth century appear within a seven-year period.
4. Ruskin’s *The King of the Golden River* is a story about a freak valley of plenty; the other farmers of the region are oppressed by a much crueller nature.
5. See my “Circularity in Fantasy: George MacDonald” *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*, London: Macmillan 1983, 71-92, especially 92.
6. See also the time- and season-based poems that fill Browne’s *Lyrics and Miscellaneous Poems*, Edinburgh, 1848. [31]

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