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Jeffrey W. Smith
Southeastern University

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Analyzing the Faërie World as a Model for Christian Spirituality

An Interpretation of Spiritual Progression in George MacDonald's Fantasy Literature

Jeffrey W. Smith

Abstract:

When studying the works of George MacDonald, one cannot neglect the deep spiritual purpose found throughout his writings. Indeed, it seems that MacDonald never wrote lest he proclaimed what would direct the reader to a greater perspective of the eternal realm. This study will analyze the role of the faerie world in MacDonald's literature as a plane which his characters must enter and acknowledge as they achieve spiritual union with the divine. Spiritual progression, therefore, will be emphasized with the use of "border-crossings" in MacDonald's novels and fairy tales.

Although MacDonald's writing should be approached with a broad knowledge of theory, a Christian reading of his work is most crucial. This proposal shall offer further insight into MacDonald's spirituality with the effect it has had on Christian thought.

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“Analyzing the Faërie World as a Model for Christian Spirituality: An Interpretation of Spiritual Progression in George MacDonald’s Fantasy Literature”

Jeffrey W. Smith

The literary realm of Faërie has perhaps been connected with the realm of humanity since time began or since humans began to evolve into the state of the realistic. Although the realistic has been and remains in constant opposition with the deeper realm of Faërie, both worlds appear to seek some form of union. Unfortunately, this union comes with a high price. Consider such works of fantasy where this idea is most prevalent: Fouqué’s *Undine*, Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” Keats’ “Lamia,” Coleridge’s “Christabel,” to name a few. A union between the two worlds is the sole object of desire, yet this connection seldom appears to take place with a positive outcome, except in the works of George MacDonald. One paramount element that sets his works apart from these is that the connection and movement between the two worlds is possible and positive. Furthermore, his characters must come to recognize their spiritual states, and they must, therefore, change. But this is where the danger lies, for as J. R. R. Tolkien warns in his essay, “On Fairy-Stories,” in the realm of Faërie, “a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of a traveller who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost” (3). Crossing the borders from the realistic into fairyland may very well be the goal of the imaginative poet-traveler, but how does this affect the Christian reader? It is the purpose of this study to offer a Christian-based interpretation of movement towards truth within Faërie using the fantasy of George MacDonald looking specifically at his inclusion and purpose of evil and the role it plays in Faërie as a spiritual path to the Divine.

MacDonald writes in his essay, “The Fantastic Imagination,” that “The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended” (9). I should also like to point out MacDonald’s spiritual attachment to Friedrich von Hardenburg, who penned himself “Novalis.” It was Novalis who wrote that “we are closer to things invisible than things visible.” Throughout all of MacDonald’s fantasy, and even within his realistic novels, he is portraying this outer layer, or perhaps dimension, that his characters not only enter, but *must* enter and go *through*. This is the realm of Faërie.

For the religious critic, combining fantasy and religion may be unsettling, and perhaps it ought to be. Novalis compares the fairytale to music and its power to incite higher thinking. MacDonald makes the same connection by writing, “Nature is mood-engendering, thought-provoking: such ought the sonata, such ought the fairytale to be” (“The Fantastic Imagination” 9). To have such a combination which pulls man into this greater sense of being is threatening to fundamentalist religion. MacDonald, as inspired by Novalis, views the realm of Faërie as a deeper, and far more beautiful plane than that of common-place religion. Tolkien appears to make a case for this proclamation of “truth” when tells us of the possible joy of finding truth in a fairytale for “such joy has the very taste of primary truth” (“On Fairy-Tales” 72). Of course, Tolkien is not claiming that fairytales are true, but that they can bring about the joy of truth. This is exactly what MacDonald has achieved with his writings. MacDonald makes the defense for the

development of not just his fairytales but any fairytale that he, the writer, “may well himself discover truth in what he wrote; for he was dealing all the time with things that came from thoughts beyond his own” (“The Fantastic Imagination” 9). A Christian-based approach is, therefore, essential to interpret MacDonald. Through his writings, he has offered spiritual truth through the realm of Faërie. As a representative of Faërie, North Wind, in *At the Back of the North Wind*, tells Diamond that “the people who love what is true will surely now and then dream true things” (370). Later when Diamond is speaking to the narrator, he asks him if all of his adventures could have been the sole products of dreams. The narrator answers, “I daren’t say [...] But at least there is one thing you may be sure of, that there is still a better love than that of the wonderful being you call North Wind. Even if she be a dream, the dream of such a beautiful creature could not come to you by chance” (376). *Through* North Wind as Faërie, Diamond has found the connection into truth by discovering love.

I do not mean to state that the Christian reader will be offended by MacDonald’s theological views, nor do I feel that the reader will fully welcome them. For it was this group that I believe MacDonald was addressing throughout his writings. MacDonald held strongly to the idea that *all* of creation would eventually return to God whence all things were created; that God did not, could not, create all things *ex nihilo* but out of Himself places a divine importance and connection on not only humanity but the natural world as a whole. Take a few moments to consider Diamond’s speculation about the sparrows that must die when winter comes: “They must die some time. They wouldn’t like to be birds always” (135) and especially when he questions Mr. Raymond about the possibility of Diamond the horse going to heaven, all the while displaying an even deeper line of knowing. What is more intriguing is not the question of the good horse getting into heaven but the absolute certainty of it getting to the back of the north wind (284)!

As well, consider the role that evil plays in MacDonald’s literature. The use of evil appears almost necessary in his Victorian realistic novels, such as the trials found in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, *Sir Gibbie*, *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, and *Ranald Bannerman’s Boyhood* to name only a slight few; however, in his works of fantasy, the symbolic nature of evil becomes disturbing and more difficult to explain. U. C. Knoepfelmacher comments on the positive purpose of evilness and evil characters in his fantasy fiction. Referring to Princess Makemnoit in “The Light Princess” he states that she “is enlisted to reshape youngsters who might otherwise grow up into adults as bland and incomplete as their satirized elders. And her magical powers, though willingly or unwillingly placed in the service of an esoteric order ruled by a divine Christ-child, are essentially pagan, harking back to traditions of nature-myths and folklore rather than relying on the formulations of organized religion” (xii). It is this usage of evil that MacDonald’s characters (in this case, his child characters) must be shaped. Although Knoepfelmacher does offer some light on Princess Makemnoit’s name, by stating that it is given to counter forgetfulness, I feel that more could have been offered. To me, MacDonald is clearly using the name as metaphor. Look again at the name, Princess Makemnoit, in light (or shall I say shadow?) of her character’s purpose. Is not MacDonald’s so-called evil fairy the instrument to make the child/children know what it is they must, which ultimately turns out to be love in truth? Makemnoit’s character becomes linked with many other “terrible” female characters – not necessarily evil ones. They are terrible in the sense that they initiate action by demanding work that challenges the characters, but pushes them toward spiritual

progression. In light of Princess Makemnoit, consider another one of MacDonald's fairytales, "Little Daylight" and the significant role evil must play in directing the characters across the spiritual borders to truth. While pondering the wicked actions of evil fairies, MacDonald writes that "what they do never succeeds; nay in the end it brings about the very thing they are trying to prevent. So you see that somehow, for all their cleverness, wicked fairies are dreadfully stupid, for, although from the beginning of the world they have really helped instead of thwarting the good fairies" (300).

And furthermore, the redemption of evil characters has appeared to take the most pivotal attacks from religious readers. This idea is best developed in *Lilith*, where the title character, Adam's first wife-turned-vampire-demon, finds salvation. In the Christian world, Judas is usually depicted in a rather negative way as the jaded disciple who sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver. In turn, his name is often linked with one who is a traitor or villain. Dante places his Judas, along with Brutus and Cassius, in the lonely circle with Lucifer himself, obviously to offer them some form of recognition as mankind's most hated sinners. Yet MacDonald offers his Judas hope. In his sermon, "It Shall Not Be Forgiven," MacDonald goes so far as to show the redemption waiting for Judas. MacDonald tells us that "when Judas fled from his hanged and fallen body, he fled to the tender help of Jesus, and found it" (64). Convincingly enough, MacDonald goes on to explain the journey Judas must take, perhaps being "sent down the scale of creation which is ever ascending towards its Maker" (64). The point in this part of the sermon is pivotal, for that is exactly how MacDonald incorporates spiritual growth in the realm of Faërie.

The presence of evil in MacDonald's work can be unsettling for the reader in the fact that it *exists*. Tolkien, in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," continuously refers to Faërie as a "perilous" realm; however, the word peril is not solely linked with evil. Anodos must experience mortal horror as he encounters the Ash and the Alder Maiden; and immediately upon beholding his "Grandmother," at the novel's introduction, he is overcome with a sense to possess her (irresistible attraction), forcing her to warn him: "Foolish boy, if you could touch me, I should hurt you" (*Phantastes* 18) perhaps meaning that his senses will be overcome should he enter this realm; his time for waking must come later. Mr. Vane must lose blood to Lilith; love must be stripped from both he and Anodos. Both men must die. The realm of Faërie is perilous because one does not enter it lest he must go *through* it. North Wind becomes the doorway through which Diamond must cross. Mossy and Tangle in "The Golden Key" never, in fact, return to the plane of the realistic. Richard and Alice in "Cross Purposes" make it through Faërie after a series of mind-bending, psychological events that are far more intense than anything Lewis Carroll's Alice encounters in either Wonderland or the Looking-Glass land. Curdie must face the flaming roses, and although his experience is brief, his pain is intense. MacDonald writes that "He held the pain as if it were a thing that would kill him if he let it go – as indeed it would have done. [...] But when it had risen to the pitch that he *could* bear it no longer, it began to fall again, and went on growing less," and soon the pain is completely gone, which causes Curdie to assume that his hands and lower arms "must be burnt to cinders, if not ashes" (*The Princess and Curdie* 94-95).

These events are essential to the characters' spiritual development and growth within MacDonald's writing; MacDonald is not a sadist who creates characters and then inflicts needless pain and suffering upon them. Therefore, the emphasis on pain and fear

in MacDonald's work can not, must not, be overlooked or taken lightly. The key to this point is to understand what MacDonald thought of evil. In his fantasy, as well as his Victorian novels, evil serves as the shadow of the good. MacDonald, like Novalis, was influenced by Jakob Böhme, who believed that the fall of man from grace through sin was necessary to *enter into* God. Likewise, William Blake wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy" (xvi). What I believe that Blake is attempting to tell us is that the forces of good and evil must join hands, whereby friction between the two causes the soul to aspire. And although I have not found the evidence needed to say that MacDonald is trying to incorporate Blake's idea of progression, I feel that there is enough evidence in his work to show that evil serves as a means to God, although it is the lowest kind.

In his first volume of *Unspoken Sermons*, MacDonald produced a sermon entitled "The Consuming Fire" where he states boldly that "Fear is nobler than sensuality. Fear is better than no God, better than a god made with hands. In that fear lay deep hidden the sense of the infinite. The worship of fear is true, although very low; and though not acceptable to God in itself, for only the worship of spirit and of truth is acceptable to him, yet even in his sight it is precious" (24). Just as in the *Princess* books with the unseen, yet ever-present Grandmother, so is God present, even in terror; and sometimes, the terror itself may very well be the form taken on by God. For MacDonald, people see what they must. In defending various points of imagination concerning the readers of his fairytales, MacDonald tells us that if one should "not be a true man, he will draw evil out of the best [...]. If he be a true man, he will imagine true things" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 9). In his fantasy, perception is the key to knowing good and evil. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, North Wind takes Diamond on an outing in which she displays a rather wolfish side of herself to frighten a drunken nurse who was abusing her charge. Whilst explaining the form she took and the reason that the child was never frightened, she states, "She [the innocent child] never saw me. The woman would not have seen me, either, if she had not been wicked. [...] Why should you see things [...] that you wouldn't understand or know what to do with? Good people see good things; bad people, bad things"; and although Diamond does not understand her fully, she states, "I had to make myself look like a bad thing before she could see me. If I had put on any other shape than a wolf's, she would not have seen me, for that is what is growing to be her own shape inside of her" (37). Another key point to consider in this scene is the hint concerning spiritual evolution, which either shows the progression towards or the decline from the truth in the realm of Faërie. This, according to MacDonald, may very well be this animal's country that Judas must enter. The animal's country is a layer of progression in MacDonald's work; although, in his sermons, to be abandoned within the blackness of the soul's dark self is the most unimaginable state of being. In "The Consuming Fire," MacDonald writes that this extreme and outermost point is even still a plane of progression, a plane where "God hath withdrawn himself, but not lost his hold. His face is turned away, but his hand is laid upon him still. His heart ceased to beat into the man's heart, but he keeps him alive by his fire. And that fire will go searching and burning on in him, as in the highest saint who is not yet pure as he is pure" (32).

Returning to the previous scene regarding Curdie obeying Princess Irene's grandmother, Queen Irene, Curdie was given an extraordinary gift to know if an individual was growing into a beast or if he were a true man upon touching his hand. Queen Irene explains to Curdie "that all men, if they do not take care, go down the hill to the animal's country; that many men are actually, all their lives, going to be beasts" (*The Princess and Curdie* 97). And indeed, Curdie comes across a broad assortment of beastly men and women throughout the fairy novel. But what is more special about MacDonald's point is the aspect of knowing the good in a person, which is his or her true self. In fact, long before Curdie ever takes the hand of a "beast-ward" growing man, he takes the hand of Lina, a very grotesque creation of MacDonald's, and discovers the soft hand of a child, whereupon Queen Irene tells him, "That paw in your hand now might almost teach you the whole science of natural history – the heavenly sort" (103). And just as Lina evolves, so must all of MacDonald's characters; so must his readers. Just as the flaming roses burned away all "independent self" from Curdie's hands, so will the Fire of Love consume the man and purify or restore him to his true, God-dependent self. MacDonald explains this in several of his unspoken sermons, and it becomes the keystone to all of his fantasy fiction, although it may be delivered in the subtlest of ways.

MacDonald writes to us, "When evil, which alone is consumable, shall have passed away in his fire from the dwellers in the immovable kingdom, the nature of man shall look the nature of God in the face, and his fear shall then be pure; for an eternal, that is a holy fear, must spring from a knowledge of the nature, not from a sense of the power" ("The Consuming Fire" 21). It is through this renewal, this restoration of the true self, that one will see and join God; and it is through this "perilous" realm of Faërie that his characters must enter and go through to discover their truth.

Allow me to close with the final words of Anodos who tells us: "Yet I know that good is coming to me – that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good. And so, *Farewell*" (*Phantastes* 320).

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