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The Wise Woman as an Agent of Identity in George MacDonald's Story *The Wise Woman*

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The following paper emerged from thoughts about the philosophy of identity and how it might apply to George MacDonald's Story *The Wise Woman*.

Introduction

George MacDonald's story, *The Wise Woman, a Parable* (1875) was first serialised in the periodical *Good Things* (Dec 1874-July 1875) and later published under the various titles *A Double Story, The Lost Princess, The Lost Princess, a Double Story, Princess Rosamond, a Double Story, The Lost Princess; or The Wise Woman and The Wise Woman or The Lost Princess: a Double Story*.

One of the implications of such a plethora of titles is to create a platform of interrogation as to whom or what the story is primarily about, is it the Wise Woman, the princess Rosamond, Agnes the shepherd's daughter or either set of parents? Is the focus on this ambiguity or, taking the lead from MacDonald's own commentary on imaginative writing (MacDonald "The Fantastic Imagination" 316), is it all of these options?

All of the above titles convey different emphases on the focal character or characters and elicit the question 'whose identity is under construction?' And, 'is the agent of identity the Wise Woman, or the lostness?'

Having thus thrown possible approaches to the story open, my aim in this paper is to focus on an investigation

of the Wise Woman herself as an agent of identity in this story and to ask the question 'how much choice does Rosamond have in the reconstruction of her own identity?'

(See below for the main points of the story).

The Wise Woman's unexpected appearance at court and her abduction of Princess Rosamond begins a process of transformation as Rosamond pursues her journey towards true princesshood. The Wise Woman's philosophy of what the identity of a true princess consists of begins a process of moral education designed to teach Rosamond that her high social position does not guarantee her identity as a princess.

The story follows the progress of two girls, the Princess Rosamond and the Shepherdess Agnes, as they mature under the tutelage of the Wise Woman. The Wise Woman as a supernatural character constantly appears in MacDonald's work under different guises. I do not intend to examine who she is, or is intended to represent, since this work is a separate study and has been addressed in other places, for example in the work of Dierdre Hayward (Hayward). Suffice it to say, she has supernatural attributes which allow her to transcend space and time.

Two concepts of identity

In contemporary culture, the concept of identity is increasingly perceived as an entity created by the personal choice of the individual, constructed, for example, in terms of

lifestyle, fashion, career expectation or any other choice centred on the individual. This is a modernist (and postmodernist) position emanating from a post-Enlightenment emphasis on the individual self as the base point from which decisions are made.

An alternative perspective, expounded by Alistair MacIntyre, is based on the Aristotelian position arguing for a selfhood constructed from the 'narrative unity of life'. From this viewpoint, narrative unity is the position upon which the meaningfulness of life is based and 'meaning is the material out of which substantial selfhood is constructed' (MacIntyre quoted in (Morgan 164). Narrative unity is the basis or context upon which identity is built and from which choices are made. Choice in modernist context includes the option to reject such a context since the individual is the starting point for decisions.

My investigation of the characters of the Wise Woman as agent, and on the Princess Rosamond as acted upon (or not) implies that in the specific context of this story, Rosamond's life and context is initially 'an ongoing connected story' (Morgan 165). Rosamond potentially has the choice to work within this contextual narrative or to detach herself from it.

Rosamond's journey towards true princesshood is therefore potentially the continuation of her story in the narrative presented to her by the Wise Woman. The Wise Woman, in other words, shows Rosamond what she could become.

The construct of identity within the story can be interpreted as both internal, in relation to the self; external, in relation to the geographical space, or environment which is used by the Wise Woman to shape Rosamond's identity; and cultural in relation to social space (that is the social strata into which a princess is born). The landscape of values within the story deflects identity in relation to social class. This landscape ostensibly transcends the romantic

order of 'noble identity', as encompassing goodness, discussed by Northrop Frye as the 'blood will tell' convention (Frye 161).

Rosamond's identity prior to meeting with Wise Woman

This is Rosamond's beginning:

a baby girl was born – and her father was a king, and her mother was a queen, and her uncles and aunts were princes and princesses, and her first cousins were dukes and duchesses, and not one of her second cousins was less than a marquis or marchioness, or of her third cousins less than an earl or countess, and below a countess they did not care to count. So the little girl was Somebody. ...

And MacDonald's narratorial comment:

As she grew up, everybody about her did his best to convince her that she was Somebody, and the girl herself was so easily persuaded of it that she quite forgot that anybody had ever told her so, and took it for a fundamental, innate, primary, firstborn, self-evident, necessary, and incontrovertible idea and principle that *she was Somebody* ...; and the worst of it was that the princess never thought of there being more than one Somebody – and that was herself (MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 3,4).

Thus the narrative construction of selfhood begun in the above passage was extended through the acquisition of 'things', since she wanted 'everything she could and everything she couldn't have' (MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 6). The situation of total self-centredness grew so bad even her parents at last 'thought it time to do something' (MacDonald *The Wise*

Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius 8).

This is the point at which the Wise Woman enters the story.

The Wise Woman's Aim

The Wise woman carries Rosamond off to her cottage in order to begin the process of reconstruction, or transformation of, her identity. The aim of the Wise Woman is to enable Rosamond to reach true princesshood, a process that necessitates Rosamond journeying from a position of exclusive 'somebody' (self-centredness) to inclusive 'somebody' (self-awareness and awareness of others). This transition is from an individual to a social self, to use Alasdair MacIntyre's terminology (MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* 33), but it is a transition in the opposite direction from that which occurred after the enlightenment, that is, from social self to the individual. When Rosamond reaches the cottage her perception of princesshood is based upon social position with herself as the centre of attention and service. The Wise Woman's concept of princesshood is entirely different. The attributes of true princesshood according to the Wise Woman are presented as not reliant on an individual's birth into any particular social strata. She explains to Rosamond:

Nobody can be a real princess ... until she is princess over herself, that is, until, when she finds herself unwilling to do the thing that is right, she makes herself do it'

(MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 109)

The Wise Woman's method

The Wise Woman's method starts from the premise that Rosamond's 'overarching narrative' is her journey from self-centredness towards true princesshood. She begins

by presenting Rosamond's story as an 'ongoing connected story' (Morgan 165) and creates a series of scenarios in which she allows Rosamond to experience the consequences of her identity as constructed by a single-voiced, self-centred narrative, to experience the consequences of her own choices and desires, in short, to experience 'herself'. Then Wise Woman then tells Rosamond how her own story could be continued in a different narrative. Rosamond's parents have constructed her to herself in terms of a self-centred narrative. The Wise Woman remonstrates with the King and Queen:

"She is a very wicked child," said the Queen; "Yes indeed," returned the Wise Woman; but it is half your fault too."

"What!" stammered the king "Haven't we given her every mortal thing she wanted?"

"Surely," said the wise woman. "What else could have all but killed her?"

(MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 10)

They had thereby created a child who "is very naughty indeed" (MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 10). (If you have read the opening chapter of the story you will discover that this is an understatement.)

The Wise Woman pursues her educative method by following what the 19th century philosopher Schelling (Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Von Schelling (1775-1854)) described as 'the history of self-consciousness' as 'progressive self-objectification' (Summerell 88). As the Wise Woman appeals to Rosamond's reason and imagination together, she works towards the formulation of Rosamond's identity as a 'mutuality' of both these attributes of personhood, or in Rosamond's case,

'princesshood' to bring both the real and the ideal into being.

By presenting Rosamond with an imaginative vision of herself, the Wise Woman seeks to influence Rosamond's decisions as to who she wishes to become. She informed Rosamond's reason by using the power of the imagination, thereby using the 'imagination (as) the creative force of identity' (Summerell 89). One example of the Wise Woman's use of the imagination to encourage the reformation of Rosamond's identity is to show Rosamond what she looks like to herself through the use of the Wise Woman's mirror. Bear in mind that when a MacDonald character is shown 'themselves', the inner self is included:

Rosamond saw a child with dirty fat cheeks, greedy mouth, cowardly eyes . . . stooping shoulders, tangled hair, tattered clothes, and smears and stains everywhere. That was what she had made herself. (MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 43).

A contemporary story where the agent uses the same method of didactic reform to modify children's behaviour can be found in *Nanny McPhee: The Collected Tales of Nurse Matilda* by Christianna Brand.

The Wise Woman's position could be interpreted as based on what MacIntyre notes is a premise of Socrates, 'that restraint within the personality and between people is a condition of their well-being' (MacIntyre 35). It follows that restraint is a condition for the well-being of the person exercising restraint, the 'when she finds herself unwilling to do the thing that is right, she makes herself do it' (MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 109) approach.

The Wise Woman opens the options to her but Rosamond has to decide for herself what is right and 'make herself do it'. The Wise Woman's

premise is that the ideal is possible and therefore her educational method is directed toward, in contemporary terminology, aspirational 'participant reaction' (Chappell 12), that is, by reacting as though Rosamond is cooperating, the Wise Woman creates the desired behaviour. The Wise Woman is therefore the agent of the behaviour which contributes to Rosamond's reconstructed identity. This is the position of the Wise Woman:

(The Wise Woman) knew exactly what she was thinking; but it was one thing to understand the princess, and quite another to make the princess understand her: that would require time (MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 32).

The Wise Woman responds to Rosamond's sullen lack of cooperation by repeating what actions she requires from Rosamond.

In order to 'reinscribe the behaviour' (McNay 176, 86,87), the Wise Woman provides an incentive, in the initial instance, food. Each time Rosamond chooses to act upon the instruction of the Wise Woman, she rejects her former mode of narrating herself to herself from a self-centred perspective and begins to look at herself more critically. By reconstructing Rosamond's narrative self the Wise Woman allows her to assess the result of her own construct from a different, critical, perspective, which brings us to the question:

Does Rosamond have a choice in her future identity construct?

In order to answer this question I will examine the part played by increasing self-knowledge and personal will, given the strength of influence employed by the Wise Woman in shaping Rosamond's perception of herself.

Before Rosamond is in a position to make any choices, the Wise

Woman teaches her what an alternative to her own perceived freedom to do as she liked might look like, and what consequences it might have. In providing an alternative way of looking at the world, the Wise Woman is framing freedom to choose in the Spinozan sense of recognising that 'emotions and desires... are ... transformable' (MacIntyre 145), that, as MacIntyre in his discussion of Spinoza writes, 'that transformation is ... to being agents, from being those whose lives are determined by factors of which they are unaware (in Rosamond's case this factor was her own self-will) to being those who are molded by themselves' (MacIntyre 145), that is, making their own choice.

Rosamond has already learnt that getting what one wants does not constitute freedom, for before her encounter with the Wise Woman,

She became more and more peevisish and fretful every day – dissatisfied not only with what she had, but with all that was around her, (MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 8)

Rosamond is regarded by the Wise Woman as subject to the individuality conferred by modernity and treats her as

a unique, conscious, responsible, discrete, bounded, coherent, choosing, acting individual equipped with a personal conscience ... a subject simultaneously of freedom... and of responsibility (Rose 301).

Agnes the Shepherd's Daughter

In order to demonstrate Rosamond's choice throughout the procedure, I need to briefly place the parallel journey of Agnes, the shepherd's daughter against Rosamond's progress. Agnes' behaviour provides insight into the amount of

freedom and responsibility given to Rosamond by mapping the contrasting reactions and choices of Agnes, against those of Rosamond.

Agnes is conceited and self-centered. This is how she appeared to those around her, with the exception of her parents, in whose eyes she could do no wrong. The Wise Woman saw her inside personality:

..... her worm had a face and shape the very image of her own; and she looked so simpering, and mawkish, and self-conscious, and silly, that she made the wise woman feel rather sick. (MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 53,54)

Efforts to persuade Agnes to become self-aware to the point of change are also strong, but she resists. She is only able to perceive her position from her own enclosed self-centeredness rather than becoming self-aware enough to see herself as others see her. Despite the apparent classlessness of the definition of 'true princesshood', Agnes' position at the end of the story raises a question related to Northrop Frye's 'blood will tell' discussion (Frye 161) mentioned earlier. Although there is no space to examine the reasons for Agnes' rejection of the Wise Woman in this paper, a continuation might address such questions as 'Was it because as a commoner she was too dense, unimaginative and insensitive to step beyond herself and her own conceit?'

It is however, Agnes' choices that foreground Rosamond's ability to choose.

Conclusion

In this brief investigation into the Wise Woman as an agent of identity I have established that Rosamond is a 'co-constructer of identity' (Schachter and Marshall 71) in that she chooses to cooperate with the Wise Woman's effort to reconstruct her identity in terms of

true princesshood. The Wise Woman is the authority who 'shapes and guides' (Rose 300) Rosamond's way of being human.

Nevertheless, Rosamond's choice to recognise and operate within an alternative narrative unity means she is not 'free' in a post-modern sense, to potentially build her life as 'a personal narrative of self-determination' (Rose 303) without reference to her context. Working within the Aristotelian concept of the 'narrative unity of life', she chooses to return to her place in society and live out her new-found identity whilst herself becoming an agent in the transformation of her parents.

Rosamond's story (or is it the Wise Woman's?) ends with a beginning, which is characteristic of MacDonald's work and places this potentially cyclical story within a mythical chronotope (Nikolajeva). This of course is GMD's didactic intention, that the truth as contained in myth will transfigure the reader's own story. (For an investigation of reader 'transfiguration' see (Pridmore)).

Rosamond is poised to continue the practices she has learnt from the Wise Woman in the education of her parents. At the end of the story, Rosamond's parents are being prepared for their own journey to the Wise Woman:

"My child", she said, "I shall never be far from you. Come to me when you will. Bring them to me." Rosamond smiled ... but kept her place by her parents (MacDonald *The Wise Woman: A Parable and Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* 142).

The main points of the narrative are as follows:

- Princess Rosamond is born
- Her behaviour worsens
- The Wise Woman is sent for
- The Wise Woman carries Rosamond away
- Rosamond begins to respond to Wise Woman
- The shepherd's daughter Agnes is introduced
- Rosamond is placed in Agnes's home
- Rosamond's education is from the shepherd, his wife and 'dog' (the dog is the Wise Woman's agent)
- Agnes is placed in palace kitchen
- Rosamond returns to palace. She is on the way to becoming a 'true princess'
- Agnes returns to country with her mother
- Her father, the shepherd goes with the Wise Woman
- Rosamond becomes an agent of identity (with the Wise Woman) in re-constructing her parents' identity

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