CHALLENGING THE FATHER, SEEKING THE MOTHER, ADDRESSING THE CHILD: SEMIOTIC ADVENTURES IN GEORGE MACDONALD'S FANTASIES

by

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Challenging the Father, Seeking the Mother, Addressing the Child: Semiotic Adventures in George MacDonald's Fantasies

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ABSTRACT

George MacDonald's fantasies written for adults (*Phantastes*, *Lilith*) and those written for children (*The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie*, *At the Back of the North Wind*) can be examined in terms of their challenge to code and doctrine. Law, logos, and ownership, tenets of the patriarchal tradition, do figure in these novels, but the fantasy landscape seems to be an ideal forum for MacDonald to explore the *possibility* of accessing an alternate place. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories of language acquisition, particularly Julia Kristeva's, I approach that dialogue as the interaction between the symbolic and the semiotic realms, and explore how MacDonald constructs his fantasy landscapes, trying to create places where the division and rigidity of the *father* is challenged by the unity and fluidity of the *mother*.

Within this larger philosophical framework, the protagonists of these novels, adult (male) in the fiction for adults, child (male and female) in the fiction for children, experience guides for their journey of discovery: MacDonald's landscape contains both feminine images that inspire the protagonists and images of the feminine that lead them. But MacDonald's view of the feminine and the degree to which "she" succeeds in leading the characters away from code and doctrine differ depending on whether MacDonald is working in the adult's or the children's forum.

The feminine, funnelled through the narrow perspective of the first-person narrators of *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, tends to appear as a "type" rather than as a fully realized being. As a result, her ability to lead the characters to an alternate realm seems to be reduced, tempered. This fragmentation is addressed in the fantasies for children, however, for children (or, as MacDonald would say, the "childlike") have a

greater capacity to accept feminine figures of enormous power and complexity: Queen Irene of the *Princess* books and the haunting North Wind blend the opposites of language, blurring boundaries and making the union of self (child) and other (mother) possible.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

George MacDonald (1824-1905) on numerous occasions wrote of his desire to leave this world and enter the realm of death and what he believed to be peace. MacDonald was, I think, just as concerned, if not more concerned, with the afterlife as with this life. For example, in a letter to his wife, Louisa, he asks, "is it not true that our life here is a growing unto life, and our death a being born--our true birth? If there is anything beautiful in this our dreamy life, shall it not shine forth in glory in the bright waking consciousness of heaven?" (in Greville MacDonald 117) MacDonald also told Louisa's sister, Caroline, that

> I cannot think of length of days as a blessing--but you must all be tired of hearing this same thing over and over again from me. Death is not an end--but a fresh beginning, the grandest birthday of all, the getting out of the lobby, into the theatre. (in Raeper 75)

MacDonald's sentiments are most certainly linked to his deep religious faith, and he did not apologize for the fact that his writing was often rather preachy and didactic: "'People,' he once remarked, 'find this great fault with me--that I turn my stories into sermons. They forget that I have a Master to serve first before I can wait upon the public'" (in Greville MacDonald 375). This aspect of MacDonald's writing may tend to alienate the modern reader, but I think there is a way to make his works, in particular his fantasies, accessible in terms of twentieth-century critical theories. When MacDonald yearns for a place beyond death, he is also yearning for a mythical place, a Golden Age, the place where division and struggle (of this rigid and time-limited patriarchal world) is swept away by unity and peace. And his fantasies both for adults and for children[1] are, I think, a forum for him to explore the possibility of such a place. For MacDonald, furthermore, the tradition of the feminine[2] is a key ingredient in this search to overcome the patriarchal[3] law. Wise

woman, angel, mother, old crone, vampire, witch--the feminine figure appears in many guises as she moves through MacDonald's fantasy landscape.

MacDonald's frequent and varied portraits of the feminine may seem surprising, for MacDonald, a Victorian male, the father of eleven(!) children, and a preacher and scholar, stands with the patriarchs of his age.[4] C.S. Lewis reminds us, in his introduction to the jointly published version of *Phantastes and Lilith*, that MacDonald's father taught him that "[f]atherhood must be at the core of the universe" (5). MacDonald's traditional classical education (in 1845 he earned an AM from King's College, Aberdeen, his studies concentrating on Chemistry, Natural and Moral Philosophy) and theological training, encouraged by his father (at Highbury Theological College he trained to be a Congregational Minister), would seem to have moulded him to be a man of his Victorian times.

At the same time, however, MacDonald associated with people like A.J. Scott who, in the mid-1800s, was raising concerns about the poor and about women, issues which would inform the Christian Socialist movement (Raeper 67-68). Further, biographical information suggests that MacDonald knew several prominent women of his time and was interested in their pursuits. His son Greville MacDonald, in his biography of his father, tells us that the MacDonalds were acquainted with Madame Bodichon, who founded Girton College (269), and "Madame Bodichon gave [my mother and father] touch or intimacy with Mrs. Reid, the founder of Bedford College, Dr. Elizabeth Garrett, Mrs. Josephine Butler, whom they loved and deeply honoured, and other advanced thinkers" (300). Similarly, William Raeper identifies in MacDonald an "urge to teach and to teach woman" and says that "it was part of his romantic ideal to elevate woman out of the drawing-room to stand beside man as an equal co-partner under God" (60).[5] MacDonald's interest in the feminine in his fantasies, then, does not come out of a vacuum. If "[f]atherhood must be at the core

of the universe" then "motherhood" is, I think, lurking on the periphery, threatening to disrupt the patriarchal core.

While my intent is not to interpret his fantasies biographically, biographical data do confirm MacDonald's interest in the feminine, an interest that is possibly translated into some of his female fictional characters. In particular, much has been made, especially by Freudian critics such as Robert Lee Wolff in *The Golden Key*, of MacDonald's mother's death when he was eight years old. But MacDonald's view of the feminine is too complex to be tied to one event, as significant as it must have been, for myth-making about the feminine formed the vocabulary of not only MacDonald's *private* realm but also Victorian society's *public* realm. Even a cursory glance at both nineteenth- and twentieth-century representations of MacDonald's socio-literary milieu shows an intense fascination with the powers of the feminine, a fascination that reaches the height of myth. For example, there is the all-pervasive image of Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House," the feminine icon of the Victorian family to whom the man returned for solace and comfort--a miniature version of Queen Victoria, who stood as the central figure in the lives of the British nation and Victorian culture.[6] This was the rather simplistic myth constructed largely by men to keep women "good" and "pure" in their eyes, untouched by the unpleasantries to be found in Victorian social, economic, and political life. Yet there is a wide tradition in literature that offers a counter-myth of the feminine,[7] chronicling the secret powers that inevitably lurk behind such a unitary portrait. If women such as the "Angel" were confined to back rooms and attics in the Victorian period, limited to domestic activities, literature would often open up their sphere of influence. Many critics note that while society repressed women economically and politically, something liberating often happened when they were translated from life to art. For example, in *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Nina

Auerbach states her subject as "the Victorian cultural imagination" which, "though it tries to be scientific, moral, and 'real,'" is actually quite "mythic," particularly in its creation of "an explosively mobile, magical woman, who breaks the boundaries of family within which her society restricts her" (1). MacDonald is one of many Victorian male writers whose work deserves a closer look within this socio-literary context, for he too creates magical feminine figures who resist boundaries, who defy words and laws, subverting the social and cultural structures that try to limit her.

And fantasy seems to be the ideal forum for such an investigation of feminine power. Karen Schaafsma is one of several critics who discusses fantasy "as essentially matriarchal in spirit" (52). Fantasy tends to be matriarchal rather than patriarchal because the genre is about "inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently 'new,' absolutely 'other' and different" (Jackson 8). And "Other," as Hélène Cixous points out, is the realm of the feminine, the side of language's dichotomies that is normally hidden and suppressed. In "Sorties" she dissects language's "dual, *hierarchized* oppositions" (in Marks 91) and asks "*Where is she*?" (the feminine figure for whom we're looking) and locates *her* on the hidden side of language's dichotomies:

> Activity/passivity
> Sun/Moon
> Culture/Nature
> Day/Night...
>
> Always the same metaphor... Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought--all of the concepts, the codes, the values--to a two-term system, related to "the" couple man/woman? (in Marks 90-91)

Cixous' question is of course rhetorical--"He" stands on the side of reality, culture, and life, "She" stands alongside fantasy, nature, and death. MacDonald's fantasies, particularly those written for adults, bear this opposition out. In both *Phantastes* and *Lilith* the action starts with a male protagonist in the ancestral home thinking about

his father/family history who, instead of finding out about his father in the "real" world, enters the fantasy realm, a place where feminine images and images of the feminine dominate.[8] The fantasies are the place, then, where the feminine rather than the masculine is the principal guide.[9] The law of the father is usurped by the fluidity of the mother.

Current psychoanalytic theories of language acquisition provide me with a framework to discuss this struggle between (put simply) "father" and "mother" as it plays itself out in MacDonald's fantasy arena, for in turning to the fantasy genre MacDonald is challenging the very nature of reality, challenging the law of the father and his words (logos). While psychoanalytic critics such as Robert Wolff concentrate on biographical and thematic analyses of MacDonald's works, my focus in applying psychoanalytic theories of language acquisition is on the dynamics of the texts themselves--the way they construct meaning. Sigmund Freud began the psychoanalytic debate about how beings are "born" into both society and the language that structures it. Freud argues that the child's connection with the mother must inevitably be lost as the father (representative of social and cultural norms/laws, the means by which children learn to function in society) gains primacy in the life of the child. Developing Freud's speculations, Jacques Lacan argues that children are truly born when they acquire language, when they become social beings of the "symbolic order," dominated by what he calls "the Law" of the father. Prior to that (Oedipal) time, children inhabit the Imaginary/pre-Oedipal realm, the place of non-differentiation, the state where children are blissfully unaware of their separateness from the (m)other. Language, premised on definition and difference (I/you), marks the end of this union with the mother, and signals the beginning of a life-long search to regain what has been lost. Such transcendental yearning for this lost state of childhood is perhaps most commonly associated with the Romantic

poets.[10] Yet the Victorian imagination was similarly haunted by a sense of loss, most profoundly initiated by Darwin's theories on evolution, but also expressed in the rapid social and economic changes sweeping the landscape. In his fantasies I think MacDonald looks to femininity as a means of regaining (metaphorically) some of that original state of peace and fluidity that beings at one time share with the mother and lose as they grow up.

Put another way, MacDonald searches for what is described by Julia Kristeva as the "semiotic," the fleeting appearances in the symbolic realm of the pre-Oedipal state.[11] We detect the semiotic, for example, in moments of fluidity, unity, and (musical) harmony, moments "left over" in the symbolic realm from that original state of union with the mother. In Kristeva's discourse, the mother is indeed the icon of the semiotic, the space where the child experiences the unity and peace of oneness with the "other." She is the reminder that pre-differentiation existed. A discussion of the semiotic is complex, for while it is undoubtedly associated with the maternal, it is not a feminine state *per se*, because masculine/feminine is not differentiated in the semiotic realm:

> Kristeva makes it clear that like Freud and Klein she sees the pre-Oedipal mother as a figure that encompasses both masculinity and femininity.... This fantasmatic figure... cannot... be reduced to an example of "femininity," for the simple reason that the opposition between feminine and masculine does not exist in pre-Oedipality. (Moi 165)

The semiotic state, then, is the space where opposition dissolves: on a biological level it is the lack of "difference" between mother and child, but in psychoanalytic terms the state has come to represent the dissolution of male/female, life/death, culture/nature, the point at which a being is truly at one with its universe.

These explanations of the primary relationship between mother and child, the gift of life bestowed by the former on the latter, may help us to understand the

Victorians' fascination (or perhaps any culture's) with the feminine. In MacDonald's myth, the feminine icon (for example, North Wind) may at times be perceived as "mother nature" but, more than that, she is representative of the semiotic, a reminder of the unity and fluidity of the womb, and of the new meanings and potentialities that it offers. This, I argue, is the place that MacDonald aims to find in his fantasies, a place *other* than and counter to the symbolic. But the symbolic/semiotic dichotomy is not an either/or proposition; rather, it is a process of what Kristeva calls "play," or *jouissance*:

> if the overly constraining and reductive meaning of a language made up of universals causes us to suffer, the call of the unnamable, on the contrary, issuing from those borders where signification vanishes, hurls us into the void of a psychosis that appears henceforth as the solitary reverse of our universe, saturated with interpretation, faith, or truth. Within that vise, our only chance to avoid being neither master nor slave of meaning lies in our ability to ensure our mastery of it [language] (through technique or knowledge) as well as our passage through it (through play or practice). In a word, *jouissance*. (*Desire* x)

Thus the symbolic and the semiotic exist not in isolation but rather in dynamic interaction, each needing the other, for the symbolic's language is restrictive and the semiotic's pre-language state is madness. There exists the need both to express possibility through language and to challenge language in favour of (new) possibility. I do not know what MacDonald would call this "play," but the way in which he manoeuvres around/through language via the feminine is worthy of further study in relation to such theories of language acquisition.

Yet the degree to which the protagonists find a "passage" through language seems to depend on whether MacDonald is working in the adult or children's forum. MacDonald's fantasies are indeed replete with both feminine images (water, tunnels, the moon) and images of the feminine (Lilith, Queen Irene, North Wind)--powerful images that challenge the law and language that inform the symbolic order. In the

fantasies written for adults, however, while feminine images such as the moon serve as a guide and source of solace in the fantasy landscape, the images of the feminine form a complex and sometimes contradictory collage--there are virgins, wise women, and mothers, but there are also witches and vampires. Most every "archetype of the goddess"[12] is contained within the pages of *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. The effect of these portraits is, I think, to render femininity fragmented, broken apart. Through the eyes of the first-person narrators Anodos and Vane, femininity appears ultimately as bits and pieces. And the feminine's location in the text also seems to be a product of this (central) masculine viewpoint, for she is relegated largely to the margins, the wilderness of the fantasy landscape. As Jennifer Waelti-Walters points out, such a strategy helps to preserve the male centre:

> In a patriarchal society such as ours, woman is kept apart from all positions of power, all policy making, all situations in which she might pose a threat to the phallocratic status quo, in the most logical and efficient way possible: she is kept apart from herself. (2)

When MacDonald breaks his vision of the feminine into "types" I think he is keeping her "apart from herself," keeping apart elements that, if combined, would be infinitely more powerful.

In the fantasies for children, however, these portraits of the feminine come together to become one strong mother image. Though the mother is one of *many* archetypes of the feminine, one must not underestimate the power of the mother image in literature and culture: she is perhaps the most complex of the archetypes, embodying, among other things, "the magic authority of the female, wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcends reason, all that cherishes, sustains, grows and fosters fertility" (Mascetti 48). Such overwhelming power must also, I think, evoke awe and fear in those with whom she comes in contact. Edith Lazaros Honig makes that point in her book *Breaking the Angelic Image: Woman Power in Victorian*

Children's Fantasy, discussing the mother's primary power over the child, the god-like power she has over not only life but also death:

> [L]et us not forget that the first power figure a child ever really encounters is his or her mother. She not only has given the child life, but assuming that the mother is the child's primary caretaker, she holds the power of life and death over the infant. To the young child, Mother is all-powerful, like a god. In fact, the child's early psychological perception of Mother is much closer to the portrayal of the magical woman than it would be to any more realistic portrayal of a mother. (114)

Psychoanalysts also point out the mother's tremendous powers. Coppelia Kahn says that "because a woman is the first significant other through whom both girls and boys realize subjectivity, women in general become charged with the ambivalence of fear and desire which is the inevitable by-product of that process" (72). Mothers have tremendous (and subversive) powers, reflected most strongly in the miraculous transformative nature of their bodies. And this power becomes clear, I think, when the (disjointed) images of the feminine come together in the mother images of MacDonald's *Princess* books and *At the Back of the North Wind*.

* * *

In Chapter I, "Fragmented Femininity: *Phantastes* and *Lilith*," I examine Anodos and Vane, the adult male protagonists of these two fantasies written for adults. Though they find themselves in a fantasy landscape, they frequently refer back to the norms of the "real" world, with its law, language, and division. That is, the symbolic realm haunts them even as they yearn for an(other) place. As a result, I think the male perspective is limited in its ability to accept the empowering influences of the feminine. MacDonald's male, adult heroes experience and seem to accept feminine *images* (ecstatic plunges into bodies of water, for example), but

there is no one feminine *figure* who encloses the opposites of language, who acts as the primary guide to an alternate place of understanding. Rather, the adult perspective seems to render her fragmented, scattered across the landscape. It is as if the feminine, via the adult (male) perspective, is unable to inhabit one body, unable to form a complete and comforting being.

Chapter II, "The Angel in the Attic: The *Princess* books," by contrast, offers (MacDonald's interpretation of) the child's perspective on the feminine. Irene in *The Princess and the Goblin* is the only character with the special "vision" (the unique child's perspective, less influenced than adults by the symbolic because chronologically closer to the pre-Oedipal stage of non-differentiation) that is needed to see her great-great-grandmother. Queen Irene impresses upon Irene the importance of faith and open-mindedness, introducing her to a world of peace and magic. Curdie is a non-believer in the first *Princess* book, but in *The Princess and Curdie* he too experiences Queen Irene and is taught that (symbolic) words and laws do not necessarily lead to true understanding. Queen Irene contains the tremendous power to enlighten the children because she embodies the opposites of language, blending the feminine elements that were split apart in the fantasies for adults into one unified mother body. Her body overcomes fragmented femininity, serving as a window onto a greater realm of peace and fluidity, perhaps the semiotic, in Kristevan psychoanalytic terms.

In Chapter III, "Diamond's Semiotic Adventure at the Back of the North Wind," I discuss *At the Back of the North Wind* as MacDonald's most powerful expression of the semiotic realm. Diamond is initially frightened of North Wind but still open to her transcendental world. She is not only a (feminine) body but also a part of nature, her dynamic powers sweeping over the landscape. The ultimate feminine guide, she figuratively (through her words) and literally (through her

body) leads Diamond from the rigid laws of the symbolic in the "real" world of London to the fluid semiotic realm at the back of the north wiud. There, Diamond is able to experience directly (again) the oneness between self and (m)other, a sense of safety and peace.

This thesis is not meant to be an authoritative statement on all of George MacDonald's fantasies, nor the last word on the feminine in his writing. Rather, I aim to explore how MacDonald uses these fantasies to challenge rigid ideas about language and understanding, as well as determine the feminine's role in such a pursuit. By referring to various landmarks in feminism and psychoanalytic theories of language acquisition, I aim to assemble and adjust a more complete picture of MacDonald's view of the feminine. In choosing this critical approach I recognize that these speculations cannot establish a rigid "truth" or unassailable fact--rather, they become tools for creating new knowledge about the texts. Indeed, if they were to establish a unitary and once-and-for-all truth, these theories would hardly be appropriate in a study of how MacDonald *opposes* rigid law and doctrine in his writing. Lacan and Kristeva are products of an historical moment, as is MacDonald, and must be understood accordingly. But what is particularly noteworthy here is to find, some 100 years before Julia Kristeva, a remarkably accurate illustration of notions about language that only in the last twenty years or so have been developed into elaborate theories by modern French philosophers. And I would agree with Coppelia Kahn that examining works by male writers in this way is a worthwhile endeavour: "[p]art of our task as feminist critics... is to excavate that gray, shadowy region of identification, particularly male identification with the mother, and trace its influence on perceptions and depictions of women in patriarchal texts" (in Garner 88).

NOTES

[1]I make this distinction for convenience. MacDonald did say in his essay "The Fantastic Imagination": "For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five" (*A Dish of Orts*, 317). It is fairly standard in MacDonald criticism to refer to *Phantastes* and *Lilith* as "fantasies for adults," though Roderick McGillis reminds us that the "Everyman edition of 1915 places it among works 'For Children'" (Introduction to *For the Childlike*, 3).

I should qualify my use of "fantasies for children": it is not always easy to separate MacDonald's fairy stories/fairy tales (see *The Golden Key*, *The Light Princess*, and the various stories contained in *The Gifts of the Child Christ: Fairy Tales and Stories for the Childlike*, edited by Glenn Edward Sadler) from fantasy, but William Raeper makes a useful distinction. He says that the "leap from fairy-tale to fantasy is a short one, moving from a traditional to a personal structure, but retaining the deeper purpose" (321). In this paper I discuss three books (*The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie*, *At the Back of the North Wind*) which several critics have referred to as fantasies for children, including MacDonald's most recent biographer, William Raeper (319-320).

[2]I use feminine and masculine in the critical tradition asserted by Toril Moi in *Sexual / Textual Politics*:

> It has long been an established practice among most feminists to use "feminine" (and "masculine") to represent social constructs (patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms), and to reserve "female" and "male" for the purely biological aspects of sexual difference. (65)

The use of "feminine," "female," and "woman" in a paper such as this can be a slippery slope, but by using "feminine" I hope to make clear that my focus is on examining how MacDonald *constructs* our view of the "female," his versions of her.

[3]Terms such as "patriarchal" or "patriarchy" are undoubtedly not as simple as some may lead us to believe, but when I do resort to using them I refer to a wide cultural and literary tradition focussed on the father, a tradition that places control of language, law, and custom in the hands of the father/man rather than the mother/woman. The tradition may also be suggested in words such as doctrine, code, and materialism (defined in *Desire* as both related to "Marxist materialism" and "mechanistic materialism... which is related to determinism, argu[ing] from cause to effect in linear, nonreversible fashion" [16]).

[4]In his biography of MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, Greville MacDonald publishes a portrait of Victorian contemporary writers that places MacDonald with Thomas Carlyle, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, J.A. Froude, Bulwer Lytton, Lord Macaulay, W.M. Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope. Four men stand and five sit, all in proper dress with serious countenances (facing p. 353).

[5]There were some contradictions in MacDonald's behaviour, however,

especially to do with his own daughters, as William Raeper points out:

> Though he advocated a better education for women, none of his own daughters attended any higher institute of learning, except Irene who was a pupil at the Slade School of Art. MacDonald's half-sister Louie [Louisa?] was, at MacDonald's encouragement, a student at Bedford College for a time, but it seems that MacDonald needed his own daughters to help run the family enterprise. (260)

[6]See Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, for example pp. 184-189.

[7]In *Woman and the Demon* Auerbach does a good job of chronicling a counter-version of the feminine in Victorian literature. She discusses numerous figures outside the scope of my discussion, including George Eliot, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Bram Stoker, and Alfred Tennyson.

[8]When I use "feminine images" I am referring to metaphors or ideas (for example, the moon) that we (because of myth) commonly associate with the feminine and femininity; by "images of the feminine" I am referring to the way that MacDonald portrays and constructs feminine characters.

[9]The major exception to the argument that the feminine guides the protagonists in MacDonald's fantasies is the strange portrait of Mr. Raven/(later) Adam in *Lilith*. Raven seems to function somewhat as Vane's superego, his moral/moralizing guide. For example, Raven berates Vane when, at Lilith's request, he climbs a tree to fetch for her "a tiny blossom which would at once heal [her] scratches" (313) and ends up wet and startled, having "plunged in a stormy water" (314): "I told you to do nothing any one you distrusted asked you!" Raven exclaims (315). And certainly when Raven is identified as Adam and tells the story of Lilith's disobedience (318-324), his moralizing function is clear. Roderick McGillis argues: "In *Lilith*, MacDonald tries to reassert the authority of masculine control which, over thirty years earlier, he had undermined in *Phantastes*" (47). The portrait of Raven/Adam perhaps suggests that this is so, but the feminine undoubtedly haunted MacDonald to the end: after all, the book is named after/for Lilith, the rebellious first female of Jewish myth. Surely this is in itself telling.

[10]MacDonald was inspired by the Romantics, especially S.T. Coleridge. See, for example, Raeper pp. 110-112 and pp. 238-242. Though it is outside the boundaries of this paper, Romantic influences are especially significant to my topic in terms of the idealization of the child as a superior "seer": the view that children are chronologically closer to God and that growing up represents slowly growing apart from that link. Wordsworth expresses this sentiment in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood":

> Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy,
> But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy;
> The Youth, who daily farther from the east

Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day. (ll. 66-76)

MacDonald also feels that children have a superior vision, a greater ability to see beyond the common and everyday, for his child protagonists in the *Princess* books and *At the Back of the North Wind* develop a relationship and a connection with the "feminine" that is not achieved by the adult male protagonists of *Phantastes* and *Lilith*.

[11]In his introduction to Kristeva's *Desire*, Leon S. Roudiez points out that the semiotic, as relating to Plato's *chora* ("receptacle"), is "anterior to any space, an economy of primary processes articulated by Freud's instinctual drives (*Triebe*) through condensation and displacement, and where social and family structures make their import through the mediation of the maternal body" (6). On the other hand, the "symbolic process refers to the establishment of sign and syntax, paternal function, grammatical and social constraints, symbolic law" (6-7).

[12]Manuela Dunn Mascetti, for example, in her book *The Song of Eve*, identifies six main "archetypes of the goddess": Virgin, Creator and Destroyer, Lover and Seductress, Mother, Priestess and Wise Woman, Muse and Inspirer. MacDonald's portraits of the feminine explore, I think, this wide range of feminine experience.

CHAPTER I

FRAGMENTED FEMININITY: *PHANTASTES* AND *LILITH*

Phantastes (1858) and *Lilith* (1895) can be examined in terms of how their narratives challenge law and doctrine. In his introduction to *Phantastes and Lilith*, jointly published in 1964, C.S. Lewis reminds us that George MacDonald learned from his father that "[f]atherhood must be at the core of the universe" (5). Put another way, Lewis recognizes that the tenets of what those critics influenced by Lacanian thought refer to as the symbolic--the Law, the father, logos, and so on--inform MacDonald's understanding of his world. It is an all-encompassing belief for, as Terry Eagleton puts it, Western philosophy itself is "'logocentric', committed to a belief in some ultimate 'word', presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation of all our thought, language and experience" (131). But if MacDonald took this teaching to heart and held "fatherhood" at the centre of his world, then "motherhood" is, I think, lurking on the periphery, threatening to disrupt the patriarchal core.

The beginnings of both MacDonald's first fantasy for adults, *Phantastes*, and his last, *Lilith*, suggest how the texts will proceed. In both novels the action starts with a male protagonist in the ancestral home, Anodos and Vane respectively, thinking about his father/family history. Instead of discovering the father in their "real" world, however, they enter the fantasy realm, a place where feminine imagery and images/portraits of the feminine dominate. In *Phantastes* Anodos is trying to learn something of his "father, whose personal history was unknown to [him],"[1] yet the first figure with whom he comes in contact is a woman: "[Her eyes] filled me

with an unknown longing. I remembered somehow that my mother died when I was a baby. I looked deeper and deeper, till they spread around me like seas, and I sank in their waters" (18). "Unknown longing.... somehow" transports Anodos to a fluid landscape. Anyone familiar with Julia Kristeva's descriptions of the semiotic state will notice the suggestiveness of this passage, for the semiotic process is not only "instinctual and maternal" but also characterized by introducing "wandering or fuzziness into language" (*Desire* 136). (Symbolic) language, reductive and unitary, is unable to define events--hence the use of "somehow." In this way the linearity of family history (continuity and certainty) has been interrupted; an alternate reality has been invoked.

Similarly, in *Lilith* the protagonist Vane experiences an(other) realm, where rules are abandoned and, by extension, lawlessness reigns. He asks, when he finds himself in the world beyond the mirror (shades of *Alice*),[2] "Had I wandered into a region where both the material and psychical relations of our world had ceased to hold? Might a man at any moment step beyond the realm of order, and become the sport of the lawless?" (193) The image of the mirror here is provocative: in Lacanian theory the "mirror phase" signifies the identification of the subject as he enters the symbolic realm. Here, however, the passage through the mirror causes Vane to *lose* his identity: he feels that "now, alas, I am nobody!" (197) In MacDonald's fantasy landscape a man may indeed at any time "step beyond the realm of order" which, in *Lilith*, is located not just in the ancestral home (suggesting continuity of family line and family name), but the *library* (suggesting logos, law) of the ancestral home. And beyond the realm of order is a strange, fantasy landscape that in various ways challenges the symbolic realm, presumably leaving behind the law and doctrine of the family home. The degree to which the masculine perspective accepts this challenge is, however, limited. This is not surprising for, as Kristeva puts it, "the

reinstatement of maternal territory into the very economy of language does not lead its questioned subject-in-process to repudiate its symbolic disposition" (*Desire* 137).

Words, Words, Words--Staving off the symbolic

Greville MacDonald says of his father that "he accepts doubt itself as 'the hammer that breaks the windows clouded with human fancies and lets in the pure light'" (371). MacDonald indeed evokes doubt in his fantasies, subverting the words upon which the symbolic realm's power and surety rests. MacDonald's narrative techniques[3] hardly deserve to be put in the same category as those of twentieth-century writers such as Virginia Woolf, celebrated and studied for their narrative experiments, but there are some important things to say about the way he constructs meaning in his fantasies. Such modernist experiments challenge the linearity and unitary meaning that are inherent in the use of words, challenge "The Law" of the father, as Lacan puts it, and MacDonald in his own way also challenges such a stance from the outset of both his fantasy novels for adults. At the beginning of *Phantastes* Anodos prepares to explore his deceased father's "old secretary" that contains his "private papers"; Anodos speculates that the papers may tell him about his father's "personal history" or may be "the records of lands and moneys" (15-16). That is, the papers are Anodos' connection to his father (suggesting ancestry, the patriarchy) or perhaps his father's possessions (suggesting the goal of the patriarchy to own, gather, control). But we never find out about these papers; rather, "a tiny woman-form" emerges from the secretary to give him a lecture on how size does not necessarily indicate ability (deriding the patriarchal code that relates size and money with

strength and power).

There is a family manuscript in *Lilith* as well and, unlike Anodos, Vane does read his father's manuscript. It tells, however, not of the continuity of family history but of the chaotic fantasy world that *disrupts* family history and the rules which bind it. This episode, furthermore, seems more conducive to the fantasy realm than the handling of the manuscript in *Phantastes*. Here we discover that the family's patriarch (not just the son) must confront the "other" realm and be terrified by its powers: "I rushed in terror from the place," Vane's father writes. The manuscript underlines the fact that the fantasy world has a past (and undoubtedly a future); Vane's father feels compelled to pass this new and troubling knowledge on to the son, convincingly placing the continuity of family history in question. He describes the world beyond the mirror as "so much another that most of its physical and many of its mental laws are different from those of this world" (220). The power of the word and the sanctity/centrality of ancestral learning is challenged in other ways as well. The novel starts with Vane in the family library (surrounded by logos!), yet the reliability of the word is immediately called into question. He thinks he sees "a tall figure reaching up a hand to a bookshelf" and later finds "a gap in the row where [a book] should have stood" (188). Later, however, the book reappears. Vane also discovers that what appear to be books on one of the walls are "bookbacks only" and "[t]o complete the illusion of it, some inventive workman apparently had shoved in, on the top of one of the rows, a part of a volume thin enough to lie between it and the bottom of the next shelf" (189). Books seem to be playing tricks on Vane and he expresses doubt about the power of books not long after his entry into the fantasy landscape. Alone and alienated, he says that "[h]itherto I have loved my Arab mare and my books more, I fear, than live man or woman; now at length my soul was athirst for a human presence" (235).

What Vane wants here is something solid and real, but the very "solidity" or surety of words is questioned in both novels. Kristeva asserts that words are heterogenous rather than solid because of the semiotic, which is outside of, but "always in sight of," the symbolic (*Desire* 133). This subversive process, where unitary meaning is questioned, seems to be at work in *Phantastes*. Anodos describes how the grass and daisies of his carpet, under the influence of water (the feminine element *par excellence*, as Toril Moi puts it [117]) from the overflowing basin,

> seemed to wave in a tiny breeze that followed the water's flow; while under the rivulet they bent and swayed with every motion of the changeful current, as if they were about to dissolve with it, and, forsaking their fixed form, become fluent as the waters. (19)

Grass and daisies, supposedly static representations on a carpet, threaten to come alive and defy their identity, showing that the use of words to describe reality is not a stable proposition. As Anodos points out early on in the novel, "There is no use trying to account for things in Fairy Land" (33). When Anodos *is* able "to account for things," however, he must suspend usual modes of understanding: walking through Fairy Land, he says that "I began to feel in some degree what the birds meant in their songs, though I could not express it in words" (42). Vane summarizes that "all [is] vague and uncertain" beyond the mirror (193), and adds that "the best choice I can make of word or phrase is but an adumbration of what I would convey" (194).

These protagonists have trouble conveying meaning because education/ reason, the domain of the symbolic realm (largely the domain of men in the Victorian period) is called into question: the woman whom Anodos meets in the cottage tells him that she would be ill "if [she] did not live on the borders of the fairies' country," that she would be ill if not for the nourishment of the undefined, unknowable aspects of the fairy country. She adds that, "I see by your eyes that you are not quite free of the same need; though from your education and the activity of

your mind, you have felt it less than I" (23). The ability to "see" the true nature of, for example, the oak-tree, dangerous at night, is equated with "how much of the fairy nature there is in you" (26) and "education and the activity of [the] mind" is suggested to be a hindrance to such insight. Further, in *Lilith* Raven (who often speaks in riddles) tells Vane that "I went through all in your library--at the time, and came out at the other side not much the wiser" (204). Vane asks in frustration, "how was life to be lived in a world of which I had all the laws to learn?" (204) (Vane, not surprisingly, assumes that the laws to which he is accustomed must be replaced by new laws, new codes). But Vane sees the attraction of his situation as well: "There would, however, be adventure! that held consolation; and whether I found my way home or not, I should at least have the rare advantage of knowing two worlds!" (204)

Feminine Alternatives

These techniques, I think, suggest MacDonald's interest in challenging the symbolic structures that inform our "real" world. Anodos and Vane, at the beginning of their respective novels, look to history/texts for guidance, but "answers" seem to lie elsewhere, not in the law of the father but rather in the *lawlessness* of the mother.[4] Indeed, when MacDonald talks in *Lilith* about "the sport of the lawless," it is the lawlessness of not only the fantasy landscape, but the *feminine* fantasy landscape to which he refers. MacDonald's fantasies for adults become a forum where boundaries dissolve, where the patriarchal centre of the ancestral home gives way to feminine elements, where the "One" gives way to the power of the "Other." This "Other" is expressed metaphorically through fantasy landscapes that contain

feminine elements such as water, where the feminine moon (rather than the masculine sun) frequently shines, where images of labyrinthine passageways/tunnels and uterine caves are commonplace. It is, for example, a water element, the basin in Anodos' bedroom overflowing, that initiates the action in *Phantastes*. This invading water animates not only images in his room such as the flowers on the carpet, but also the protagonist's *psychic* landscape, preparing him for his adventure. The feminine element opens up a world in which he can see "the path into Fairy Land, which the lady of last night promised I should so soon find" (20). Water imagery indeed recurs throughout the novel. While at the fairy palace, Anodos says that

> the heat of the sun soon became too intense even for passive support. I therefore rose, and sought the shelter of one of the arcades.... The whole of the floor of this hall, except a narrow path behind the pillars, paved with black, was hollowed into a huge basin, many feet deep, and filled with the purest, most liquid and radiant water.... I dived, and swam beneath the surface. And here was a new wonder. For the basin, thus beheld, appeared to extend on all sides like a sea. (78-79)

Anodos here escapes the (masculine) heat of the sun for the safety and refreshment of the (feminine) water. Later, Anodos' diving into the "heaving abyss" (128) (surely with sexual connotations--pure delight in the feminine) is described as "[a] blessing, like the kiss of a mother [which] seemed to alight on [his] soul" (128).[5]

The domineering, if not unbearable, (masculine) sun is countered in the fantasies in another way: frequently, in both *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, it is in the company of the (feminine) moon that both Anodos and Vane find some solace in this strange landscape. During the day, under the light of the sun, Anodos' shadow haunts him, but when night falls the moon, for a time, offers some comfort: the "moon shone, I watched her light slowly descending the wall, as I might have watched, adown the sky, the long, swift approach of a helping angel. Her rays touched me, and I was free" (161). Likewise in *Lilith* the moon protects Vane from

strange creatures in the night: he says that, "I know now it was that the moon paralysed them... [t]hough hers was no primal radiance, it so hampered the evil things, that I walked in safety" (229). But later, when the "moon went below, and the world went dark" (231) in preparation for the dawn, fear again descends on him in the following chapter, entitled "The Evil Wood."

Both novels end with a sense of hope and celebration that is explicitly related to the protagonist's experience not just of the feminine elements but of the place, ultimately, to which they may lead the follower: in Kristevan philosophy this may be described as the semiotic, the mysterious pre-Oedipal state that breaks through the surface of the symbolic, challenging its beliefs and defying its boundaries. At the end of *Phantastes*, Anodos describes an experience that seems to rise above the data of the text, a blissful reunion with the mother, a semiotic homecoming of sorts: "Now I lay in her bosom, the whole earth, and each of her many births, was as a body to me, at my will. I seemed to feel the great heart of the mother beating into mine, and feeding me with her own life, her own essential being and nature" (178). Division and opposition are dissolved as Anodos becomes one with the cosmic maternal body.

Similarly, Vane's ascent with Lona to "a great city" (416) is described in terms of the blending of opposites: the experience is described both in terms of the father ("the altar of the Father's never-ending sacrifice to his children" [413]) and the mother (Vane sees his mother, and Lona sees "lots o' mothers!" [416]). Vane exclaims that the

> world and my being, its life and mine, were one. The microcosm and macrocosm were at length atoned, at length in harmony! I lived in everything; everything entered and lived in me.... Now I knew that life and truth were one; that life mere and pure is in itself bliss. (412-413)

MacDonald describes a state of non-differentation, the dissolving of binary opposition. In this way the experience has an affinity with the semiotic, which is

neither masculine nor feminine, for binaries do not exist in that state. The above descriptions are also consistent with MacDonald's personal/religious beliefs about death. MacDonald called God "Him who is Father and Mother both in one" and "father and mother and home" (in Raeper 262). But while the protagonists may here joyously experience a semiotic state at the novels' finales, replete with feminine images, a different picture emerges when feminine *figures* are involved. Whereas in the fantasies for children, to be discussed in Chapters II and III, I think there is a close relationship between the feminine figure and a semiotic experience, the adult protagonists here cannot seem to derive such pleasure from the feminine figures. Roderick McGillis[6] makes some interesting points about how MacDonald's *Phantastes* and *Lilith* "press towards a vision of mutuality in which the divisions of masculine and feminine, life and death, body and spirit are no more" (32), but I think he simplifies the issue. If "the divisions of masculine and feminine" struggle throughout the novels, and if this struggle is resolved, then it is done at the expense of the feminine side of the equation.

The feminine on the margins

While feminine images in the fantasies for adults may provide some solace and protection, MacDonald's *images of the feminine* are much more ambivalent. When feminine images become embodied, they tend to be reduced to simplistic types rather than rendered as fully realized characters who may lead the protagonists to greater understanding. Feminine images such as water and the moon create a sensuous backdrop to the novels, but images of the feminine do not occupy the foreground;

rather, they are relegated to the wilderness, the margins.[7] When MacDonald creates feminine figures, figures who may, in ideal circumstances, help the characters find alternatives to their narrow views, they instill in the protagonists fear and confusion rather than peace and comfort.

The feminine figures' centrality in the texts is doubtful from the start, for they inhabit the margins, as if the male perspective is trying to keep their powers at a distance. Lilith is kept at bay, for example, through MacDonald's narrative techniques. Lilith comes into the text early on when Vane visits "The Cemetery" and finds "the form of a beautiful woman, a little past the prime of life. One of her arms was outside the sheet, and her hand lay with the palm upward, in its centre a dark spot" (214-215). A short time later she turns up during a battle of phantoms: "The moon shone till the sun rose, and all the night long I had glimpses of a woman moving at her will above the strife-tormented multitude.... I saw her dead eyes and her dark spot, and recalled what I had seen the night before" (234). It is Adam finally who names Lilith as the creature with the "open wound" (322) and places her within Jewish myth as Adam's rebellious first wife, whose first and only thought was power and insurrection. But up until that time Lilith moves mysteriously and silently through the text, like a leopard (her alter-ego) in the jungle. Lilith's identity is, for much of the book, withheld by a technique of "deferred or postponed significance," as Gérard Genette puts it (57). By delaying understanding in the novel, MacDonald both underlines the mysterious powers of the woman whom we will come to know as Lilith, and accentuates the hero's vulnerability in this world (it is more difficult, of course, to combat the enemy of whom you are not aware). MacDonald's technique here, however, may have another effect--to reduce Lilith to the narrative's sidelines for much of the book. She is strangely submerged, lost in a story that bears her name. I think that the text's contents here reflect and endorse Vane's ambivalent

feelings toward Lilith. He is fascinated yet fearful of her powers; he will be enslaved by her, yet "she only fascinated me," he says (306). The male perspective, vulnerable in the face of this contradictory state, undoubtedly holds the feminine at a distance to both reduce her power and increase his.

Roderick McGillis says that many women in *Phantastes* "have no room to roam, but rather are confined to cottages, to blocks of alabaster, to infancy, or to the ground" (42), but I would disagree. Feminine figures are most likely to be found wandering on the margins of the fantasy landscape, wandering in the wilderness. After all, the first thing that Anodos' alabaster woman does when he frees her from the stone is run out of the cave, away from him, and into the wilderness: "There arose a slightly crashing sound. Like a sudden apparition that comes and is gone, a white form, veiled in a light robe of whiteness, burst upwards from the stone, stood, glided forth, and gleamed away towards the woods" (47). She is "found, freed, lost!" Anodos says (48) (lost according to him, not necessarily her!). Lilith, the central female figure in MacDonald's later fantasy, is similarly associated with the wilderness. Though she has civic power as Princess of Bulika, the first powerful image we get of her is her naked body, near death, collapsed by the side of a stream, vulnerable in the forest (274). Her cut-off hand, buried by Vane in the desert at the novel's dénouement, similarly confirms her place on the margins.

Carving a place out of the landscape

An analysis of the feminine's position in the landscape is revealing, as Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar assert in their groundbreaking work *The Madwoman in the*

Attic. They examine how, in fiction written by women, physical isolation affects both the female writer and the heroine of her fiction. They argue that female writers tend to see the landscape (or, more broadly speaking, society) as a dangerous place because of the "patriarchal" sun that beats down relentlessly (or the patriarchal laws and customs that bind women). Thus, women take refuge in rooms and caves, trying to remain hidden and safe, all the while becoming even more isolated, more alienated from the world. Gilbert and Gubar explain:

> Detached from herself, silenced, subdued, this woman artist tried in the beginning, as we shall see, to write like an angel in the house of fiction: with Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, she concealed her own truth behind a decorous and ladylike facade.... But as time passed and her cave-prison became more constricted, more claustrophobic, she 'fell' into the gothic/Satanic mode and, with the Brontës and Mary Shelley, she planned mad or monstrous escapes, then dizzily withdrew... from those open spaces where the scorching presence of the patriarchal sun... emphasized her vulnerability. Since 'creation seemed a mighty crack' to make her 'visible,' she took refuge again in the safety of the 'dim hypaethic cavern' where she could be alone with herself, with a truth that was hers even in its fragmentation. (101-102)

Elaine Showalter also points out the connection between women, madness, and confinement in her study of women's fate at the hands of the psychiatric profession in both Victorian and modern times, entitled *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*.

The "madwoman," then, is both the protagonist and the writer who creates her; both are isolated, the feminine figure because she cannot participate in the mainstream of the fictive world (*Jane Eyre*'s Bertha, the original madwoman, is unacceptable, sexually and otherwise), the writer because of the deep frustrations that she can only express in and through her writing. But for each woman, the place that she carves out of the landscape is her own to explore, her own in which to create, fragmented though it may be. Significantly, MacDonald also writes of fragmented feminine figures, but his is a *masculine* rather than a *feminine* interpretation of the dilemma. His feminine figures are not hiding, but rather

vulnerable and exposed in the landscape. If female writers hide their protagonists in caves to protect them from the patriarchal sun then MacDonald, I suggest, seems to expose them so they can be fully seen--still marginalized, but visible rather than hiding in a cave. This seems to be a technique of his fantasies for adults: in the *Princess* books, which I discuss in Chapter II, MacDonald creates a central feminine figure more in the tradition of women writers, a mysterious, hidden figure. But in the child's forum this figure, though confined, is not fragmented--rather, she is able to derive power and magic from her situation. In the fantasies for adults, however, the feminine, object of the masculine eye/I, seen through *his* first-person narrative, does not have a "room of her own," does not have a safe (though isolated) place where she can assert her powers and creativity. Rather, she is exposed in the landscape, fragmented into bits by the masculine, first-person narratives controlled by Anodos and Vane.

The feminine figures are fragmented most profoundly because they are expressed in (stereo)types (angel/whore, beautiful young virgin/old crone and so on) scattered across the landscape. MacDonald's portraits here are an expression, I think, of what has been observed as the Victorian tendency to reduce women to simplistic "types," most profoundly expressed in the angel/whore split.[8] Just as the practice of reducing women to "types" reduced their contributions to society and kept control of the (feminine) *object* in the hands of the (masculine) *subject*, so too does MacDonald's view of the feminine in his fantasies for adults reduce her power. By fragmenting her in the fantasies for adults MacDonald, I think, represses and neutralizes her powers--a technique of divide and conquer, so to speak. In *Phantastes*, for example, Anodos comes across a Wise Woman[9] who "[feeds] him like a baby" (131), sings old ballads to him, spins, and shows him a secret "mark" (137) by which he may find his way back. We may think that, as a Wise Woman, she is a positive

representation of the feminine but, still, she is a "type" rather than a fully realized character. In her typical capacity, she is there only to serve him; he feels that "she could give me everything I wanted; as if I should never wish to leave her, but would be content to be sung to and fed by her, day after day, as years rolled by" (135-136).

That the Wise Woman of *Phantastes* is not particularly complex becomes more clear when we meet the helping figure in the children's books, where the "Wise Woman," Princess Irene's great-great-grandmother, embodies great complexity, both good and evil, safety and threat. In discussing *Phantastes*, Roderick McGillis points out that

> [u]ntil late in the book, the females Anodos meets--Alder-maiden, beech, marble lady, country maiden, old crone, and elderly lady--fall into these categories; either they offer Anodos beauty, gratification, protection, service, or they threaten him with emasculation, loss of identity, pollution, enslavement. (41)

Perhaps such typecasting is the price the "Angel" must pay for leaving the confines of the house or cave--subjected to/object of the male eye, she is envisioned as a unitary rather than a heterogenous being. Nor is she a fully realized character, however, as an "Angel in the House." Feminine figures are seen here largely as good or evil, little or big, beautiful or ugly rather than as beings of depth and complexity. Such dichotomies are blended in the children's fantasies, to be discussed in Chapters II and III, but here they do not seem able to inhabit one body.

In *Lilith*, likewise, Lilith's evil is not countered within herself but through three other female characters: Lona, Eve, and Mara. Nina Auerbach theorizes that "MacDonald... dilutes his queen [Lilith] by counterbalancing her ambition against the benevolent wisdom of Eve, Mara, and Lona, three 'good' ruling women" (38). But these women are also well-known types: Michael Mendelson describes Eve as "immortal deity," Mara as "tender mother," and Lona as "virginal lover" (208).[10] Put another way, women are presented in pairs in *Lilith*, not as single, unified subjects:

in MacDonald's loose version of the creation myth, Lilith and Eve, historically the first women, one choosing rebellion, one submission, are each given daughters, Lona and Mara, one naive and wan, the other worldly and aggressive. Yet, near the end of *Lilith*, Lilith meets both Mara and then Eve in what may be a movement in the book toward reconciliation (in itself indicating that there is a process of fragmentation in the novel). In Mara's House of Bitterness Lilith has her evil taken from her: "Like her mother [Eve], in whom lay the motherhood of all the world, Mara put her arms around Lilith, and kissed her on the forehead. The fiery-cold misery went out of her eyes, and their fountains filled" (378). Later, at Raven/Adam's house, we see "Eve with Lilith in her arms" (386) in the chamber of death. The contemporary feminist theologian Judith Plaskow recognizes the significance of a reconciliation between Eve and Lilith when she rewrites the Book of Genesis to include a meeting between the two first women of the world. Eve comes across Lilith and

> [a]t first sight of her, Eve remembered the tales of Adam and was frightened, but Lilith understood and greeted her kindly. "Who are you?" they asked each other. "What is your story?" and they sat and spoke together, of the past and then of the future. They talked for many hours, not once, but many times. They taught each other many things, and told each other stories...
>
> And God and Adam were expectant and afraid the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together. (in Rigney 93)

But it is inequality between the opposites (Lilith's repentance) that makes possible the meeting in MacDonald's version of the myth, not the sense of equality and togetherness described above. Plaskow suggests, perhaps, why MacDonald does not allow for a more meaningful interaction between the two women in his story, for she touches on the masculine fear of the feminine (here unified and enlightened) as *threat*: "God and Adam [are] expectant and afraid" when Eve and Lilith, a potentially powerful combination, join forces. So in *Lilith* the two women are not allowed to team up; the "good" and "evil" mother are kept apart until Lilith transforms

(relinquishes her evil), and thus a transcendental figure is, I think, kept at bay. In MacDonald's version of the myth, Lilith must be "defeated," as she puts it (378), before a resolution to the story is possible. Lilith cannot, in MacDonald's version of the myth, fight Adam; she is co-opted by good and redeemed, torn away from her *self*. MacDonald may have seen Lilith's redemption as positive, but that is a masculine version of her story.[11]

Feminine shapes/shapeshifters

The feminine figures are able, however, to a certain extent, to elude the patriarchy's attempt to pin down, define, restrict. The masculine perspective may attempt to identify and shape the feminine figures with which it comes in contact, but when feminine figures take a shape, they are often *shapeshifters*--strange and changeable. The "tiny woman-form" whom Anodos finds in the secretary at the beginning of *Phantastes* hops onto the floor to become "a tall, gracious lady" (17). And though Anodos is "overcome with the presence of a beauty which [he] could now perceive" (17), she informs him that she is actually 237 years old and may even be his grandmother. And women change not only size but also form. MacDonald's view is not simply an "imaginative association of women with monstrosity" (Auerbach 65). The great anti-mother, Lilith, not only embodies monstrosity--she *becomes / is* monstrosity. Vane comes across a (yet-to-be-named) Lilith, who transforms before his eyes:

> Suddenly pressing both hands on her heart, she fell to the ground.... she began to writhe in such torture that I stood aghast. A moment more and her legs, hurrying from her body, sped away serpents. From her

> shoulders fled her arms as in terror, serpents also. Then something flew up from her like a bat, and when I looked again, she was gone. The ground rose like the sea in a storm; terror laid hold upon me; I turned to the hills and ran. (230)

Lilith is also the "great white leech" (the vampire) who bites Vane during the night. The feminine is, in many ways, seen as destructive--not just because she/it can bite, but because you do not always know what she/it is. It is more difficult to defend yourself against an enemy that you cannot name, and what you cannot name may easily be perceived as an enemy.

Lilith is also dangerous because her past is mysterious, shifting along with her shape. When Adam reads her manuscript to Vane he is trying to expose her, pin her down with words. He is trying to chronicle her conversion to evil, and this is deplorable to her because it takes away her autonomy as an individual to make decisions about her own life and her own identity. She declares, in perhaps the strongest speech that MacDonald ever gave a feminine figure, "I am content to be to myself what I would be. What I choose to seem to myself makes me what I am. My own thought makes me me; my own thought of myself is me. Another shall not make me!" (371) In addition, by turning her back on her child Lona and ultimately killing her, she is refusing/defying the notion of ancestry from which the plots of both *Phantastes* and *Lilith* spring. Another famous feminine vampire who has a book named after her, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871),[12] also recognizes the importance of not revealing personal facts that may be used as a weapon against her. *Carmilla*'s (male) narrator says that he

> found that [Carmilla] exercised with respect to herself, her mother, her history, everything in fact connected with her life, plans, and people, an ever-wakeful reserve.... What she did tell me amounted... to nothing. It was all summed up in three very vague disclosures: First.--Her name was Carmilla. Second.--Her family was very ancient and noble. Third.--Her home lay in the direction of the west. (587)

Carmilla does not get any more specific than that, frustrating the patriarchy's desire

to pin her down to a stable proposition. She, like Lilith, does not want another to "make" her.

Feminine threats: The power of sex, the closeness of death

While the shifting aspects of the feminine figures may defy the symbolic realm, undercutting the patriarchy, they also give the patriarchy a concrete excuse to quell her powers. It is a game of power, the ultimate masculine/feminine struggle, with the feminine figures affecting the protagonists in the most basic and complete ways: life (sex) and death.[13] For example, Anodos' encounter with the alabaster woman in MacDonald's earlier fantasy has undeniably sexual connotations. They enter a small cave in which she tells him

> [a] strange tale.... It was a tale which brings back a feeling as of snows and tempests; torrents and water-sprites; lovers parted for long, and meeting at last; with a gorgeous summer night to close up the whole. I listened till she and I blended with the tale.... And we had met at last in this same cave of greenery, while the summer night hung round us heavy with love.... (53)

This appears to be a scene of sensuousness and peace, associated with the comforting feminine images that we find at the end of the novel, but Anodos' relation with this feminine *figure* (embodied femininity) turns to fear. In the morning Anodos wakes to find "a strange horrible object" at the mouth of the cave. He discovers that "[his] beauty was the Maid of the Alder" (54), a being which "looked like an open coffin set up on one end.... it had for a face and front those of my enchantress, but now of a pale greenish hue in the light of the morning, and with dead lustreless eyes" (54). He is faced with the (sexually repulsive) reality that "beauty and ugliness" are

surprisingly close, perhaps even inseparable. There is an element of sexual betrayal here as well, for she is in league with the dreaded Ash-tree.

Lilith is likewise associated with sexual threat. The original Jewish myth tells us that she rebelled because, significantly, she refused to take the submissive position during sex (Walker 541). In MacDonald's version of the story, Lilith is the ultimate sexual predator--a vampire, an un-dead, a creature who sucks Vane's blood, possibly threatening his life. Indeed, it is surely his blood rather than the warm water baths and grapes that revives Lilith. What develops in the fantasies for adults, then, is a complex interweaving of masculinity and femininity, sex and death. And in the fantasies for adults, ultimately, the combination of elements results in more fear and confusion than joy and harmony.

The texts indeed contain various mentions/images of death that are implicitly associated with the feminine. Anodos comes across a sea that "is like a sea of death, ready to ingulf and never to reveal: a visible shadow of oblivion. Yet the women sport in its waters like gorgeous sea-birds. The men more rarely enter them" (86). Women, it would seem, have a greater capacity than men to inhabit this sea of death. And in MacDonald's doctrine, death is to be wished for, desired rather than feared--men, however, are held at a distance from this state. In *Lilith* MacDonald creates a world, moreover, where men should be prepared to enter a "sea of death," symbolized by Raven/Adam and Eve's "chamber of death." This is a place, Vane is told, where you are "born" into life, but he has difficulty accepting this challenge with such abandon, perhaps because he has a literal rather than a figurative understanding of death. For the male perspective, the power of death[14] in the fantasy landscape is difficult to comprehend, particularly in terms of its association with the feminine.

Edith Lazaros Honig, in her book *Breaking the Angelic Image: Woman Power in Victorian Children's Fantasy*, indicates at least one of the reasons that the feminine,

coloured by its association with the mother, tends to be associated not only with life but with death, for "the first power figure a child ever really encounters is his or her mother. She not only has given the child life, but assuming that the mother is the child's primary caretaker, she holds the power of life and death over the infant. To the young child, Mother is all-powerful, like a god" (114). As a protector and nurturer, traditionally a woman may be associated with life/birth. But the *need* to protect and nurture suggests something from which one must be protected: it is here that the image of the feminine/life/death gets more complex. It is here that the feminine becomes a mother, becomes the magical figure who encloses life and death, comfort and fear. And it is this reality with which Anodos and Vane struggle throughout their narratives. In fact, the mother's body is explicitly rejected on several occasions in *Lilith*. For example, we discover women who "find" rather than have babies; the Little Ones go to Bulika to try to find their mothers; and Lilith, though a mother to Lona, is actually the great anti-mother, hater/murderer of children, enemy of procreation. The solace, comfort, and peace to be had from the greatest feminine figure, the mother, a vital component of the fantasies for children, as we shall see, is a missing dimension in these (adult) works. She, enclosing infinite possibility, is seen by the masculine "I" as chaotic and frightful--this is to be expected for how, after all, can the symbolic realm account for (in words) such a state of fusion and unity? It cannot, and thus the transcendental state of the mother is rendered fragmented, neutralized. Anodos and Vane are unable to access the mother body except in brief, vague descriptions at the end of each of their narratives.

Power and punishment

Karen Schaafsma points out, quite rightly, that it is the man, not Lilith or any other woman, who becomes a total being through experiencing the adventures in *Lilith*: "it is the hero in fantasy who, in moving through the darkness to the light, comes to represent the possibility of human wholeness. The nature of the hero reveals the attempt to embody a balance of masculine and feminine" (60). But during this process, where is the feminine, and what does "she" embody? I think that she stands on the margins of this process, circling the male centre, inhabiting the text largely to make possible the male revelation (mostly inspired by transitory feminine images of nature, water, the moon) that understanding comes from dynamic and opposing elements, that understanding is not just culture, activity, and words, but nature, passivity, and silence. He is able to reach this point because "she" does not--she is used by him rather than participating as an equal in the discovery. The fact that she is also dangerous, fragmented, a shapeshifter, hints at her relationship with the mysterious unknown, which man must conquer in order to complete his own journey.

Roderick McGillis believes that *Phantastes* and *Lilith* "press towards a vision of mutuality in which the divisions of masculine and feminine, life and death, body and spirit are no more" (32). Edmund Cusick, in his paper "MacDonald and Jung," focusses on MacDonald's search for the anima, in Jungian psychology the feminine side of "man's" personality. In these feminist and psychological interpretations, critics tend to focus on the heroes' finding the anima, breaking down binary oppositions, and so on, but I think such interpretations tend to overlook the fact that the binaries dissolve at the expense of the feminine side of the equation. For

example, Lilith contains dynamic opposition near the end of her story: Mara states that Lilith "is far away from us, afar in the hell of her self-consciousness. The central fire of the universe is radiating into her the knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge of what she is. She sees at last the good she is not, the evil she is" (373). But this state of duality precipitates her defeat, not her empowerment. At this moment I think she has been reduced to virtually nothing as a character, subdued so that Vane can complete his ascent to the great city with Lona, the "good" mother of the Little Ones, not the murderous one.

* * *

George MacDonald begins and ends his writing career with strange, chaotic views of the feminine and the role she may play in the search for a realm of unity and peace. It is in between, in some of his fantasies written for children, that we find a more focussed, integrated view of her and the powers she may embody. It is as if children, unlike adults, have the permission to explore the powers of the feminine, culminating in the experience of the mother body. In MacDonald's fantasies for children a more complete, unified version of the feminine begins to emerge, one with the ability to awaken the fictional characters to a place of order and peace, a state perhaps approaching the semiotic that is largely denied the male protagonists in the fantasies for adults.

MacDonald's fantasies for adults ride a tight line between *exploring* the feminine and *controlling* the feminine. I think it is clear in *Phantastes* and *Lilith* that MacDonald, to a certain extent, wanted to challenge codes, to challenge divisive ways of thinking and writing. But the results are strange. Even in the fantasy landscape the male protagonists are continually influenced by the symbolic realm,

the means by which they understand the (real) world. This is not surprising for, as Kristeva points out, we can only experience the semiotic realm in bits and pieces because it is pre-language, and we need language to function in society. But throughout the fantasies for adults I sense that the male protagonists desire to break free of laws that limit and bind, yet fear the consequences of such an action, fear the madness[15] that may result.

MacDonald's son Greville remarks in his biography of his father that in his works for adults there is an "atmosphere of sadness" that is not prevalent in "his fairy-tales for the young" (343). Sometimes I think that there *is* a prevalence of "sadness" in MacDonald's works for children, but the atmosphere of the fantasies for adults does, I think, consistently result in a sad, strange poignancy that derives at least in part from MacDonald's searching and grasping for something that he cannot quite seem to reach--specifically, I think it is the comfort and peace of the feminine that fascinates, inspires, and eludes him. And through his male protagonists he seems to act this process out. The fantasies for adults also suggest, I think, that the masculine perspective finds it easier to relate to *images* of the feminine than a feminine *body*. Embodied, she invokes fear and uncertainty; as images, she is submerged enough to be acceptable. In the fantasies for children, however, the child protagonists seem able to relate to her as both idea and body, philosophy (an abstract principle to which we aspire) and substance (the physical being who may take us there).

NOTES

[1]George MacDonald, *Phantastes and Lilith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), p. 16. *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, though written many years apart, were jointly published in this edition, an indication of their shared concerns. All further references to both novels are from this edition and will appear within the body of the thesis.

[2]The mirror is, of course, a favourite device to introduce the fantasy landscape, and Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books are probably the most famous example. Carroll, as has been well documented, was a friend of the MacDonald family. In fact, Carroll apparently read *Alice in Wonderland* to MacDonald's children, and decided to publish it when they heartily approved (Greville MacDonald 342). Carroll is perhaps another writer who can be explored in terms of femininity and "lawlessness."

[3]When I use the term "narrative strategy" or "narrative technique" I have in mind studies like that of Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse*. He places narrative techniques into five main chapters/categories: Order, Duration, Frequency, Mood, and Voice. Such strategies, among other things, challenge the inherent linearity of written discourse. For my purpose here, I focus on MacDonald's strategy of delaying/thwarting understanding in the traditional, patriarchal sense.

[4]As Greville MacDonald tells us, MacDonald had a strong relationship with his father, who died in 1858. Despite this, MacDonald's fantasy writings suggest that he yearned for something beyond the father (as we know, his mother died when he was eight years old). It seems ironic, furthermore, that the year MacDonald's father died is also the year that *Phantastes* was published. It is as if, on the heels of losing his father, MacDonald embarks on a quest to recover his mother.

[5]As a biographical aside, it is probably not surprising that MacDonald loved the water. As a teenager he contemplated becoming a sailor, writing to his father that "the sea is my delight" and that if his father blocks his aims "I feel I would be continually wishing and longing to be at sea" (Greville MacDonald 66). But it is later, in the imagery of his fantasies, that MacDonald forges the philosophical link between water and the feminine.

[6]Roderick McGillis' essay "*Phantastes* and *Lilith*: Femininity and Freedom" is one of the best attempts by a scholar so far to analyze MacDonald using modern feminist criticism. McGillis is especially inspired in this essay by the writings of the french feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous. Though I do not agree with all of McGillis' observations, he was one of the first critics to demonstrate how fertile MacDonald's writings are for such interpretations. In 1992 McGillis also published a fine compilation of essays on MacDonald's fantasies for children, entitled *For the Childlike*, some of which are inspired by current feminist theories.

[7]The image of women on the margins or in the "wilderness," outside of/other to male discourse, has become widespread. See, for example, Elaine Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on*

Women, Literature, and Theory, Edited by Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

[8]Much has been written about Victorian stereotypes of women, especially the angel/whore dichotomy. For example, in her book *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel*, Françoise Basch looks at the idealistic portrait of the "wife-mother" and "two negative images that are the reverse of the ideal: that of the single woman, debased and largely caricatured, and the impure woman, condemned and even damned" (xix). She compares, for example, both Charles Dickens' "mythic wife-mother" (53ff.) with the "'impure women'" (210ff.). At times MacDonald's works reflect such myths and other times they challenge them.

[9]MacDonald wrote a strange children's book entitled *The Wise Woman: A Parable* (1875). The Wise Woman, like Queen Irene in the *Princess* books, is described as "a woman perfectly beautiful, neither old nor young; hers was the old age of everlasting youth" (195). But she is not a particularly pleasant character, smacking of Christian retribution; for example, she blinds the King and Queen for not recognizing their daughter Rosamond (218). In any case, the book has more of an affinity to MacDonald's fairy tales, like *The Golden Key* and *The Light Princess*, and is outside the scope of (although not irrelevant to) my discussion.

[10]I agree with Mendelson's distinctions here, though I realize that nothing is quite that simple. For example, Mara's name is associated with the "ancient name of the Goddess-as-Crone, the death-bringer" (Walker 580). In addition, Vane sees Lona as a figure who comprises many feminine archetypes at once: "I hardly remembered my mother, but in my mind's eye she now looked like Lona; and if I imagined sister or child, invariably she had the face of Lona! My every imagination flew to her; she was my heart's wife!" (346) But this passage seems to me to be an idealistic expression of what he feels/wants Lona to be--everything, that is, that Lilith is not. As well, Lona is characterized here in terms of her relationship with Vane ("my heart's wife!"), not as an individual. She is still not a complex figure who encloses opposites and contradiction, like Queen Irene in the *Princess* books and North Wind.

[11]Karen Schaafsma points out that "George MacDonald's is perhaps the richest, most complex treatment of the Lilith archetype and its significance for the hero, but the theme does recur in a wide range of contemporary fantasy novels.... MacDonald is unique, however, in his portrayal of Lilith's redemption" (58). That Lilith can be redeemed is not surprising, for in MacDonald's theology even heathens and animals can find a place in heaven; because of his unorthodox views his Congregation at Arundel effectively forced him to resign in 1853 (Raeper 76-95). MacDonald's version of the myth is also unique because, as Jeanne Murray Walker notes, "[w]hereas in the original Hebrew myth Lilith resides in a place of 'roaring waters,' of too much water, a place where people are drowned, in MacDonald's romance Lilith makes her home in a place plagued by too little water, in a place of drought" (180). MacDonald associates Lilith and her evil with a wasteland that must be revived.

[12]Raeper also makes the connection between *Carmilla* and *Lilith*, though in a different context (375).

[13]The male fear of female sexuality, as represented in literature, is powerful, as we see with Bertha, the woman entrapped in Rochester's attic in *Jane Eyre*. She clearly illustrates the male fear of feminine sexuality gone out of control, and its relationship with violence and death. Rochester is "dazzled, stimulated" (332) by her when they meet in Jamaica; "she allured me" (333) he tells Jane, as if Bertha had devised for him an elaborate sexual trap. In "madness" she must be imprisoned, for she is violent, vile, even vampiric, as when she bites Mason and "suck[s] the blood" (242). And while she tries (unsuccessfully) to kill Rochester at the end of the novel, she does succeed in bringing down Thornfield Hall, killing, so to speak, the ancestral icon of the novel. Perhaps if some of the feminine figures had been allowed full play in MacDonald's fantasies for adults, another "Bertha" may have been born.

[14]Rosemary Jackson describes the fantasy world of *Lilith* as "a dead landscape":

> Throughout *Lilith*, a topography of labyrinthine passages, wastelands, doors opening to emptiness, graveyards, mirrors, constitutes the internal 'space' which Vane occupies. It is a dead landscape, inhabited by ravens, eagles, black cats, ghosts, the un-dead. (149)

[15]As I discussed in my Introduction (page 7), Julia Kristeva points out the relationship between the semiotic and madness: one can be hurled "into the void of a psychosis that appears henceforth as the solitary reverse of our universe, saturated with interpretation, faith, or truth" (x). Surely, if this is so, then the semiotic has the capacity to strike fear into adherents of the symbolic realm, who crave order and certainty.

CHAPTER II

THE ANGEL IN THE ATTIC: THE *PRINCESS* BOOKS

In *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), MacDonald depicts a world in which children have a greater capacity than adults to challenge the tenets of patriarchy and, likewise, a greater capacity to experience the feminine figure, the mother, guide to a realm of unity and fluidity. The limitations of the symbolic realm are present in the fantasies for children, but the feminine, as experienced by the child, has more power to confront these limitations. I discussed in Chapter I how the feminine in the fantasies for adults is rendered fragmented and confused, a reflection, I think, of the male protagonists' fear of her powers to challenge the norms that shape his (symbolic) view of the world. But the child protagonists in the *Princess* books seem to accept the mother body and her powers, for the central feminine figure who guides them,[1] Queen Irene, embodies the qualities and powers that are split apart in *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. MacDonald's portrait of the feminine, then, changes depending on whether he is writing in the adult or the child's forum.

Several critics have noted such a contrast between the adult and child fictional context. For example, Edith Lazaros Honig focusses, as do I, on the fantasy realm. It is perhaps a generalisation, but she points out that "Victorian women in adult fiction were submissive and repressed or, if independent and assertive, mad and bad. Twentieth-century fiction for adults saw the emergence of the liberated female. Where did she come from?" (3) She says: "Carroll's bright and independent Alice first suggested to me that Victorian children's fantasy might provide the

strong, liberated females who would forge that missing link" (3).

Honig sees the children's forum as being less constrained by narrow societal views. She says that "while novels for adults might have contained some fairy-tale elements--witch-like figures or a plot that seemed to ape a fairy tale--they were grounded in reality and constrained by the adult reader's narrow, prosaic expectations" (3). Put in psychoanalytic terms, we may say that the (male) adult's adherence to the symbolic order limits his ability to accept an(other) state, even given the supposed freedom of the fantasy context. But in the fantasies written for children I think MacDonald strives more fervently to create (with the help of the more open, perceptive view of the child) a place where reality cannot altogether be pinned down and defined, a state of mystery and fluidity.

June Sturrock, in a discussion comparing William Blake's treatment of the female in the *Songs of Experience* (enclosing the adult perspective) and the *Songs of Innocence* (enclosing the child's perspective), also touches on how the narrow, adult view limits the feminine's role. Sturrock pinpoints the role of the maternal figure of the *Songs of Innocence* as both nurturer and protector (from threat), but says that in the "(non-pastoral) world of experience the association between protection and the female persists, but it becomes destructive" (7). She surmises that "Blake writes in an historical context in which the qualities valued and rewarded in women include chastity and fragility, and the role most respected for a woman is that of mother.... For Blake these associations are positive only within the sheltered world of pastoral" (8). The adult perspective, coloured by "experience," cannot, it would seem, allow itself to be lulled by the pastoral world of innocence--to do so would be to let one's guard down, to be vulnerable in a threatening world. And where does this threat come from? It would seem to come from sources that do not comply with accepted norms--that is why a powerful feminine figure would represent so much threat to a

society that upholds her innocence, her fragility, her subservience.

MacDonald was born three years before Blake's death, yet he too wrote in a society that attempted to define the feminine in terms easy to pin down, easy to shape. And MacDonald in his fantasies for adults, like Blake in his *Songs of Experience*, tries to name her--that failing, she becomes frightening and destructive. For example, Anodos is successful in giving birth to a woman by freeing her from a block of marble: "I have found thee: wake for me" (46), he sings. When she runs away Anodos pursues, and when he sees "a dim white figure" in the forest he proclaims her to be "my white lady" (51). She responds in the affirmative, but by accepting his "making" her, giving her a name, she is in fact devising a trap. Anodos wants to believe that it is his "white lady" with whom he is spending an evening of passion, even though he suspects that "there was something either in the sound of the voice... or else in this yielding which awaited no gradation of gentle approaches, that did not vibrate harmoniously with the beat of my inward music" (51). He wants her to be what he believes her to be, so it is with "succeeding horror" (53) that he discovers that she has deceived him and lured him into sexual depravity, for she is really the Maid of the Alder, and has "nearly slain [him]" (54).

Like Anodos, Vane gives birth to a woman in a cave, Lilith (the argument that the patriarchy strives to make/construct the feminine is obviously upheld in these two episodes where a man gives "birth" to a woman).[2] In attempting to revive Lilith, what Vane wants is a creature who will worship and adore him, an angel: "Every time I slept, I dreamed of finding a wounded angel who, unable to fly, remained with me until at last she loved me and would not leave me" (279). Of course, what he gets is not an angel but a vampire, Lilith, a sexual predator, the being who does not obey Adam, let alone any other man.

There is a constant power struggle, then, between the feminine and masculine

elements in the adult forum, and that conflict renders a meeting between the two unlikely. Each tends to destroy the other--the masculine because he feels threatened, the feminine because she feels constrained, split apart. But in *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*, that is, in the child's context, the feminine figure is allowed full expression. She has the capacity to be both nurturer and protector, young and old, beautiful and ugly: she is allowed to embody all the power that is denied the feminine "fragments" of the fantasies for adults. She is also permitted to occupy a central position in the narratives. While *Phantastes* and *Lilith* remain, I think, masculine-centred, revolving around the patriarchal core (the masculine perspective), the *Princess* books are feminine-centred: Queen Irene is physically central to the novels, occupying the attic of the royal family (undermining the surety of the ancestral home by her secret presence), and also emotionally central, playing a key role in both Irene's and Curdie's education and development.

"Gradual awakenings"

Feminine images create a sensuous backdrop in the fantasies for children. For example, the labyrinth[3] of passageways that lead to Queen Irene's attic suggests the primacy of feminine elements in this fantasy landscape. To reach the attic, Irene must confront long passages with many doors, a world of infinite, undefined possibility. Her finding her great-great-grandmother is like an initiation into a world beyond the symbolic, a world beyond certainty and fact:

> Up and up she ran--such a long way it seemed to her!--until she came to the top of a third flight. There she found the landing was the end of a long passage. Into this she ran. It was full of doors on each side....

> She ran for some distance, turned several times, and then began to be afraid....
>
> She did not cry long, however.... At last, in a corner, through a half-open door, she did see a stair. But alas! it went the wrong way: instead of going down, it went up....[4]

In the next chapter Princess Irene finally finds her great-great-grandmother. Finding her is arduous and frightening, yet challenging and exciting in its uncertainty. Irene's search reminds me of Hélène Cixous' description of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) in "The Laugh of the Medusa." Cixous says that such writing is "not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthcoming" (in Marks 256). I do not suggest that MacDonald was ahead of his time in expressing *écriture féminine* in 1872, but that Irene's finding Queen Irene, the mother body in the text, is not linear, is not simplistic to describe--rather, it is mysterious and uncertain, a wonderful "gradual awakening." That is the (great-great-grand)mother's promise. Curdie must also experience "yet another" stair, "yet another" passage[5] in his search for Queen Irene in *The Princess and Curdie*.

Queen Irene is also associated with the ancient feminine symbol, the moon, known among other things as "the Mother of the Universe," eclipsing the importance of the sun in some cultures (Walker 669). In *The Princess and the Goblin*, in a wonderful description from the chapter "The Old Lady's Bedroom," the connection between the powerful feminine figure and the moon is explicit: "[t]here was the moonlight streaming in at the window, and in the middle of the moonlight sat the old lady in her black dress with the white lace, and her silvery hair mingling with the moonlight, so that you could not have told which was which" (77). And in her bedroom Queen Irene has "a lamp as round as a ball, shining as if with the brightest moonlight" (80), which later in the book becomes "a great silvery globe" whose light

leads Irene back home (94-95). In addition, one of the chapters in *The Princess and Curdie* is entitled "The Mistress of the Silver Moon" and it is under the light of the moon that Queen Irene brings back to life the pigeon that Curdie has shot.

Queen Irene's association with the spinning wheel further aligns her with mysterious feminine power, as Clotho the Spinner, one of the three fates.[6] On her spinning wheel she spins the magic thread that leads both Irene and Curdie out of the caves. And in a strange scene from *The Princess and Curdie*, when Curdie thinks he is a good person even though he has shot the pigeon, Queen Irene "spins" new understanding into him:

> All at once a light seemed to break in upon his mind, and he woke up and there was the withered little atomy of the old lady on the other side of the moonlight, and there was the spinning wheel singing on and on in the middle of it!
>
> "I know now, ma'am; I understand now," he said. "Thank you, ma'am, for spinning it into me with your wheel. I see now that I have been doing wrong the whole day, and such a many days besides!..." (33)

Her spinning goes beyond materialism,[7] for she has the capacity to spin not only material things but also spiritual states. Such understanding is not grounded in reason and logic, tenets of the symbolic realm, as we may expect; rather, understanding here has more of an affinity with Cixous' "gradual awakening." In spinning, the "product" (whether thread or understanding) gradually emerges out of the creator's great care and skill, and Queen Irene has this unique approach to enlightening the characters.

Dissolving the symbolic through children's eyes

Within this mythical context the power of law and doctrine is challenged.

Curdie may not realize it, but when he uses verse and rhymes in *The Princess and the Goblin*, "the chief defence against [the goblins]" (46), he is using a mode of communication that challenges more traditional uses of words. Here rhymes are a defence against the insurgent goblins. In *The Princess and Curdie* the actions of the rebellious citizens of Gwyntystorm must be addressed. Gwyntystorm's clergy is interested in texts, laws, and fundamental principles, yet a legserpent lifts the preacher in the middle of a sermon and

> [at] the back of [the pulpit] he dropped him into the dust hole among the remnants of a library whose age had destroyed its value in the chapter. They found him burrowing in it, a lunatic henceforth--whose madness presented the peculiar feature, that in its paroxysms he jabbered sense. (226-227)

When we are told that in "madness... [he] jabbered sense" we are asked to understand sense and logic by a different means. Such references are not central to the *Princess* books, but they do provide a backdrop for the children's fantasies, a context in which norms are challenged and new views/perspectives developed.

MacDonald's narrator in the *Princess* books also encourages this questioning. As in the fantasies for adults we have here an *adult* narrator, but the stories are told in the third rather than the first person.[8] This different perspective affords, I think, new opportunities for the stories to develop. In the fantasies for adults the first-person narrative keeps perspective and control with the male protagonists. In the *Princess* books, however, and in *At the Back of the North Wind*, to be discussed in Chapter III, the stories are not dominated by one character. Rather, the narrator moves about, recording the feelings and conversations of the different characters, both child and adult. The narrator is particularly valuable in detailing the child's experience of the feminine, both fearful and joyful. When Irene first opens the door to Queen Irene's attic, "[s]he was rather afraid, but her curiosity was stronger than her fear, and she opened the door very gently and peeped in. What do you think she

saw? A very old lady who sat spinning" (15). In the tradition of children's fiction, MacDonald's narrator here both describes the scene and remembers the reader to whom the work is addressed. That reader, young or old, child or childlike, is encouraged to be inquisitive, to accept the unexpected, to relinquish control to the magic of the story's adventures and awakenings. I do not think that this is as possible in the fantasies for adults, where Anodos and Vane, as they tell their respective stories, are often confused as they move through their landscapes, uneasy about what may happen next. The reader too becomes uneasy, caught in the dream-vision (sometimes nightmare) of the protagonists. The third-person eye of the *Princess* books does not have this same anxiety; the Princess series, which begins with the timeless fairy tale opening "There was once a little princess...", is told by a narrator with an eye to the past, present, and undoubtedly the future, as we discover when *The Princess and the Goblin* ends with the narrator's telling us that the "rest of the history of *The Princess and Curdie* must be kept for another volume."

The de-centring of narrative focus encourages, among other things, frequent conversations and debates between the characters. There are still (adult) figures who are not equipped with a willingness to accept what cannot be explained entirely in rational terms. But in the characters' interactions unitary belief is addressed and subdued more convincingly than in the fantasies for adults. For example, Irene's nurse Lootie thinks that the Princess' description of the encounter with Queen Irene is only a dream. Queen Irene later explains to Irene the limitations of the adult's positivism:

> "I knew Lootie would not believe you. If she were to see me sitting spinning here, she wouldn't believe me, either," [said Queen Irene].
> "Why?" [asked Princess Irene].
> "Because she couldn't. She would rub her eyes, and go away and say she felt queer, and forget half of it and more, and then say it had been all a dream." (77-78)

What Irene's great-great-grandmother is describing here is the adult's inability to understand and accept that which cannot be seen or touched. The child's superior vision is suggested more explicitly, furthermore, by the narrator of *The Princess and Curdie*. Near the beginning of the book the narrator points out that Curdie, as he grows older, increasingly doubts Princess Irene's descriptions of her great-great-grandmother (from *The Princess and the Goblin*) because of the influence of the miners with whom he works:

> [The miners] knew silver from copper ore; they understood the underground ways of things, and they could look very wise with their lanterns in their hands searching after this or that sign of ore, or for some mark to guide their way in the hollows of the earth; but as to great-great-grandmothers, they would have mocked Curdie all the rest of his life for the absurdity.... I am not sure that they were able quite to believe there were such persons as great-great-grandmothers; they had never seen one. (18-19)

Curdie grows up in an environment that mocks what it does not readily understand (and what it cannot readily categorize). Further, Curdie's education at the hands of the patriarchy is most graphically portrayed in his shooting Queen Irene's pigeon with the bow and (phallic) arrow. In this scene he, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner in his shooting the albatross, upholds the patriarchy's tendency to assert (violently) its point of view, breaking ties with nature and, by extension, the maternal body. Curdie experiences "a gush of pride at his skill" before he begins "his repentance" (21) under the influence of Queen Irene. The narrator counters such narrow views with a statement on the superior vision of the child:

> The boy should enclose and keep, as his life, the old child at the heart of him, and never let it go. He must still, to be a right man, be his mother's darling, and more, his father's pride, and more. The child is not meant to die, but to be forever freshborn. (20)

In MacDonald's fantasies for children, adults seem not only to be limited in their "vision," but also stereotypical in how they view the feminine. Adults, particularly male, are quick to bestow names upon the feminine figure, reflecting

their narrow views rather than the object's true identity. But you cannot in fact know "true" identity--that would be essentialist[9]--and MacDonald, through Queen Irene and later North Wind, seems to argue against a unitary definition of the feminine. Socio-historical accounts of the Victorian era suggest that women in that period had to combat stereotypes that minimized their roles and reduced their identities, stereotypes such as the "Angel in the House." These cultural superstitions are blended into the fictional forum in *The Princess and Curdie*. The miners talk of "Old Mother Wotherwop" (46), a shapeshifter:

> They said she could take any shape she liked, but that in reality she was a withered old woman, so old and so withered that she was as thin as a sieve with a lamp behind it; that she was never seen except at night, and when something terrible had taken place, or was going to take place--such as the falling in of the roof of a mine, or the breaking out of water in it. (47)

I believe that the image of the feminine shapeshifter in MacDonald's fantasies often evokes empowerment, but here even the shapeshifter has been reduced to a "type" (the shifting feminine figure, not to be trusted). The miners talk of her being seen "beside some well... stirring it with her forefinger" and all but one miner agree that illness would follow those who drink from such a well:

> Was she not a witch, an old hating witch, whose delight was to do mischief? One said he had heard that she took the shape of a young woman sometimes, as beautiful as an angel, and then was most dangerous of all, for she struck every man who looked upon her stone-blind. (47)

The miners uphold a popular Victorian view, much to Curdie's chagrin: that women who did not conform to the popular image or interpretation of the feminine, the Angel (never mind whether this view ever contained any truth in reality), had to be the angel's opposite--if not a whore, at least a witch.[10]

In *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*, however, we discover Queen Irene, a figure who seems somehow to encapsulate youth/age, good/evil and so on, fusing the contraries of language, dissolving the patriarchy's architecture (or appropriating it for her own magical uses). In *The Princess and the Goblin* she is immediately represented as a figure able to blend opposites and dualities. Irene sees "[a] very old lady who sat spinning" and the narrator continues:

> Perhaps you will wonder how the princess could tell that the old lady was an old lady, when I inform you that not only was she beautiful, but her skin was smooth and white. I will tell you more. Her hair was combed back from her forehead and face, and hung loose far down and all over her back. That is not much like an old lady--is it? Ah! but it was white almost as snow. And although her face was so smooth, her eyes looked so wise that you could not have helped seeing she must be old. The princess, though she could not have told you why, did think her very old indeed--quite fifty, she said to herself. But she was rather older than that, as you shall hear. (15)

The (adult) narrator analyses systematically the curious dualities, the bits and pieces, of this scene: logic says that it is "not much like an old lady" to be beautiful, with long hair and smooth white skin. Princess Irene, on the other hand, instinctively knows, "though she could not have told you why," that this woman is old and wise. She, a child, has a knowledge or "vision" that goes beyond the overt, vision that gets to the heart of the thing. The adult narrator here, grounded in logic, may be a vestige of the narrators of the fantasies for adults. Vane, for example, struggles to understand the fantasy landscape in which he suddenly finds himself and to convey it sensibly and logically to the reader: "I beg my reader to aid me in the endeavour to make myself intelligible.... I begin indeed to fear that I have undertaken an impossibility, undertaken to tell what I cannot tell because no speech at my

command will fit the forms in my mind" (194). The significant thing here is that Vane frets about how he will explain his experience, rather than simply experiencing it. The adult narrator of the *Princess* books is not as anxious: contradictions are recorded, but not necessarily understood. And the child protagonist learns from this strange and contradictory state. For example, Queen Irene affirms life when she heals the pigeon that Curdie has recklessly shot, but she is not altogether against killing:

> "never kill anything without a good reason for it...."
> "Ma'am, I will go and fetch my bow and arrows, and you shall burn them yourself" [said Curdie].
> "No, no, Curdie. Keep them, and practice with them every day, and grow a good shot. There are plenty of bad things that want killing, and a day will come when they will prove useful." (35)

Curdie learns from this incident about how to treat others and how to protect oneself, but it is a contradictory state that adults, as we have seen elsewhere, evidently have trouble understanding.

In such episodes MacDonald picks up on the Romantic tradition of the child as source of insight and vision, believed to have a greater ability to relate to the powers of the mother and nature because chronologically closer to that original state. For example, S.T. Coleridge asserts in "Frost at Midnight" that his son (unlike him, grown up, raised in "the great city") will not lose his connection with nature and all she embodies (will not, in late twentieth-century terms, fall victim to the symbolic realm):

> But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
> By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
> Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
> Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
> And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language... (ll. 54-60)

To this Romantic tradition of the power of nature, MacDonald injects more

explicitly the power of the feminine. To be closer to (feminine) nature is to be closer to acceptance, closer to understanding. Queen Irene's relationship with the moon and pigeons ties her to nature, but her magical use of roses also suggests her link with its transformative powers. In *The Princess and the Goblin* Princess Irene is initially baffled when her grandmother puts the ball of her spinning into a fire of roses:

> ...the lady turned, and threw the little ball into the rose fire.
> "Oh, grandmother!" exclaimed Irene; "I thought you had spun it for me."
> "So I did, my child. And you've got it."
> "No; it's burnt in the fire!"
> The lady put her hand in the fire, brought out the ball, glimmering as before... (102-103)

Queen Irene works with and manipulates nature, using its magic to attain her own magic. Irene accepts the fire-opal ring, attached to the magic thread, and Queen Irene's magic helps Irene find and rescue Curdie. She tells Irene of its/her power:

> "If ever you find yourself in any danger--such, for example, as you were in this same evening--you must take off your ring and put it under the pillow of your bed. Then you must lay your forefinger, the same that wore the ring, upon the thread, and follow the thread wherever it leads you.... But, remember, it may seem to you a very round-about way indeed, and you must not doubt the thread. Of one thing you may be sure, that while you hold it, I hold it too." (103-104)

Irene must accept not only Queen Irene's magic but also the fact that her directions may be roundabout rather than straightforward. Theirs is a communication greater than words, an understanding that resides in (feminine) circumlocution rather than (masculine) linearity. Irene's faith in her great-great-grandmother's powers, as strange and illogical as they may seem, highlights the strength of their relationship and the pre-discursive understanding that they share. Likewise in *The Princess and Curdie* Queen Irene is associated with nature's magic and its transformative powers: her fire of roses transforms Curdie's hands, giving him the ability to understand men, while her army of pigeons moves from Irene like "living javelins," empowering her to the point that the enemy sees her as a transformed being, "an enchantress"

(254).

And it is not just children who experience Queen Irene's magical powers. When Curdie tells his mother of strange happenings, she reveals that she was once confronted, alone and at night, by "cobs" who tore her clothes and possibly threatened her life, until something/somebody intervened:

> "A broad ray, like a shining road, came down from a large globe of silvery light.... The cobs dropped persecuting me, and looked dazed, and I thought they were going to run away, but presently they began again. The same moment, however, down the path from the globe of light came a bird, shining like silver in the sun. It gave a few rapid flaps first, and then, with its wings straight out, shot down the slope of the light. It looked to me just like a white pigeon. But whatever it was, when the cobs caught sight of it coming straight down upon them, they took to their heels and scampered away...." (159-160)

"Whatever it was" cannot be defined within the narrative because definition is not what the child protagonists' education is all about. The reader knows that the "globe of light" and the bird are associated with Queen Irene's magic, but faith for the fictional characters is found in trusting a power that is not altogether comprehensible in terms of (symbolic) notions of language and law.

The Angel in the Attic

It is clear that Queen Irene possesses magic, but how much power does she really wield in the *Princess* books? In the fantasies for adults, feminine figures escape the confines of enclosed spaces (the alabaster woman in *Phantastes* is freed from her stone prison and runs from the cave, Lilith runs from the cave where Vane brings her back to life) but their venturing into the wilderness of the fantasy landscapes seems to diffuse their power, rendering them fragmented. In the fantasies

for children, on the other hand, the central feminine figure contains in one body the fragmented bits of femininity explored in the fantasies for adults, but she is confined to the castle's attic. She is not, however, simply an "Angel in the House." That Victorian cultural myth is rather simplistic and reductionist, whereas the myth of Queen Irene is complex, open-ended, and often contradictory. Even from her attic she facilitates a complex environment for the children, within which they can learn and become resilient in the face of life's strange complexities.

I suggest that Queen Irene, in fact, can be examined as blending two of the most powerful images that we currently have of the feminine. Queen Irene is neither the Angel in the House (male interpretation of the feminine) nor, in Gilbert and Gubar's philosophy, the Madwoman in the Attic (female interpretation of the feminine). That is, she is neither locked in the house, trapped within the confines of her domestic role, nor locked in the attic like Bertha, driven to madness because her powers (physical, sexual) are denied and locked up by the patriarchy. Queen Irene is mostly, but not always, associated with her place at the top of the house. She has the central (or slightly elevated) position in the home, making her accessible both physically (though it takes some searching on the part of the children) and emotionally (as a source of comfort and enlightenment in strange landscapes of insurrection and struggle). But she also has a degree of mobility. In *The Princess and the Goblin* Queen Irene enters the outside world through the image of the moon and the flight of her pigeons. In *The Princess and Curdie*, however, she *literally* ventures outside her confines: Curdie and his father see her in the tunnels of the mine, she becomes an old country-woman when they leave the mine (67), and she takes on the role of a housemaid later in the book. In these scenes she is strangely marginal: appearing in the tunnels of the mine or taking on the persona of a housemaid, she seems, like the feminine figures in the fantasies for adults, to be relegated to the

wilderness. But her ability to move (subversively) through the landscape gives her a subtle degree of power, for both the fictional characters and the reader never know where she will appear, or as whom.

But it is perhaps in a different way, a more creative way, that the great-great-grandmother of the *Princess* books achieves the greatest mobility. She does not just move about geographically; she in fact changes physically, defying the symbolic realm that strives to name, define, and pin her down. In both fantasies Queen Irene is a shapeshifter but, unlike Lilith, she uses such powers in a positive way, affirming the transcendental power of the maternal. Curdie's first view of her in *The Princess and Curdie* is of "a small withered creature" (30) crouched over her spinning wheel. A short time later, however, she rises from the seat at her spinning wheel, and Curdie is astonished to see her transformation:

> when or how it came about, Curdie could not tell--the same instant she stood before him a tall, strong woman--plainly very old, but as grand as she was old, and only *rather* severe-looking. Every trace of the decrepitude and witheredness she showed as she hovered like a film about her wheel, had vanished. (36-37)

And, significantly, when he asks her, "what am I to call you?" (38) she has disappeared, refusing to be named, true to her multi-faceted personality. Further, in the mines Curdie and his father see

> a lady, beautiful exceedingly, dressed in something pale green, like velvet, over which her hair fell in cataracts of a rich golden color... Curdie knew somehow or other, he could not have told how, that the face before him was that of the old princess, Irene's great-great-grandmother. (54-56)

It is not only that she is a shapeshifter--it is that she cannot be pinned down, she cannot be *named*. She defies language because she is continually changing, harbouring many identities at once: she is "poor as well as rich" (60); she is referred to as Old Mother Wotherwop (60), Lady of the Silver Moon (61), Princess Irene's great-great-grandmother (62), and Queen (261). She concludes,

> "I could give you twenty names more to call me, Curdie, and not one of them would be a false one. What does it matter how many names if the person is one?... Shapes are only dresses, Curdie, and dresses are only names. That which is inside is the same all the time." (63)

Shapeshifting and other forms of magic are, I think, the means by which the feminine figure both explores her powers and takes the characters toward greater understanding about how meaning is really constructed. To be enlightened is to recognize that the essence of a person cannot necessarily be "seen" and "analyzed." Understanding is an awakening to be experienced rather than a thing to be pinned down and defined. As MacDonald points out in his religious writings, society is obsessed with words: yet he notes that the Bible "nowhere lays claim to be regarded as *the* Word, *the* Way, *the* Truth" (in Lewis 25). MacDonald shows an awareness that the belief in words and laws is all-pervasive--and here, as elsewhere, he subtly challenges that tradition, showing it to be misguided, even wrong.

Queen Irene's attic, this "room of her own," is also a tremendous source of power in the *Princess* books because it is a natural part of their world. Unlike in the fantasies for adults, here there is no fantastic mechanism (overflowing basin of water, mirror) that bridges the gap between the real (masculine) world and the fantastic (feminine) world, a split that the adult perspective perhaps needs to retain some degree of order and control. Julia Kristeva sees the interaction of the symbolic and semiotic realms as a necessary and dynamic process rather than an either/or proposition; such would seem to be the relationship of the "real" and "fantasy" landscapes in the children's books. Princess Irene simply ascends the castle's stairs to find her great-great-grandmother Queen Irene in another part of the house. Just as the "Angel" and "Madwoman" are blended in these two books, so too is the sense of fantasy/reality. In fact, in comparing the fantasies for adults and children we find, surprisingly perhaps, that the fantasies for children are more realistic in terms of

the way they portray events. For example, socio-political issues come into play. In both *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* there is a sub-plot of political rebellion: in the former the goblins have, prior to the text, been forced underground, and plot to overthrow the king and kidnap the princess; in the latter the people of Gwyntystorm also plot to overthrow the king and make the princess one of their own. The relationship between the children and Queen Irene sets the *Princess* books in the realm of fantasy, but the easy way in which the "real" and "fantasy" landscapes interact (the refusal to allow these binaries to be split apart as if they have no relationship to one another) suggests that MacDonald did not want Queen Irene to be seen as a strange, inaccessible element to be experienced and then forgotten.

Exploring the mother body

Queen Irene perhaps has the capacity not only to challenge the accepted norms, but to present to Irene in particular an alternate place, a place which Kristevan psychoanalytic theory refers to as the semiotic. It is a place of madness because it is pre-language and pre-speech, the place where communication takes on a new complexion, with new rules and behaviour. But it is also a place of heightened sensitivity and understanding and Queen Irene's position in both the house and the text seems to enable her to take Irene in particular to such a state. She indeed becomes the spiritual centre of Princess Irene's life. After a visit with her, Queen Irene tells the Princess that "[she] must go downstairs." Irene responds, "I'm so glad, grandmother, you didn't say 'Go home,' for this is my home. Mayn't I call this my

home?" (104). Princess Irene tells Lootie early in *The Princess and the Goblin* that "'I lost myself, and if I hadn't found the beautiful lady, I should never have found myself'" (22). Princess Irene's comment is surely referring to more than her physical state of being "lost" or "found." When Queen Irene announces herself as Irene's "great-great-grandmother" who has "c[o]me here to take care of her" she is creating a link for the motherless Irene to a matriarchal line, a feminine history: her/story rather than his/story.[11] This connection between Irene and her great-great-grandmother is, I think, a cultural representation of our desire for the semiotic, for that link between not only subject/object, but also past/present. Queen Irene's body provides an entry to such a state. This episode hints at the transcendental link that may bind beings together over time. In *The Princess and Curdie* Curdie's mother also tells of stories,

> "all good stories--but strange, very strange. What they were I cannot tell, for I only remember the faces of my grandmother and my mother as they talked together about them. There was wonder and awe--not fear--in their eyes, and they whispered, and never spoke aloud." (158-159)

Though the stories are strange whisperings, they provide an integral link between mother and child. And such a feminine/matriarchal connection may best be pinpointed in the scene of sexual initiation between Princess Irene and Queen Irene in *The Princess and the Goblin*. The older woman is, among other things, associated with the mythical and sexual power[12] power of the moon: "[t]here was the moonlight streaming in at the window, and in the middle of the moonlight sat the old lady in her black dress with the white lace, and her silvery hair mingling with the moonlight, so that you could not have told which was which" (77). Queen Irene "mingles" or blends with the moon, becoming a seductive force of nature. The "old lady" then rubs Irene's injured hand with an ointment that smelled "like that of roses and lilies" (80). Queen Irene says to the Princess, "'I don't think I can let you go away tonight.... Would you like to sleep with me?'" (80). The scene continues:

> Then she got a large silver basin, and having poured some water into it made Irene sit on the chair, and washed her feet. This done, she was ready for bed, And oh, what a delicious bed it was into which her grandmother laid her! She hardly could have told she was lying upon anything: she felt nothing but the softness. The old lady having undressed herself lay down beside her. (81)

There are striking similarities, furthermore, between this scene and another of sexual initiation: that between Christabel and Geraldine in S.T. Coleridge's poem "Christabel." There is the similar element of flowers: Christabel offers Geraldine "a wine of virtuous powers;/My mother made it of wild flowers" (ll. 192-193). Geraldine, like Queen Irene with her granddaughter, undresses and lies down beside Christabel: "Her gentle limbs did she undress,/And lay down in her loveliness" (ll. 237-238). But while in Christabel, and in MacDonald's fantasies for adults, the scene of sexual initiation represents a threat to the character at the hands of the feminine force, here the experience is a celebratory one, replete with comfort and peace.

Queen Irene also presents to Irene the opportunity to reunite with the peace and fluidity of the mother body when Irene soaks in her grandmother's large silver bath. While Anodos *plunges* into bodies of water in his story, here Irene is gently *placed* in the water like a child in the cradle, a state "perfectly blissful," full of mysterious resonances:

> And from somewhere came the voice of the lady, singing a strange sweet song, of which she could distinguish every word; but of the sense she had only a feeling--no understanding.... In after years, however, she would sometimes fancy that snatches of melody suddenly rising in her brain must be little phrases and fragments of the air of that song; and the very fancy would make her happier, and abler to do her duty. (154)

The water imagery here, the "feminine element *par excellence*" (Moi 117), is fused with references to words that are indistinguishable, to rhythm and music, evoking Kristeva's descriptions of the semiotic, the pre-language place of "rhythmic drive" (*Desire* 142). To be with the mother body is to experience this strange and unique

state. It is little wonder that Princess Irene says, nestled in her great-great-grandmother's arms, that "I didn't know anything in the world could be so comfortable. I should like to lie here for ever" (82).

Life-in-Death?

Elsewhere, however, the mother body has the capacity to present to both Irene and Curdie a curious sense of not only safety but also threat. Yet, while in the fantasies for adults several characters present different possibilities to the protagonists, in the fantasies for children one character, Queen Irene, encloses the promise of both pain and happiness--the unique "awakening" that this state can bring. Mythologically, the name Irene is suggestive of many things, underlining her multiple role(s) in the *Princess* books. She is the third of Aphrodite's "three Horae, or celestial nymphs: Eunomia, Dike, and Irene, meaning Order, Destiny, and Peace" (Walker 302). But peace also has connections with death--the name Irene is associated with "the 'peace' of dissolution [death] decreed at the end of life by Aphrodite Columba, the Dove of Peace" (302). Queen Irene of the *Princess* books, unlike her mythological predecessor, does not have doves of peace, but she has white pigeons that are a pretty good match--pigeons that protect several of the characters. Those pigeons, for example, join forces near the end of *The Princess and Curdie* both with each other and with Princess Irene:

> the motion of [Irene's] arm so fitted with the rushes of birds, that it looked as if the birds obeyed her gesture, and she was casting living javelins by the thousands against the enemy. The moment a pigeon had rounded her head, it went off straight as bolt from bow, and with trebled velocity. (253-254)

Queen Irene's spinning wheel, on which she spins the magic thread that leads Irene and Curdie from the mines, also associates her with supreme feminine power, with the three fates who oversee birth, life, and death (Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer). Irene here becomes a mythological/philosophical figure, a strong icon in the book representing a mode of being that is beyond symbolic knowledge and definition: she contains both life and death, beginnings and endings. The mix of peace and death here is not a contradiction, for in MacDonald's theology he describes an ideal place of both peace and death (or peace *because* death). This is a place where boundaries dissolve, where mother/father/being meet again in a cosmic embrace:

> The final end of the separation is not individuality; that is but a means to it: the final end is oneness--an impossibility without it. For there can be no unity, no delight of love, no harmony, no good in being, where there is but one. Two at least are needed for oneness. (in Lewis 64)

Irene and Curdie are confronted with this dichotomy of safety and threat throughout the *Princess* books. The plight of the child is to be exposed to, and then thankfully saved, from danger as s/he travels on the path to maturity, which in *The Princess and the Goblin* is related to the ability to "understand other people" (152). Irene's flight down the mountain with Lootie, and her rescuing Curdie from the mines, chronicle such safety/threat. For the children, this would seem to be an educational process: the world is, in sum, both intriguing and unsure, or intriguing *because* it is unsure. In *The Princess and Curdie*, however, Queen Irene's association with pain and death is more morose. Curdie is presented with a number of trials, the most significant of which is Queen Irene's commanding him to thrust his hands into a fire of burning roses: "It will hurt you terribly, Curdie, but that will be all; no real hurt but much good will come to you from it" (76). The narrator tells us that Curdie

> rushed to the fire, and thrust both of his hands right into the middle of the heap of flaming roses, and his arms halfway up to the elbows. And it *did* hurt! But he did not draw them back. He held the pain as if

> it were a thing that would kill him if he let it go.... But when it had risen to the pitch that he thought he could bear it no longer, it began to fall again, and went on growing less and less until by contrast with its former severity it had become rather pleasant. (77-78)

Honig believes that Queen Irene of *The Princess and the Goblin* has, in the latter *Princess* book, "been replaced by a severe mien. She seems saddened at the state that men are in and somewhat impatient with their shortcomings" (129), citing especially this incident in which Curdie must thrust his hands into a fire, undergoing "unbearable pain" (130). But Curdie's pain subsides; indeed, the pain is part of the journey toward knowledge, giving him the power to understand what/who a person really is by touching their hands. (MacDonald is rather pessimistic, however, to show that Curdie discovers most people to be animals, humans regressed to the point of inhumanity.) And pain is a precursor to enlightenment (in this case of sensual pleasure) in *The Princess and the Goblin.* A pin prick causes Irene's thumb to ache and swell, but Queen Irene rubs a special ointment over her wound: "The sweetest odour filled the room--like that of roses and lilies--as she rubbed the ointment gently all over the hot swollen hand. Her touch was so pleasant and cool that it seemed to drive away the pain and heat wherever it came" (80).

But at the end of *The Princess and Curdie*, one of MacDonald's last books, the message that pleasure and understanding can come out of pain, a sort of spiritual rebirth, does not sustain the action. Queen Irene lives in the "uppermost rooms in the palace" (261), yet seems ineffectual in the last breaths of the story, for the message ultimately is not to die into *life* but to die into *death*--no resurrection is suggested here. The novel had begun on a promising note with a prolonged description of evolution,[13] as a description of the movement toward life and creation:

> the heart of the earth is a great wallowing mass, not of blood, as in the hearts of men and animals, but of glowing hot, melted metals and stones.... Now think: out of that caldron... certain bubbles have bubbled out and escaped--up and away, and there they stand in the cool, cold

> sky--mountains.... All this outside the mountain! But the inside, who shall tell what lies there? Caverns of awfullest solitude, their walls miles thick, sparkling with ores of gold or silver, copper or iron, tin or mercury, studded perhaps with precious stones--perhaps a brook, with eyeless fish in it.... (9-11)

The finale of the novel, however, portrays the opposite movement--a movement toward stasis, infertility, death. The dichotomies of language--life/death, good/evil--are played against one another in this novel, with the maternal feminine icon at the novel's core. But the ending decidedly does not have the spirit of an upbeat children's book--MacDonald's works for children are not that simple. Lina, for example, is burned into oblivion in Queen Irene's fire of roses: "[t]here went up a black smoke and a dust, and Lina was never more seen in the palace" (262). If she is transformed or given new powers (as in Curdie's case) it is not apparent here. And though Princess Irene and Curdie are married at the end of the novel the result is infertility and death rather than renewal for the kingdom: "they had no children, and when they died the people chose a king. And the new king went mining and mining in the rock under the city, and grew more and more eager after the gold, and paid less and less heed to his people" (263). Greed and wickedness result in destruction: "the whole city fell with a roaring crash. The cries of men and the shrieks of women went up with its dust, and then there was a great silence" (263). The patriarchy's obsession with property (here gold) seems to win out. MacDonald shows us the power and sensuousness of the central feminine/mother figure within the fantasy landscape, and then seems to snap her away from us in the crashing roar of the novel's conclusion. The silence of the novel's conclusion, however, is perhaps the space that she will now fill, the space no longer filled with (symbolic) words of greed and deceit. Or perhaps MacDonald is suggesting, in this case, that in death new "life" can be achieved (a realization that will become more obvious when I discuss *At the Back of the North Wind*).

* * *

Queen Irene has extraordinary powers but, unlike Lilith, has no civic power. Perhaps this is her greatest weakness. Her powers extend occasionally beyond the attic's confines, but her home is at the top room of the royal residence, a domestic space. And when she does escape the boundary of the attic she is often associated with confined, cave-like spaces (as when Curdie and his father see her in the tunnels of the mines). Though her portrait is complex and her powers impressive, her realm, like that of the Angel in the House, is domestic rather than civic: she, unlike the King, cannot go riding around the kingdom, nor does she rule it. Her function in the novels, furthermore, is mostly to serve, to educate first Irene and then Curdie. Though powerful, her participation in the narrative itself is somewhat limited to this function. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, however, MacDonald most powerfully portrays a feminine figure who taps into a world beyond the symbolic. There the sensuous, transcendental figure is both mother and magician, extending (often unpredictably) her body not just over a kingdom but over the entire fantasy landscape.

NOTES

[1]This is not to say that there is only one feminine figure in the fantasies for children, but one *central* feminine figure, central to the plot, central to the children's problems being resolved.

[2]Michael Mendelson (205) and Roderick McGillis (31) also make this point. Further, Mendelson makes a connection with the Pygmalion myth of the man who constructs/creates the perfect woman.

[3]In "The Diamond in the Ashes: A Jungian Reading of the 'Princess' Books," Joseph Sigman makes the point that "[h]istorically, the labyrinth is an ancient symbol associated with the mother goddess and the underworld," and in Jungian terms is "a depiction of the unconscious" (in McGillis, *For the Childlike*, 186).

[4]George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin* (Middlesex, England: Puffin Books, 1986), pp. 12-13. All further references to the novel will appear within the body of the thesis.

[5]*The Princess and Curdie* (Clinton, Mass.: The Colonial Press Inc., 1960), p. 27. All further references to the novel will appear within the body of the thesis.

[6]Queen Irene actually encompasses all three fates (Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos), to be discussed later in the chapter. Nancy-Lou Patterson discusses the role of the fates and other mythological allusions in *The Princess and the Goblin* in greater detail in her essay "*Kore* Motifs in *The Princess and the Goblin*" (in McGillis, *For the Childlike*, 169-182).

[7]By materialism I mean that which is related to the material (rather than the spiritual), but also materialism as discussed in note 3 of my Introduction.

[8]Sometimes the narrator of the *Princess* books and *At the Back of the North Wind* identifies himself as "I". For example, in *The Princess and the Goblin* the narrator says, "I have said the Princess Irene was about eight years old..." (11), so strictly speaking the distinction between first- and third-person narrative in MacDonald's writing can be difficult. In the *Princess* books, however, the "I" is not a character in the stories, and in *North Wind* he is a rather anonymous character introduced late in the narrative. Therefore the sense of omniscience is largely maintained in these books.

[9]Here I am thinking of the essentialist debate as to whether there are "natural" or "essential" elements that may be considered feminine or masculine. This issue is especially important when trying to define *écriture féminine*. This topic is too big to be explored fully here, but I would say that MacDonald has too many different and contradictory views of the feminine to be considered "essentialist."

[10]The tradition of the witch hunt in Salem and elsewhere represents, of course, the persecution of women (and sometimes men) for not conforming to whatever norm dominates at the time.

[11]See Nancy-Lou Patterson, "*Kore* Motifs in *The Princess and the Goblin*," for a Jungian discussion of the women's connections over time, how "[e]very mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother" (in McGillis, *For the Childlike*, 175).

[12]Walker points out the mythical/sexual connotations of the moon: "The moon ruled the sexuality of women, and sometimes made them scornful of the male-dominated society's notions of hierarchy" (673).

[13]MacDonald's descriptions here are undoubtedly inspired by the evolutionary theories of Darwin and others that were being debated in the mid- and late-nineteenth century.

CHAPTER III

DIAMOND'S SEMIOTIC ADVENTURE AT THE BACK OF THE NORTH WIND

At the Back of the North Wind (1871) is, I think, within the context of this discussion, MacDonald's strongest challenge to the symbolic's laws and doctrines. We experience this fantasy largely through the emotions of Diamond who, the narrator tells us, has the capacity to understand the paradoxes that North Wind presents because he is a young child: "If Diamond had been a little older, and had supposed himself a good deal wiser, he would have thought the lady was joking [about not being cold with the north wind]. But he was not older, and did not fancy himself wiser, and therefore understood her well enough."[1] Diamond's vision has not been narrowed by rigid ideas that come out of books. Diamond "knew quite as much as anybody [about fairyland]; for his mother had no money to buy books to set him wrong on the subject" (17). Early in the novel Diamond has no access to books, and thus his vision cannot be negatively affected by the unitary laws that they may contain. Later Diamond does learn to read but, significantly, it is a poet, Mr. Raymond, who inspires him, offering him "sixpence and a book with fine pictures in it" (188). As Roderick McGillis argues in his article, "Language and Secret Knowledge in *At the Back of the North Wind*," the poet is significant here because poetry is indeed the language of the book.

Diamond's capacity to accept the uncertainty that such a language may contain is affirmed early in the book in his relationship with North Wind. North Wind challenges the symbolic realm, proclaiming herself to be above man's restrictive laws. When she and Diamond are talking through a "little hole" in his wall,

Diamond tells her that his mother had wanted his father to make a window in that space, but his father responded that "it was against the law, for it would look into Mr. Dyves's garden" (6). North Wind proclaims that the "law would have some trouble to catch [her]" and that she is indeed "above *that* law" (7). Later, North Wind berates Diamond for believing that size is an indication of strength, just as the "tiny woman-form" that appears in Anodos' father's secretary gets angry at Anodos for believing that her *small* size could not harbour *large* powers: "If there's one thing makes me more angry than another, it is the way you humans judge things by their size" (61), North Wind proclaims.

North Wind's mysterious views about language and law in fact shape the book's actions, just as her powerful wind shapes the book's landscape. Diamond is initially baffled by her perspective. The hole through which North Wind speaks to Diamond is, to her, a window that allows her to see out of her "house." In her mind, *she* is the centre, looking out onto the world:

> "But it can't be a window, because windows are holes to see out of" [said Diamond].
> "Well, that's just what I made this window for" [answered North Wind].
> "But you are outside: you can't want a window."
> "You are quite mistaken. Windows are to see out of, you say. Well, I'm in my house, and I want windows to see out of it." (6)

The house metaphor is used elsewhere as well, as when North Wind, soaring over London, is "getting ready to sweep one of [her] rooms" (38). In such descriptions she is changing Diamond's figurative view/perspective on the world. The *world* is her house, her domain. In this way, the magical feminine figure has broken free of Queen Irene's attic; the boundaries of the domestic space have not only been dissolved but also redefined. Later, however, she literally has the ability (as when she nestles Diamond in her hair, travelling over the sea) to move characters from one place, or state, to another. The feminine has gradually gained prominence over the

course of my discussion. In *Phantastes* and *Lilith* the masculine figures Anodos and Vane occupy the centre of their respective stories, with the feminine figures marginalized. In *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*, by contrast, Queen Irene stands at the centre of the action, in the royal castle (though somewhat confined), guiding the child protagonists. Here, however, the feminine guide is de-centred: as an actual force of nature, the wind, she is everywhere, sweeping across the landscape. Neither marginalized nor confined, she comes and goes as she pleases, a potent image of feminine freedom. She is complete in the largest sense, both physically and spiritually.

The power of beauty and terror

Her "unprecedented power" (Honig 124) as a feminine figure in MacDonald's writing derives from her ability to fuse the opposites of life and death, softness and strength, her ability to see and be everything at once. She is powerful to the point that Diamond is, initially, afraid of her. He slides under his blankets, refusing to come out, and his defiance (his saying "the word") evokes in North Wind both beauty and terror:

> The instant he said the word, a tremendous blast of wind crashed in the board of the wall, and swept the clothes off Diamond. He stared up in terror. Leaning over him was the large beautiful pale face of a woman. Her dark eyes looked a little angry, for they had just begun to flash; but a quivering in her sweet upper lip made her look as if she were going to cry. (10-11)

As with Queen Irene of the *Princess* books, North Wind encloses the opposites of language, a harbinger of balance and infinite possibility, the perfect guide for

Diamond's adventures. She is also, like Lilith and Queen Irene, a shapeshifter, but her power is limited neither to the civic power of Bulika nor the domestic sphere of the royal castle. Like the other feminine shapeshifters whom I have discussed, her ability to enclose many identities and possibilities at once defies law and language, defies the symbolic world that tries to name her. She explains this reality to Diamond:

> "If you see me with my face all black, don't be frightened. If you see me flapping wings like bat's... don't be frightened.... Nay, Diamond, if I change into a serpent or a tiger, you must not let go your hold of me, for my hand will never change in yours if you keep a good hold. If you keep a hold, you will know who I am all the time, even when you look at me and can't see me the least like the North Wind. I may look something very awful. Do you understand?" (14)

And "awful" here suggests the word's original meaning, not just terrible but "full of awe." That is the state that the powerful feminine figure inspires.

She blends easily with nature, refusing to be pinned down to a single proposition. While Queen Irene's image fuses with the moon in the *Princess* books, here North Wind fuses with the entire night sky:

> What was most strange was that away from her head streamed out her black hair in every direction, so that the darkness in the hayloft looked as if it were made of her hair; but as Diamond gazed at her in speechless amazement, mingled with confidence--for the boy was entranced by her mighty beauty--her hair began to gather itself out of the darkness, and fell down all about her again, till her face looked out of the midst of it like a moon out of a cloud. (11-12)

Her hair becomes one with the darkness, and then her face becomes the illumination for that darkness. She metamorphoses before Diamond's eyes, defying fixed identity; even her relationship to and within nature changes: she is wind, light, darkness and so on. She forever hovers, not just because she is the wind extending over the landscape, but because she is every potentiality that nature has to offer. This is how she is able to "[take] care of a poor little boy with one arm, and... [sink] a ship with the other" (70), how she can be, on the one hand, protective, and on the other, death-

dealing.

Her education can indeed be harsh. For example, she becomes a huge wolf to scare a wicked, drunken nurse: North Wind tells Diamond that "[she] flew at [the nurse's] throat, and she tumbled over the floor with such a crash that [her employers] ran in. She'll be turned away tomorrow--and quite time, if they knew as much as I do" (36). Here North Wind somewhat violently impresses her views of right and wrong on a situation,[2] but her teaching is not always so harsh. She does not just dictate to Diamond, for when he is riding in her hair over London and sees a little girl who is being "dreadfully blown by the wind" (41), he insists that if North Wind is not going to help her, then he will:

> "Oh! please, North Wind," he cried, "won't you help that little girl?"
>
> "No, Diamond; I mustn't leave my work."
>
> "But why shouldn't you be kind to her?"
>
> "I am kind to her: I am sweeping the wicked smells away."
>
> "But you're kinder to me, dear North Wind. Why shouldn't you be as kind to her as you are to me?"
>
> "There are reasons, Diamond. Everybody can't be done to all the same. Everybody is not ready for the same thing."
>
> "But I don't see why I should be kinder used than she."
>
> "Do you think nothing's to be done but what you can see, Diamond, you silly! It's all right. Of course you can help her if you like. You've got nothing particular to do at this moment; I have." (42-43)

Such a dialogue is not to be found in the *Princess* books. There Irene and Curdie learn unquestioningly from Queen Irene, and she of course leads them to safety and enlightenment. Queen Irene, however, especially in *The Princess and Curdie*, can at times seem rigid and didactic. But North Wind's is a more flexible portrait, I think, flexible because even though she has a job to do in this scene, she accommodates Diamond's concerns. She is more flexible and open, reflecting her rather fluid ideas about language and words. She and Diamond can argue over a point, and she allows him to do what he thinks is right, even though when he steps out of North Wind's

hair there are serious consequences, for he too is subject to "the fierce coils of the blast, and [is] all but blown away" (44).

The semiotic at the back of the North Wind

North Wind is not, however, simply a magical figure who carries children across the night sky--she is also a mother figure. That is not unique in MacDonald, but in *At the Back of the North Wind* she is not functioning as a surrogate mother for the protagonist, Diamond, as Queen Irene was for Irene. Diamond already has a mother, and she plays an active role in the story. North Wind's qualities are maternal, but they are also something much more: she reinforces both the mother/child relationship and the semiotic state, in Kristevan reasoning, to which mothers can potentially lead us. Diamond's interaction with North Wind suggests not only safety and peace, but a sensuousness that would seem to be pre-Oedipal, pre-language. Diamond nestles in North Wind's hair like a child in the womb as she carries him over the sea toward the back of the north wind: "Diamond parted her hair with his hands, crept between, and feeling about soon found the woven nest. It was just like a pocket, or like the shawl in which gipsy women carry their children" (39). (Arthur Hughes' illustration of the episode in R. Routledge's edition of the novel, moreover, clearly depicts Diamond assuming a fetal position within North Wind's hair.) He is not only with her--he is *enclosed* by her in a maternal embrace.

When Diamond goes to the back of the North Wind for the first time, the suggestion of the comfort of a mother's womb is even more explicit. In an episode that seems strangely to *invert* the birth process, Diamond must enter/go through

North Wind as he moves over the threshold to get to her "back," the goal of his journey:

> "I want to go into the country at your back."
> "Then you must go through me."
> "I don't know what you mean."
> "I mean just what I say. You must walk on as if I were an open door, and go right through me..."
> He walked on still, groping through the whiteness.... It was when he reached North Wind's heart that he fainted and fell. But as he fell, he rolled over the threshold, and it was thus that Diamond got to the back of the north wind. (112)

The threshold image here emphasizes the sense of transition from this (symbolic) realm to an(other), semiotic place. North Wind's feminine body is the transition between the two worlds; she represents the potentiality of being led to and finding a place of unity and peace. She hovers between the two worlds, knowing life and death, happiness and pain. It is perhaps because of this rather undefined role that she tells Diamond that, "I am nobody there [at the back of the north wind]" (102). I do not think that this comment is meant to devalue her position in the narrative, but rather to emphasize her role as guide or sage for Diamond, her role as a teacher presenting infinite complexities: a mediator between the symbolic and semiotic worlds, a reminder that they can and must interact if true awakening is to occur.[3] Near the end of the novel, soon before Diamond will go to the back of the North Wind permanently, "she placed him on her lap and began to hush him as if he were her own baby, and Diamond was so entirely happy that he did not care to speak a word" (358). Here, through her body, North Wind reminds Diamond of the semiotic state, the place that she will later take him permanently: a place where words do not need to be spoken, where understanding is found in the senses, not in *sense*. It is a process, as Kristeva would say, not so much of increasing our knowledge of language, but of "tackling" it (*Language The Unknown* 325). Silence ended *The Princess and Curdie*, but there the possibility that silence may signal the beginning of

something fruitful is in doubt. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, however, the positive aspects of silence are certain. MacDonald's portrait of the North Wind is a celebration of the maternal icon, guide to a place of unity and peace. She is not the place *per se*--that is at her *back*--but bonding with the mother's body seals the promise for Diamond that something greater does await.

"A far-off song"

Silence here is the prelude to a world of new possibilities, of music and harmony: joyful, spontaneous interaction. We learn of the power of music early on in the narrative, for it is a "far-off song" that makes North Wind able to bear sinking a ship:

> "I will tell you how I am able to bear it, Diamond: I am always hearing, through every noise, through all the noise I am making myself even, the sound of a far-off song. I do not exactly know where it is, or what it means; and I don't hear much of it, only the odour of its music, as it were, flitting across the great billows of the ocean outside this air in which I make such a storm; but what I do hear, is quite enough to make me able to bear the cry from the drowning ship. So it would if you could hear it." (77)

A song, a secret message from the back of the north wind, seems to order this landscape, finding sense in what may seem like (non)sense. North Wind's voice is itself song-like, compared with musical instruments:

> Her voice was like the bass of a deep organ, without the groan in it; like the most delicate of violin tones without the wail in it; like the most glorious of trumpet-ejaculations without the defiance in it; like the sound of falling water without the clatter and clash in it; it was like all of them and neither of them--all of them without their faults, each of them without its peculiarity: after all, it was more like his mother's voice than anything else in the world. (66-67)

The music metaphors here highlight the dichotomies ("it was like all of them and neither of them") that North Wind encloses but, more than that, they are highly suggestive in psychoanalytic terms. Kristeva believes that music is one of the ways that we (in the symbolic realm) can access the powers of the semiotic. She frequently, for example, describes the semiotic in terms of rhythm:

> We must also listen to Celine, Artaud, or Joyce, and read their texts in order to understand that the aim of this practice, which reaches us as a language, is, through the signification of the nevertheless transmitted message, not only to impose a music, a rhythm--that is, a polyphony--but also to wipe out sense through nonsense and laughter. (*Desire* 142)

Riddles and nonsense are indeed important elements of *At the Back of the North Wind*'s "music." Diamond's mother finds a nursery rhyme partially buried in the sand that tells of "a river whose waters run asleep" (138). His mother[4] (representing the somewhat narrow, adult perspective) declares the poem to be "such nonsense" written by "[s]ome silly woman for her children" (144), but the verse makes sense to Diamond, who recognizes it as the song that the river sang to him when he visited the country at the back of the north wind. Later he sings to his baby sibling a song that is "such nonsense to those who couldn't understand it! but not to the baby, who got all the good in the world out of it" (157). MacDonald, in each of these passages, centres on the heightened abilities of the child to understand what to others may be nonsense, to recognize meaning in words that do not follow the tenets of the patriarchy.

Dreams of death

Many critics agree that the "back of the north wind" is death.[5] Edith Lazaros

Honig, for example, describes North Wind as "a harbinger of death" (124). MacDonald was, of course, fascinated by the subject: Greville MacDonald tells us that the writer's "first definable memory" was of a funeral (52). And I have discussed MacDonald's belief that death is a joyful extension of life, another, better life. So while North Wind does take Diamond to the back of the north wind (takes him to his *death*), it is not surprising that she also attended his *birth*: "'I know your mother very well,' said [North Wind]. 'She is a good woman. I have visited her often. I was with her when you were born. I saw her laugh and cry at once. I love your mother, Diamond'" (13). Here we are reminded of the feminine's, particularly the mother's, association with not only life but also death. As Honig points out, the mother "holds the power of life and death over the infant" (114). North Wind's position as a figure on the threshold (here figuratively), encompassing many opposing possibilities at once, is reinforced.

Yet for readers, young and old, the novel's conclusion may be disturbing. If the back of the north wind is death, and if Diamond goes there permanently at the end of the book, how can we accept the narrator's lack of distress in describing Diamond's fate? The maid cries but the narrator does not: "I walked up the winding stair, and entered his room. A lovely figure, as white and almost as clear as alabaster, was lying on the bed. I saw at once how it was. They thought he was dead. I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind" (378). But I think MacDonald's mythical landscape at the back of north wind is more than death: it is the place for which North Wind has prepared Diamond, the realization of a dream, the place, perhaps the semiotic, where law and language do not function as adults understand them. The back of the north wind actually dominates his dreams:

> When he knew he was coming awake, he would sometimes try hard to keep hold of the words of what seemed a new song, one he had not heard before--a song in which the words and the music somehow

> appeared to be all one; but even when he thought he had got them well fixed in his mind, ever as he came *awaker*--as he would say--one line faded a way out of it, and then another, and then another, till at last there was nothing left but some lovely picture of water or grass or daisies.... (154-155)

The (adult) narrator seems envious of what Diamond has found: "Things there are so different from things here! The people there do not speak the same language for one thing," the narrator says of Diamond's original trip to this transcendental place (113). This is a place where the usual divisions that we understand, like land and water, dissolve: "the river... flowed not only through, but over grass" (116). This is a place neither hot nor cold, a place where the river sings, and where people do not speak, but rather "look at each other, and understand everything" (116-117). To look at the back of the north wind as the realm of the semiotic, a place without divisions, led by music, is to develop a more comprehensive approach to what many consider a disturbing conclusion, especially for a children's book. And the adult narrator, like Anodos and Vane, is not obsessed with explicating or understanding this strange place: to know of it seems to be enough. We are shown a place that contains a unity and peace that is incomprehensible in strictly logical terms, a place where Diamond can enjoy a sense of peace and a sensuousness presumably unattainable in the "real" world, and the narrator seems satisfied with that.

Emotionally, however, I suspect that the reader is still uneasy about the conclusion, for Diamond's (semiotic) death is the end result (at least partially) of his unfortunate social position at the hands of a symbolic realm that divides people into social classes and equates money with power. Diamond's family is poor, his accommodation inadequate: "He had not the least idea that the wind got in at a chink in the wall, and blew about him all night. For the back of his bed was only of boards an inch thick, and on the other side of them was the north wind" (4). Critics theorize, moreover, that Diamond dies of tuberculosis, a disease that MacDonald and his

family encountered on several occasions.[6] Diamond escapes from this reality at the end of the novel, but the world will undoubtedly remain a place where socio-political structures favour some people over others. North Wind, then, is not only maternal comfort and solace; she is also a practical figure in a threatening, diseased world where innocent children die.[7] Queen Irene of the *Princess* books also intercedes in societies facing struggle (greedy goblins and greedy citizens), but North Wind attends to a dying boy, ensuring his eternal safety and peace by drawing him away from society. She suggests that you can ultimately (re)discover the mother body and the peace and comfort she offers, and in this novel it is a child (closer to the pre-Oedipal state in psychoanalytic terms) who is able to make that discovery--it is also, however, a dying child.

* * *

When North Wind expands over the landscape she affects/changes its shape. Land and wind relate to and react with one another in a dynamic relationship. North Wind's relationship to the landscape can, I think, be compared with the semiotic's relationship to the symbolic; dynamic interaction, with each needing and modifying the other. That is Kristeva's vision, and when North Wind takes Diamond to her "back" for the first time that sense of interaction and alternation between the two realms is strong. In fact, Diamond's "semiotic" experience there is pitted against London's "symbolic" reality on several occasions as the novel progresses. For example, Diamond's mother frets about the family's poverty and lack of food, for her vision is informed by a material world that *must* be concerned with such practical matters. Diamond, on the other hand, having experienced the back of the north wind, sees beyond social and economic concerns to a place of unity and abundance (155). But

when North Wind takes Diamond to her back permanently at the end of the novel, she is proposing an entirely alternate state, a permanent place of escape. The semiotic here is taken to the extreme, to the point that it is an escape from this life rather than an adjunct to it. Terry Eagleton points out that in Freud the "final goal of life is death, a return to that blissful inanimate state where the ego cannot be injured" (161) and that may be MacDonald's aim here. This place at the back of the north wind has many of the characteristics that Lacanian/Kristevan psychoanalytic theory would characterize as the semiotic, but the tension between it and its opposite, the symbolic, has been abolished. Moreover, the relationship between the feminine figure and death has been made explicit: North Wind leads Diamond to this place.

Crossing the barrier of death is an important act in MacDonald. Vane does not want to die when Raven/Adam and Eve first introduce him to the House of Death. At the end of each of the fantasies for adults, the heroes experience something that seems like death, but return to the "real" world. Irene's mother in the *Princess* books is dead, which perhaps opens the way for Queen Irene, the surrogate mother, to work her magic. Yet Queen Irene is also dead, for she is too old to be truly alive. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, however, the protagonist finally dies--and seems to be released. In MacDonald's philosophy, as I have discussed, death is new life, is a return to the blissful state where self and other, life and death, are united rather than warring. But what is particularly significant to the feminist critic must be the feminine's conspicuous role in this passage. She sometimes frightens and other times comforts the various characters with whom she comes in contact. Neither the feminine figure, nor the world to which she may lead the protagonists, is stable enough to be reduced to a single proposition. Her power is in the uncertainty, and her power can be death-dealing, as we discover with North Wind, who sinks ships

and takes Diamond to his death. If *At the Back of the North Wind* is the most "semiotic" of the books that I have discussed, it is also the most explicit in relating femininity and death, expressing the tremendously powerful ability of the feminine to enlighten, to lead, and sometimes to frighten.

But through these complex associations of femininity and death, MacDonald unravels *life*. When Diamond tells the narrator that the "wind is like kisses from a big lady. When I get up [into the trees] I feel as if I were in North Wind's arms" (345) the narrator concludes that Diamond has accessed a special knowledge beyond this world, "the secret of life":

> The whole ways and look of the child, so full of quiet wisdom, yet so ready to accept the judgment of others in his own dispraise, took hold of my heart, and I felt myself wonderfully drawn towards him. It seemed to me, somehow, as if little Diamond possessed the secret of life, and was himself what he was so ready to think the lowest living thing--an angel of God with something special to say or do. (345)

The adult narrator here may be experiencing a revelation not unlike that of Anodos and Vane in their respective stories, but here the knowledge is received via the child. The adult voice seems to be an outsider, just as Anodos and Vane seem to be outsiders, their revelations at the end of *Phantastes* and *Lilith* somewhat tacked on rather than fully realized. There is a distance between the adult "speaker" and the "experience" that does not seem to separate the child from his/her discovery. MacDonald was also, I suggest, searching for the "secret of life," and in his fantasies for children, in particular *At the Back of the North Wind*, he seems through the child's eyes to dabble in that secret--to be found not in logical words but in illogical silence, a "quiet wisdom" that the feminine seems to impart to those who will or can listen.

NOTES

[1]George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind* (New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1976), p. 12. All further references to this novel will appear within the body of the thesis.

[2]Here, interestingly, North Wind upholds a code/doctrine of right and wrong in the patriarchal tradition. Her shifting/contradictory nature is, I think, what makes her so powerful and fascinating.

[3]Roderick McGillis also sees the importance of such an interaction between worlds. He says that "[t]hrough Diamond MacDonald wishes to fit together two worlds: that behind North Wind and that of London" ("Language and Secret Knowledge," *For the Childlike*, 153).

[4]Within the context of this paper I cannot address all of the comparisons that could be made between the female characters, but I should say something about Curdie's and Diamond's mother and how they may relate to the central feminine figure of their respective books. North Wind seems particularly strong in her narrative, perhaps because of the weakness of Diamond's mother: while the former *creates* circumstance (such as storms), Diamond's mother seems largely an *object* of circumstance (for example, poverty). They are both seen frequently in terms of actions, and we sense both their spirit and their deficiencies.

Queen Irene and Curdie's mother, however, are rendered more in terms of their psychology than their physical situations. Moreover, we have little sense of the deficiencies of either of them. Both are wise and humble in their own ways, with Mrs. Peterson in fact defending the possibility of Irene's "invisible" grandmother on more than one occasion. In each book perhaps the central and magical feminine figure may be considered a "larger," more fully drawn version of the "real" mother.

[5]However, Roderick McGillis, in arguing that *At the Back of the North Wind* is a novel inspired by poetry, says that the back of the north wind is "the source of poetry," a sort of eternity ("Language and Secret Knowledge," *For the Childlike*, 154-155).

[6]The MacDonald family had an unfortunate history with tuberculosis; MacDonald's mother Helen, his brother John, and his daughter Lilia (among others) fell victim to the disease.

[7]Poems, fairy tales, and novels for and about children spring out of misery as well as joy, as William Blake among others would attest. In *The promise of happiness: Value and meaning in children's fiction*, Fred Inglis comments:

> The children's novels spring from the impulse to change the scale of childhood: the powerful sense on the part of the writers that even as the new age [roughly the beginning of the Romantic period] gave name and hope and energy to all those wretches who had been discounted from history for centuries--to idiot boys, chimney-sweeps, illegitimate

> children, harlots, orphans, nursemaids, pickpockets, and crossing-sweepers--so at the same time, other, monstrous forces of the times drove these same wretches into new and deadlier miseries, in the coal mines, the factories, the building sites, the slums. (83)

This reality resulted in many suffering and dying children in literature, for example the orphans at *Jane Eyre*'s Lowood Asylum. Though it is outside the context of this paper, Diamond's plight follows in a wide literary tradition.

CONCLUSION

"Symbolic" and "semiotic," as psychoanalytic terms, were not, of course, in MacDonald's vocabulary, but I think his fantasies reach toward a state that can be explored using psychoanalytic theories of language acquisition. This school of thought has gained much favour in the last twenty years or so as critics discover its tremendous explanatory powers. There is something rather surreal and haunting about the fantasies that I have discussed here, an intellectual as well as an emotional impact that leads me to conclude that MacDonald's writings provide fertile ground for such analyses. For MacDonald, as for theorists such as Julia Kristeva, the feminine and the maternal are central in the process of exploring alternatives to linearity and doctrine. Kristeva describes this impulse to quell the "phallic presence": it is "to pierce through the paternal wall of the superego and afterwards, to reemerge still uneasy, split apart, asymmetrical, overwhelmed with a desire to know, but a desire to know more and differently than what is encoded-spoken-written" (*Desire* 164-165).

This is not to tear the novels that I have discussed from the fabric of their Victorian milieu: George MacDonald's fantasies written for adults and those written for children are importantly seen as cultural artifacts, intricate expressions of both the author's personal beliefs and cultural influences. But his fascination with words, with the feminine, with the transcendental, weaves, I think, a complex web of meanings and associations that, when explored with psychoanalytic theory, help us understand not just what these books mean to the writer, but also what they mean to the reader. Indeed the issue of audience was not lost on MacDonald. Though he said that his first duty was to serve his "Master" (in Greville MacDonald 375), his

different treatment of the feminine in the adult as opposed to the child's forum indicates, I think, his keen awareness of what the Victorian audience expected from its art. If we try, through examining MacDonald's portraits of the feminine in the fantasies for adults, to construct the adult audience to which he is aiming his work, we may conclude that the adult audience did not believe in, or could not accept, portraits of a feminine figure who is powerful, complete, unified. So Anodos' and Vane's limitations, their inability to experience oneness with a feminine figure, suggest a society, a cultural milieu, that had difficulty "seeing" femininity as a key aspect in achieving peace and unity, a state not to be feared but to be celebrated. Feminine figures in these novels are ultimately plagued by the symbolic's words, which tend to threaten and reduce their identity.

But those words that are restricting in the adult forum become liberating in the child's forum, for children do not just hear what the magical mother figure has to say--they experience things in new ways because of her "words." A house, as North Wind points out to Diamond, does not have to be a wooden box: it can be the landscape itself. MacDonald suggests the child's, or as an extension the childlike's, greater capacity to accept a state that transcends rigid laws and words. The speech of the father is challenged by that of the mother. Witness North Wind, who vehemently asserts her femininity: she is not *Mr.* North Wind. And Princess Irene has a "grandmother," not a grandfather. Further, we can infer from this view of the child the social and cultural conditions that may have produced it. MacDonald suggests the power of the child's forum to unleash the transformative powers of the feminine, and in particular the mother. It is as if the child, both as protagonist and, as an extension, as reader, has the author's (society's) permission to explore the mother body. If in the fantasies for adults the feminine figure incites fear of *sexuality*, in the fantasies for children she inspires a celebration of *sensuality*. Both Irene and

Diamond nestle in the mother's arms in a way totally unlike what MacDonald "allows" for his male protagonists. In the fantasies for children he achieves a reunion with the mother, an acceptance of her body (its power to contain both life and death) and of the place her body represents (a pre-Oedipal state of peace, fluidity, unity). MacDonald suggests that the feminine is a means in *this* world (which even in the fantasy realm is limited by language as we know it) to see possibilities *beyond* this world.

But MacDonald's striving to see *beyond*, in combination with his fascination with the feminine, also results in the books' nagging associations between femininity and death. As I have discussed, Lilith is the great anti-mother. In the *Princess* books, Queen Irene is "very old indeed," too old to be anything but a "dead" magical spirit or ghost. And North Wind's association with death is especially strong, for she conjures up tempests that sink ships, and carries children to the back of the North Wind. MacDonald is clearly fascinated by her powers, and death is frequently the means by which she is discovered. For feminist critics this fact may be disturbing, but Lilith's association with death is quite different from Queen Irene's or North Wind's association with death. In the fantasies for adults some of the feminine figures are portrayed as life-in-death figures--a genuine physical threat. In the child's forum, however, death is perceived less as a physical ending of life, and more as a spiritual awakening of life: a wonderful opportunity to open up a window onto (an)other world of heightened perception and infinite opportunity. Death has long been a cultural and a literary metaphor of rebirth, and the magical and transformative powers of the feminine are often, for MacDonald, expressed in/through death, surely the single greatest metaphor of change and transformation. She is ultimately associated with this great unknown, and this must create some distance, some trepidation between the writer and what he is trying to convey: we especially detect

this uneasiness in the fantasies for adults, but in the fantasies for children MacDonald seems more comfortable with exploring such realities.

* * *

C.S. Lewis describes MacDonald as being best at "mythopoeic art," best at telling stories that rise above the text, rise above words:

> If we define Literature as an art whose medium is words, then certainly MacDonald has no place in its first rank--perhaps not even in its second. There are indeed passages where the wisdom and (I would dare to call it) the holiness that are in him triumph over and even burn away the baser elements in his style.... What he does best is fantasy--fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic. And this, in my opinion, he does better than any man. (preface to *GM: An Anthology* 14)

But George MacDonald's words are not to be underestimated. He was fascinated by them and it shows in his fantasies--fascinated with *what* they mean and *how* they mean. He was also frustrated by them, and probably felt trapped by their limitations. MacDonald makes this point in one of his "Unspoken Sermons," and in so doing makes a rather Kristevan observation about language:

> Whatever belonging to the region of thought and feeling is uttered in words, is of necessity uttered imperfectly. For thought and feeling are infinite, and human speech, although far-reaching in scope and marvellous in delicacy, can embody them after all but approximately and suggestively. (*Light to Live By* 55)

I think MacDonald, near the end of his writing career, was speaking through Vane when he says in *Lilith* that "I begin indeed to fear that I have undertaken an impossibility, undertaken to tell what I cannot tell because no speech at my command will fit the forms in my mind" (194). In *Lilith* MacDonald perhaps struggles more than in any other novel to come to grips with the inadequacy of words, and is most pessimistic with the results. *Lilith* is arguably his strangest, most chaotic, and

disturbing book. It certainly drove his critics to distraction: some felt that he had fallen into "strange mystical farrago," had written "a wild phantasmagoria of nonsense" (in Raeper 383). The plight of MacDonald's male protagonists reflects this chaos; their fate seems to be one of frustration, of continually reaching for something which is just out of their grasp. But in the fantasies for children words seem to be adequate; there is a sense of calm in these works. If words are necessary to communication as we know it, children can be exposed to them and not become trapped by their limitations. Words, as North Wind says, cannot indicate "true" nature and the child protagonists fully understand this.

Yet shortly after finishing *Lilith*, MacDonald's last major work, the writer moved away from words, becoming more and more withdrawn, and eventually "subsided into silence until the power of speech seemed to abandon him completely" (Raeper 390). We can speculate that MacDonald suffered a stroke that impaired his ability to speak. Whatever the cause, I read/interpret his silence at the end of his life as I do the peaceful wordlessness to be found in some of his fantasies, especially those written for children. In an enormously suggestive metaphor that at least *reaches* toward an alternate state, perhaps the semiotic (as Irene and Diamond do as they nestle in Queen Irene's and North Wind's arms respectively), MacDonald seems to trade (masculine) words for (feminine) silence at the end of his life. In such a place the silence can speak an(other) language, focussed on the openness of the child rather than the rigidity of the adult. Adults perhaps grapple in vain with things that are not best understood through their eyes.

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