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The Space Between: Women and the Language of Opposites in George MacDonald's Short Fiction

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George MacDonald was a well-known nineteenth-century writer and clergyman in Scotland. His body of work is large and diverse, including sermons, poetry, novels, and short fiction. Many of MacDonald's works lost popularity after the end of the Victorian era, but the "books in which the fairy element was strong remained in print and continued to attract moderate interest" (Phillips 344). These powerful stories have kept their critical acclaim through the years, being hailed even in the twentieth century as "among the best ever written" (344). This type of story, the literary fairy tale, has become a long-standing and well-established genre. As Jack Zipes explains:

> By the beginning of the nineteenth century when the Brothers Grimm set about to celebrate German culture through their country's folk tales, the literary fairy tale had long since been institutionalized, and…a host of Victorian writers from George MacDonald to Oscar Wilde assumed different ideological and aesthetic positions within this institutionalization. (Zipes 12)

It is the literary fairy tale, particularly MacDonald's short fantasies, that I will be studying in this paper.

One of the most striking characteristics of MacDonald's short fantasies is the way in which they play on the conventions of the fairy tale genre that served as their inspiration. This, again, is not in itself unusual. In fact, the literary fairy tale is often more concerned with using the tales to explore contemporary societal problems than with writing a conventional tale. "Many writers would parody, mock, question, and undermine the classical literary tradition and produce original and subversive tales that were part and parcel of the institution itself" (Zipes 15). MacDonald's fairy tales certainly serve this purpose, simultaneously revering and undermining stereotypical fairy tale conventions.

Nowhere is this pattern more evident than in MacDonald's female characters, and the ways in which they do or do not conform to standard female roles in the fairy tale genre. The common thread running through all of MacDonald's fairy tale women is that they mingle characteristics of roles that are diametrically opposed in the fairy tale genre. For example, a character will be both heroine and damsel in distress, or act like a fairy godmother but at the same time be described in terms of a witch. It is these four main character types, heroine, damsel in distress, godmother, and witch, that I will be exploring in this paper.

Before I proceed any further, however, it must be said that the fairy tale genre includes an extremely vast number and diversity of stories. Although these four rather simplistic character types can certainly be found in many tales from the genre, they by no means provide the direct basis for all female characters in the fairy tale genre. In folk and fairy tale, there are more examples of women who in some way break free from such rigid character types than there are of women who precisely conform to them. However, MacDonald was not working with actual tales, but rather with perceptions of the fairy tale universe as a whole, particularly the "bleak, dark, cruel and scary" universe envisaged by writers and collectors such as the Brothers Grimm (Carter 25). The conventions MacDonald plays on are not an exact reflection of the characters in the genre so much as a reflection of what he and his society perceived as the basic fairy tale characters. As Jack Zipes says, MacDonald used his books to question "the standardized model of what a fairy tale should be" (Zipes 75). While they provide no real delineation of existing fairy tale characters, these perceptions have continued into our society today. Therefore, for the purposes of this essay, I will draw comparisons between MacDonald's characters and those in the most popular oral (not literary) fairy tales in our society, such as "Beauty and the Beast," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Snow White." The four main perceptual female character types that MacDonald uses in his tales, then, are the heroine, the damsel in distress (or passive heroine), the fairy godmother, and the witch or hag.

The most balanced blend of opposites can be found in MacDonald's heroines. In MacDonald's work, there are examples of female characters caught between protagonist and antagonist, but an even more common blend is that of an active and a passive heroine. Since a link has been established between MacDonald's works and the Grimms' fairy tales that served as part of MacDonald's inspiration, we might turn to Maria M. Tatar's essay "Born Yesterday: Heroes in the Grimms' Fairy Tales," which gives a basic description of some classic hero types. Tatar separates her male heroes into two main types: the active hero and the passive hero. The term 'passive' is somewhat misleading in this context—what Tatar is referring to by this is the trickster hero common in many folk and fairy tales, perhaps most notably the 'Jack Tales.' These stories center around a person who often seems somewhat simple at first, but who eventually outsmarts others in the tale, often to escape a perilous situation. Tatar considers these to be passive heroes

because in many tales this type of figure does not seek danger, but instead has to use cunning to escape the dangers that come to meet him.

While Tatar's use of the term is valid, during this essay I will instead be using "passive heroine" to refer to a protagonist who provides the focus of the story and draws the majority of the audience's sympathy (therefore a heroine), but who must rely on others to rescue her from adversity (and therefore passive). Many popular oral fairy tales today feature a passive heroine. The best example might be the title character of "Sleeping Beauty." Doomed from her christening at the beginning of the story, the princess follows the proscribed role outlined by the bad fairy's curse at the start of the tale, and then sleeps while the prince slashes and fights his way through thorn bushes and dragons to save her. The prince is a typical chivalric male hero in the tale, but the audience is meant to identify with him only insofar as he provides a means for the main protagonist, Sleeping Beauty, to triumph over the curse. Another example might be "Snow White," in which we again see a main protagonist who survives to marry the prince through luck or outside help rather than through any action of her own. The huntsman spares her because of her youthful innocence; she does not overpower him and escape. The dwarves subsequently release her from the witch/evil stepmother's poisoned haircomb and constrictive laces. The prince falls in love with her while she lies in a passive, comatose state, from which she wakes only after the poisoned apple is jostled from her throat by his embrace. The audience's sympathy is drawn mainly to the young girl, but Snow White's struggle is not one between herself and her stepmother so much as a struggle between her stepmother and helpers such as the dwarves. In other words, a passive heroine in this style is functionally a damsel in distress who serves as the main figure in the story. It is this type of heroine that I will be examining in MacDonald's work, in conjunction with the other, more typically male, hero type, the active hero.

The active hero often taps directly into the image of chivalric knighthood. This sort of hero "is seen departing adventurously in search of woman; he slays the dragon, he battles giants" (Tatar 95-96). This hero meets adversity and eventually conquers it through his own action. The fairy tale genre generally deals with characters that change over the course of the tale; thus, an active hero nearly always has an uncertain beginning to his eventual triumph. Sometimes this change is characterized by a name that picks out

the character's unsuitability for a hero's role (such as 'the brave little tailor') but which is eventually countered by the deeds of the character. At other times, the change is merely that the dragon slaying or other challenge is a grueling test of the hero's strength or bravery. Seldom do we see a character that enters at the height of physical prowess and remains there throughout the tale. However, the active hero always surmounts these challenges in the end, usually in a display of courage or power, and this is what separates an active hero from a passive one.

Active heroines can be seen in popular tales such as "Tatterhood," in which a rambunctious older sister who dresses in rags must fight to save her beautiful, milder sister from a horde of goblins. Her success not only saves her sister, but also the prince who becomes Tatterhood's husband. The audience's sympathy is with Tatterhood both as a female character working toward marriage and as the heroic means of saving the other characters in the story. A similar heroine would be Janet from the many retellings of "Tam Lin." Janet falls in love with the title character during an illicit glimpse at a fairy procession, and she ultimately saves him through a feat of strength and courage by physically holding him down while he transforms into a myriad of wild beasts. Janet draws the audience's sympathy both through her quest to marry Tam Lin and by providing the means of saving the young man from his fairy captors. A third example might be the main character in "The Six Swans" who must save her six transformed brothers by weaving six shirts of nettles with her bare hands and not speaking for six years. The woman bravely persists in her painful task and her silence until her brothers appear at the very last moment, when she is about to be burned at the stake for false (but undenied) charges of infanticide. In this case, a prince falls in love with and marries the woman while she is undergoing her lengthy and painful test of courage, and the six brothers are rescued by their sister. In all three of these stories, the heroine stands as a woman whose ultimate destiny is marriage, but she also takes an active role in saving the men around her, often through a strength of will that seems to surpass theirs.

The MacDonald stories that feature a prominent female character usually combine both the active and passive heroines into a single entity, who goes through the story saving and being saved by turns. The clearest example of this is Nycteris in the story "The History of Photogen and Nycteris: A Day and Night Märchen," which concerns a

young man and woman who were raised by a witch ultimately to embody the essence of day and night, respectively. Watho, the witch, keeps Nycteris alone in a tomb, lit only by the barest hint of a glow from an alabaster lamp. Photogen, the boy, has nearly constant companionship and is never allowed to experience the absence of light. Gradually, Nycteris's life begins to center on understanding the world around her, while Photogen lives for adventure and conquest. The two children grow to become exact opposites, but they eventually must unite to help each other, tempering each others' faults in order to escape from the witch.

One of the most obvious traits through which to examine Nycteris's role as an active hero is bravery. The beginning of the tale sets Photogen up to fit the stereotype of the classic chivalric hero. His courage is boundless as he pits himself against all manner of wild beasts, but as soon as he sees his first sundown, he becomes absolutely incapacitated by fear. His greatest strength becomes his greatest weakness. However, the night is Nycteris's day, and her knowledge of and communion with the nighttime world allow her to step in as both comforter and protector to Photogen. At night, it is always Nycteris who leads Photogen by the hand through woods, and who negotiates around dangerous predators with a huntsman's sense of wind-borne smells.

This is not to say that Nycteris never shows fear in the story; on the contrary, she is very frightened at various points in the story. Although she makes no pretenses to bravery, though, Nycteris consistently works through her fear to find a solution to the problem at hand. An excellent example is when her lamp shatters, leaving her in utter darkness. This may not seem traumatic to a child reared in near-darkness, but as the narrator says, "Nycteris, except by shutting her eyes, knew less about darkness than she did about light" (The Golden Key, 44). She sits trembling for a moment and goes into a panic, but her panic manifests in action—she seeks a way out, to find the light that has left her lamp. Nycteris' greatest problem during the day is not her fear, although some fear certainly accompanies her in the transition, but rather pain and even more importantly, blindness. Nycteris, raised in a manner that should make her accustomed to dealing with darkness and thus sightlessness, actually knows very little about facing blindness at all. She becomes completely incapacitated by the thing she would be expected to know the most about.

A similar statement might sum up Photogen's situation as the failed ideal of the chivalric hero. During the day, he faces some of the most terrible beasts imaginable with never a twinge of fear, while chasing beasts into unexplored regions of the extensive hunting grounds. He should be used to conquering his own fear, but as soon as he is presented with something that does make him afraid, he is completely unable to assuage his fear of everything around him.

An interesting comment on this issue of bravery, and especially how it relates to gender stereotypes, is made in a conversation between Photogen and Nycteris:

> 'Come, come, dear!' said Nycteris; 'you must not go on this way. You must be a brave girl and—'
>
> 'A girl!' shouted Photogen, and started to his feet in wrath. 'If you were a man, I should kill you.'
>
> 'A man?' repeated Nycteris: 'what is that? How could I be that? We are both girls—are we not?'
>
> 'No, I am not a girl,' he answered; '—although,' he added, changing his tone, and casting himself on the ground at her feet, 'I have given you too good reason to call me one.'
>
> 'Oh, I see!' returned Nycteris. 'No, of course! you can't be a girl: girls are not afraid—without reason. I understand now: it is because you are not a girl that you are so frightened.' (The Golden Key, 65-66)

This last is a humorous statement, but one that the story actually takes very seriously. MacDonald is letting his characters put into words the idea that his story explores—that the people most associated with courage, stereotypical heroes like Photogen, may sometimes know the least about it. MacDonald is playing on this fairy tale ideal of bravery to show the value of a more realistic approach to fear. Knowing fear and being able to cope with it is much more valued in this text than the fearlessness Photogen shows in the beginning.

As far as bravery is concerned, Nycteris emerges as a closer match to what a true fairy tale heroine should be, according to the way MacDonald presents the issue. However, the tale makes a point of trying to weigh equally the two characters' flaws and merits, and what Nycteris unexpectedly shows in courage, she lacks in physical strength or willpower. Although the story equates Photogen's fearlessness with foolhardiness rather than with true courage, this quality, along with his strength and ability as a huntsman, nevertheless proves essential to their escape. When the witch assumes the guise of a red wolf and chases down the two escapees, their survival comes down to

Photogen's ability to fire two arrows quickly into the pursuing beast. Once that is done, Nycteris emerges from behind a tree. She assures Photogen that she "was not a bit afraid" (The Golden Key 84), but she does so in a feeble voice. At one point, the narrator asserts Nycteris's superiority, despite having to be "borne along like a baby" by Photogen during the day: "she was the greater, for, suffering more, she feared nothing" (The Golden Key 83). Nycteris's fear of the damaging sun has good cause, while Photogen's fear of the night and its sounds is mostly unfounded. However, this assertion is not carried out anywhere else in the story—Nycteris's daytime pain and blindness leave her every bit as helpless and weak as Photogen's nighttime fear. Their final resolution, as spoken by Photogen, is to use their differences to help each other:

> "She has got to teach me to be a brave man in the dark, and I have got to look after her until she can bear the heat of the sun, and he helps her to see, instead of blinding her" (The Golden Key 86).

Nycteris proves to be every bit as deficient in willpower as Photogen was in courage, which balances out her tendency toward an active hero's bravery with a passive hero's need to be saved. Each character conquers his or her weaknesses in the end of the tale, and the two reverse equally again, coming to love best the spheres that once gave them the most agony.

There is also a much less obvious trait one can use in comparing Nycteris's role to that of an active hero. In his book The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man, Max Lüthi outlines several common traits of the fairy tale hero. The most helpful of these that has not already been discussed is the characteristic of isolation (Lüthi 135), which applies very closely to the Photogen and Nycteris story. Both the young protagonists of this tale express this isolation in much the same way. According to Lüthi, one way of expressing this isolation is for the hero to be an only child. This fits both Photogen and Nycteris, since each is the only child of his or her natural parents, despite the fact that they unknowingly share a surrogate witch-mother. The two might as well even have separate surrogate mothers, as the witch performs a separate mother role with each child. While Photogen is still a small child, the witch acts as protector and nurturer. She practically hovers over him, keeping him always in the light, "watching against shadows as if they had been live things that would hurt him" (The Golden Key 39). Watho herself undresses

the boy to lay him in the sun. With Nycteris, the witch is a teacher, teaching the girl music along with what "little education she intended her to have" (The Golden Key 42). As far as named characters are concerned, the equality in their isolation is made complete as each child is given a caretaker—Photogen is placed largely in the care of the huntsman, Fargu, and Nycteris is given a nursemaid, Falca. The similarity in the look and sound of their names is probably intentional; it points out the fact that these two serve mirror roles, functionally the same character on two separate sides of the story.

The similarity in solitude is continued in that each child also "leaves home to wander out into the world, in a sense out into the void" (Lüthi 135). Nycteris breaks free from her tomb to explore the world outside. Photogen runs off on the verge of dusk, breaking away from his enforced daylight waking hours. They are equals in this departure from their sheltered, structured realities, and they meet in a garden separate from both worlds. Both children are "set apart from [their] surroundings by some more or less obvious peculiarity" (Lüthi 136), another means of expressing isolation, as each represents an extreme of existence only made possible through the witch's elaborate scheming. Through the story, their union of extremes allows each to gradually approach a more practical middle ground. Each character is also "in need of help…a deficient creature" (Lüthi 137) in some way. Photogen's amazing bravery and strength during daylight reverts to fear and utter helplessness at night, just as Nycteris's ease with the look, sound, and sensation of night changes to horrific pain and blindness under a searing sun.

Interestingly enough, the main trait that motivates Nycteris to act as an active heroine in the story is one that seems more readily applicable to a passive heroine. Quite simply, this trait is a compassion for and communion with the natural world. Nycteris's compassionate and philosophical nature is responsible for her ease with the creatures and forces around her. As mentioned earlier, when Nycteris leads Photogen at night, she relies on her awareness of creatures she can scent in the breeze and the direction her own scent will be carried to skirt around the wild beasts without signaling her presence. Her protection of Photogen, then, is based in this sort of knowledge of nature. Equally important for Photogen's survival is Nycteris's compassion for him. Nycteris gives him

enough strength and courage to be able to walk, to be led through the darkness instead of being too afraid to move.

Tied in with this issue of a connection to the natural world is Lüthi's idea that a typical fairytale hero is "capable of accepting gifts and advice from 'helpers'" (138) during his journey through the tale. Not counting the aid he receives from Nycteris, Photogen gets no help from outside sources as he tries to escape Watho the witch. On the contrary, he seems at odds with the natural world around him, seeking to conquer it through physical strength rather than working peacefully through it. Nycteris, on the other hand, does receive help from outside sources in nature, in what at times seems an almost mystical intervention. When her alabaster lamp shatters, leaving her lost and blind in utter darkness, a firefly that she mistakes for the spirit of her lamp leads her to the outside world. This allows her to escape and explore her world (another theme mentioned before in connection with heroes) when she might otherwise have been trapped, unseeing, in her tomb. Later, when Watho casts her into a great field to die beneath the approaching sun, a series of dangerous animals approach and each run away rather than hurt Nycteris—"no creature hurt her, and Watho was angry with the whole creation" (The Golden Key 76). She did not have to be saved from the animals by another person; some inner quality of her own or some connection with the animals was responsible. When Nycteris finally awakens in the sunlit field from her faint, she takes comfort from the pain in a scattering of fragile daisies beneath her. Nycteris' bond with the natural world prevents her from fitting perfectly in the role of the passive heroine. However, that same bond also separates her from the ideal of the classic chivalric hero, who often succeeds by conquering the people or things that confront him.

The widely disparate characterizations of Photogen and Nycteris in this tale are common in fairy tales that show the adventures of a pair of siblings. In this type of story, the two siblings can be interpreted as representatives of a dual human nature, and "the main message is that these must be integrated for human happiness" (Bettelheim 78). Noted scholar Bruno Bettelheim associates this dual nature with a tension between the civilized and the animal: at some point, one of the two siblings "begins an animal existence, and the other does not. At the end of the tale the animal is changed back into his human form; the two are reunited, never to be separated again" (Bettelheim 79). This

provides an interesting way of looking at the differences between Photogen and Nycteris, in that it reveals how each character's integration of opposite traits both continues and disrupts traditional fairy tale structures.

On the one hand, one might interpret "The History of Photogen and Nycteris" as pointing to Nycteris as living an animal existence, and Photogen helping her to return to his more civilized lifestyle. As demonstrated previously, Nycteris enjoys a very close, almost mystical connection with the natural world. She shows a keen awareness for other animals' use of airborne scents, and she uses this skill herself quite easily. Animals avoid harming her and even aid her when she is in need. Nycteris even connects with the wind and the moon, which she views as sentient forces. Photogen has no such communion with nature. Instead, he perpetually seeks to dominate the natural world through violence, spending the days hunting various beasts.

On the other hand, however, Photogen may equally be interpreted as the more animal of the two characters. He tries to conquer nature, but he does so on nature's terms—he views existence as a matter of hunting or being hunted. The dominance he has over the world during the day reverses at night, when he feels hunted by the world at large. Instead of actually breaking free of an animal existence by conquering the world around him, he mirrors beasts such as the lions in the story, who are hunters, dominant forces in their own right, until hunted by a stronger animal—Photogen. By indulging in an existence built on violence, he is strongly linked to a quality most often linked to the id, the more animal consciousness in Bettelheim's structure of analysis. If we use this interpretation, Nycteris's communion with nature can be seen as based on her philosophical nature. Her desire to know the world around her and how it operates drives her to this close relationship. Nycteris's scientific and philosophical tendencies would be most strongly connected to the higher, more traditionally civilized levels of consciousness like the superego.

By including the possibility of both interpretations, MacDonald avoids stripping the tale of the traditional fairy tale structure of a move between two types of existence. He adheres outwardly to the fairy tale conventions, but he makes his tale more complex and in some ways more realistic by making each character deviate in some way from the normal pattern. One result of this is that the tale grows with the reader, opening up

interpretations that are increasingly subtler as the reader becomes more ready to pick up on them. This heightens what many critics have pointed to as one of the main benefits of fairy tales—namely, that they adapt to the reader, forming increasingly larger circles of awareness as the reader ages. As MacLeod Yearsley says of fairy tales, "to the rational mind they are something more. Its spirit of inquiry spurs it to seek what hidden meanings lie beneath the surface" (Yearsley 2). MacDonald's use of opposition to deepen his characters allows the tales to maintain their appeal on a simple level of interpretation while extending it to a much more complex one. Tales like "The History of Photogen and Nycteris" can capture the interest of young readers by fitting into the traditional fairy tale structures, and yet still question the appropriateness of those structures, especially as they relate to gender. This tale does so by introducing a female character who is not only capable, but in some ways better suited to dealing with problems than the traditional chivalric hero.

Turning from an exploration of Nycteris, an active heroine in MacDonald's work, it might be helpful now to look at an a more traditional example of a passive female character in his work, namely the title character in the story "The Light Princess." This tale concerns a princess cursed at her christening by an uninvited relative to lose her gravity, both physically and emotionally. The girl eventually finds that she is immune to the curse somewhat while she is in the water, and she soon develops a passion for swimming, just before she meets a handsome prince who is immediately smitten with her. When the witch who cursed her finds out about the loophole the princess has been enjoying, she drains the kingdom of water. The prince steps in to sacrifice his life for the return of the princess' beloved lake. Fortunately, the prince's sacrifice breaks through to the princess, and she cries after saving him, which breaks the curse on her and the kingdom.

The princess in this tale behaves outwardly just like the stereotypical passive heroine we see in many fairy tales. In fact, this story seems to be fairly heavily based on a popular type of folk tale in which a young man accepts a challenge to make a princess laugh (or sometimes cry) for the first time. In most of the versions of this tale, the majority of the story is spent on the misadventures of the young man, while the princess waits offstage. As I said earlier, by 'passive heroine' I am referring to a main protagonist

of the story who nevertheless relies on others to rescue her from her predicament. She draws the audience's sympathy, but is generally not an active force for change. This is precisely the case with the princess in "The Light Princess." However, even in this character, MacDonald subtly critiques female stereotypes in fairy tales through the use of unexpected, contradictory traits.

One way to view the princess' place in the tale would be by looking at the game of ball the castle populace plays with the young girl:

> Going down into the kitchen, or *the room*, you would find Jane and Thomas, and Robert and Susan, all and sum, playing at ball with the little princess. She was the ball herself, and did not enjoy it the less for that. Away she went, flying from one to another, screeching with laughter. And the servants loved the ball itself better even than the game. But they had to take some care how they threw her, for if she received an upward direction, she would never come down again without being fetched. (The Light Princess, 17)

This passage shows a direct correlation between the princess' role in the game and her role in the story as a whole. Here, the girl is central to the game, carrying every participant's focus. Yet she is not an active participant in the game. She does not direct the ball; she is the ball. Her role is to be manipulated by the others. This carries through to the princess' life in general. Within the story, she has no power, no direction of her own. Her position in the tale at any time has only to do with how other people use her. For example, the princess' tragic anti-gravitic state is due to her aunt's attempt to revenge herself on the king. The further measures the witch/aunt takes to drain the water from the land are merely to prevent her vengeance from being thwarted: "their brains shall boil and frizzle in their skulls before I will lose my revenge" (The Light Princess 73). For Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck, the two Chinese philosophers commanded to cure her, the princess is merely a means through which to continue their ongoing argument between Spiritualism and Materialism, as they present opposite extremes of treatment. Just as the first part of the princess' existence follows the curse placed on her by the witch, her release from the curse follows an oracle found in the lake:

> Death alone from death can save.
> Love is death, and so is brave—
> Love can fill the deepest grave.
> Love loves on beneath the wave. (The Light Princess 83, 84)

The princess' release from enchantment is due to the prince's intervention, which is outlined in advance by this rhyme. Not only is the princess' emotional response brought about by an active sacrifice of the prince's, but it is also preordained. In her interaction with these people and others, the princess never seems to break away from passivity. Outwardly, she is a perfect example of the passive heroine.

However, MacDonald includes several important features in this story that promote a more realistic image of womanhood. This story, like "Photogen and Nycteris," operates on the notion that extreme personality traits are detrimental, a theme not in keeping with a completely passive ideal. In the case of "The Light Princess," this theme is not as obvious as in "Photogen and Nycteris," because it centers on traits associated with maidenliness, instead of dealing so directly with passivity. In this story, this ultimately boils down to decorum.

The princess, of course, seldom seems to display decorum, and her hilarity causes pain to her family, a hindrance to love, and masks an even greater pain within the princess. The curse that strips her of gravity means that she cannot be serious, even when told in an experiment that "the city would certainly be abandoned to the mercy of the enemy's soldiery" (The Light Princess 24).

In dire situations such as these, she laughs immoderately, which tortures her mother and father. The two grow more and more despondent and tense. In a tribute to a Mother Goose nursery rhyme, the king is seen in the counting house, taking no pleasure in counting his money, and the queen is seen in the parlor, unable even to eat her bread and honey (The Light Princess 18). The royal couple has many serious discussions and even arguments about their daughter's state of affairs. The most notable (and humorous) of these takes place in a series of puns, in which the two argue the merits of being light-hearted, light-handed, light-footed, and light bodied against the disadvantages of being light-headed, light-fingered, light-minded, and light-haired/heired (19-21). Her near-hysterical appearance above her parents' heads interrupts private consultations about the princess. The fearful couple grow so anxious about their daughter's safety that they cannot even allow her out without a troop of light horse in attendance to pull her back in by her leash if the wind carries her off.

The unbounded hilarity the princess presents would also be a barrier to love, were it not for the slightly mellowing effect of the water she swims in. Fortunately for them both, while the princess is in the water she "was not so forward in her questions or pert in her replies…as on shore. Neither did she laugh so much; and when she did laugh, it was more gently. She seemed altogether more modest and maidenly in the water than out of it" (69). The princess' normal behavior would be completely inconducive to a romance. Even when she is more sedate due to the water, the princess is still referred to occasionally by the prince as cold. He sings for the water to "renew/Cold and true/Kisses round her" (65). During the sacrifice of his life, the princess speaks to him "quite coolly" (97). Upon the prince's request, the princess bestows upon him "a long, sweet, cold kiss" (103). We see just how much of a hindrance her normal behavior can be later in the story, when the lake has dried up. The princess' night-swimming interludes with the prince disappear completely, and she no longer has any interaction with him. In fact, she "had forgotten him. However much she had enjoyed his company in the water, she did not care for him without it" (82). The prince's love for her is what eventually breaks her inability to be serious, which in turn allows for a real, mutual love.

Perhaps most important, however, is that the princess' unmoderated sense of humor is shown at times to be a desperate façade, masking a much greater pain and sorrow. There are several points at which we hear that in the princess' laugh "there was something missing…I think it was a certain tone, depending on the possibility of sorrow—*morbidezza*, perhaps. She never smiled" (30). When the prince first sees the princess in the water, he mistakes her high-pitched, anxious laughter for screaming and rushes in to rescue her. Likewise, in the hopes that making his daughter cry will cure her, the king gives her "an awful whipping." The only result of this, however, is that "she looked grave, and her laughing sounded uncommonly like screaming" (48). Her constant laughter obviously obscures sadness and pain that she cannot express. Her extreme, always happy state is not only a curse on her family. For the princess, too, it becomes a trap rather than a blessing. The narrator reveals a greater happiness in the story when discussing her slight transition in the water—"great pleasure spoils laughing" (42). A true happiness is tempered with peacefulness, perhaps even with some degree of sorrow.

It must be said that the purpose of the tale is not to promote a completely serious approach to life, either. Seriousness is esteemed a great deal in the story, but at the same time, the boisterous side of the princess is upheld as warm, down-to-earth, and even, rather incongruously, as sensible.

First of all, when the hero prince is first introduced, the narrator mentions his sympathy for the passive female character in fairy tales:

> Then the princes get away to follow their fortunes. In this way they have the advantage of the princesses, who are forced to marry before they have had a bit of fun. I wish our princesses got lost in a forest sometimes. (50)

This comment validates the princess' love for adventure, expressed by such things as her desire to be "tied to the end of a string…and be flown like a kite" (34), and her passion for falling into the water from great heights, with the prince's aid. In fact, her love for the water is partly that it is "in it alone that she enjoyed any freedom" (45). The water is a temporary reprieve from escorts. It provides the only time in which the princess may explore or merely exist on her own.

Second, the mentions of the princess as cold are counterbalanced by occasional warmth that springs from her joyful behavior. Her lack of gravity causes pain to her parents, and it at times is a strain on the servants, who must constantly watch her and save her from sudden drafts. However, her joyfulness simultaneously endears her to those around her, and "kept the household in…constant good humor" (14). She associates freely with the servants. She kisses a page, albeit somewhat accidentally, which causes her father embarrassment. Her laughter is divisive at times, such as when the prince talks "about being in heaven" (66). However, it acts as a warm, positive force, at times even in the same passage, such as when the prince's growing affection makes him wonder "whether the princess's way of looking at things infected him, or he was actually getting light-headed" (66). The princess's lack of gravity causes both problems and happiness to the other characters.

Finally, what at times can seem to be unfounded and inappropriate amusement on the part of the princess is at other times depicted as completely sensible and down-to-earth. The young woman has a zest for life that strips her of frivolous squeamishness and prejudice. As mentioned before, the princess has no qualms about kissing a servant, in this case a young page. "She did not mind it much; for she had no shyness in her

composition; and she knew, besides, that she could not help it" (29). She does not hold herself unnecessarily aloof from members of a lower class. She is also uncondescending toward creatures lower on the food chain. Just before the encounter with the page, the princess is forced to pick up a toad in order to stay on the ground. "Not knowing what disgust meant, for this was one of her peculiarities, she snatched up the toad and bounded away" (26). I think this detail is probably an intentional reference by MacDonald to the well-known fairy tale "The Frog Prince." This tale of a transformed prince shunned by a rather spoiled and unpleasant princess highlights the warmth and sensibility of the princess in the MacDonald tale. Even further emphasizing the sanity of her rather extreme personality is a comment by the princess herself: "I have a curious feeling sometimes, as if I were the only person that had any sense in the whole world" (32). Most people, of course, have probably felt this way at some point. This comment, although spoken by a character whose behavior is obviously abnormal, still manages to cast some doubt on the unreasonableness of that behavior.

Overall, the tale works to criticize extremes of behavior or personality held up as ideals. The princess's excessive light-heartedness is more or less balanced in its merits and flaws. The story promotes an integration of such bipolar traits, one which the character achieves in the end. Instead of laughter hiding sorrow, or sorrow completely winning out over happiness, we see the princess admitting to being happy for the first time while sobbing. The two poles join, and together seem to grow less pronounced. The princess becomes normalized by the end of the tale, smiling "the sweetest, loveliest smile" (109) and occasionally complaining of the trials brought on by her newfound gravity. Although the princess in this tale seems to adhere to a passive female heroine role, "The Light Princess" underscores that with the message that no one can or should conform to one ideal.

This message is especially interesting in the context of Victorian society. Women in the Victorian age, when "The Light Princess" was first written, were very much expected to conform to an ideal. Now most often referred to by Virginia Woolf's phrase 'the Angel in the House,' the female ideal promoted by Victorian society was fairly close to the image of the Virgin Mary. The woman should be chaste, pious, a caretaker. The female roles most highly esteemed in society were those of wife and mother. Female

characters that did not fit into those roles were generally viewed as the opposite—as lascivious, deceitful, ambitious seductresses. Nina Auerbach states that "the literary marketplace, like Victorian society in general, rewarded women for adhering to stereotyped roles. Once women conformed outwardly, an age still free of psychoanalytic suspicion exempted their emotions from close inspection" (Auerbach 1). This seems to fit well with "The Light Princess," in which a female heroine is conforming outwardly to a stereotypical, passive role, but which uses deeper undercurrents within that character to question the adherence to such an uncompromising, unrealistic role. For that matter, even "Photogen and Nycteris," which has a rather more outwardly active heroine, calls into question the sensibility and even possibility of conformity to an extreme in behavior. Realistically, women combine parts of the positive and the negative icons, the active and the passive traits, and MacDonald's female characters seem to make the case that this combination is both necessary and good.

Turning from an exploration of passivity to one of alignment, MacDonald also occasionally uses a combination of a passive heroine and an antagonist or even monster in one character. In "The Gray Wolf," we are presented with a young male narrator describing his journey through a stormy wilderness in the Scottish Highlands. On this journey, he meets a beautiful young woman who guides him to her old mother's small cabin for shelter. The man is immediately enraptured by the delicate, troubled woman, but he is eventually pitted against her for survival when she transforms into a ravenous wolf. The strange woman is simultaneously a monster and the helpless victim of an enchantment. This dichotomy very deliberately serves as the main feature of the story.

In many ways, the maiden is similar to the traditional damsel-in-distress in the fairy tale genre. This is much like the passive heroine I have been referring to elsewhere in the paper, but in this case the maiden is not the main protagonist. In "The Gray Wolf," the story is told completely from the perspective of the young man, and all we know of the woman's motivation is what we see from her outward behavior. The damsel in distress exists in tales such as this one mostly as a goal that the hero achieves by braving dangers. This tale is unique in that it inextricably ties together the maiden and the danger to both her and the hero.

At some points in the story, the woman represents a typical damsel in distress. Her first words to the young man are spoken "in a sweet tone, and with a smile that bewitched him, revealing the whitest of teeth" (The Gray Wolf 2). Her delicate features match her voice: "Her thin nostrils were tremulous as eyelids, and her lips, whose curves were faultless, had no colour to give sign of indwelling blood" (2). This paleness of the maiden's skin is a trait often highly esteemed in traditional fairy tales. She is graceful, even "catlike" (2). She appears to have delicate sensibilities as well. Her disdain of her elderly mother's fish supper manifests in her physical reaction: "Her nostrils and mouth quivered with disgust" (3). This sensitivity is fairly common in the fairy tale genre, even to a great extent in stories like "The Princess and the Pea" and "The Frog Princess." Along with this sensitivity, the woman also seems rather demure. She only speaks two sentences to the narrator. She keeps her eyes downcast much of the time. After an encounter with the narrator in wolf form, the woman becomes "modestly attentive to him" (7). When the man threatens to leave, the girl reacts by giving him "a beseeching glance" (7). In her wolf-form's final attack on the man, the woman breaks free long enough to start "weeping on his bosom" (8). All of these traits speak of a noble, sweet lady like the ones sometimes rescued by the heroes in prominent fairy tales.

In addition to her beauty, sweet voice, and delicate mannerisms, the strange woman also appears to be in some sort of serious trouble. Her appearance contrasts with her more permanent features: "Her garments were scanty and torn, and her hair blew tangled in the wind" (2). Furthermore, the girl is obviously nervous, perhaps even terrified. From her first meeting with the narrator, "her long fingers kept clutching and pulling nervously at her skirts" (2). She wanders in from a storm one night looking "ill and faint" (7). The last glimpse of the girl is as she stands "on the edge of a cliff, wringing her hands. One solitary wail crossed the space between [the woman and the young man]" (10). The only clue to the young woman's problem (before the narrator becomes aware of the true problem with the girl) is hunger. The narrator tells the old woman that the girl "does not seem in good health" (3), a problem she answers only with a sigh and the excuse that "she doesn't like fish…and I haven't anything else to give her" (3). In sight and sound the woman appears to be, in many ways, the type of character that would be rescued and eventually married by the hero of the tale.

However, MacDonald throws a dramatic twist into the tale by linking this positive side of the young woman to a much darker one. As the narrator gradually realizes, the woman is by some strange means a creature that we would probably best call a werewolf. The most obvious signal early in the story is the woman's gaze. Whenever the young man looks directly into her eyes, he feels that they are hungry, "fixed upon him with a strange look of greed amounting to craving" (3). Yet the clues to this half of the woman's identity run through the story from the very beginning. Before the narrator even sees the woman for the first time, he hears a footfall that he takes to be "that of a wild beast, upon the bones at the mouth of the cave" (1-2). This same bestial footfall presages the woman's entrance in several other instances as well. Despite her delicate features, her skin has an odd gray cast. The woman repeatedly sits "in an unusual posture, resting her chin upon her hand" (3). She enters and exits at strange intervals, and reenters at one point with "a single drop of blood on her white skin within her torn dress" (4).

All of these clues make the narrator uneasy, and they are quite obvious to those readers who know ahead of time that the girl is half wolf. In fact, many of the traits mentioned earlier that point to the maiden's more fragile, human side can be doubly interpreted to point to this animal side as well. The teeth so white that they entrance the young man suddenly seem more menacing, as does her catlike grace. Her disdain of the fish seems more horrible when we realize that what she really seeks is quite probably a human meal. Her downcast eyes can be seen as demure, but they can also be seen as an attempt to hide her inner, predatory nature. Even the woman's nervous fidgeting shows more clearly as a result of an inner struggle, perhaps even an attempt to subdue a bestial nature that is trying at that moment to break free. The tension between the two halves of the woman's being, which seems fairly straightforward during a first reading, grows even more intricate and extreme with successive readings. The split identity of the girl that infuses all of the narrator's descriptions of her becomes all the more obvious.

It is no secret that the tension of the two opposite halves in the woman provides the main horrific element to the story. The narrator names his real difficulty with the situation: "Lovely face and craving eyes alternated fascination and repulsion" (4). What this alternating reaction ultimately means for the young man is that he does not know

how to proceed. The typical fairytale hero would protect the maiden and kill the beast. In this case, the maiden is the beast, so the hero of this tale is left with no model for behavior. His fierce first struggle with the wolf leaves it with a bruised, throttled neck. When the same bruises are revealed on the woman's "lovely throat—the marks of the four fingers and the thumb of a left hand" (8), undeniably the young man's own doing, his horror sends him running from the house. When the wolf pursues, the man is blocked again by the awareness of her woman-half: "There was no weapon at hand; and if there had been, his inborn chivalry would never have allowed him to harm a woman even under the guise of a wolf"(8). The narrator does not explain whether his horror was because the maiden was revealed as the beast, or because he was revealed as having injured the maiden. The importance the story places on the tension of the two opposites, however, implies that the combination of the two provides the repugnance of the revelation.

Since the man is left with no guide for dealing with this sort of situation, he panics and disassociates himself from it—he runs away. He makes his way past the wolf, but when he looks back from a safe distance, he sees only the girl, wailing mournfully on the edge of the cliff. "She made no attempt to follow him, and he reached the opposite shore in safety" (10). The tension in this ending matches the tension carried throughout the tale. Even if the reader does not accept the possibility of an alternative action, the young man's departure does not satisfy the reader's desire for the girl to be saved from the beast that controls half of her being, nor does it satisfy the desire for a union between the beautiful woman and the young man. However one interprets the degree to which the wolf is dominant in the character, the girl still exists on some level as a woman. The beseeching glance, a silent plea for the young man's help or merely his continued presence, cannot be left out of any consideration of the justification of escape. For that matter, neither the transformation from pouncing wolf to weeping young woman nor her final appearance in human form can be dismissed easily from the reader's consciousness. Had the woman been more exclusively bestial in the story, particularly at the end, this action on the part of the young man would be completely acceptable. However, this final look at the girl as a victim to another part of herself is damning to the young man. We

see a hero who runs away from a vicious wolf, but who also abandons and flees a helpless maiden.

This ending has fascinating implications for the true nature of courage, and for a hero's role in general. The only acceptable option for the young man would have been to find a non-traditional means of dealing with the conflict. Obviously, his escape leaves him haunted at the end of the story by that final, forlorn image of the woman. The assertion of his safety seems to be a mockery compared with the girl's obvious pain. Not defending himself against the wolf, and treating the creature solely as a docile maiden would have resulted in his death. Yet the damage he did to the wolf in self defense seems equally to damage his conscience when he sees those marks on the maiden. The traditional hero's means of dealing with the situation are ineffectual; both would be shameful to the hero, who must traditionally survive the encounter with the beast and keep the maiden safe. Running away is also cowardly. The only solution unexplored by the young man is an attempt to find a way of living with the girl's dichotomy.[1] Dealing with a woman and her demons, then, seems the only courageous alternative; in this tale, it is esteemed above transitory victories like conquering a beast or saving a maiden. Photogen's fearlessness eventually leads to an inability to conquer fear, while Nycteris' truer courage allows her to work through fear and find solutions to problems. The story seems to be pointing out the flaws in the traditional hero's role, and calling for a new approach to problems.

Another interesting implication is that female identity is much more complex and capable than many characterizations of it in fairy tales allow for. While "The Gray Wolf" is a fantastic story, and the young woman is on the surface either very passive or bad by turns, both subtly present a very realistically multifaceted portrait of a woman and the problems she presents to herself and to others.

As I mentioned in connection with "The Light Princess," women in Victorian Britain were struggling with identity and unsatisfied with either of the extreme portrayals of women they found. This search for a feminine self did not by any means end in the Victorian period. In her book The Feminine in Fairy Tales, Marie-Louise von Franz

[1] This solution does not seem terribly unreasonable, especially since the old mother apparently coexisted with the girl for quite some time.

argues that even "women in the Western world nowadays seem to seek images which could define their identity" (1). She links this need largely to a lack of strong female representatives in Christian religions. Conceding that Catholicism has a strong image in the Virgin Mary, she nevertheless finds this image lacking as well:

> ...this feminine archetypal image is incomplete because it encompasses only the sublime and light aspects of the divine feminine principle and therefore does not express the *whole* feminine principle.

In other words, even the strongest feminine image available to women is too much of an extreme to provide a fulfilling model for realistic female identity. There is simply too much of a gap between this sort of icon and real women with human desires and flaws. This problem certainly carries over into the fairy tale genre, where all characters, male and female, are generally typecast very firmly. MacDonald is using "The Gray Wolf," and indeed all of his works that are explored in this paper, to point out and address this problem. By incorporating widely different poles into his female characters, MacDonald reveals a realistically complex human nature without losing the 'otherness' that gives fairy tale characters so much of their magic.

Moving from MacDonald's heroines to his secondary characters, we see the same pattern of combination repeated and slightly simplified. Where his younger characters combine active with passive heroines, or even positive damsels in distress with negative monsters, his older female characters simply combine positive and negative—godmother with witch. The godmother acts as a kind of surrogate mother, aiding or providing for a heroine in distress.[2] Examples of the godmother are quite prevalent in fairy tales—Cinderella's fairy godmother is probably the most widely recognized. In the more recent versions of the tale, she mothers the girl by comforting her and bestowing her with gifts, the means of going to the ball where she meets the prince. In many of the earlier versions of the tale, this character is actually the spirit of the girl's dead mother.

The witch, of course, is extremely common in fairy tales, "Hansel and Gretel" being one example. The witch is also occasionally linked to motherhood. In many versions of this tale recorded by the Brothers Grimm, the witch is the real identity of the

[2] For the purposes of this paper, I will be using examples of characters who are not officially godmothers, but who serve the same purpose to the point of taking over the care of a child. I am mostly using the term not as a family-sanctioned title, but as a convenient type name.

two children's evil stepmother. She cares for the boy, feeding him to make him grow. It is her final purpose that is evil—she wants to cook and eat the children. It is interesting to note that in some stories, like "Hansel and Gretel," the witch's maliciousness manifests in a domestic task—cooking. However, when the witch is connected to motherhood, it is always a case of motherhood gone wrong. She represents a deliberately faulty mothering.

Bruno Bettelheim points to this phenomenon of the dual mother as the norm in the traditional fairy tale genre: "the mother is split into two figures: the pre-oedipal wonderful good mother and the oedipal evil stepmother" (114). The good mother would apply to the godmother, and the evil stepmother is parallel to (and sometimes identical to) the witch or hag. Bettelheim argues that the purpose of this split is that "for the oedipal girl, belief and trust in the goodness of the pre-oedipal mother, and deep loyalty to her, tend to reduce the guilt about what the girl wishes would happen to the (step)mother who stands in her way" (114). This Freudian argument can be extended outside the oedipal complex, however, to apply to the simpler idea that no child always has completely positive interactions with his or her mother. The availability of two widely different types of mothers in fairy tales gives young readers a model for feelings and, to some degree, behavior in both positive and negative interactions. Bettelheim goes on to discuss how necessary this availability of separate models is for the young reader, who uses these as a way "to sort out his contradictory tendencies" (66).

George MacDonald frequently uses both godmothers and witches in his short fantasies, but into each character of one type he inserts many traits of the opposite type. With the godmother or wise woman characters, there is often an accompanying mysteriousness or even cruelty, albeit one used for a good cause. The most in-depth exploration of this in MacDonald's work is the old woman in his story "The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story."

This tale concerns two young girls, Princess Rosamond and a shepherdess named Agnes. Both girls are incredibly spoiled and unpleasant. A wise woman appears to each family in turn to take away the little girl and discipline her until she behaves appropriately. The girls eventually switch places, with Rosamond living briefly with the shepherd and shepherdess, and Agnes becoming a scullery-maid in the king's kitchen.

The wise woman is present throughout the story as the focus switches from one girl's ordeal to the other.

Although she is meant to be placed within the story in the traditional godmother role, aiding the heroines, the wise woman often seems very much like the stereotypical fairy tale witch. The similarities are brought up when she is first introduced in the tale: "In some countries she would have been called a witch; but that would have been a mistake, for she never did any thing wicked, and had more power than any witch could have" (The Wise Woman 7). She appears "in the dead of night" as "a tall woman, muffled from head to foot in a cloak of black cloth" (7), what is certainly not a comforting introduction.

The tale goes on to describe the woman in terms that are even more disturbing. In her terror, Rosamond sees the wise woman as "an ogress, carrying her home to eat her" (12). On the journey to the woman's cabin, Rosamond feels that this assumption is backed up by the terrible looks the old woman gives her. Furthermore, the woman sings a song about an old woman as "cold as death." The woman's character is outlined in an almost chilling way in lines such as:

> She has not a tear;
> Afar and anear
> It is all so drear,
> But she does not care,
> Her heart is as dry as a bone. (15)

The narrator explains that "at the first note almost, you would have thought that she wanted to frighten the princess; and so indeed she did" (15). The woman actually wants to put more fear into a girl who believes she is about to be eaten.

By far, the wise woman's actions are even more disturbing than the rather dark descriptions of her. She snatches both girls without their or their parents' consent, and she takes them far away to a cabin where they are completely under her control. Although she does this in order to cure the two young girls, there is nevertheless some tension created by this deed. The audience, of course, wants to see the girls cured and not harmed, and kidnapping is generally the territory of the antagonists. The deed is described in fairly graphic terms, as well. To capture Rosamond, the woman "caught her to her bosom and flung the black garment around her" (11). On the journey to the cabin

with Rosamond, with "the princess struggling and screaming all the time, and the wise woman holding her tight," the wise woman only lets her down once she is "too tired to struggle or scream any more" (11). The woman leaves the terrified girl behind at every instance of rudeness, until Rosamond's "heart gave way; she burst in to tears, and ran on, silently weeping" (16). At one point, she leaves her in the midst of a forest full of wild beasts, and saves her only at the very last moment from the jaws of a huge old wolf. Through a disconcertingly calculating rationale, the wise woman does not let Agnes down at all, because "she knew that if she set her down she would never run after her like the princess, at least not before the evil thing was already upon her" (48). The woman eventually even purposefully blinds Rosamond's parents and takes Agnes's father away from her and her mother. These acts will be discussed later, however, in terms of their positive religious significance.

Most cruel are the ordeals the woman sets up for Rosamond and Agnes, which make use of starvation, fear, and isolation. Rosamond is left alone in the woman's cabin with instructions to clean, only after which will she receive food from a hole in the wall. As soon as the room is clean, however, it becomes instantly dirty again every time she forgets even one task. By the end of the day, she finally finishes everything and is able to eat a meal of bread and milk. Agnes's punishment is to be placed into a hollow sphere "with neither door, nor window, nor any opening to break its perfect roundness" (48). Through its walls, the girl can "see nothing but a faint cold bluish light all about her" (48). Her punishment seems all the more painful as the narrator describes her unfruitful attempt to walk out of her prison:

> Like a squirrel in his cage she but kept placing another spot of the cunningly suspended sphere under her feet, and she would have been still only at its lowest point after walking for ages. (49)

After three days of this sensory deprivation, she finds an ugly, sullen girl seated next to her. She attacks the girl only to find her own hair pulled, and "her teeth in her own arm" (51). When Agnes realizes that the girl is only a reflection of her own inner self, her spirit is broken, albeit temporarily, from the shame. These ordeals are designed only to improve the two girls, to heal them from the behavioral problems that are destroying them and the people around them. Yet the knowledge of that does not alleviate all of the uncomfortable tension of these rather harsh punishments. Both in glance and in deed, the

old woman is incredibly and perhaps even cruelly stern, a trait which does not normally accompany the traditionally kind and comforting godmother. Instead, in stories like Cinderella, the godmother counteracts the stern, punishing nature of the evil stepmother.

However, for all the menacing aura and the sometimes cruel nature of the discipline she uses, the wise woman is nevertheless placed in many ways on the opposite end of the spectrum as a good, motherly, and even holy woman. The wise woman's unusual methods are obviously intended to help both the girls and their parents. Princess Rosamond is insatiably greedy, and she throws horrible temper tantrums. Her parents call the wise woman in for help after "she had nearly killed her nurse, and had all but succeeded in hanging herself" (The Wise Woman 6). The old woman's severe discipline eventually cures Rosamond, who gradually becomes industrious, selfless, and beautiful. The princess's violent reaction to the old woman is somewhat justified by her fear, but her fear is pointed out as unreasonable because "she had led such a bad life, that she did not know a good woman when she saw her" (17). Agnes is also problematic in the beginning; she is vain, condescending, and most dangerously, conceited: "self-conceit will go far to generate every other vice under the sun" (43). Agnes leaves the wise woman's care and ends up with a broken spirit. The implication is that the wise woman's care could have helped Agnes in a way that she could not help herself. Furthermore, the wise woman is set in opposition to antagonistic agents in the tale. When a "huge army of wolves and hyenas had rushed like a sea around them" the woman, "like a strong stately vessel, moved unhurt through the midst of them" (18). In fact, when the terrible beasts are asleep in the wood surrounding the cottage, they "shivered in their dreams" upon hearing her voice" (32).

Besides the wise woman's positive role in the plot, she is also described much of the time in a gentle, motherly way. When stealing away with Rosamond, she clutches the girl to her bosom, where the girl sleeps "as soft and as soundly as if she had been in her own bed" (The Wise Woman 16). She carries the girl this way day and night until they reach the old woman's home. The princess's first glimpse of the woman's face is as she "gazed down upon her gravely and kindly" (The Wise Woman 12). The princess misinterprets the woman's intentions only because she "did not in the least understand kindness" (12). The softness of the woman's cloak reminds the girl of "her mother's

camel-hair shawl" (13). At times, the wise woman cares for both children as lovingly as a mother would: "The wise woman lifted [Rosamond] tenderly, and washed and dressed her far more carefully than even her nurse. Then she set her down by the fire, and prepared her breakfast" (25). With Agnes, there are even implications of mother's milk:

> The moment she was asleep, the wise woman came, lifted her out, and laid her in her bosom; fed her with a wonderful milk, which she received without knowing it; nursed her all the night long, and, just ere she woke, laid her back in the blue sphere again. (49)

When comforting Agnes at one point, the more the girl "wept and clung to her… the more tenderly did the great strong arms close around her" (52).

The wise woman is very powerfully connected with the 'good mother' image, but even more powerful is the implication of a religious significance in this character. She is described several times as having "heavenly eyes" (52). The wise woman's kiss "was like the rose-gardens of Damascus" (25), and at one point it is revealed that "hers was the old age of everlasting youth" (95). When the woman steals away with Agnes, the girl's father sees the woman vanish into "a gray cloud…which [the sun's] last rays turned to a rosy gold" (45), implying a heavenly, or at the very least otherworldly, ascension.

In fact, the wise woman's cottage is depicted in terms of the Christian heaven. Surrounded by forests, the whitewashed house rests above the forest on a circular moor "like the shaven crown of a monk" (19). In what could only be an allusion to the heavenly gates, the wise woman states that "No one ever gets into my house who does not knock at the door, and ask to come in" (19). As a result the woman's cottage is "the safest place—in fact the only quite safe place in all the country" (28). Once Rosamond has reached humility and conquered her faults, she looks back and sees the cottage as "the loveliest palace-front of alabaster, gleaming in the pale-yellow light of an early summer-morning" (97).

At times, the old woman speaks in a language reminiscent of Old Testament phrasing. She tells Rosamond that if she leaves the house while the woman is gone, the girl will "grievously repent it. Remember what you have already gone through to reach it" (27). In fact, the Christian concept of trial by fire features more openly later in the story, when the woman tells Rosamond that "if you would be a blessed creature instead of a mere wretch, you must submit to be tried" (81). The religious implications in her

speech are reflected in her appearance at the end of the story, which reveals a terrible greatness also reminiscent of the Old Testament concept of heavenly beings. When she throws off her cloak, Agnes feels "the presence upon her like the heat of a furnace seven times heated" (107). The unshielded apparition is seen by the cleaning woman and by Agnes's father, who goes away with the woman in an allegorical representation of death and ascension. However, the unshielded vision also has the power to punish the sinners, Rosamond's parents, as "the radiance that flashed from her robe of snowy whiteness, from her face of awful beauty, and from her eyes that shone like pools of sunlight, smote them blind" (106). When the wise woman partially softens the vision with what is probably meant to represent the religious concept of grace, Agnes experiences the change as if "a soft dewy cloud had come between her and the torrid rays of a vertical sun" (107).

This idea of a harsh means toward a good end is not uncommon in Victorian literature. As Gillian Avery says of books like Charles Kingsley's The Water Babies, "the punishment and the purification that form the main substance of the book are both characteristic of the Victorian fairy tale" (Avery 131). The author points specifically to "The Wise Woman" in saying "MacDonald himself did not escape the Victorian preoccupation with punishment" (133). However, Avery makes a point of saying that it would be wrong to look at stories such as this one as tales of punishment instead of focusing equally on the redemption that comes at the end. She seems to feel that the harshness of the woman's discipline is vital to the overall power of the tale: "MacDonald…succeeded in presenting the beauty of holiness; lesser writers who attempted it were only mawkish" (132). MacDonald's combination of both poles makes "The Wise Woman" somehow ring true in a way that a one-sided examination of punishment or salvation would not. The combination of the two alignments in his female characters can be said to accomplish the same result in comparison with more traditionally unilateral fairy tale characterizations.

The same dichotomy we see in the wise woman can be found in the witch figure Watho in the MacDonald's tale "The History of Photogen and Nycteris." Watho quite obviously serves the normal function of a witch in the tale. She provides a block to the young couple's union, first by engineering them to exist in opposite time frames, and

eventually by attempting to kill the two youths. Watho does harm to the mothers of the two children, by telling Photogen's mother that the child died after birth, and letting Nycteris's blind mother die of melancholy in the same tomb where the girl is raised. The witch's manipulation of the two children is in itself cruel. She views the two as experiments, training them to sleep and wake at certain times as one might train a pair of lab rats. When Photogen takes ill, Watho sees him as a failed experiment; "she looked on him as a painter might upon a picture, or a poet upon a poem, which he had only succeeded in getting into an irrecoverable mess" (The Golden Key 73). Watho also grows bored with Nycteris, "like a sick child weary of his toy: she would pull her to pieces, and she how she liked it" (75). The witch resolves to set Nycteris out in the sun and watch her die from afar, through a telescope. The detachment Watho maintains through the distance and the telescope mirror the detachment she maintains from the two youths throughout the tale.

Watho's physical description is also in many ways suited to her status as a fairy tale witch. Her black eyes "had a red fire in them" (36). Her hair is also fiery red, and her skin is white (but not fair). This description, coupled with the image of Watho as "tall and graceful…straight and strong" (36), is presented as a sort of horrible beauty. This echoes depictions of the evil stepmother in tales like Snow White, who is strikingly beautiful but cold and calculating.[3] Her final appearance in human form is just before she transforms into a wolf to pursue her two escaped charges. In this scene, Watho's profound wildness and lack of control are chilling. She spreads an unnamed ointment from head to toe, ties her long red hair around her waist, and "began to dance, whirling round and round faster and faster, growing angrier and angrier, until she was foaming at the mouth with fury" (83-84).

However, MacDonald makes a point of including positive details in his characterization of Watho. Despite her dark purpose, she nevertheless is mother to the two children. Her desire that Photogen "should not know darkness" (39), when read metaphorically, seems to imply good intentions. She strips the boy to place him in the

[3] It is interesting to note that although this description is linked to that of Snow White's stepmother, Watho's strident mingling of red, white and black also strongly echo the blood, snow, and ebony coloring of Snow White herself. Perhaps this is another intentional pairing by MacDonald, an attempt to tie Watho both to the archetypal evil stepmother or witch and to the classic heroine.

sun, and "the boy rejoiced in it, and would resist being dressed again" (39). The witch desires that the child's body grow strong, in order "that his soul, she said laughing, might sit in every fibre, be all in every part, and awake the moment of call" (39). Photogen responds well to her care in the beginning, and becomes "the merriest of creatures, always laughing, always loving, for a moment raging, then laughing afresh" (39). Watho teaches Nycteris music, "in which she herself was proficient" (40), and Nycteris's instrument becomes her chief pleasure. "Her very fingers loved it, and would wander about over its keys like feeding sheep" (43). One would not expect, say, the witch in Hansel and Gretel to teach Gretel anything that would become her chief pleasure. Furthermore, Nycteris "was not unhappy. She knew nothing of the world except the tomb in which she dwelt, and had some pleasure in everything she did" (43).

Turning from the positive mother images linked to Watho, we might also see her scientific nature as a positive attribute. Of course, the witch's great intelligence is asserted several times in the story. In fact, the first line of the tale is "There was once a witch who desired to know everything" (36). This in itself is unusual for a fairy tale witch, who may be crafty, but who is seldom intelligent or learned. In some cases, Watho uses her knowledge for good immediate purposes—"She brought all her knowledge to bear on making his muscles strong and elastic and swiftly responsive" (39). Furthermore, the witch's wise and scientific nature by its very presence counteracts the traditional fairy tale pattern of wisdom exclusive to godmothers or heroes.

The most striking defense of Watho, however, is MacDonald's portrayal of her as a victim of an even crueler force. In her introduction, he alludes to this force:

> Her name was Watho, and she had a wolf in her mind. She cared for nothing in itself—only for knowing it. She was not naturally cruel but the wolf had made her cruel. (36)

This wolf inside Watho seems to consume her from the inside out. Although she stands straight and tall, she occasionally "would fall bent together, shudder, and sit for a moment with her head turned over her shoulder, as if the wolf had got out of her mind on to her back" (36). When she decides to leave Nycteris in the sun to die, she does so to ease her own inner torment—"It would be a sight to soothe her wolf-pain" (75). Eventually the wolf takes over completely, and she pursues Photogen and Nycteris. When Photogen kills the wolf and goes to retrieve his arrow, he finds "no wolf, but

Watho, with her hair tied round her waist!" (85). After her death, the characters acknowledge her misdeeds, but nevertheless assert that she somehow served a good purpose in the tale after all:

> No one knew anything of the father or mother of Nycteris; but when Aurora saw in the lovely girl her own azure eyes shining through night and its clouds, it made her think strange things, and wonder how even the wicked themselves may be a link to join together the good. Through Watho, the mothers, who had never seen each other, had changed eyes in the children. (86)

Watho's terrible cruelty in the story as a witch is counterbalanced by her unexpected position as mother, intellectual, victim, and by serving as the harsh means to a good end (although admittedly not intentionally like the woman in "The Wise Woman").

Marie-Louise von Franz explains that this type of double figure is found in many ancient cultures. Archaic figures such as Baba Yaga, who features in many old Russian folktales, mix the negative and the positive. "She is full of the powers of destruction, of desolation, and of chaos, but at the same time is a helpful figure" (Franz 173). Franz points to Baba Yaga as a derivation of the even older Greek figure Hekate. She goes on to say that in modern Western nations, the Virgin Mary (discussed earlier in the paper in connection with "The Gray Wolf" and women's search for identity) represents the light side of the double figure, but that she is incomplete, because she "lacks the shadow" (Franz 173). Franz sees the function of the double figure as a manifestation of woman's "uncertainty of instinct" (176); "the process of becoming conscious for a woman is that, within herself, she has to become clear about her positive and negative reactions and know where they are…" (Franz 176). In other words, double figures are helpful in that they give women a realistically complex role model, one that combines positive and negative in intricate ways. This avoids setting up unattainable expectations of the feminine identity.

MacDonald's stories are more reminiscent of the archaic double-woman figures than the more recent, Western concepts of an extreme, one-sided female identity. They combine all these dichotomies into a single character rather than spreading extreme characters of different alignments through many stories. In doing so, MacDonald enables every character to fulfill what Bettelheim feels is a child's need for two mother-types, or for different models of behavior. In some ways, this seems a dangerous experiment for a

writer of stories that are often considered children's literature. Some critics like Bettelheim are convinced that children would not find these more realistic combinations of difference appealing, since many young children are not yet comfortable with dealing with the possibility of both good and bad in their own mothers. Bettelheim claims that young children need to maintain the fantasy of a separation between the two different personas. He sees the unilateral characters common in the genre as helpful because "while the fantasy of the evil stepmother thus preserves the image of the good mother, the fairy tale also helps the child not to be devastated by experiencing his mother as evil" (69). However, MacDonald's fairy tales have kept their appeal for adults as well as children through the years, probably because the characters retain most of their overall place in the story. The witches are still the antagonists, which we know from plot cues like their death at the end or the heroes' success despite the witches' attempts. The godmothers are still seen ultimately to aid the heroes' quests, regardless of how strange or cruel they may seem in the process. Young readers can find the basic characterizations they look for in MacDonald's tales. Yet the dichotomies are subtle and interwoven enough to allow for much more complex interpretations by more adult readers, who appreciate more realistic, well-rounded characters.

In conclusion, MacDonald's stories use opposition in an incredibly artful way. This opposition ultimately makes the stories accessible for both children and adults, but perhaps most importantly, they retain the fairy tale's magical structure of extremes while allowing for much more complex female characters. As one critic says of MacDonald's work, his stories:

> ...captivate the natural imagination by the vivid realisation of every-day things as in a beautiful dream. But for those who have eyes to see through the clear flow of the tale, the bed of truth can be plainly perceived under the running stream, that seems widening to the river and ever going onward to the infinite sea. (Johnson 259)

The realism behind the complexity of these characters allows for a closer identification with the reader. Most especially, the elements of truth behind George MacDonald's stories provide a unique and very powerful feminine image.

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