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Roderick McGillis

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Abstract
Studies an enigmatic character in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, the old woman in the tower. Notes some of the explanations offered for whom she represents, and discusses her function as embodying the reconciliation of opposites.

Additional Keywords
MacDonald, George—Characters—"Grandmother"; MacDonald, George. The Princess and the Goblin
"If You Call Me Grandmother, That Will Do"

Roderick McGillis

The most fascinating character in George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* is the old lady who lives in a tower. Who is she? Colin Manlove does not speculate although he suggests her pigeons "could be symbols of the Holy Ghost." Robert Lee Wolff's contribution is that Mac­Donald envisaged a "Mother-God" in his fiction. Tony Tanner and Richard Reis accept the superego theory. Nancy-Lou Patterson discusses the grandmother as Jung's Mother archetype. Louis MacNeice, in keeping with his suggestion that writers of parable have a "strong spiritual, or indeed mystic, element", more willingly accepts the ambiguity of "MacDonald's extraordinary supernatural females." They are, he says, "neither goddesses nor angels nor enchantresses nor fairies but something of all four."1 Who is she? Is this even a legitimate question? The answers cannot avoid reducing the grandmother to a concept. However, MacNeice appears to ask a different question: what does she do? He answers: she works for good. This is a beginning, but only that. It does little to illuminate the grandmother and her function in the structure of the book. What is the nature of 'good works'? Does she work as a "woman who works"? Answers to these questions direct us to allegory: her good works are spiritual intervention; she intervenes as an agent of the divine, of God. How do we avoid allegory? Yet clearly the question - who is she? - is fair. Any answer must first take us to the book.

Many things are clear, if conflicting. The great grandmother is related to the Princess Irene; indeed they have the same name. The fact that she spins suggests that the grandmother has something to do with fate and possibly death. But she also cleans and heals. Irene finds her after a bewildering experience exploring a strange region of the house that is full of doors. Before meeting her grandmother, Irene must climb a very narrow stairway on her hands and knees. She loses herself to find her grandmother's three rooms.

The three doors face each other across the landing. One is the door to the grandmother's workroom which contains hardly any furniture, "no carpet on the floor - no table anywhere - nothing but the spinning wheel and the chair beside it." The opposite door leads to the grandmother's bedroom. It sharply contrasts with the austere workroom. It is large and dome-shaped. It contains the moon-like lamp, an oval bed, the fire roses glowing "between the heads and wings of two cherubs of shining silver." The walls of this room are blue, "spangled all over with what looked like stars of silver." The most powerful item, however, is the "large oval tub of silver", a kind of cosmic bath in which the grandmother places Irene after she has rescued Curdie from the goblin mines. This bedroom represents the noumenal, and the workroom logically represents the phenomenal. The two rooms are opposites. What brings them together is the middle room. When the grandmother opens the door to this room Irene sees "the blue sky first, and then the roofs of the house, with a multitude of the loveliest pigeons, mostly white, but of all colours ..." This is a room that isn't a room; it connects the noumenal and the phenomenal, sky and house. The birds are both earthly and spiritual. They provide food and they are beautiful. They reconcile opposites: work and rest. Their work is their rest.

Everything about the grandmother we have seen so far suggests that she embodies the reconciliation of opposites. She reconciles paradox. Irene's experience of the grandmother enables her to defeat the goblins. The goblin/human conflict ends. The grandmother also helps reconcile social opposites, Curdie and his family with Irene and her family. This unifying function is also evident in the grandmother's treatment of Irene. Clearly she acts as Irene's teacher, and from this point of view she can be compared to many of MacDonald's mentor characters, especially Hugh Sutherland in Book Two of David Elginbrod (1864). Her mode of teaching is, at first,
strange. She intentionally confuses Irene. When Irene first meets her, she learns that her grandmother's name is also Irene, and that the grandmother has allowed Irene to have her name. Irene thanks her, but the lady replies: "A name is one of those things one can give away and keep all the same." Then she tells Irene who she is, Irene's "father's mother's father's mother." This confuses Irene, but the grandmother says she expected Irene would not understand. This same use of paradox and riddle is evident when the grandmother presents Irene with the ball of finely spun spider's thread. She first throws it into the fire and then places it in her cabinet. Irene exclaims:

"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!"

"Have I done anything to vex you, grandmother?"
said Irene pitifully.

"No, my darling. But you must understand that no one ever gives anything to another properly and really without keeping it. That ball is yours."
"But what use can I make of it, if it lies in your cabinet?"

"That is what I will explain to you. It would be of no use to you - it wouldn't be yours at all if it did not lie in my cabinet."

Strange explanation! And yet MacDonald is serious. Only by grappling with this kind of problem can Irene learn to think independently. This teaching is antithetical to that of the McChoacumchild school. It asks for both faith and intellectual struggle, faith in the grandmother's goodness and intellectual struggle to reconcile the paradoxes. Irene will grow to understand her grandmother's meaning that our imaginations are useless unless tied to an ideal, a vision; that a unity of mind is necessary for fulfillment.

This brings us to the final paradox reconciled by the grandmother: dream and reality. The grandmother, shut away in her tower, appears to offer little that is practical for the reader's fairy tale escape. Positivists would see little value in offering her seriously as a "true" character to children. Fairy godmothers do not exist; nor do mystic balls of thread that help us out of danger. The grandmother is closer to dream than to reality. Dreams may tell us something about our neuroses, but they are of little practical use unless we can either explain them away, or find moral truths in them to help us program our lives. Irene can neither explain her grandmother away, nor extract moral truths from her cryptic remarks. Neither can we if we wish to remain faithful to the spirit of the book.

For much of the book Irene worries that her grandmother is a dream, and MacDonald hints that Irene's worries have foundation. After her father's first visit Irene concludes that her grandmother is a dream although she "often and often wishes that her huge great grandmother had not been a dream." Her next visit to the grandmother follows the accident with the old brooch when Irene cuts herself. The grandmother says she expected Irene would not awaken; she cannot see or believe in the grandmother. Curdie is on his way to this awakened condition, but as yet he has not reached it. So he dreams, but we remember: "Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one." The grandmother is both dream and reality, nature and supernature. She reconciles the two.

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