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God's Library: A Comparative Analysis of George MacDonald's *Lilith* Manuscripts

Janet Carr Zellmann

In 1895, at the end of his career, George MacDonald's greatest visionary tale of another world was published. *Lilith* stands out among MacDonald's writings and Victorian literature in general because of its nonconformity with traditional Victorian novels and attitudes. The significance of *Lilith* in MacDonald's career is best summed up by Richard Reis, who wrote, "MacDonald knew he was making his definitive statement, not merely grinding out another . . . addition to the immense corpus of his work" (94-95). The fact that the author wrote five versions of *Lilith* over a period of five years before publishing the final version shows the importance he attached to this work.

In writing a doctoral dissertation at Duquesne University, I am currently comparing and contrasting MacDonald's first handwritten version of *Lilith* (*Lilith A* - 1890) and the final published version (which I will call *Lilith F* - 1895). I am focusing on MacDonald's characters, themes, and motives for revision, for I believe that looking at how MacDonald revised his writing will help us understand his creative method and the importance he attached to presenting his message in a way that would be readily comprehended. Clarity of theme was undoubtedly the reason for such intense revision; MacDonald was anxious that *Lilith* not be misunderstood, and so he labored to ensure that his readers would be able to grasp his central ideas. Some of his changes may have been based on the social and cultural limitations with which he wrestled or on popular Victorian literary conventions of the day. Family concerns—including wife Louisa's dislike of the novel and the death of MacDonald's daughter, Lilia, during the revisionary process—may also have prompted the alterations.

In my dissertation, I hope to demonstrate how the characters develop to suit MacDonald's purposes and to show that the changes in characterization reinforce the themes. For instance, by the final version, Mr. Vane, evolves into a mature, self-satisfied, and self-interested man with little personality, who has completed his studies at Oxford and is alone in the world. This is a far cry from *Lilith A* in which he emerges as a personable fifteen year old interested in finding his place in the world yet very involved

with his family. The changes in Vane's personality distance the readers and so allow them to observe his actions with less emotional involvement. They also illustrate **[end of page 57]** the protagonist's search for truth and his struggle with a proper perspective of the self.

Other alterations in character work similarly to change the reader's objectivity and to permit MacDonald to focus on themes rather than character development. The importance of a study of *Lilith A* and *Lilith F* is validated by MacDonald himself. His son, Greville, wrote: "My father was fully aware that a poet's emendations were not always satisfactory. He would enlarge upon this when lecturing on *The Ancient Mariner*, and insist upon our comparing the first and final versions" (Footnote, 540). MacDonald perhaps argued for this activity because he believed it would reveal the development of the author's thoughts. Greville suggests that *Lilith* came to MacDonald as a vision but notes: "The point of view of a craftsman intent upon polishing his work is necessarily different from that when its first inspiration dominated his design" (539). The process involved in the polishing reveals the themes and spirit of the work.

In my dissertation, then, I will consider how the primary focus of the work remains, for the most part, unmodified from beginning to end, despite other major revisions. Although *Lilith A* supports some of MacDonald's messages in a way that *Lilith F* does not, both versions of the work consistently reinforce the same theology and morals that are trademarks of MacDonald's career. Some of these fundamental themes include finding a correct vision of the "self," understanding repentance, and exploring the Romantic theme of death in life. Additionally, I will show how key characters change to support the themes of the work. From A to F, Lilith, who both entices and thwarts Vane at every turn, undergoes important revisions in her character, as do the "Little Ones" (who help Mr. Vane in his struggle to find meaning in life) and the leopardesses.

I will also consider how the minor characters alter, including Mara and Lona—who are absent in *Lilith A* but prominent in F—together with the protagonist's family, friends, and servants who decrease in importance from A to F, with some significant thematic changes resulting. As I trace the evolution of Eve, of the Skeletons, of the Shadow, and of the land of seven dimensions, I will illustrate how each addition or subtraction reinforces the over-arching message MacDonald strove to present. Finally, I will draw inferences about why MacDonald worked on this novel so intensely and made so many changes in the process. While no one can read MacDonald's

mind to understand why he labored over *Lilith* to this extent, one can make educated guesses based on a knowledge of his personal life and of the social forces surrounding and influencing his work. I believe that MacDonald's life and times, along with his persistence [58] in clarifying his themes, caused the changes to *Lilith*'s characters, plot, and symbolism.

With an eye toward historical consideration, I will include biographical and socio-historical criticism as I examine possible reasons for MacDonald's extensive editing process. Close textual reading and detailed analysis of individual passages should shed light on why MacDonald revised *Lilith* so extensively. Symbolism and archetypal meanings too are important because the plot cannot be separated from the theme. With Greville MacDonald, I feel unable to decipher completely the spiritual structure or symbolism in *Lilith*, but I recognize the need for exploring the mythical and representational elements involved.

While I find some of the images and characters in A more generally compelling than their counterparts in F, F is a smoother, more polished and unified work, more powerful and moving in the force of its themes and ideas. Two fundamental keys to understanding both A and this dissertation, however, are an understanding of how the book evolved, as outlined above, and a reminder that A was intended to be a rough draft, a handwritten starting point never meant to be published or to be assessed as a completed entity. As such, at times I hope to avoid any negative comments on the organization or unity of the manuscript, knowing that MacDonald never intended it to be critiqued. I try to keep this thought foremost in my mind and ask that my readers kindly do the same.

Study of George MacDonald and his other worlds can leave one agreeing with C. S. Lewis who said, "MacDonald is the greatest genius of this kind whom I know" (16). Comparing and contrasting the original draft of a unique and complex work such as *Lilith* to the final published novel is a rare and interesting challenge. It is important to any scholar who desires to look over the shoulder of an artisan at work, to watch as he or she records his or her vision and dreams "in forms so shadowy," and then to discover how a prolific and gifted author refines and polishes his original inspiration. Finally, perhaps, one can perceive in the various facets of the last version, "a kind of light not seen before" in George MacDonald's land of seven dimensions.

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