

Inklings Forever

Volume 5 A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis &
Friends


Article 22

6-2006

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Recommended Citation

Barnett, Catherine (2006) "Tolkien, MacDonald, and the Cauldron of Story," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 5 , Article 22.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/22

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Cover Page Footnote

Undergraduate Student Essay

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2006

Upland, Indiana

Tolkien, MacDonald, and the Cauldron of Story

Catherine Barnett

The following essay by Catherine Barnett also appears in a recent issue of Saint Austin Review. It is printed here with permission of the editors.

Tolkien, MacDonald, and the Cauldron of Story

Catherine Barnett

In his essay, *On Fairy Stories*, J.R.R. Tolkien writes, “. . . the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty” (Tolkien, *Tolkien Reader* 52). Makers of stories are constantly borrowing from one another, spooning into the pages of their works ideas and themes from the Cauldron and adding their own creativity to produce tales unique, yet in many ways familiar. Being well read in the realm of fairy-stories himself, it is not surprising that Tolkien incorporated many elements from the Story Stew into his own tales. In the stories of George MacDonald, with which Tolkien was familiar, one can observe several themes that, being ladled from the Cauldron, may have influenced Tolkien’s writing.

As a child, Tolkien enjoyed reading MacDonald’s stories. In his biography of Tolkien, Humphrey Carpenter writes, “He was . . . pleased by the ‘Curdie’ books of George MacDonald, which were set in a remote kingdom where misshapen and malevolent goblins lurked beneath the mountains” (Carpenter, 24). In *On Fairy-stories*, Tolkien mentions having read “The Golden Key” and “The Giant’s Heart” in addition to the ‘Curdie’ books. However, when he reread some of MacDonald’s tales later in his life, Tolkien did not like them as much as he had before. He “noted that it was ‘illwritten, incoherent, and bad, in spite of a few memorable passages.’ [Here apparently referring to ‘The Golden Key’.] Tolkien . . . liked the Curdie books, but found much of Macdonald’s writing spoilt for him by its moral allegorical content” (Carpenter, 274).

Apparently his feelings toward the particular story of “The Golden Key” fluctuated somewhat. He calls it a story “of power and beauty” in *On Fairy-stories*. In a letter written in 1964, responding to a request from Pantheon Books to write a preface for a new edition of “The Golden Key,” Tolkien wrote, “I am not as warm

an admirer of George MacDonald as C.S. Lewis was; but I do think well of this story of his . . . I am not naturally attracted (in fact much the reverse) by allegory, mystical or moral” (Tolkien, *Letters*, 351).

Although he disliked aspects of MacDonald’s writing, Tolkien himself acknowledges their possible influence on his own writing. Addressing the topic of orcs in a letter written to Naomi Mitchison in 1954, he states, “They are not based on direct experience of mine; but own, I suppose, a good deal to the goblin tradition . . . especially as it appears in George MacDonald, except for the soft feet which I never believed in” (Tolkien, *Letters*, 178). He is referring to the goblins in the ‘Curdie’ books, which have soft feet; a characteristic that his own goblins and orcs do not share. This quote also suggests that both authors were borrowing from sources and traditions older than either of them.

In the preface for the new edition of “The Golden Key”—which, incidentally, was never completed—Tolkien emphasizes this point through one of his less complimentary references to MacDonald: “He probably makes up his tale out of bits of older tales, or things he half remembers, and they may be too strong for him to spoil or disenchant. Someone may meet them for the first time in his silly tale, and catch a glimpse of Fairy, and go on to better things” (Carpenter, 275). Perhaps this is what Tolkien did as a child, treasuring up all the “glimpses of Fairy” he caught through the lens of MacDonald’s stories. When Tolkien began to write, these elements from the Cauldron of Story revealed themselves in his own tales. They include female characters in important roles, concealed identity, similar talismans and experiences of characters, use of other ingredients from the “stew,” descriptions of eyes, use of light and contrast, and the incorporation of nature and the heavenly bodies.

In the literature of both MacDonald and Tolkien, women play a significant role. MacDonald frequently has as his central character a woman of great beauty, wisdom, mystery, and seeming agelessness, from whom the protagonists receive advice, aid, and sometimes talismans to help them on their respective quests. Tolkien gives great importance to similar women, such as Goldberry or Galadriel, in his stories.

In MacDonald's writing, this central woman is often known as "grandmother" and she is always beautiful, though sometimes her loveliness is hidden or unperceived by the observer. "She was tall and strong, with white arms and neck, and a delicate flush on her face . . . She had not one ornament upon her, but she looked as if she had just put off quantities of diamonds and emeralds" (MacDonald, *Golden Key* 18). At the same time she is ancient and wise: ". . . not only was she beautiful, but . . . her hair . . . hung loose far down and all over her back . . . it was white almost as snow. And although her face was so smooth, her eyes looked so wise that you could not have helped seeing she must be old" (MacDonald, *Princess and the Goblin* 20).

Tolkien's elves, especially Galadriel, are reminiscent of the "grandmothers" of MacDonald. Their eyes often betray their age and wisdom. "Very tall they were . . . and they were grave and beautiful. They were clad wholly in white; and the hair of the Lady was of deep gold . . . but no sign of age was upon them, unless it were in the depths of their eyes; for these were keen as lances in the starlight, and yet profound, the wells of deep memory" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 369).

Goldberry reminds one especially of the "grandmother" in "The Golden Key" who, like Goldberry, lives in a cottage in the woods that is a haven for travelers. "A beautiful woman rose from the opposite side of the fire and came to meet the girl . . . here she was in the simplest, poorest little cottage, where she was evidently at home. She was dressed in shining green" (MacDonald, *Golden Key* 17,18). Of Goldberry, Tolkien writes, "Her long yellow hair rippled down her shoulders; her gown was . . . green as young reeds, shot with silver like beads of dew . . . About her feet in wide vessels of green and brown earthenware, white water-lilies were floating . . . she sprang lightly up . . . and ran laughing towards them" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 134). Both the women wear green, suggesting their closeness to nature. They welcome their guests warmly and serve them a wonderful meal.

Hidden power and beauty is a major theme in the writings of both authors. It is demonstrated near the end of *The Lost Princess*, when the wise woman, who up to that point was seen as an old crone, suddenly reveals her true self. "She threw her cloak open. It fell to the ground, and 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" (MacDonald, *Lost Princess* 126). When Gandalf reappears in *The Two Towers* as the White

Rider, a similar episode occurs in which Tolkien gives an almost equivalent description using the color white and the light of the sun. "His hood and his grey rags were flung away . . . gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand" (Tolkien, *Two Towers* 97-98). Both of these instances involve characters who appear to some to be old and feeble or unimportant, but when they choose to show themselves in their true forms, they prove to be people of great power and magnificence.

In addition to the characters, some of the talismans in MacDonald's stories are also reflected in Tolkien's works. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, Princess Irene is given a magic ring by her grandmother, which guides her through the dark tunnels of the goblins. The One Ring possessed by Bilbo helps him in a similar way, in that both were used to navigate through the underworld. However, that Ring is essentially of a malevolent nature (although it is not fully revealed as being so until *The Lord of the Rings*); whereas Irene's ring is entirely good, and is nearer in essence to the magic phial which Galadriel gives to Frodo, saying, "May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 393). Its light and power help Frodo and Sam to challenge the horror of Cirith Ungol.

Another talisman, the key kept by Thorin in *The Hobbit*, "a small and curious key . . . with a long barrel and intricate wards, made of silver" (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 20), reminds one of the key found by Mossy in "The Golden Key." "The pipe of it was of plain gold, as bright as gold could be. The handle was curiously wrought and set with sapphires" (MacDonald, *Golden Key* 14). Each of these keys fit a lock that must be discovered in order to achieve a quest, but that cannot be found except under certain circumstances. The keyhole in *The Hobbit* could only be seen by the light of the setting sun on Durin's Day. When that time came, "A flake of rock split from the wall and fell. A hole appeared suddenly about three feet from the ground" (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 190). Mossy's keyhole is also discovered in the face of a rock wall. ". . . as his eyes kept roving hopelessly over it . . . he caught sight of a row of small sapphires. They bordered a little hole in the rock" (MacDonald, *Golden Key* 43). Both Thorin and Mossy successfully use their keys and are able to move on to the next stage of their respective journeys.

The experiences leading to the acquisition of talismans and the advice of those who bestow them are often as important as the talismans themselves. Throughout her travels, like many of Tolkien's characters, Tangle in "The Golden Key" faces a series of tests followed by rests. These respites are as vital to the advancement of the story as the perils faced in between, because of what is given to the traveler from those providing refuge, such as knowledge or tools for the quest. After each phase of her journey, Tangle meets in turn "grandmother," the Old Man of the Sea,

the Old Man of the Earth, and the Old Man of the Fire. These characters give her advice and instructions for the next stage of the undertaking, but do not accompany her. Indeed, the Old Man of the Earth remarks, “I wish I could go to see him, but I must mind my work” (MacDonald, *Golden Key* 36).

Tom Bombadil gives a similar response to Tolkien’s hobbits as they are leaving his land: “Tom’s country ends here: he will not pass the borders. / Tom has his house to mind, and Goldberry is waiting!” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 159). In his house, the hobbits found rest and refreshment, wisdom and council. As their journey progresses, the companions in *The Lord of the Rings* receive aid, counsel, or tools from a variety of characters—Barliman Butterbur, Elrond, and Celeborn and Galadriel, among others—to prepare them for and help them through the rest of their mission; but they are rarely accompanied by their hosts once they have crossed the margins of their lands.

For MacDonald and Tolkien, however, the borders of their own literary lands extended far and included bits and pieces of other realms, through which they rode at will. Both authors have at least one case in which they borrow a nursery rhyme and counterfeit the history behind it. The nursery rhyme “Sing a Song of Sixpence” includes the following lines:

The king was in his counting-house,
Counting out his money;
The queen was in the parlour,
Eating bread and honey.

In “The Light Princess,” a scene opens in which “the king went into his counting-house, and counted out his money,” and “the queen was in the parlour, eating bread and honey” (MacDonald, *Golden Key* 57). Tolkien creates his own version of “Hey Diddle Diddle” through the song Frodo sings at the Inn of the Prancing Pony.

With a ping and a pong the fiddle-strings broke!
the cow jumped over the moon,
And the little dog laughed to see such fun,
And the Saturday dish went off at a run
with the silver Sunday spoon.
(Tolkien, *Fellowship* 172)

In these instances both authors cleverly invent the background story of a well-known nursery rhyme, further borrowing from the riches of the Cauldron of Story.

Characters’ eyes play an important part in the tales of MacDonald and Tolkien. As in the cases of the “grandmothers” or the elves, eyes reveal deep wisdom and beauty. MacDonald also puts color and light into the eyes to show what is going on in a person’s mind. This is especially illustrated in Princess Makemnoit, a wicked, spiteful witch. “When she was angry, her little eyes flashed blue. When she hated anybody, they shone

yellow and green . . . Her eyes, however, shone pink [when] she was happy” (MacDonald, *Golden Key* 48-49, 59). Likewise, Gollum’s eyes betray his different moods as he debates with himself. “Gollum was talking to himself . . . A pale light and a green light alternated in his eyes as he spoke” (Tolkien, *Two Towers* 240). Some of the crooked schemes of Saruman are also disclosed in this way; “. . . in his eyes there seemed to be a white light, as if a cold laughter was in his heart” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 271).

MacDonald places vivid emphasis on color and the contrast between light and dark. In “The Golden Key,” Mossy is drawn into the forest, fascinated by the light of a rainbow. “He had not gone far before the sun set. But the rainbow only glowed the brighter” (MacDonald, *Golden Key* 13). Several episodes in Tolkien’s writing are reminiscent of this. Thorin and company are lured off the path in Mirkwood by an elvish feast; “. . . it seemed plain that torches and fires were burning under the trees . . . they all left the path and plunged into the forest” (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 137, 138). Beren is enchanted by the beauty of Lúthien, and drawn to her as Mossy was to the rainbow. “. . . And forth he hastened, strong and fleet, / And grasped at moonbeams glistening” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 204).

Elements of nature and especially the heavenly bodies are a common theme in the writing of Tolkien and MacDonald. The “grandmother” of *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* is often associated with the moon. In her room “. . . hung the most glorious lamp that human eyes ever saw—the Silver Moon itself . . . with a heart of light so wondrous potent that it rendered the mass translucent, and altogether radiant” (MacDonald, *Princess and Curdie* 62). The moon is also emphasized in “The Light Princess” as it shines in the deep water of the lake.

The elves of Tolkien harbor a great love for the moon and stars, as demonstrated in a lullaby sung in Rivendell: “The stars are in blossom, the moon is in flower, / and bright are the windows of Night in her tower” (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 267). Galadriel gives to Frodo a phial containing the light of Eärendil, the favorite star of the elves. Even the dwarves appreciate the beauty of the sky, and Gimli is awed by what he sees in the dark lake of Kheled-zâram. “There like jewels sunk in the deep shone glinting stars” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 348).

The wonderful stew found in the great Cauldron of Story was not made by one cook with hoarded and secret recipes, but is still simmering, being sampled and added to by all who are willing to share their own spices and tidbits. It is constantly growing, even as it is dished out, and elements are drawn from the recipes of all the storymakers of history to be re-used in new contexts. In this way Tolkien, as he dipped his ladle into the Cauldron, may have come up with flavors from some of MacDonald’s contributions: wisdom and beauty, personified or concealed; various talismans and quest experiences; eyes, glowing with expressive color;

and the moon and the stars. Finding these flavors savory, Tolkien employed them in the creation of his own delicious, masterful dishes.

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