View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by St. Norbert College

North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies

Volume 38 Article 16

1-1-2019

Review of Hein and Manlove

Roderick McGillis

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind

Recommended Citation

McGillis, Roderick (2019) "Review of Hein and Manlove," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 38 , Article 16.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol38/iss1/16

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact sarah.titus@snc.edu.

Review of Hein and Manlove

Roderick McGillis

Hein, Rolland. *Doors In: The Fairy Tale World of George MacDonald*. Foreword by Olga Lukmanova, ix-xiii, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018, p. 124.

Manlove, Colin. *George MacDonald's Children's Fantasies and the Divine Imagination*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019, p. 140.

I began work for my Ph.D. in 1970. My focus was the fantasy novels of George MacDonald, and at that time I had little prior work on MacDonald to assist me. Robert Lee Wolff's *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* had appeared in 1961, and it was at the time the only full-length study of McDonald's work. Most influential was C. S. Lewis's "Preface" to *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (1946). A year before I completed my Ph.D., a second full-length study appeared, Richard H. Reis's *George MacDonald* (1972). The year I began my studies, an article appeared on MacDonald's fairy tales in the journal, *Studies in Scottish Literature*. This was Colin Manlove's "George MacDonald's Fairy Tales: Their Roots in MacDonald's Thought." Five years later his *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* appeared, and it contained a chapter on MacDonald. In the mid 1970s, a series of anthologies of MacDonald's prose began to appear under the editorship of Rolland Hein, the first three of these being *Life Essential: the Hope of the Gospel* (1974), *Creation in Christ* (1976), and *The World of George MacDonald: Selections from his Works of Fiction* (1978). Then in 1982, Hein published his first study of MacDonald's work, *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald*. Manlove and Hein are, then, two of the earliest commentators to devote critical energy to the work of MacDonald, and they have influenced the many others who have followed until today we have a rich and varied scholarship on MacDonald and his writing, including more works by Hein and Manlove. Indeed, forty-nine years after Manlove's essay on the fairy tales and forty-four years after Hein's first MacDonald publication, these two scholars and critics continue to offer their thoughts on MacDonald's work; they continue to guide us in understanding both MacDonald's thinking and his art.

In 2018, Hein published *Doors In: The Fairy Tale World of George MacDonald*, and in 2019, Manlove published *George MacDonald's Children's Fantasies and the Divine Imagination* (both with Cascade Books). As the titles of their studies indicate, they approach MacDonald's writing

North Wind 38 (2019): 148-154

though his fantasy/fairy tales and they take differing, yet similar, approaches to this work. They differ in their interpretive method, yet they are similar in their focus on imagination and the necessity for an intuitive understanding of MacDonald's work.

It is noteworthy that after so much commentary on MacDonald's work has appeared since Hein and Manlove first began to publish, MacDonald's fairy tales remain his most examined work. This may or may not be for aesthetic reasons. Certainly this past half century has seen a continuing interest in the fairy tale as a form of narrative. Not only have we seen interest in the folk origins of fairy tale, but we have also seen the fairy tale make its way into popular culture through films and television programmes and graphic novels. Contemporary insistence on the importance of fairy tale is a testament to the influence of nineteenth-century writers of the form, especially MacDonald whose stories, as Hein and Manlove argue, are powerful expressions of the ability of the fairy tale to communicate at a subliminal level. Stories such as these are sustaining in a non-rational way. They speak to the feelings as much, or more, than they speak to our analytical abilities.

Rolland Hein sets out to aid the reader in grasping and appreciating MacDonald's theology, his Christian vision. He informs us that an "understanding of and a certain sympathy with his Christian convictions is necessary for a fuller appreciation of his work" (5). Hein also argues that any reader who wishes to understand MacDonald's ideas and vision must set aside an intellectual approach and receive MacDonald's stories imaginatively; only in this way can the reader encounter the "ultimate Reality that an imaginative entering into the fantasy affords" (1). At the outset, then, Hein sets up a duality: intellectual reading and imaginative reading. Just how these two differ remains a bit fuzzy to me, although clearly an intellectual approach involves analysis of the type Wordsworth described when he wrote in "The Tables Turned," "we murder to dissect." Imaginative reading appears to be reading that allows for, and again I call on Wordsworth, a "wise passiveness" ("Expostulation and Reply"). Following C. S. Lewis's assessment of MacDonald as a mythopoeic writer, Hein says he hopes his study will help readers "to experience mythic moments and to receive 'undefined, yet vivid visions of something beyond, something which eye has not seen nor heard'" (8). The quotation here, not documented by Hein, is from MacDonald's essay, "The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture", 1867. In short, Hein will guide the reader through the Christian ideas inherent in MacDonald's fantasy work, what Hein calls his "fairy world."

Accordingly, Hein begins his study with MacDonald's first fantasy, *Phantastes* (1857), and then goes on to devote chapters to "The Light Princess," the two "Princess" books, *The Wise Woman: A Double Story*, *At*

the Back of the North Wind, "The Golden Key," and finally *Lilith*. He does not consider the other short fairy tales, those appearing in *Dealings With the Faeries* (1967) and the later two stories, "The Carasoyn" and "The Day Boy and the Night Girl." The method of reading the works is to provide a plot summary with commentary along the way. For example, the chapter on *Phantastes* begins with a brief introduction in which Hein says that in this book MacDonald "is endeavoring to show that the role of the imagination is critical in experiencing "a vital relationship with God" (11). Then we have twelve sections that summarize the twenty-five chapters. Along with the summaries, we have commentary. In the summary of chapters 1-3, Hein tells us that Anodos has inherited a "set of mind" that sees spiritual reality as "a chimera." The story will have Anodos "embark on a metaphysical quest that leads him into a highly gratifying knowledge of the true nature of life" (11). The strength of conviction here is clear. Hein takes MacDonald's vision of life and his examination of spiritual truths to be an expression of the "true nature of life." Despite his suggestion that imagination rather than intellect is needful in an understanding of *Phantastes* and MacDonald's fairy world in general, Hein is not reluctant to inform the reader what to think concerning the goings on in the book; he is, in other words, willing to allow his intellect to work on these stories. He lets us know that when Anodos encounters the Maid of the Alder in his summary of chapters 5-7, he confronts the "human dilemma." In trying to realize his ideal, Anodos becomes ensnared by his desire for "sensual gratification" (15). Such reading is fine, as far as it goes. However, at times I think we could ask for more. For example, when Anodos meets the young maiden with the globe, and he destroys the globe by grasping it, Hein comments that Anodos "destroys her faith in her imagined world" (17). This may be so, but the comment slides over the incident without noticing the erotic aspects of Anodos's actions. We do have an acknowledgement of the erotic nature of Anodos's experiences when he arrives in the Hall of Phantasy, and this is good. But the Hall of Phantasy, like so much of *Phantastes*, deals with art and imagination and we have no consideration of the relationship between art and the need for "restraint and purity of motive" (21). This insistence on seeing everything in the book as an expression of spiritual teaching leads to commentary that strikes me as somewhat reductive and at times not entirely clear. For example, when Anodos departs the old woman's cottage that has four doors, she shows him a red mark on her hand. This mark Hein equates with a stigmata, an allusion to Christ's sacrifice. Just why we should have this allusion here is unclear. Does the old woman represent Christ? And if so, then in what way? Also, the text provides a diagram of the mark on her hand, a sort of open oval. What this mysterious mark may signify is surely more elusive than simply a stigmata. And the old woman with her spinning wheel has clear connections with the

fates, time itself.

Hein's reading of MacDonald's texts is single-minded. Allusions to Greek mythology or Romantic literature, much of which MacDonald signals in his chapter epigraphs in *Phantastes*, remain outside of Hein's consideration. This is fine as it is not his intention to offer the kind of literary analysis that takes advantage of ways of reading or theoretical avenues of approach. His focus on MacDonald's Christian vision allows him to offer little exploration of MacDonald scholarship. His bibliography contains 34 entries, 12 of which are texts by MacDonald, and only 1 is a text on MacDonald's work, this being Wolff's *The Golden Key* (1961). A reading of Hein's book does not offer any evidence of the richness of commentary on MacDonald. When I note that the commentary here is reductive, I can cite again the spinning wheel that the old woman in *Phantastes* has in her cottage. This spinning wheel, or at least a spinning wheel, appears elsewhere in MacDonald's fantasies, most notably in the two "Princess" books. Hein has little to say about this spinning wheel in *The Princess and the Goblin*, although he does offer commentary on the string the old lady is spinning, by way of William Blake. In his commentary on *The Princess and Curdie*, Hein notes that the spinning wheel is "an image suggesting the providence of God" (49). This is all he has to say. Throughout this book, I kept wishing for more or for clearer explanation. For example, in this same chapter on *The Princess and Curdie*, Hein remarks that MacDonald "seizes an opportunity to hold up to ridicule what he saw to be the gist of the established church of his day" (52). Then he cites the preacher in Gwyntystorm who preaches "on the text, 'Honesty is the best policy,' maintaining that all society would be in a blissful state if that simple principle were observed" (52). The reader has to figure out why a sermon on this text ridicules the established church because Hein does not offer an explanation. These days, honesty in our society, especially in our politics, would be, if not blissful, at least a breath of fresh air.

Hein sees *Lilith* as MacDonald's masterpiece, and he devotes his longest chapter to this book. The chapter proceeds in the same manner as the other chapters, summary plus comment. And again, some of this commentary leaves me wondering what I have missed, rather than clarifying the text for me. As an example, I offer one passage from the section on Chapters 28-29:

> Coming to himself in the garden of his estate, Vane asks the question, "What does it all mean?" and the raven replies, "Nobody knows what anything is; a man can learn only what a thing means! Whether he does depends on the use he is making of it." The raven is pressing upon Vane the shortcomings of the scientific approach of which he is enamoured. It is good at analysing, but all its analysis is unable to reveal in any metaphysical sense what an object is, and, although science may be adept at revealing an object's function, it is unable

> to reveal what something means. This can only be ascertained by discerning an object's relation to Transcendent Reality, and one discovers that by finding its proper use. (103-104)

In the exchange between Vane and the raven, I do not see any mention of science or analysis or of transcendence. What I do see is an argument on the part of the raven that asserts that the meaning of a thing depends upon the use a person makes of that thing. Consequently, when Hein asserts that science can reveal an object's function, but not its meaning, I am confused. Function equals use, I think, and the raven has said that meaning resides in use (i.e., function). Nowhere do I see the raven mentioning Transcendent Reality, although he may be implying such a reality. But I would like to know how he implies such a reality. In short, I leave this passage asking for more.

I suspect that my desire for more commentary from Hein reflects my own failings as a reader. *Doors In* will most likely prove useful to readers who find Hein's many connections between MacDonald's fantasies and scripture informative and empowering. He also makes useful connections between *Lilith* and the poet Dante. Finally, however, Hein's book is less literary criticism than it is a hermeneutical understanding of a set of texts by George MacDonald.

Turning to Colin Manlove's *Children's Fantasies and the Divine Imagination*, I note that we have six pages of Works Cited, and that the first page alone contains 17 items, half of all the citations in Hein's bibliography. In other words, Manlove's book is a work of literary criticism, thoroughly researched and inventively interpretive. His reading of MacDonald's work for children is nuanced and thorough. His purpose is to engage in analysis, intellectual analysis, if you will; he says as much when he writes that in his book "you will find what are largely intellectual interpretations" (14). Like Hein, Manlove takes as his theme MacDonald's interest in imagination. The imagination fascinated Romantic writers and MacDonald follows in the wake of Coleridge and others in his understanding of imagination, fancy, and reason. Imagination, we remember, is reason in her most exalted mood (see Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, 1850, Book XIV). For Hein, imagination "is critical" in establishing a "vital relationship with God" (11). For Manlove, MacDonald in all his fantasies "explores different aspects of the imagination, showing it under different conditions and at shifting levels." In other words, Manlove is sensitive to the complexities of MacDonald's explorations of the imagination. He suggests it has differing functions depending on what text we are considering. *The Princess and the Goblin*, for example, shows the imagination as "part of the mind," whereas *At the Back of the North Wind* explores the "divine imagination" in connection with a child's imaginative life, and *The Wise Woman* demonstrates the need for "bad children" to "enter their imaginations." *The Princess and Curdie* shows how the imagination

can direct itself against "the evil of a materialist city" (12). He goes on in the introduction to distinguish between an imagination that has to do with "being" and another that has to do with "doing" (15).

After the Introduction we have five chapters plus a Conclusion and three Appendices. The five chapters examine MacDonald's shorter fairy tales and his four longer fantasies, *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Wise Woman*, and *The Princess and Curdie*. Neither Manlove nor Hein consider MacDonald's short fiction contained in volume X of *Works of Fancy and Imagination* (1871). Each chapter of Manlove's study examines an aspect of imagination, first the "various imagination" in the shorter tales, and then in the world, in the self, against the self, and against the world respectively. Manlove is a perceptive and clever reader. An example of this is his parsing of the shorter tales. He takes note of their similarities and their differences, but concludes that "in the end" these short tales "show themselves remarkably alike in their fundamental idiom" (29). His readings share Hein's grasp of the spiritual and Christian dimensions of MacDonald's work. For example, in his reading of *At the Back of the North Wind*, he argues that the book offers a "mystical experience," but that this experience "is not to be made by rational means, only through trusting relationship with God" (45). Manlove knows, however, that calling on such a reading experience may seem abstract, somewhat rarified and beyond reach. He notes that what the book does is induce feeling; it "asks for a non-conscious response to the story, because only that way will we intuit rather than try to be certain of its meaning" (46). Meaning itself in MacDonald's work is multi-layered and often rests on paradox.

I noted above that MacDonald's interest in imagination partakes of the Romantic sensibility, and of course it does. MacDonald writes in full knowledge of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake, the German Romantic writers and the whole tradition of Romantic writing. What Manlove contributes to this history of reflection on imagination is a sharp distinction between the Coleridgian understanding of imagination and MacDonald's understanding of imagination. What distinguishes MacDonald's view of imagination is his situating God as "the great imaginer." Manlove notes that "MacDonald is indeed highly novel in his view of God sitting in the darkest depths of the human mind and sending up 'wonderful gifts into the light of that understanding which is His candle' " (120). He goes on to demonstrate how God deep in the human imagination manifests itself in MacDonald's fantasies (121). He manifests in the mysterious figures of wise women that appear and reappear throughout MacDonald's fiction for children. He notes the complexity of figures who are at the same time aspects of the protagonists' psyches and independent figures of the divine. This may not be what Coleridge envisages, as Manlove demonstrates, but it may have affinity with

the thinking of William Blake for whom the imagination is “the human form divine.”

Manlove’s exploration of McDonald’s fantasies also draws on his extensive knowledge of Victorian fantasy. He shows what is special about MacDonald’s work, in part, by setting it alongside work by the likes of John Ruskin, William Morris, Dinah Mulock, Lucy Lane Clifford, Frances Browne, Juliana Ewing, and the German writers MacDonald admired. This dip into the history of the fairy tale in the Romantic and Victorian periods sets this book apart from Hein’s *Doors In*. In Hein and Manlove we have two scholars whose admiration for MacDonald is obvious. They both have something to offer the engaged reader. For Hein what matters most is the Christian message; for Manlove what matters most “are the great images” (125). These two books complement each other.