

The Progressive Key: A Study of Bunyan's Influence in MacDonald's "The Golden Key"

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In the manner that John Bunyan renders the pilgrimage of life a dream, George MacDonald renders that dream a fairy tale. It was not unusual for the Victorian artist to play with allegorical pilgrimage motifs (Robb 58), and the influence of Bunyan, Milton, Spenser, and even Dante are evident in all of MacDonald's writings. The influence in "The Golden Key" of the two parts of *Pilgrim's Progress* seems lost on many modern scholars, however. In fact, the episodic pilgrimage plot is often seen as a primary weakness of the tale. In "Narrative Strategies of Parable" Marshall writes: "I would be content to ascribe the perceived formal weakness in 'The Golden Key' to the pilgrimage pattern, were it not for another, larger question: the reason for the disparity in the assigned paths of Mossy and Tangle" (in McGillis 99). But perhaps familiarity with the writers MacDonald loved would eliminate such misapplied disparagement.

In writing "The Golden Key," George MacDonald has taken another's tale, foundational in his life, and twined its two parts into an art form close to his heart—fantasy. Bunyan's tale was by no means the only one of pilgrimage with which the well-read MacDonald was familiar, nor the only one that influenced "The Golden Key," but as the "episodes" unfold, the similarities to Bunyan become striking.¹ Similarities in theology and age-progression are also apparent, and certain ordinances that are important to Bunyan's dream become vital to MacDonald's tale. Where *Pilgrim's Progress* is gender-specific, MacDonald seeks a balance in both his tale and Bunyan's.

The theological structure of both parts of Bunyan's work begins with God's call. Book in hand, Christian is seen in great distress. He looked "this way and that way, as if he would run; yet he stood still because . . . he could not tell which way to go" (18). Inner disturbance and fear of things around him cause Christian to leave, but he begins to progress only through Evangelist's direction. One wonders if the suggestion here is that traumatic struggle validates one's call. Such an assumption may be unjust to Bunyan, but MacDonald offers a balance when we turn to "The Golden Key." Tangle's experience is strikingly similar to Christian's. Terrifying evil makes her flee, yet without direction. In her escape she is

caught by a tree and must be saved by an “air-fish.” This creature, whose head resembles a wise owl, plays the same directive role as Evangelist.

Mossy’s journey is remarkably different, however. He is introduced to the quest by a guardian, but he is not ordered to go on this journey, nor even prodded. The idea intrigues the boy, yet even when the trees seem to be waiting for him to enter, a hungry stomach holds him back. Only when a rainbow floods the woods does he spontaneously leave—a clear example of free will. His journey’s beginning is closer to that of Christiana’s, though his is a greater example of personal volition. With the simultaneous inception of a journey that demands both solitary progress and growth in companionship, MacDonald broadens the scope of the story.

Bunyan’s “House of Interpretations,” in which Christian and Christiana experience justification, appears as the Beautiful Grandmother’s Cottage in “The Golden Key.” Tangle is the first to arrive at the cottage, following the lead of her air-fish. Her instruction begins the moment she enters the door. She is washed clean and is granted a new garment. When Mossy arrives he does not receive the ceremonial bath Tangle did, for Mossy has already decided to quest. Tangle has yet to set out by choice.

Mossy is not dirty when he arrives; he has just outgrown his clothes. He is, however, shown into a chamber like that of Tangle’s, and so it is safe to presume that with morning comes a garden bath like that of Tangle’s second experience. After her morning bath Tangle feels “happier, for having once been in her grandmother’s pond, she must be clean and tidy ever after” (23). Both Tangle and Mossy look different in their new clothes, “but the wearer of grandmother’s clothes never thinks about how he or she looks, but thinks always how handsome other people are” (26).

In *Pilgrim’s Progress*, after his instruction and his experience of [70] renewal at the cross, Christian also gets a new garment. But MacDonald’s fairy tale experience is far more reminiscent of Christiana and her companion Mercy. After their garden bath experience, the women “came out of that bath not only sweet and clean, but also much enlivened in their joints. So when they came in they looked fairer a deal than when they went out to the washing” (191). Once dressed they, like Mossy and Tangle, marvel at each other’s beauty. In addition, the emphasis on animals through the tutelage of Bunyan’s women is carried over by MacDonald as the children discover that what they eat opens their ears to the world around them. They understand and learn from the conversation of animals, and they hear the murmuring of all nature. The understanding of each is increased as they pass through the

sanctification process, though their questions remain many.

Sanctification is the more extensive portion of both *Pilgrim's Progress* and "The Golden Key." Before Mossy and Tangle are able to cross the sea to the glorification of the rainbow and the land from which the shadows come, they must travel far. Their journey includes a time of mutual growth and experience, a shared longing for that land from which the shadows come, and an experience of the pain of separation and solitary journey. No person's journey is the same as another's, and the addition of *Pilgrim's Progress Second Part* is Bunyan's concession to that reality. Just as Bunyan's characters are surrounded with "melodious noises" and thousands ascending "round on every side," transfigured in the glory of the Lord, so the new Tangle and Mossy ascend within the rainbow. Amid the "sounds of Aeolian music . . . beautiful beings of all ages climbed up with them" upon me journey's completion (147, 45). They too were transfigured by their journey.

As Tangle and Mossy ascend, they are a different Tangle and a different Mossy physically as well as spiritually. This follows an apparent pattern laid out by Bunyan. The life journey demands a progression in time, and both authors are careful to note that the discoveries and experiences that develop one's spiritual understanding also make a claim on mortality. In Bunyan, we see the [71] change from Christian's youthfulness when he fights Apollyon to his mid-life strain when he is in the Valley of Shadow of Death, in Vanity Fair, and with Flatterer. The Enchanted Ground, where the danger of falling asleep is almost actualized, is reminiscent of mid-life complacency and loss of passion. When Christiana meets the disciple Gaius, he refers to her as an "aged matron" (237). As she progresses to Beulah Land, the peacefulness and the reward of those who have travelled far on the straight and narrow path is evident. Likewise, MacDonald misses no opportunity to emphasize this truth. Mossy and Tangle begin their journey as children but age steadily, as MacDonald repeatedly points out. Tangle is ten when her tale begins, thirteen by the time she eats at the cottage. And Mossy, a boy at home, is a "youth who had outgrown his garments" by the time he reaches the cottage (24). Soon MacDonald is pointing out gray hairs and making note of minutes that turn to years.

Consistent with MacDonald's presentation of differing paths, Mossy discovers death during his visit with the Old Man of the Sea: "'You have tasted of death now,' said the Old Man. 'Is it good?' 'It is good,' said Mossy. 'It is better than life.' 'No,' said the Old Man: 'It is only more life'" (42).

Tangle, however, seems to go through a purgatorial experience, not only bathing in the life-affirming death-bath of the Old Man of the Sea, but also traveling through to the refining fires of the Oldest Man of All. When he who is able to “help everybody” places his “little cool hand on her heart,” she is ready to be brought to the rainbow’s beginning. While MacDonald reveals here some of his own wrestling with the concepts of justice and mercy, he parallels Bunyan. What is readily surmised from Bunyan, MacDonald presents as indisputable. The children have grown, aged, and died.

The process of aging, maturing, and dying can bring with it much difficulty—even suffering. As with the intensification of the bath scene, MacDonald seizes upon an idea presented in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and in the limitations of his art form chooses it as a cen- [72] tral concept. Both tales stress the value of suffering. This teaching for Christiana occurs in the House of the Interpreter:

So he had them into a slaughter-house, where was a butcher a-killing of a sheep. And behold the sheep was quiet and took her death patiently. Then said the Interpreter, “You must learn of this sheep to suffer, and to put up wrongs without murmurings and complaints. Behold how quietly she takes her death, and without objecting she suffereth her skin to be pulled over her ears. Your King doth call you his sheep.” (186)

This lesson, a minor incident in Christiana’s journey, MacDonald expands in the lesson of the air-fish. After this strange, beautiful, and memorable rescuer of Tangle has brought her to safety, it flies directly into a cooking pot in the cottage. And when it is time to eat, Tangle discovers that her fish is part of the meal. The lady responds to Tangle’s distress with the assurance that the fish’s greatest desire is to be eaten: “In Fairyland the ambition of the animals is to be eaten by the people; for that is their highest end in that condition. But they are not therefore destroyed. Out of that pot comes something more than the dead fish, you will see” (21). Even Bunyan’s wording is paralleled in MacDonald: “she pulled off its feathered skin, ready to be eaten” (21). Tangle is soon to discover that something even more beautiful than her fish will metamorphose out of that eucharistic pot. Whether Tangle is acutely aware of it, she learns a very real lesson from her fish, and she will eventually be called to enter her own boiling furnace. She is being prepared for a difficult journey.

While the male has the greatest obstacles to overcome in Bunyan’s works and the female journey is relatively easy, in MacDonald’s tale the

roles are reversed. Mossy's journey to the land from which the shadows fall is shorter, easier, and less painful than Tangle's. One must return to the tale's beginning to discover why. Tangle, like Christian, is chased into her journey. It is not an unmotivated choice. She was not prepared for this entrance into Fairyland; in fact, up to this point she had known only [73] neglect. Mossy, on the other hand, knows much about Fairyland before he begins his journey. His knowledge is gained through the tales told to him in his home. Like a child raised on Bible stories, Mossy had benefited from many lessons in the quiet listening of his home. But he experiences another, perhaps deeper, preparation that again Tangle lacks. While Tangle's guardians seem completely unaware of the existence of Fairyland, Mossy's father has already completed the journey of the Golden Key.

It is in this, perhaps, more than in any other aspect, that MacDonald reveals how Christian's journey creates a difference in Christiana's journey. It is not because Christiana is female that her journey seems much less complex, but rather because someone has gone before her, and she has been able to learn from his lessons. "What Christian left locked up and went his way / Sweet Christiana opens with her key" (157). Throughout her journey Christiana carries with her the gold letters from her husband that identify her connection to him and help her to walk straight. When Mossy arrives at the cottage door with his key he does not need cleansing so much as he needs to be given more room in which to grow spiritually. Tangle, on the other hand, is a mess. Both she and Christian have no footsteps to follow. They do not have the "faith of [their] fathers" to clear the way for them and so they must endure many more lessons. Perhaps, among other things, MacDonald wants to communicate a very practical truth to those parents who might be reading this fairy tale to their children, and who have not gleaned this truth from the journeys of Christian and Christiana.

Some readers, without the comparison of Bunyan in mind, might be tempted to complain that MacDonald is sexist, requiring his female protagonist to undergo much more testing and travail than her male counterpart. Yet when we look at the works side by side we see that the integral difference between Mossy's and Tangle's journey, like that of Christiana's and Christian's, is the prior state of the heart, the mind, and the soul. That state does not decide the journey's fate, but it does affect it. Perhaps Robert Lee Wolff should have considered Bunyan's tale and MacDonald's intimacy with it more carefully before wondering in ink why Mossy has "this advantage (of a short journey) over Tangle, except that he is

a man,” and answering his own query with a phallic expla- [74] nation: “he has an instrument which she has not” (144-5).

By combining both journeys in one tale, MacDonald clarifies Bunyan’s position. As Mossy and Tangle ascend their rainbow hand in hand, the differences neither of gender nor of journey have determined their destination. They enter the land together. For each to reach the foot of the rainbow, however, their paths had to differ, for each began at a different spot. The point of departure, then, not gender, decides the pattern. As MacDonald clarifies this truth, the many other elements of this well-loved tale are clear, and we see that it might serve as an exegetical key. In “The Golden Key,” MacDonald maintains the structural frames of journey set up by Bunyan and draws the recollection of his reader back again and again to a dream that has successfully transcended time, genre, and gender.

Notes

1. For other influences, see Milton’s “Comus”: “Yet some there be that by due steps aspire / To lay their just hands on the Golden Key / That opens to palace of Eternity” (II. 12-14, opening scene); “I took it for a faery vision / of some gay creatures of the element / That in the colours of the Rainbow live” (II. 298-300). (C. Anderson, “The Golden Key: Milton and MacDonald,” in McGillis [87])

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