

## The Mystical Sophia: More on the Great Grandmother in the *Princess* Books

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**M**aria Gonzalez Davies's discussion of the great-great-grandmother of the *Princess* books reflects a continuing interest in this figure, and deepens the understanding of a presence which is a powerful embodiment of feminine principles; particularly the Great Mother archetype, who, as Davies observes, "is a goddess in most societies and a feminine presence in fairy tales."

The power of this figure in MacDonald's writing is indisputable, and much has been written about her. Yet, given the difficulty of wholly explaining her by, for example, Freudian analysis, or as a symbolic presence, or as part of a mythic/fairy-tale tradition, the question still lingers: *why* was she such a profound figure for MacDonald? Apart of the answer is to consider MacDonald's thought within a more mystical framework. Adelheid Kegler has touched upon some Sophianic elements in MacDonald's thought (1991, 1993); I would like to look further at this aspect.

By "mystical" here I mean the search for spiritual truth or enlightenment, with a desire to achieve personal communion and union with God. These were lifelong concerns of MacDonald, which would in part have been addressed through his reading in the Kabbalah, Jakob Böehme, and Swedenborg. He was strongly influenced by Novalis, whose outlook was based upon his mystical concept of the Imagination, which MacDonald shared (MacDonald 1908,1-42; Hayward 23ff.), and informed by the equally mystical notion of the Divine Sophia. MacDonald devoted much time and effort to translating Novalis's Sophianic "Hymns to the Night" and "Spiritual Songs," and their imagery has many reflections in his writing (Hayward 35ff.). In addition, both men read and were influenced by Böehme, whose mystical writings demonstrate a well-wrought conception of the Sophia as a female revelation of God, a divine principle of wisdom and the beloved of the alienated soul. It may well be this figure that MacDonald is intuiting.

The *Sophia Perennis* is much more than just a fairy godmother, a lost mother, the feminine anima, the Earth Mother; although she is all these: mystical tradition sees such aspects as fragmented images of the One Goddess—the female personification of divine wisdom (gnosis). The

summation of the spiritual quest is the union of the soul with the Queen of Heaven, **[end of page 29]** signalling a return from the duality of separation to the wholeness; of God, through the medium of union with the beloved (Campbell 111, 116, 297).

All these ideas are present in Novalis's "Hymns" and "Spiritual Songs." The yearning for union with the Sophia as a prelude to a life of bliss with God is also clear in Böehme's vision. He writes: "if the soul wishes to obtain Christ's conqueror's crown from the noble virgin Sophia, [it] must court her with great love-desire . . . if he deserves her love, she is willing" (39, 44). The Sophia, for Böehme, is mystically part of Christ, speaking both as bride of the soul, and as Christ's love of mankind. In "A Short Formula for Prayer" Böehme has the soul saying: "O honest and deepest love of God in Christ Jesus, give me your Pearl [the love of the Sophia], press it into my soul" (49). Further: "She has revealed herself in the precious name of JESUS as Christ . . . as the anointed of God" (45). We have here a figure who can be seen as the female countenance of God, who can mediate between God and man to bring about at-one-ment with God (see also Raeper 262). If MacDonald saw her as this, her importance to him must have been paramount.

Let us therefore seek some evidence linking MacDonald's great-great-grandmother with these Sophianic characteristics. Böehme has the soul saying to its "noble Sophia": "O sweet love, you have brought the waters of life out of God's fountain and revived me in my great thirst . . . you have made death in me to be life" (57). Irene is immersed by her great-great-grandmother in a bottomless, starry silver bath, whose waters are akin to the waters of eternal life; she experiences a mystical state of bliss, and an intuition of the truths of eternity. She is revived and renewed: "When she stood up on the floor, she felt as if she had been made over again" (125). Böehme sees the Sophia appear in cosmic splendour "in her virginal clothing before the soul" saying: "I am a Queen of Heaven . . . and crown you with a crown of Paradise" (60). As the form of wisdom through which God reveals himself, she is an all-seeing eye: "the Virgin Wisdom is a mirror of divinity . . . she is like the eye that sees" (xi).

Novalis sees the Sophia in like terms: "Thou upliftest the heavy laden pinions of the soul. . . Didst thou not . . . [agitate] in the gulfs of space those flashing globes, to proclaim . . . thy omnipotence?" (1992, 9-10). MacDonald's "Lady of the Silver Moon" is a manifestation of the Sophia, a Queen of Heaven, dressed in the azure of the Virgin and set in

the surroundings of the night. On entering her room, Curdie sees “the great sky, and the stars and beneath . . . —only darkness!” (215). A great wheel of fire turns, flashing with brilliant blue lights. She sings of clouds, stars, suns and [30] time, of the cosmos and destiny (Kegler 1991, 113). With her is a silvery moon: a globe with a heart of light so wondrously potent that it never goes out. This is the all-seeing eye, a sign of her penetrating power. She tells Irene: ““When I please, I can make the lamp shine through the walls—shine so strong that it melts them away from before the sight”” (81). Novalis writes that she is “the portress of Heaven, that steppes to meet them out of ancient stories, bearing the key to the dwellings of the blessed, silent messenger of secrets infinite” (1992, 11), and MacDonald’s “Mistress of the Silver Moon” indeed seems to be such a figure.

Böehme writes of the Sophia holding the “*mysterium magnum*” out of which the spirit reveals the wonders of eternity. She waits unseen “behind the soul’s door” (44, 46). Novalis writes of her veil and secret power: “unspeakable, mysterious night . . . what holdest thou under thy mantle, that with hidden powers affects my soul?” (1992, 9). MacDonald’s Queen is hidden in the uttermost attics, her cloak of mystery compounded of night, timelessness and spatial disorientation. Irene believes in her and can penetrate the mystery; Curdie at first can not.

The truth residing in the figure of divine wisdom was traditionally represented in Isis worship as being covered by a veil, only dis-coverable by the Queen of Heaven herself. This is why the Queen says, in answer to Irene’s question about Curdie’s inability to see: ““It means, my love, that I did not wish to show myself”” (122). When the soul does meet the Sophia, it is shot through with exquisite joy. Böehme’s soul exclaims: “O sweet love . . . in you I can be joyful! You change my fire—anguish into great joy” (59). And Novalis writes: “I laid hold of her hands, and the tears became a sparkling chain that could not be broken . . . I welcomed the new life with ecstatic tears” (1992,12). In the mine, the Queen takes the hand of Curdie’s father and “tears came into Peter’s eyes . . . his heart was much too full to speak” (210). And when the “housemaid” looks Curdie in the eyes and he recognises her as the Queen, his emotional response is intense: “And Curdie started, and sprang from his seat, and dropped on his knees, and burst into tears” (339).

These are only brief examples of the Sophianic aspects of MacDonald’s great-great-grandmother figure, but it can be seen that the image of the Sophia was of profound interest and importance to him. Böehme and Novalis responded to this tradition in a deeply personal and religious

way; it is not surprising that MacDonald, a poet “whose religion was his life,” as his son Roland puts it (78), and whose beliefs were characterized by a deep yearning for the overcoming of self and achievement of at-one-ment with God, shared [31] [32] [Note: image not available] the same views. The Sophia, with her life-giving and creative powers, and her ability to bring the soul to God, to mediate between this world and the next, is a figure who had immense meaning and relevance to MacDonald.

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[NB. Most of Novalis’s work is not translated into English, but some important passages are translated and commented upon in Pfefferkorn, Kristin. *Novalis: A Romantic’s Theory of Language and Poetry*. New Haven: Yale U.P., 1988. A selection of his aphorisms is available in *Pollen and Fragments: Selected Poetry and Prose of Novalis*. Trs. and ed. Arthur Versluis. Grand Rapids: Phanes, 1989. Ed.] [33]