FRI-2G.405-1-LL-07

# ASPECTS OF THE CONCEPT OF THE "ANGEL IN THE HOUSE" IN THE FANTASY TEXTS FOR CHILDREN BY GEORGE MACDONALD[13]

**Senior Lecturer Iliyana Benina, PhD**
Department of Foreign Languages,
"Angel Kanchev" Univesity of Ruse
Tel.: 082 888 815
E-mail: ibenina@uni-ruse.bg

***Abstract:*** *The purpose of the present study is to demonstrate how the Victorian stereotype "the angel in the house" has been problematized in the children's fantasy texts by George McDonald. The subject of discussion are the characters of wives and mothers in such fantasy children's texts as: "The Princess and the Goblin", "The Princess and Curdie", "The Light Princess" and "At the Back of the North Wind". Through all the characters of the type McDonald shows and proves that it is possible for women to possess intellectual potential, as well as potential for violence and aggression to the same extent as men and that they do not differ from male figures in any respect: neither good, nor evil. The model of wife and mother, approved and defended by McDonald subverts the Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house", welcoming the free expression of female activity, creativity and intelligence.*

***Key words:*** *"The angel in the house", Subversion, Victorian stereotype, Female activity, Creativity, Intelligence.*

## INTRODUCTION

The stereotypical Victorian image of the perfect wife and mother is defined by the phrase "angel in the house", originally used in the title of the extremely popular at the time poem by Coventry Patmore (Patmore, C., 1863), in which he sets up his wife as a role model for all women (Freiwald, B., 1988). The poem gradually began to embody the dominant view of women, perceived and approved by the majority of society members, during the period under consideration. Thus a long-lasting stereotype was constructed, according to which the ideal wife and mother was a passive, kind, charming, self-sacrificing, graceful, pious, pure and chaste one (Vrachnas, B., 2014). Elaine Showalter confirms this assertion, adding that: "*The middle-class ideology of the proper sphere of womanhood, which developed in post-industrial England and America, prescribed a woman who would be a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home* (Showalter, E. 2009)."

The purpose of the present study is to trace, analyze and define the model of mother and wife affirmed and approved by the texts of George McDonald. The object of discussion are his fantasy texts for children *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie*, *The Light Princess* and *Behind the Back of the North Wind*.

## EXPOSITION

In *The Princess and the Goblin*, the protagonist's mother is present at the background of the whole text, but a particular emphasis is placed on her in chapter 23, which is also evident from its title – "Curdie and His Mother". Here the mother figure goes out of the frame of passive femininity, progressively demonstrating potential for independent thinking and psychological insight, as well as a tendency to break clichés. Unlike the typical figure of the ideal mother, the mother character here does not unconditionally stand in defense of her child but, on the contrary, often criticizes and admonishes her son. For example, she tells him sagaciously that he conforms to stereotypes,

[13] The paper was presented in the section of Linguistics, Literature and Art Science on October 28, 2017, with an original title in Bulgarian: АСПЕКТИ НА КОНЦЕПТА ЗА "ДОМАШНИЯ АНГЕЛ" ВЪВ ФЕНТЪЗИ ТЕКСТОВЕТЕ ЗА ДЕЦА НА ДЖОРДЖ МАКДОНАЛД

perceiving princess Irene as a spoiled aristocrat, but forgets the fact that she has saved his life risking her own:

*They all sat silent for some time, pondering the strange tale. At last Curdie's mother spoke.*

*'You confess, my boy,' she said, 'there is something about the whole affair you do not understand?'*

*'Yes, of course, mother,' he answered. 'I cannot understand how a child knowing nothing about the mountain, or even that I was shut up in it, should come all that way alone, straight to where I was; and then, after getting me out of the hole, lead me out of the mountain too, where I should not have known a step of the way if it had been as light as in the open air.'*

*'Then you have no right to say what she told you was not true. She did take you out, and she must have had something to guide her: why not a thread as well as a rope, or anything else? There is something you cannot explain, and her explanation may be the right one.'*

*'It's no explanation at all, mother; and I can't believe it.'*

*'That may be only because you do not understand it. If you did, you would probably find it was an explanation, and believe it thoroughly. I don't blame you for not being able to believe it, but I do blame you for fancying such a child would try to deceive you. Why should she? Depend upon it, she told you all she knew. Until you had found a better way of accounting for it all, you might at least have been more sparing of your judgement* (MacDonald, G.)*.'*

At the same time, through Curdie's words in the above quote, the text suggests that the very idea of "**female courage**", activity and initiative is perceived as foreign and strange and is obviously not approved by most members of society. As far as the mother character is concerned, Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara describe Mrs. Peterson as "**the wisest character**" in *The Princess and the Goblin*, concluding that the reader is convinced not only that her arguments are meaningful, but that everything she says corresponds to the truth (Dickerson, M., D. O'Hara, 2006).

In the sequel, *The Princess and Curdie*, in chapter 4, "*Curdie's Father and Mother*", a special emphasis is laid on the woman's projection on the matrimonial relationship, revealing that Mrs. Peterson respects the feelings and personality of her husband and demonstrating the mutual understanding of both spouses. The general implication is that ***equality and reciprocity*** in the relationship is the pledge for their happiness as a couple.

Reflecting on another children's fantasy text by MacDonald, Linda Montag draws a conclusion about the equality of male and female subjects, with which I could agree and address to the books of the Princess cycle discussed here as well:

*"MacDonald is perhaps at his most subversive when, in stark contrast to the contemporary conduct books for women which stressed that a wife must completely subordinate her needs to those of her husband and children, he demonstrates that in a happy relationship the husband and wife function not as polar opposites and according to hierarchy, but operate on a system of mutuality, complementarity, and reciprocity* (Montag, L., 2003)*."*

One of the prominent biographers and researchers of McDonald, William Raeper, argues that "*it was part of his romantic ideal to elevate woman out of the drawing-room to stand beside man as an equal co-partner under God*" (Raeper, W., 1987)."

The text repeatedly suggests that although Mrs. Peterson does not belong to the sophisticated society, she is a true "lady", as **her nobility is a nobility of the spirit**, not one that is inherited from birth. This idea is proved by the opinion of her husband, who several times tells his son, Curdie, that his mother is a "true lady", referring to her numerous personal qualities.

In a fairly similar way the mother figure in *Behind the Back of the North Wind* is represented. On the one hand, during most of the narrative time, the mother is the protective figure over her sick child, always ready to defend and shield him, as well to create normal living conditions for her child according to the family's humble means, thus conforming to the stereotype of the protective and sacrificing femininity. On the other hand, the character manages to successfully escape the cliché of the Victorian Angel in the House. Like Mrs. Peterson, Diamond's mother has the potential for sternness, hardness and uncompromising desire not to raise a spoiled and whimsical child. The scene of the conversation between Diamond's parents, in which his mother notes how big and beautiful eyes has their son, is quite indicative in this respect:

*'Have I got goggle-eyes, mother?' asked Diamond, a little dismayed.*

*'Not too goggle,' said his mother,* ***who was quite proud of her boy's eyes, only did not want to make him vain.***

*'Not too goggle; only you need not stare so* (MacDonald, G.) (my emphasis)*.'*

Similarity between the two mother figures could also be noted in the attitude to their husbands. Like Mrs. Peterson, Diamond's mother is represented as an equal partner to her husband and respects him as a personality and companion in life. But this second mother figure evolves further on, as the reader sees her in a number of cases expressing her opinion boldly and independently, especially when she does not agree with her husband's judgement or point of view. She does not just criticize him but declares her standpoint, often using biting irony. For example, in connection with his haughty attitude towards the people in a small provincial town, her reaction varies from a reproach to irony:

*'Sleepy old hole!' said his father.*

*'**Don't abuse the place; there's good people in it**,' said his mother.*

*'Right, old lady,' returned his father; 'only I don't believe there are more than two pair of carriage-horses in the whole blessed place.'*

*'Well, people can get to heaven without carriages—or coachmen either, husband* (MacDonald, G.) (my emphasis)*'.*

The last text under discussion, *The Light Princess*, represents maternal figures from a very different social environment, since both characters in question are related to the royal power – the queen and the sister of the king.

The tale begins almost identically to "The Sleeping Beauty" by Charles Perrault, but makes a curious plot turn shortly afterwards. After many vicissitudes, the king and the queen have a child, a beautiful girl, and all the fairies in the kingdom are invited to bless her, but the mean and wicked one has not been invited, and she is quick to avenge for that. She has the interesting name, "Makemnoit" (from the sentence "I'll make them know it", shortened and pronounced "Makemnoit"), and is the sister of the king. She curses the infant princess not to obey the gravitation, which, as expected, creates a lot of problems for both the parents and the courtiers. What makes an impression almost immediately is the stark opposition of the queen's intelligence and her husband's modest intellectual potential. The first chapter, entitled "What? No Children?" positions the narrative on the ironic and satirical plane mainly by representing the king as a person not particularly intelligent and sensitive:

*And the king said to himself, 'All the queens of my acquaintance have children, some three, some seven, and some as many as twelve; and my queen has not one.* ***I feel ill-used.****' So he made up his mind to be cross with his wife about it. But she bore it all like a good patient queen as she was. Then the king grew very cross indeed. But the queen pretended to take it all as a joke, and a very good one too.*

*'Why don't you have any daughters,* ***at least****?' said he.* ***'I don't say sons; that might be too much to expect*** (MacDonald, G.) (my emphasis)*.'*

From the outset the ironical tone sets McDonald's perspective on gender roles. In many ways the text sounds surprisingly modern and feminist, especially the sarcastic "*at least daughters*", which reveals without any doubt both the derogatory attitude of the king to the opposite sex and the contrary, **disapproving position of the author on the matter**. The wise and patient queen implements a smart strategy, pretending that all the terrible tactlessness and imbecility of the king is just a joke, as she would do if she soothes a spoiled child. King's reply '*I don't say sons; that might be too much to expect*' can be interpreted not only as a complete disbelief in his wife's ability to fulfill "*her purpose*" according to him, but also demonstrates a total disrespect to the "*other sex*" from a gender point of view.

The text of chapter one goes on as ironically as possible:

*But he was not an ill-tempered king, and in any matter of less moment* ***would have let the queen have her own way with all his heart****. This, however, was an affair of state.*

*The queen smiled.*

*'**You must have patience with a lady, you know, dear king,**' said she.*

***She was, indeed, a very nice queen**, and heartily sorry that she could not oblige the king immediately* (MacDonald, G.) (my emphasis).

The king's "kindness" is evident in the fact that he condescends to allow the queen **to act by her own wish in insignificant situations**, but that, in his view, is unacceptable in the "important" cases that only male interference and "supreme" intellectual qualities are able to resolve. The smile, with which the queen makes the statement in question, as well as the end of the last sentence - that "she could not oblige the king immediately", transforms the meaning into a parody, and the king himself turns into a caricature. It is now quite obvious that the queen is not only a kind person, but also a wise mistress and wife, and that **the author's sympathy is on her side.**

In the third chapter, entitled "*She Can't Be Ours*" the text states directly that "the queen was much cleverer than the king" (MacDonald, G.) and the text proves this immediately – she is the first person to understand who laid their daughter under the evil curse. The king's reaction is a significant one, as instead of reflecting on the cause of their child's condition, he asks the wrong question – whether the child is theirs or not, which by association leads to the cliché "***she is not my child***". The parody in the situation is further extended through the nomination of the king by the text as "***a little king with a great throne***", adding to the comic and parodic elements a comment, containing social criticism, which implies that he is actually "***like many other kings*** (MacDonald, G.) (my emphasis)".

Another situation, portraying the character of the queen from a gender perspective, is the play on words with a root "light" between her and the king, through which the reader has also the opportunity to compare their views on female sexuality, character and behavior. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas notes in this respect:

*"The king uses metonymy to praise the stereotypical female body parts and to erase all the more the woman's corporeality: whether the princess be light-hearted, light-footed, light-handed or light-bodied, the traces of dangerous female sexuality have been obliterated, and the rhetoric cutting up the female body, secures gendered positions of male domination and female subordination. <...> The queen, on the other hand, does not turn her daughter's representation into a series of metonymies which fragment her body into fetishized parts, the better to deny its materiality. In the woman's view, the princess's physical assets matter less than her unmarriageability, her stupidity and laziness, that is, the uselessness of the stereotype of the weak-willed and silly blond angel that patriarchal ideology extols (Talairach-Vielmas, L., 2007)."*

In the course of the text ***another female character contributes to the meanings of the mother figure paradigm***. According to some scholars, discussing the text, such as Talairach-Vielmas and Knoepflmacher, the king's evil sister, ***princess Makemnoit, can be regarded as a double or a counterpart of the queen mother***. U. S. Knoepflmacher argues that Makemnoit remains a version of the "evil mother" (Knoepflmacher, U.C., 1998) and Talairach-Vielmas supports this view, noting that:

*"Princess Makemnoit is the queen's Other, shamelessly venting her discontent and enacting her anger. As opposed to the queen, Makemnoit is unmarried and so is neither dependent on male designs nor confined in any male text. On the contrary, she is literally out of patriarchal scriptures: the king has forgotten her in writing his will and forgets her again in writing his invitations for the christening* (Talairach-Vielmas, L., 2007)*."*

I must also point out that the character in question is the only one in the whole narrative that has a name – all the other characters are nameless, which is indicative of the importance, attributed to the heroine by the text. In the beginning, the queen's double draws readers' attention to her appearance. The distinctive physical features serve to emphasize her great intelligence: the huge forehead, "protruding over her face like a cliff over the abyss", the big, black, gleaming eyes – all these elements suggest something, which later on becomes extremely clear – the princess is the smartest and the most knowledgeable person in the kingdom. All the complex spells which Makemnoit uses are made up by herself; she is competent in chemistry and physics and is familiar with the gravity laws so very well that she even knows how to cancel them.

The character also impresses with a very characteristic feature – her constant physical and intellectual activity. While this activity is aimed at negative results, it is also indicative of the fact that women do not differ from men in the sphere of "dark" impulses, passions and deeds.

## CONCLUSION

In the texts, confirming patriarchal ideology, the qualities, represented by the above-mentioned characters of wives and mothers, are usually perceived as characteristic of male figures. Through all the heroines discussed in the study, McDonald shows and proves that it is possible for women to possess intellectual potential, as well as potential for violence, cruelty and aggression to the same extent as men; in other words, that they do not differ from male figures neither in good, nor in evil. The model of wife and mother, approved and defended by McDonald, clearly opposes the Victorian ideal, the "angel in the house", thus welcoming the free expression of female identity and qualities.

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