NOBILITY FROM GEORGE MACDONALD TO
C. S. LEWIS

Joyce MCPHERSON
University of Tennessee

Abstract

C. S. Lewis first discovered the works of George MacDonald when he read Phantastes, A Faerie Romance, a book he “unwittingly” picked up from a bookstall before a train journey (Surprised by Joy 219). He went on to read dozens of books by MacDonald and later wrote that “the quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic reality in which we live” (George MacDonald preface). As Lewis’s career matured, he followed in the steps of MacDonald by writing on literature and faith and, ultimately, by writing fantasy. Lewis called MacDonald his master, and their shared concept of nobility makes a fascinating study of the themes that inspired both men. These themes include the value and costliness of nobility as well as the significance of belonging to a kingdom in order to become noble. The connections between their fiction and faith reveal an idea of goodness within reach of every person. As a result, MacDonald and Lewis created a particular type of fantasy that has endured into the twenty-first century.

Keywords: imagination, fairy tale, Christianity, C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald

INTRODUCTION

The word nobility means the quality of being noble, a word with a long history in the English language. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, noble is derived from the “Anglo-Norman and Old French, Middle French, French noble
(adjective), *distinguished* (c 1050), *magnificent* (late 12th cent.), of high social rank, of high moral character (early 13th cent.)” (OED *noble*). Together, these meanings provide a fund of ideas for authors working in the borders between reason, faith, and imagination. Owen Barfield, a colleague and friend of Lewis, explored the history of English words and described how the Latin *gentilis* became entwined with the English word *noble* so that the connotation of *nobility* or *king* in England held a sense of endearment, unlike the word *tyrant*. (Barfield 24, 113) Lewis built on Barfield’s work in *Studies in Words*, where he singled *nobility* out for particular analysis. He wrote, “A word like *nobility* begins to take on its social-ethical meaning when it refers not simply to a man’s status but to the manners and character which are thought to be appropriate to that status.” (*Studies* 22) Lewis explains how Boethius, Horace, Chaucer, and Spenser acknowledged that “the true nobility is within.” (22-24) The flexible meaning of *noble* creates a type of metaphor in which nobility of position becomes a symbol for nobility of character. George MacDonald, writing in the nineteenth century, crafted fairy tales and fiction that blurred the lines between the two denotations. His stories are populated with princesses and kings and miner boys, who are royalty in disguise. He communicated a spiritual message aimed at the hearts of his readers, rather than their minds. His legacy of reaching the heart through stories inspired Lewis, who, writing in the twentieth century, also used imagination to illuminate meaning. Lewis wrote in his essay, “Bluspels and Flalansferes” that, “[f]or me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.” (*Essays* 354) In the course of their work, these authors developed a justification for fantasy literature that can be traced through the exploration of themes of nobility.

When Lewis created an anthology of his favorite quotes from MacDonald, he wrote in the introduction: “I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him.” (*George MacDonald* preface) Both authors created fairy tales for children to inspire them to see a deeper reality. Lewis develops this theme in his essay, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said.” He describes how, through stories, objects of faith could “for the first time appear in their real potency” and thus “steal past those watchful dragons.” (*Stories* 70) Lewis’s aspiration was inspired by MacDonald, who in his essay entitled “The
Imagination: Its Function and its Culture,” exhorted his readers to “seek not that your sons and daughters should not see visions, should not dream dreams; seek that they should see true visions, that they should dream noble dreams.” (Orts 21) Lewis and MacDonald cultivated the idea that noble dreams led the heart to understand truth. In their stories they illustrated how nobility comes from invisible qualities of character, and true royalty belongs to a kingdom that is beyond the physical sight. For both authors, fairy tales were a medium to take the reader further than the rational mind. As MacDonald explained through the words of the great-great-grandmother Irene in *The Princess and the Goblin*, “Seeing is not believing—it is only seeing” (Complete 2117). Perhaps most importantly, MacDonald and Lewis wrote stories that encouraged a deeper nobility as the objective of all the King’s sons and daughters.

**NOBILITY**

C. S. Lewis was aware of MacDonald’s double meaning for the word *noble*. In his anthology of favorite MacDonald excerpts, he quotes MacDonald using the word to be synonymous with “lastingly good” (154) and the opposite of “wrong” (156). He also cites MacDonald’s fairy tales where noble meant belonging to a royal lineage, such as being the child of a king. Interestingly, Lewis and MacDonald were professors who lectured and wrote about English literature. As a result, both were in a strong position to advance the heritage of the particularly English concept of nobility from their native literature. MacDonald’s analysis of the early religious texts of England includes a poem by Chaucer entitled “A Balade made by Chaucer, teaching what is gentilnesse, or whom is worthy to be called gentill.” Here again, the Latin word *gentilis* comes through the French *gentil* to join with *nobleness*. MacDonald highlights as significant Chaucer’s phrase “first stock-father,” whom anyone desiring to be noble “must follow his trace” (Antiphon 42). Here is the ballad as transcribed by MacDonald with his annotations in italics:

The first stock-father of gentleness—*ancestor of the race*
What man desireth gentle for to be *of the gentle.*
Must follow his trace, and all his wittes dress *track, footsteps*
Virtue to love and vices for to flee; *apply*
For unto virtue longeth dignity, *belongeth*
And not the reverse falsely dare I deem,
All wear he mitre, crown or diadem. *although he wear*

The first stock was full of righteousness; *the progenitor*
True of his word, sober, piteous, and free;
Clean of his ghost, and loved business, *pure in his spirit*
Against the vice of sloth in honesty;
And but his heir love virtue as did he, *except*
He is not gentle, though he rich seem,
All wear he mitre, crown, or diadem.

*Vicesse may well be heir to old Richesse, Vice: Riches*
But there may no man, as men may well see,
Bequeath his heir his virtue’s nobleness;
That is appropriated unto no degree, *rank*
But to the first Father in majesty,
That maketh his heires them that him queme, *please him*
All wear he mitre, crown, or diadem.

*I can come to no other conclusion than that by the first stock-father Chaucer means our Lord Jesus.* (Antiphon 42-43)

MacDonald admired Chaucer's ballad for its clear delineation that all nobility descends through the Lord Jesus, and thus, this type of nobleness is superior to mere worldly degree or rank. Joining this concept with the fairy tale genre gave rise to a type of fantasy that utilizes nobility with dual meanings.

Lewis and MacDonald wrote a particular type of fairy tale and fantasy. When Lewis first read *Phantastes*, he discovered a quality that he later called “goodness” (*Surprised 220*) and “holiness” (*MacDonald* preface). As Lewis explained in his autobiography, it was a crucial moment for him because he was on the brink of sliding into a type of fantasy tinged with evil and insanity. In time, he appreciated how MacDonald invested his literature with the aspiration for good. MacDonald shared this objective with other contemporaries in literature and the visual arts. John Ruskin was his close friend. They met when MacDonald admired Ruskin's authoritative work, *Modern Painters*. Ruskin explains nobleness in this work: “The style is greater or less in exact proportion
to the nobleness of the interests and passions involved in the subject” (Painters 952). During MacDonald’s 40-year friendship with Ruskin, both of them wrote fairy tales with a nobleness of interest and passion. Ruskin’s fairy tale was The King of the Golden River, and MacDonald’s fairy tales included The Princess and the Goblin, The Princess and Curdie, and The Wise Woman. In MacDonald’s essay on imagination, he made his purpose clear: “It is necessary that all should understand and imagine the good; that all should begin, at least, to follow and find out God” (Orts 27). Inspired by MacDonald, Lewis went on to write the same noble type of fantasy in the Narnia Chronicles. A comparison of their stories is instructive.

From the first introduction of the child Princess Irene in the unabridged version of The Princess and the Goblin, MacDonald provides hints that nobility is not a matter of birth but of character. The story begins:

There was once a little princess who—
“But Mr. Author, why do you always write about princesses?”
“Because every little girl is a princess.”
“You will make them vain if you tell them that.”
“Not if they understand what I mean.”
“Then what do you mean?”
“What do you mean by a princess?
“The daughter of a king.”
“Very well, then every little girl is a princess, and there would be no need to say anything about it, except that she is always in danger of forgetting her rank, and behaving as if she had grown out of the mud.” (Complete 2045)

MacDonald illustrates in his stories that royalty is the potential of everyone, and it relies on inner qualities rather than external titles. This concept is reinforced in The Princess and the Goblin when Curdie’s mother says of Princess Irene, “She’s a good girl, I am certain, and that’s more than being a princess” (Complete 2122). Alternatively, Mr. Author says:

“But Lootie [the nurse] had very foolish notions concerning the dignity of a princess, not understanding that the truest princess is just the one who loves all her brothers and sisters best, and is most able to do them good by being humble toward them” (Complete 2127).
In fact, true royalty works backward—from the nobility of thought and deed to nobility of position. Thus, Irene may be recognized as a princess from birth, but the actual proof is how she interacts with others, like her nurse and the miner boy, Curdie. The same holds for Curdie. He confesses when he does wrong, and MacDonald observes:

“Here I should like to remark, for the sake of princes and princesses in general, that it is a low and contemptible thing to refuse to confess a fault, or even an error. If a true princess has done wrong, she is always uneasy until she has had an opportunity of throwing the wrongness away from her by saying: ‘I did it; and I wish I had not; and I am sorry for having done it.’ So you see there is some ground for supposing that Curdie was not a miner only, but a prince as well.” (Complete 2127)

If, as MacDonald claims, every child is the daughter or son of a king, then there must be more to nobility than heredity from one of the few monarchs on the earth.

MacDonald, who studied for the ministry and read his Bible in Greek and Hebrew, harkens to an older royalty of Adam and Eve, who were given dominion by the Lord of Creation, thus making all their descendants royal. Lewis echoes this idea when Aslan tells Prince Caspian “You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve. And that is both honor enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth” (Narnia 603). The shame comes because every person has the potential not only for royalty but also for degradation. In MacDonald’s sequel, The Princess and Curdie, the young miner is given the gift of perceiving the true inner person by simply touching the hand. The great-great-grandmother explains, “A beast does not know that he is a beast, and the nearer a man gets to being a beast the less he knows it” (Complete 5822). Lewis chose this sentence for his anthology of MacDonald quotes. For both authors, a person could grow less noble until they were essentially beasts. In The Chronicles of Narnia, Lewis describes the degradation of talking animals that lose the powers of speech, as in the Lapsed Bear of Stormness and the final judgment on Ginger, the cat. These stories were a warning to those pursuing the noble path.
THE COST

For both authors, the process of growing into nobility is costly. MacDonald’s story of *The Wise Woman* illustrates how growth in character is painful. In this tale, there is a spoiled princess, who: “as she grew, she grew worse, for she never tried to grow better” (*Complete 2754*). Her papa called for the wise woman to help, and MacDonald wrote:

“How very badly you have treated her!” the wise woman said. “Poor child!”
“Treated her badly?” gasped the king. “Haven’t we given her every mortal thing she wanted?”
“Surely,” said the wise woman. “What else could have all but killed her? You should have given her a few things of the other sort.” (*Complete 2755*)

The wise woman takes the princess away so that she can experience hardship until she learns to be a true princess in her heart—one who is kind to others and seeks ways to serve them. At first the princess revolts against the wise woman and will not accept her help. Through improving experiences, she begins to grow in the right direction and follows the wise woman, who gives her a series of trials. Only after failing miserably does she ask for help. The final trial is still difficult, but the wise woman helps her “see” in a new way that enables her to choose the right action. *The Wise Woman* was first published with the title *The Lost Princess: A Double Story*, because at the same time that the spoiled princess was growing better, another little girl was inserted into the castle but grew worse. She could not become a true princess during that tale, but as MacDonald points out, the story was not yet over. He explains as an aside that gives hope to those who have not yet faced the costliness of nobility: “And that is all my double story. How double it is, if you care to know, you must find out. If you think it is not finished—I never knew a story that was.” (*Complete Fantasy 1062*).

Lewis incorporates the painful process of growing into nobility in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Edmund learns that repentance comes before kingship, and redemption comes at an incredible price. Prince Caspian learns that a true prince must be brave and keep the faith. Eustace learns that he must die to his inner dragon, and only Aslan can un-dragon him. For MacDonald and Lewis, nobility comes through the suffering of growth.
One of the most interesting growth lessons occurs in *Prince Caspian*, when Lucy must lead the rest of the party by following Aslan, even though no one else can see him. She is a Queen of Narnia, yet the other royals hesitate to believe her (*Narnia* 542). Lewis is spinning a tale with a similar message to MacDonald’s story of Princess Irene, whom Curdie does not believe at first. The great-great-grandmother tells her, “You must be content not to be believed for a while. It is very hard to bear; but I have had to bear it, and shall have to bear it many a time yet.” (*Complete* 2117) Why do these noble children face this particular challenge? In both stories, they put their faith in an invisible ruler, a parallel to the Christian concept of faith in the unseen Creator God. Both authors believed that fairy tales and fiction held deeper meanings than a surface reading might reveal. Fantasy was not a temporary escape but a lasting journey toward the King and His kingdom. As MacDonald wrote in *The Elect Lady*: “The Lord of the Promise is the Lord of all true parables and all good fairy tales.” (*Complete* 6279) Lewis adopted this precept and, like MacDonald, used his stories to point to a higher reality, which required a nobility of faith.

A significant aspect of the costliness of growing in nobility is the wisdom of obedience to a higher law. This may provide an explanation for the “goodness” that Lewis admired and emulated in MacDonald’s work. In *The Silver Chair*, Aslan gives Jill signs to remember with the warning that “the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearances” (*Narnia* 802). However, Jill and Eustace grow careless of the signs and must learn that noble persons remember and obey. Their story illustrates the importance of bearing love and allegiance to the King by following his ways. In *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis described objective values that inform the conscience, which he called the *Tao* (32). He cited these values as another artifact of the reality of God because we perceive a type of eternal law outside of ourselves. Each person has an inner truth that convicts of right and wrong, and even when things look different, conscience is the guide to virtue. As a link to the value of conscience in stories, Lewis includes this excerpt from the story, *Sir Gibbie*, in his anthology of George MacDonald quotes because he wanted to emphasize the value of conscience. MacDonald wrote: “She was sorely troubled with what is, by huge discourtesy, called a bad conscience—being in
reality a conscience doing its duty so well that it makes the whole house uncomfortable” (MacDonald 152). Lewis would agree with his mentor that even in fiction, conscience is an authoritative force that can discern between good and evil and affirm the value of obedience. MacDonald’s Princess Irene knows that “a princess must do as she promises” (Complete 2142) and reminds her father of this principle. He replies, “Indeed she must, my child—except it be wrong.” (Complete 2142) Even in keeping promises, conscience should act to evaluate whether an action is right or wrong. True nobility recognizes that it is under the eternal law and follows it despite the cost.

In The Horse and His Boy, C. S. Lewis gave King Lune the opportunity to speak into what it means to be a nobleman. When his son questions whether it is right for him to become king after his father, the king replies, “The King’s under the law, for it’s the law makes him a king. Hast no more power to start away from thy crown than any sentry from his post” (Narnia 451). Again, the law is objective and extends to everyone, regardless of social status. Moreover, King Lune explains, “For this is what it means to be a king: to be first in every desperate attack and last in every desperate retreat, and when there’s hunger in the land (as must be now and then in bad years) to wear finer clothes and laugh louder over a scantier meal than any man in your land” (Narnia 451-452). The king reminds his son that leadership comes with an obligation to seek the welfare of others. Royalty follows the eternal law and leads through service and risk, obeying with wisdom even when signs do not look as expected.

For both authors, this nobility is not simple moralism, but an authentic desire to seek the holy God, and this process is aided by imagination. In MacDonald’s quote about noble dreams, he continued, “Such outgoing of the imagination is one with aspiration, and will do more to elevate above what is low and vile than all possible inculcations of morality.” (Orts 21) For MacDonald, instead of appealing to morals or ethics, the imagination appeals to the goodness and love of the Creator King, who designed His people to seek Him. Lewis explored a similar theme in Spenser’s Hymn of Love where he observed “the effects of love in producing nobility and knightly deeds.” (English Literature 471) The aspiration is toward God and holiness, and interestingly, both Lewis and MacDonald demonstrated the necessity of divine help. MacDonald’s lost princess has to ask the wise woman for help (Complete Fantasy 1048), and Aslan “likes to be asked,” as Fledge reminds the children in The Magician’s Nephew.
(Narnia 133). The challenges that are necessary for becoming noble are intimately associated with the nearness of God (or his representative) through suffering. The great-great-grandmother in MacDonald's stories weeps with Curdie as he suffers in the purifying rose fire. In The Chronicles of Narnia, Aslan dies on the Stone Table to redeem Edmund. He also walks with sighs beside Shasta and reveals that he was the one who guided the boy’s boat when he was cast out as an infant. Indeed, the aspiration for God may take one on a pathway that leads through death. In The Last Battle, Roonwit the Centaur says, “Remember that all worlds draw to an end and that noble death is a treasure which no one is too poor to buy.” (Narnia 1024) Rather than moralism, the goal of costly growth is to become a royal citizen of a kingdom.

“BECOMING” FOR A KINGDOM

MacDonald interpreted nobility as the process of becoming a citizen of God’s kingdom throughout his realistic fiction. Even for characters that were of noble birth, their sacrificial service was a more accurate indicator of their royalty than their birth certificate. These characters did not seek to be recognized for their hereditary rights but served faithfully according to their callings within an eternal kingdom. There is Malcolm, who lived as a poor fisherman and then a servant, though he was actually a marquis (The Marquis of Lossie). Sir Gibbie began life as a poor waif and remained humble even after being elevated (Sir Gibbie). C. S. Lewis's favorite realistic novel by MacDonald was What's Mine's Mine, in which two brothers, one of whom is the hereditary clan chief, care for their people despite the demise of the clan system in the face of the Highland Clearances. In their respective stories, none of these protagonists grasped for power or wealth even when their noble identity was clear. Instead, they served because they were becoming citizens of a larger kingdom. In Guild Court, MacDonald wrote:

“A man must do his duty whether he likes it or not, and whether it is appreciated or not. But if he can regard it as the will of God, a work not fallen upon him by chance, but given him to do, understanding that everything well done belongs to His kingdom, and everything badly done to the kingdom of darkness, surely even the irksomeness of his work will be no longer insuperable.” (Guild Court 115)
This passage summarizes a significant viewpoint that many of MacDonald’s characters demonstrate throughout their stories. In contradistinction to a pragmatic or materialist worldview, these men and women see their work in the larger perspective of God’s work. G. K. Chesterton wrote, “George MacDonald did really believe that people were princesses and goblins and good fairies, and he dressed them up as ordinary men and women. The fairy-tale was the inside of the ordinary story and not the outside” (Chesterton 11). The key to understanding the actual motive for these characters is to understand their identity. The artist John Ruskin also wrote about the importance of identity and how it is developed. In his “Of King’s Treasuries”, he encouraged nobility through personal growth and reading. He queried, “Do you ask to be the companion of nobles? Make yourself noble, and you shall be” (Sesame 10). Though the characters in MacDonald’s fiction might appear to be commonplace people, they are becoming noble men and women in reality, and they have an allegiance to a higher kingdom.

For MacDonald and Lewis, the allegiance to a higher kingdom meant service for others, often leading to social justice. In The Princess and Curdie and in Prince Caspian, it is the true princes and princesses who stand up for righteousness and save their kingdoms. Curdie must battle a populace that has degraded to the point that the king is powerless and injustice rules. Prince Caspian must battle a usurping tyrant who has oppressed the Old Narnians. MacDonald and Lewis believed that people are connected to the kingdom. In large and small ways, actions matter. In fact, social justice requires not only saving others but reminding them of who they are. MacDonald wrote: “I have seen little princesses behave like the children of thieves and lying beggars, and that is why they need to be told they are princesses. And that is why, when I tell a story of this kind, I like to tell it about a princess.” (Complete 2045) Lewis also used stories to remind his readers who they were. Prince Rilian, under enchantment, forgot his identity, and Jill and Eustace help break the spell. Then the witch tries to get them back in her power and almost succeeds, for as Lewis observed, “the more enchanted you get, the more you feel that you are not enchanted at all.” (Narnia 902) It is the honest Marsh-wiggle, Puddleglum, who demonstrates how to endure against false royalty when he burns his foot to clear the witch’s incantation. Suddenly, the prince and the children know who they are. Prince
Rilian vanquishes the witch and saves the kingdom as he is freed for his natural vocation to bring justice.

For both Lewis and MacDonald, nobility meant not only pursuing justice but also acknowledging the position of belonging to a kingdom. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Aslan is the son of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea and the true heir to the throne. He rules by the Deeper Magic when he sacrifices himself for the traitor Edmund. He then appoints the Pevensie children as kings and queens in Narnia. He has redeemed them, and they belong to his kingdom now. In *The Magician’s Nephew*, which tells the story of the creation of Narnia, the first royalty are King Frank and Queen Helen, whom Aslan selects to rule Narnia. Frank was a cab driver and his wife a country girl—not considered royalty in England, but in Narnia their nobility shines forth. Their character has grown already, and Aslan makes them King and Queen by virtue of his authority as the son of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. When the Pevensies return home, they are told by Professor Kirke: “Once a King in Narnia, always a King in Narnia,” (*Narnia* 292) and he should know because he is Digory, now grown up to be Lord Digory in Narnia. Lewis and MacDonald wove stories of royalty and kingdoms to awaken their readers to the potential in every person. By blending fairy tales with an aspiration for nobility, they created a genre of fantasy that continues to draw a faithful readership.

**CONCLUSION**

In George MacDonald’s writing, C. S. Lewis discovered Gibbie’s meaningful imagination that reaches the heart. In particular, their shared concept of nobility opened the possibilities of the fairy tale and fantasy genre to generations of readers seeking goodness and truth. By expanding the meaning of nobility to those with noble character, they placed their readers inside the world of fairy tales as potential princes and princesses. They also presented the potential danger of evil as man or beast could grow less noble. In their realms of fantasy, growth was necessary to become noble, and accepting the costliness of the process of maturity was virtuous. Their fairy tales reached beyond moralism to the act of becoming noble. The aspiration was for the King and His work, which meant that social justice followed naturally. It also meant that everyone needed to be awakened to their identity as belonging to the kingdom. MacDonald and
Lewis continue to remind readers of their true nobility in a way that makes them ache to know: is this true? As MacDonald wrote, “the imagination, seeking the ideal in everything, will elevate them to their true and noble service.” (Orts 21) Their tales inspire their fellow sons and daughters to seek the invisible kingdom and move beyond the rational mind to understand more deeply. Both authors used their stories to encourage everyone to dream noble dreams and go “further up and further in.”

Works Cited


BIONOTES

Joyce McPherson, PhD., teaches English at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and is also the author of biographies for children, including “Beyond the Land of Narnia: The Story of C.S. Lewis.” She is currently writing a children’s biography of George MacDonald. She has published in the Victorian Institute Journal
and The English Journal and has contributed chapters to books on Victorian Fiction and Containing Childhood as well as presented for the International Conference of the Children’s Literature Association.

E-mail: mcpclan@epbfi.com