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"He That Will Be a Hero, Will Barely Be a Man":

Other-Worldliness as the Ascent to Spiritual Maturity in *Phantastes*

Before George MacDonald became the 'grandfather' of Modern Fantasy,[1] he served as a minister at the Trinity Congregational Church in Arundel; however, influenced by German Romanticism and the works of Novalis, MacDonald's place at the pulpit was scrutinized by doctrinal anxieties steeped in the tenets of predestination and limited atonement. According to Michael Phillips, MacDonald's spiritual vision was "unsettling" to the working-class population, leading them to accuse him of heresy. Their inability to awaken to the loving God MacDonald preached about resulted in his resignation in 1853.

MacDonald was no stranger to ethereal concepts, expressing his unorthodox theology in his fiction, as seen in his 1858 novel *Phantastes*. Subversive in nature, MacDonald's other-worldliness plays on gendered concepts, alluded to in the novel's subtitle: "A Faerie Romance for Men and Women." *Phantastes* is what John Pridmore calls 'transfiguring fantasy,' work which "cross[es] the frontiers into *faerie*, promising an end which it holds in abeyance, engaging

[1] While some refer to MacDonald as the Father of Modern Fantasy, many scholars attribute this title to J.R.R. Tolkien. Kirsten Jeffrey Johnson calls MacDonald the 'grandfather' of Modern Fantasy in her biographical introduction, and I have elected to use this title to consider Madeleine L'Engle's designation of MacDonald as "the grandfather of us all." (See back cover of the Wm. B. Eerdmans edition of *Phantastes* published in 2000).

the subject of the narrative and the reader of the narrative alike in a common quest of the coming good" (54).

As such, MacDonald's bifocal vision permeated his works,[2] evoking the dual existence of the temporal and the eternal. For G. K. Chesterton, MacDonald was "a true mystic to whom the supernatural was natural" (qtd. in Gabelman 38), and MacDonald's mythopoeic other worlds famously baptized C. S. Lewis' imagination. At the beginning of the novel Anodos embodies a (traditionally masculine) rationalist worldview. As Anodos leaves Victorian England to journey through Fairy Land, which functions as MacDonald's other world and Anodos' secondary one, he must be awakened by childlike wonder, a stereotypically feminine image of humanity's submission to Christ. In order to return to his Primary World as a true man,[3] one "that will be a hero, [but] will barely be a man," (*Phantastes* 166) Anodos must hold the nature of his Secondary World above his Primary, effectively coming of age to the cosmic reality. According to MacDonald, for Anodos to rise or to be fully human, one must not only be morally educated, but spiritually mature. In *Phantastes* MacDonald represents other-worldliness in the transformative power of childlike imagination as the ascent to spiritual maturity.

From the outset, Fairy Land immerses Anodos in a world where even time is ordered by the cosmos, as "night is the fairies' day, and the moon their sun" (12). Not only does Anodos begin to accept the existence of fairies and believe in their power, but Anodos learns that he must have fairy blood in him to be in Fairy Land. The Victorian rationalist is concerned with the

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[2] "Bifocal" is a term literary critic Stephen Prickett uses to describe MacDonald's vision. See page 20 of "The Two Worlds of George MacDonald" for more information.

[3] MacDonald scholar Kirsten Jeffrey Johnson—who is quoted later in this essay—capitalizes "Primary World" in her PhD thesis on MacDonald, citing Tolkien's utilization of capitalization to distinguish the term from the common noun. See page xxiii ("Primary World") and page 8 ("Secondary World") of *Rooted in all its Story* for further details.

material concreteness of reality, devoid of the fluidity in the cosmos. At the beginning of chapter 9, everything in Anodos' undertaking to the palace of Fairy Land "existed for [him] in its relation to [his] attendant" (58). His attendant, the shadow influence of rationalism, directly changes Anodos' worldview from the first day of their journey together. When a tired Anodos lies down on the grass, crushing flowers beneath him, the ones he crushes will rise again in the sunlight, but the flowers under his shadow will die, and be "hopeless of any resurrection" (59). Influenced by Wordsworth, MacDonald believed in the connection between God and His creation found in Nature. The shadow's destruction of the flowers warns of rationalism's ability to stunt spiritual growth.

Anodos does not heed this warning, only "shudder[ing], and hasten[ing] away with sad forebodings, and instead falls prey to his shadow's disenchantment of Fairy Land (59). Before Anodos reaches the palace of Fairy Land, he encounters four individuals—the fairy-child, the knight, the host's daughter, and the little maiden—all representing the childlike wonder MacDonald held in high regard. Like Fairy Land itself, Anodos' shadow has a transformative effect on the one inhabited by it, and this is most evident in Anodos' meeting with the fairy-child, who in the darkness of Anodos' shadow turns into a "common-place boy," his "wonderous toys" now a "multiplying-glass and a kaleidoscope" (60). Furthermore, Anodos' shadow misleads his intuition as in addition to altering the appearance of the host's daughter, it makes Anodos feel that he can no longer trust the knight. A significant precursor to Anodos' moral education is his meeting with the maiden and her glowing globe. Unlike the others, the shadow did not change the maiden, but it did possess Anodos to grab the globe with both hands in a desire to know more about it, thereby breaking it. This destruction is symbolic: "Put simply, how a man reacts to art reveals the quality of his manhood: … if he seeks to take possession of the art, whether

intellectually of [sic] physically, then he is equally foolish and also overcome by his own pride" (Pionke 34).

This pursuit of possession continues to be displayed in the intellectual greed and erotic obsession in Cosmo's story. In the palace of Fairy Land's library, Anodos is introduced to Cosmo von Wehrstahl and the lady in the mirror. Cosmo, a student at the University of Prague is described as "a poet without words" (MacDonald, *Phantastes* 86). Despite "prid[ing] himself upon the independence that poverty gives" (85), Cosmo has a penchant for knowledge, as demonstrated in his desire to learn more about the mirror. When the lady in the mirror appears, Cosmo's obsession immediately changes his surroundings, as the reclusive scholar who wanted no one to know where he lives rearranges the room to the lady's preferences. As his "secret treasure" (93), Cosmo can only see the lady in the mirror through a glass darkly (85), a biblical allusion that MacDonald inserts into Anodos' narration of the story. Cosmo's love "*withered* into passion" (94) as he becomes consumed with possessing his ideal. Cosmo must make the ultimate sacrifice by breaking the mirror to set her free; to truly love her he must let her go and to be free to live a life according to the ideal he must relinquish it.

As Kirsten Jeffrey Johnson states, "If all elements of the story are entirely foreign, it cannot have a mythopoeic effect upon the reader. The reader must be able to enter the story, to be 'inside' it, before there is a possibility of returning to the Primary World somehow transformed" ("George MacDonald and Mythopoesis" 27). Anodos is aware of the parallel, remarking, "Of course, while I read it, I was Cosmo, and his history was mine" (MacDonald, *Phantastes* 84), signalling the transformative effect of fantasy. Since "True myth offers a glimpse of a transcendent, permanent world" (Hein 17), Anodos learns that his ideal is higher than the beauty of the Marble Lady.

But other-worldliness, while strange and foreign at times, is not chaos, nor pure confusion. As Anodos acclimates to Fairy Land, he comes to the realization that "[I]t is no use trying to account for things in Fairy Land; and one who travels there soon learns to forget the very idea of doing so, and takes everything as it comes; like a child, who, being in a chronic condition of wonder, is surprised at nothing" (MacDonald, *Phantastes* 24). However, other-worldliness is not happiness either, rather functioning in a state of joy that is dependent on sorrow. Anodos experiences the power of imagination MacDonald covets, in that "The beauty may be plainer in it than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairytale would give no delight" ("Fantastic Imagination").

Anodos notices the similarities in appearance between himself and the "resplendent knight" (MacDonald, *Phantastes* 160), even seeing his reflection in the knight's shining armour. This is who Anodos will become without moral education that develops spiritual maturity. Like Cosmo ignoring his unease with the shop owner, Anodos follows the knight instead of overtaking him to pass. Notably, Anodos is convicted that "the knight and [his shadow] were one" (161). When he meets the little maiden again, who is now a beautiful woman, she thanks him for breaking her globe because she does not need it anymore. Anodos is ashamed: "She was uplifted, by sorrow and well-doing, into a region I could hardly hope ever to enter" (165). Just as Cosmo frees Princess von Hohenweiss, Anodos does not need the Marble Lady to feel content and this submission to other-worldliness is key to his resurrection and fulfillment of purpose back in his Primary World.

Hence, MacDonald's "fairytales are not like so many intended to convey morals but to awaken humanity to the cosmic adventure that is all around them, to reveal the miraculous real in their midst" (Gabelman 38). Without other-worldliness, Anodos would be forever stagnant,

bound by the state of disenchantment rationalism produces. Therefore, having humbled himself after his second encounter with the singing maiden and subsequently turning away from the tower and stripping himself of his armour, Anodos must "return, for a time, to this life, this earth, but [he is] aware that the end will be light, not darkness" (Lochhead 67). Anodos' sacrifices are not easy to make, as he forsakes everything he has ever known when he enters Fairy Land. He must die—both literally to return to his Primary World and figuratively to himself—to come into his manhood.

One might argue that MacDonald does not rely on subversive feminine imagery in his other world, with Sir Percivale echoing the chivalric code of Arthurian romance that Anodos must follow in order to mature. Yes, it is indeed true that Anodos' moral education is not merely female iconography because not only is Anodos saved by Sir Percivale, but he even serves as Sir Percivale's squire despite discovering that 'his' Marble Lady is in love with the knight. And yet, even though the female seductress exists in *Phantastes* as the Maid of the Alder-tree, the singing maiden spurns spiritual maturity in Anodos. As Roderick McGillis argues, "[T]he type of male MacDonald constructs in his fairy tales is one in need not only of the instruction of women, but also of something we might think of as a feminine side, a nurturing side" (97). The nurturing of Anodos' imagination and childlike wonder causes him to abandon his masculine rationalist point of view.

When MacDonald gave a sermon called "The Higher Faith" on John 20.29,[4] he had not yet written *Phantastes*, but his protagonist can be seen in Thomas, Jesus' doubting disciple. As

[4] MacDonald cites "JOHN xx.29" as the epigraph to his sermon. The version is as follows: *Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.*

fully God and man, Christ did not hesitate to make the ultimate sacrifice, and MacDonald does not want the believer to "wait for the other world" as it is "the foolishness of a worldly and lazy spirit" to do so ("Higher Faith"). Like Thomas, who did not believe in Christ's resurrection until he saw the holes in his saviour's hands, Anodos does not know the truth until he no longer understands the world around him at all. Anodos rejoices in the loss of his shadow, and so transformed is he that he refers to the experience after his death in Fairy Land as "blessedness" (*Phantastes* 184). As Anodos rises to the higher faith of that other world, he returns to earth as a new man, "blessed [because] a wonder is not a fable, … who [is] content to ask, 'Is it like Him?'" ("Higher Faith"). Through the loss of the self in the ideal, fantasy shines dawn-like hope, illuminating the sacred beauties of this world that will not even compare to the glories of the next.

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