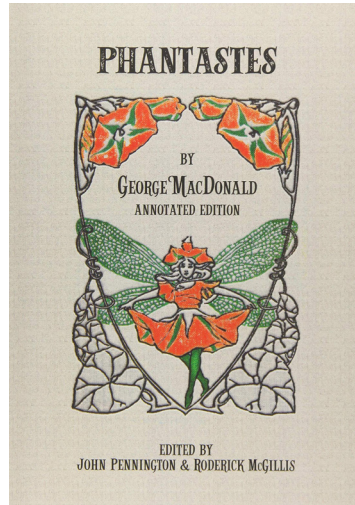


Book Reviews

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George MacDonald. *Phantastes: Annotated Edition*. Edited by John Pennington and Roderick McGillis (Hamden, CT: Winged Lion Press, 2017).

Once again, John Pennington and Roderick McGillis have brought out an erudite, scholarly edition of a beloved George MacDonald text. The pair did the same thing with *At the Back of the North Wind* in 2011, and it looks as if *Lilith* may soon follow. All MacDonald scholars should rejoice at this edition of *Phantastes*: Pennington and McGillis are giants in the field of MacDonald studies with many years of teaching, research and writing experience between them, and they pack a wealth of learning and contextual material into their critical editions. There have been several attempts at annotated or critical editions of *Phantastes* and other MacDonald fantasy works in the past with varying degrees of success, but Pennington and McGillis are the gold standard: meticulous, authoritative, comprehensive. And yet, part of me wonders if MacDonald would be rejoicing quite as loudly at this new substantially appended edition.



The scholar in me is delighted and enthusiastic: finally, a reliable version of the text that I do not have to check against a PDF version of the first edition for every quotation. Finally, an edition that collects all the early reviews of the book up to 1924, and reprints significant portions of primary source material such as *The Faerie Queene*, Fletcher's *The Purple Island*, Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot*. Finally, an edition that annotates all of MacDonald's obscure epigraphs and allusions and points me in the right direction when I want to find a reference quickly. Pennington and McGillis have loaded this edition with a lengthy introduction, extensive and wide-ranging notes, multiple appendices that help contextualise the book, a detailed bibliography of recent criticism, a chronology of MacDonald's life, and a discussion by Jan Susina of Arthur Hughes's 1905 illustrations to the text together with reproductions. The scholar in me could (and would like to) niggle with this or that comment in the introduction or notes, but overall the commentary is incisive and elucidating, particularly in the way it

suggests possible sources or comparable contemporary texts. The aesthetics of the book are also appealing: an attractive William-Morris-style cover image, reasonable margins, thick paper, a softback spine that you do not have to break to read, and easily readable font.

Some other part of me, however—perhaps the Romantic or Wordsworth's child within the man—is less pleased, and even a little dismayed. This part of me is uneasy about the intrusion of the paratextual apparatus that surrounds, interrupts, and weighs down the original text (roughly doubling the word count). Where MacDonald's text creates mystery, uncertainty and puzzlement, the editorial insertions seek to resolve the reader's hermeneutical anxiety. Where MacDonald encourages his readers to be like Anodos taking "everything as it comes, like a child, [...] in a chronic condition of wonder," this edition seems to train them to approach the text like a critic, in a chronic condition of cataloguing (24). MacDonald in his famous essay "The Fantastic Imagination" (included, in an appendix) demurred even from defining a fairy tale (let alone a symbol within one), instead telling his questioner to "read Undine" and various other fairy tales so that then "you will see what is a fairytale" (324). This edition of *Phantastes* confidently elaborates what every image and symbol represents, often with the ontological certainty of predication. We are told, for instance, in the introduction that the key to Anodos's cabinet "is the key to self-understanding," and that his fairy grandmother "is the embodiment of Nature" and that the marble lady "is the Romantic lady who symbolizes the poet's soul," and that the ogress in the Church of Darkness "is a sophist," and that Anodos's shadow "is the analytical faculty that dispels poetry," and that the episode with the goblins "is inescapably Freudian," and that the grandmother on the island "is the maternal spirit of nature," and so forth (vii, xii, xv, xvi, xxi. emphasis added). This feels like the kind of certitude that MacDonald constantly warns against and sedulously avoids himself. At times, this edition seems to approach one of the most ambiguous, allusive and elusive texts in the fantasy corpus like an algebraic equation (shadow=analytic faculty, grandmother=nature, beech tree=x, solve for x). On some level, Pennington and McGillis seem aware of the dissonance of their approach with MacDonald's, for in their "Assessment" at the end of the introduction they note how "MacDonald's symbols are purposefully vague" and that "this difficulty is deliberate"(xxvii). It nonetheless feels in a strange way like the editors and the author are at odds in this book: MacDonald strives for mystery, polyvalence and suggestiveness, while the editors seek clarity, definition and certainty.

As a scholar and long-time reader of MacDonald, I value and rather enjoy such penning of certitudes: it is always useful to see someone else's reading of the text, particularly two such experienced, knowledgeable interpreters. Moreover, this is one of the most compelling and convincing readings of the text to date, backed up with assiduous research and seminar-room

experience of student queries, and as such this edition should be in every university library and on every MacDonald scholar's shelf. However, my inner-Romantic would not want this to be the text that a first-time reader encountered. Ironically, it is perhaps too helpful, too certain, making it too easy to pin down symbols and episodes. *Phantastes* dramatizes the experience of reading: it puts the reader at the centre of its narrative labyrinth and turns them loose to find their own meanings—even meanings MacDonald never intended, even meanings this edition does not evince. As MacDonald says in "The Fantastic Imagination," "it may be better that you should read your meaning into it" for "that might be a higher operation of your intellect than the mere reading of mine out of it: your meaning may be superior to mine" (326). It would be hard for a first-time reader to resist merely reading Pennington and McGillis's authoritative meanings out of this edition.

In other words, the scholar in me can confidently pronounce that this is a good critical edition, while the Romantic in me worries—tentatively, hesitatingly—about the general enterprise of making critical editions like this one. *Phantastes* might be particularly prone to murder by dissection. For that reason, my inner-MacDonald hopes that new readers do not find this edition till later. This part of me hopes the next generation of *Phantastes* readers will find slightly dog-eared copies of that Eerdmans paperback with the pulp cover in attics of used book shops, or long-forgotten first editions in their grandmothers's libraries, or Everyman 1915 editions in bookstalls at train stations. Failing that, though, the scholar in me (who demands the last word) recommends this edition in the highest terms.

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