

1-1-2002

## Of “Frustrate Desire”: Feminist Self-Postponement in George MacDonald’s Lilith

John Pennington

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind>

---

### Recommended Citation

Pennington, John (2002) "Of “Frustrate Desire”: Feminist Self-Postponement in George MacDonald’s Lilith," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 21 , Article 3.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol21/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact [sarah.titus@snc.edu](mailto:sarah.titus@snc.edu).

## Of “Frustrate Desire”: Feminist Self-Postponement in George MacDonald’s *Lilith*

John Pennington

“She [Christina Rossetti] was replete with the spirit of self-postponement”  
- W. M. Rossetti

In the influential *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar begin their study with two epigraphs: one from Laura Riding’s “Eve’s Side of It,” the other from George MacDonald’s adult fantasy *Lilith*:

The strife of thought, accusing and excusing, began afresh, and gathered fierceness. The soul of Lilith lay naked to the torture of pure interpenetrating inward light. She began to moan, and sigh deep sighs, then murmur as holding colloquy with a dividual self: her queendom was no longer whole; it was divided against itself . . . . At length she began what seemed a tale about herself, in a language so strange, and in forms so shadowy, that I could but here and there understand a little. (viii)

Gilbert and Gubar claim that the Lilith myth:

represents the price women have been told they must pay for attempting to define themselves. And it is a terrible price: cursed both because she is a character who “got away” and because she dared to usurp the essentially literary authority implied by the act of naming, Lilith is locked into a vengeance (child-killing) which can only bring her more suffering (the killing of her own children). (35)

They view Lilith as a metaphor for “the problems of female authorship and female authority” that represents the following:

a life of feminine submission, of “contemplative purity,” is a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of “significant action,” is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story. (36)

Lilith’s terrible story is given that monstrous pen by MacDonald in *Lilith* (1895), a novel that has created interpretative debates amongst MacDonald critics, for the myth seems too expansive for his fantastic

imagination. Robert Lee Wolff in *The Golden Key*, for example, calls the novel “feeble, ambiguous, and inconsistent in its imagery, full of senile hatreds and resentments, and the most violent in its aggressions of all MacDonald’s works” (332), concluding that “MacDonald has muddled his own symbols and clouded the entire cosmology that he has been trying to construct” (363). However, William Raeper, much more positive about the book in general, argues that MacDonald “was always dogged by this sinister figure” (366) but “was able to integrate his unconscious [end of page 26] anger and fear into a powerful myth, for at last even Lilith, MacDonald’s own image of the betraying woman, does lie down in the House of Death and seek salvation” (383). And Roderick McGillis admits: “In short, *Lilith* is a troubling book” (47); Lilith becomes “the woman who refuses to be written” (51). But *Lilith*, he suggests, is “a great book . . . because of the subversive power of its mysterious images” (53).

*Lilith* is a troubling book; it is also a problematic book, one haunted by the mysterious image of that metamorphosing character, Lilith. Mr Vane, the narrator of the fantasy novel, recognises the difficulty of “reading” Lilith. When seeing Lilith as Princess of the evil city of Bulika, Vane states: “My frame quivered with conflicting consciousnesses, to analyse which I had no power. I was simultaneously attracted and repelled: each sensation seemed either” (132). Such contradictory impulses of attraction and repulsion of Lilith propel the fantasy novel and become the central metaphor for our reading response to *Lilith*. As Vane journeys through the magical realm, he admits that he “was lost in a space larger than imagination” (33), a space that represents the tensions of frustrate desire. In a sense, the Lilith myth is too expansive, too complex, too contradictory for MacDonald’s imagination: Lilith’s “dividual self”—at once repulsive yet fascinating, dangerous yet enticing, horrific yet erotic—overpowers the narrative space in such an aggressive way that MacDonald must eventually silence the temptress by imprisoning her in his Christian myth of redemption. He places her in a room of his own, but the narrative finally is unable to silence her completely, for her self is dissolved only to haunt the fringes of the novel, an absence that is always present, that is *vocalised* clearly in the narrative. That attempted silencing, in turn, suggests that MacDonald struggled, like Christina Rossetti in *Goblin Market*, with the fear and fascination of temptation and fall, finally “resolving” this tension via Christian redemption. Helena Michie argues that:

absence seems to be the primary motif in fiction of the period; the Victorian novel is haunted by a series of dim shadowy figures that

hover on the margins of canonical texts. They are warnings in whispers, an implied contrast to heroines; like the governess, they hint at alternate tragic endings—they partake of none of the physicality which, in turn, haunts the Victorian canon. (72)

MacDonald, we shall see, engages the shadowy Lilith myth to comment upon the conflicting temptations of desire that challenge societal unity at the expense of self. Thus Lilith is condemned, like Laura and Lizzy in *Goblin Market*, to “self-postponement”—she must sacrifice her feminine desire for self to the Christian myth of selflessness, ultimately denying her power as woman to that transcendental patriarchal signifier, God. *Lilith* is a fascinating novel that mirrors MacDonald’s own “frustrate desire” over the fleshly desires and [27] Christian goodness, a mirror that reflects a tension indicative of the Victorian period.

The binary polarities that frame the narrative are Blakeian—innocence versus experience—and these polarities represent those dichotomous feminine images that Gilbert and Gubar define as the *angel* and the *monster*—Lilith, interestingly enough, “both the first woman and the first monster” (35). Thus Lilith, one can argue, is trapped by her divided self—the pull towards angelic figures (represented by Eve, Mara and Lona) and Lilith’s demand to remain her own monstrous Self (represented by shadow, worm and vampire). In *Woman and the Demon*, Nina Auerbach argues that the woman as demon is:

that disruptive spiritual energy which also engorges the divine.

The demon is first of all the woman’s familiar, the source of her ambiguous holiness, but it is also the popular—and demonic—imagination that endowed her with this holiness in defiance of three cherished Victorian institutions: the family, the patriarchal state, and God the father. (1)

The demon, suggests Auerbach, provides “new icons, new shapes for the self, new sources of belief” (2). Bram Dijkstra contends that “the search for woman as the lily, the paragon of virtue, had carried within itself the discovery of Lilith, of woman as snake, the inevitable dualistic opposite of the image of virginal purity” (216). Thus Lilith becomes the negative transformation of female purity. Erich Neumann finds Lilith symbolic of “spiritual-psychic death” (74) that can become one of “the forerunners of inspiration and vision and so manifest . . . on a road leading to salvation, through extinction of death to rebirth” (76). Lilith certainly is one such demon, for she denies family (abandoning and eventually killing her daughter, Lona), denies the patriarchal state (refusing domestic life as Adam’s wife), and denies God (refusing to be controlled by her maker and His

myth). Yet MacDonald suggests at the end of the fantasy that she will transform into something good.

What may be the most fascinating demonic subversion in the novel, however, is Lilith's defence of the individual Self, her refusal to succumb to the power of others. Until the end of the fantasy, Lilith maintains her own identity in spite of and in defiance of patriarchal control and the submissive women who are willing to become passive angels. As a demon, Lilith thwarts angelic imprisonment for monstrous freedom. Thus Lilith becomes a contradictory figure in *Lilith*, a true Blakean figure that marries heaven and hell, for as Blake tells us: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (pl. 3).

Early in the novel, Vane follows Mr. Raven, who is also Adam, upstairs to the room with the mirror, which becomes the portal to the alternative world. Of course, a mirror symbolises the self, but it also represents the Other, the double, [28] and, like Alice's looking-glass, this mirror reflects an alternative world of possibility where "all was vague and uncertain" (8). Immediately after entering the mirror world, Vane writes: "I did not know myself . . . As for the name I went by in my own world, I had forgotten it, and did not care to recall it, for it meant nothing" (11). Vane is willing to abandon his very essence in this new world: he represents the path MacDonald's characters generally are to take—abandonment of self for the great good of redemption through death. But Lilith veers off this path. She is Self, but she is also confined by MacDonald's world view that demands relinquishment of Self for the Spirit—which is reflected in Adam and God. Lilith is caught in the process of "feminist self-postponement," which Kathleen Blake defines as "the evasion of one pattern of self-limitation [which] involves the imposition of another" (ix). In the *angel-monster* opposition, Lilith is confronted with the feminist self-postponement double-bind: she refuses to lose Self and become the passive angel represented by Eve, but by not embracing the angelic, she must remain a monster if she wants to continue to live and be her own Self, thus doomed to kill her daughter Lona.

What compels Lilith to live in the world of Self is *desire*—or more precisely, *frustrated desire*—which ultimately fragments her Self in the fantasy. Vane's first vision of Lilith depicts the angel-monster dichotomy as Lilith transforms from "angelic" beauty to monsters before his eyes:

She was beautiful but with such a pride at once and misery on her countenance that I could hardly believe what yet I saw . . . Suddenly pressing both hands on her heart, she fell to the ground, and the mist rose from her and melted in the air. I ran to her. But

she began to writhe in such torture that I stood aghast A moment more and her legs, hurrying from her body, sped away serpents. From her shoulders fled her arms as in terror, serpents also. Then something flew up from her like a bat, and when I looked again, she was gone . . . Behind me rose a waste and sickening cry, as of frustrate desire. (50)

Vane later finds Lilith in a trance wasting away; he warms the cold, naked body with his body; feeds her; and bathes her in the warm waters of a stream, but each night he has unsettling dreams:

Every time I slept, I dreamed of finding a wounded angel, who, unable to fly, remained with me until at last she loved me and would not leave me; and every time I woke, it was to see, instead of an angel-visage with lustrous eyes, the white, motionless, wasted face upon the couch: (104)

Vane desires to possess and control Lilith, the same goal Adam has for her, yet Lilith is unyielding, transforming from angel to monster in order to maintain her Self. She is ironically labelled a wounded angel, but more precisely she is a [29] vampire, whom Vane describes as follows: “Her mouth wore a look of satisfied passion; she wiped from it a streak of red,” her “thirst demoniac” (138). Thus she transforms into the white leech and sucks the blood from Vane, nourishing her Self back to strength, her vampire or succubus self-symbolic of sexual desire, but desire that is more auto-erotic—Lilith lives solely for herself, dependent upon no one. Before fleeing Vane, Lilith tells him: “We must understand each other! . . . You have done me the two worst of wrongs—compelled me to live, and put me to shame: neither of them can I pardon!” (111). Vane remarks later: “Could such beauty as I saw, and such wickedness as I suspected, exist in the same person?” (133).

Lilith, caught in the throes of self-postponement, cannot be forced to live or die; she cannot be beholden to anyone but herself. And this makes her in the eyes of Adam and his philosophy a monster. She later tells Vane: “I . . . live to live on. Old age is to you a horror; to me it is a dear desire: the older we grow, the nearer we are to our perfection” (134). Of course, Lilith professes the opposite doctrine to that which Adam or Mr Raven preaches in the House of Death, where death is the great sleep that leads to redemption and the true beginning of life. Thus as Adam encourages Vane to die into life, Lilith desires life at the expense of death, which is a relinquishing of Self to the creator, God, who gives Life under His own terms. As self-creator, Lilith tempts Vane to embrace her desire; she now wants to “create” Vane in her image and control

him:

But you must satisfy my desire or set me free—prove yourself priceless or worthless! To satisfy the hunger of my love, you must follow me, looking for nothing, not gratitude, not even pity in return!—follow and find me, and be content with merest presence, with scantest forbearance! (135)

“What you have made me is yours!” taunts Lilith to Vane. “I will repay you as never yet did woman! My power, my beauty, my love are your own: take them” (136). And Vane tells us that “for a moment I was tempted to love a lie” (136).

Lilith’s desire to live contributes to her self-postponement, for to live she must remain a passionate monster or deny desire and become a passive angel. Leo Bersani, in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*, argues that the nineteenth century novel is torn between two selves: the socially defined self and the free, universal transcendent self; consequently, most realistic fiction of the century tried to posit the myth of the *coherent self*, where “a rigidly ordered self contributes to a pervasive cultural ideology of the self which serves the established social order” (56). “Desire makes being problematic,” argues Bersani. “[T]he notion of a coherent unified self is threatened by the discontinuous, logically incompatible images of a desiring imagination” (84). According to Bersani, this desire is primarily subversive in two ways: “Desire [30] can subvert social order; it can also disrupt novelistic order. The nineteenth-century novel is haunted by the possibility of these subversive movements, and it suppresses them with a brutality both shocking and eminently logical” (66). Of course, MacDonald abandoned the realistic novel for his final book, returning to the more expansive and subversive fantastical mode that he began his career with in *Phantastes*. (1858).

The “genre” choice is calculated. Rosemary Jackson argues that fantasy “is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss” (3). To Jackson, fantasy can “*tell of*” or “*expel*” (3) this desire, which makes the mode or genre inherently oxymoronic:

The movement from the first to the second of these functions, from expression as manifestation to expression as expulsion, is one of the recurrent features of fantasy narratives, as it tells of the impossible attempt to realise desire, to make visible the invisible and to discover absence. (4)

By uncovering this absence of desire in the guise of Lilith, and by attempting to expel this very desire, MacDonald opens up a very subversive can of narrative and theological worms. (Remember, Lilith at one point in the narrative is a

leech.) Even in the fantasy mode, where an author has the freedom to tell of taboo desire, Lilith seems too powerful for the narrative to control. As a character of desire, Lilith is, in a sense, coherent self-postponement, for a coherent or unified self would imprison her, as Bersani argues, “within a psychology which [the character’s] creator has developed from the society being contested, a psychology of the coherently structured and. significantly expressive self” (59-60). Lilith then has an “ontological slipperiness” where her being is “always somewhere else” (198). She cannot be controlled by the thematic centre (redemption by God) and the authorial creator (MacDonald); she slips around throughout the novel, transforming into various others, feeding off Vane. Or as Bersani argues: “Desire . . . is essentially vampiristic”; “the fate of all fascination with the self as the other—the fate of a radical open-endedness of being—is a kind of restless immortality” (212).

This restless immortality is what Lilith craves but cannot have, for she must be silenced and made to sleep and rise again, ultimately imprisoned by her creator. She is trapped in MacDonald’s patriarchal Christian universe. The fascination with *Lilith*, then, is with the ending—or the supposed closure to Lilith’s character—which forces MacDonald to “tame” the monster thematically and structurally in the fantasy. Two key scenes reflect this tension that MacDonald is unable (and maybe unwilling) to resolve. The first scene concerns Adam and Lilith when they “meet” in Vane’s house after he climbs a tree back into the “real” narrative world. Adam reads from a fragmented manuscript which is Lilith’s story in her own words. McGillis points out that “Adam reads this [31] book in order to reassume control over his first wife Lilith, to put an end to her protean behaviour . . . The book which contains her words is used to control her” (46). Adam tells Vane of Lilith’s history: God “brought me an angelic splendour to be my wife: there she lies! For her first thought was *power*; she counted it slavery to be one with me, and bear children for Him who gave her being” (154). Lilith’s designated role is to be an angelic mother-figure. But Lilith rebels and is sent off into the night world. Adam gets a new wife, Eve, whom Adam describes as follows: “but my Eve repented, and is now beautiful as never was woman or angel, while her groaning, travailing world is the nursery of our Father’s children” (155). Eve is reduced to a beautiful object—an angel—whose primary function is as child bearer. Adam even tells Vane: “for even Lilith shall be saved by her childbearing” (154). Upon hearing Adam, Lilith, who has been hearing all this as a Persian cat, transforms into “a woman once more” and says, “I will not repent. I will drink the blood of thy child” (156). In this scene the self-postponement that Lilith finds herself facing is clear: to remain her own



Self, or repent and become a wife/mother/angel in the service of Adam and God. The other central scene entails Mara, Adam and Eve's daughter and "double" of Lona, Lilith's daughter whom Lilith has killed. Mara attempts to get Lilith to repent. Mara, however, represents bitterness and lives in the House of Sorrow, which may represent the loss of female identity—it is bitter and sad, as Rossetti's Laura can attest to. Mara tells Lilith that if she will repent and give herself over to Adam, she will be "remade" into her proper image as woman. Again, Lilith rebels. Lilith's desire for Self is seen in her challenge to Mara as she catalogues her defiance in a series of epitaphs:

"I will be myself and not another!"

"I will be what I mean myself now."

"I would do after my nature."

"I will do as my Self pleases—as my Self desires."

"I will do what I will to do."

"I am what I am; no one can take from me myself!"

"Another shall not make me!"

"No one ever made me. I defy that Power to unmake me from a free woman!" (208-09).

When Mara tells Lilith that if she does not repent she will suffer, Lilith answers: "But be free!" (209). Lilith's defiance is centred around her desire for the power of Self. Even when Mara has her look into a mirror to see her Self, Lilith states: "I will not be remade! . . . I will not be aught of his making" (211-12); "I will yet be mistress of myself! I am still what I have always known myself—queen of Hell, and mistress of the worlds! (215). **[32]**

Thus we face the crux of the narrative problem: what can be done with Lilith in the narrative? Should she remain free? Or should she be subdued? Should she become fulfilled? Or should she remain in a lack? MacDonald, it seems, writes himself into an impasse, for at the end of the fantasy he unconvincingly (in the narrative sense, not necessarily in terms of MacDonald's Christian world view) "converts" Lilith, domesticates her so she can be like the other women in the fantasy—Eve, Mara, and Lona, all angels, all Great Mothers. But Lilith has continually rejected these roles; thematically and aesthetically she should remain a monster. After all, she has just killed her own daughter. Nina Auerbach recognises MacDonald's fictional problem:

Lilith seems too large and suggestive a figure for MacDonald's religious allegory to encompass; his declamatory female overreacher stalks about without being given much to do until she is chastened by an abruptly introduced and not very convincing

male, Adam. MacDonald further dilutes his queen by counterbalancing her ambition against the benevolent wisdom of Eve, Mara, and Lona, three “good” ruling women who preside over the House of Death, soothing its inhabitants into a mesmeric trance to await a vague universal awakening. (38)

Thus after seeing her Self in the mirror, Vane tells us that: “She was what God could not have created. She had usurped beyond her share in self-creation, and her part had undone His! She saw now what she had made, and behold, it was not good!” (216). And Lilith conveniently repents. She states: “I yield. I cannot hold out. I am defeated.—Not the less, I cannot open my hand” (216). This scene seems unsatisfactory, for what she sees in the mirror is exactly what she wants to see: a Self-creation not at the mercy of any maker. Why she gives up, then, makes little narrative sense, except that MacDonald needs her to repent so that his story can move towards closure. Thus Lilith’s character seems inconsistent.

Lilith’s sudden surrender can be explained simply if we acknowledge that MacDonald believed that evil is only a stage in the continual progress toward goodness. At the end of *Phantastes*, the narrator, Anodos, writes:

yet I know that good is coming to me—that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good. And so *Farewell*.

But the *Phantastes* solution is more a problem in *Lilith*, for Lilith’s transformation is problematic. In *Idols of Perversity*, Dijkstra catalogues the images of woman in nineteenth-century visual art (which correspond closely to Gilbert and Gubar’s angel-monster dichotomy). He writes: [33]

This is a book filled with the dangerous fantasies of the Beautiful People of a century ago. It contains a few scenes of exemplary virtue and many more of lurid sin. Much of it deals with magnificent dreams of intellectual achievement doomed to wither before the tempting presence of woman, who . . . is to be found dragging man into a grim trough of perversion. (vii)

He continues:

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, . . . the promise of material progress and the cultural success of the functional marginalization of women, had made males heady with

confidence that they might actually succeed in changing  
“earthly woman, with a woman’s weakness, a woman’s faults”  
back into “the unforgotten Eve of Paradise.” (4-5)

Thus MacDonald’s basic tenet that all evil is in the process of becoming good gets tangled into gender, for Lilith’s defiance and eventual submission seems part of the nineteenth century’s gender politics.

Lilith’s apparent defeat as she collapses and eventually goes off to sleep can be viewed as MacDonald’s attempt to “tame” the passionate character into his religious mythology of redemption. Dijkstra argues that one significant image of woman in the later half of the nineteenth century was “the collapsing woman” (64), who must collapse or sleep as a consequence of her overabundant desire, which manifested “in the throes of overindulgence in autoerotic pleasures” (79). Paintings of the sleeping or collapsed woman depict her to be “at once the object of erotic desire and a creature of peculiar self-containment, not really interested in, and hence not making any demands upon, the viewers participation in her personal erotic gratification” (69-70). Since Lilith is a creature of pure Self and desire, she should continue to roam the narrative like Keat’s *femme fatale* in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci.” But MacDonald feels compelled to silence her and make her a passive, submissive object, a static being designed to be gazed at. Ironically, this turns Lilith into an object of desire. As Dijkstra suggests about the sleeping woman: this pose allows the male “once more to enter into a voyeuristic, passive erotic titillation within a soothing, undemanding context conducive to a state of restful detumescence” (78).

Thus Lilith remains a dividual self: though controlled, she still reflects the tension between Adam’s desired angelic innocence and Lilith’s self-desire, remaining in a state of self-postponement, waiting to be born. The ambiguous ending of the fantasy supports this contention, for Lilith’s transformation from monster to angel is not complete at the end of the fantasy—she remains in transformative process. And there are hints at the end that MacDonald is torn over Lilith’s female power and her relinquishing of it to patriarchal control. A key symbol is her clenched hand that seems to represent all the evil of her Self.

**[34]** Try as she might, Lilith cannot open that hand, and in a way remains symbolically defiant; she yields, but not completely. Lilith is brought to the House of Death where she meets Eve—the symbolic intersection of the great archetypes in the work: Angel (repentant Eve) and Monster (Lilith). In a final act of unmaking Lilith’s Self, Adam cuts off her defiant hand, and in its place begins growing a beautiful hand. All Lilith can say at the end seems mere defeatism:

“Show me then to my grave; I am so weary I can live no longer” (225). Lilith’s Self is castrated by Adam, the great father, and as McGillis argues, “In *Lilith* little pleasure derives from the text: the imagination is castrated” (53). That castrated imaginative force is Lilith, who has provided the desire for Self and life that makes the work fascinating. This castration can also be seen as a form of “therapeutic rape,” to use Dijkstra’s term (83). Adam—a representative of patriarchal, religious power—must therapeutically rape Lilith—representative of monstrous female power—so that Lilith can transform into the passive, angelic, Eve figure. The castration scene, consequently, fuses the erotic and the religious, for Lilith’s powerful desire is attractive (remember Vane’s attempt to heal the naked Lilith earlier in the novel), yet repulsive, and the hand is chopped off finally in the name of religion. “MacDonald was of the Devil’s party without knowing it,” quips McGillis (53), for he recognises the attractive power Lilith holds over MacDonald’s imagination. Lilith’s hand, we may speculate, represents creative feminist power at odds with patriarchal power; thus the hand as power must be castrated, silencing the female creator. The monstrous hand can no longer hold the monstrous pen.

After the symbolic castration, Lilith speaks no more, yet the fantasy continues for seven more chapters. Lilith dissolves in the work, her identity gone. But to MacDonald’s credit, he does not have Lilith rise immediately to a new life. At the end of the novel she is in process, so the haunting image we are left with is as follows: Lilith, asleep on the death-couch, awaits to be born. But since we do not have any image of a transformed Lilith, we are still left with her monstrous Self—with the Lilith myth in general—hovering over the fringes of the narrative. Her self is still postponed. And MacDonald balances this postponement with Vane’s postponement into Heaven, for he is returned back into his library, the fantasy-world narrative never closed, the final chapter entitled “The ‘Endless Ending.’”

This endless ending seems entropic, as if the narrative about Lilith fizzles out, returning to Vane, who is pushed back into his library to wait for death. “I wait, asleep or awake, I wait” says Vane (264). For MacDonald death is life, or more life. MacDonald’s focus on death as redeeming life creates the impasse in *Lilith* and is in itself fascinating, for MacDonald as writer has death serve as a new beginning, but to Lilith death is an end to Self and enslavement to a self [35] created by others. Thus Lilith, to a degree, does not fit into the fantasy’s theme. Bersani argues that “only death can provide us with a myth of uninterrupted life” (213); death is “the most appropriate metaphor for that radical transference of the self to another” (211). But such an uninterrupted

life to Lilith is perpetual enslavement as an angel figure, so she does not go gentle into that good night. For MacDonald, however, whose life is in its waning years, death as *more life* is an enticing prospect. George Bataille in *Death and Sensuality* contends that “discontinuous beings that we are, death means continuity of being” as we “yearn for our lost continuity” (16). Death as continuation of life—only better life—is what Bataille labels “religious eroticism” that is “concerned with the fusion of beings in a world beyond everyday reality” (16).

*Lilith*’s seemingly inconsistent ending in the service of MacDonald’s religious eroticism cannot be ignored, but the ending’s failure may be part of the book’s success. *Lilith*, concludes McGillis,

survives as a great book not because of its emasculating strictures against changing sex roles, social dislocation and individual identity, not because of its eschatological vision, but because of the subversive power of its mysterious images. The book resists systematisation; it delights in paradox, in synecdoche, in riddle, in metaphor, in pleonasm, in oxymoron, in change. (53-54)

But Wolff states: “As we near the end, the imagery of *Lilith* breaks down completely. On the one hand MacDonald paints the picture of a triumphant resurrection. On the other, evil is all about, even on the ‘frontiers’ of heaven itself (369). Both McGillis and Wolff are accurate in their assessments. MacDonald’s religious eroticism may be at odds with *Lilith*, for MacDonald wants to want death to be a continuation of life; *Lilith* does not. And though the literary creator—MacDonald—tames *Lilith* and has her lie down in the House of Death so that she can live in eternity, the *Lilith* myth refuses to be so accommodating. *Lilith* is subdued but not silenced; she haunts the fringes of MacDonald’s fantasy. She continues to haunt Vane’s dreams: “Her words were terrible with temptation” (233).

#### Works Cited

- Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.
- Bataille, Georges. *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*. New York: Walker, 1962.
- Bersani, Leo. *A Future for Astynax: Character and Desire in Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1984. [36]
- Blake, Kathleen. *Love and the Woman Question in Victorian Literature: The Art of Self-Postponement*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983.
- Blake, William. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. 1790, London: Oxford UP, 1975.

- Dijkstra, Bram. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Jackson Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. New York: Methuen, 1981.
- MacDonald, George. *Phantastes*. 1858. Whitethorn CA: Johannesen, 1994.
- . *Lilith: First and Final*. Whitethorn CA: Johannesen, 1994.
- McGillis, Roderick. "Phantastes and Lilith: Femininity and Freedom." *The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald*. Ed. William Raeper. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1990, 31-55.
- Miche, Helena. *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Neumann, Erich. *The Great Mother*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. Princetown: Princetown UP, 1972.
- Raeper, William. *George MacDonald*. Tring: Lion, 1987.
- Rossetti, William Michael, ed. *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgiana Rossetti*. London: Macmillan, 1904.
- Wolff, Robert Lee. *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1961. [37]

**[Note: this article was submitted to the other contributors of this volume of North Wind. Their comments—and the writer's response to these comments—immediately follow this article.]**

## Initial Responses to “Of ‘Frustrate Desire’”

### Deirdre Hayward

Taking a feminist approach to *Lilith*, given its title and focus, is obviously appropriate, and in many ways valuable. The author argues that Lilith is a divided self, torn between a life of feminine submission and angelic perfection (that desired for her by others), and a life of active rebellion, a “self-desire” which is subversive and inimical to “societal unity.” She is therefore condemned to “self-postponement,” sacrificing her own desires for a (female) self to a Christian notion of selflessness, unable to embrace either position. Understood thus, the piece is persuasive in that it explores the main issue of feminism—the relationship between the sexes in terms of inequality, oppression or submission, and self-affirmation. However, it also raises questions about definitions: how comprehensively, for example, can a feminist critique of *Lilith* identify the so-called feminist issues in the text? How well does a theory which presupposes patriarchal dominance deal with the possibility that concepts like love and salvation, although achieved through submission and self-loss, may not derive from the tyranny of the “patriarchal signified,” but rather from a genderless mystical necessity (as mystics would affirm)? And how well do theories of feminism correspond to the extraordinary complexity of MacDonald’s vision here, in a text which is famously resistant to any “rational” (including feminist) critique?

My feeling is that, valuable as a feminist approach can be, its scope is limited, and an understanding of *Lilith* needs to be incorporated into the widest possible parameters, ones which themselves strain against any defined or systematic structure. The paper leads us to interpret the book in terms of binary oppositions: male/female, self/society, angel/monster, trapped/free, passive/active. However, how secure are these expressions in terms of a fundamental stable meaning-structure? As Derrida argues, not at all. Derrida’s analysis of texts focuses on the conceptual oppositions they rely on: speech/writing, masculine/feminine, self/other. In examining these terms, Derrida destabilises them, concluding that there is no fixed meaning to the transcendental signifieds encapsulated in the “black and white” of oppositions and definitions. To interpret *Lilith*, therefore, in terms of masculine/feminine oppositions is to be trapped in parameters which are superficially “fixed” but fundamentally unstable. MacDonald’s own use of language, context, place, time and narrative are in the Derridan sense “playful” or slippery, and loosen fixed constructs so radically that there is often no relationship between his speaker’s meaning and the system of conceptual-linguistic signs within which he works—as, for



example, Mr Raven so clearly demonstrates in chapters 2, 4 and 5, and Vane on [38] pages 9 and 46. From Saussure, Derrida argues that all signs, spoken or written, are arbitrary: system-relative and self-referential. Hence his insistence on the inherent instability of language, and his emphasis on ambiguity, pun, indeterminacy—all prominent features of *Lilith*. Given the instability of MacDonald's text, it seems to me that a deconstructuralist approach would illuminate its openness more fruitfully than a feminist critique.

I am therefore uneasy about statements such as "[Lilith] must sacrifice her feminine desire for self to the Christian myth of selflessness." At one level, everyone (male and female) has a "desire for self," and it is quite feasible to argue intellectually, without reference to gender, that the self should be sacrificed (German romantic philosophy was full of this, as are most religious mystical traditions). Is a "feminine desire for self" different from a "male desire for self," and in what way? Perhaps a clearer way of writing this would be "her desire for a feminine self," but again, this begs the question as to what such a self may be. Against the author's argument, a traditional view of feminine "self-desire" (and is this what is meant here?) is more likely to put self last than first, and the question then arises whether this is "natural," or learnt passivity. This in turn is of little value unless we know what is meant by "natural," or from what sources such passivity is absorbed. Again, problems arise in referring to Eve (and females like her) as "passive angels" where "passive" clearly implies negativity: "[Lilith], refuses to lose Self and become the passive angel represented by Eve." This is a disingenuous use of the adjective as it implies that "passivity" is somehow wrong in an angel, and that there must be the possibility of "non-passive" angels, who are more positive than "passive" angels. It is difficult to make sense of this. The omission of the word, however, would not suit the author's argument, and would open the way for reader-sympathy with Lilith for *not* choosing the angelic option: she would maintain her own identity in defiance of women who were "willing to become angels." Using qualifiers in this way to support a discussion can diminish the force of the underlying argument.

Another issue arising from the feminist approach is whether there can be "self-postponement" without a sense of self which is being postponed. In MacDonald's slippery text, Lilith can be any number of selves: a creation of Vane's mind—clothed "in the likeness true / Of that idea where his soul did cleave!" (150); a self-made being, "my own thought of myself (209), and a child of God—"another has made you" (209)—; a mythical being (the original Semitic legend); a fictional character, both as MacDonald's heroine and as the



subject of a poem in Vane's library; and there are clearly more options to be explored. If Lilith has not been given a wholly defined self, we cannot assert anything definite about that self, yet the feminist argument clearly assumes an [39] *oppressed* female self, defining Lilith exclusively as such a self. Rather, Lilith is a not-yet-self, chaotic and unformed, waiting for birth and, importantly, for definition.

The perception that Lilith is forced to make an unenviable choice between the two options of "angel" and "monster" does little to bring the feminist argument forward, or allow Lilith to move onwards. The crux of the narrative problem is, as the author observes, what can be "done" with Lilith. MacDonald is accused of writing himself into an impasse on this view, but it is the feminist argument which has trapped itself in the closure of mutually exclusive possibilities and can offer no solution. Additionally, such polarities have, as Derrida has argued, no fixed reference points, and therefore it is meaningless to ask whether Lilith should "remain free," "become fulfilled," or "remain in a lack" so long as we have no criteria for knowing what it is that (female) freedom, fulfilment or lack signify. There are no answers, and MacDonald himself leaves the question open, attempting to give it a theological solution, to be sure, but not conclusively tying up the threads.

Lilith is rightly described as having an "ontological slipperiness": it is this which makes her frightening and powerful, needing to "be silenced," not, I would argue, the notion that she is a monstrous female, forced into twisted femininity. The point is supported if we try viewing MacDonald's "bad" male characters—for example, Count Funkelstein (*David Elginbrod*), Lord Morven (*Donal Grant*), or James Blatherwick (*Salted With Fire*) solely as "twisted masculinity." Certainly, they may be "monsters," but not because of their masculinity; for MacDonald it is their *humanity*, their being, that has become diminished. All evil for MacDonald is ultimately less specific to male/female behaviour than to humanity failing to reach its true potential. Lilith is "evil" because she is "evil," not because she is female. And her evilness lies in her sense of self, not as a female, but as a human being who has committed hubris. This is the core of Lilith's problem, and that of every individual, male and female, in MacDonald's novels: living only in self and not in God cannot be endured and must be reversed. Feminist critics continually condemn MacDonald for oppressing, "castrating" Lilith by making her give up her self, yet no one has yet advanced the parallel accusation that Robert Falconer—for example—or Cosmo Warlock have become emasculated because they fought with self and gave it up to God. MacDonald has empowered Lilith by allowing her to

transcend gender stereotype, setting her above all oppositions except self and God, the only binary oppositions which ultimately mattered. His theology demands the death of such a false self to allow birth of the “true” self, and this is always non-gender-specific in his texts. The feminist argument that in this opposition between self and deity, God is still a patriarchal tyrant, merely shifts [40] the argument to the ultimate “Transcendental Signified” (God), who, on a deconstructionist account, is an arbitrary sign, unstable and system-relative, wrongly understood by Lilith’s false self. MacDonald was at pains to deconstruct this tyrannical image in much of his writing, but Father or Mother God both would require the same self-renunciation as is required of Lilith.

If we have an argument with MacDonald in *Lilith*, we must concern ourselves more with his philosophy of self-renunciation than with feminism if we are to attempt an understanding of such a complex text. The issues at stake are more theological and existential than gender-specific. The lack of “closure” in the book is yet another deconstructionist technique to make MacDonald’s wider point: if there is no reality except the self and God, then, he is saying, there can be no end to the on-going of that relationship. This applies as much to Vane, the man, as to Lilith, the female. For MacDonald, all individuals are self-postponing—“waiting to be born”—until they find their selves in God. Like Vane, “asleep or awake,” they wait.

### David Jasper

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar begin their study *The Madwoman in the Attic* with a question: “Is the pen a metaphorical penis?” If indeed the nineteenth century saw the fictional reversal of the Johannine image of the Word made Flesh in the body of the male saviour into its female opposite, the flesh made word, then the Victorian male writer not only condemns woman to a literary subjugation, he also portrays her in glorious opposition to incarnational theology. Unknowingly he releases her into a world which is the mirror image of the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel—a deathly fate, but a powerful one in the pages of his text.

This is the world of MacDonald’s Lilith. According to apocryphal Jewish lore she was unlike Eve, not created subordinate to man but like Adam from the dust. Adam’s first wife, before Eve, she considered herself the equal of her husband, and refused to lie beneath him and submit to a patriarchal marriage. As punishment she was condemned to suffer the daily deaths of one hundred of her demon children.

Lilith deconstructs the construction of women and the myth of

Christian redemption inscribed by the pen of the patriarchal male writer. She is, indeed, more than MacDonald's text can control—that has been Lilith's nature from the very beginning. She remains murderously alive, refusing the aesthetic conclusion that has been made in the interstice between death and the dead feminine body (Elizabeth Bronwen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 1992). The Victorian heroine must either submit to the patriarch, and therefore become a second Eve, or else die. [41] Lilith does neither and effectively castrates the male pen(is) of MacDonald. In the twentieth century, the textual trap which MacDonald falls into has been explored in the erotic writings of Georges Bataille, whose *Madame Edwarda* (1956) is also Lilith in:

a book which leads God upon the stage. God in the plenitude of his attributes; and this God, for all that, is what? A public whore, in no way different from any other public whore. But what mysticism could not say [because] at the moment it began to pronounce its message, it entered it—entered its trance, eroticism does say: God is nothing if He is not, in every sense, the surpassing of God: in the sense of common everyday being, in the sense of dread, horror and impurity, and, finally, in the sense of nothing . . . .

No use laying it all up to irony when I say of Madame Edwarda that she is GOD. But God figured as a public whore and gone crazy.

So is Lilith, then, this figure as she continues to haunt Vane's dreams? She is the mirror image of John 1, the darkness which "shines" in the light, the mysterious heart of the postmodern, the rebellion of the text.

### Adelheid Kegler

MacDonald is mainly discussed as a Christian writer. Is it possible that the parameters of discourse concerning his oeuvre and his art have hitherto tended to overlook the very spiritual context and traditions which inspired it and to which it points? The interpreter's critical look at the Christian message has neglected MacDonald as an excellent Symbolist. He belongs—along with Edgar Allan Poe, Le Fanu, Baudelaire; Brjussow, Solovyov, Ensor and other representatives—to this last great common European movement in the arts.

A gender study may indeed throw some light on any work of art, as it might do on *Lilith*. Yet gender studies of works such as Le Fanu's *Carmilla* or *Uncle Silas*, Charles Dickens' *Edwin Drood*, or Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* would only hint at a minor aspect in these works and would miss the important topics and messages of late Realism and early and later Symbolism. If *Lilith*

is critically approached as a gender-study in connection with the basic theory of MacDonald as a Christian writer, the issue of the analysis will be more or less predictable. The researcher, regarding a female character in the light of a patriarchal religion, will find what he looks for: the motifs of a religion the traditions of which are connected with ideologies originated in late antiquity; in some phases of mediaeval Aristotelianism; and, perhaps most of all, in the climate of fear of early Modernism. All these sources have amalgamated and produced a fateful disqualification of women, including the demonising of women and the theories about women's physiological debility. In case of her rebellion, the Christian author has to put his female Prometheus-figure in chains (once again). [42] MacDonald abstains from such stereotypes. His works show a great variety of female characters with traits as complex as those of the male characters (an aspect in which he differs most agreeably from Dickens). The figure of Lilith should not be hastily paralleled with stereotypes like the languid, cold hearted temptress Lufa in *Home Again*. In many traits Lilith also resembles the mature, responsible heroines such as Hester Raymount in *Weighed and Wanting*.

It is rather tempting to read the figure of Lilith as a rebellious woman, who tries to define herself against a patriarchal God, or even without him. But approval or disapproval of MacDonald as a Christian writer is irrelevant here. When thought of as preaching a Christian message he tends to be seen as being overpowered by the mighty Lilith-myth which must be integrated into Christian thought-structures: which means that Lilith must be overthrown, castrated, depersonalised and, finally, killed. Her destiny must remain unsure, as she is not to be fitted totally into the writer's world-view. On the whole, then, the Lilith myth is considered "too expansive for MacDonald's fantastic imagination." With this approach, the meaning of *Lilith* is reduced to one aspect, which, because it is isolated from the whole, misleads our understanding, producing a restricted crippled image of what the oeuvre is about.

Would a gender-study's access to *Carmilla* manage to analyse the stress of Le Fanu's horror, the menace of the laws of an alien world, if Carmilla was seen as overpowered by victorious men at the end of the story? Or would such an approach to the figure of Maud, the female protagonist of *Uncle Silas*, make it clear that the story is a parable of Hell? Would it be possible to show *Edwin Drood* as a "Todesroman" as Stephen Prickett has suggested in comparing *Edwin Drood* with *Lilith*, if a gender study took the figure of Rosa Bud as a key to the novel? It would work the other way round,

because if the structure and imagery of the *Todesroman* is understood, the figure of Rosa is easily inserted as a symbol of a last (female) flower in a decaying world.

Of course it is most interesting to pursue the outlines of a figure like Lilith. There are fascinating traits to be found: her appearance, her manners of moving and speaking, of changing her shape; Lilith surrounded by the landscapes she has created, the architecture which underlines, symbolises and expresses her; Lilith as the author of the mysterious book in Vane's library, "written in some universal language of the soul" (Prickett), which makes it clear she is a projection of Vane's highest aspirations. It is strange that a paper which stresses Lilith's being denied "creative feminist power" does not discuss these most important passages.

All these aspects supply much information about female idols of MacDonald's time and about haunting threatening femininity as MacDonald saw it. But in this paper the analyst is only at the beginning of a single approach to [43] the parable of *Lilith*. The polished formal structure, as well as the content, point to the work as a parable (just as *Uncle Silas: A Tale of Bartram Haugh* is a parable of Hell). The theme of *Lilith* is earthly life as the realm of death. With this conception, MacDonald's work is rooted in the tradition of "Romantic Agony." (Cf. for example, a title such as Chateaubriand's: *Mémoires d'outre Tombe*.)

As Stephen Prickett has shown, MacDonald's Lilith has an antecedent in the figure of Geraldine in Coleridge's "Christabel," which has been an antecedent for some of the most powerful myths of the nineteenth century, among them Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Dr Polidori's *The Vampyre*, and, of course, MacDonald's *Lilith*.

The context of negative imagination, leading from the Romantics to late Realism and Symbolism, to German expressionistic lyrics and expressionistic art in general, up to the "mental landscapes" of the films of David Lynch (*Twin Peaks*, *Lost Highway*, *Mullholland Drive*) and Jim Jarmusch (the landscapes of death in *Dead Man* and the apocalyptic urban landscape in *Ghost Dog*) is the context of *Lilith* as well.

"Natural causes only seem," "nobody is what he or she seems to be," "there's more to the picture than meets the eye": these formulae contain the key to the view of reality which underlies the examples given above. Swedenborg's "natural causes only seem" sums up one of the powerful sources of Romantic and symbolistic art. Identity and causality are ambiguous. A landscape, a churchyard, a piece of music, a manor house, a pious old gentleman and his self-

righteous brother; they are not what they seem to be. They are, as it were, tips of invisible icebergs. Uncanny dimensions are manifested above or beneath our known natural and supra-natural reality. Although Vane is a young heir in this world, he is the androgyne Vane/Lilith in the other natural and supranatural dimensions. The borderline between “the two worlds, so strangely . . . one” is symbolised by the mirror in the attic of Vane’s house.

In the works of Le Fanu and MacDonald (both influenced by Swedenborg), there are still connections across the borderline between and supra-natural reality on the one hand, and correspondences to the natural appearances—even if only dim ones—on the other. But already in the paintings of James Ensor, also, perhaps, in some traits of *Lilith*, and some decades later in expressionist poetry and painting, the correspondences move more and more into the invisible realm.

“Floating through the darkness / all alone / love is gone in darkness / cold as stone / Searching through the shadows / you have known/ love’s gone /bare as a bone.” Is David Lynch’s verse from the album *Floating into the Night* an intensification of the *Lilith* experience or is it already manifest in MacDonald’s parable? [44]

Some consequences:

1. As with every other modern or traditionalist approach, the gender-study approach to literature does, of course, produces answers or results which may be verified within the frame of the respective model. Mythopoeic works are multi-layered and concern the whole scale of existence. They contain socio-cultural aspects which may be isolated and analysed separately. But at the very least it remains rather unsure whether such analysis does justice to the literary work, or whether only a cognition of some of its contents has taken place. With MacDonald’s *Lilith* (and some of his other works), there is, I think, no essential difference between a conventional, traditionalist (Christian) approach and what is called a modern one (i.e., gender-study). The world-views (paradigms) from which both these approaches originate are rather restricted.

The episode of the cutting off of Lilith’s hand may be taken as an example. In the imagery used by the gender-study approach it signifies, as the paper in question shows, a form of castration, which is in part applicable to Lilith’s situation. But is that all? A more comprehensive view of mythopoeic tradition shows that the loss of a hand means much more: it is not only punishment and shame, but also an initiation by dismemberment (cf. the story from the *Mabinogion* of Culhwch and Olwen, where Gwalchmei, son of Gwyar, has lost one hand and is by this initiated as hero. The theme also appears in John

Irving's recent book *The Fourth Hand*.)

2. Though some time has passed since the 1979 study by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the attic motif has not yet been considered as a symptom of the state of modern western consciousness in general as a consciousness of isolation, a consequence of the development of western thought-structures and ethnocentrism.

The history of literature from the late eighteenth century up to now shows such an accumulation of this and kindred motifs that they cannot easily be overlooked. So, if one is not content with a system-immanent literary analysis, one should not renounce a comprehensive approach, based on an *extensive* knowledge of the history of ideas and the history of consciousness, and of the techniques of comparative literature: "Specialist" modern approaches may then throw some additional light on the phenomena of a work of literary art.

The quotations from Prickett's paper "Death in Lilith" come from *Inklings Jahrbuch* 13 (1995).

### **Colin Manlove**

This is a useful, clear essay, if a bit overwritten, and it expresses a strand of truth about *Lilith* that cannot be gainsaid. (In fact, it's odd that such an interpretation has not appeared before.) Few readers have ever been happy with that brutal [45] severance of Lilith's refusing hand, and few have remained unmoved by her terrifying presence in the story. Without doubt, her history reflects unacknowledged repressions in Victorian society and mind.

There are just one or two points I would make. First, MacDonald, as a habitué of the unconscious, and as an explorer of the night side of the nineteenth century mind, would have been quite aware of the magnetic power of a Lilith and all she represented. And what she represents is much more than crushed female sexuality. She need not represent anything MacDonald himself repressed, any more than he suppressed his awareness of the degradation of women and children he saw in the slums of Manchester or London. (As for MacDonald's own personal repressions, we know little of these, if they existed. So far as we know, his marriage was a truly equal and loving one, and it is mistaken to assume that any Victorian marriage necessarily shut Lilith out.)

However, there was that in MacDonald which had always been responsive to the flirtatious animality of women, for his books are full of them, and the embarrassments and shames they cause. So in *Lilith* he is confronting something he would recognise and had often struggled to deal with—and clearly



here this involves lopping her nature so that she can fit heaven. He is in a sense on both sides—God’s and Lilith’s. It is possible that his solution was to hand over the work to God, whom he claimed as the author of *Lilith*: that way God could simplify MacDonald while the narrative simplifies Lilith.

Then I’d point out that if *Lilith* is to be seen as a symbolic story of sexual and theological repression, that is not the whole truth about it—any more than that the truth about MacDonald’s beloved Blake is that he was simply of the devil’s party in writing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. To say that in *Lilith* a side of MacDonald is drawn to Lilith does not remove from the strength with which the other side is drawn to God. The religious/mystical/Christian side both holds and is compromised.

(Incidentally, the Blakean analogies the writer of the paper makes seem to undermine the case being made, for they point to a warring marriage of Heaven and Hell, a reconciliation of the Energy of a Lilith with the Reason of an Adam, whereas the writer sees Lilith as wholly divorced from God and man.) Next, some points about the stories themselves. Lilith’s femininity is not final. MacDonald in *Phantastes* depicts Anodos as being as full of desire and as voracious as Lilith, if not so savage. The Ash and Alder trees turn up because part of him is them. Anodos’ whole journey involves the slaying of self, a journey he knows is never finished in this world (290). To this end he is cut out of Fairy Land by swords just as Lilith is cut out of the purgatorial world she inhabits by the severance of her grasping hand of self. There are other parallels. Anodos being protected by the Beech Tree at a cost to its vitality is partly like [46] Lilith being saved by Vane while the white leach is sucking his blood. On the other hand, Anodos’ wakening of the White Lady is also like Vane’s of Lilith. MacDonald uses similar narrative patterns and characters in his early and his late fantasy, which removes from the feminist specificity of what happens in *Lilith*. Indeed the two works are so interwoven by parallels and contrasts and by their overarching subject of First Things and Last, that Lilith’s nature is much more integrated in a web of religious meaning than appears by considering *Lilith* on its own. In this larger context, the Christianity, integrated as it is in the material, is much less of an imposition on the “free self.”

Nor is Lilith inextinguishable desire, for on her own she is almost dead when Vane finds and revives her. Rather than treat her as a separate being, it is more appropriate, as in *Phantastes*, to see each meeting as reflective of the spiritual state of the protagonist—here called Vane. When Vane goes through the mirror in his attic, he goes into his own, and God’s, unconscious. In symbolic narrative we are always being pushed beyond merely surface reading and the



notion that each character is an island. Lilith is in great part the old devil in Vane himself, and when he attends to it, he lets that devil go about roaring. Here again, the Christian meaning of the text is not an imposition, but is wholly integrated in the material. This is not the whole truth about *Lilith*, for it also deals with Christian realities and ultimates, but it is certainly a part of it, and makes Lilith no more a woman than she is part of the mind of a man.

Specific textual comments:

There are misreadings on page 29 especially at line 5: the whole point about Vane is his vain insistence on himself, his continual refusals to lie down in the house of the dead.

Page 30, line 19. The view continually put forward by the story is that the so-called personal self is actually a slave, and that one only finds one's true self and perfect freedom in God. Doubtless this is only the religious view, but the same "only" can be applied to the view that makes Lilith a doomed rebel against the cosmic system.

Page 30, last paragraph. Bersani's view of Victorian fiction and life alike are certainly questionable in relation both to the recent socio-literary work of Michael Mason and others, and to the literary facts. The evidence suggests that the Victorians, from Victoria down, were far less repressed than the myth has supposed. The crowds of prostitutes emerged more out of poverty than out of the aridity of Victorian marriages. Bersani's remarks about desire being a threat to the unity of the self, the state, or the novel seem at least open to challenge. Similarly with Bram Dijkstra's views as summarised on pages 33-34.

Page 32, line 1. Adam does not want to possess Lilith: he wants to free her from herself. The whole interpretation of Heaven as repressive rather misses the [47] facts. Arguably Lilith represses her self, by not allowing it to die. She is told that her deepest self's desire is to be one with her creator, and that the self she so cherishes is actually the slave of the great Shadow of Hell. Is this simply to be ignored as a piece of Christian legalism?

Somewhere around this point the paper has made its case, and the remaining material could usefully be abbreviated.

### **Rod McGillis**

It is well said that Lilith is a "divided self." But perhaps more to the point she is a multiple self, a self that is not a self, or a self that comes into being only in and through desire. In other words she is all of us and none of us. As Adam's first wife, Lilith is the first woman, and as a creation from red earth like Adam himself, she both is and is not Adam. She is eternally the Other

and simultaneously she is eternally the self. She is, in short, the “Ideal I.” I take the term “Ideal I” from Jacques Lacan, of course. And I do so to initiate a reading of MacDonald’s *Lilith* that strikes close to the reading of MacDonald’s great book in the essay, “Of ‘Frustrate Desire’. . .”

MacDonald is, I think, well served by readings that respect his sense of exploration and ongoing process and development; his sense that language, like all things human, is impossible to contain. Opposition is true friendship precisely because it keeps thoughts and feelings moving, perhaps even progressing. And so, if MacDonald himself has any connection with “feminism,” then this is the necessary connection any writer sincere about questions of liberation must have with the feminine enterprise.

If Lilith is the Ideal-I, then she is the reflection of all of us, readers and characters. She is an unrealisable Imaginary, reflecting, as she says, “every woman” (150). To find this “bodiless thing,” this “nameless something,” after which he hungers, Vane travels through a mirror. He then brings Lilith to life “out of himself (151). I am quoting here the words Adam reads to Vane in chapter 29. Significantly, the words Adam reads appear to be Lilith’s. But we know that these words are just as much Adam’s as they are Lilith’s. In this mirror-land of Imaginary things, everything reflects everything else. That which appears to be other is, in reality, the self. To put this another way, all the characters are out-issues of Vane’s own imagination, the characters he encounters manifest aspects of his desire. They are symptoms of his desire. Lilith, the paramount symptom, is not so much “absence of desire,” as she is the impossibility of desire.

MacDonald has constructed a deeply intricate and disturbing psychological field. Vane “births” Lilith as his Other in the mirror phase of his development, but Lilith is also the mother he has lost. His desire for her is a desire both to be [48] the person he imagines himself to be and to return to that time when the self was One. His desire for her is “frustrate” because he cannot have her from the outset. She is the alluring and illusive ideal-other that is the self always and ever just beyond completion and beyond containment Lilith’s appearance in Vane’s life precipitates him into a world of fragmentation, a world of symbolic meaning. She is dangerous because she represents both Vane’s libidinous desire and his shifting of desire onto the material world. Lilith is obviously the *femme fatale*, she who would be obeyed. But her very insistence on being obeyed signifies the law of the father. Lilith is overseer, tyrant, governor, master. She is the female who controls the phallus, and this is why she must suffer symbolic castration and silencing.

Lilith may be domesticated “so she can be like the other women in the fantasy” but Vane does not cease desiring. The object of his desire becomes Lona, Lilith’s daughter. Lona appears safer, less narcissistic, less directly Vane’s “other self” than her mother. Lona is both child and mother, a virgin mother. She is non-threatening. But she too is beyond consummation. Vane cannot have Lona any more than he can have Lilith since to complete these loves would be to satisfy desire, and the satisfaction of desire can only come at time’s end, time no longer. Satisfaction entails both a forward movement and a regression, a return, a regaining of that which was lost at the moment of reflection, fall, consciousness, speech, initiation, loss.

I mix discourses here, I hope purposefully. Of course, MacDonald speaks from a specifically Christian perspective. No one would dispute this. And of course, *Lilith* is about a return to values we understand as Christian. Lilith comes to remove herself from the influence of the Great Shadow, Samoil, Satan, and to accept the guidance of the New Adam. But MacDonald’s genius was to write more than he knew. That he understands the living nature of language and its products is clear from his well-known essay “The Fantastic Imagination.” That he was interested in the psychological as well as spiritual growth of the individual is clear from his essay “A Sketch of Individual Development.” And that he was well aware of the social and economic realities of his day (the “woman question,” socialist movements, and economic disparity between labour and management) is clear from many of his novels. He was also nimble enough to play intertextual and intellectual games of the kind identified in his work by John Docherty and Fernando Soto. In short, his work, and most especially his great and troubling book, *Lilith*, will sustain many approaches.

Although I do not think that one must find proof that MacDonald shared an interest in a specific subject in order for a reader to locate such a subject in his work, the reader who sees “feminist” interests in *Lilith*, or who finds a Blakean source for the apparent structures of binaries in the book can find such proof. [49] MacDonald did move in “feminist” circles and he was an admirer of William Blake. Just as Blake saw the human psyche drawn in two directions, in one direction by a Spectre and in the other by an Emanation, MacDonald sees his characters, including Vane, drawn in two directions. The struggle between Spectre and Emanation or between the Symbolic and the Real (we can shift language depending on what spin we wish to bring to our reading) is ongoing, it moves us always to an endless ending. And so we can move to the language of trace, aporia, abyme and so on.

Thus I can only applaud a reading of *Lilith* that acknowledges the

powerful attraction Lilith undoubtedly has for MacDonald and that attempts to understand the significance of this attraction. The book's lapse into "entropy" seems unsatisfactory, it is suggested, because of MacDonald's shift of erotic energy from Lilith to death itself. This may be true, but for me the apocalyptic journey of Vane and the Little Ones, with its evocations of Dante, Milton, Blake and Revelation, and Vane's continuing yearning for Lona, underscore the erotic nature of that *sehnsucht* or longing that is always MacDonald's theme. The desire for completion is a desire for physical as well as spiritual satisfaction. If Lilith represents the body's desire and the desire for the body, as I think she does, then she cannot be absent. Her absence in the final pages testifies to her continuing presence, even if in some less recognisable form than she had earlier.

### Richard Reis

In the following commentary, I shall not address the *argument* of this study, for I am not sure that I understand that argument. Instead I shall focus on the chief reason for my uncertainty, the *language*, both of the author and of the critics cited. Much of that language approaches the unintelligible: the jargon is arcane, the terminology undefined.

Right at the outset we encounter such an obscurity: the author neglects to explain what W. M. Rossetti meant by "self-postponement," nor in what sense it can be feminist as in the study's sub-title. Without such initial clarification, the reader is sure to have difficulties in comprehending the argument. In the fourth paragraph, however, we find what appears to be an attempted explanation:

Lilith is condemned, like Laura and Lizzie in [Christina Rossetti's] *Goblin Market*, to "self-postponement"—she must sacrifice her feminine desire for self to the Christian myth of selflessness, ultimately denying her power as woman to that transcendental patriarchal signifier, God.

But again obscurity prevails over lucidity. What is meant by "signifier"? If Lilith's Self is to be sacrificed, isn't that a different thing from being postponed? The author tries to clear things up by citing Kathleen Blake's definition of self- [50] postponement: "the evasion of one pattern of self limitation [which] involves the imposition of another," but this makes the terminology even more impenetrable.

Indeed, the critics cited in this study have a proclivity for the obscure which even surpasses the author's. I am at a loss to comprehend what Nina Auerbach means by "that disruptive spiritual energy which engorges the

divine.” Or consider the following citations. Roderick McGillis tells us that “in *Lilith*, little pleasure is derived from the text: the imagination is castrated.” What does Bram Dijkstra mean by “therapeutic rape”? George Bataille’s puzzling term “religious eroticism,” which shares with the McGillis and Dijkstra citations a sexual vocabulary of questionable applicability even as metaphor, is supposedly clarified by Bataille himself as “concerned with the fusion of beings within a world beyond everyday reality.” What is erotic about that? As for the author’s quotations from Rosemary Jackson and Leo Bersani, I find them so bewildering that I cannot even trace their obscurity to a word or phrase, as I can with the others.

The author of this study then, shares with the critics whom he cites the idea that exotic metaphor is an appropriate tool of literary criticism. By contrast, I believe that plain English and prosaically lucid definition of terms is the better language when trying to analyse works of literature. And look at this study’s vocabulary: “dichotomous,” “oxymoronic,” “ontological,” “detumescence,” “entropic,” “eschatological,” “synecdoche,” “pleonasm.” I had to look up the last of these, and no doubt most readers of *North Wind* (and of George MacDonald!) would be similarly frustrated. Perhaps such ostentatious flaunting of polysyllabic terminology (see—I can do it too!) is at home in professional journals of literary criticism (although I myself would refuse to read them for that very reason), but I do not think of *North Wind* as such a medium.

### **Author’s Response to Above Comments**

When Alice meets Humpty Dumpty on her journey through Looking-Glass Land she is impressed with the talking egg’s dexterity with language. “You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir,” said Alice. “Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called ‘Jabberwocky?’” “Let’s hear it,” said Humpty Dumpty. “I can explain all the poems that ever were invented—and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet.” A literary critic is somewhat like Humpty Dumpty, for a critic has that Humpty-Dumpty audacity to feign understanding about a work under examination—and to foist that understanding onto unsuspecting critics, who are also playing the nursery-rhyme hero. As we all know, however, a literary interpretation is merely one possible explanation for a work of art. Such interpretation is always open to [51] one possible explanation for a work of art. Such interpretation is always open to debate. In fact, literary interpretation is vital—and invigorating—precisely because it leads to intellectual sparring among critical participants. The lion needs the unicorn. When John Do cherry, the editor of *North Wind*,

inquired about my willingness to subject my essay to a public forum of critical debate, I agreed immediately. The following two-part essay will chart my responses to the six MacDonald scholars who critique my essay on Lilith.

*Twas brillig and the slithy toves.*

Though the audience for a critical essay is always to a degree a sceptical reader, the writer of an essay hopes that most readers will be convinced of the essay's persuasiveness. I am grateful to Colin Manlove, David Jasper and Roderick McGillis for their general support of my argument. Each writer, in turn, challenges many of my claims and presents counter-arguments that push me to reconsider and tweak my argument.

Colin Manlove writes that: "This is a useful, clear essay, if a bit overwritten, and it expresses a strand of truth about *Lilith* that cannot be gainsaid . . . Undoubtedly her history reflects unacknowledged repressions in Victorian society and mind." Manlove, to quote him again, confirms my suspicion that MacDonald was aware, "of the magnetic power of a Lilith and all she represented." Manlove focuses on MacDonald's willingness to embrace Lilith and God, which creates a tenuous relationship: "So in *Lilith* he is confronting something he would recognise and had often struggled to deal with—and clearly here this involves lopping her nature so that she can fit heaven. He is in a sense on both sides—God's and Lilith's." My allusion to Blake attempted to capture a similar sentiment, though I believe that Manlove states the concern more directly and eloquently. I also agree that *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, in effect framing texts in MacDonald's canon, should be considered together as expressing his struggle with fleshly desire and love of God. In *Lilith*, Manlove finds that:

the Christian meaning of the text is not an imposition, but is wholly integrated in the material. This is not the whole truth about *Lilith*, for it also deals with Christian realities and ultimates, but it is certainly a part of it, and makes Lilith no more a woman than she is part of the mind of a man.

Willing to make larger universal claims about Lilith than my essay does, Manlove supplements my argument. I also appreciate his "specific textual comments." That he challenges Bersani's and Dijkstra's contentions by referring to Michael Mason's work on Victorian fiction and desire further enhances my initial claim in this response: that criticism evolves. These debates are at the heart of the academic enterprise. [52]

Rod McGillis' response begins with a much stronger claim than I make

in my essay: “It is well said that Lilith is a ‘divided self’ . . . . But perhaps more to the point she is a multiple self, a self that is not a self, or a self that comes into being only in and through desire. In other words she is all of us and none of us.” McGillis filters his argument through Lacan. As such, he demonstrates that Vane’s desire of Lilith:

is an unrealisable Imaginary . . . . To put this another way, all the characters are out-issues of Vane’s own imagination, the characters he encounters manifest aspects of his desire. . . . Lilith, the paramount symptom, is not so much “absence of desire” as she is the impossibility of desire.

I agree wholeheartedly with McGillis—a Lacanian approach provides us with a vocabulary that allows us to express the inability to achieve desire: that “*Objet A*.” Vane’s first-person account reinforces this too, for language is incapable of articulating desire (which reflects the writer MacDonald’s struggle to write of this desire). If I would further pursue a Lacanian analysis, I would argue that God, as the patriarchal Phallus of desire, castrates the Lilithian desire but becomes only a temporary fulfilment, thus thrusting Vane, MacDonald and the reader further into the throes of the quest to satiate desire. Thus MacDonald’s Christianity provides temporary solace *and* additional frustration—Lilith and God achieve the same effect. McGillis’ final assessment of *Lilith* becomes a useful coda to my analysis:

for me the apocalyptic journey of Vane and the Little Ones, with its evocations of Dante, Milton, Blake and Revelation, and Vane’s continuing yearning for Lona, underscore the erotic nature of that *Sehnsucht* or longing which is always MacDonald’s theme. The desire for completion is a desire for physical as well as spiritual satisfaction. If Lilith represents the body’s desire and the desire for the body, as I think she does, then she cannot be absent. Her absence in the final pages testifies to her continuing presence, even if in some less recognisable form than she had earlier.

Another more postmodern articulation can be found in David Jasper’s review. He writes:

Lilith deconstructs the construction of women and the myth of Christian redemption inscribed by the pen of the patriarchal male writer. She is, indeed, more than MacDonald’s text can control—that has been Lilith’s nature from the very beginning. She remains murderously alive.

Jasper revisits Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* and provides



a slight twist: he inverts gender roles,, arguing that Lilith—unwilling to “submit to the patriarch . . . or else die,”—does “neither and effectively castrates the male pen(is) of MacDonald.” In effect, Jasper reinforces my argument about the [53] paradoxical character of Lilith. He effectively grafts his version of the anxiety of influence onto the Christian myth, concluding that Lilith “is the mirror image of John I, the darkness which shines in the light, the mysterious heart of the postmodern, the rebellion of the text.” I have always found that MacDonald’s fantasies and fairy tales play with metafictional techniques, which make his writing simultaneously Victorian and quite contemporary. Jasper’s view that *Lilith* reflects the rebellion of the text further places MacDonald within the context of postmodernism. This should not be that surprising, for Lewis Carroll and MacDonald push the limits of narrative. Whereas Carroll’s “nonsense” elides larger theological concerns, MacDonald confronts them, which makes such works as *Phantastes*, *Lilith*, and, I would add, *At the Back of the North Wind*, quite exhilarating and troubling.

*All mimsy were the borogoves*

If borogoves are critics who challenge my approach, then I have found them in Deirdre Hayward and Adelheid Kegler. Hayward does admit that: “Taking a feminist approach to *Lilith* . . . is obviously appropriate, and in many ways valuable,” but concludes that “valuable as a feminist approach can be, its scope is limited, and an understanding of *Lilith* needs to be incorporated into the widest possible parameters, ones which themselves strain against any defined or systematic structure.” She prefers a deconstructive approach that opens up the text without committing to interpretation. While I find a deconstructive approach intriguing, I am not convinced that it leads to any additional insight. What such an approach does, however, is ask a series of questions that are ripe for further speculation (dare I say additional analyses of *Lilith*?). I agree with her that the masculine/feminine dichotomy is problematic—as are all binary oppositions— but I would suggest that my argument is somewhat deconstructive: I attempt to show that Lilith resides in that “space larger than imagination” that is neither masculine nor feminine. At the same time, though, I do believe that MacDonald uses the gender dichotomy consciously and that his strain of Christianity is primarily patriarchal, ultimately at odds with Lilith. The fact remains that we are conditioned by binary thinking, and MacDonald is no exception—look at his structuring in “Little Daylight” and “The Day Boy and the Night Girl.” Hayward finally suggests that “Lilith is ‘evil’ because she is ‘evil’ not because she is female. And her evilness lies in her sense of self, not as



a female, but as a human being who has committed hubris.” It appears then, that Hayward rejects my feminist strain by deconstructing the feminine-masculine dichotomy, but I find that she commits a similar binary opposition—evil exists only in relationship to good. I would suggest that my feminist approach opens up *Lilith* as much as a deconstructive one could, and I would argue that my claim that Lilith haunts the fringes of the fantasy is to a degree deconstructive.

[54]

Another critic who challenges my approach is Adelheid Kegler, who writes, “If *Lilith* is critically approached by a point of view which connects the gender study aspect with the basic theory of MacDonald as a Christian writer, the issue of the analysis will be more or less predictable.” This is an insightful claim and supports Stanley Fish’s notion of interpretative communities: a discourse-community brings to a text a meaning that it finds according to its reading strategy. But Kegler’s complaint could be made about any theoretical approach to *Lilith*, particularly her own focus on MacDonald as a symbolist or mythopoeic writer. She contends that my reading of *Lilith* “as a whole oeuvre is reduced to one aspect, which, because it is isolated from the whole, misleads our understanding, producing a restricted crippled image of what the *oeuvre* is about.” By necessity, an interpretation is restricted as it evokes ideas that challenge—and often support—existing criticism, and I contend that finding a phenomenological truth about a writer is ultimately a confidence trick. J. Hillis Miller eventually became a deconstructionalist. There is not a whole George MacDonald. There are many George MacDonalds, father, husband, preacher, poet, critic, dramatist, novelist, fantasist. Kegler, on the other hand, is quite inclusive in her assessment of MacDonald, finding connections to Poe, Le Fanu and Baudelaire, to name only a few writers. Certainly these writers echo similar concerns to a degree. But to evoke the likes of David Lynch, Neil Young, and John Irvine and suggest that MacDonald’s *Lilith* is part of a larger mythopoeic movement that includes these men is suspect. I doubt that Lynch, Young and Irvine have even heard of MacDonald. In general I find the labelling of MacDonald as a mythopoeic writer as problematic as Kegler finds my feminist approach. C.S. Lewis, in fact, apologised for MacDonald by calling him a mythopoeic writer: “What he does best is fantasy—fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic . . . . The critical problem with which we are confronted is whether this art—the art of myth making—is a species of literary art.” Lewis then suggests that MacDonald’s myth-making resides in his “particular pattern of events,” not in his actual writing: “Any means of communication whatever which succeeds in lodging these events

in our imagination,” concludes Lewis, “has, as we say, ‘done the trick.’ After that you can throw the means of communication away.” Kegler’s approach to universalise MacDonald’s patterning of events—or his creation of women characters—ignores the social and aesthetic attributes of this myth-making, thus defining MacDonald as a passive conduit of archetypal themes. In my article I try on one level to explore the intricacy of MacDonald’s struggle with gender issues in a fantasy novel that thematically and aesthetically grapples with this concern. [55]

*The vorpal blade went snicker snack!*

The one visceral response to my essay comes from a critic who is influential to MacDonald studies, particularly in the United States. I am referring to Richard Reis. His Twayne book *George MacDonald*, is now updated as *George MacDonald’s Fiction: A Twentieth Century View* by Sunrise. Reis objects to “the language, both of the author and of the critics cited” and suggests that “the author of this study, then, shares with the critics whom he cites the idea that exotic metaphor is an appropriate tool of literary criticism.” Thus Reis dismisses Nina Auerbach, Roderick McGillis, George Bataille, Rosemary Jackson, Leo Bersani and Bram Dijkstra, his complaint seeming more *ad hominem* attack. His desire for a lucidity of language begs the questions to a degree, for I suspect that he is reacting in general to theory that challenges more traditional thematic approaches. That Reis demands more clarity, while other critics urge me to embrace Derrida and Lacan (two writers not known for penetrability), reinforces the notion that literary criticism feeds on debate. Though I agree with Reis that criticism should be clear and concrete, I cannot agree that critical diction is necessarily jargon. What some dismiss as jargon is for others vital vocabulary. “Signifier,” for example, is so common in critical parlance that I was surprised that Reis challenges my use of the term. And for those terms that are a bit more obscure I can only paraphrase my friend Humpty Dumpty: “When *I* use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less”!

*And, as in uffish thought he stood*

My response to the above critics has been guided by the generosity of Lewis Carroll’s creations, so it seems fitting that I end where I began. I do indeed stand in uffish thought! If a critic is somewhat like Humpty Dumpty, then he or she is also like the White Knight, who can claim unabashedly, “It’s my own invention.” Literary interpretation is an invention. Some readers may find such

inventions insightful, others may find them problematic, and some may feel they are downright preposterous, but the game of criticism is a useful activity because of that very debate. There is a method to literary debate. It is not a chaotic caucus-race. I do not for one moment suppose that my interpretation of Lilith is the quintessential reading of the great fantasy novel, *Lilith*. Having said that, however, I also believe that no critic has such a magical interpretation. Great works of literature continue to spur new inventions, and the conflicts in theoretical approaches are a catalyst for renewed debate: Any interpretation is just a momentary explanation that will immediately be in need of reinvention. In this way, a critic should remember the warning of the Red Queen: once you interpret, to use the words of Her Majesty, “It’s too late to correct it, . . . when you’ve once said a thing, that fixes it, and you must take the consequences.” [56]

## Second Responses

### Deirdre Hayward

John Pennington finds a deconstructive approach “intriguing”; I find it much more than this, opening up texts, as it does, and changing conventional expectations and circumscribed interpretations. It seems clear to me that MacDonald himself adopts this approach: a close look at even his more conventional texts, such as *Robert Falconer* (Hayward, *N. Wind* 15, 19-25) or *Donal Grant*, shows how subversive they are, with normal expectations confounded.

With regard to binary thinking, Pennington is quite right to say that we are conditioned by it, and that MacDonald uses it; but MacDonald constantly strains against it. To deconstruct such thinking we are inevitably bound to employ those same categories of thought which we are trying to destroy—we have no other tools. Thus to say that MacDonald is so conditioned, is not to assume that he is unaware of it, nor that he cannot escape from it. After all, despite their life-long conditioning, the Day Boy and the Night Girl still manage to break their moulds. Pennington suggests that, having rejected his feminist account by deconstructing the feminine-masculine dichotomy, I “commit” a similar binary opposition by using the word “evil,” pointing out that “evil exists only in relation to the good.” I use inverted commas for “evil” as a deliberate disclaimer, which denies any conceptual solidity to the word, any defined ontological status. And I do this because MacDonald himself takes great pains *not* to set up “evil” and “good” as mere oppositions: indeed, for him they do exist in a relationship with each other, but on the same spectrum. Evil is “the

only and best shape which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good" (*Phantastes*, final para.) It is a false opposition, existing "only by the life of the good, and has no life of its own, being in itself death" (*U.S.* 512). Indeed, "all extremes" says MacDonald, "touch . . . they lean back to back" (*Paul Faber* 284). Further deconstructing the terms, MacDonald's radical theology shifts conventional ideas of good and evil by arguing that evil is too much self, self-willed isolation from God, and good is abandoned self, renounced to God (see the sermon "Self Denial" and, of course, *Lilith*). Ultimately, good and evil are for MacDonald slippery, false oppositions, for "oneness" with the Divine is his goal, a state where all such oppositions are reconciled. The only one which matters is that of self (-will) or non-self (in God), and that is surely one which we can allow him. MacDonald must speak popularly of God as goodness and light as opposed to evil and darkness, otherwise the whole idea of a loving Deity becomes meaningless, as does the necessary "conditioning" tension within which he frames—and struggles to expand—his theological and metaphysical thought [57]

Of course, Pennington is correct to say that no text can claim exclusive rights to one interpretative reading—and this naturally applies to mine. Yet I do value texts—and interpretations—which do not lead towards closure, as they remain alive and breathing, emergent, and continually challenging at new levels—a point also noted by Pennington. All interpretations can illuminate MacDonald's text, and basically there is no "right" reading of *Lilith*—though there may be more restricted ones, which press limitations on MacDonald's creative thinking.

### **Adelheid Kegler**

That a discussion concerning the interpretation of a work of literature is carried out controversially, goes without saying. But it should also go without saying, that that model of interpretation is preferable by which the interpreter is able to categorise the phenomena in question both in a more comprehensive way and with less contradictions than other models. That is the way the method functions which—drawing on the laws of thought—should be employed to verify conceptions.

This position requires that cognition is possible. It is related to truth as a fundamental value, requiring an intelligent and responsible engagement to a reality beyond us. Great art deserves to be taken seriously, i.e., to be researched with the intention of true cognition. For it is itself under a commitment to truth: Truth is learnt, found, in specialised areas of art where the

writer (for instance) struggles to make his deep intuitions of the world into artful, truthful judgement. This is the truth, terrible, delightful, funny, whose strong lively presence we recognise in great writers and whose absence we feel in the weak, empty, self-regarding fantasy of bad writers. (Murdoch 215)

John Pennington understands himself as a representative of a school of thought which is engaged in the “game of criticism”—the worst sort of a game: a “useful activity”—by which meaning is severed from truth and language from world. Consequently, there is a complete lack in his exposition of the sense of obligation which should give every statement its philosophical basis. He sees himself in a position to dismiss any approach aiming at cognition as a mere “confidence trick.” He does not take note of my arguments which come from the context of the History of Consciousness.

#### Work Cited

Murdoch, Iris. “Derrida and Structuralism.” *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Penguin 1993, 185-216. [58]

#### Colin Manlove

The original letter from John Docherty asking for reactions to John Pennington’s essay on *Lilith*, ventured that: “Nearly all our [*North Wind’s*] contributors have, it seems, either felt more comfortable with a more traditional critical approach or believed that modern techniques are inappropriate to MacDonald’s texts.” If that is so, several of them would seem to have changed stance, as four of the responses here emerge from positions developed in recent critical theory. The question of whether Pennington’s own “theoretic” approach was appropriate to an investigation of MacDonald’s work is not really addressed, perhaps because most agree with it, or else, as in my case, they tend to concern themselves not with the rightness of the approach so much as the yield of insight from it. Only Richard Reis raises objections to literary theory, but that is more in relation to its language than to the theory itself. The issue is however a real one here. How appropriate are the intellectual abstractions of literary theory to a writer who said his work was beyond such things? Or again, since most modern criticism would rather talk about different textual realities than admit the notion of a transcendent one, what has it to say of books that try to convey Christian or even mystical experience?

Overall, both in the “fors” and the “againsts,” there is a sense of enclosed theoretic approaches rather than critical engagement. Pennington is being judged not so much on his merits, as by how far he fits in with the

given critical position of his readers—good if he does, bad if he doesn't. There is little notion that one might be learning something from him, and still less of a community engaged in the shared pursuit of exploring literature. It struck me that one of the reasons for this is that few address the specific text, wherein all debates gain clarity and can really interact. I'm not sure if the current view is not sometimes that "the text" is a conservative notion and that there are as many texts as readers (which in a sense has always been true), but surely these readers start from a common datum, or if they do not, we learn only about their views. Or perhaps there is a different datum now—not the text itself, but the text seen through the eyes of certain canonical theorists, who are often cited with a regularity previously bestowed on the author's own words, and with a veneration not unlike that accorded by mediaeval writers to the *auctores*.

So far as Pennington's (generous) reply to the replies is concerned, I found it conducted on theoretic terms that made only one reference to the actual story and the text. It struck me more as a debate about the rightness of critical approach than about the rightness of conclusions, and as such it simply does not interest me. Pennington's delight in "intellectual sparring" here is more one of well-conducted abstract discussion than of argued proof through evidence. This may [59] however be put down to the kinds of comments he received, which did not invite any other mode of reply.

There seem to me however some specific points where *a priori* readings come near enough to the text to be questioned.

i) In talking about Lilith as forced or repressed, the feminist argument seems not to consider how much she is a ravaging oppressor to mothers and their babies in Bulika. Or is this to be seen as the consequence of her assumed rejection by Adam? If so, this in turn would raise the question of what she was like in the *Zohar* that this had to be done—and there one would find that it was Eve who supplanted her.

ii) If Lilith is the "alluring and allusive ideal-other that is the self just beyond completion and beyond containment" (Rod McGillis), how is she different from the no more capturable ideal of the white lady in *Phantastes*?

iii) Deirdre Hayward seems at pains to de-specify the text, so that Lilith has no fixed self, is not simply a woman, is not different from other evil or male characters in MacDonald's work, and so on. But to say that, because her self is not "wholly defined" (whose is?) we cannot say anything valid about it at all, seems open to question. If that self is made of many selves, then those of them it attends to are real enough on their own terms, and to say feminist things about one of them is not to suppose that that one is all of them. Again,

to say that “we have no criteria for knowing what it is that (female) freedom, fulfilment or lack signify” seems debatable since Lilith outlines them to Vane in chapter 25 (134-35) and Adam to Lilith in the poem fragments (150-153); and Lilith in a stunted way tries to live them as leopardess and in Bulika.

iv) How is *Lilith*, the rebellious text against patriarchal Victorians (David Jasper), any different from, say, *Paradise Lost*? Isn't there much sympathy for her here in just the vein of Satan versus God in *Paradise Lost* because she has such energy, and is the under-bitch? But in turn, isn't the mystical drive of the book as strongly felt as she is? Surely the point is not the general one of the “patriarchal” nature of MacDonald's faith (if it is that, since he always describes the Father as love), but whether fascination with Lilith has greater textual force than the drive towards God.

v) I can find nowhere in the book which says that the volume from which Adam reads to Lilith was written by her (as Kegler and—apparently—McGillis assume). It seems more like a dramatised monologue that damns her as she would not herself—her line is rather pages 134-35. It infuriates her, and its words when it is thrown before her have the consequence of fixing her, preventing her escape. [60]

### **Rod McGillis**

The various reactions to John Pennington's reading of *Lilith* confirm the book's power to provoke. I like this. I am also surprised to see that a so-called “feminist” approach to the book raises such resistance. I gather that such an approach does not meet full favour because it reduces MacDonald's complex book to a familiar tale of patriarchal authority and the diminishment of woman. As we know, feminism as both a method of textual interpretation and as social practice has changed considerably over the past thirty and more years. It has evolved through “second wave” feminism, through post-feminism, and into theories of gender, transgender, and gay and lesbian sexuality and being. In other words, feminism does not (and never did) offer a single way of reading a text. Feminism has always had connections with non-feminist ways of thinking: we have had Marxist feminist readings, mythopoeic feminist readings, psycho-analytic feminist readings, and so on. None of these ways of reading necessarily delivers a one-dimensional text.

On the other hand, we have yet to find a way of reading that does not reduce texts. Reduction is the inevitable result of any reading of a text. Clifford Geertz's notion of “thick” reading is perhaps the closest we come to the possibility of non-reductive reading, but “thickness” may be well-



nigh impossible for each of us to achieve in our readings, and even if it were possible, I am not entirely convinced that even with a thick reading we would avoid reduction of any text we wished to explicate. A text should not mean, but be. Or the only complete reading of any text is the text itself. Borges' "Pierre Menard, the Author of *Don Quixote*" makes the point, I think. The meaning of MacDonald's *Lilith* is *Lilith*. Doesn't MacDonald make this point in his essay "The Fantastic Imagination"?

In this same essay, MacDonald also allows that each reader will make of a book what she will. And this is as it should be. Once each reader articulates his or her reaction, the conversation is on the way. And as the conversation goes, I suspect we can see that each of us that converses will, in the words of Adelheid Kessler, "find what he looks for."

If we locate *Lilith* in its historical context, then discussions of androgyny or of women's concerns, or of the cult of the dead woman and so on, do not seem to me to be out of place. If we take just the question of women's concerns and ask, as Deirdre Hayward does: "Is 'a feminine desire for self' different from a 'male desire for self,' and in what way?"—then we must answer, must we not?, yes. If the male desire is for the mother, then the female desire is from the mother. We may, of course, not accept the Freudian narrative. If we do, then the question of desire is distinctly gendered. Females must desire differently from males because of their different relationships within the family romance and their different anatomical and biological make-up. The interesting thing about Lilith is that her [61] desire is to be both the mother and the father. She wishes to contain both the fluid and the firmness. Such containment is impossible and she can only experience lack, even in the fullness of her power over Bulika. Lilith is confused in her sexuality, her desire is to be male as well as female. But of course, she remains subservient to the Shadow male; her desire finds its source in male desire. What MacDonald cannot do is imagine a truly female desire, as much as he may desire to do so. And so desire is the clue. Desire, however we define it, is that which eludes our grasp. It is that which males and females both experience as elusive.

Perhaps what compels readers of *Lilith*, at least in terms of its title character, is that female desire looks forward to release, to change, to challenge of convention and authority. Male desire, on the other hand, looks behind, back to the mother who so comfortingly protected the young man. Vane finds Eve attractive, and Mara and Lona, females who represent nurturing and self-sacrifice and succour and beauty combined. They are images of the mother. To turn away from such a comforting image and contemplate a woman who



challenges the law of the father (while accepting the law of the dark father) inevitably unsettles. That this book challenges our sense of comfort seems to me unquestionable, and such a challenge ensures that we cannot rest complacent with a one-dimensional reading. Desire is mystery, and mystery is the condition of *Lilith*.

### **Richard Reis**

John Pennington evidently misses my point, which is that the great majority of *North Wind* readers will find much of his article unintelligible. This is not a journal for literary critics only; it is equally for lay admirers of George MacDonald's works and ideas.

I did not, for example, mean to "challenge" Pennington's *use* of the word "signifier," but his failure to explain this technical term for most readers of *North Wind*. As for the critics cited in Pennington's study, I did not "dismiss" their work nor engage in "*ad hominem* attack" upon them, but (again) deplored Pennington's failure to elucidate the unclarified phrases of which I complain. For example, I am told that Bram Dijkstra's study (which I have not seen) *does* explain his phrase "therapeutic rape." Pennington could easily have provided the lay reader with the gist of that explanation, but neglected to do so.

No, Dr Pennington, my commentary's focus on your article's language rather than its ideas is not "begging the question," motivated, as you imply, by timid and compulsive conventional unwillingness to confront non-traditional theory. For an argument to be considered by its reader, it must first be intelligible to its [62] reader. Neglect of this requirement may be merely negligence, but can give the impression of obscurantism.

### **Editorial Contribution to the Above Comments**

Contributors' comments have ranged widely over the issues raised by John Pennington, but I feel that one or two important issues have not received attention.

One perplexing aspect of modern literary criticism grounded in psychological theory is the way the existence of "natural laws" is usually ignored. All aspects of western culture have been subsumed by the consumerist ethos, with its assumption of an individual's right to the (*unpostponed*) satisfaction of every desire. Yet, as Kegler implies, for thousands of years it has been known that if people have deserts within their souls (especially those in positions of power like MacDonald's Lilith as ruler of Bulika and its hinterland), then their greed and folly soon creates external deserts (Inge, William Ralph, *The*

*Philosophy of Plotinus*, London: Longmans 2nd ed. 1923, 28-31).

In the case of MacDonald's Lilith, the modern assumption is as absurd as it is irresponsible, because hers is not an autonomous identity. The internal nature of the adventures of MacDonald's protagonist Vane is now generally accepted. Yet many critics nevertheless treat the figure of Lilith as an autonomous female, not as an aspect of (the outlook of) Vane and of every adult *male*. Certainly, she can think of herself as autonomous, but all her different selves are related to the adult male. MacDonald was an out-and-out subversive in every literary genre he took up—as Hayward stresses in the present discussion. To imply that, because he took up the Lilith myth he was obsessed with Lilith *in the same way* that Bram Dykstra shows so many men to have been in the late nineteenth century, is to ignore all his powerful subversive irony in *Lilith*.

MacDonald concentrates particularly upon showing how the Lilith side of man can work towards disintegration of the personality. Where Mara (primarily acting as a personification of beneficial suffering) finally brings this home to Lilith in chapter 39, MacDonald largely confines himself to a straightforward, unbiased dramatisation of parts of Mark 9 and 10. He makes clear that what Lilith is being asked to give up is *not-giving*, nothing else; exactly as Christ-Jesus summarises in the passages of Mark which use the same imagery. To suggest that Jesus' discourses here imply a "patriarchal" God, or that their moral content is "mythical," would be absurd. Yet because MacDonald's Adam-figure is depicted (at this stage of the story) as a patriarchal religious figure, he is identified with MacDonald, and the whole episode is assumed to display MacDonald's patriarchal view of God. This view is held regardless of [63] MacDonald's extensive irony throughout the story, not least the way the character who becomes Adam first appears as a Mephistophelian figure.

Most of the themes which "feminist" readings recognise in *Lilith* are undoubtedly present, as is lucidly demonstrated by McGillis. MacDonald's aim is not the approval or rejection of *fin de siècle* (or twenty-first century) fantasies about these matters. He seeks the roots of their manifestations. The fantasies themselves are as insubstantial as is Lilith herself when disintegrating into obscene fragments in the Bad Burrow (50), and MacDonald may well intend readers to recognise this initial glimpse of Lilith as a summation of her nature.

A few days ago I noticed for the first time the relevance to *Lilith* chapters 38-40 of verses 33-50 of Mark 9 and 6-31 of Mark 10. (That MacDonald's *Unspoken Sermons* begin at the same point may not be mere coincidence). Although much of *Lilith* is "biblical" in tone and in its central allegories, it seems to contain less actual biblical allusions than might

be expected. When striking words or phrases are checked against a good concordance, however, allusions are found to be numerous. A first attempt at this, by Tim Martin, (*North Wind* 14 (1995), 75-78) suggests—as might be expected—that biblical allusions are most abundant in three chapters: 29, where Lilith as a bedraggled cat is confronted by Adam, 39 where Mara gains Lilith's repentance, and 43 where Vane in his "death-sleep" talks with Adam. Martin's check-list does not, however, bring out the crucial importance of the Mark passages.

Mark 9.33-50, which is paralleled and supplemented by Matthew 18.1-10, describes Jesus' strong response to the disciples after they have been disputing as to who is greatest amongst them. The admonition is given "in the house" in Capernaum (verse 33). The definite article is unexpected here when there is no previous mention of a house. MacDonald takes up this symbolic emphasis upon "the house" by using it in the titles for chapters 38 and 40: "To the House of Bitterness" and "The House of Death." Jesus, sitting down to indicate that he is giving formal teaching to his disciples, first points out to them that if anyone wishes to be first they will be last of all (35). The principal stress in the Lilith legend is upon Lilith's wish to be first amongst mankind. Adam tells her she will be "the last to wake in the morning of the universe" (228).

Jesus then takes a small boy and sets him in the midst of the disciples, explaining that whoever takes a specific example of the truly childlike into their soul in a Christian spirit is taking Him (36-7). In *Lilith*, chapter 38, the Little Ones question the goodness of Mara. In response, she picks up Odo (the Little One who is closest to understanding and trusting her), permits him a clear glimpse of her normally veiled face, then sets him down among them (205). The Little Ones remaining with Vane at this stage of the story are a group of twelve [64] whom he has chosen as his disciples. And he has just previously been attempting pedantically to teach them moral-spiritual discernment—fully living up to his homophone Vain. It should be added that after Lilith's repentance, she gives her first sign (ever) of any concern for others when she hears the Devil (Great Shadow) outside Eve's cottage and asks "'Are the children in the house?'" (226).

Jesus' words cause his disciple John to realise that he and the other disciples had exhibited spiritual arrogance on another recent occasion when they rebuked someone unknown to them who was casting out devils in Christ's name. Jesus again responds strongly: "Whosoever is not against us is for us" (40). Many people pray to be delivered from Mara/suffering, but she is able to

drive out devils. Her all-night vigil with Lilith, which is the subject of chapter 39, is a casting-out of the Devil. MacDonald combines the Prince of the Air and the Prince of Darkness of his “A” draft into a conventional bat-winged image of “the” Devil, referring to this hybrid as the Great (i.e., everyone’s) Shadow and describing him as overshadowing Lilith. “Overshadowing” is here used as a neat alternative way of expressing “possession.”

Jesus illustrates his meaning here by teaching the disciples that even small gestures of friendship, such as giving a drink of water, have their spiritual reward if the gesture arises from the giver’s recognition of Christ in a person (41). Mara gives the Little Ones their first-ever drink (of water) when they come to her house (205). Previously in the story, only skeletons and part-skeletons, slowly re-growing their humanity, have shown any recognition of the Christ-nature of the Little Ones (199-200). Nothing Vane has ever done, ostensibly for their good, has shown genuine recognition.

Jesus’ next comment refers specifically to “little ones” (42). This is often misunderstood because of a failure adequately to distinguish the Greek *paedion* (used for the small child in verse 36) from *micron*. “Little ones” are what start to grow in people’s souls when they begin to become again little children.

Matthew 18 interpolates here Jesus’s emphasis that “it is a necessity that offences come” (7). This concept is absolutely central to MacDonald’s theology. From his own experience he had found that most if not all spiritual growth is through suffering and oppression.

Many people, in rejecting Jesus’ next words: “And if ever your hand make you stumble, cut it off” (43) have created a stumbling block to their own happiness. MacDonald’s depiction of Lilith’s ultimate desire to do exactly this has caused many people wilfully to reject *Lilith*. Because the whole of *Lilith* is spiritual metaphor, MacDonald has no need to stress that, the amputation of Lilith’s hand happens at the spiritual level. But it should be noted that the instant it is done Lilith falls “asleep”—which is the essential preliminary to entering *into* life in the sense this concept is used by Jesus and by MacDonald’s Adam-figure.

**[65]** Raven/Adam (as perceived by Vane) is constantly changing, and not in all ways for the better. He rejoices in his patriarchal act of castration, but the Mark allusions show that he is here the unwitting tool of a higher power, which is Love—not patriarchal authoritarianism. Mara assures Vane that a “true, lovely hand” promptly begins to grow (229). Readers’ distrust might have been reduced had she stressed that this new hand is no different from the old before that had begun to be clenched.

Jesus makes it clear that such cutting-out, if it is necessary, is to enable people “to enter into life.” He stresses its crucial importance by applying it, not only to the hands which should implement the love streaming from the heart, but also to the eye (47), which should look up for inspiration, and to the foot (45), which should tread rightly on the Earth. And, after each of these three, He alludes to the closing verse of Isaiah, warning that if people do not cut out an offending member their spirits must exist—before as well as after death—“where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (44; 46; 48). This fiery worm burrows into Lilith and is crucial in enabling her ultimately to recognise herself as she is (207; 210). It then presumably dies, its task achieved.

Jesus’ final words in this discourse stress the core of his teaching here: that his disciples must learn to “have peace with one another.” He also emphasises that “everyone must be salted with fire” (49). This metaphor seems appropriate to Lilith’s ordeal, although it does not appear in any of the versions of *Lilith*. It is, however, used by MacDonald as the title for his next novel.

The same teaching is taken up again with different emphasis in Jesus’ next discourse (Mark 10.6-31 paralleled by Matt. 19.4-26). It is first applied to marriage (6-12). Adam’s union with Lilith and subsequent marriage with Eve is essential to the plot of *Lilith*. Jesus quotes from Genesis: “male and female created he them” (6). MacDonald, like Blake, seems to read the Hebrew as indicating that humans were first created in heaven as male-female. The subsequent split involved loss of love. MacDonald’s Adam rectified this—as far as is possible for man on Earth—by union with Eve: “so then they [we]re no more twain, but one flesh” (8). But he has been unable to live satisfactorily with Lilith—a portion of his femininity which could not split off because essential to enable him to be attracted to Eve. This portion is not simply “the body’s desire and the desire for the body” as McGillis expresses it, although that is, of course, its most obvious element.

Jesus repeats and extends with many children (13-16) his teaching with a young child in 9.36-37. Then a rich young man too attached to his possessions comes to seek help from him (17-27). MacDonald quotes Jesus’ response from verse 27 “with God all things, are possible” and then accurately summarises the earlier part of this response (23-26) as “He can save even the rich!” (216).

**[66]** Jesus’s words are wholly appropriate to MacDonald’s context: love of possessions—including friends, relatives and aspects of oneself *if these are regarded as possessions*—does distract from deeper, selfless love (*agape*).

Jesus summarises and closes this discourse almost as he began his previous one: by pointing out that “many that are first shall be last; and the last

first” (31).

## **Second Part of Author’s Response Essay (Responding to Second Round of Critical Comments)**

*O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!*

I guess it can be considered a frabjous day when you can finally bring some closure to a critical project. I will be able to callooh! and callay! once I respond to the final round of comments the readers supplied. First and foremost I want to thank all the readers who read with utmost care my article. If I were asked to revise the article, I would revise according to all the comments presented, for gaps and lapses in an argument can only be found when a work is subjected to such critical scrutiny.

*And the mome raths outgrabe: A Coda*

“Two objects . . . cannot exist in the same place at the same time!” So exclaims Vane to Mr Raven in *Lilith*. “Can they not?” asks Raven, “I did not know!—I remember now they do teach that with you. It is a great mistake—one of the greatest ever wiseacre made!” (20). Vane’s difficulty in understanding the seven dimensions in *Lilith* provides an apt coda to this critical discussion about MacDonald’s fantasy novel: when we interpret *Lilith* we should understand that there are simultaneous interpretations that often compete with—even negate—other interpretations. But taken together, they provide us with a holistic critical picture that becomes a kind of looking-glass into *Lilith*. In the paragraphs that follow I will briefly respond to the final comments of the critics who have sensitively read and subsequently critiqued my essay.

My initial response to Richard Reis was based upon the assumption that he did not endorse literary criticism he deemed obscure, that is, criticism focused on more contemporary critical theory like feminism and post-structuralism. But Reis’ primary concern is with audience: “John Pennington evidently misses my point, which is that the great majority of *North Wind* readers will find much of his article unintelligible. This is not a journal for literary critics only, it is equally for lay admirers of George MacDonald’s work and ideas.” Reis’ major complaint is that I need to define my critical terms more for the lay audience. On the one hand I agree with Reis completely, for the audience of *North Wind* is a hybrid one, ranging from MacDonald scholars (and Victorianists) to those lay admirers [67] that Reis identifies. I admit that for the latter audience my article (and this project in general) may confuse. On the other hand, a critical essay is designed for a specific audience, and I would

argue that what a specialist audience expects is something quite different than a general overview of *Lilith*. I must further admit that my intended audience is the literary critics. Having said this, however, I hope that the critical conversation that has taken place in this volume of *North Wind* will be interesting to all readers of MacDonald, for this critical enterprise was designed to reflect an often-neglected fact: that MacDonald is a nineteenth century writer who remains vital today.

Colin Manlove's final comments compliment those by Reis. He suggests that the critical debate focuses too heavily on the theoretical approach taken. "There is little notion that one might be learning something from him [Pennington] and still less of a community engaged in the shared pursuit of exploring literature." Manlove is correct to a large degree. After reading my initial responses to the critics, I realised that my "defence" centred more on my approach than on how *Lilith* may be better understood. Central to Manlove's overarching critique are two concerns: 1) "How appropriate are the intellectual abstractions of literary theory to a writer who said his work was beyond such things?" and 2) "Or again, since most modern criticism would rather talk of different textual realities than admit the notion of a transcendent one, what has it to say of books that try to convey Christian or even mystical experience?" These are central questions that this project does not adequately address. I think an answer to the first question could be framed as follows: no writer has the authority to claim that his or her work is beyond critical approach, especially when literary criticism necessarily must reflect the mindset(s) of a particular time and place. Literary theory is the parasite that feeds off MacDonald, but it is the host that *Lilith* itself feeds off. In other words, theory injects new life into a literary work, further demonstrating the work's enduring value. An answer to the second question is more difficult, and I would argue that there is not a satisfactory answer, especially for those defining MacDonald as a Christian writer. I might venture to say that in MacDonald's case the claim that he is only trying to promote a form of Christian mysticism is doing an injustice to him: he is a much more complex man than that. I would evoke C. S. Lewis again, who shows that an apologist for MacDonald can simultaneously relegate him into the second- or third-tier of canonical writers.

Rod McGillis contends that this critical experiment "confirm[s] the book's power to provoke," while suggesting that "we have yet to find a way of reading that does not reduce texts." Evoking Clifford Geertz' notion of thick reading, McGillis argues for a criticism that approaches such thick description. What you are reading in this volume of *North Wind* is an attempt at that thick



description [68] of *Lilith*. McGillis adds a new idea to the discussion by suggesting that female desire is at odds with male desire: “What MacDonald cannot do is imagine a truly female desire, as much as he may desire to do so.” Thus Lilith “challenges our sense of comfort.” This is true too, to paraphrase *King Lear*.

Of course, Deirdre Hayward would challenge McGillis’ binary oppositions of male versus female, desire, as she does with my essay’s focus on feminist self-postponement. She defends her “erased” terms of evil and good and suggests that MacDonald’s ultimate goal in *Lilith* is to find a “oneness with the Divine . . . , a state where all oppositions are reconciled.” I agree that MacDonald attempts to do this, but I contend that the Lilith legend is too great for him to silence into a oneness with God. Hayward’s view is that Lilith’s severed hand suggests that she is in the process of transforming into good—“What’ we call evil, is the only and best shape which . . . could be assumed by the best good” (*Phantastes* 324)—demonstrating that MacDonald must speak popularly of God as goodness and light as opposed to evil and darkness, otherwise the whole idea of a loving Deity becomes meaningless, as does the necessary “conditioning tension” with which he frames, and struggle to expand, his theological and metaphysical thought.

I once again agree with Hayward: MacDonald may desire to speak of God as goodness and light, but Lilith makes it impossible for him completely to do so, as she haunts the fringes, of the novel at the end, in process of becoming good, it seems; but this is a process that probably will never be complete—Lilith cannot be tamed. It is interesting that in the *Curdie* books MacDonald does not strive for such complete unity. *The Princess and Curdie* finds characters spiritually evolving or devolving, and the ending admits to Gwentystorm’s continual devolution to destruction. While MacDonald may intend Lilith to be a Lina figure, I do not sense that Lilith can reform like Lina, for she is made of material that defies. Hayward concludes that she embraces conclusions “which do not lead to closure, as they remain alive and breathing, emergent, and continually challenging at new levels.” I intended my essay to be that brand of interpretation. I can only hope that readers take it that way.

Final we come full circle to Adelheid Kegler’s response and John Docherty’s editorial contribution. What do I mean by “full circle”? Kegler and Docherty represent a more traditional approach to MacDonald studies (and that is not a “bad” thing, it is just a “different” approach). Kegler, quite frankly, rejects my argument because she believes a critical approach should “categorise the phenomena in question both in a more comprehensive way

and with less contradictions than other models.” To Kegler, great art has “true cognition,” a fundamental value and truth: Any criticism where “meaning is severed from truth and language from word” is suspect to her. She challenges my notion of (he [69] “game of criticism” as a “useful activity,” because it diminishes the value and importance of literature. I never meant any disrespect to the importance of critical debate by calling it a game that has some utilitarian outcome, but I do not believe, as Kegler does, that there is a definitive interpretation which comes from the context of the History of Thought *Lilith* creates such critical debate because the novel is slippery, is contradictory, “it challenges our sense of comfort,” to quote McGillis once again.

John Docherty’s fine end-comment resides in the critical realm that Kegler supports. His Jungian approach finds fault with any interpretation that “treats the figure of Lilith as an autonomous female, and not as an aspect of Vane and of every adult male.” He suggests that the novel is partly about “how the Lilith side of man can work towards the disintegration of the personality.” In effect he embraces the concepts of anima and animus of the collective unconscious that is ever present and unchanging: he embraces Eric Neumann’s Great Mother. Furthermore, Docherty meticulously traces the biblical echoes from the New Testament (primarily Mark) which allows him to conclude that “the whole of *Lilith* is a spiritual metaphor.” Docherty’s interpretation certainly adds to our understanding generally and of *Lilith* specifically; however, his interpretation would certainly be challenged by most feminist readings (and deconstructive ones too). If Lilith is seen as the anima of Vane, then her cosmogony is reduced, for she is made from the same materials as Adam—she is equal, and she must flee when she rejects the notion of subservience to Adam the male. Thus Lilith becomes the *femme fatale*, the tempting whore of Jungian analysis, not an independent self. It follows then, that Lilith is seen only in relation to Adam the masculine, and only as a destroying figure. Docherty, of course, argues for the balance of the masculine-feminine in Vane, but the privileged signifier remains the masculine. Gilbert and Gubar in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* are persuasive when they argue for the independence of Lilith.

I hope the readers of *North Wind* find this volume enlightening. I certainly found the project to be so. And I want to thank once again John Docherty, Deirdre Hayward, David Jasper, Adelheid Kegler, Colin Manlove, Rod McGillis and Richard Reis for their thoughtful and challenging comments. I could envision another go-around as we dig deeper and deeper into that complex work called *Lilith*. Maybe this critical enterprise should best be summed up not

by MacDonald's friend Lewis Carroll but by *Lilith* itself—we are finally faced with “The Endless Ending” of literary analysis. **[70]**