
Anne Hiebert Alton

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol36/iss1/8
This critical edition of George MacDonald’s first published novel (it followed his publication of a play in verse and his translation of Twelve of the Spiritual Songs of Novalis) provides a welcome addition to the existing body of MacDonald scholarship. Along with MacDonald’s primary text and a multitude of informative footnotes, the book includes a valuable introduction and note on the text; a brief chronology of MacDonald’s life and major publications; five appendices containing contextual and critical materials; and a select bibliography with biographical, bibliographical, and critical sources.

The introduction begins by establishing the historical and literary environments in which the novel first appeared, then takes the reader through the main points of the story, highlighting not only the action but also the significant sources, allusions, and underlying meanings. Among many good examples, one of the most interesting is the short section discussing Anodos’ episode on the island detailing the way that his ventures through the cottage’s four doors represent his “process of psychic cleansing” (xxiii). Pennington and McGillis establish the connection between the opening epigraph by Novalis and the overall structure of Anodos’ progression through Fairy Land as a series of interludes and stories rather than a directed journey, and their analysis serves as an organic explication rather than a typical academic summary of the text’s various thematic and ontological aspects. As such, it works extremely well to introduce Phantastes in a way that makes it accessible to a wide variety of readers, be they new students of fairy tales and fantasy or academic researchers already familiar with the novel, while still pointing out intriguing textual overtones and resonances. Their rationale for choosing the 1858 first edition as their copy-text rather than Greville MacDonald’s commemorative edition of 1905 is sound, and researchers will appreciate their brief overview of editorial principles and two-page list of substantive differences between the editions.
Pennington and McGillis’s scholarship particularly shines in their extensive footnotes, located throughout MacDonald’s text (at the bottom of pages, rather than as endnotes, which is much appreciated), that provide definitions for obscure words, clarifications for various passages, and information about a wide scope of topics, including literary and mythological sources, historical material, issues of influence, theoretical underpinnings, and critical commentary. They note that the footnotes are “primarily reader generated” (xlii) and perhaps this is one of the reasons for the text’s accessibility, for they range from the most minute points of etymology (such as the comment on variations of spacing between the lower-case “c” and the upper-case “D” in the name MacDonald), to broader contexts of Victorian culture, with short notes on Victorian church architecture, geology, and attitudes towards the tensions between science and poetry. Other footnotes include information about Greek and Egyptian mythology, the lore of flowers and precious stones, and citations for an enormous variety of authors, including Goethe, Poe, Tennyson, Shakespeare, and Dante, among innumerable others. One of the best examples of the editors’ delightful eclecticism appears in a footnote identifying German poet and dramatist Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller and connecting him to not only the English politician and writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton but also to the American fantasy writer Madeleine L’Engle and Charles Schulz’s Snoopy (124). Other footnotes provide theoretical connections to such figures as Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, and Mikhail Bakhtin, among others, as well as short critical commentary.

The Appendices begin with an explanatory note and translation of the Novalis Epigraph that opens the novel, followed by a selection of reviews from contemporary sources including the *Athenaeum*, *The Leader*, and the *Spectator*. The third Appendix provides literary context, with selections from Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*, Novalis and other German Romantic writers, several British Romantic poets including Wordsworth, Keats, and Coleridge, and influential illustrations from Blake and Cruikshank. While some of the texts might be familiar to readers, it is nevertheless interesting to review them or to read less familiar ones such as Adelbert von Chamisso’s *Peter Schlemihl* and to consider the ways in which, as the editors suggest, *Phantastes* enters a dialogue with these sources; in this context, Cruikshank’s illustrations seem clearly connected to the shadow in *Phantastes*, as does Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” with Anodos’ experience in the grotto. Appendix D, which contains selections on Fantasy and Realism in the 19th century,
similarly provides useful background, while Appendix E, which focuses on the illustrations of *Phantastes*, includes several images by Arthur Hughes and other illustrators as well as an informative original essay by Jan Susina considering the debate about whether the novel should be illustrated.

Overall, the editors are to be commended for providing such a comprehensive and highly accessible edition. Its scholarly underpinnings are impeccable, and yet it demonstrates a lightness of tone and absence of academic pretentiousness that make the book appealing to the widest range of audiences. If I have a quibble, it would be the book’s lack of an index: while this might not be necessary for MacDonald’s text itself, it could have been very useful for both the Appendices and the Footnotes—though perhaps this is taking pedantry too far. I strongly recommend this edition for all libraries as well as for any readers of George MacDonald or fantasy enthusiasts.