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Book Reviews

“Special Annotated Edition” of George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*. Ed. Nick Page. London, Colorado, and Hyderabad: Paternoster, 2008. 284 pages.

Fernando Soto

Readers interested in the fantasy works of George MacDonald may agree that an annotated edition of *Phantastes* was long due, perhaps 150 years over-due. Nick Page’s book may prove a helpful source of information for many readers interested in a better understanding of parts of *Phantastes*. On the other hand, this “Special Annotated Edition” of *Phantastes*, while perhaps welcomed by new comers and uncritical readers, does not seem to rise to the expectations created by such a long passage of time, nor by its sub-title. I will explain what I mean by attempting to examine some of the outward aspects of the book as well as some of its inner components.

This inexpensive edition has some desirable and attractive outward aspects. The inclusion of the illustrations of the 1905 edition of *Phantastes*, by Arthur Hughes—MacDonald’s long time friend and illustrator—adds to the book’s aesthetic appeal. This is supplemented by the raised, golden lettering of the title and tasteful photograph on the glossy cover, and what appears to be a good, strong binding. These components should make the book accessible, outwardly appealing, and long lasting.

The fact that someone set out to annotate this complex book is a positive move on its own, because it assumes that there is disparate research on MacDonald’s story that needs to be brought together, elucidated, and perhaps reconsidered. Hence, even as a partial compendium of the scholarly work performed thus far on *Phantastes*, it is a positive step, particularly for the benefit of those that are just beginning to be attracted to MacDonald’s “faery romance for men and women.” And although the Notes are at times few and far between, those included—particularly those devoted to the elucidation of MacDonald’s references to other writers and books—can be helpful, if not illuminating.

On the other hand, there are many errors and inconsistencies in this edition. I give a few examples: spelling errors, typos, and lay-out mistakes

(15, 31, 156, 172, 185, 269); the idiosyncratic use of, and at times a confusion with, the scholarly sources used (16, 23); and the inclusion of unnecessary notes, ones which supply information that is explicit in MacDonald's text (218-9), or material which seems counterintuitive or highly suspect, although it is provided in a somewhat dogmatic fashion (239). All but the last of these mistakes and oversights are perhaps easily overlooked, although this cannot be performed with as much facility with Page's opinions, often expressed as accepted facts. For instance, in the first page of his Introduction, he states: "[T]he best biography is Roland Hein's *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker*." A critical reader may ask, "is this the case?" and "how could anyone judge such a set of disparate texts with this high degree of accuracy?" Perhaps inspired by C. S. Lewis' superficial understanding of MacDonald's supposed third-rank use of "words," Page proceeds to denigrate much of the poetry in *Phantastes* (15) by claiming that one of the book's "faults" is MacDonald's "uneven poetry" (16). The questions "really?" and "how would one judge this with such certainty?" spring to mind. On the other hand, Page's notes imply or state things that are obviously mistaken or misleading, such as The Retreat was William Morris' residence before, not after, the MacDonald's lived there (27); Orcus is "the Latin name for "hell," while not stating that this is also the name for Pluto, Ceres' daughter's husband (185); MacDonald is preaching through *Phantastes* (19); the mark on the old woman's palm is "a stigmata...an obvious allusion to Christ" (209); and MacDonald includes the Christian concept of sin in the book (176, 200). Due to lack of space, I will deal only with the latter. In the whole book there appears to be one reference to sin. In the last words of Chapter 18, while Anodos is dreaming, he admits to being "almost glad I had "sinned." This, unlike Page's interpretation, seems hardly the type of a Christian understanding of "sin" we can easily apply to MacDonald.

Some of the above examples appear to point to an uncritical acceptance of a supposed central Christian message in MacDonald's *Phantastes*. This may be related to the motto of the publisher (Paternoster)—"thinking faith"—and perhaps to the book's expected Christian readership. This reading of the book as a Christian text is not well supported in the scholarship, and its propagation appears to rely more on the wishful thinking or biased assumptions of the author(s). Had MacDonald wanted to write a Christian fantasy for men and women, with a male God, sin, and a Christian message of salvation, he likely would have done so without the many references to secular texts, magic, multiple personal deaths and births, and a

constant reliance on pagan Greco-Roman myths.

Generally speaking there are three other related deficiencies in Page's Introduction and Notes. One of these is the lack of a thorough review of the critical literature devoted to *Phantastes*. There are several papers that have added greatly to our understanding of this complex text, which Page left out of his book. This is followed by a confusion of the sources that the annotator had at his disposal, particularly that related to Roderick McGillis' work. When sources are used in the Introduction or Notes, there are many spots where direct references to literary pieces—where the information originated—are not provided. This confusing activity is compounded by Page occasionally giving a full citation for the information he uses, and by inserting his own ideas in the Notes. I will give a few of the many possible examples of omissions, or the fumbling of information, below.

Page states in his Introduction: "*Phantastes* is a *Bildungsroman*, a story of personal development" (15). The writer does not provide an acknowledgement of Stephen Prickett's "From Bildungsroman to Death Romance: *Phantastes*, *Lilith*, and German Romanticism." Prickett's theory is located in Chapter Six of *Victorian Fantasy*, a book in Page's list of Secondary Sources. By omitting this key bit of information, Page appears to give the impression that this is his theory. The above is not an isolated incident: there seems to be more uses of others' works, than there are full or partial citations. Here are a few examples of some of Page's explicitly unaccredited or partially credited sources: references to John Docherty's theories—that MacDonald met Carroll in 1858 (16, 27, 32), as well as Docherty's idea that the beetles and rockets in Chapter IV are modeled on the Egyptian god Kephri pushing the sun disk (67)—are not mentioned; the omission of a reference to John Pennington's work—outlining *Phantastes*' impact on the rock band The Waterboys, particularly on their album *Room to Roam*—is somewhat glaring, both in Page's Note (30) and in his Secondary Sources section; and the almost direct, unaccredited quotation from William Raeper's *George MacDonald*, in the first Note of the book (39), also stands out. Almost two hundred pages later, the annotator gives the exact Raeper quotation and the proper citation (220). This seems a very roundabout method to account for the use of the slightly altered, unaccredited quotation in his first Note.

Although there is some helpful information in Nick Page's book, the many mistakes, omissions and mishandled references in his Introduction and Notes tilt the scales against a positive review of his handling of MacDonald's

complex work. It is hoped that if there is a second edition of this book, the above and other omissions and inconsistencies will be remedied. This should go some way to making this work not only welcomed by the novice, but also embraced by critical readers and researchers of MacDonald's books.

[Note: Page has produced a "Special Annotated Edition" of *Lilith*, which will be reviewed in the next volume of *North Wind*.]