

**PHANTASTES: A
FAERIE ROMANCE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649097081

Phantastes: a faerie romance by George MacDonald

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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GEORGE MACDONALD

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FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



GEORGE MACDONALD'S
PHANTASTES • WITH A PREFACE
BY GREVILLE MACDONALD, M.D.

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LONDON: J. M. DENT & SONS, LTD.
NEW YORK: E. P. DUTTON & CO.

INTRODUCTION

Phantastes was George MacDonald's earliest prose work. It appeared in 1858—the year in which Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Carlyle's *Frederick the Great* were first published. More definitely than his dramatic poem, *Within and Without* (1857), or the earlier *Poems* (1855), *Phantastes* proclaims the radiant imaginative power that dominated all its author's best work, whether we look for it in his fairy tales or in *The Diary of an Old Soul*, whether in the theology of his novels or in the most mystical of all his writings, *Lilith*. To him the imagination stood highest of all the faculties. It is the soul of Art—the power of creating symbolic utterance for Ideas, which, without it, could have no means of presentation. It is, no less, the power of vision; of seeing, that is, Truth revealed in every form of beauty. Granted this high office of the imagination, then the fairy tale is, in so far as it is Art, revelation; even though its significance is not to be defined in terms of precise allegory, parable, or fable. When Anodos steps from his bed into Fairyland, we know that Fairyland was always about him waiting to be stepped into. When he reaches the clearing in the wood, wherein "the trees seemed all to have an expression of conscious mystery, as if they said to themselves, 'we could, an' if we would!'" and finds a woman preparing vegetables for dinner, who tells him he must have fairy blood in him or he could never have got so far into the wood, it becomes quite plain that the ash tree's greed and the fairies' games are much more real than the vulgar world that will not let us step outside its heavy bars. Though Anodos sets out to find his ideal and comes home again rejoicing that he had lost his shadow—the maleficent part of him that vulgarises all it touches

by darkening the Light that lighteth every man and transfigures all, the Romance is no allegory with a secret moral that could be more fittingly told in balder words. Nevertheless it is all symbolic utterance; and if we accept Emerson's definition of allegory, we must give this book a highest place as such. "The moment," says that writer, "our discourse is inflamed with passion or exalted by thought, it clothes itself in images. . . . Hence good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories. . . . This imagery is proper creation."¹ Perhaps allegory fails as Art only when its discourse is so little inflamed and exalted that it invites and demands intellectual interpretation. It surely succeeds when by its beauty we know its worth and the hopelessness of trying to reveal its secret to the wise, when the babes understand it readily.

Once a lady, well known in the educational world, asked the author of *Phantastes* if he could tell her in a few words what might be its meaning? His reply was to the effect that he had written the book with the sole object of giving her its meaning. Herein one may perceive one purpose of the fairy tale in general: to serve, namely, as antithesis to the text-book. The latter finds advertisement for the lark's skeleton rather than for its song; yet, because the bird's place in the empyrean is more necessary to its lover than a shelf in a natural history museum, it is quite necessary that fairy tales should have prominence in our education. The unbeliever, who is incapable of finding fairy tale in the mustard seed, asks for Truth in a nutshell. Dogma, however servicable as an algebraic sign, becomes anti-Christ as soon as it claims to *contain* the unknown quantity. Art ceases to be such when it is meaningless; yet its claims are absurd if it admit that Truth can be stated in terms other than its own.

The title of this Faerie Romance is a little puzzling; and I must confess that the quotation from Phineas Fletcher's "Purple Island" is not wholly illuminating. A reference, however, to the context leaves no doubt in the mind that Fletcher's *Phantastes* stands for Imagination. Three great councillors rule the Castle of the Mind. The first of these

¹ *Nature*, chap. iv.

apparently is Judgment and the third Memory. The following refers to the second:—

“ The next that in the Castle’s front is plac’t,
Phantastes hight; his yeares are fresh and green,
His visage old, his face too much defac’t
With ashes pale, his eyes deep sunken been
 With often thoughts and never slakt intention:
 Yet he the fount of speedy apprehension,
Father of wit, the well of arts, and quick invention.

But in his private thoughts and busy brain
Thousand thinnè forms, and idle fancies flit;
The three-shap’t Sphinx, and direfull Harpyes train,
Which in the world had never being yet:
 Oft dreams of fire and water, loose delight;
 And oft arrested by some ghastly sprite,
Nor can he think, nor speak, nor move for great affright.

Phantastes from the first all shapés deriving,
In new abilitiments can quickly dight;
Of all materiall and grosse parts depriving,
Fits them unto the noble Prince’s sight;
 Which soon as he hath view’d with searching eye,
 He straight commits them to his Treasure,
Which old Humnestes keeps, Father of Memorie.”¹

GREVILLE MACDONALD.

¹ *The Poems of Phineas Fletcher, B.D.*, Fuller’s Worthies Library, 1869, vol. iv. p. 181.

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“ Es lassen sich Erzählungen ohne Zusammenhang, jedoch mit Association, wie Träume, denken; Gedichte, die bloss wohlklingend und voll schöner Worte sind, aber auch ohne allen Sinn und Zusammenhang, höchstens einzelne Strophen verständlich, wie Bruchstücke aus den verschiedenartigsten Dingen. Diese wahre Poesie kann höchstens einen allegorischen Sinn im Grossen, und eine indirecte Wirkung, wie Musik haben. Darum ist die Natur so rein poetisch, wie die Stube eines Zauberers, eines Physikers, eine Kinderstube, eine Polter- und Vorrathskammer. . . .

“ Ein Märchen ist wie ein Traumbild ohne Zusammenhang. Ein Ensemble wunderbarer Dinge und Begebenheiten, z. B. eine Musikalische Phantasie, die harmonischen Folgen einer Aeolsharfe, die Natur selbst.

“ In einem echten Märchen muss alles wunderbar, geheimnissvoll und zusammenhängend sein; alles belebt, jeder auf eine andere Art. Die ganze Natur muss wunderbar mit der ganzen Geisterwelt gemischt sein; hier tritt die Zeit der Anarchie, der Gesetzlosigkeit, Freiheit, der Naturstand der Natur, die Zeit von der Welt ein. . . . Die Welt des Märchens ist die, der Welt der Wahrheit durchaus entgegengesetzte, und eben darum ihr so durchaus ähnlich, wie das Chaos der vollendeten Schöpfung ähnlich ist.”—NOVALIS.