

C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald – Phantastes: II

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This morning I picked up George Sayer's, *Jack*, and saw that he does a much better job of interacting with Lewis and MacDonald that I'll be able to do – so let me point you in that direction if you want to pursue the subject – but having said that – I'll still venture forth.

Lewis was living with his tutor Kirkpatrick when he read *Phantastes*. Kirkpatrick was, as I recall, an atheist. I find it interesting that in the midst of his time with Kirkpatrick that he encounters *Phantastes*. His time with Kirkpatrick was wonderful, and if memory serves me well Kirkpatrick started Lewis off with Homer in Greek – there we have romance as well. So even if Kirkpatrick was an atheist it would seem that he had a sense of “beauty” about him. (Are these speculations valid?)

MacDonald idealizes women in his writings. Better yet, if we consider *Lilith* (which I intend to reread), MacDonald has strong women in his writings. MacDonald works with at least two types of women, the wise older woman and the idealized younger woman. *Lilith* would be yet a third type of woman, beautiful evil – though that may be simplistic, I really need to reread that book – and let's add the Ash-Tree in *Phantastes* to the category of evil women.

The wise older women encountered in *Phantastes* would have spoken to Lewis of his mother and his nurse. Lewis's loss of both at an early age was a life-defining experience – *Phantastes* presumably would have evoked their memory, their presence, and the joy and beauty associated with that innocent season of life. Also, consider that after the death of his mother that Lewis was sent to England and the hell of Robert Capron's boarding school – what a shattering of joy and beauty and hopes and dreams! With Kirkpatrick Lewis finds true learning, stability, intellectual challenge – and lo – in reading MacDonald while with Kirkpatrick he once again senses “joy”. Of course he has no idea that MacDonald is a Christian – but the return journey has begun.

The idealized younger women in *Phantastes* may have been a counter balance to Lewis's preoccupation with women as sexual objects; of perhaps even misogamy as a reaction against the death-abandonment of his mother? Lewis and his friend, Arthur Greeves, discussed and fantasized about some pretty dark sexual things; beyond that, as far as I know, we have speculation. I raise this not to speculate, and I know that many are uncomfortable with approaching this subject in general or

with Lewis in particular, but the pre-Christian Lewis was hardly a saint, as he would readily confess, and while some elements of his pre-Christian life matured in an ethical fashion, others got worse – he was a snob and a liar to name two elements that got worse. This is a testimony to the grace and redemption of God – we ought not to avoid the facts, we have only to read Lewis’s letters.

My sense is that when Lewis came to Christ that his moral and ethical life experienced an immediate change – and that he continued to work through these things with a deep awareness of the grace of Christ towards him and in him.

Both kinds of women in *Phantastes*, the older wise woman and the younger idealized woman, speak of something higher, something nobler, which in turn leads to joy and beauty – to that which is invisible and which is also enduring.

There are also five prominent men in *Phantastes*; the knight with the tarnished armor, Cosmo in the fairy story, the two brothers with whom Anodos (the protagonist in *Phantastes*) joins in brotherhood and battle against giants; the fifth is Anodos.

The knight’s armor is tarnished because he has fallen victim to the Ash-Tree – but he will redeem himself through noble actions, through redeeming others, and attain to true love with an idealized woman.

Cosmo is a character in a story read by Anodos. Cosmo gives his life to free a woman he loves (yet another woman in *Phantastes*) from a curse.

The two brothers give their lives to restore the honor of their father, a king, whose land is under the tyranny of three giants who are holding hostages. One of the brothers is engaged to be married but is willing to risk this deep love in battle – so again love for a woman enters into the story, though in this case it is not a driving force.

Anodos, the fifth man, well, *Phantastes* is about his journey through Fairy Land. This journey commences when he turns twenty-one years old and it lasts, in man’s natural time, twenty-one days – he learns this when he returns to his own land. It is a journey of maturation, of testing, of triumph and failure, of heart-searching, of an exploration of selfish and unselfish love – and if you’ve read the book I’m sure you can add other elements.

Considering Lewis’s enchantment with epic story and myth it is little wonder *Phantastes* had an immediate and unfolding effect on him. What George MacDonald began, Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien would complete years later as

the three friends traversed Addison's Walk in Oxford. Dyson and Tolkien would bring into focus for Lewis that which he undoubtedly already knew at some level – that it is all one story, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a longing for our home, a return to “joy”. From Boxen to *Phantastes* to Fairy Land to Narnia – not a bad pilgrimage at all, not a bad pilgrimage at all.

I have never concealed the fact that I regarded George MacDonald as my master; indeed, I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him. – C.S. Lewis