The Structure of *Phantastes* and a Lesson in Humility

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Some may believe that fantasy exists as a genre without structure. If the laws of time, space, and gravity cannot constrain the plot, how could something as simple as structure do so? And yet many of the greatest works of fantasy are also the most carefully plotted and structurally organized. J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance, demonstrates several discernible structural elements that serve to set free, not constrain, the wonder of Middle Earth. Nearly a century earlier, another great work of fantasy,*Phantastes*, by George MacDonald, used elements of structure to free the magic of Fairy Land.

Some readers, however, have failed to appreciate the structure of MacDonald’s work, suggesting that it lacks any discernible structure at all. In his excellent essay, “The Structure of George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*,” Adrian Gunther challenges such positions and claims that “there can be no doubt that the principles of structural form underlying this book are both elaborate and extraordinarily self-conscious and some understanding of these principles is essential for a true appreciation of it” (Gunther, p. 43). Gunther argues convincingly that MacDonald structures the work around key events that occur in the Fairy Palace at the center of the book. The opening and closing sections in Anodos’ own world serve as an appropriate prologue and epilogue to his Fairy Land journey, and the center of the book is its most lengthy section, thus highlighting the time Anodos spends at the Fairy Palace. Gunther goes on to explore how the Fairy Palace “offers him [Anodos] a crucial glimpse into what transcends and gives meaning to his suffering, a glimpse which colours all his experiences thereafter, but also retrospectively places his previous adventures in their true context” (Gunther, p. 44). Consequently, the central placement of the Fairy Palace at the center of the work likewise looks retrospectively at
his previous experiences and prospectively at his future adventures and serves as an interpretive lens for the book as a whole.

Building upon Gunther’s excellent work on structure, two additional structural elements that Gunther fails to discuss play an important role in the story, namely the cottages that bracket Anodos’ first foray in the Fairy Forest and the four-door cottage Anodos encounters later in the novel. On account of space limitations, this essay seeks only to explore the first of these structural elements. This essay will propose that MacDonald creates intentional parallels between the two cottages as a structural element to bracket Anodos’ first forest experience, an experience in which he first meets the knight, in an attempt to highlight for the reader that Anodos’ transformation throughout the book will come by learning to live in imitation of the knight.

Two stories, with their striking similarities, bracket Anodos’ first entrance into the forest of Fairy Land. When Anodos first enters Fairy Land he finds himself on the outskirts of a forest. As he begins to enter the outer areas of the forest he encounters a young girl who gives him a warning about the types of trees he will encounter and which ones he can trust (MacDonald, p. 11). Soon, Anodos finds himself at a cottage and he meets the mother of this young girl (MacDonald, p. 12). The woman invites him into the home and likewise warns Anodos about the ogre (i. e., the Ash Tree). As Anodos sits in the home, he sees a book blocking a window that captures his attention, and he asks if he may read the book. The book is a collection of “tales of Fairy Land, and olden times, and the Knights of King Arthur’s table” (MacDonald, p. 15). Anodos focuses particularly on one story, the story of Sir Percivale and Sir Galahad, which he recounts at length before

1To be clear, Gunther does mention these on pages 44-45, but he does not provide further discussion on their significance.
being interrupted (MacDonald, p. 15-16). Soon after he is interrupted, and after a
discussion about fairies and their flowers, Anodos sets off at nightfall into the forest
(MacDonald, p. 23). After a series of adventures that befall Anodos in the forest, he once
again emerges from the forest and finds himself on the outskirts of the forest looking at a
“matronly woman” (MacDonald, p. 48). The woman brings Anodos indoors, and Anodos,
seeing the concern and care the woman showed, tells her the story of the Alder Tree. She
attempts to comfort him, and by the time her husband returns home he could hardly
believe in Fairy Land. However, when he looks toward the chimney-corner, he sees a
little girl with a little book—*The History of Graciosa and Percinet*—on her knee, and he
“believed in Fairy Land again” (MacDonald, p. 50). These two scenes bear a striking
resemblance, with similarities including entering and exiting the forest, finding a cottage
on the outskirts of the forest, dialoguing with a woman and a daughter about dangerous
trees, and the presence of a book about knights. Given these clear parallels, the reader
should note how MacDonald is bracketing Anodos’ first entrance in Fairy Land in order
to highlight the events that occur that night.

The narrative of Anodos’ night in Fairy Land within these bracketing stories
contains some of the more compelling encounters in the whole novel. During this night,
Anodos encounters three trees. The first tree terrifies him with its shadows and its pursuit
through the woods (MacDonald, p. 27-29). When he reaches the second tree, the beech,
she says, “Do not fear the goblin; he dares not hurt you now” (MacDonald, p. 29). His
initial encounter, then, seems to be with the Ash (or a similarly dangerous tree), and then
an encounter with the trustworthy Beech. Upon leaving the Beech in the morning,
Anodos encounters a lady in marble that he manages to free with his song (MacDonald,
p. 36-40). However, the lady leaves, and Anodos chases after her. Before traveling far, however, Anodos encounters a knight who bears the resemblance of Sir Percival from the story he read in the cottage. Indeed, the knight himself makes this comparison when he asks if Anodos has read the story of Sir Percival and the Alder Tree. He adds, “As it befell to him, so has it befallen to me” (MacDonald, p. 41). The knight gives Anodos a warning to avoid the allure of the Alder Tree, and Anodos is convinced that he will heed the warning. However, Anodos almost immediately falls into the trap, thinking that the woman he sees is his marble lady. Before long, Anodos finds himself trapped by the Alder who prepares to hand him over to the Ash. Anodos is only saved by the unsuspecting blow of an axe that the reader later learns came from the knight (MacDonald, p. 43-47, 138). After this encounter, Anodos leaves and wanders out of the forest and into the second cottage. Between the two narratives of the cottage, then, is a story of Anodos’ failure that imitates the knight’s own previous failure. Moreover, MacDonald emphasizes the knight in three ways: the Percival story before entering the wood, the mention of the Percival connection when Anodos meets the knight, and Anodos’ salvation on account of the knight’s brave action. The knight, therefore, stands at the beginning, middle, and end of this journey. Furthermore, Anodos seems to be reliving the knight’s failures. This message, then, stands at the heart of the forest excursion that is bracketed structurally by these cottage stories.

The most intriguing aspect of this revelation is that the rest of Phantastes seems to bear out the significance of the Anodos/knight/Percival connection. If the larger work bears out this connection, then recognizing the way the structural elements of the cottages bracket the introduction of this connection would be a helpful insight into the meaning
and message of the story on several levels. Not only do both Anodos and the knight get fooled by the Alder, but the two have a number of other key parallels and connections throughout the story that suggest that Anodos’ journey is in many ways an imitation of, or a reliving of, the knight’s own story. One of the key connections between these two characters is their mutual love for the Marble Lady. Although the Marble Lady marries the knight, she has a genuine love for Anodos, so her reciprocal love for the two joins the characters as well (MacDonald, p. 138). Another parallel between the two characters is their loss of pride and their discovery of humility. Upon first meeting, the knight recounts to Anodos: “I that was proud am humble now” (MacDonald, p. 41).² Pride, too, is a besetting sin of Anodos. Throughout the story, one of the key aspects of the narrative is Anodos’ constant shadow, which is closely linked with Anodos’ pride. For example, when Anodos finally loses his shadow late in the novel, he rejoices, saying: “Ere long, I learned that it was not myself, but only my shadow, that I had lost. I learned that it is better, a thousand-fold, for a proud man to fall and be humbled, than to hold up his head in his pride and fancied innocence” (MacDonald, p. 166). Finally, the knight’s heroic act in saving Anodos from the Ash and the Alder³ is reciprocated by Anodos when he saves the knight from the spell of the worshipers. As the knight and Anodos stand watching these worshipers, Anodos observes the events and is confident of an evil presence. Anodos recounts as the narrator: “I could not endure that my master should be deceived,” and Anodos concocts a plan, puts it into action, and manages to break the spell and save the knight through his bravery (MacDonald, p. 177-179).

²Note that this occasion happens between the structural brackets of the cottage stories this paper is exploring.

³The story is recorded on page 47, and pages 138-139 confirm that it was, in fact, the knight who saved Anodos.
These parallels demonstrate how several key aspects of Anodos’ journey are bound up in the story of the knight and his journey. Moreover, the structural bracketing of the two cottage stories helps highlight the initial introduction of the knight and Anodos’ connection to him. Consequently, the reader can see how MacDonald uses the cottage scenes as a bracketing device to highlight Anodos’ reliving of the knight’s story, which becomes a key theme throughout the book. The subsequent parallels between Anodos and the knight, therefore, should be read through the lens of this relationship that comes into clearer focus when the reader notices this structural bracketing. The reader, then, is able to discern the heart of MacDonald’s meaning: like the knight, Anodos must learn how to lose his pride and be humbled if he is to grow up into true manhood. Indeed, this is Anodos’ realization when he loses his shadow: “I learned that he that will be a hero, will barely be a man; that he that will be nothing but a doer of his work, is sure of his manhood” (MacDonald, p. 166).

Although readers will likely see parallels between Anodos and the knight, the structural bracketing of the two cottages helps provide an interpretive lens for these parallels. As Anodos is reliving the knight’s story between these two accounts of the cottages, so also must he relive the knight’s story of lost pride and found humility. Brilliantly, MacDonald uses the “constraints” of structure to set free the message of the novel: he who will be a good man, must first become humble.
References
