



I found myself in
a little cave

Arthur Hughes, 'I Found
Myself In a Little Cave',
*Phantastes: A Faerie Romance
for Men and Women* by
George MacDonald, 1905.

Fairyland's Gothic offspring: The Maid of the Alder Tree as an arboreal femme fatale in George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858)

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George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858) follows the male protagonist Anodos on his strange, dream-like journey through a fantastic world called Fairy Land on a quest to spiritual ennoblement. Instead of a peaceful Arcadia or 'a land of heartbreakingly beautiful forests and glens,' as Melody Green describes it, the Fairy Land in *Phantastes* is closer to what Tolkien described as Faërie in his lecture/essay 'On Fairy Stories': 'Faërie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold.'¹ It is 'filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords.'² The unwary protagonist of *Phantastes*, Anodos, indeed encounters enchanting yet perilous beauty in the form of the Maid of the Alder; MacDonald's unique example of a Gothic fairy.

Previous academic reflections on MacDonald's female characters have noted the sexual allure of demonic women, especially in his 1895 novel *Lilith*, and identified the Maid of the Alder's function as a *femme fatale* or as the 'archetypal female figure' of the 'temptress' who embodies the negative side of the Jungian anima.³ However, the Maid of the Alder has received little close attention with regard to her Gothic dimension, her relation to fairy lore, or her function as an embodiment of the dangerous aspects of nature.

In this article I am going to investigate the Alder Maid as a Gothic fairy in more detail. First, I am going to describe the various fairies of Fairy Land in order to draw attention to similarities and differences in form and behaviour to other fairy creatures in the narrative. Particular attention will be paid here to the flower fairies and the tree fairies in *Phantastes*.

The second and main part of the analysis is devoted to the Maid of the Alder's body and her function as a Gothic *femme fatale*. As Marie Mulvey-Roberts argues,

the female Gothic body has developed through the Madonna/whore duality, incarceration, fragmentation, hybridity and sexuality, while femininity itself has been demonised in Gothic literature by way of the *femme fatale*, man-made monster, vampire and Medusa.⁴

I will show how the Maid of the Alder's body is invested with many of these Gothic images that serve to make her a powerful paragon of the literary *femme fatale*. As a hybrid creature that is half human and half tree, the Maid of the Alder is moreover strongly rooted in nature and folklore. Hence I will concentrate on the natural features of alder trees as well as their folkloric associations in order to shed light on possible reasons for the choice of this particular tree species for her character. The Alder Maid's curious hollow back relates her to Scandinavian elves and fairies, especially the Danish *elle-maids* and Norwegian *huldras*. Their appearance and behaviour will consequently be compared to that of the Maid of the Alder. Since the Maid of the Alder is specified as a fairy *femme fatale* with magic power, I will explore intertextual links to literary works such as Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, the ballad of 'Thomas the Rhymer', and John Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' as possible influences for MacDonald in this respect.

Finally, the Alder Maid's human/tree hybridity provokes questions of man's ambivalent relationship to female sexuality and nature in general. The concluding part of the analysis will therefore discuss the Alder Maid's personification of nature's seductive and destructive potential and draw attention to the problems such a feminisation of nature entails. I will summarise the results of the analysis to give a comprehensive picture of this Gothic fairy's literary and folklore heritage and her function in *Phantastes*.

Types of fairies in *Phantastes*

Fairy Land is populated by various kinds of fairies. During a brief sojourn in a forest cottage, Anodos observes the activities of tiny flower fairies in the cottage garden:

The whole garden was like a carnival, with tiny, gaily decorated forms, in groups, assemblies, processions, pairs or trios, moving stately on, running about wildly, or sauntering hither or thither. From the cups or bells of tall flowers, as from balconies, some looked down on the masses below, now bursting with laughter, now grave as owls; but even in their deepest solemnity, seeming only to be waiting for the arrival of the next laugh.⁵

This passage clearly shows the close affinity between fairies and flowers. Anodos even asserts that 'the flowers seem a sort of houses to them, or outer bodies, which they can put on or off when they please.'⁶ The comparison of the fairies' activities to a carnival evokes

notions of Bakhtin's carnivalesque mode in the sense of a chaotic subversion of human systems of belief and codes. In appearance and behaviour, the flower fairies thus largely correspond to the 'flower-and-butterfly minuteness' Tolkien railed against and for whose popularisation he held Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Michael Drayton's *Nymphidia* partly responsible.⁷ Blake's illustrations for Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* and his accounts of fairy funerals and thistle fairies may have been another major source of influence in this respect, as John Docherty argues.⁸

In contrast to the flower fairies, the tree fairies in *Phantastes* seem to be imaginatively indebted to the dryads from classical mythology and to Celtic fairy lore which informed works like Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and the ballads of 'Tam Lin' or 'Thomas the Rhymer'. The fairies or elves in these works are of human size yet possess supernatural powers and an enchanting or uncanny aura. Apart from various literary works, George MacDonald would have had recourse to several publications on fairies resulting from an increased fascination with folklore all over Europe, such as Thomas Keightley's *Fairy Mythology* (1828), Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802), Benjamin Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* (1851), Thomas Crofton Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825), and the German Romantic folk and fairy tales.

In *Phantastes*, three such tree fairies feature more prominently – the Beech, the Ash, and the Maid of the Alder. Before Anodos actually meets any of them, he is taught a lesson in tree lore by the young woman. She identifies Oak, Elm and Beech as trustworthy, the Birch as young and volatile, but warns Anodos to 'shun the Ash and the Alder'.⁹ Her knowledge proves correct as the Beech later saves and protects Anodos whereas Ash and Alder are bent on his destruction. Their bodies usually look like the trees of the eponymous species yet they can move, are capable of human speech and can take on a more humanoid form so that Anodos is repeatedly confused over whether the Beech is tree or woman and he is fooled by the Maid of the Alder's deceptive human form.¹⁰

As different as these kinds of fairies may seem, Anodos is informed that the tree and flower fairies 'are of the same race'.¹¹ They share a strong physical connection to nature and hedonistic impulses unbridled by human codes of morality. As a consequence, the fairies in *Phantastes* are associated with inordinate violence and death.

Even though the flower fairies initially act like innocent children at play, Anodos witnesses the fairy of calceolaria murdering the already moribund Primrose with a bite for flimsy reasons. The serious action of murder is rendered ludicrous by its transmission in a childish song-dialogue between the fairies and the murderer is simply scolded like a naughty child. Even the funeral for Primrose is ridiculed because the fairies resume their frolics immediately afterwards as if nothing had happened.¹² The underlying motivation for almost any of their actions is fun because 'they like fun better than anything else'.¹³ Thus, the flower fairies' actions – in the Bakhtinian sense of the carnivalesque – ridicule human moral codes by trivialising murder and mocking funeral rites.

The Ash's primary motivation for hunting Anodos is 'a grasping desire to possess'.¹⁴ As the Beech explains to Anodos:

They [ash trees] are all disagreeable selfish creatures . . . but this one has a hole in his heart that nobody knows of but one or two; and he is always trying to fill it up, but he cannot. That must be what he wanted you for.¹⁵

This need to fill his own metaphysical void is often conveyed by means of comparisons to corpse-figures with an insatiable hunger and particular emphasis on the Ash's groping claw-like hands. One of the first glimpses of the Ash reminds Anodos of 'what [he] had heard of vampires', corpse-like with rather handsome features but with eyes that 'were alive, yet not with life. They seemed lighted up with an infinite greed'.¹⁶ After his encounter with the Maid of the Alder, the Ash appears with 'ghoul-eyes', and with 'the hideous hand outstretched, like a beast of prey'.¹⁷ As a means of protection against the Ash, the Beech gives Anodos a girdle of her leaves that resembles a chastity belt.¹⁸ This indicates that the Ash may be read as a projection of Anodos' own selfishness and sexual possessiveness at the beginning of the narrative which he needs to learn to control. Significantly, Anodos loses this belt in his encounter with the Maid of the Alder, whose chief hedonistic impulse is possession too – yet in an entirely sexual sense.¹⁹ Ash and Alder are therefore examples of 'the metaphor of "the beast within the human"' – the innate animalistic impulses that threaten to govern human behaviour if not held in check by social norms.²⁰ The Alder Maid's role as a *femme fatale* corroborates the impression of a character operating outside socially acceptable boundaries.

The Maid of the Alder as a Gothic *femme fatale*

'Thy lips, like worms, / Travel over my cheek'. These lines from William Motherwell's poem 'The Demon Lady' preface chapter VI, in which Anodos meets the Maid of the Alder.²¹ Both the title and the lines already foreshadow the image of a *femme fatale* due to the interlacing of erotic imagery and notions of death and decay.

In the preceding chapters of the narrative, Anodos had been warned about the Maid by various characters such as the knight and the girl from the cottage – both virtuous characters Anodos had met on his journey. The knight's adventure with the Maid has stained his reputation; this is symbolised by the coat of rust on his armour. His misfortune mirrors the story about Sir Percivale, which Anodos had read in the cottage. This already contained important features of 'the damosel of the alder tree', such as 'fair words and false countenance', her 'beguil[ing]' behaviour and her leading the man away.²² In addition, the cottage girl warns Anodos that the Alder 'will smother you with her web of hair, if you let her near you at night'.²³ The web of hair indicates entrapment and mesmerising beauty. It

furthermore evokes the snake hair of the gorgon Medusa – one of the earliest instantiations of the *femme fatale* motif, 'who encodes the perils of sexual autonomy and aberration'.²⁴ Since the Maid of the Alder also represents sexual temptation on Anodos' way towards spiritual ennoblement, she adopts the typical function of the *femme fatale*, which is to 'stand in the way of the male hero's quest, providing an immediate goal that distracts the protagonist from the sacred one'.²⁵ Clearly fashioned as a *femme fatale* before her first actual appearance, the Maid of the Alder entraps the gullible Anodos in an opportune moment – when he is full of desire for his marble lady.

In chapter VI, Anodos pursues the marble woman with whom he has fallen hopelessly in love. When he sees a woman in the forest, Anodos mistakes her to be his beloved, not knowing it is the deceptive Maid of the Alder. Like the marble woman, the Alder Maid is described as a translucent white figure with the sweetest voice and a girlish figure that leaves an 'impression of intense loveliness' on Anodos,²⁶ but she is also intensely erotic. Her 'delicious laugh' as 'of one who has just received something long and patiently desired' significantly 'ends in a low musical moan' and she leads Anodos to a classical *locus amoenus* – her earthy grotto, which alludes to female genitalia.²⁷ In there, Anodos eventually succumbs to her charms and forgets about the outside world: 'And we had met at last in this same cave of greenery, while the summer night hung round us heavy with love, and the odours that crept through the silence from the sleeping woods were the only signs of an outer world that invaded our solitude'.²⁸ Anodos's being lured to the Alder Maid's grotto thus invokes the motif of fairy abduction.

Despite his eager responses to her advances, Anodos notices from the beginning that there is something strange about his companion: Her touch feels cold, he can never see her clearly and she carefully avoids showing him her back.²⁹ This strange detail recalls the Beech tree's warning to 'try walk around them' if Anodos should see others like her.³⁰

The reason for this is presented the following morning when Anodos sees an object which 'looked like an open coffin set up on one end' but which is in fact 'a rough representation of the human frame, only hollow, as if made of decaying bark torn from a tree.' As soon as the thing turns around, Anodos recognises his 'enchantress' but with 'dead lustreless eyes' and her rosy light replaced by 'a pale greenish hue'.³¹ John Patrick Pazdziora argues that the green colour 'identifies her as one of the fairy folk' but it could also emphasise her corpse-like look.³² This nightmarish vision is further exacerbated since she is about to deliver Anodos into the murderous hands of the Ash after she had effectively rid Anodos of his protective belt.

It is striking that the Alder Maid's body is verbally dismembered in this passage with particular emphasis on her hollow back, her colour and 'her dead lustreless eyes'.³³ This focus on individual body parts, especially those associated with female sexuality, contribute to a monstrous distortion and generalisation of the female body in 'an erasure of individuality and denial of integral personhood. Fragmentation is conducive to hybridity, the stuff of monstrosity'.³⁴ Her hollow back, in particular, is regarded with horror.

Similar to the hole-hearted Ash, the Maid's hollow back suggests unwholesomeness in a physical but also metaphysical sense. In his analysis of George MacDonald's *Lilith*, Dieter Petzold argues that monsters in MacDonald are generally depicted as unwholesome creatures to signify a lower level of moral development, 'perhaps in particular the human instinctive nature, which, to MacDonald as Victorian moralist, is suspect.'³⁵ The Maid's rotten core might thus symbolise her as well as Anodos' own moral corruption.

The images of the gaping hole and the torn bark furthermore invite interpretations of the Maid's back as a *vagina dentata*, 'a horrific image conveying the dread that the female will eat or castrate the male during sexual intercourse.'³⁶ Camille Paglia even speaks of '[w]oman's latent vampirism' because '[m]etaphorically, every vagina has secret teeth, for the male exits as less than when he entered.'³⁷ Such sexual anxieties about the draining of male power through the female body underlie the frequent link between the *femme fatale* and predatory monsters such as vampires and gorgons. Even euphemisms like *la petite mort* for sexual orgasm stress the perceived interconnection between sex and death. In *Phantastes*, the Alder Maid's sexuality poses an existential threat to Anodos which culminates in his post-coital, almost oxymoronic impression of the Maid of the Alder as a 'walking Death.'³⁸

Her hollow back and the *femme fatale* motif relate the Maid of the Alder to seductive female elves from Scandinavian folklore such as the *elle-maid*, *huldra*, *skogsrå*, and others. Despite some geographical variation, they share the features of physical beauty and attractiveness, a deformed back and a symbiotic relationship with the woods and marshes in which they live. In her typology of fairy creatures, Katherine Briggs draws on William Craigie's *Scandinavian Folklore* (1896) for her description of such 'Wood Elves': 'The females had pretty, smiling faces, but were hollow at the back, like the trunk of a hollow tree.'³⁹ Chronologically, MacDonald would have needed earlier sources than Craigie. He is likely to have found them in Thomas Keightley's *Fairy Mythology* (1828) and Benjamin Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* (1851), who are strongly indebted to the Danish folktale collector Just Mathias Thiele. Both publications preceded *Phantastes* by several years. Keightley's book proved particularly popular in the 19th century and underwent several reprintings and revised editions (for example, in 1833, 1850 and 1878).

In Keightley's folktale collection, the Danish 'Ellefolk or Elve-people' are said to 'live in the Elle-moors'. From the front the female is 'of a fair attractive countenance, but behind she is hollow like a dough-trough'. Men should be wary 'for it is very difficult to resist her' and her dance in the moonshine has the power to enchant.⁴⁰ This description is followed by several stories about human encounters with Elle-Maids that repeat the characteristics, such as 'The Elle-Maid near Ebeltoft' as well as an account of the 'strange connexion between the Elves and the trees' for '[t]hey not only frequent them, but they make an interchange of form with them.'⁴¹ In tree shape, they may walk about, visit human houses or guard certain parts of the country. As consequence, certain types of wood, especially that of elder and lime trees, may cause strange occurrences and misfortunes.⁴²

Benjamin Thorpe mentions the 'huldra' that – in some parts in Norway – 'is described as a handsome female, when seen in front, but is hollow behind, or else blue'.⁴³ Thorpe also writes about the *skogrå* in Swedish folklore, who are generally 'represented as evil, wanton and foreboders of misfortune' even though they might occasionally bring luck in hunting. When coming close to men, she appears as a beautiful woman but hides her back, where 'she appeared as hollow as a hollow tree or a baker's trough'.⁴⁴ A more oblique reference is made to the Swedish *löfferskor* who inhabit trees. As a consequence of their symbiotic relationship to their trees, they offer rewards for humans who take care of their trees or exact dreadful punishments for tree cutters.⁴⁵

The hollow, tree-like back clearly marks the Alder Maid as a fairy. These Scandinavian elves are not necessarily associated with a particular kind of tree even though elder and lime are said to be particularly popular with fairies, just as hawthorn and elder are in Anglo-Irish folklore.⁴⁶ MacDonald's decision to make his fairy *femme fatale* an alder tree requires further investigation into the biological facts and folklore beliefs about alders.

For one, the fact that alder wood turns from white to blood-red when cut makes them particularly suitable candidates for the anthropomorphisation of trees in fantastic literature.⁴⁷ Alders have also been linked to witches via their red hair. In the north of Germany there is a proverb which roughly translates as follows: neither red hair nor alder trees grow on wholesome ground. The unwholesome ground in this saying refers to the alder trees' natural habitat. They usually grow close to water or in boggy environments whose uncanny atmosphere has consequently been conferred to alder trees so that they are regarded as inherently evil trees.⁴⁸ Bogs are liminal spaces – they represent the fuzzy border between water and earth, between life and death, and are the sites of strange phenomena, crime and deception. The *ignes fatui* in folklore that deceive and lead wanderers to their destruction are imagined to be small fairies who prefer alder trees as their abode.⁴⁹ Since water and earth are both traditionally seen as female elements, it is perhaps not surprising that the fairies dancing on the moors and leading unhappy men astray are usually female. Incidentally, Jerrold Hogle uses the metaphor of the 'the primal and engulfing morass of the maternal' and its connection to 'abject monster figures' to describe the central focus of the Gothic.⁵⁰ Taken together, the aspects of liminality, femininity, deception and death make bogs a quintessentially Gothic landscape and the bleeding alders and their fairies their arboreal icons.

Another possible connection between fairies and alders might derive from Goethe's extremely popular ballad 'The Alderking' – a sinister male alder who preys on children. Goethe was strongly influenced by Herder's ballad 'Alderking's Daughter', Herder's translation of the Danish ballad 'Her Oluf'. Herder reputedly mistranslated the Danish phrase 'Eller-Kongens daatter' as Alderking's daughter instead of Elf-king's daughter. Hannah Berner, however, argues that Herder may have deliberately exploited the homonymous relation between both words in order to associate his elf-maiden with the sinister trees of haunting moors.⁵¹ Even though elf-king seems

more likely as the original meaning in the context of the Danish ballad, there is indeed a close relationship between the words for alder and elves in Danish, as can be seen in words like *elletræ* (alder tree) and *ellepige* (elf-girl). Whether a translation mistake or deliberate poetic licence caused Herder to turn the fairy in his ballad into an alder cannot be determined for certain, yet his 'Alderking's Daughter' and Goethe's 'Alderking' certainly contributed to the close affinity between malignant nature sprites and alders in German literature and the popular imagination. As an avid reader and translator of German literature, George MacDonald surely would have known Goethe's ballad and probably even Herder's.

Whereas the degree of influence of these German works on *Phantastes* remains uncertain, there are more overt parallels to the ballad of 'Thomas the Rhymer' as related in Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802), Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (1819) and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590). In all these works the motif of the *femme fatale* is inextricably linked to the motif of fairy abduction, which endows the female perpetrators with fantastic as well as Gothic qualities that are also discernible in the Maid of the Alder.

Based on the medieval romance *Thomas of Erceldoune*, the ballad of 'Thomas the Rhymer' contains the central elements of fairy abduction, a mortal's sojourn in Elfland, the human-sized 'queen of fair Elfland' with whom the male protagonist becomes infatuated, and a special tree.⁵² The latter is called the 'Eildon Tree'; it serves as a landmark and firmly sets the story in the Scottish border region. Underneath this tree, Thomas first spies the fairy queen and it also canopies the fateful kiss that seals Thomas's thralldom.⁵³ Although the Eildon tree species is not specified, it serves as a portal to the otherworldly Elfland. MacDonald's *Phantastes* concludes with Anodos dreaming underneath a tree about his experiences in Fairy Land and listening to the Beech tree's voice, so that a tree likewise functions as a fuzzy border between worlds. The road to Elfland in 'Thomas the Rhymer' lies between the paths 'of righteousness' and 'wickedness'.⁵⁴ Elfland is thus a place of moral liminality – just like Fairy Land in *Phantastes*. The erotic dimension of the fairy abduction also links MacDonald's narrative to 'Thomas the Rhymer', even though Thomas eventually returns from Elfland relatively unscathed after seven years of service. Whereas the connection between sexuality and power is clearly emphasised, the Scottish ballad is less concerned with death.

The knight in Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' is less lucky. Whereas Keats also fashions his *femme fatale* as a 'fairy's child' with wild eyes and long hair, she does not abduct her victim to a morally ambiguous Elfland.⁵⁵ Instead, she takes the knight to 'her elfin grot' which is echoed in the grotto to which the Alder Maid leads Anodos.⁵⁶ The sexual allusions are similarly strong and both men awake to a vision of horror – in Keats's ballad the knight suffers from a nightmare vision of the dame's previous victims with their ghost-like pallor and 'starv'd lips' gaping '[w]ith horrid warning'.⁵⁷

Similar to the knight, whose armour rusts after his encounter with the Alder Maid in *Phantastes*, the knight in Keats's ballad has fallen from his chivalric code of honour and given into sexual temptation. The fact that he is 'alone and palely loitering'⁵⁸ makes him the antithesis of the chivalric knight and implies his social ostracisation, which is an inextricable part of the sexual threat the *femme fatale* poses: 'The permanence of the *femme fatale* as a sexual persona is part of the weary weight of eroticism, beneath which both ethics and religion founder.'⁵⁹ Even though Paglia ignores the fact that sexuality and eroticism are – to a large extent – social constructs too, she draws attention to the long tradition of imagining animalistic sexuality as the antithesis of civilised human society. For the knight figures, the encounter with the *femme fatale* consequently results in a social death. The fact that Keats's knight is 'alone and palely loitering' suggests a living death which is reinforced by the absence of life in nature as the 'sedge has withered from the lake / and no birds sing.'⁶⁰ The lifeless body of water in the ballad links the text to the watery habitat of alder trees again. Moreover, the Alder Maid regards Anodos' plight with a look of 'careless dislike on her beautifully moulded features'.⁶¹ Her own mercilessness echoes the epithet of Keats's Dame so that both women are portrayed as essentially amoral. Keats's ballad and MacDonald's narrative therefore resemble each other in their use of a long-haired, entrancing, yet amoral fairy *femme fatale*, the figure of the fallen chivalric ideal and the pronounced link between sex and death.

As an important reference to chivalric romance, Joseph Sigman has pointed out the Alder Maid's very similar role 'to that of Malory's demon lady and Spenser's Duessa and his false Florimell'.⁶² Duessa is a 'false Sorceress / that many errant Knight hath brought to wretchedness' in *The Faerie Queene*.⁶³ MacDonald uses several lines from *The Faerie Queene* as an epigraph in *Phantastes*, and his Maid of the Alder shows indeed many parallels to Spenser's Duessa.⁶⁴ Just as the Alder Maid poses as the marble lady to seduce Anodos and deliver him into the hands of the Ash tree, Duessa – in the shape of a virtuous and beautiful maid (Fidessa) – deceives the Redcrosse Knight and brings him to the monstrous Orgoglio.

In addition to these plot elements, a transformed tree is of particular importance in this context. After the Redcrosse Knight and Duessa have been travelling together for some time, they reach 'two goodly trees' whose 'arms' are with 'gray Moss over-cast' but in whose shade 'the fearful Shepherd' never sat nor plays his pipe 'but shun'd th' unlucky Ground'.⁶⁵ The latter indicates a supernatural or cursed atmosphere around the trees. Yet, together with the moss, which prefers moist conditions, Spenser's description evokes similar superstitious connotations as the alder tree. In the subsequent lines, the tree's arms are revealed to be more than a metaphor. When the Redcrosse Knight cuts a twig from one of the trees, 'small drops of gory Blood' issue from the wound because the tree is Fradubio, a man who had been transformed into a tree by Duessa.⁶⁶ The bleeding tree is primarily intended to demonstrate the tree's anthropomorphic core yet it recalls the blood-red wood of freshly cut alder trees.

Fradubio then relates how he and his true love (the second tree) were cursed into arboreal shape because Fradubio had once doubted and abandoned his lady for Duessa, with whom he lived in enchanted bliss for some time until he discovered Duessa's real shape:

I chaunst to see her in her proper hew,
Bathing her self in origane and thyme
A filthy foule old woman I did vew,
That euer to haue touch'd her, I did deadly rew.

Her neather partes misshapen, monstrous,
Were hidd in water, that I could not see,
But they did seem more foule and hideous,
Than Woman's Shape Man would beleue to bee.⁶⁷

Once again, the *femme fatale* is portrayed as a deceptive sorceress with a close affinity to nature, especially water and earth. Duessa's initial sexual appeal is turned into a horrifying vision of monstrosity by the verbal dissection of her body and her dehumanisation through notions of obscurity, elemental hybridity, and an existence beyond male comprehension.

Seductive and destructive nature personified

As these brief excursions into folklore and selected literary works have shown, the alluring yet dangerous fairy *femme fatale* is usually inextricably linked to nature. Camille Paglia sees a general tendency to conflate nature and women in the form of the *femme fatale* as a result of men's attempt to repress both:

The more nature is beaten back in the west, the more the *femme fatale* reappears, as a return of the repressed. She is the spectre of the west's bad conscience about nature. She is the moral ambiguity of nature.⁶⁸

Paglia's argument reveals a central problem of a feminisation of nature. As a synthesis of patriarchal fears about women and nature and the desire to control both, feminised nature is set in diametrical opposition to masculinised society, and there seems little hope for harmonious coexistence.

The knight's social death has already been discussed as an example of this clash between nature and culture, yet it also becomes vivid in one of the Alder Maid's foil characters: the marble woman. In a Jungian sense, Sigman interprets the marble woman as embodying the figure of the muse and thus a positive aspect of the anima. In this role, he compares her function to that of Dante's Beatrice and Spenser's Una.⁶⁹

The marble woman's relation to art is obvious from her first appearance because she is found entombed in a block of alabaster and freed by Anodos through song. To stress her status as a work of art even further, MacDonald furnishes this scene and the setting with various references to the classical myth of Pygmalion and his artistic creation of the ideal woman.⁷⁰ Her statuesque body and confinement in alabaster underline her opposition to the Alder Maid's hollow frame and natural surroundings. The pair therefore curiously corresponds to Mulvey-Roberts' distinction between the classical and the Gothic female body: 'The classical female body, as opposed to the unruly or transgressive female Gothic body, is represented by the closed mouth, enclosed body and locked household door.'⁷¹ As the ideal woman of patriarchal society, the marble woman is confined to mute beauty, but devoid of any sexual agency. Later in the narrative, she is revealed to be the knight's lady who waits for his return, which also explains her rejection of Anodos' advances. Hence, she represents the faithful wife and ideal woman of courtly love who must not be approached with sexual intentions and who is firmly situated within the codes and norms of society.

Despite the idealisation of the marble woman and the demonisation of the Alder Maid in *Phantastes*, MacDonald also offers decidedly positive examples of feminised nature in his narrative. The Beech tree is another foil character to the Alder Maid and represents nature's protective aspect. Unlike the Alder, the Beech unselfishly rescues Anodos from the Ash and accepts that her love for him is unrequited because she regards her vegetative existence as inferior to Anodos' human one.⁷² Her only desire is to become a real woman, and the girdle she gives to Anodos symbolises chaste and pure female love. Docherty writes about their relationship: 'With Anodos and this Beech, MacDonald is allegorising an attitude towards the world of nature directly contrary to the attitude of exploitation that has prevailed for centuries in the West.'⁷³ This interpretation, however, depends on what is meant by exploitation. Anodos certainly does not exploit the Beech in any sexual sense but he gladly uses her as a shelter, takes the girdle made of her leafy hair, and offers nothing in return. With her unselfish attitude and her generous gifts, the Beech resembles the maternal image of nature.

The ancient conceptualisation of nature as a mother also finds expression in *Phantastes*, especially after Anodos' death:

Now that I lay in her bosom, the whole earth, and each of her many births, was as a body to me, at my will. I seemed to feel the great heart of the mother beating into mine, and feeding me with her own life, her own essential being and nature.⁷⁴

The passage exemplifies the desired physical as well as spiritual union with nature, which is compared to the foetus in the maternal womb. Despite the comfort of the mother-child

constellation, the imagery in this passage has erotic connotations. A similar eroticisation of the Earth itself occurs just before Anodos meets the Maid of the Alder: 'Earth drew me towards her bosom; I felt as if I could fall down and kiss her.'⁷⁵ Whether as mother or as mistress, Earth and nature are invariably gendered as female. And, as the passage above also shows, female nature is always connected to both life and death. Feminised nature in *Phantastes* is consequently both the womb and tomb, the lover and killer. These configurations correspond to the 'dialectical image of nature as the active unity of opposites in tension' that were both traditionally identified 'with the female sex and were projections of human perceptions onto the external world.'⁷⁶ John Pridmore also recognises MacDonald's use of an ambiguous model of nature and that this 'model is inescapably anthropocentric. It is as if we were describing *someone*.'⁷⁷ The problem of this personification, however, lies in its use of gender stereotypes.

The dialectical image of feminised nature is constructed as irreconcilable antipodes that seem to exclude all possibility for shades in between. Gender stereotypes about human women are projected onto nature and vice versa, creating one-dimensional characters that are either idealised or demonised. Whereas one might argue that such one-dimensional representations result from the genre conventions of the fairy tale and romances, the women figures in *Phantastes* are in stark contrast to the multidimensional and dynamic protagonist. As mutually exclusive opposites, Mother Nature/Beech tree on the one hand and the Alder Maid on the other hand perpetuate the misogynistic Madonna/whore dichotomy. In addition, both roles can be considered as subservient to male needs. The feminisation of nature thereby runs the risk of continuing the patriarchal fiction of masculine human dominance over nature.

Despite these problematic implications, the Alder Maid is a fascinating character with a relatively high degree of autonomy. Unlike the other women characters in the narrative, she seems remarkably cunning and possesses enchanting powers and sexual agency. Even though her hollow back and vampiric lust for Anodos suggest a parasitical existence, she seems fairly independent in her seduction of Anodos and in her moral indifference to his fate after their night together. She is even beyond poetic justice as she receives no retribution for her actions. As a personification of untamed, sensual and dangerous nature, she is allowed to persist.

Conclusion

George MacDonald's Maid of the Alder is a literary fairy who is firmly set in the Gothic tradition and rooted in folkloric and literary sources as well as in gendered constructions of nature as female. Having first investigated the various fairies and elves in MacDonald's *Phantastes*, I subsequently argued that the Alder Maid's Gothic monstrosity derives from her body's associations with images of decay, death and predatory sexuality. The Maid of the Alder's tree-like hollow back, in particular, represents animalistic desires and a

death-like loss of male sexual agency. Yet her hollow back and the literary motifs of fairy abduction and the *femme fatale* with supernatural powers also link the Alder Maid to nature and folklore.

Her fairy nature, her unusual appearance and explicit identification as an alder tree have consequently warranted an exploration of the Alder Maid's folkloric and literary sources. The blood-red wood of alders and their boggy habitat have endowed this tree species with a sinister and supernatural reputation. The hollow back and the seduction/abduction pattern strongly suggest an imaginative kinship with Scandinavian wood elves, whereas her portrayal as a fairy *femme fatale* may have been partially inspired by literary works like the ballad of 'Thomas the Rhymer', Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

By comparing the Alder Maid with her foil characters in *Phantastes*, the final part of the analysis discussed her personification of nature's seductive and destructive potential. In an antithetical positioning of feminised nature as either idealised nurturer or demonic destroyer, the Maid of the Alder's associations with female sexuality, death and animalistic nature make her the nemesis of patriarchal society and its moral codes. Such a feminisation of nature involves the danger of implying that women and nature must be harnessed by men. However, the Alder Maid's success in her designs and her continued existence also demonstrate that nature is eventually beyond human control. MacDonald's Gothic fairy is a creative amalgam of folkloric and literary various sources and she is an arboreal *femme fatale*. Unscathed and unchecked, the Alder Maid keeps stalking the woods of Fairy Land – beautiful and perilous, just like Fairy Land itself.

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Notes

1. Melody Green uses this description indiscriminately for the settings of *Phantastes*, *Lilith* and 'The Golden Key'. Even though I agree with Green that these fantastic worlds serve to bring MacDonald's characters 'closer to God, and closer to each other', they portray a variety of sceneries – from Arcadian idylls to apocalyptic wastelands (Melody Green, 'George MacDonald and Celtic Christianity', *North Wind* 35 (2015): 103-13 (112)).
2. J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 109-61 (111).
3. For *Lilith*, see Dieter Petzold, 'Beasts and Monsters in MacDonald's Fantasy Stories', *North Wind* 14 (1995): 4-21 (18); and Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, 2nd rev. edn (1979; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 202. For the *femme fatale*, see Michaela Hausmann, '*Music Makers and World Creators: The Forms and Functions of Embedded Poems in British Fantasy Narratives*' (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2020), 76. For the Jungian archetype, see Joseph Sigman, 'Death's Ecstasies: Transformation and Rebirth in George MacDonald's *Phantastes*', *English Studies in Canada* 2 (1976): 203-26 (208).
4. Marie Mulvey-Roberts, 'The Female Gothic Body', in *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 106-19 (108).
5. George MacDonald, *Phantastes*, ed. John Pennington and Roderick McGillis (1858; Hamden, CT: Winged Lion Press, 2017), 17.

6. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 16.
7. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', 111.
8. John Docherty, 'Dryad Fancies and Fairy Imaginations in *Phantastes*', *North Wind* 24 (2005): 16-28 (23).
9. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 9.
10. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 28-9, 44.
11. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 15.
12. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 18-20.
13. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 15.
14. Roderick McGillis, '*Phantastes* and *Lilith*: Femininity and Freedom', in *The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald*, ed. William Raeper (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 31-55 (41).
15. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 29.
16. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 27.
17. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 47.
18. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 30.
19. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 47.
20. Petzold, 'Beasts and Monsters in MacDonald's Fantasy Stories', 14.
21. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 41.
22. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 14.
23. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 9-10.
24. Mulvey-Roberts, 'The Female Gothic Body', 106.
25. David Leeming, 'Femme fatale', in *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195156690.001.0001/acref-9780195156690-e-547>, accessed 3 August 2021.
26. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 46.
27. A *locus amoenus* is Latin for 'pleasant place'. As a literary topos, it denotes a place of natural beauty and seclusion that serves as a meeting place for lovers.
28. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 46.
29. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 45-6.
30. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 30.
31. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 47.
32. John Patrick Pazdziora, *Haunted Childhoods in George MacDonald* (Leiden and Boston: Brill & Rodopi, 2020), 168.
33. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 47.
34. Mulvey-Roberts, 'The Female Gothic Body', 11.
35. Petzold, 'Beasts and Monsters in MacDonald's Fantasy Stories', 13.
36. Mulvey-Roberts, 'The Female Gothic Body', 115. William Gray, for instance, remarks that the scene 'expresses a horror and disgust of the vagina both as a displaced anus and as the site of castration' (William Gray, 'George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva, and the Black Sun', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36, no. 4 (1996): 877-93 (883)).
37. Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 13.
38. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 47.
39. Katherine Briggs, *The Vanishing People: A Study of Traditional Fairy Beliefs* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1978), 75.
40. Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology: Illustrative of the Romance and Superstition of Various Countries*, vol. 1 (1828; London: H.G. Bohn, 1850), 81.
41. Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology*, 92.
42. Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology*, 93.
43. Benjamin Thorpe, *Northern Mythology: Comprising the Principal Popular Traditions and Superstitions of Scandinavia, North Germany, and The Netherlands*, vol. 2 (London: Edward Lumley, 1851), 3.
44. Thorpe, *Northern Mythology*, 73-4.
45. Thorpe, *Northern Mythology*, 73.

46. See Ben Simon, 'Tree Traditions and Folklore from Northeast Ireland', *Arboricultural Journal* 24, no. 1 (2000): 15-40 (19); and Briggs, *The Vanishing People*, 74-5.
47. See Leopold Hartley Grindon, *The Trees of Old England: Sketches of the Aspects, Associations, and Uses of Those Which Constitute the Forests, and Give Effect to the Scenery of Our Native Country* (London: Pitman, 1868), 83.
48. Hanns Bächtold Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, vol. 2: C.M.B-Frautragen (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1987), 922. In German, the proverb reads, 'Rotes Haar und Erlenloden wachsen nicht auf gutem Boden'.
49. Hans Ehrlich, 'Die Waldflora in ihren Bezeichnungen: Eine kulturhistorische Studie', *Deutsche Forstzeitung: Organ für die Interessen des Waldbaues, des Forstschutzes und der Forstbenutzung* 6 (1891/2): 142-4 (142).
50. Hogle, Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 10.
51. Hannah Berner, "'Her Oluf hand rider saa vide': Stationen der Wanderung einer dänischen Ballade von Herder bis Heine", in *Fremde Ähnlichkeiten: Die 'Große Wanderung' als Herausforderung der Komparatistik*, ed. Frank Zipfel (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 114-39 (117).
52. Walter Scott, 'Thomas the Rhymer', in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border: Consisting of Historical and Romantic Ballads*, vol. 2 (London: Longman & Rees, 1803), 269-73, line 15.
53. Scott, 'Thomas the Rhymer', lines 4, 17-24.
54. Scott, 'Thomas the Rhymer', lines 43, 47.
55. John Keats, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', in *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox (New York and London: Norton, 2009), 338-42, line 14.
56. Keats, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', line 29.
57. Keats, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', lines 41-2.
58. Keats, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', line 46.
59. Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 15.
60. Keats, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', lines 46-8.
61. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 47.
62. Sigman, 'Death's Ecstasies', 219.
63. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (London/New York: Longman, 1977), 1.2.34, lines 8-9.
64. See Hausmann, 'Music Makers' and World Creators, 88-9. Even the title of *Phantastes* has a source in *The Faerie Queene* (Hausmann, 'Music Makers' and World Creators, 65-7).
65. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1.2.28.
66. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1.2.28, line 9.
67. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1.2.40-1.
68. Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 13.
69. See Sigman, 'Death's Ecstasies', 208, 219. Una is indeed the virtuous female counterpart to Duessa.
70. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 32, 34.
71. Mulvey-Roberts, 'The Female Gothic Body', 107.
72. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 29-30.
73. Docherty, 'Dryad Fancies', 21.
74. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 190.
75. MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 43.
76. Carolyn Merchant, 'Nature as Female', in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*, ed. Ken Hiltner (Routledge: Abingdon and New York, 2015), 10-34 (14, 10).
77. John Pridmore, 'Nature and Fantasy', *North Wind* 19 (2000): 2-8 (4).