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### **“But What is the Moral?”: A Dramatized Bibliographic Study of the Relationship of George MacDonald’s “The Light Princess” to *Adela Cathcart***

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**“But What is the Moral?”: A Dramatized Bibliographic Study of the Relationship of George MacDonald’s “The Light Princess” to *Adela Cathcart***

**Cover Page Footnote**

Research performed under Taylor University’s Faculty Mentored Undergraduate Summer Scholarship Program.

**“But What is the Moral?”:  
A Dramatized Bibliographic Study  
of the Relationship of George MacDonald’s  
“The Light Princess” to *Adela Cathcart***

by Joe Ricke, Abby Palmisano, Blair Hedges, and Cara Strickland

Thanks to Taylor University’s Faculty Mentored Undergraduate Summer Scholarship program, the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis and Friends Center received a research grant in the summer of 2016 to conduct descriptive bibliographic research on the holdings of Taylor’s Brown Collection. Three researchers, Dr. Joe Ricke (Professor of English and Director of the Center) and two Taylor undergraduate English majors, Blair Hedges and Abby Palmisano, began their research in late May.

In the first week of research, as a sample version of what could be done with any book in the collection, the team created a bibliographic history of George MacDonald’s fairy tale, “The Light Princess.” Our research included exploring the relationship of this, one of MacDonald’s most famous fairy tales, to one of his lesser-known novels, *Adela Cathcart*, within which “The Light Princess” was first published in 1864.

For the 10th biennial Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis and Friends, the researchers presented their findings in a literally dramatic way. The Lewis and Friends Colloquium has had a long tradition of staged amateur dramatic readings featuring colloquium participants. In fact, “The Light Princess” itself was previously performed in 2010. However, it had never before been performed, here or anywhere, within its original (published) context, the story of *Adela Cathcart*. To do so, a Reader’s Theatre version of “The Light Princess,” previously adapted for performance by former Taylor student and now professional writer Cara Strickland, was adapted yet again, this time adding the framework of *Adela Cathcart*. The script for that dramatic reading follows this brief introductory essay.

In 1862, MacDonald attempted to interest publishers in his manuscript of “The Light Princess,” complete with its delightful illustrations by Pre-Raphaelite artist Arthur Hughes, as a children’s story. However, according to a leading scholar on Victorian fantasy, U. C. Knoepfmacher, “publishers wondered . . . whether “The Light Princess” might appeal to child readers, let alone be fully understood

by them” (ix). MacDonald’s good friend, author and art critic John Ruskin, also worried that “the swimming scenes...would be to many children seriously harmful” (Knoeplmacher ix-x). In other words, the story was too improper, especially with its ecstatic mixed bathing scenes (and lots of kissing). So MacDonald was forced to think of a new way to publish his story. Despite the fears voiced by others that “The Light Princess” may be harmful, MacDonald still believed that the tale could provide wisdom and joy for young and old alike. How then to get this story to readers? Rolland Hein writes that “convinced of the value of story as myth, especially parable and fantasy, to minister to the needs of the human spirit, he conceived the plot that became the novel *Adela Cathcart*” (163). Thus, in order to publish his now-famous fairy tale, MacDonald inserted it, along with several other fanciful tales, into the framework of his novel.

*Adela Cathcart* tells the story of a 21 year-old woman with a sort of “death wish.” When she is unable to find any meaning or reason for living from the world around her, her wise and concerned uncle, John Smith, devises a plan to heal her emotionally. His plan involves the recreation of interest in living and feeling for others by telling Adela a number of stories, the first one being “The Light Princess.” As Knoeplmacher shrewdly observes, Smith hopes to do for Adela what MacDonald hopes to do for his readers. “Hovering between adolescence and a womanhood she resists, Adela is an ideal audience for MacDonald’s purposes” (xiii).

*Adela Cathcart* was first published in 1864. In the meantime, MacDonald’s friend Charles Kingsley had published his surreal children’s fantasy, *Water Babies*, in 1863. And MacDonald’s very close friend, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), with the encouragement of the MacDonald family (especially the children), had finished his landmark *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (published in 1865). These works opened the door for other fantastic children’s tales to be published, until finally the Victorian children’s fantasy craze became a highly lucrative market. Thus, in 1867, MacDonald was able to publish “The Light Princess” in the collection, *Dealings with the Fairies*. The *Adela Cathcart* framework, however, provided and still provides an interesting insight into the fairy tale, especially through the reactions of the various characters to whom the story is told. Over the years, readers have voiced various complaints regarding the plot and structure of *Adela Cathcart*. Rolland Hein noted that one “reviewer writing in the *Athenaem* suggested that MacDonald had “ransacked his desk for ‘all old bits of writing he had in his possession’ and related them by

a story-telling club.” Hein himself has described the plot as “meager” (164). To us, this criticism misunderstands the purpose of the novel, failing to pay close attention to the links between the “bits of writing” and the larger concerns of the story of the healing of Adela.

In crafting a dramatic version of the *Adela* framework, we chose to highlight the parallels MacDonald established between the characters of *Adela Cathcart* and “The Light Princess” by having the corresponding characters from each story be played by the same actors. For example, Adela is played by the same actress who plays the Light Princess, for, as one scholar suggests, “like Adela herself, the Light Princess resists the relations and responsibilities of adult life” (Knoepfmacher 13). In this way, as the Light Princess transitions from her childhood lack of gravity (in both senses of the word) into the positive, although painful, experiences of adulthood, Adela herself begins to come to life, learning to value her emotions. In performance, the same actor embodies both of these metamorphoses. The young Doctor Armstrong, who has fallen in love with Adela, comments, after hearing the story: “I think the moral is that no girl is worth anything until she has cried a little” (MacDonald, *Adela Cathcart* 104), further displaying the rather countercultural value which MacDonald places on emotional experience.

Just as Adela mirrors the Princess, Adela’s father mirrors the King, and was played by the same actor in our version. Dr. Armstrong, who loves Adela, parallels the Prince, and Mrs. Cathcart (Adela’s over-bearing and puritanical aunt) becomes the witch. The similarities between Mrs. Cathcart and the witch (the aunt of the princess in the fairy tale) are particularly pointed and satiric. During and after the story-telling, Adela shows a surprising ability to stand up to her domineering aunt. According to Knoepfmacher, “Like the Light Princess herself, [Adela] must continue to challenge the adult limitations embodied in characters such as her literal-minded aunt” (xiii). In fact, the novel seems to suggest that Mrs. Cathcart herself is emotionally stunted, especially evidenced in her general disapproval of fairy tales and “The Light Princess” specifically. Smith, who is the narrator of the entire novel as well as the narrator of “The Light Princess” (but other tales included in *Adela Cathcart* are told by other tellers, as in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*) cleverly lampoons Mrs. Cathcart. Throughout his story-telling, she is depicted as knitting. Towards the end of his telling of “The Light Princess,” he specifies that the evil witch (the Princess’s aunt) sits down and knits after draining the Princess’s beloved lake. *Adela Cathcart* likewise satirizes the overly pious and prudish attitudes

of Victorian society (and perhaps publishers and critics who found “The Light Princess” too dangerous) through Mrs. Cathcart, who takes offense at the mixed bathing scenes and demands that the story have a clear “moooooowral.”

Mrs. Cathcart’s demand for a moral (and one of her own liking) sets off one of the most interesting aspects of this framed version of “The Light Princess,” in which character after character in *Adela Cathcart* responds with his or her sense of the meaning or moral of the fairy tale. The variety of views, or dialogical interpretive method, provides important insight into MacDonald’s views on the imagination, fairy tales, and meaning. Just as Mrs. Cathcart insists that the story must have an obvious moral, publishers who turned down the *The Light Princess* were concerned that children would not “fully understand” the story. MacDonald, however, who ironically is often considered too preachy by some readers, believes that good stories will communicate truth and meaning to the minds and hearts of his readers. In fact, it might communicate different truths and meanings to different minds and hearts. And this is as it should be, according to MacDonald.

In his important 1893 essay, *The Fantastic Imagination*, MacDonald writes that a fairy-tale “cannot help but having some meaning; if it have proportion and vitality, and vitality is truth” (MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination” 316). Furthermore, MacDonald insists that “a genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer the art, the more things it will mean” (317). This belief is enacted in *Adela Cathcart* as its characters provide, from their different existential perspectives, different morals for “The Light Princess,” several of which MacDonald obviously affirms. MacDonald places a large value on “emotional meaning” and “the feeling intellect,” ways of knowing that one may experience through fairy tales (and the imagination more generally). A “meaning,” that is, may be as much a feeling as a thought, in traditional terminology. In other words, the “affect” of a work may be the most important part of its effect (its moral energy may be more important than its moral idea). For MacDonald, fairy tales work, when they are allowed to work (contra Mrs. Cathcart) much the way “The Light Princess” works on Adela Cathcart. They speak to the depths of a person’s being (mentally but also emotionally and morally), bringing not only “truth” (“meaning”) but life (“vitality”).

*Adela Cathcart* numbers among several notable Victorian works (such as *The Secret Garden*) that depict a renewal of life due to a change that takes place in the heart of an emotionally dead character. In fact, MacDonald dedicated *Adela Cathcart* to John Rutherford Russell

M.D. According to Rolland Hein, “John Rutherford Russell was a physician to the Homeopathic Hospital in London” (165). For a number of years, homeopathy, “the practice of medicine that embraces a holistic, natural approach to the treatment of the sick” (American Homeopathic Society) had been gaining popularity in British culture, especially amongst the upper class. “MacDonald was convinced of the soundness of homeopathy, Russell having been a help to him” (Hein 165). Dr. Armstrong of *Adela Cathcart* resembles Russell, especially as he proposes a homeopathic cure for Adela, stating “my conviction is that the best thing that can be done for her is to interest her in something if possible” (MacDonald, *Adela Cathcart* 48). By the end of the novel, the fantastic stories told to Adela (as well as several other factors, including the sermons of Dr. Armstrong’s brother) help her return to “vitality.” She is then able to become the comforter of her father, who has lost his fortune, and the lover and wife of Armstrong, to whom she becomes betrothed.

For MacDonald, good stories had the power to heal the soul because they communicate spiritual truths. “The laws of the spirit of a man must hold, alike in this world and any world he may invent” (MacDonald, *The Fantastic Imagination* 316). In *Adela Cathcart*, Smith notes of Adela’s condition (as he has witnessed in others before), that “without good spiritual food to keep the spiritual sense healthy and true, they cannot see the things about them as they really are” (MacDonald, *Adela Cathcart* 53). But, MacDonald seems to suggest, they might see things truly in fairy-tales. For fairy tales present spiritual truths in a world that is enchanted and strange, and, for those reasons, exciting and “vital.” Adela, who has become stuck in a dull vision of supposedly mundane reality, responds to “her” story, refracted by fairy magic and fancy dress. Once these truths are experienced as part of her own reality (as she recognizes, in her “real world,” the witch aunt and the healer prince, etc.), the world regains its wonder, her heart begins to beat. Life becomes more than just existence.

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