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The Not-So-Light Princess: Tori Amos and Samuel Adamson's Reimagining of George MacDonald's Classic Fairy Tale

John Pennington

George MacDonald's "The Light Princess" appeared in his 1864 novel *Adela Cathcart*, where Mr. John Smith, to cheer up Adela (who is suffering from ennui), tells three fairy tales—"The Shadows," "The Giant's Heart," and "The Light Princess." That latter tale was eventually published in various collections of MacDonald's fairy tales throughout his career. He included his famous essay on fantasy and fairy tales, "The Fantastic Imagination," as a preface to an American edition of the fairy tale in 1893; that essay also appeared in an updated *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination and on Shakespeare* (1893). U. C. Knoepflmacher writes that "The Light Princess" "mixes a carnivalesque levity that relies on picaresque absurdism, parody, and extended punning, with a spiritual seriousness that befits Protestant symbolists such as Spenser, Bunyan, or Richardson" (xvi). This blend of the carnivalesque and seriousness has led Daniel Gabelman to label much of MacDonald's work as straddling "divine carelessness and fairytale levity."

"The Light Princess" has become a canonical tale in its own right; it is a classic fairy tale of the nineteenth century. One could argue that it was an influence on Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* (1865), especially when we consider that *Phantastes* (1858) had an important white rabbit in its narrative that Carroll took interest in. John Docherty in *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Friendship* traces this symbiotic artistic relationship thoroughly, suggesting how important MacDonald was as a writer of fairy tale and as a literary influence on others.

That influence, though, goes well beyond the Victorian age, as most canonical works do. "The Light Princess" continues to speak to readers.[1] While C. S. Lewis paved the way for the renewed interest in MacDonald generally, Maurice Sendak may be the first to pay artistic homage to MacDonald by illustrating *The Golden Key* (1967, with an Afterword by W. H. Auden) and *The Light Princess* (1969), two works still in print. Sendak also wrote an influential article on MacDonald that was collected in *Caldecott & Co.: Notes on Books and Pictures*; in that work he described MacDonald

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as "one of the towering and mystifying figures of Victorian literature" (45). In 1978 an animated version of the tale appeared on the BBC. Jump 20 years: the award-winning fantasy author Robin McKinley retold "The Light Princess," with illustrations by Katie Thamer Treherne. McKinley, in "A Note about the Author," states that "any reader who is pleased or intrigued by this book should read the original story; it can be found in one of several collections of his short fantasy stories, all of which are well worth reading" (np).

Most recently, Tori Amos, an American singer-songwriter and pop-culture feminist icon is the latest to be drawn to MacDonald's tale. Amos is an important figure in the development of the female singer-songwriter of the 1990s, and her first album *Little Earthquakes* (1992) cemented her as a major talent. She has sold over 12 million records, with eight Grammy nominations to her credit. Amos began working with playwright Samuel Adamson on a musical version of "The Light Princess," and in October 2013, *The Light Princess*, the musical collaboration between Amos and Adamson, premiered at the National Theatre, London. In October 2015, the original cast recording of *The Light Princess* was released. *The Light Princess*, the musical, has become a major musical event. Amos is currently negotiating with producers to bring her adaptation to Broadway.

In an interview with Adam Rathe, Amos states that the genesis for the musical was her interest "in marrying the idea of a fairytale with 21st-century emotions that teenagers are experiencing now, that I saw through my nieces and nephews and through my daughter. That's been the driving force." Reviewers of the musical have, for the most part, embraced Amos's intention to make MacDonald's "The Light Princess" a timely tale for the 21st century. Broadway World.com, as an example, begins its interview with Amos and Adamson by claiming: "From George MacDonald's 19th century fairytale, *The Light Princess* has been transformed into a stage production, with a deeper morality play and potential anthem for present day youth." The reviewer goes on to state that "the changes to the story flesh out what may well have been hidden truths in MacDonald's work, involving politics, war, and a form of early feminism." Even Marina Warner, in *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (2014) writes that many contemporary adaptations "now require Parental Guidance; several are classified Adults Only." Warner writes about this movement:

> Current fairy tales on stage and screen reveal an acute malaise about sexual, rather than social, programming of the female, and the

> genre continues ever more intensively to wrestle with the notorious question Freud put long ago, "What do women want?" The singer Tori Amos, for example, adapted a Victorian fairy tale, *The Light Princess* (2013). . . . George MacDonald wrote the original tale in 1867; he was a Christian allegorist, a friend of Lewis Carroll's, and encouraged and influenced the *Alice* books. Tori Amos's vision, by contrast, is sparked by the dominant psychological concern with young girls' troubles and unfocused desires, the search for numbness and nullity that leads to binge drinking, passing out, self-harm, even death" (173-74).[2]

Such adaptations of MacDonald reflect the continual and growing popularity of the Victorian writer specifically and the Victorian fairy tale generally. Tim Burton's film adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* was a phenomenal hit, and soon *Alice Through the Looking Glass* will premiere on the big screen, produced by Tim Burton. In *Slate's* Culture Blog from 2011, Amos was interviewed by Nina Shen Rastogi about the conception of her adaptation of MacDonald: "The thing about the original story I wasn't crazy about is that the princess's disability gets blamed on an old hag . . . We're not going to deal in spells cast by old ladies; we're dealing with problems cause by power and greed, many of which start with men." Rastogi muses that this new version "also promises a healthier take on cross-generational gender issues" and the adaptation "will modernize MacDonald's story, drawing out the environmental themes and using the princess's 'lightness' as a way to explore modern afflictions with anorexia." Rastogi admits that Amos's artistic sensibilities are likely to combine "the dreamy and the dark."

MacDonald's fairy tale is being asked to support various contemporary concerns as identified by Warner and Rastogi: women's health (including drug addiction, anorexia and binge drinking), the sexual development of young women in relationship to male desire, political machinations by corrupted governments, and the inevitability and horrors of war. Amos and Adamson's transformations, critics argue, address important contemporary issues—particularly gender issues—that the original failed to illuminate. What of the lightness of the tale that Knoeplmacher identifies? Rastogi answers: "The princess's 'lightness' [will be] a way to explore modern afflictions like anorexia." Adaptations of fairy tales, though, can create problematic issues in their transformations, and key issues about fairytale adaptations concern the *how* and *why* adapters choose to update a particular work. Why choose MacDonald's tale? How does one bring a

modern sensibility to his tale? This article will examine the *how* and *why* of Amos and Adamson's *The Light Princess*. While a breathtaking spectacle of music and stage production, Amos and Adamson tend to misunderstand fairytale conventions (the *how* of the fairy tale) and strain MacDonald's fairy tale (the *why*), ultimately dramatically misreading MacDonald's classic tale. Ironically, they aim to create a feminist manifesto about the plight of young women today, but in fact it perpetuates essentialist notions of gender construction. *The Light Princess* musical reinscribes retrograde gender roles as it wishes to liberate those very roles.

Such a claim has to be qualified, however, for fairy tales are in a constant state of revision. If fairy tales are, as Jack Zipes claims, *cultural memes*, then they provide strategies for survival, what Kenneth Burke would call "equipment for living." Zipes is quick to point out in *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* that "the memetic crystallization of certain fairy tales as classical does not make them static for they are constantly re-created and reformed, and yet remain memetic because of their relevant articulation of problematic issues in our lives. Fairy tales, like our own lives, were born out of conflict" (20). In other words, a memetic fairy tale will be adapted because the original provides a foundational meme that resonates over time and space. Other critics agree. Cristina Bacchilega, in *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, argues that, in particular, contemporary feminist retellings—which is what Amos and Adamson's adaptation is at heart—must involve "substantive though diverse questioning of both narrative construction and assumptions about gender. . . . Postmodern revision is often two-fold, seeking to expose, make visible, the fairy tale's complicity with 'exhausted' narrative and gender ideologies, and, by working from the fairy tales' multiple versions, seeking to expose, bring out, what the institutionalization of such tales for children has forgotten or left unexploited" (24). In her most recent work *Fairy Tales Transformed*, Bacchilega provides further speculation on the proliferation of fairy tale adaptations and makes the following qualification: "This proliferation of adaptations of and twists on the fairy tale, however, does not guarantee the articulation of new social possibilities for the genre" (27). Let us do a quick comparison of MacDonald's "The Light Princess" and Amos and Adamson's *The Light Princess* to see if the musical taps into the memetic possibilities of MacDonald's fairy tale or falls prey to binary thinking about gender construction.

Quick Comparison: MacDonald's vs Amos and Adamson's "The Light Princess"

MacDonald's Version

"Once upon a time, so long ago I have quite forgotten the date, there lived a king and queen who had no children," begins MacDonald's fairy tale. The king feels ill-used because the Queen has not given him children, and when she does, the King is not graced with a boy, who will inherit the throne, but with a girl. The king forgets to invite his sister, the witch Makemnoit, who casts a spell on the girl—the Light Princess loses her gravity, thus allowing her to float in the air and cursing her with the lack of any seriousness, any psychological gravity. The King tries to find a cure for his daughter and engages two metaphysicians, Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck, one a materialist, the other a spiritualist, both incapable of finding a cure, but not before they prescribe ludicrous cures that would certainly lead to the Light Princess's death. The Light Princess, after her father tosses her into the water as a joke, discovers that water giving her physical, but not psychological, gravity. So she finds herself floating in the kingdom's lake, perfectly content with her temporary gravity. One day, while floating, a lost prince, who is escaping political turmoil in his kingdom, happens upon the Light Princess and falls in love. Witch Makemnoit, unhappy with this turn of events, reanimates the White Snake of Darkness, which begins to such the pond dry so she can destroy the Light Princess and the kingdom. Soon it is discovered that the pond has a hole and a plate of gold that states: "Love can fill the deepest grave." The prince sacrifices himself for the Light Princess by plugging himself into the hole, and as the pond rises the prince will soon drown for the princess's sake. As the water rises, the prince sings love songs to the Light Princess and the dire situation moves her. The Light Princess jumps into the lake, for "love and water brought back all her strength," and she saves the prince. The princess cries; those tears bring her gravity. The prince and princess marry, have children, and the witch is drowned and buried under the water, thus leading to a happy ending.

Amos and Adamson's Version

Althea, the Light Princess, is sixteen and hails from the kingdom of Lagobel, one rich in gold but barren of water. Digby aged 18, is the Solemn Prince of Sealand, a kingdom rich in water but poor in gold. Althea's mother, the Queen, dies when Althea is six, and the young girl, so distraught, wishes to join her mother in heaven by lifting herself in the air, thus losing her gravity:

"From that day, Althea had no gravity, and never cried." Althea's brother, Prince Alexander, will inherit the throne and Althea is locked up in a tower since she has no real value to the kingdom. In Sealand, meanwhile, the Queen also dies by the hand of the King Ignacio, who never wanted his tyranny to be questioned by anyone, including his wife. No one cries in Sealand over the Queen's death, except her son Digby, and "his laughter followed her; and from that day Digby's heart was so heavy, he never smiled." The king hungers for Lagobel's gold and "a Sealand spy shot Althea's brother, Prince Alexander dead" (6). Now King Ignacio commands Digby to kill the Light Princess so that he can rule both kingdoms. At the same time, King Darius informs Althea that she must command Lagobel's army, though she questions whether she is "queen material." Althea decides to run away in a motorcar with her servant Piper, and as they are driving they spot Sealand's army moving to invade Lagobel. Althea recognizes that her kingdom has given up because she has abdicated the throne and refuses to be the leader of Lagobel's army. Althea feels conflicted. They find a "hidden lake" (25) that, they discover, provides Lagobel with what water it already has, and she begins to think that she might, indeed, be queen material and save her kingdom. Meanwhile, Digby has killed the last Lagobel fighter. Althea reveals herself to Digby, who proceeds to fire a gun at her, yet she is saved by Zephyrus, Digby falcon. Digby and Althea begin to converse and the prince is moved by Althea's sense of hopelessness and lack of gravity, but Althea demands a sword and challenges Digby to a duel. While fighting, their attraction toward one another grows, and soon they kiss. The remaining Lagobelians feel that Althea is a traitor because "she snogged him—!" (38) instead of killing him. Yet King Darius, in his political wisdom, knows that the future is dependent on Althea to be Queen. So King Darius decides that Althea must marry. He commissions a Mr. Flower and a Mr. Crabbe to help restore Althea's gravity—Flowers reports that Althea is drug addicted, while Crabbe claims she's anorexic. A Mr. Grey also appears and suggests that Althea only needs love, and his solution to her anti-gravity is to hold her down by putting a kind of chastity belt on her—and to marry her against her will. In the meantime, Digby is destined to marry Lady Delphine. Althea escapes and returns to the lake, which gives her gravity as she swims. Digby returns to the lake too. And thus ends Act One.

Act Two opens with preparations for the two weddings. Althea and Digby swim together in bliss and then fall in love completely. King Ignacio orders his other son Llewelyn to bring Digby back home, and the King plans

to dam up the lake to lead to the "death / By /Drought" (72) to Lagobel. Althea and Digby disagree over each other's role in their relationship, and Digby decides to leave, right before Llewelyn appears. Digby tells his brother that he has killed Althea and they leave. Althea notices that the lake is drying up and she feels betrayed by Digby. Althea becomes ill as the lake drains. Althea is strapped to a bed back in her kingdom so that Darius can have her healed by marriage. Piper chastises the king over his treatment of his daughter, and it is soon discovered that Althea is pregnant. Darius has an epiphany and realizes that he needs to first act like a father, and second like a king. Digby hears that Althea is dead so the wedding with Lady Delphine seems natural now. But he is soon informed that Althea is still alive. Althea, while sick, desires to return to the lake and destroy the dam; Digby, now "a *fearless fairy-tale knight*" (96; italics in original), promises to save Althea. Dragons attack Althea and her entourage; they fight. Digby appears and destroys the dam. King Ignacio shoots Digby, who injured floats on the blood-stained lake. Zephyrus attacks the king and rips out his eyes. The water begins to return to the lake and Althea declares her love for Digby once again. She cries and "*the weight of Althea's tears bring her down. She cradles Digby in her arms, kissing him*" (102; italics in original). Digby survives, Althea gets her gravity, Digby his happiness. Llewelyn and Piper marry. The two kingdoms are united, with King Digby and Queen Althea holding their baby at the coronation. "*Queen Althea, King Digby, their daughter, families and countries. And they all lived reasonably happily with the occasional skirmish until they died. The End*" (109; italics in original).

The Contamination: The Revision of MacDonald's Fairy Tale

It is clear that Adamson and Amos's *The Light Princess* is not-so-light after all. What do we do with a version that is so dramatically different from the original? *The Light Princess: A New Musical* screenplay published by Faber and Faber (2013) lists authorship as follows:

> *music and lyrics by* Tori Amos
> *book and lyrics by* Samuel Adamson
> *suggested by a story by* George MacDonald

In the original cast recording soundtrack (2015), Amos and Adamson's names are featured on the front cover of the CD, MacDonald's is not, his name only appearing as fine print at the end of the lyric sheet. It is clear that MacDonald was an initial inspiration for *The Light Princess* musical, though he plays, it appears, a minor role in the adaptation. The questions to ask: 1) *How* do

Amos and Adamson revise the tale? And 2) *Why* did they do such a revision? Jack Zipes has posited that fairy tales are "social documents" concerned with the transmission and transformation of important cultural messages. In an essay that appears in his edited collection *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition* (2001), Zipes argues that classic fairy tales are "culturally marked" and "have a great general paradoxical appeal that transcends their particularity" (845). Zipes furthers that these classic fairy tales themselves are adaptations from folk tales and other narratives—in other words, all fairy tales, argues Zipes, fall under the condition of *contamination*. Zipes uses this term in a neutral sense since adaptations have "'contaminated' one another historically through cross-cultural exchange that has produced fruitful and multiple versions of similar social and personal experiences" (846). Yet the word *contamination* also hints at more complexity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* catalogues one definition of the word as "the blending of two or more stories, plots, or the like into one," thus reinforcing Zipes's use. But the first definition given by the *OED* is the following: "The action of contaminating, or condition of being contaminated; defilement, pollution, infection." This use of *contamination* suggests impurity. Can an adaptation contaminate a fairy tale so that the adaptation harms the intent of the original without a clear purpose for doing so?

Contamination of the Fairytale Type and Spirit

Fairytale adaptations demand that the adapter is consciously transforming the "base" tale for some particular reason. There is a self-awareness of the original that is be transformed. Adaptation, then, is a form of parody, which Linda Hutcheon describes as "one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity; it is a form of inter-art discourse" (2). Parody requires "repetition with critical distance" and "marks difference rather than singularity" (6). Hutcheon calls parody "trans-contextualizing" and a form of "artistic recycling" (15). A key to parody, argues Hutcheon, is that it "can be a serious criticism, not necessarily of the parodied text; it can be a playful, genial mockery of codifiable forms" (15), yet it must be self-aware of the original. Parody by "inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance . . . is also capable of transformative power in creating new synthesis" (20). Amos and Adamson certainly intend for their version to transform and create such a "new synthesis," but one wonders if they have an astute awareness of what MacDonald was achieving in this fairy tale. MacDonald, in fact, was creating an original fairy tale by subverting classic fairy tales; the burlesque,

yet serious attitude of the tale simultaneously pays homage to the classic tales while parodying them to demonstrate how they limit the development not only of the Light Princess but also the Prince.

The beginning of MacDonald's "The Light Princess" is an obvious parody of Charles Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty," including the spurned witch who casts an evil spell, thus propelling the narrative action. This connection to Perrault is self-conscious on MacDonald's part, and any reader half-versed in reading fairy tales would make the connection. MacDonald also parodies tropes in other fairy tales, including "Cinderella" (both Perrault's and the Grimm's versions), and the Grimm's "The Frog Prince" and "Rapunzel." In his illustrations for the 1969 version of "The Light Princess," Maurice Sendak visually depicts an ironic reversal of "Rapunzel" as the Light Princess floats to her tower castle as the Prince watches from the ground; in turn, Sendak's illustrations were also homages to Arthur Hughes, the illustrator of numerous MacDonald works including *At the Back of the North Wind* and the *Princess* books. Sendak demonstrates the clear operation of parody—he recycles MacDonald and Hughes to create a transformed version of the fairy tale. This method is precisely what MacDonald is doing by parodying Perrault and Grimm. A key to MacDonald's tale is the tone: this levity of spirit that embraces the very notion of the fairy tale while simultaneously subverting the very form itself. A central action in MacDonald's tale is when we find out how the Light Princess discovers the lake—Lagobel—and her ability to find gravity through swimming: there is a "carnival of the country" and the king, trying to make "light of his misfortune," throws his daughter into the lake, and "there she was, swimming like a swan" (29). The swan evokes multiple fairy tales, including Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling."

This subversive tone is essential to the spirit and meaning of the tale, which takes on a seriousness at the end when the Prince is willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of the Light Princess, who in terms shows gravity and love that leads to the happy ending. But this lightness of tone is not to dismiss some very serious happenings in the tale. Knoepflmacher reminds us at how impressed Lewis Carroll was by the tale (suggesting the whimsy and word play that is central to the fairy tale) and how concerned John Ruskin was over his perception that the tale was too risqué, too sexual. As Ruskin writes: "The swimming scenes and love scenes would be to many children seriously harmful" (qtd. Knoepflmacher xiii). The playfulness of the pun on the King being "light-*haired* or light-*heired*" (21; italics in original) at the

beginning of the fairy tale ridicules the King, who has no children, and takes on more complicated meaning once the Light Princess finds her gravity in the water: the narrator, bemused, speculates on the Light Princess new-found gravity in water and asks: "For what indeed could a prince do with a princess that had lost her gravity? Who could tell what she might not lost next? She might lose her visibility, or her tangibility . . ." (31). Or her virginity? That is the other obvious question the narrator suggests. That the witch Makemnoit brings to life the phallic "White Snake of Darkness" (40) suggests that MacDonald is dealing with issues of sexuality, passion, and the desire of both men and women. If we read the tale in this way, MacDonald is perfecting the art of subversion, the notion that Zipes highlights in his important history of fairy tales of the nineteenth century.

Amos and Adamson, on the other hand, seem unfamiliar with the foundational texts that MacDonald is parodying, which allows them to reject certain tropes that classic fairy tales often use to elicit that memetic function of a tale. That Amos in an interview scoffs at the notion of wicked witch allows her to make a feminist claim about certain stereotypes that haunt fairy tales and the depiction of women, but she fails to recognize that MacDonald, by evoking those seemingly sexist tales, is challenging these classic tales' notions of gender and sexuality, in particular the ATU 410 "Sleeping Beauty" tale type. Without the witch woman, one might argue, women can only be seen as good, the men as evil, further perpetuating stereotypes of gender.

In fact, the fairy tales and other narratives that Amos and Adamson directly identify in their *The Light Princess*, those that go beyond MacDonald, seem confused and, at best, ill-conceived allusions:

> **Althea** (to Piper)
> Are they insane? - (referring to death of her brother and the impending war)
> Things are looking very dim—
> **Althea and Piper**
> Like a scene from Brothers Grimm—(9)

The audience is never sure what Grimm tales Althea and Piper are referring to, and how this reference as to the parodic text operates to renew or revise Grimm. Althea also makes references to herself at Cleopatra, Gloriana, and Boudicca, and while they are not from fairy tales, they do bring a historical weight to the story that is well-beyond the tone that MacDonald evokes. Althea, at one point, asks Piper to read her one of her "mother's books. *The Little Match Girl*, I think" (14). Amos and Adamson suggest that this

Andersen tale is a tonic for Althea, though the reader recognizes the sadness and perceived misogynism of Andersen killing a young girl to escape real-world conditions rather than providing for alternatives. Yet the reader is unable to situate the Match Girl reference in any system of adaptation of transformation of MacDonald's tale or fairy tales in general. Or more simply, do Amos and Adamson intend for the Andersen tale to resonate thematically? Or is the tale used as a throw-away allusion? The parody seems unclear.

Amos and Adamson's direct references to fairy tales, consequently, suggests that their parody of MacDonald's tale and other classic fairy tales is not conceived in any self-aware thematic and/or structural ways. Immediately after the Andersen reference, Althea identifies herself as "like Scheherazade" (15), again evoking a reference that is not quite clear since Althea does not survive by telling stories. The tales they evoke suggest heaviness by allusion, not lightness, and *The Light Princess* ignores the levity of MacDonald's parody and original creation. In the "Note on Althea," Amos and Adamson provide stage directions describing Althea's weightlessness and how that lack of gravity should be presented visually to an audience. They write: "In many scenes, humour should be extracted from her inability to do 'normal' things, or her ability to do them but in her unique fashion" (2). The word *extracted* is telling, for it suggests that *The Light Princess* is not concerned with a central concern of MacDonald's fairy tale.

Contamination of Indoctrination: Gender Trouble in The Light Princess Musical

A fairytale version, of course, has no obligation to maintain the original's tone, especially if the adaptation is designed to challenge the original's ideological stance on specific issues. In Amos and Adamson's case, they omit MacDonald's levity with a deathly serious tone to bring forth feminist issues. Early in the musical Althea sings, as she floats in the air:

> . . . Here's Mother's kiss . . .
> My life's seventh heaven
> My mother's alive
> And father loves me,
> My floating world, where I'm gravity-free!
> All that I wish for's in
> This fairy-story;
> Why change the story?
> My fairy-story

Up high with my family . . . (16)

She asks a telling question: "Why change the story?" An adaptation, as has been discussed, assumes a particular ideology that the new version brings that the old version lacks. In Amos and Adamson's case that ideology is the focus on feminist issues, which Amos overtly acknowledges in various interviews about the musical. Amos has been a leader is promoting women's issues, so she speaks with authority. Marelise van der Merwe in *Daily Maverick* writes that "her relentless exposure of pain and suffering, too, had an impact on her personal lives of her fans; her raw, a capella description of her rape in 'Me and a Gun', for instance, and her work as an activist for the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), which she co-founded, made her a rallying point for survivors of gender violence." Amos tells van der Merwe that she and Adamson "had no desire to set it before the birth of women's rights," highlighting the contemporary feminist issues that drive the musical. In an interview with Brian Ives for *radio.com*, Amos states: "'Well, this is a feminist fairy tale, and not everyone will be comfortable with it.' It's not always going to make everyone feel warm and fuzzy. It brings up confrontations between teenagers and their parents, that would resonate in the 21st century." Amos implies that MacDonald's "The Light Princess" is a "warm and fuzzy" tale of the Victorian age set before the feminist movement, further suggesting that MacDonald's fairy tale perpetuates sexist stereotypes that Amos and Adamson need to debunk. William Raeper, who has written the most definitive biography of MacDonald to date, admits that MacDonald was not that interested in women's issues (including suffrage), though Raeper acknowledges that MacDonald, through his relationship with women's activist Octavia Hill, assimilated many of her views on women's equality that were based on Mary Wollstonecraft's work and the Unitarian push for such equality (261). Raeper paints MacDonald as a typical Victorian who mouthed equality but simultaneously endorsed a form of Christian patriarchy of submission for women; in addition, Raeper argues that MacDonald, typical for the age, depicts women as "an erotic angel" (261), promoting the Angel in the House concept made popular by Coventry Patmore.

If we take Raeper at face value, then maybe Amos has a legitimate concern about "The Light Princess." But other critics see a more nuanced MacDonald on women's issues. In particular, Jack Zipes in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* argues that MacDonald, along with Oscar Wilde and L. Frank Baum, "were consciously inserting themselves into the discourse on civilization in the process of change" and "refused to comply with the

standard notions of sexuality and sex roles and questioned the restrictions place on the imagination of children" (101; italics in original). Specifically, Zipes argues that "The Light Princess" has an "irreverent tone" that "places the convention of traditional fairy tales in question . . . and, yet, there is a serious side to the light comedy" (106). One effect of this blending of the humorous and the serious, furthers Zipes, is a key concern on gender equality: "Moreover, in *The Light Princess*, his female protagonist does not become dependent on the prince, who is a 'softy.' Rather she gains certain qualities through her relationship with him just as he benefits from the encounter. There is more sensitive interaction between two unique individuals that traditional role-playing at the end of the take, a special configuration which MacDonald was to develop in all his narratives" (107). If we agree with Zipes's assessment, then MacDonald's fairy tale is an important feminist tract in its own right.[3] MacDonald's fairy tale emphasizes that the princess and prince mutually edify, develop, transform, and empower one another, something not seen in many contemporary fairy tales, let alone a Victorian one.

If "The Light Princess" emphasizes to a degree a modicum of equality, then a key concern of Amos and Adamson's retelling is how they adapt MacDonald's fairy tale to comment on women's issues, thereby demonstrating what was lacking in the original. That becomes the complexity of feminist retellings of fairy tales. As mentioned earlier, Bacchilega notes that feminist retellings should have a two-way move: 1) the retelling needs to demonstrate how the original text is "exhausted" and fails to reflect complex female issues; and 2) the retelling must also explore that exhausted form by exposing and rectifying gender stereotypes. But can feminist retellings go amiss? In "Feminist Frauds on the Fairies? Didacticism and Liberation in Recent Retellings of 'Cinderella,'" Karlyn Crowley and I ask this very question. Our conclusion is that feminist adaptations can go wrong—or commit a fraud on the fairies, a term made famous by Charles Dickens—if they

> reinscribe gender norms even as they seek to be liberated from them. . . . We argue that a feminist fraud on the fairies is *prescriptive*, one that imagines gender as singular, essential, and purely identity-based and is also reflected aesthetically versus a feminist retelling that is *descriptive*, one that imagines gender and genre as complex, intersectional, and multifaceted. Naturally, there is a constitutive relationship between ideology and form; we argue that frauds on the

> fairies commit sins of weak imagination in both areas—gender and genre. (302)

Furthermore, we argue that feminist retellings often fall prey to the

> notion of power [that] depends on essentialism: men and women act out particular gender roles (men in control, women submissive) that once overturned mean the world is in its proper place, usually with women in charge. A strength of fairy-tale retellings is that power is wrested and fought over, though appearing clearly drawn initially. Powerful feminist fairy tales, ones that are descriptive and self-reflexive, do not seek to simply subvert stereotypes—replace the old with the new; rather, they rattle the foundational cages of the tale where the power structures reside. (304)

It is clear through interviews that Amos intends to rattle a lot of cages with *The Light Princess*. Thus the irony in Amos and Adamson's musical: they overtly express their desire to liberate MacDonald's tale from its sexist roots, yet they can be accused of falling into the trap of perpetuating age-old stereotypes of gender. A further irony is that they fundamentally misread MacDonald's fairy tale, which is, arguably, more subversive about gender than Amos and Adamson's musical.

Althea's Passivity and Weakness

In interviews, Amos suggests that her rejection of the trope of the uninvited witch and her magic spell has more to do with her feminist focus than with a desire to play a variation on a particular tale type—in this case the ATU 410, "Sleeping Beauty" type Perrault followed, as did the Brothers Grimm in their version, "Briar Rose." Neil Gaiman (a good friend of Amos's) is a keen observer of how fairy tales operate, and in *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014), a mash-up of "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White," he keeps the witch and the spell, which provides the conflict of the fairy tale and liberates both tales to capture complex female relationships. A complaint can be made, certainly, that the motif of the "evil" witch in fairy tales can demean women, especially when we can only conclude that strong, aggressive women are evil, while passive women are heroines in the service of patriarchy. The question that readers and viewers and listeners of *The Light Princess* should ask, fundamentally, is how Amos and Adamson have revised the tension of the active (evil) versus passive (good) stereotype that structures many classic fairy tales.

The first irony is that the Light Princess and the Queen in

MacDonald's tale are not the typically passive heroine. Her mother seems the equal of the King and is overjoyed by giving birth to a daughter, not a male heir to the throne. Women seem to be equals to men throughout MacDonald's fairy tale, with a hint of their superiority as the King is impotent to father a son and becomes content to sit in his counting house all day, isolated from the world of action. Amos and Adamson intend for Althea to be a strong independent women, yet they perpetuate essentialist notions about gender. First, when the Queen dies during childbirth, Althea is so distraught that she desires to die and join her mother, thus giving herself no gravity, and eliminating the need to evoke a spell for a wicked witch. The implication, while unintended, is that Althea cannot survive without her mother: her grief overpowers her, suggesting a psychological weakness. Having a wicked witch cast a spell that denies Althea her gravity, one could argue, might make her stronger, not weaker, for she would be a victim not an actor in her disability and passivity.

In addition, after Althea's birth, the King locks her in a tower (a reversal of "Rapunzel") because a woman is not valuable since she cannot be king. While the feminist point is made, it is not made by transforming our understanding of gender but by promoting essentialism of gender by making the King a type of witch who imprisons Althea. The result is the same: she becomes imprisoned as a passive creature. The entire *The Light Princess* demonstrates this tension between Althea as a passive character and one who is active, an aggressor, and Amos and Adamson perpetuate the essentialism of gender so much so that when Althea does turn to action—killing of a dragon, for example—she imitates the masculine notions of control and authority. When she does transgress feminine roles and be assertive and powerful, however, Althea regrets it and backtracks to a passive stance. She is content being weak. In one telling scene she sings,

> I will live a life of light
> In the forest like Snow White,
> Free
> From monarchical hostility! (21)

The Snow White reference becomes confused. The stepmother from this tale is one of the most sinister characters in all of literature—her desire to kill Snow White so she can be the fairest of them all. Even Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the monumental *The Madwoman in the Attic* emphasize how the evil stepmother and Snow While reflect that binary of gender: "Whether she is a passive angel or an active monster . . . the woman writer feels herself

to be literally or figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternative her culture offers her, and the crippling effects of her conditioning sometimes seem to 'breed' like sentences of death in the bloody shoes she inherits from her literary foremothers' (57). Gilbert and Gubar were referring, of course, to the dilemma female writers found themselves in during the nineteenth century. Clearly Amos has no anxiety of patriarchal influence that would preclude her from pushing gender construction in radical ways. As the memetic tale demonstrates, Snow White herself hides away, is taken care of by male dwarfs, gets tricked into eating a poisoned apple by an old woman who is disguised as the witch-stepmother (even after being warned by the dwarfs not to talk to any strangers), and is finally rescued by the prototypical fairytale prince. One wonder what feminist revisioning Amos and Adamson intend with this reference.

Althea's Complicity with Purity and Beauty Myths

With Althea's passivity, Amos and Adamson do not "conceive of new gender possibilities (Crowley and Pennington 310); rather, they become prescriptive and didactic by viewing gender in traditional binary fashion. The same can be said of Althea's purity and beauty, key defining characteristics of her in the adaptation. Early in the musical Althea sings: "I'm Cleopatra, Gloriana, / Boudicca— /Boudicca, how / ridiculous. I couldn't / defend you miserable, / hypocritical land-lovers / even if I wanted you" (11). These odd allusions become a transition from Althea the passive princess to one that is defined by her purity. That Althea rejects Boudicca—the strong Celtic warrior who battled the Romans and who supposedly poisoned herself rather than be captured—suggests that she lacks confidence and strength. Yet she can embrace Cleopatra, a strong, intellectual woman, but one primarily known for her beauty and charm—and for her ability to seduce men with those feminine charms. Cleopatra is both angel and demon. Althea also aligns herself with Gloriana, the Virgin Queen, who is the Faerie Queen of Spenser's epic. The trio of women references mirrors gender confusion in the musical, a hodge-podge of allusions that do not resonate clearly in any thematic way.

Numerous examples in the musical further depict Althea as conditioned by her purity and beauty, a central conceit in many fairy tales. So how does Amos and Adamson transform those depictions? In their initial flirtation Digby and Althea, who are supposed to be at war representing their kingdoms, trade witty banter:

Digby You are, you are Althea—

You are changing the world for me,
You are heaven-scent—
A vision of golden light falling!
Just look at me,
Look into my eyes—

Althea But, sir—
—there's procedure in a war.

Digby Did you go to school, or did you have a governess?

Althea What? Incredible that I'm above you yet you can still talk down to me.

Digby You're adorable.

Althea You're meant to be solemn

Digby I know.

Althea So why are we dancing? (35)

Soon after they kiss. This scene is confusing on its gender politics. The initial rejected seduction attempt by Digby—with Althea's claim about being talked down to—is clever in its use of her floating and feminism, but it is undercut with her ultimate complicitness in this flirtation. The seduction scene seems to come from a contemporary romance novel, where the woman's "no" is taken to mean "yes" by the male suitor. To exacerbate the problem, the dancing and kiss are perceived as tainting Althea: King Darius and his kingdom quickly turn on Althea, for her kiss is a betrayal, not only of Lagobel, but of her purity, which becomes vital for Althea's acceptance by all in the kingdom. The Lagobelians chant: "She snogged him—! (38). *Snog* means to kiss amorously and suggests an action sexual and impure, as reflect by those in the kingdom: "She is light / *And a slut!* / . . . What a blight! / Interbreeding . . ." (39; italics in original). Of course Amos and Adamson are being ironic, for it is the Lagobelians who are slut-shaming Althea. Althea's sexual desires are held against her, making her a traitor to her kingdom and forcing her father to look for professional help—from men, of course—to cure Althea of her lightness, and from, we assume, her desiring sexual self. MacDonald's "The Light Princess," one should remember, took John Ruskin aback because he thought the tale too sensual. That Althea gets pregnant while floating on the lake with Digby before marriage plays again into the purity stereotypes of women. That Digby finally rescues Althea primarily because she is pregnant and will soon become a mother reasserts the heteronormative behavior of classic fairy tales that Amos claims she is debunking. Of course, marriage returns all gender roles to their proper places:

King as leader, Queen as wife and mother. All's right with the gender world in *The Light Princess*.

Althea's Social Traumas

One of the more fascinating (and some might say the more problematic) updates of MacDonald's tale is the creation of the three men who come to cure Althea of her illness. In "The Light Princess" MacDonald creates Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck as ludicrous characters who demonstrate the ridiculousness of overt spiritualist and materialist sensibilities; Knoepflmacher argues that MacDonald was parodying Hume's and Kant's philosophies for the Victorians (344). Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck are also most certainly prototypes of Tweedledee and Tweedledum of Carroll's Alice world—the absurdity of all these characters reflecting the irreverent tone that MacDonald and Carroll sought in their works. Amos and Adamson use these three men in completely different ways, foregoing the lightness and humor to highlight didactic social concerns that haunt young girls and women. Mr. Flowers, the first that King Darius consults, concludes that Althea's lack of gravity is a result of drug addiction: "High as a kite, King. Somewhere in here she's harvesting very magical mushrooms" (44). One would hope the reference would be a nod to Alice and the Caterpillar, but the musical does not for that connection. Mr. Flowers forces her to inhale opium to bring her down from her high, treating drug addiction with further drug addiction, it appears. His cure does not take.

The second man, Mr. Crabbe, suggests that she is suffering from anorexia: "All she needs is fattening up" (47). He forces Althea to eat, the increased fat in her body designed to weigh her down to earth. Althea, as you might guess, vomits, floats again, and then is called "a puking witch" (48) by those around her. Anorexia and body image are major contemporary concerns for women, particularly young women, but Amos and Adamson bring up the issue without any clear—or clever—resolution to the problem, except to suggest that patriarchy is complicit in such a disease (as with drug addiction). Finally a Mr. Grey (an allusion to the 50 shades of Mr. Grey?) tells King Darius that love will bring Althea down to earth. As one might expect, the King arranges for Althea to marry Mr. Grey. If Mr. Flowers and Mr. Crabbe were not violent enough on their prescriptions for Althea's cure, Mr. Grey goes beyond imagination: he arranges for Althea to wear some kind of chastity-belt torture device: "*She lets Piper touch her, then look beneath her hoop skirt. Everything is bloody; she has been weighted, her body 'solidified'*

by a medieval golden contraption bolted into her thigs, calipers, robot-like body armour" (58; italics in the original). If Althea has lost her purity earlier to Digby, the King makes certain that no sexual defilement will happen again. This part of the musical becomes quite disturbing. In fact, these three men—as patriarchal forces—subdue with force Althea; in a sense, they violate or rape her. But the point Amos and Adamson intends to make, as discussed earlier, seem unclear: if they are drawing attention to women's issues such as addiction, anorexia, and rape culture, how do they empower Althea to reject these controls? She remains passive and at the whim of the men—and her ultimately rescue comes from Prince Digby, reinforcing a traditional fairytale meme that promotes patriarchy. And is it fair to blame patriarchy for drug addiction and anorexia, when the musical has embraced the passivity of Althea and her willingness to be defined by the purity and beauty myth? They critique oppressive realities in the lives of young women—male dominance and control, rape culture, slut-shaming, fatphobia, and lookism. But they give Althea no tools to reject them.

Althea's Love, Marriage, and Motherhood

A final concern of the gender trouble in Amos and Adamson's adaptation is the ending of the musical. Mr. Grey, it turns out, has been right: love conquers all and will bring Althea back down to earth. Mr. Grey is just the wrong man to cure Althea of her lightness. To be fair to the plot of the musical, there is a mutual saving of the characters—Althea saves Digby from drowning, after Digby gets shot while breaking down the dam so the water can flow again and save Althea and her kingdom. During the finale they also battle physically and verbally, which suggests an equality or superiority of Althea. While on the lake we witness the following exchange:

Digby Althea, I was thinking that I might build us a bed. . . .
I could chop down those trees,
I could build us a house . . . over there!
Let me build us a house!

Althea Why? You sound very stern:
Is it you're wanting to make me a dutiful wife?
To cook and darn socks?
A spouse in a house?

Digby No, Your Majesty, no . . .
I mean a home—God, help me say this—
For the day when the stork

Brings a child.
Well, she might
Bring a child?

Althea Child?! You sound like the King.
This is my home, it has everything, I need
Nothing more than this!

Althea questions Digby's motives and challenges the notion that she should be defined by being a wife and mother. The ironic contradiction remains, though, since Althea will get pregnant, which leads Digby to save her since motherhood is so sacred. And she *does* become the Queen, suggesting that she will be a dutiful wife. Amos and Adamson embrace the ending of classic fairy tales where the prince and princess marry, and they reassert, in another irony, the gender norms that the musical seems to want to break down. Ending a fairy tale with a princess who can be alone (think of Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess*) or love someone besides a man—a sister, for instance—is even something Disney accomplished in *Frozen*. But in *The Light Princess* musical, all is right with Lagobel and Sealand as Digby and Althea marry and bring order to the political world—and order to the domestic world. Donald Haase's comments about some feminist fairytale scholarship aptly applies to Amos and Adamson's adaptation: "Some feminist fairy-tale analyses remain stuck in a mode of interpretation able to do no more than reconfirm stereotypical generalizations about the fairy tale's sexist stereotypes. Such studies are oblivious to the complexities of fairy-tale production and reception, sociohistorical contexts, cultural traditions, the historical development of the genre, and the challenges of fairy-tale textuality" (ix-x).

In 1992 when Amos released her debut album *Little Earthquakes* she did, indeed, shake some ground. Steve Huey, for *AllMusic*, boldly states:

> With her haunting solo debut *Little Earthquakes*, Tori Amos carved the template for the female singer/songwriter movement of the '90s. Amos' delicate, prog rock piano work and confessional, poetically quirky lyrics invited close emotional connection, giving her a fanatical cult following and setting the stage for the Lilith Fair legions. But *Little Earthquakes* is no mere style-setter or feminine stereotype—its intimacy is uncompromising, intense, and often far from comforting. Amos' musings on major personal issues—religion, relationships, gender, childhood—were just as likely to encompass rage, sarcasm, and defiant independence as pain or tenderness;

sometimes, it all happened in the same song.

The connection of Amos to Lilith also connects her to MacDonald in a more intricate way, for Lilith was the central character in MacDonald's 1896 adult fantasy *Lilith*. Amos and Adamson have certainly given us a lush, serious musical production in *The Light Princess*, and, as with Twyla Tharp's ballet of *The Princess and the Goblin*, these adaptations have pushed MacDonald more to the foreground with popular audiences. To enjoy *The Light Princess* is no guilty pleasure—it is a stunning production, an adventurous updating of MacDonald's fairy tale, with beautiful songs that enhance the dramatic action. But for one to agree with Amos's claims about the musical being a much-needed tonic to MacDonald's problematic fairy tale on gender is to misread MacDonald and to misread Amos's own problematic feminist adaptation. *The Light Princess* musical closing scene comments that "Althea did become Queen, but most importantly she went to university and became a marine biologist" (105). We laugh and nod our heads for the emancipated Queen. But this comment reflects the problem of the musical—feminist revision is tacked on as an after-thought. The conventions of the classic fairy-tale made memetic by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm remain—the King and Queen have a baby, and the old gender roles are reinscribed as "Queen Althea, King Digby, their daughter, families and countries. And they all lived reasonably happily with the occasional skirmish until they died. The End" (109). We know what Queen Althea did as wife and mother. We never find out, though, what she did as a marine biologist.

Endnotes

1. *The Light Princess* musical is not the only MacDonald work receiving attention. Rebecca Nesvet, in an article in this number of *North Wind*, examines the musical adaptation being done by Jeffrey Haddow and Thomas Tierney of MacDonald's classic 1871 children's fantasy *At the Back of the North Wind*. In addition, Twyla Tharp's ballet of MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* premiered on 2012 at the Atlanta Ballet in the United States and will return to the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Center in Atlanta in April 2016. MacDonald, it appears, in currently a hot property.
2. One assumes that MacDonald would question Warner's description of him as an allegorist. In turn, scholars would point to MacDonald's guidance of John Ruskin in his relationship with Rose La Touche to suggest that MacDonald was also aware of Warner's very contemporary issues with women. Warner also ignores the fact that Adela Cathcart suffers, to a degree, by the same afflictions haunting today's girls.
3. Other critics point out MacDonald's proto-feminist leanings. Two examples: U.

C. Knoepflmacher in *Ventures into Childland* contends that "The Light Princess" has a complex gender construction that is cemented in the ironies of the tale. The witch Makemnoit, for example, is a central character: her "extraordinary power as a villainess thus stems from anger that 'The Light Princess' sets out to exorcise and to replace with a more gender-balanced alternative" (135). The overt sexuality of the tale, claims Knoepflmacher, allows MacDonald to stress that "the young woman is capable of a sexual maturation that will lead to her eventual growth" (140). Thus Amos's scoffing at MacDonald's use of the witch as a residue of sexist fairytale construction misses a central move that MacDonald makes to create a more emancipated fairy tale. In "Of 'Frustrate Desire': Feminist Self-Postponement in George MacDonald's *Lilith*," I argue that MacDonald in his last fantasy novel *Lilith* (1895) depicts a Lilith that defies binary oppositions such as good and evil; in fact, Lilith demonstrates MacDonald complex attitude toward women: while she is silenced in the text by Christian patriarchy, she haunts the fringes by remaining a powerful myth with wide appeal in the nineteenth century.

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