

1-1-2019

## The Christian Enlightened Princess: Contemporary Religious Retellings of MacDonald's "The Light Princess"

John Pennington

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind>

---

### Recommended Citation

Pennington, John (2019) "The Christian Enlightened Princess: Contemporary Religious Retellings of MacDonald's "The Light Princess"," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 38 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol38/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact [sarah.titus@snc.edu](mailto:sarah.titus@snc.edu).

## The Christian Enlightened Princess: Contemporary Religious Retellings of MacDonald's "The Light Princess"

John Pennington

“**T**he Light Princess” first appeared in George MacDonald’s *Adela Cathcart* (1864) as an interpolated fairy tale told to Adela by John Smith, who is trying to lift her spirits. The first volume of the novel sets the scene explicitly—it is Christmas eve in London. In fact, the first sentence reads: “It was the afternoon of Christmas Eve, sinking towards the night,” hinting at the purpose of the novel to alleviate the sense of ennui that Adela is experiencing. The setting situates the novel, clearly, in a time of Christian celebration and reflection. Before John Smith begins “The Light Princess,” the characters chat about the importance of fairy tales in such a Christian context:

“This is Christmas-time, you know, and that is just the time for story-telling,” I [Smith] added.

“I trust it is a story suitable to the season,” said Mrs. Cathcart, smiling.

“Yes, very,” I said; “for it is a child’s story—a fairy tale, namely; though I confess I think it fitter for grown than for young children. I hope it is funny, though. I think it is.”

“So you approve of fairy-tales for children, Mr. Smith?”

“Not for children alone, madam; for everybody that can relish them.”

“But not at a sacred time like this?”

And again she smiled an insinuating smile.

“If I thought God did not approve of fairy-tales, I would never read, not to say write one, Sunday or Saturday. Would you, madam?”

“I never do.”

“I feared not. But I must begin, notwithstanding.”

Mrs. Cathcart is not a true believer in fairy tales. Certainly, she does not think that they can do much good for Adela. But MacDonald thinks otherwise. Richard Reis writes about MacDonald’s approach in *Adela Cathcart* and argues that “the therapeutic value of the interpolated fantasies” can provide “a healthy Christian therapy more effective than any ordinary novel” (61). Nancy Mellon has written about the homeopathic story-telling medicinal practice in *Adela Cathcart*, where the “homeopath approach is a Christian one—it assists people to overcome out of their own resources, leaving them in perfect freedom” (26).

Mrs. Cathcart's aversion to fairy tales is understandable, for such tales seem more about freedom than religious teachings. MacDonald's popularity with lay readers—and a significant number of scholars—is focused around his spiritual teachings in his works. C. S. Lewis even has MacDonald as a spiritual guide in *The Great Divorce* (1945), further reinforcing MacDonald as a Christian writer. Michael Phillips's recent "Cullen Collection" is designed to "make MacDonald's stories and spiritual ideas more accessible to contemporary readers" (i); the "Cullen Collection's" goal overall is to cement MacDonald as a Christian writer by reestablishing, as Phillips writes, "MacDonald's stature in the twentieth century as a Christian visionary with singular insight into the nature of God and his eternal purposes."

"The Light Princess" has become one of MacDonald's most famous fairy tales and one that has led to numerous retellings and reimaginings. Maybe the most famous is Maurice Sendak's second illustrated version for Sunburst Books in 1969, which followed Sendak's first illustrated version of "The Golden Key" for Sunburst in 1967, with an Afterword by W. H. Auden. In the Afterword, Auden admires MacDonald because his "most extraordinary, and precious, gift is his ability, in all his stories, to create an atmosphere of goodness about which there is nothing phony or moralistic" (86). In both Sunburst editions Sendak's illustrations were original, but he allowed MacDonald's fairy tales to speak for themselves—they appear in their original form. Others have tinkered with the retelling of "The Light Princess." In 1988, noted fantasy author Robin McKinley retold MacDonald's "The Light Princess" to appeal to more contemporary audiences (describing MacDonald's prose as too Victorian), with illustrations by Katie Thamer-Treherne; the primary goal of this edition was to update, not to add elements to the story.

A recent full-barrel appropriation of "The Light Princess" comes from Tori Amos and Samuel Adamson, who adapted the fairy tale into a stage musical. Though Amos and Adamson's reinterpretation certainly does not focus on the spiritual dimension to the fairy tale, let alone Christian elements, it does add a moralistic center focused on women's issues. 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":

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 [sic]; 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).

In an article for *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*, I argue that Amos and Adamson, while creating an aural beauty in the musical soundtrack, misread the fairy tale by perpetuating "essentialist notions of gender construction. 'The Light Princess' musical reinscribes retrograde gender roles as it wishes to liberate those very roles" (83).

Two recent adaptations of "The Light Princess" focus on the Christian aspect of MacDonald that is consistent with the therapeutic and spiritual thrust of the fairy tale that is found in *Adela Cathcart*. At first glance, these versions would have given Auden some pause, for a Christian adaptation would most likely add a moralistic and didactic flavor to the fairy tale. Rabbit Room Press's "The Light Princess" follows in the spirit of Maurice Sendak's 1969 illustrated edition of the fairy tale—Rabbit Room reprints MacDonald's fairy tale intact, with illustrations by Ned Bustard that embeds religious symbols in the visuals. Rabbit Room Press is named after the back room of The Eagle and the Child, the pub made famous by the Inklings (primarily C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams), who would meet and share their stories. The website for Rabbit Room declares that it "fosters Christ-centered community and spiritual formation through music, story, and art."

Rabbit Room's edition of "The Light Princess" is framed by mini essays about the fairy tale. There is a Foreword by Jennifer Trafton, and an Afterword by Andrew Peterson that argue for the importance of reading the fairy tale in a Christian context. In turn, Cave Pictures Publishing's five-part comic of the fairy tale rewrites the tale from a consciously Christian perspective (by Meredith Finch), with the illustrations by Renae De Liz (pencils), and Ray Dillon (inks, colors, and letters). These two works show, contrary to what Auden might claim, approaches for inventive ways to evoke the Christian message found so often in MacDonald's more realistic novels, but less often—and obvious—in his fantasies and fairy tales.

In his "Artist's Statement" for the Rabbit Room edition of "The Light Princess," Ned Bustard describes the inspiration for his black-and-white linocut images: "As I worked on designing and illustrating this book, again and again I found myself noticing details that inspired in me theological musings beyond the time-worn paths of a textbook fable" (103). In her Foreword, Jennifer Trafton bluntly states that MacDonald "was one of the most beloved Christian authors and thinkers of the 19th-century English-

speaking world, on both sides of the Atlantic” (12). Trafton contends that MacDonald’s fantasies and fairy tales reflect a clear Christian worldview: “The world shimmers with spiritual meaning that lies just beneath the surface, winking at us through stone or tree or bird or star. And because artists are not creating things so much as finding them, uncovering the truths God has already planted in his creation, then the writer of a fantasy story and the reader of that story are both, in a sense, on a journey of discovery. . . .” (14-15). For Trafton, the illustrations to the fairy tale are a mechanism to visualize Christian themes in a way that rewards the reader as he or she discovers these themes, not necessarily in the words of the fairy tale itself, but in Bustard’s illumination of Christian themes in the illustrations. Bustard has “paid homage to all the multilayered themes and resonances in MacDonald’s writing,” concludes Trafton, “by threading visual symbols throughout the illustrations like little Easter eggs for you to discover” (16).

*Easter* is the appropriate descriptor here. Though the term is used to identify hidden messages in films, video games, and other electronic works, the use of the term *easter* does not have any prominent religious import to it—easter eggs are a way for viewers and readers to find hidden references and clues, similar to childhood hunting for Easter eggs and baskets. A recent work that highlights easter eggs is Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One* (2011), a novel nested with popular-culture easter egg references, which was made into a film by Steven Spielberg in 2018 that is chock-full of such eggs to discover. For Trafton, however, *Easter* eggs in “The Light Princess” illustrations retain the religious aura, for they include “Christian iconography—seashell, dolphin, anchor, bread wine, and more” (17), as well as hidden images to other MacDonald works. The Rabbit Room’s “The Light Princess,” then, engages the reader on two levels: 1) to activate the Christian background of the story by interpreting the illustrations in a religious and spiritual light, and 2) to enjoy finding references to other MacDonald fantasies and fairy tales. Andrew Peterson’s Afterword—“Gobsmacked”—goes further in its Christian insistence: “The Light Princess” gobsmacked him in a similar way as did the story about the Ark of the Covenant in Joshua 3: “The same is true of the best fairy tales. I don’t mean to say that they’re factual in the way Joshua 3 is factual. After all, part of the power of that story is that it actually happened. But when a child hears a fairy tale, they take it as seriously as fact” (100). The edition by Rabbit Room honors the original story while it grafts a religious reading to the story through illustrations.

In *Figure 1: The Castle*, Bustard illustrates the opening to Chapter One: “What! No Children?” This illustration captures the spirit of what you might expect from a fairy tale illustration: there is the castle where the King, Queen, and the Light Princess live. In the background appears a crooked castle—that, we assume of Makemnoit—and the singular castle echoes that

of “Rapunzel” and “Tangled” (the Disney version of the classic tale). On the bottom right side even appears a smiling fairy that literally tells us that we are reading a *fairy tale*. Yet the illustration does double duty as it embeds at least three religious icons: the bird seems a pelican, which reflects the sacrifice of Christ, as the bird in mythology supposedly wounded her own breast to feed her young. Bees, the hive, and resultant (milk and) honey are staple images in the Bible—the bee represents Christ’s attributes, the honey his sweetness. In addition, the tree branches and leaves are surrounded by circles, a symbol of completeness/wholeness, of eternity. The trees, one could argue, seem to have a halo effect, as if in a Pre-Raphaelite painting of Christ and his disciples.

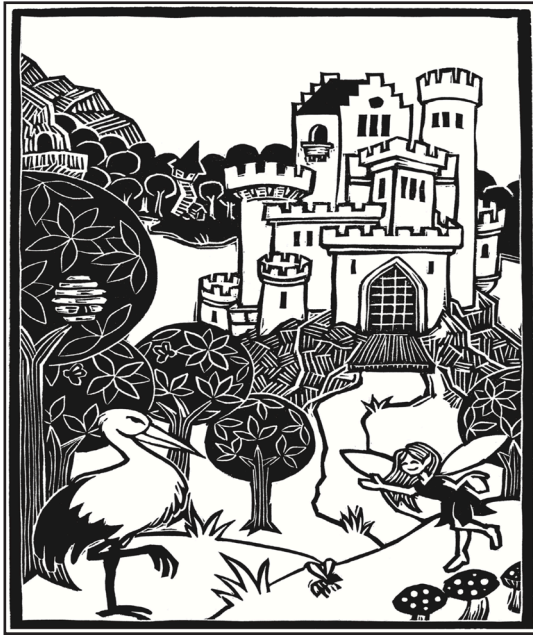


Figure 1: The Castle  
*The Rabbit Room*

The illustration, *Figure 2: Honey Queen*, from Chapter Five: “What is to Be Done?” works in a similar fashion—honoring the fairy tale itself while commenting on it with religious images. This chapter, one filled with humor, finds the Queen upset because their child is, well, “light” in so many ways: “light-hearted,” “light-headed,” “light-handed,” “light-fingered,” “light-footed,” “light-bodied,” “light-minded,” and “light-haired,” which is a pun on their daughter not being a boy, so she is also “light heired” (34-35). The image depicts what typically a reader would expect a King and Queen to look like; Makemnoit’s twisted castle appear in the background to remind

readers of the evil Princess's curse. Honey flows on the bread from the honey pot, which seems to depict a bee that is closer to cross than insect. And, of course, the most obvious image is the bread and wine.



Figure 2: Honey Queen  
*The Rabbit Room*

Let us look at two more examples to demonstrate the technique used by Bustard to evoke the fairy tale proper and the religious dimensions evoked by the illustrations. *Figure 3: Philosophers*, from Chapter Seven: “Try Metaphysics,” and *Figure 4: White Dragon*, from Chapter Eleven: “Hiss!,” also provide Easter eggs to find that allude to other MacDonald fantasies and fairy tales.





Figure 3: Philosophers



Figure 4: White Dragon

*The Rabbit Room*

The image on the left depicts the Chinese philosophers or metaphysicians Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck, who are satirized in the fairy tale by MacDonald for being respectively a “Materialist” and a “Spiritualist” (46). MacDonald may be satirizing Taoism, which Bustard depicts by the yin-yang symbol on the unspooled yo-yo, certainly a pun that is intended to capture the silliness of the philosophers.<sup>1</sup> *Phantastes* is the only book identified in the bookcase, which is a direct homage to Sendak’s depiction in Chapter 13 of his illustrated “The Light Princess,” where the king is talking to the soon-to-be hero. On the right side in Figure 4 we see *Lilith* on the bookshelf, and it could be that the bird skeleton in Figure 3 is that of a raven, which is fitting since Kopy-Keck admits that Hum-Drum’s prescription to cure the Light Princess “would presently arrive in the form of grim Death” (49). The fairy tale’s last image by Bustard is of Mr. Raven (Figure 5). *Lilith*, which is found in bookcase for Figure 4, also connects to Makemnoit, a femme fatale in the vein of Lilith herself, and maybe to an interpolated story in *Adela Cathcart* called “The Cruel Painter,” whose main character is named Lilith. The keys in the trunk recall “The Golden Key.” The dominant figure in the illustration reflects the religious: the snake biting its body alludes to the Borromean Ring, three circles interlocked that represents the Trinity; furthermore, the snake represents the ouroboros, a snake or dragon that eats itself and represents infinity.





Figure 5: Librarian  
*The Rabbit Room*

Rabbit Room’s version of “The Light Princess” performs a dual service of respecting the integrity of MacDonald’s fairy tale while illustrating the tale in a unique way that plays with images from classic fairy tales and the fantasies and of MacDonald, while adding a religious dimension by subtly evoking images from religious iconography and symbolism.

When we turn to the Cave Pictures Publishing version of “The Light Princess,” we see an even more pointed Christian approach. Cave Pictures reimagines the fairy tale as a graphic comic series and rewrites the tale to add a conscious Christian strain to the tale in these words and images. The editorial statement from the website of Cave Pictures states: “We produce content that is excellently crafted, deeply questioning, and spiritually meaningful.” Taking their company’s name from Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” Cave Pictures further defines its mission:

Our name is also inspired by Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, in which man who initially only sees reality cast in ill-defined shadows on a cave wall is freed and moves upward and onward toward the source of all goodness and truth. We believe that this journey is universal and fundamentally spiritual, that the one who seeks, finds. Cave Pictures is committed to creating stories that seek to make sense of our world, that draw us toward the source of goodness, and that uncover what we worship, because as David Foster Wallace wrote, “Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.”

The opening of this version of “The Light Princess” depicts the technique of the comic to use bright colors reminiscent of classic comics (Figure 1), with the use of dark to depict evil (Figure 8). (The print version

of *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies* could not replicate the Cave Pictures images in color. To see them in their original color, please go to the online version of this article at <https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/>.) The lettering creates a more ancient look, as if in medieval times, as if in a fairy tale. The page defies clear linear reading, with three inserted panels forcing the reader to move left to right, up and down; each volume in the series maintains this graphic format throughout. The word bubbles show that the story will primarily be told through dialogue, thus necessitating a revision that conveys the fairy tale in a different method than the original, which is highly descriptive and is consciously self-reflective, as the narrator interjects personal comments throughout.



Figure 6: Once Upon a Time  
*The Light Princess*, Cave Pictures Publishing

The first major change in the Cave Pictures version of “The Light Princess” is to cast the barrenness of the King and Queen as a serious, even

tragic, issue, not the playful tone that MacDonald uses. Meredith Finch decides to depict the Queen’s inability to give birth to a child as a sign from God, as the Queen states: “The Lord Gives us what we need not what we want” (Volume 1). Her servant—who admits, “I don’t know much about God. But if it were *me* . . .”—suggests that the Queen allow her to become a surrogate mother (Figure 7):



Figure 7: The Proposition  
*The Light Princess*, Cave Pictures Publishing

“Forgive me . . . it’s just, the heir has to be of the King’s blood, but nothing says it has to be a child birthed by you. What if someone carried the babe for you? You would still raise it as your own. The king would have his heir. And you would have yourself a baby to love.”

While the Queen convinces the King to agree to the servant’s plan

initially, he decides, on the night of consummation, that he cannot go through with it, telling the Queen, “I was tempted. True. But I could not . . . will not destroy the love you have for me for the sake of an heir. Do not ask such a thing of me ever again.” In the next panel he gently touches the Queen’s cheek and says, “You are worth more to me than a thousand heirs. If I am to die childless, then it is as God wills. I love you” (Volume 1). And God does will something, for the Queen immediately gets pregnant, a kind of miracle. This change to the original “The Light Princess” is stunning—and some might say misguided—but it serves the spiritual purpose: to highlight the significance of love and trust (and monogamy) in marriage that is rewarded with fruitfulness. In a way Finch describes a kind of sacramental immaculate conception in the fairy tale, while also hinting at the nobleness and wisdom of the King, who is more of a fool in MacDonald’s version. Clearly, this episode is designed to recall the Abraham and Sarah story in the Bible: Sarah is barren for many years until God allows her to become pregnant, giving birth to Isaac. Upon his birth, Sarah declares that “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me” (Genesis 21, New International Version). Soon the King and Queen will have their daughter cursed to not have gravity—she floats and laughs at anything serious.

The revision of the fairy tale also brings in the notion of temptation. That the Queen and King do not give into the temptation to do anything for a child makes them more noble, which contrasts directly to the evilness of Makemnoit, who is a classic fairy-tale villain, thus making the good-evil dichotomy as clear as possible (as seen in Figure 8). In a way, the fall that does not happen with the Queen’s plan for pregnancy is then transferred to “Auntie Makemnoit,” who curses the new-born child with the lack of gravity, an ironic anti-fall: the King and Queen do not “fall” in their marriage; now the Light Princess literally cannot fall but only float.



Figure 8: Volume 1 Makemnoit  
*The Light Princess*, Cave Pictures Publishing

Much of Cave Pictures version follows fairly accurately MacDonald's original related to the Light Princess and the young Prince, who falls in love with her and is willing to sacrifice himself for her. What Cave Pictures' version does do, however, is consistently remind readers of the overt religious dimension to the retelling by having characters seek guidance from God, as seen in the following two images. *Figure 9: Praying* depicts the King praying for his daughter, who is now cursed without gravity; the Queen, in turn, confesses that she did not put her trust in God, further supporting the need for faith in God. *Figure 10: Our Father* comes near the end of the series when the Prince, who nearly drowns plugging the hole so the waters return to the Light Princess's lake and save her, is in need of salvation. The Light Princess recites the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6: 9-13. Earlier, on the lake, the Light Princess must save the Prince. As the Prince is slowly drowning, the Light Princess again echoes the words of the Bible, particularly Matthew 26:26, as demonstrated by Figure 11. The eating of bread and the drinking of wine replicates Christ's requests at the Last Supper.



While the characters in the fairy tale are active agents in the narrative, there is a sense that their actions are at the mercy of God. Those who pray and give thanks to God survive. Princess Makemnoit is defeated, as the Lord’s Prayer delivers the characters from evil. Upon Makemnoit’s demise, the final scene in *The Light Princess* series finds the Queen remarking, “One cannot repay evil for evil. Evil can only be overcome with good” (Volume 5). That sentiment can be found in much of MacDonald, particularly in *Phantastes* written six years before “The Light Princess”: “What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good. And so, *Farewell*” (196). Cave Pictures’ *George MacDonald’s The Light Princess* ends very seriously, which is the dominant tone throughout the series: by eliminating the playful aspects of the original fairy tale, Finch’s version emphasizes the moral and religious seriousness of MacDonald.



Figure 9: Volume 2, Praying



Figure 10: Volume 5, Our Father

*The Light Princess*, Cave Pictures Publishing



Figure 11: Volume 5, Eat, Drink  
*The Light Princess*, Cave Pictures Publishing

At the end of *Adela Cathcart*, Adela is cured of her ennui. The Light Princess, similar to Adela, is cured of her curse, falls in love, and can now literally fall as she gains her gravity. The narrator John Smith, the primary storyteller, directly confronts readers and asks a pointed self-reflective question for them: “Pray, Mr. Smith, do you think it was your wonderful prescription of story-telling, that wrought Miss Cathcart’s cure?” The answer: “Probably it had its share” (459). Earlier in the novel, “The Light Princess” was one of those stories. At the end of the fairy tale, the schoolmaster makes a small complaint, “I don’t think the princess could have rowed, though—without gravity, you know.” Adela replies, “But she did. I won’t have my uncle found fault with. It is a very funny, and a very pretty story” (103). Though there is no consensus amongst the listeners about what the moral of the fairy tale was, Mr. Armstrong, the doctor, admits that “there is a great deal of meaning in it, to those who can see through its fairy-gates” (104). Rabbit Room and Cave Pictures Publishing both open the fairy-gates of “The Light Princess” to show how the fairy tale can have a clear Christian moral when you retell it in unique ways.



The images from Rabbit Room Press and Cave Pictures are used by permission. I would especially like to thank Pete Peterson (Rabbit Room) and Mandi Hart (Cave Pictures Publishing) for their generosity and encouragement for this article review.

#### Endnote

1. MacDonald's depiction of Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck as foolish "Chinese Philosophers" could be labeled as "orientalist," the concept made most relevant by Edward W. Said to argue how the West stereotypes and demeans the East—Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East (*Orientalism* Pantheon, 1978). In other words, is MacDonald relying on orientalist tropes as Victorian England was engaged in imperialism? That Bustard would choose to depict the philosophers as oriental stereotypes is a bit surprising in the 21st century, though the stereotype is originally in MacDonald.

#### Works Cited

- Auden, W. H. Afterword. *The Light Princess*, by George MacDonald, Illustrated by Maurice Sendak, Sunburst, 1967.
- Bustard, Ned. Artists Statement: More than a Fine Fairy Tale. *The Light Princess*, by George MacDonald, Rabbit Room, 2019, pp. 103-104.
- Finch, Meredith, adaptation. *George MacDonald's The Light Princess*, illustrated by Renae De Liz and Ray Dillon. Cave Pictures Publishing, 2019. <https://cavepicturespublishing.com/>.
- MacDonald, George. *Adela Cathcart*. Johannesen, 2000.
- . *Phantastes*. Edited by John Pennington and Roderick McGillis. Winged Lion, 2017.
- . *The Light Princess*. Illustration and design by Ned Bustard, Rabbit Room, 2019. <https://store.rabbitroom.com/>.
- McKinley, Robin. *The Light Princess*, by George MacDonald, illustrated by Katie Thamer Treherne, Harcourt, 1988.
- Mellon, Nancy. "The Stages in Adela Cathcart's Cure." *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*, vol. 15, 1996, pp. 26-43. <https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/>.
- Pennington, John. "The Not-So-Light Princess: Tori Amos and Samuel Adamson's Reimagining of George MacDonald's Classic Fairy Tale." *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*, vol. 34, 2015, pp. 80-101. <https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/>.
- Peterson, Andrew. Afterword: "Gobsmacked." *The Light Princess*, by George MacDonald, Rabbit Room 2019, pp. 99-102.
- Phillips, Michael. *George MacDonald: A Writer's Life*. The Cullen Collection, vol. 38. Sunrise, 2018.

- Reis, Richard. *George MacDonald's Fiction*. Sunrise, 1988.
- Sendak, Maurice. *The Light Princess*, by George MacDonald, Sunburst, 1969.
- Trafton, Jennifer. Foreword. *The Light Princess*, by George MacDonald, Rabbit Room, 2019, pp.11-17.
- Warner, Maria. *Once Upon a Time: A Short History*. Oxford UP, 2014.