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MacDonald and Adaptation: *Phantastes* as a Case Study

John Pennington

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon writes that “the Victorians had a habit of adapting just about everything—and in just about every possible direction; the stories of poems, novels, plays, operas, paintings, songs, dances, and *tableaux vivants* were constantly being adapted from one medium to another and then back again” (xi). Phillip Allingham writes on *The Victorian Web*, for example, that “in the late 1830s and early 1840s, the number of adaptations of Dickens's novels on the early Victorian stage prompted critic F. Dubrez Fawcett in *Dickens the Dramatist* (London: W. H. Allen, 1952) to term these early stage-versions “The Boz Cascade” and “The Dickens Deluge.” Dickens, himself, was fond of transforming his own work for his public readings—his adaptations of *Oliver Twist* (a key scene being the murder of Nancy) and *A Christmas Carol* were central to his public readings. Philip Bolton traces the popularity of the myriad adaptations of Dickens’s Christmas books:

Although the second Christmas book, *The Chimes* has not had the *Carol*'s enduring appeal, “at least nine stagings of “The Chimes” occurred in the first season of its life” (Bolton 268) in London and provincial theatres. However, after first announcing *The Chimes* for Christmas 1844, the management of London's Strand Theatre settled upon a revival of the more sentimental *Carol*. “Stirling's “Chimes” at the Lyceum ran about thirty-three performances, whereas his “Carol” at the Adelphi in early 1844 had run more than forty, and his “Martin Chuzzlewit” at the Lyceum itself had run over 100” (Bolton 268). The next

Christmas Book, *The Cricket on the Hearth* was quite a different story, however: within a month of its 20 December 1845 publication no fewer than 16 productions appeared on the London stages alone — in fact, of some two dozen theatres in the metropolis, only six were not featuring some version of the novella, although the most popular version of the story, *Dot* by Dion Boucicault, appeared fourteen years later. Whereas Bolton records 24 distinct adaptations of the *Carol* by the end of the nineteenth century, he gives 114 for *The Cricket on the Hearth*, as opposed to 117 for *David Copperfield*, 46 for *A Tale of Two Cities*, and a mere 16 for *Great Expectations*, although these full-length novels proved much more popular as the subjects of film-adaptations in the twentieth century.

And that is just one author!

The twentieth-first century finds itself continuing the popularity of adaptation—think of the Marvel universe film adaptations. In fact, Penguin Classics now offers its series, Penguin Classics Marvel Collection. While Marvel tends to rule the popular culture world right now, Victorian adaptations continue to be popular. *Manga Classics Great Expectations* was published in 2020, and the BBC is in production of a six-part version of *Great Expectations*, starring Oscar winner Olivia Colman as Miss Havisham. Now to a lesser degree we are seeing adaptations of George MacDonald’s work being reworked into graphic form. Hillary Chute reminds us that the transformation of classic literature into graphic form is no longer considered low-brow art. While the Classic Illustrated series that began in 1941 “helped cement the belief that comics were easier rendering of a harder, worthier thing,” today’s renderings “reveals the

3 MacDonalld and Adaptation

efficacy and the complexity of graphic takes on celebrated stories (*The New York Times*). Chute mentions Gareth Hind's *The Illiad: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* as a key example. One could also argue that Neon Lit's *Paul Auster's City of Glass* (1994) as another transformation that cemented the graphic appropriations of literary works as serious art.

A somewhat surprisingly author getting adaptation attention is George MacDonalld. A key player in the graphitization of MacDonalld is Cave Pictures Publishing, which recently presented MacDonalld's *The Light Princess* as a five-part graphic novel. I wrote in an article for *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonalld Studies* that Cave's version of *The Light Princess* was an inventive way to re-envision MacDonalld's fantasy work in a more overtly Christian way (27). Cave Picture Publishing is returning to MacDonalld with a graphic version of *Phantastes* (1858), MacDonalld's first full-length fantasy. Below is the promotional graphic for the upcoming work:



In an interview with *Mere Orthodoxy*, Mandi Hart, president of Cave Pictures Publishing, and Meredith Finch, the writer of the graphic version of *Phantastes*, discuss their approach to adapting MacDonald generally and *Phantastes* specifically. Hart states that *Phantastes* was appealing to adapt because of “its layers of complexity and allegory” that forces one to “work a bit harder to find all the layers of meaning.” A key layer to MacDonald’s fantasy is “a very clear theme,” continues Hart, “about the protagonist Anodos discovering the necessity/blessing of self-sacrifice and self-denial.” Finch adds that the theme of self-sacrifice is central to her vision of *Phantastes*: “And I think as Christians sometimes we talk about God being love, we forget that the greatest love that even we can show each other is that of self-sacrifice For me it’s the biggest reminder always of faith and Christianity.” (*Mere Orthodoxy*).

A graphic adaptation of a literary work is quite different than rewriting or redacting a work, as Michael Phillips has done for his MacDonald Collection. In fact, Phillips, who tends to dismiss MacDonald’s fantasy novels and shorter fairy tales, has not rewritten/redacted those works at all—he publishes these as they appeared in MacDonald’s day. (One possible explanation for this is that Phillips doesn’t find the fantasy and fairy-tale works promoting a clear Christian element.) What he does with MacDonald’s more realistic novels is to, in his rationale, make them less Victorian and thus more accessible to contemporary readers—and to make more obvious the Christian and spiritual dimensions of these novels. Some might argue that such an editing, adapting, transforming may lead to overt didacticism, a kind of Bowdlerization that eliminates perceived negative elements and emphasizes the goodness or morality of the work (in this case the

Christian emphasis). Some might argue, on the other hand, that such versions widens the audience for MacDonald.

Because a graphic adaptation has a twofold purpose—to revise the written word and interpret the original work with illustrations—such adaptations have a rationale—or freedom—to take additional liberties with a literary work, liberties not afforded to those rewriting or redacting the prose. Hutcheon theorizes that adaptations are both “process and product”: they are “inherently ‘palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts” (6). Yet “adaptation,” argues Hutcheon, “is repetition, but repetition without replication” (7). An adaptation is not “vampiric”: “It may, on the contrary, keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have otherwise” (176). This sentiment is reflected in the edited volume *Comics and Adaptation*, where the editors claim that “adaptation is intimately bound to its purpose. In other words, the question “How to adapt?” largely depends on the question “Why adapt?” (20). In Hutcheon’s paradigm for adaptation, three things must be considered:

1. That adaptation be “seen as *formal entity or product* . . . an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works”.
2. That adaptation be “*a process of creation*, the act of . . . (re-)interpretation and then (re-) creation . . . called both appropriation and salvaging . . . ”
3. That adaptation be a “*process of reception* . . . a form of intertextuality . . . as palimpsests . . . that resonate through repletion and variation.” (7-8)

An adaptation, then, is an original work, “a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary” (9).

This notion that an adaptation is an original creation is important, particularly when we consider a graphic adaptation of a literary work. In chapter 18 of *Phantastes*, Anodos relates to the reader the following: “But so indistinct were the visions, that sometimes I thought I was sailing on a shallow sea, and that strange rocks and forests of sea-plants beguiled my eye, sufficiently to be transformed, by the magic of the phantasy, into well-known objects and regions” (136). In other words, Anodos struggles with describing his fantastical world. His comment also provides illumination on *Phantastes* in generally, a work that readers often struggle to understand: in an 1858 review for the *Athenaeum*, for example, the reviewer suggests that the fantasy “is a riddle that will not be read” (201), going so far as arguing that “any one after reading it might set up a confusedly furnished second-hand symbol-shop” (200-01; cited in Pennington and McGillis). A graphic adaptation, one could argue, attempts to make visual those confusing symbols, attempts to provide tentative solutions to the riddle of the fantasy. The operative word in the above quotation is *transformed*: the OED defines the verb *transform* as “to change the form of; to change into another shape or form; to metamorphose” and the verb *adapt* as “the action of applying one thing to another or of bringing two things together so as to effect a change in the nature of the objects.” *Transform* and *adapt* are closely synonymous. And since such a transformation/adaptation, according to Hutcheon, is original as it pays homage to the original, such modification provides opportunities for creating a new vision or perspective. As Cave Pictures Publishing has remarked, that perspective is to bring a spiritual dimension to its graphic interpretations. As its website states:

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."

Plato's allegory is an apt reference, particularly in terms of *Phantastes*, which focuses heavily on the shadow Anodos gains and then loses on his journey, or as he states in the final chapter: "Thus I, who set out to find my Ideal, came back rejoicing that I had lost my Shadow" (195). Finch admits that her adaptation of *Phantastes* was inspired by the shadow: "I was going to say, Anodos' Shadow is a highlight for me. And yet, I don't want to give away too much of what that represents. I think I want the reader to have the same journey I did of understanding along with Anodos, taking that journey into understanding that Shadow that follow him through much of the book" (*Mere Orthodoxy*).

My comments on Cave Pictures Publishing's rendition of *Phantastes* must ring with tentativeness, for the graphic retelling of the novel is not yet finished; in fact, I received from Cave the first three pages of the graphic novel. It will be interesting to see how the writer Finch and the artists Christine Norrie and Andrew Pepoy adapt the fantasy novel in the published version. But here are some initial observations. The opening of the graphic novel focuses first on Anodos's 21st birthday party, and we

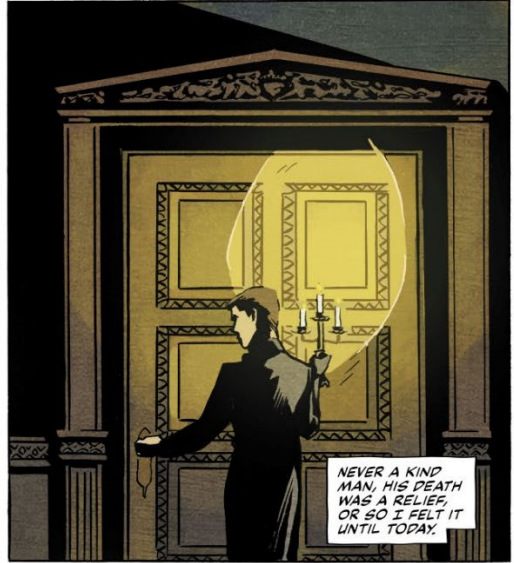
see him greeting guests and remarking that the night “marked the end of my childhood freedoms, and the putting on of the shackles of responsibility and servitude that running an estate this size entails.” His remark is a creation of Finch’s, for Anodos in MacDonald’s novel tells the reader objectively that his birthday has also made him “investing me with my legal rights” (2). Clearly Finch’s version is interested in the human dimension of Anodos family, particularly the relationship between Anodos and his father. In fact, we are give a backstory for his father, who “had died two years earlier in a drunken fall from his horse.” And then we find out that the father, “never a kind man,” is not mourned over by Anodos. And then comes the kicker at the beginning when we find that Anodos is “worried that I would lose myself and become the monster I had always considered my father to be.” These opening pages hint at Anodos’s journey of self-sacrifice being related to forgiveness of his father’s debauchery, his monstrosity. It’s probably just a coincidence, but the opening word bubble talks of the birthday party as a “ripper,” echoing the monstrous murderer that haunted London in 1888, a serial-killer mystery that has never been solved. It’s clear at the beginning, though, that the adaptation will be one of Christian self-sacrifice and forgiveness, centered around family.

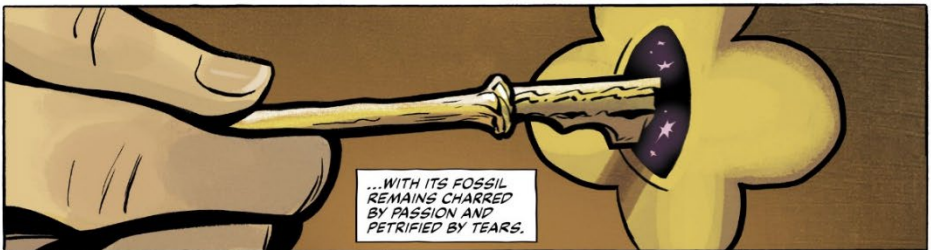
The third page of the graphic novel sets the stage for the opening of the bureau. The interest of this page is that Finch uses MacDonald’s words rather than retell—as Anodos places the key into the secretary’s lock (which emits a star-like glow) he says (directly from the novel): “. . . with its fossil remains charred by passion and petrified by tears.” This passion and tears may more directly reflect a Christian message in the

9 *MacDonald and Adaptation*

graphic novel—the Christian forgiveness, the passion of Christ and his cleansing tears for forgiveness.







What can we conclude so far from the graphic adaptation of *Phantastes* is that the authors are paying homage to the original while injecting a focused Christian perspective to the narrative that does not overtly—or clearly—appear in MacDonald’s *Phantastes*. The visuals, in turn, add an additional dimension to the fantasy.¹ How the themes of self-sacrifice and forgiveness play out, we assume, will drive the adaptation. In chapter 25 of *Phantastes* Anodos asks, “Could I translate the experience of my travels there, into common life?” (194). Anodos need not fear: Cave Pictures Publishing’s *Phantastes: A Graphic Novel: Adapted from George MacDonald’s Classic* will help with that translation.

Endnote

1. Fantasy as a verbal construct has often been seen by readers as antithetical to graphic illustration. For example, readers of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* imagine Middle-earth and construct the world in their imagination. A major concern with Peter Jackson’s film adaptations was whether the audience would “buy” into his rendering—his vision—of all things Middle-earth. That the *Lord of the Rings* movies generated nearly \$3 billion in receipts (with *The Hobbit* series also generating nearly \$3 billion) clearly answers this issue.

Personal Note

The author would like to thank Mandi Hart for sharing early panels from the upcoming graphic version of *Phantastes*.

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