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Separating the Rainbow’s Egg: Reflection on a Practice-as-Research Investigation Illustrating Themes in George MacDonald’s Fairy Tales

Adam Paxman

Introduction

This article presents selected material from and reflections on The Rainbow’s Egg: A Practice-led Illustrative Research Dossier Investigating Thematic and Theological Correlations within the Works of Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald. Following a successful proposal based on a public call for papers, the sixty page dossier, including over one hundred original full colour illustrations, was compiled over several months for a twenty-minute presentation at the conference Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald: An Influential Friendship, hosted by Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy in Chichester on the first of September 2018. Figure 1 shows the completed dossier and two supporting sketchbooks.

Figure 1
This article will focus on the process of discovery I undertook in order to foster familiarity with MacDonald’s fairy tales; specific problems I encountered depicting characters, locations and themes in his narratives; and how these were solved. For example, Figure 2 shows a page of the dossier combining multiple iterative illustrations of MacDonald’s titular golden key synthesized from both primary and secondary research materials, hand-generated formative reflections, and typed analytical annotations.

Findings pertaining to each of the themes will be delineated clearly, whilst conclusions shall also be drawn on the Practice-as-Research (P-a-R) process. It is hoped this article may be of interest to scholars of MacDonald’s writing in providing fresh insight and perspective, as well as to students and practitioners of illustration by providing an example of how this design discipline may be both applied to literary analysis and can contribute to academic discourse. Figure 3 breaks down the layout of dossier pages.
Separating the Rainbow’s Egg

The dossier was based upon three themes. These were thresholds: specifically those between the human world and Fairyland; theology and ecology, or how the characters, environments and locations in MacDonald’s fairy tales might suggest his theological position; and transformations. The latter was considered through both physical and metaphysical examples. I envisaged these expansive themes would provide correlations between MacDonald’s fairy tales and Carroll’s nonsense, whilst highlighting differences in their fantastical worlds. Figure 4 shows the dossier page on Pinterest boards. I made these in order to keep secondary online visual sources of research and reference organized.
I used Pinterest for secondary online visual research more than I have for any recent project or commission. I have a love / hate relationship with Pinterest, as I used to find it a really useful tool when it first began but I have since gone off it. Once it became really popular and mainstream, people dumped all sorts of imagery on there. However, I did persevere during this project and found it useful in keeping a pretty diverse assortment of reference images in order. The image above shows my homepage and the three thematic pinboards, which are freely available to view and interact with.

Figure 4

The themes also provided foci. These were essential to maintaining an analytical perspective on the material and preventing the research from becoming self-indulgent, over-reliant upon subjective interpretation of the text, or too reminiscent of a commercial-illustration project. My aim, for instance, was not to exhaustively depict each story. In this regard, I deemed it unnecessary to design human characters, as any human designs would lack the overt fantastical elements of, for example, the goblins from *The Princess and the Goblin*. Some of these can be seen in Figure 5.
Figure 5

In MacDonald’s fairy tales, the physical appearance of the protagonists is often arguably unimportant to the advancement of the plot, or their descriptions remain vague. An instance in which the physicality of the protagonists represented the theme of transformations was Mossy and Tangle’s supernaturally rapid but erratic aging process throughout *The Golden Key*. Though I made some preliminary sketches, I omitted these entirely from the dossier and chose not to develop them further, as doing so would be time-consuming and unlikely to provide insight. An example of initial sketchbook doodles and notes for characters and scenery from *Cross Purposes* can be seen in Figure 6.
Process of Discovery

When I initially considered writing my conference proposal, I was completely unfamiliar with MacDonald or his writing. Conversely, I was well versed in the works of and biographical information on Lewis Carroll. In a sense, my research process began from polar extremes. It was important to rediscover Carroll and his two Wonderland stories without the burden of prior knowledge or personal bias becoming creatively stifling. The challenge with discovering MacDonald was quite different, and began with preliminary reading. I consulted several online biographies of MacDonald, including Britannica (2018), The Victorian Web (Anon, 2004) and The George MacDonald Society’s more in-depth Life, Works, Legacy resource (Bracey, 2015). I also read Project Gutenberg of Australia’s e-book of The Golden Key (MacDonald, 2016). My first impressions of the story were its unconventional tone and structure, its focus on ideas over plot and characterization, and its ambiguity. Depictions of thresholds from The Golden Key are shown in Figure 7.
From my initial reading on MacDonald’s life, I formed an impression of a deep and free thinker who was frustrated by the dogma and doctrinal constraints of organized religion. I was intrigued how this first impression would be supported or challenged by a critical reading of a selection of his fairy-tale fiction, and my own illustrative response to these tales. With the conference focusing on the friendship between MacDonald and Carroll, I felt it useful early in the research process to visualize their lives and publishing careers as relative timelines. This diagram can be seen in Figure 8.
Ontology and Epistemology

The dossier is an example of P-a-R based on personal interpretations, analysis and reflections of fantasy fiction, and what this might reveal about MacDonald’s underlying theology. It can therefore be defined in terms of ontology as adopting a broadly relativist position, mainly drawing upon qualitative rather than quantitative data. In its epistemological approach, the dossier resembles a form of emic research. These were not considerations I made at the outset, as I am not entirely familiar with the terminology and concepts, though I do recall considering how my own personal philosophical position as an atheist with an interest in different systems of belief—perhaps
adhering more closely to a realist ontology—might affect my interpretation of MacDonald’s religious imagery.

**Reading and Table**

Once the proposal was accepted, I purchased a copy of MacDonald’s *The Complete Fairy Tales* (1999) and read the following selection: *The Light Princess, The Shadows, The Giant’s Heart, and Cross Purposes*. I also re-read *The Golden Key*. While reading I made initial notes and doodles on the themes in sketchbooks. Figure 9 shows initial pencil doodles with reflective annotations for the fairy Peaseblossom. Sketchbooks remain an integral aspect of my professional and self-initiated illustration practice. They aid in organization, ideation, and iteration.

![Figure 9](image-url)
I then tabulated the notes on all of the stories. This permitted an overview and facilitated the systematic colour coding of correlations of thematic imagery both across MacDonald’s various stories, and between MacDonald’s and Carroll’s. I also used highlights to track my own progress. As the project went on, the table proved invaluable. This simple diagrammatic overview helped me select the stories I would illustrate within the dossier, and therefore which I would omit. The table, reproduced in full as Table 1, was flexible in that I was easily able to make additions and amendments throughout the development process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Thresholds</th>
<th>Theology/Ecology</th>
<th>Transformations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Golden Key</em></td>
<td>Key&lt;br&gt;Door&lt;br&gt;Sunset again&lt;br&gt;Thin things appear thick and vice versa&lt;br&gt;Forms ascending&lt;br&gt;Winding stair&lt;br&gt;Arch to beach through mountain</td>
<td>Fairy/fish&lt;br&gt;Old lady&lt;br&gt;Stages of man&lt;br&gt;Hearing animals talk&lt;br&gt;Shadow valley (shadows cast by Heaven)&lt;br&gt;Fairy guide light in darkness (like thread in The Princess and the Goblin)&lt;br&gt;Extra colour of rainbow and eighth pillar&lt;br&gt;Ignorant ugly fish in ocean awaiting higher calling</td>
<td>Fairy/fish&lt;br&gt;Shadow magic = ape, chairs, wardrobe attack&lt;br&gt;Tangle&lt;br&gt;Age of children throughout&lt;br&gt;Rejuvenation of T and M&lt;br&gt;Non-binary relationship of life and death?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland</strong></td>
<td><strong>Through the Looking-Glass</strong></td>
<td><strong>“The Light Princess”</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Shadows</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep White Rabbit Rabbit hole Tiny door Door in tree Sister's sleep/dream</td>
<td>Half asleep to begin with Mirror Abrupt scene changes Red King’s dream Waking up</td>
<td>Flowers (talking) —don't really point to LC's theology Elephant gathering honey (nonsense) Insects—once again, nothing theological</td>
<td>Life and death, sleep and wakefulness Litter passes through window</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear, deliberately no morals Theories on certain analogues for characters?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sea and Heavens are reflected? Child says shadows of the mind (soul) Black and white shadows (angels) in sky above palace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice and her neck change size throughout due to drink, food and ingesting mushrooms</td>
<td>Red Queen to Sheep in shop</td>
<td></td>
<td>Touch temples to transform perception Story of shadows thickening into male and females</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*LC*'s theology references.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>The Giant's Heart</strong></th>
<th>Physical boundary (but difficult to pinpoint) Massive mountains and clouds Valley = space between two roots of a tree</th>
<th>Owl, nightingale, larks sun = god?) Ride spiders up mountain (benevolent as in The Princess and the Goblin) Stab the giant? Kill evildoers? Warriors of god?</th>
<th>Giant’s heart size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cross Purposes</strong></td>
<td>Impossible to know Bed to valley Palm leaf boat Sunset (recurring)</td>
<td>Eye light Fairy court = glade with mole heap at centre (very visual) Sun always setting Fairy and goblin class system or prejudice hinted at Dark passage with black creatures</td>
<td>Umbrellas become black geese herded by turkey Goose becomes hedgehog in R’s hands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One example of a later addition was the longer story *The Princess and the Goblin* (2017) and its character illustrations, which generated a significant portion of the Theology & Ecology section of the dossier. Examples of these are seen in Figure 10, and they are critically discussed in more detail below.
Theology & Ecology: The Princess and the Goblin

I shall pick up the idea of binary god/evil relationships in the Scramble, Punch or Pixiw section. This is something I consider with care when writing my Burning Zebras stories, and more whimsically when writing my sarcastic MPGB and The Museum of Fragmented Shadows stories.

Having initially written off this story for not featuring enough content relevant to my themes, it has become obvious there’s a great deal of theology/ecology to mill over. The verticality of the story – set up a mountain and in a literal underworld – seems to me and strongly reminiscent of other tales by GM. This will be developed further in sections on The Shadows and Cross Purposes. Across cultures ancient and modern, and numerous religions, this concept of holiness equating with height has recurred time and again. Another very literal light/dark contrast or binary relationship is the no-creatures and goblins, and the humans who dwell in daylight.

Finally, as mentioned elsewhere in annotations, the environment having a significant effect on the goblins is really quite progressive for GM at the time of writing, and this speaks to both the nature/nurture debate and evolution.

A Critical Note on Availability and Quality

A marked difference I noted early in the process was the vast difference in availability and quality of Carroll and MacDonald books. While useful for my purposes, the Eternal Sun edition of The Princess and the Goblin (2017) I purchased online, generated via publishing-on-demand (POD) software via Amazon due to the work’s public domain status, included low resolution black and white scans of the Jesse Willcox Smith frontispiece and illustrations. My used edition of The Complete Fairy Tales (1999), which took for its cover illustration an unrelated pre-existing religious piece
by Frank C. Pape, was purchased online through necessity as I quickly discovered no local bookshops currently stock any of George MacDonald’s works. Late in the process too late for inclusion, as it transpired—I located a used copy of *Phantastes* in a second-hand bookshop in York.

When reflecting on the sustained ubiquitous status within popular culture of imagery from Carroll’s Alice stories, and the ease by which high quality new editions can be readily purchased, I concluded MacDonald’s literary legacy is deserving of wider appreciation and public awareness. This discrepancy, and the creative freedom resulting from fewer existing illustrative interpretations of MacDonald’s works, may account in part for the preponderance of material in the dossier relating to MacDonald, and the relatively small amount of content pertaining to Carroll. Indeed, at the conference, I was implored to generate my own interpretation of the Alice stories by members of the Lewis Carroll Society but pointed to the creatively stifling mass of historical and contemporary interpretations across numerous media—and the pressure I felt these caused.

**Thresholds**

This was not the first section to be illustrated but it appears first in the dossier because many of the thresholds I investigated were entrances to Fairyland. Without limiting my primary and secondary research to Judeo-Christian artifacts, I produced multiple iterations of the titular golden key. Many of the images I used as inspiration, combining elements of ancient examples from various cultures through synthesis with my own visual language and colour palette to create something new, were found on the online research hub of the British Museum. Coalbrookdale Museum of Iron in Shropshire provided primary examples, which I photographed and combined in the same way. Visual exploration of the sapphire-encrusted golden key as a device led to reflections on it as both a threshold for Mossy at the start of the narrative, between his human existence and his magical journey, and only one component of an interlocking threshold: the lock and key to the Heavenly rainbow staircase, itself a threshold, ascended by Mossy and Tangle at the story’s conclusion. “They were in the rainbow. Far abroad, over ocean and land, they could see through its transparent walls the earth beneath their feet” (MacDonald, 1999, 144). Description of the interior of the rainbow as “transparent” led me to omit it from my illustrations.

Thresholds at the outset of *The Golden Key* are numerous, and the relationships between them ambiguous. The tall tales Mossy’s great-aunt...
tells him, “would have been nonsense, had it not been that their little house stood on the borders of Fairyland” (MacDonald, 1999, 120). The distinctions between the fictional real world of humans in the story, Fairyland, and what would constitute the intersection of these two sets in a Venn diagram is paradoxically defined and blurred.

Figure 11 features primary photographs taken in Ironbridge Gorge, Shropshire, and attempts to synthesize the woodland and cottage for *The Golden Key* using the loose linearity and palette developed for this project. I carefully considered the spiritual connotations of dark and light, day and night, as well as liminal spaces and the alluring uncertainty of transitional states—dawn, dusk, twilight, penumbra, and the crepuscular period.
Secondary research imagery of sunrises, sunsets, and ancient forests was compiled on Pinterest. As before, I edited and combined reference photographs as montages and then drew over these. I also looked at examples of Tove Jansson’s classic *Moomin* illustrations and David Hockney’s Yorkshire landscape paintings for inspiration in a purely aesthetic sense. Reflecting on my reading of MacDonald’s theology from biographical materials, coupled with his essay *The Fantastic Imagination*, I found a correlation in his various fairy tales in terms of surrounding the borders of Fairyland, connected to the divine, with nature. I noted potential ties to Paganism and primordial fears.

Critically I found the supernatural shifts in scenery between states of immateriality and solidity described by MacDonald particularly difficult to depict with any measure of success. “Things that look real in this country look very thin indeed in Fairyland” (MacDonald, 1999, 120). Experiments with opacity, translucent trees and solid rainbows resulted in confusing and muddled scenery, as seen in Figure 12. Two potential solutions to this problem would be either a composition featuring obvious foreground, character, and background elements, with transparency in some of the foreground elements; or close-up compositions of the figure’s hands or feet interacting with the translucent foliage.
In order to more effectively visually communicate the twilight threshold between night and day, I decided to add signifiers. I therefore researched crepuscular birds and nyctinastic flowers, focusing on the nightingale and hibiscus. These can be seen in Figure 13. The choice of a nightingale would have also been useful had I illustrated _The Giant’s Heart_, providing a sense of continuity across the illustrations.
The mountain Tangle is guided through by the Aeranth allowed me to emphasise light and dark. I experimented with dappled colour around the mountain entrance and beach exit to exaggerate contrast, and found depicting this as a sequence helpful to contextualize the already-designed Aeranth. As this figure was the only light source inside the mountain, I stripped Tangle back to a silhouette amid extremes of pure black and white. Figure 14 shows this sequence.
Two reflections that bear further consideration occurred to me during completion of the Thresholds section of the dossier. The first concerned MacDonald’s recurring story-within-a-story motif, which points out the fictive status of his fairy tales to readers and, in conjunction with his experimentations with and subversions of narrative structure, arguably establish his fairy tales as examples of metanarrative. The second, more subjective, reflection was the non-binary relationship between life and death exemplified in *The Golden Key*’s interdependent protagonists Mossy and Tangle. I began to question, as I read, whether the children were actually dead—or not entirely alive—early in the story.
Theology & Ecology

This section continued to expand as I developed the dossier, becoming the largest of the three by a wide margin. The initial question behind this heading was whether MacDonald’s theology could be represented through the environments, flora, and fauna in his fairy tales. The first design problem I encountered was one of continuity. The question was, simply put, should the goblins be homogenous in design, or a chaotic swarming mob of different body shapes and facial features? Figure 15 shows sketchbook annotations and doodles identifying pre-existing secondary reference points from science fiction and horror films, which provided some preliminary inspiration. I decided on the latter of the two options to exaggerate their malevolence through monstrous disharmony. This seemed more fitting based on my reading of the text. These goblins are, after all, the embodied forces of darkness, and have bred in their subterranean kingdom for untold eons. Also, this option was more creatively satisfying from the perspective of an illustrator who enjoys character design, and if the drawings were ever to be developed into more finished narrative illustrations, the mixture of shapes and sizes would provide more visual interest for readers.

Figure 15
Separating the Rainbow’s Egg

Having initially doodled very rough iterations of Toadstool the goblin and Peaseblossom the fairy from Cross Purposes in my sketchbook, I realized whilst reviewing my table that the goblins from The Princess and the Goblin, once expelled from their mountain home, become the antecedents of all subsequent generations of goblins. Although MacDonald’s stories share some recurrent imagery and literary devices, they do not exist in a congruent fabricated universe. Despite this, I decided to create a coherent visual language for the goblins from The Princess and the Goblin in order to provide some evolutionary foundation and physiognomy for goblins in the other fairy tales. To do this, I sketched potatoes to incorporate basic uneven forms, surface pattern and textures into the heads and bodies of the goblins. Figure 16 shows how these were synthesized with other eclectic elements from the animal kingdom, the ears of horseshoe bats, for instance, mediaeval attire, and monsters from TV and film.

Figure 16
Illustration practice often draws laterally from life experience, and around the time I was developing the dossier I had watched several Akira Kurosawa samurai films. This led me to attempt to incorporate details from Japanese feudal apparel into the otherwise European sources of secondary clothing inspiration I compiled on Pinterest and synthesized in my sketchbooks. To my surprise, with considered selection, specific artifacts such as gourds and hats from disparate cultures proved, in an aesthetic sense, cohesive and logical. Examples can be seen in Figure 17.

Whenever I create character designs, even in the genre of fantasy fiction, I try to be conscious of issues of diversity and logic. For the goblin
species, this meant developing a sense of ethnic diversity through differing body shapes, sizes and facial features, as well as differing skin tones. Early on I ruled out the prevailing use of green, as it seemed far too cliché. Thinking critically, I also wanted to avoid any similarities to Brian Froud’s extensive goblin repertoire. As I experimented further with facial features and attire, I broadened the colour palette based on the notion that in the story some of the goblins raid above ground and some remain in complete darkness their whole lives. A sickly range of hues deviating from a tonal gradient of charcoal to off-white developed, with distinctive highlights emphasizing bulbous eyes, ruddy noses and leech-like sucker lips. Examples can be seen in figure 18. The reasoning was informed by secondary research into cave-dwelling animals and fish that never experience sunlight and have evolved to be eyeless with transparent skin.

Figure 18
At the same time, I questioned the target audience for MacDonald’s stories. It seemed that most of his fairy tales originally appeared in books for adults but would also appeal to children. I therefore tried to walk a line between grotesque and charming. As a result, the goblin figures in the dossier alternate between more realistic figures and more stylized or exaggeratedly cartoon-like. As this went on, I included other reference points such as monkeys and apes from natural history documentaries, as seen in Figure 19. In this way, the design process was consistently informed by reflection, research and evaluation. As this was not a professional commission for a publisher, I decided not to produce any finished illustrations but instead to work more in the manner of a concept designer, producing multiple experimental iterations.

These six sketchbook pages document attempts to imbue the goblins with simian qualities. I sketched from online sources, looking at snub-nosed monkeys for facial characteristics, as well as postures and proportions. These are highly expressive monkeys, and a personal favourite from natural history documentaries. Their distinctive eyes - shape and linear surround - were also a feature I felt could work alongside the goblins I had already “approved”, so to speak. A traditional Oriental domed straw hat seemed like a logical addition to Traditional, so this will be explored elsewhere with fungal colours and textures. Bottom right: I also looked at gelada monkeys - again, I was familiar with these from documentaries - and saw a parallel with their shaggy shoulders and the straw peasant attire from previous iterations. Gelada are fascinating-looking (vegetarian) monkeys from Ethiopia, and their formidable grandeur could set them apart as regal figures - the goblin king, queen and prince - if I develop these characters.

Figure 19
Once I established a broad visual foundation for the goblin species, I developed both the goblin King and Queen. These highlighted an issue for illustrators specific to MacDonald’s writing, in that his stories often take place over years and include long gaps. Such is the case in *The Princess and the Goblin*, so I sketched a number of different garments for the goblin royal family. This is fairly atypical, as in many instances fictional characters will have one memorable, distinctive outfit. The King and Queen were a challenge because they needed to be easily distinguished from a mob of regular goblins, and easily recognizable despite multiple wardrobe changes. Figures 20 and 21 show how Shih Tzu under-bites and various crown designs were tested to set apart the King, and how the Queen’s clothing synthesized elements from Japanese and Viking traditional garb, respectively. Although I considered incorporating non-human signifiers of royal status and power, dress and jewelry as cumbersome royal paraphernalia were effective and well-established semiotic shorthand that became impossible to ignore. On the level of characterization, this reinforced the avaricious and materialistic concerns of the goblins. On another note, I was determined that the goblin Queen not suffer from what I term “Minnie Mouse syndrome” by being—in a design sense—a tokenistic feminine form of her male counterpart. Not to put too fine a point on it but I did not feel merely attaching a bow would do the malicious character justice.
I approached the goblins’ weird animal menagerie as somewhat disturbing mongrel monsters rather than wondrous hybrids. In the story, these are animals that have been bred, domesticated, and combined underground for generations. After preliminary sketchbook doodles, as seen in Figure 22, I initially synthesized a cat and a horse, with mixed results as seen in Figure 23. The unnatural creation of these chaotic monsters, I felt, emphasized the goblins’ evil status. They are perhaps the most apt representation of the Theology and Ecology theme, monsters that dwell in a literal underworld, and so I used the pained face of a Butoh dance performer to create a gruesome and uncanny consistency across these wildly divergent beasts. MacDonald describes the faces as looking as though they were carved out of turnips, hence the orange-yellow pallor. Examples can be seen in Figure 24.
The goblin’s world manages to balance in terms of the themes of ecology and theology. These are hybrid domestic pets, farmyard animals and some wild creatures that live in the natural with the goblins. Personally, this animal hospitality has manifested merged creatures rather than wondrous fantasy animals. However, they are of very little consequence to the plot, and GM only describes one in any detail— a cat with horse legs. Every hybrid has the same sort of human face, which looks so much like it were carved out of a turtle. Mix a few chenille dusted and three-dog dirtiffes, I realize how difficult it is to “read” these animals visually with any success. The hybrids and goblins themselves represent the supernatural linked to nature or supernatural or perhaps intentionally living with them some sort of understanding on the part of GM.

In ‘The Princess and the Goblin,’ characters are either on the side of light, in a more literal way, or darkness (the evil goblins and hybrid dwelling in the mines).

Figure 22

Theology & Ecology: The Princess and the Goblin

Figure 23
The design process for the fairy figures in *The Golden Key* and *Cross Purposes* began with primary photographs being taken of butterfly and moth taxidermy in Liverpool’s World Museum. Samples were combined with vintage photographs of Edwardian dancers from Pinterest, and drawn over digitally. In order to set apart the fairies and illustrate the idea that they
exist in another dimension, I experimented with retro 3D glasses and simple optical effects. This allowed the fairy characters to seemingly occupy a different picture plane to other elements, as seen in Figure 25.

Further experimentation with different wings and colour palette, as well as extending the gown as part of the organism itself, thereby making it distinctly inhuman, can be seen in Figure 26. As I was tracing loosely over secondary images without attempting to convey actual likenesses, and the project was not for commercial but academic purposes, I found Pinterest useful in assembling images of actors such as Karen Gillan, Christina Hendricks, Tilda Swinton and Deborah Ann Woll. Initially I considered tying the fairy characters together through colour palette and hair colour, and by differentiating hairstyles and accessories. However, through successive iterations Tangle’s Aeranth guide from *The Golden Key* came to be based on an otherworldly, and perhaps more traditionally angelic, androgynous
Tilda Swinton reference image, rather than more obviously female figures. These can be seen in Figure 27. This led to an interesting reflection about the reproductive cycle of the fairies, which is covered in more detail in the section on Transformations but here is noteworthy because it obliterated any need for the fairies to appear mammalian or to suckle young, reinforcing the androgynous concept. A problem I encountered with the fairy designs in terms of off-white, purplish skin tones was a somewhat cadaverous appearance or lividity. Once the Aeranth design was developed sufficiently, I inserted it into the Thresholds section, in the aforementioned mountain passage sequence.

Figure 26
When designing the Queen of Fairyland for *Cross Purposes*, I reflected on her playful, restless, fun-loving, and childlike spirit. I knew that I wanted to set her apart not only from her subjects—especially the younger, earnest Peaseblossom—but from the other royal figures in the dossier. This meant carefully considering semiotic signifiers of royal power and status. Rather than use precious materials and formal regalia as visual vernacular, as I had with the goblins, I attempted to subvert expectations and eventually represented her instead with a short pixie crop and no obvious regal accouterments. Several poses were loosely based on reference photographs of Mia Farrow, examples of which can be seen in Figures 28 and 29. This approach was intended to reinforce her closeness to nature and that she is entirely comfortable in her status and power without any need of external reminders. It also helped to make her appear less serious. It seemed apposite for a monarch whose court is a glade in the woods.
Figure 28

Figure 29
In contrast with the expedient design of the Queen of Fairyland, Peaseblossom and Toadstool were the two characters I spent the longest developing and refining. They were amongst the first characters I doodled in my sketchbooks, as seen in Figure 30, and I gravitated back to redesign these figures towards the end of the entire project. Part of this undoubtedly has to do with the wit, invention, and child-friendliness of *Cross Purposes* as a fairy tale. As much as I enjoyed his other stories, there are certain disconnects and an occasional dryness to MacDonald’s prose absent from *Cross Purposes*. On a personal note, I found the mismatched buddy comedy duo of Peaseblossom and Toadstool entirely charming. Initial doodles exaggerated their physical differences—height, body shape, coloration—in a very explicit way.

As I developed Peaseblossom, I went back to MacDonald’s description of her as “the daughter of the prime minister . . . graceful” and “apologetic” (MacDonald, 1999, 103). These key words informed my later
depictions of the character as youthful and inexperienced, perhaps naïve, yet formal. I was adamant due to association with her name she should wear green and, in contrast to the Queen, jewelry. This included an ornate beetle headpiece. I experimented with several hairstyles and plaits, with the tendrils of pea plants woven into them, wings based not on those of moths but rather green leaves, and gave her a dainty mushroom parasol and Victorian sheath mounted on her dress. These are seen in Figure 31. The parasol was added to make her seem refined but inept and impractical; she is ill-equipped for the task at hand. It also helps to visually distinguish her from any other fairies in the court. I alternated between secondary references of actors Deborah Ann Woll and Jane Fonda, as seen in Figure 32. For both the Queen of Fairyland and Peaseblossom, I felt the need for visible feminine qualities despite my earlier androgynous designs for the Aeranth in *The Golden Key*. Both characters are described as female in the text, and this also helped to contrast them with the design of Toadstool.
Toadstool became the final character I designed for the dossier. As seen in Figure 32, he wears a hat made of a toadstool and his body is either encased inside or is constituted of globular fungi. For continuity with his distant ancestors in *The Princess and the Goblin*, he has no toes and grey skin, ears based on those of a horseshoe bat, and yellow eyes. I used a very deliberately loose and imprecise line when drawing Toadstool, as he is always in motion, furtive, mischievous. His limbs are spindly so they will fold around his plump body when he rolls about like a ball. His other appearance in the dossier is with Peaseblossom as a tailpiece, see Figure 33, in which he is gleefully hanging by his arms from a bare tree. I finished the conference presentation in Chichester with a reading of the pair’s punishment, which the tailpiece illustrates: “For Peaseblossom and Toadstool, they were both banished from court, and compelled to live together, for seven years, in an old tree that had just one green leaf upon it” (MacDonald, 1999, 119).
As biased as it might sound, in developing designs for the characters within this section I had my personal favorites. Drawing the grotesque animal menagerie was so personally satisfying and enjoyable that I had to practice self-discipline and set a time limit on its creation. Peaseblossom and Toadstool as a mismatched pair were another highlight; they are foils for one another, dramatic counterpoints and their tragicomic fate makes them yet more endearing. However, they also potentially reveal something significant about MacDonald’s theology in that the court of Fairyland includes at least one devious goblin. Unlike in *The Princess and the Goblin*, with its generally simplistic binary depiction of good and evil, *Cross Purposes* presents unpredictable forces of the supernatural; or perhaps more accurately infra- and ultra-nature, as they are integral aspects of MacDonald’s vast and unknowable divine cosmogony, beyond human morality and comprehension.
Transformations

This truncated section of the dossier is worthy of further development. I regret not having time to illustrate *The Shadows* or *The Giant’s Heart* before the conference. In this section I illustrated the fairy life cycle as it is described in *The Golden Key*. See Figure 34. I based the flying fish on black bass because their distinctive spiny appearance and mottled scales allowed me to create some sense of visual continuity with the moth’s wings of the Aeranth. However, critically, the addition of the owl’s head was extremely taxing and difficult to harmonize with the other elements. Frustrated, I reflected in the dossier and again at the conference that where Carroll wrote with an illustrator in mind, MacDonald seemingly did not. A fish flying through a magical forest is surely interesting enough but MacDonald chose to add another ingredient. Arguably this was because he wanted readers to imagine the fanciful creatures, which is indubitably commendable. Still, it is not easy to draw.
Findings / Conclusions

With regards to illustrating aspects of George MacDonald’s fairy tales in particular, *The Rainbow’s Egg* was an example of research driven by curiosity and creativity. The selected stories, whilst incongruous, arguably reveal much about MacDonald’s theology. From the simple verticality of his moral cosmos in *The Princess and the Goblin*—Heaven above, lacking established religious iconography, the Earth sandwiched between Heaven and a Hellish underworld, and the covetous goblins’ dark industrial domain below—to the ambiguous esoteric thresholds of *The Golden Key*, and the uncertain inhuman morality of the fairies of *Cross Purposes*, MacDonald’s fairy tales evidence a breadth of evocative ideas and questions about the nature of existence that remain ripe for personal interpretation and academic discourse.

The dossier was the first extended Practice-as-Research project I have undertaken. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that there is much potential in the application of illustration practice to literary analysis. Thinking of the conference presentation, visual communication strategies coupled with more traditional forms of research, facilitated an engaging and perhaps more universal experience.

As I compiled the dossier, I was able to reflect upon and evaluate the process, whilst simultaneously analyzing the themes within MacDonald’s fairy tales. I believe the illustrative approach has academic merit in the insights I have collected. I received positive feedback from peers at the conference, and as a lecturer I have already used it as a teaching tool and example for undergraduate students’ research projects across a variety of design disciplines.

Beyond this, my awareness of and newfound appreciation for MacDonald has already begun to influence my creative writing. In the dossier I included a section entitled Scrambled, Poached or Fried? This discussed my own use of fairy-tale figures and imagery, and one unforeseen benefit of *The Rainbow’s Egg* was a desire to revisit and expand upon existing stories from my darkly humorous blog about Victorian monster scientists, *The Museum of Fragmented Shadows*. Reading and drawing MacDonald has subsequently inspired me to come up with new ideas for this blog, too, in that I intend to write and illustrate short stories about the infuriatingly convoluted inner workings of the court of Fairy Land and the political machinations of its neighboring goblin provinces.

The P-a-R approach demanded a lot of time be spent drawing, providing a sustained focus often missing from my short-term freelance
illustration or design commissions, my self-initiated creative writing, and teaching commitments. One advantage I found to working this way was a growing confidence in the concept art-inspired rough or unfinished appearance of the visual language I created. I was able to work far more quickly and more efficiently as the project went on. I intend to apply aspects of the visual language I developed to future installments of *The Museum of Fragmented Shadows*, as can be seen in the portrait test in the top right of Figure 35.

The development of the dossier’s goblin characters into villainous gluten-obsessed extra-terrestrials for my web-based *Burning Zebra* illustrated stories, an example of which is shown in Figure 36, is another example of how the P-a-R process was beneficial to aspects of my creative practice and output.
The difficulty I found in locating quality copies of MacDonald’s fairy tales was a source of irritation at the outset of this research but the more familiar I became with his work, the more I recognized a very real need for greater awareness and wider appreciation of it. Indeed, at the conference on Carroll and MacDonald’s friendship, several peers remarked, once I admitted I had known nothing of MacDonald before the initial Call for Papers, that they too were previously unfamiliar with his writing. I consider my appreciation for MacDonald’s work to be one of the most positive outcomes of the research process, and it has subsequently led me to identify a remarkable coincidence or confluence. That is, concurrent with the reading I undertook for The Rainbow’s Egg dossier, I happened to be reading a children’s book by English Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington entitled The Milk of Dreams (2013) and a digest book of her short stories, The Skeleton’s Holiday (2018). This led me to collect her other books, including Down Below (2017), the cover of which features a detail of her 1987 painting of her ancestral home, Crookhey Hall. The painting features black and white apparitions, and after I created initial, entirely unsuccessful sketchbook doodles for The Shadows, I noticed this detail with a fresh perspective.
Intriguingly, when reading Marina Warner’s introduction to *Down Below* after completion of the dossier, MacDonald is one of several authors mentioned as early inspirations for Carrington: “She also absorbed the English and Scottish nursery blend of nonsense, fabulism, comedy, and mysticism (Beatrix Potter, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, George MacDonald)” (Warner in Carrington, 2017, xvi). This connection is more compelling when recalling MacDonald’s recurring twilight thresholds and Carrington’s exploration “of her inner world, the ‘hypnagogic visions’ that rose before her eyes when consciousness and the unconscious merge in the in-between of waking and sleeping” (Warner in Carrington, 2017, vii).

Finally, once the conference was over but the enthusiasm for MacDonald’s characters had not abated, I produced a souvenir illustration, Figure 37, of Toadstool from *Cross Purposes* emerging from his molehill. I sent this to the organizers, sponsor, and other presenters as a token of thanks and respect, and to commemorate the event.

Figure 37
Works Cited


—. *The Golden Key*. 1867. Project Gutenberg of Australia, September 2016. www.gutenberg.net.au/ebooks07/0700571h.html,