

Currents of Adaptation: Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* and L. Frank Baum's *The Sea Fairies* on Screen

In 1978, Charles Kingsley's moralistic "fairy tale for a land-baby," *The Water-Babies* (1862-63), was adapted into a partially animated musical adventure film. Kingsley's many digressions, aimless plot, and Victorian morality seemingly necessitated dramatic alterations to make the story more filmic and plot driven.

In this paper, I argue that L. Frank Baum's 1911 underwater fantasy *The Sea Fairies* is an unacknowledged source of influence on the 1978 *The Water Babies* film. Though somewhat aimless itself, the second half of *The Sea Fairies* concerns a fight against a giant sea monster keeping innocents captive, as does the plot of *The Water Babies* (an incident that appears nowhere in Kingsley's novel). Furthermore, the 1978 film incorporates more generally the tropes of twentieth-century children's fantasy, many of which can be traced back to Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and its MGM film adaptation.

Kingsley's original plot is in some ways predominantly internal, being a coming-of-age narrative focused on young Tom's development of Christian attitudes toward redemption and forgiveness. The film draws on *The Sea Fairies* (and *The Wizard of Oz*) in presenting a largely external threat, to the whole realm of the ocean. This threat's defeat by the protagonist (while accompanied by an array of misfit characters) serves as a marker of a moral growth that emphasizes bravery and teamwork more than Kingsley's Victorian Christian values.