Dealing with Victorian Fairies

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Victorian Fairy Painting, ed. Jane Martineau. London: Merrell Holberton, 1997.

Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness, by Carol G. Silver. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

These two volumes explore the fascination and multiple meanings that fairies had for the Victorians. Although Rose Fyleman's 1917 poem "Fairies" begins with the line "There are fairies at the bottom of our garden!" (1), during the Victorian period, it seems, fairies could be found everywhere. One might say that the Victorians were obsessed with fairies. They frequently appear in art, music, and literature—for children and adults—as well as in the decorative arts. Charlotte Gere reports that when Queen Victoria visited the Great Exhibition of 1851, she suggested that the Crystal Palace had "quite the effect of fairyland" (64). Benjamin Disraeli privately referred to Queen Victoria as "the Faery," an ironic allusion to Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. More publicly, Gilbert and Sullivan's 1885 operetta *Iolanthe*, which was advertised as a "New and Original Fairy Opera," featured Iolanthe the Fairy Queen, who was widely assumed by the public to be a portrait of Queen Victoria.

Victorian Fairy Painting is focused on the visual interpretation of fairies—artwork, book illustration, and theatrical representation. It is the exhibition catalogue for the impressive "Victorian Fairy Painting," organized by Pamela White Tripe of the University of Iowa's Museum of Art in collaboration with the Royal Academy of Arts, London. Consequently, its primary strength lies in its beautiful full-color reproduction of seventy-six images by thirty-five artists. *Victorian Fairy Painting* stands on its own, however, as an extremely helpful visual companion to Carol Silver's *Strange and Secret Peoples*, which is a broader study of fairies emphasizing the use of folklore in Victorian culture. *Victorian Fairy Painting* is a valuable reference work since much of the artwork is in such fragile condition that it was only included in the London

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exhibition. Thus, the catalogue is more comprehensive than the impressive but select show that toured the United States and Canada. In addition to the stunning illustrations, *Victorian Fairy Painting* contains seven short critical essays. The most significant are "Victorian Fairy Painting" by Jeremy Maas, the art historian most responsible for promoting and elevating the status of Victorian art, and "Fairies on the Stage" by Lionel Lambourne, who notes that although literature provided the inspiration for fairy paintings, much of the visualization of fairies was drawn from the theater, opera, and ballet, and especially from pantomime produced for children.

Maas suggests that the Golden Age of fairy painting extended from 1840 to 1870, three decades that correspond with the Golden Age of children's literature. Although fairies have been a part of English and Irish folklore since the fourteenth century, most fairy pictures are based on literary sources. The most common literary references are to William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream, The Tempest*, and the "Queen Mab" speech from *Romeo and Juliet*. Fairy tales became appropriate reading for children in England due to the success of Edgar Taylor's English translations of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *German Popular Stories* (1823 and 1826). The Grimms' collection of traditional folktales was part of the Romantic movement in Germany, which helped establish fairy tales and fairy painting as a significant part of mid-Victorian culture. But it was also Wilhelm von Schlegel and Christoph Martin Wieland's translations of Shakespeare into German that helped initiate the Romantic movement in Germany. It is significant that the first English editions of *German Popular Stories* were illustrated by George Cruikshank, whose comic drawings helped make the tales accessible to children. Critics such as William Makepeace Thackeray and John Ruskin widely praised Cruikshank's imaginative book illustrations. Cruikshank would later illustrate his own *Fairy Library*, begun in 1853; his former friend and collaborator, Charles Dickens, doomed the series with his scathing attack "Frauds on the Fairies" in *Household Words* (1859), in which he took Cruikshank to task for rewriting traditional fairy tales.

Fairy paintings provided an alternative to the popular genre painting of scenes of ordinary life produced by artists such as William Frith and Augustus Egg. In contrast, fairy paintings create a mysterious glimpse into an unknown and forbidden world. Henry Fuseli's paintings clearly make the erotic an aspect of the fairy world, in contrast to the codes of Victorian respectability. Some may think that fairy paint-

ings were just a ruse to paint and exhibit nudes by simply adding wings. But other artists, including William Blake, use fairies as part of a personal mythology or to express a longing for a more simple and elemental world.

In his essay Lambourne warns, "The politics of fairyland are never correct" (47). This evaluation is supported by the obsessive images and violent lives of some of the most prominent Victorian fairy painters. Maas suggests that fairy painting, more than most visual genres, was intimately linked to the exploration of the subconscious, which accounts for the numerous images of dreaming figures. This genre allowed the artists to explore opposing elements of the Victorian psyche including new attitudes toward sex, a curiosity about the unknown and forbidden, and a desire to escape respectability.

A minor but productive fairy painter, John Aster Fitzgerald, who earned the nickname "Fairy Fitzgerald," adds narcotics to the list of desires; several of his paintings include tell-tale medicine bottles of opium or steaming punches of the opium derivative, laudanum, clearly featured in works such as "The Artist's Dream" (1857). Maas argues that Fitzgerald's intense colors were the direct result of his opium use, and his paintings, such as "The Artist's Dream," certainly have a hallucinatory feel to them (19). Fitzgerald's use of dramatic lighting, however, is more inspired by the contemporary development of gaslight and limelight in theaters.

Although he only painted a dozen fairy paintings, most of which were only exhibited after his death, Richard Dadd is considered by Maas to be the "quintessential fairy painter" (14). He exhibited several fairy paintings at the Royal Academy in the 1840s, but it was only after his internment at the Bethlem Royal Hospital for murdering his father that he produced his two masterpieces, *Contradiction: Oberon and Titania* (1854–58) and *The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke* (1855–64). Dadd's obsession with detail results in congested and troubling designs that resemble medieval tapestries. The volume includes a disturbing photograph of Dadd in the act of painting *Contradiction* in the lunatic asylum. Mental illness also affected another fairy painter, John Altamont Doyle, the less successful brother of Richard Doyle. John Doyle voluntarily entered a lunatic asylum that he ironically referred to as "Sunnyside"; the sketchbooks of watercolors that he produced there reveal a vivid fairy world that provides an unsettling counterpart to the more public illustrations produced by his more successful brother. John's son, Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories,

was influenced by his own beliefs in spiritualism and would write *The Coming of the Fairies* (1921), an emotional defense of the Cottingley fairy photographs.

Richard "Dickie" Doyle designed in 1843 the long-running cover for *Punch* magazine that included a number of fairies. He also illustrated John Ruskin's literary fairy tale *The King of the Golden River* (1851). Ruskin himself was no stranger to madness. But Richard Doyle's chief contributions to fairy painting are his thirty-six magnificent illustrations for *In Fairyland, Or Pictures from the Elf World* (1870), printed by Edmund Evans, which is often considered the masterpiece of Victorian book illustration. Doyle's comic illustrations of fairies far surpass William Allingham's poem "The Fairies," which they are meant to illustrate. Allingham's poem was first published in *The Music Master* (1855), where it was illustrated by Arthur Hughes—who would later illustrate George MacDonald's *Dealing with the Faeries* (1867)—and Dante Gabriel Rossetti—who would go on to illustrate his sister Christina's *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). Andrew Lang, the compiler of the twelve-volume Color Fairy Book series, was so impressed with Doyle's illustrations that he rearranged them to create the literary fairy tale *Princess Nobody* (1884). As impressive as Doyle's book illustrations for *In Fairyland* are, and I believe it to be the greatest fairy book ever designed, even more impressive are the two large watercolors "The Enchanted Fairy Tree" (1845) and "The Fairy Tree" (undated) included in *Victorian Fairy Painting*. In my opinion, these two drawings surpass the works of Richard Dadd that are considered the most outstanding fairy paintings; Doyle's watercolors embody the comic genius of George Cruikshank while avoiding the overt eroticism that mars the work of Henry Fuseli and Joseph Noël Paton.

Paton's fairy paintings caught the eye of Lewis Carroll, who asked the artist to illustrate *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), but Paton declined, insisting that John Tenniel was the man for the job. Carroll viewed Paton's "The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania" (1846–47) at the Scottish National Gallery in 1857 and, being a precise mathematician with a strong fascination with fairies, counted 156 of the creatures in the large painting.

Maas suggests that the Golden Age of fairy painting ended with the publication of *In Fairyland*, although the genre never completely died. The last great fairy art was produced by Arthur Rackham for J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Garden* (1906), the major triumph of the artist's distinguished career. Walt Disney contacted Rackham and

hoped to have him develop some of the artwork for his first full-length cartoon, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937). *Victorian Fairy Painting* gathers together the usual artists and illustrators who are associated with the genre, but what is unusual is that it also includes artists who are not normally associated with fairy painting. Edwin Landseer, John Everett Millais, and J. M. W. Turner each produced at least one major fairy painting during his career, suggesting the popularity of the genre with Victorians. *Victorian Fairy Painting* is a fascinating study of the Victorian iconography of fairies, which blurred the distinctions between high and low art and left a lasting mark on Victorian culture.

Whereas *Victorian Fairy Painting* is concerned with the visual and literary images of fairies, Silver's *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* deals with the folkloristic aspect of fairies and how the Victorian study of folklore from 1840 to 1870 functioned as a way to reinscribe "the dominant ideas and the concealed anxieties of the era" (57). Silver argues that the rise of science and social science in the second half of the nineteenth century helped promote the serious study of supernatural creatures such as fairies. Ironically Darwin, or perhaps more accurately, social Darwinism, was used to justify the belief in fairies. Silver convincingly argues that it was the rise of Darwinism in the 1870s that made speculation on the existence of fairies respectable. Who would have imagined Darwin on the side of the fairies? Certainly not Charles Kingsley, who poked fun at the theory of evolution in his literary fairy tale *The Water Babies* (1863).

Folklore developed as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century along with other new fields of knowledge such as anthropology and archeology. Folklore was dominated by amateur scholars, antiquarians, and field collectors. Much of Silver's study owes a great deal to Richard Dorson's *The British Folklorists: A History* (1968) and its companion, the two-volume *Peasant Customs and Savage Myths* (1968). With their interest in origins, many Victorians believed that the reality of fairies would eventually be proved by scientific means.

Many folklorists, such as Thomas Croker and Thomas Keightley, understood folk beliefs in fairies to be remnants of ancient Aryan religious thinking. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm argued for a similar link between German folk tales and mythology and proposed a similar Aryan origin back in ancient India. Max Mueller, the Sanskrit scholar at Oxford University, argues that fairies were part of folk beliefs that were aspects of early mythopoeic thinking. Edward Burnet Tylor, the founder of anthropology, maintained that all cultures went through

the same three-step evolutionary process of social development and that folk beliefs were survivals from an earlier, more savage period. Tylor made the study of fairies a significant aspect to the study of comparative anthropology and, according to his doctrine of survivals, folk tales were not just stories but embodiments of the earlier beliefs and customs.

Later David MacRitchie popularized the so-called pygmy theory in *The Testimony of Tradition* (1890), which associated fairy lore with archeology and suggested that underground mounds were evidence of an ancient, dwarflike, non-Aryan race in Britain (48). George Schweinfurth's discovery of African Pygmies in 1870 was used by some folklorists to support the pygmy theory of fairy origins and the existence of a race of fairies in Britain in a distant past. Silver notes that the Pygmies were constantly compared to goblins, gnomes, and brownies in the popular press. The discovery of Pygmies made fairies real; at the same time, their existence, coupled with the theory of cultural evolution that placed dark-skinned people at the bottom of the three stages of cultural evolution and white skinned people at the top, served to confirm the racial superiority of the English.

In a slightly different fashion, Victorian spiritualists, including William Butler Yeats and Arthur Conan Doyle, developed the concept of spiritual evolution, which linked scientific evidence to the existence of fairies. For the spiritualists, Darwin did not empty the world of nature but, as Silver writes, "peopled it with other invisible species" (56). The way folklorists and spiritualists used science and social science to support their beliefs in fairies is the process by which the demythified is remythified (129).

Silver then examines the process by which the fairies of existing folk beliefs were appropriated by educated Victorians and reconstructed via social Darwinism as monstrous symbols of the other. Concepts like that of the changeling—a child stolen by fairies for breeding purposes and replaced with a false child—were a way for educated Victorians to displace their fears of the lower classes and concerns about social mixing. The changeling was a folk explanation for disabled or diseased children, so that almost any abnormal child could be considered a changeling. This explanation for disease and deformity quickly found its way into Victorian literature, especially the novels of Dickens. The changeling theory then enabled middle-class Victorians to view the rural poor as another less culturally evolved group, like other colonized subjects of the British Empire. In a similar fashion, Silver shows

how the folklorist's and the Victorian public's fascination with tales of fairy brides coincided, in the 1880s and 1890s, with the public debate on issues pertaining to women—the concept of the new woman, women's rights to property, and the marriage question.

Whereas *Victorian Fairy Painting* emphasizes the erotic elements that are to be found in fairies, Silver also observes what she calls fairy sadism (157) and the strong strand of violence and other antisocial behavior on their part. Fairies are shown to be compassionless and cruel and frequently at war with each other or with other creatures. They are generally characterized as an angry mob, wild and uncivilized. This brutal characterization of fairies allowed middle-class Victorians to feel pride in their own cultural evolution and maintain their racial superiority to other races and social groups. Silver emphasizes that this folk version of fairies is at odds with the fairy tales created for children, which promote a false set of sentimentalized assumptions. Such tales make fairies small and cute, little angels of nature who either entertain or protect children. She points out that such petite fairies are much more literary than folkloristic in origin. Fairies of folklore are a rather unpleasant, crude lot, creatures at best to be avoided, if not feared. With the gradual passing of folk beliefs and the increasing number of literary fairies, however, the creatures became domesticated and trivialized, so that the connections between children and fairies, children and fairy tales, was forged. This romanticizing and sentimentalization of fairies was still another way for the urban middle class to neutralize a once powerful social source of rural and lower-class power in Victorian culture. After reading Silver's remarkable study of Victorian folklore and the folk construction of the fairies, one no longer will be able to look at the charming images of Victorian fairy painting with such an innocent eye. Beneath those diminutive features may lurk a hostile attitude.

Those interested in nineteenth-century children's literature and fairy tales in particular will find both *Victorian Fairy Painting* and *Strange and Secret Peoples* fascinating cultural history and necessary reading. Using differing critical lenses, both volumes provide an extremely rich and ambiguous cultural context for Victorian fairies.

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