FAIRIES, FAIRY TALES,
AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF BRITISH POETICS

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Abstract

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Fairy poetry has been central to the development of British poetics since the sixteenth century, and its offshoot, fairy tale poetry, has proliferated throughout the twentieth century. However, twentieth-century literary critics have largely failed to recognize fairy and fairy tale poetry as pervasive sub-genres, and tend to code such poems as marginal in spite of their near ubiquity. My dissertation addresses this scholarly oversight in four ways. First, it offers an alternative historicization of British poetics that identifies a centuries-long lineage of fairy and fairy tale poems in the work of nearly two hundred canonical and non-canonical poets. Second, it argues that the development of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary theory is heavily indebted to theorizations of fairy tales and that recognizing the politicized use of fairy tales in theory can both contextualize and illuminate the political implications of apparently innocuous and apolitical fairy tale poems. Third, it grapples with the question of how such a central, prolific aspect of British poetry could be overlooked by critics by identifying blind spots in the structures of folklore, poetry, and children’s literature scholarship that have
contributed to the occlusion of fairy and fairy tale poetry. Finally, by transcending traditional chronological and movement-based categorizations of British poetry, it facilitates fresh engagements with twentieth-century British poetry, inviting scholars to robustly reevaluate critically neglected fairy tale poems in the oeuvres of canonical poets (Wilfred Owen, Denise Levertov), substantiate the recovery of long-neglected fairy tale poets (Charlotte Mew, Anna Wickham), draw new attention to constantly reprinted but rarely analyzed fairy tale poets (A.A. Milne, Alfred Noyes), interpret the nationalist and colonial implications of fairy tale poems written in response to canonical British fairy tales (Jackie Kay, John Agard), and reinterpret key terms like “fairy tale” and “myth” in parallel poetic movements like mythopoesis (T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound).

In sum, this dissertation resynthesizes British poetry to challenge long-standing assumptions about fairy tales and, in doing so, to foster a self-conscious reevaluation of methodological biases in contemporary criticism.
To the Promethean genius who first dropped a peppermint leaf in boiling water.
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As an undergraduate at the University of Aberdeen, I was the only student I knew who had a card for both the main university research library and the children’s room of the downtown public library. I remember being both endlessly fascinated by children’s literature and deeply embarrassed by that fascination. While other students went off to the local pub on a weekend to pursue more socially acceptable addictions, I would often stay home greedily making my way through stacks upon stacks of fairy tales. As an undergraduate, I don’t think I could have explained to anyone what drew me to children’s literature in general or fairy tales in particular, but as I have begun to come out of the closet as a fairy tale reader, I have been able to put words to my addiction. I like fairy tales because they don’t pull any punches. Betrayal, incest, abandonment, genocide, domestic abuse, faithfulness, friendship, true love, generosity, filial devotion—there is no relationship, personal or social, that fairy tales do not explore. I also like fairy tales because they strip complicated social issues down to a handful of key characters (the king, the peasant, the fool) and then navigate overwhelmingly complex social issues in very relational, human terms. In fairy tales, all social contexts (for good or for ill) grow out of personal choices, and fairy tales remind us that we must take responsibility for our actions and that very small acts of selfishness or kindness can have major repercussions.

I also appreciate the fact that fairy tales are gladly naïve in pursuit of questions like “How do we become more loving, more generous, and more trustworthy people?” As
gender-liberals and postcolonial scholars will point out, fairy tales often have very
damaging answers to this question—but there is something to be said for making the
question a priority. For every “Cinderella” tale that cautions young women to wait
passively for the intervention of a fairy godmother and the acknowledgement of a prince
charming, there is another “Cinderella” tale that encourages young women to question
the social preoccupation with female beauty, to take control of their own destinies, and to
bravely employ every scrap of wit and good humor on the way. More importantly, the
variety of competing “Cinderella” tales reminds us that “happily ever after” can take
many shapes, that it is never guaranteed, and that if you are bold and clever and lucky
enough to earn happiness, you must never take it for granted.

In formal terms, I also like fairy tales for the many of same reasons that I like
poetry. Both do astonishing things with language—they are full of luscious-sounding
words, sly repetitions of important phrases or concepts, hyperawareness of metatexual
contexts, double- and treble- and quadruple-entendres, and insider-joke allusions to
previous work. There is a fundamental playfulness, cheekiness, and commitment to
innovation in the formal aspects of poetic and fairy tale aesthetics that transcends even
the most disturbing topics and most terrifying subject matter. Poetry and fairy tales
always imply that the horrors of the world can be resisted because the reader knows that
whatever horror inspired the poem or the fairy tale has already been resisted, at least
once, by the person who bravely transmuted it into art.

I officially came to graduate school to study twentieth-century British and Irish
poetry, but, when I won an open-ended summer research fellowship, I faced up to the
dreadful sense that I was doing something irreverent and asked a sympathetic professor if
he would sponsor me in reading a list of fairy tale novels for young adults. Somewhat to my surprise, he agreed enthusiastically, and thus began my official study of children’s literature—but I still found myself thinking of children’s literature and poetics as an “either-or” study option. Poetry would be my “real work” and fairy tales (in prose) would be my literary hobby (and by “hobby,” of course, I meant “vice”). I was aware that some poets, even major poets, had incorporated fairy tales into their work, but I had always assumed that fairy tales were a relatively minor motif found in the scattered work of a handful of the more eccentric writers. In my graduate coursework, however, I was invited to read dozens of volumes of twentieth-century poetry, and the more I poetry read, the more fairy tales I found—Rose Fyleman’s fairies at the bottom of the garden had company in W.H. Auden’s fairy tale children lost in the Spanish Civil War, the traumatized “Farmer’s Bride” described by Charlotte Mew as “a little frightened fay,” changelings in Robert Graves, “magic trees” and “bewitching daughters” in Mina Loy, magic mirrors in Edwin Muir, wickedy witches and most unusual princesses in Carol Ann Duffy and Liz Lochhead. I was shocked, scandalized, and utterly delighted to discover something that Wolfgang Mieder had noted in the “poetry” entry of The Greenwood Excyclopedia of Folk Tales and Fairy Tales (2008): “there are literally countless poets who have written at least one if not two fairy-tale poems. In fact, one could perhaps go so far as to say that there is hardly a single [twentieth-century] poet who has not at least alluded to a traditional fairy tale in a poem.”

1 752. Mieder’s examples were primarily American and German, though he mentions several key British poets; I would now suggest that he slightly overstates the scope of fairy-tale poetry, but his very strong claim provocatively draws attention to an underrecognized field. However it is significant that Mieder, though an editor of the fairy tale poetry collection Disenchantments: An Anthology of Modern Fairy Tale Poetry (1988), is primarily a folklore scholar rather than a poetry scholar in that his argument is
Over a period of about eighteen months, my dissertation project hatched out of two related questions. Why are so many twentieth-century British poets writing fairies and fairy tales into their work? And why aren’t fairy tales widely recognized as a foundational thematic preoccupation by poetry scholars?

In my first attempt to answer these questions, I started reading material from children’s literature, folklore, theoretical, and literary scholarship, but I was stymied by a baffling variety of contradictory uses of key terms like “fairy tale,” “myth,” and “legend.” Consequently, the first chapter of this dissertation is, above all, an untangling of terms that I hope will provide a useful reference point for future cross-disciplinary study. The second chapter is my archival answer the question: why is it important to study fairy tales and poetry together? Part II speaks to the importance of fairy tales at the foundations of what is now considered literary theory and the ongoing ubiquity of fairies in Victorian British poetry, and Part III is the payoff of all the previous archival material, and offers a re-reading of twentieth-century poetics in light of the importance of fairy tales to previous generations of poets and theorists.

Because this dissertation has material drawn from a very broad chronology and unusual range of scholarly disciplines, it would never have been possible to complete it without the unstintingly generous support of a great many colleagues and mentors. I would particularly like to thank Shane Alcobia-Murphy, Cristina Bacchilega, Kate Bernstein, Gail Bederman, J.H. Bowman, Brian Boyd, Jacque Brogan, Matthew Capedeville, Beverly Lyon Clark, Norma Clarke, Seamus Deane, Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, calculated to persuade fairy tale scholars of the value of poetry rather than to persuade poetry scholars of the value of fairy tales.
Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Maud Ellmann, Don Haase, Glenn Hendler, Peter Holland, Eileen Hunt-Botting, Vanessa Joosen, Essaka Joshua, Virginia Lowe, Ali Lumsden, Melissa Morphew, Isobel Murray, Briona NicDhairmada, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Laura O’Connor, Susan Ohmer, Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, Alicia Ostriker, Abby Palko, Lissa Paul, Wayne Price, Denise Riley, Julie Sauvage, Valerie Sayers, Delia Sherman, John Sitter, Barbara Taylor, Carole Walton, Kevin Whelan, Pam Wojcik, and the many, many colleagues who asked vital questions, shared ideas, and offered generous advice at conferences around the world. Your infectious joy in language has comforted my heart and electrified my mind; this dissertation would have been small and drab without your effervescent, vibrant enthusiasm for literature. And thanks also to my lovely and brilliant colleagues from the “Myths and Fairytale: Defining the Nation” ISLA-Mellon Workshop, and to the marvelous and nearly omniscient collective brain of the ChildLit listserv which has been so generously employed in sharing obscure sources.

Warmest thanks and deepest gratitude to my dissertation committee, Barbara Green, Jack Zipes, and most especially Romana Huk for your unsparing generosity in reading innumerable (lengthy) drafts, asking the just the right questions, offering criticism that was both constructive and kind, and pointing me in enticing new directions. You embody the best of what academe can be. I want to be like you when I grow up.

Thanks also to the unflagging efforts of the gorgeous librarians at the Irish National Library, the Scottish National Library, Trinity College, the University of Minnesota Library, and the Hesburgh Library— and my undying gratitude to Aedin Clements, Gay Dannelly, Rita Erskine, Laura Fuderer, Jennifer Matthews, and Margaret Porter, who helped unearth the most arcane resources and answered the most convoluted
bibliographic questions with unfailing kindness, saintly patience, and eternal good humor. I adore you all! And a special thanks to Susan Walker from the Lewis Walpole Library at Yale University for tracking down Horace Walpole’s fairy tale holograph and bringing the Kingdom of the Ducks to light, and to Jane Carpenter from the UCLA Library Special Collections for helping me track down a sequence of morality tales which might or might not have been fairy-related—as the moral storybooks say, may your many virtues be rewarded. And thanks also to Stephen Munro, Duty Curator of the National Museum of Australia in Canberra for his etymological investigations of “gibbet sixpence.”

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Ultimately, however, this dissertation was made possible by my family, who found me books to read and glasses to read them with. You gave me the world, gave me eyes to see it, and gave me the courage to revel in it. Especially the weird bits.
PART I:

INTRODUCTION
Although fairy tales are still arguably the most powerful formative tales of childhood and permeate mass media for children and adults, it is not unusual to find them deemed of marginal cultural importance and dismissed as unworthy of critical attention. Yet the staying power of these stories, their widespread and enduring popularity, suggests that they must be addressing issues that have a significant social function—whether critical, conservative, compensatory, or therapeutic.

—Maria Tatar

In the idealized vision of childhood largely underwritten by media giants like the Disney Corporation, fairy tales are the comforting and delightful conclusion to a long day, affirming warmth and stability in the face of a perplexing and dangerous world. As the advertisements for Disneyland assure us: “little ones can fly beyond the border of Never Land to attend a kingdom where the loveliest of fantasies are delightfully realized — and be back in time for bed!” (“Fairy Tale Fantasy”).

But for scholars, fairy tales are frustrating.

This is not to say that scholars cannot or do not enjoy reading fairy tales, quite the contrary. The fairy tale causes problems for scholars because it is an amorphous grouping without a readily agreed-upon definition. The first problem is a matter of identification. If you are reading a poem, how do you recognize a “fairy tale” allusion? Does an allusion have to be to a particular canonical tale (like “Cinderella”), or can it merely reference a key “fairy tale” phrase (“deepest darkest woods,” “damsel in distress,” “prince charming,” etc.)? Does the allusion have to involve actual fairies?

The second problem is a matter of interpretation. Once you have identified a fairy tale allusion, what does it connote? What is the ethos that a fairy tale allusion invokes? Childhood? Childishness? A link with ancient oral folkculture? Literary marginality? Idealized romanticization?

In part, both of these problems grow out of a quirk in the history of literary scholarship; at the turn of the twentieth century, barely-formed English departments (Oxford in 1894, Cambridge in 1919) were already on the defensive. Study of English-language literature was characterized as “the ‘soft option’, a woman’s subject, and the ‘poor man’s Classics’, it was derided for its supposed lack of substance” (Baron 2). Early English Literature dons like John Churton Collins (1848-1908) had to argue passionately to defend the study of “great modern literature,” and had neither time nor inclination to further defend non-canonical texts, and most certainly not those that were associated with “juvenile literature.”

Unsurprisingly, fairy tales were among the genres with which English Departments chose not to engage or to, in any way, take “seriously.”

That early decision has left a long shadow in twentieth-century literary scholarship, and in poetry scholarship specifically. For the most part, when twentieth-century poets have used fairy tales in their writing, such a move has been considered subversively acanonical—coded as either an allusion to the “domestic” (Severin, “Gilt” 207), willfully “ex-centric” (Huk “Poetic Subject” 152), or hopelessly, simplistically childish. In the essay “Malevolent Flippance” (1991), a famously caustic critique of the American poet Anne Sexton (1928-74), Helen Vendler (b.1933) argues that:

It was not the ethical parables of the Bible, or the fertile suggestiveness of Greek myth, but the grim tit-for-tat of fairy tales—where the unsuccessful suitors are murdered, or the witch is burned in her own oven, or the wicked wolf is himself sliced open—that appealed to Sexton’s childlike and vengeful mind. The fairy tales and folk tales put forth a child’s black-and-white ethics, with none of the complexity of the Gospels, and none of the worldliness of the Greeks. (440)

For Vendler, the use of fairy tales is irrefutable evidence of Sexton’s “infantile fantasy” (441). Fairy tales have been so powerfully associated with children and so powerfully disassociated from the academic literary canon that the literary and political history of fairy tales in poetry before the 1970s has been almost entirely occluded from mainstream literary scholarship.

Even in very contemporary work, poetry scholars who are not specifically invested in Children’s Literature or Fairy Tale Studies have tended to treat fairy tales as homogenously crude, childish narratives and tend not to give fairy tales the individuated, nuanced attention (in terms of form or narrative) that are given to any other pattern of literary reference. For example, Wilfred Owen’s poem “The Sleeping Beauty” (written in 1912, and revised in 1917-18) tends to be overlooked or, at best, dismissed in biographical terms or in terms that distract from the significance of the fairy tale as such.
Paul Norgate has an endnote which says “Nénette Léger had also inspired Owen to a poem—‘The Sleeping Beauty’” (35). Gregory Woods argues that the line “let us sleep now” from Owen’s “Strange Meeting” is homoerotic but does not engage with the language of sleeping and death in “The Sleeping Beauty” or its corollary “The Kind Ghosts” (Woods 65-6). Dominic Hibberd notes that it is “the first of Wilfred’s sonnets in Verlaine’s style” (139), and Jennifer Breen suggests that it “represents another of WO’s early attempts to idealize an event in Keatsian language” (201). However, none of these scholars have gone back to the language of the Grimms or Perrault, attempted to explain why (of all fairy tales) Owen only chose to write extensively and specifically about “The Little Mermaid” and “The Sleeping Beauty,” speculated about why Owen might be specifically preoccupied with “The Sleeping Beauty” (or any fairy tale) in the middle of a war-zone, compared in detail Owen’s fairy tale writing with the fairies and fairy tales that appear in the war poetry of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, or considered whether there is particular significance to writing a fairy tale in a sonnet form that borrows language from Romanticism. I will suggest that (in this particular case study and in literary scholarship more broadly) these kinds of questions are important and highly fruitful.

To offer only a few examples—a study of the language of the Grimm’s “Briar Rose,” will make it clear that Owen’s “The Kind Ghosts” is a parallel poem to “The Sleeping Beauty,” told from the point of view of the ghostly failed suitors whose bodies are impaled on the thorns of the magical rose bushes surrounding the castle. And, in fact, the commonality that Owen stresses in his retellings of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” and the Grimms’ “Briar Rose” is his focus on characters who died
because of their failure to achieve a successful, heteronormative, “happily ever after.”

Fairy tales in all the war poetry of WWI tend to stress a paradoxical longing for a return to an idealized, safe, comforting domestic space represented by the fairy tale genre and, at the same time, a deep sympathy for the extremely traumatic events that occur in any individual fairy tale; for example, the bodies of soldiers who have died on the barbed wire surrounding the trenches clearly reminds Owen of the lost princes whose bones are caught in the thorns surrounding the Sleeping Beauty’s tower. Owen also linguistically links his own work to a tradition in Romanticism that frequently used the language of fairies to represent poetic imagination, and to the genre of nineteenth-century British fairy tales were linked to national identity at a very foundational level. A reader’s knowledge of fairy tales may not, perhaps, seem to be as hard-won as knowledge of Shakespeare or Milton, but determining the role of a fairy tale in any given poem or in the history of British poetry can be equally productive and, because there is relatively little scholarly precedent, potentially far more complex.

With that promise of richness to come, I will start by suggesting that to begin to talk about fairy tales in poetry, it is necessary to grapple with two apparently simple questions: What is a “fairy tale”? and What does “fairy tale-ness” entail?

1.1 Defining Fairy Tales in Departmental Terms


—The Oxford English Dictionary

3 All Oxford English Dictionary Definitions are taken from the OED Online which is updated quarterly. Endnotes will refer to the specific print edition for which the entry was last updated and will give the date of the most recent online search. e.g. “fairy-tale.” OED 2nd ed. (1989) last accessed 22 Apr 2010.
For the purposes of delimiting a literary genre, the definitions of “fairy-tale” given by The Oxford English Dictionary are counterintuitive at best: “a story about fairies” and “a falsehood” would respectively exclude “Little Red Riding Hood” and include “the dog ate my homework” while “an unreal or incredible story” could encompass all of literature. Unfortunately, the etymology is not much more helpful. The English term “fairy tale” is a borrowing from the French phrase “les contées de fées” coined by Madame d’Aulnoy (c.1650-1705) at the turn of the eighteenth century to describe a genre of courtly writing that included many fantastical tales featuring glittering princess, marvelous knights, fairies both benevolent and wicked, and magical plots. However, attempts to categorize the genre of English-language materials encompassed by the term “fairy tale” have proven to be contradictory and complex, in part due to the distinctions between the way that fairy tales are situated in different scholarly departments. And even in the twentieth century, to begin to define the fairy tale is to carefully define narrative patterns that are not (or at least not always) equivalent to “fairy tale, “ most importantly: “legend,” “myth,” and “folktale,” genre distinctions which have widely divergent meanings for folklorists, fairy tale scholars, literary theorists, librarians, and children’s literature scholars. In practice, the lack of a stable, central term has strongly impacted all scholarship that addresses the “fairy tale” in any context, and powerfully inhibited discussion of fairy tales across theoretical schools and departmental divisions. Parsing out these terms in a poetic context is exceptionally important because poets borrow terminology from all of these sources and frequently write about fairies or canonical fairy tales but define their work under broader headings of “folktale” or
“mythology.” Consequently, mapping the key interstices between these arguments and untangling the competing definitions historically will be an essential part of this dissertation project.

1.1.1 How are Fairy Tales Defined by Folklorists?

Folklorists tend to be primarily interested in oral traditions and in the written tales which are transcribed directly (or as directly as possible) from those oral tales. “Folklore” is the broadest subject heading and encompasses all oral material, and, by and large, English-language folklorists tend to divide folklore into three general categories: myths, legends, and folktales.4 However, depending on the geographical, linguistic, and cultural region(s) in which a particular folklorist is invested, only two of these categories might be pertinent, or an additional category (such as “fairy tale,” “ogre tale,” or “tall tale”) might warrant distinct treatment.5 Partly because such variants tend to acknowledge their departure from the central three categories and partly to represent the most mainstream trend in folklore scholarship, I am going to offer here James Frazer’s foundational

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4 Comparable to the German categories mythen, sagen, and märchen, and the French categories mythes, traditions populaires, and contes populaires. (Cf. Bascom 25)

5 Irish folklorists, for example, tend to stress only two categories (“legend” and “folktale”) and to foreground the importance of narrative form as well as content and believability. In an Irish context, “legends” are told informally and in colloquial terms by anyone, and at least half-believed by all participants; this category includes ghost stories, tall tales about local characters, fairy tales, and contemporary urban legends. In contrast, “folktales” are told more formally and in formulaic terms, often by a designated/qualified storyteller; these include the big myth cycles, tales of Cuchulain, etc. and are understood as having taken place in a mythic past of long-long ago. Irish storytellers had been specifically critiqued by late nineteenth-century folklore and anthropology scholars for being superstitious and backwards, so stressing the legitimacy of belief in the otherworldly became an important anti-colonial move, and that language is reflected in the development of Irish folklore scholarship (Ó Giolláin, “Private Conversation”).

definition of “myth,” “legend,” and “folktale” then gesture at some of the more
contemporary usages of those terms. In the introduction to his translation of Apollodorus’
*The Library* (1921), Frazer argues that:

As the distinction between myth, legend, and folk-tale is not always clearly
apprehended or uniformly observed, it may be well to define the sense in which I
employ these terms.

By myths I understand mistaken explanations of phenomena, whether of
human life or of external nature. Such explanations originate in that instinctive
curiosity concerning the causes of things which at a more advanced stage of
knowledge seeks satisfaction in philosophy and science, but being founded on
ignorance and misapprehension they are always false, for were they true they
would cease to be myths. […] By legends I understand traditions, whether oral or
written, which relate the fortunes of real people in the past, or which describe
events, not necessarily human, that are said to have occurred at real places. Such
legends contain a mixture of truth and falsehood, for where they wholly true, they
would not be legends but histories. […] By folk-tales I understand narratives
invented by persons unknown and handed down at first by word which, though
they profess to describe actual occurrences, are in fact purely imaginary, having
no other aim than the entertainment of the hearer and making no real claim to his
credulity. In short, they are fictions pure and simple, devised not to instruct or
edify the listener, but only to amuse him; they belong to the region of pure
romance. (xviii-xix)

Frazer stresses three important criteria for his definition: truth-claims (myth claims to be
true, legend claims to be true-ish, folklore admits to untruth), plot content (life and
nature, socially significant historical events, imaginative fiction), and designated purpose
(to explain natural and religious phenomena, to explain social structures, to entertain).

Both the criteria and the general outline of his schema—that myths explain origins and
how the world works, legends describe the adventures of specific individuals who are
supposed to have really existed, and folktales are purely fantastical—still widely hold in
contemporary folklore scholarship, though there has been heated debate about all of the
categories.
The nuances of how the categories are parsed out tend to reflect both the influences of postcolonial scholarship and the individual priorities of the author. To give just two quick examples—In *Folk and Fairy Tales: A Handbook* (2004), D.L. Ashliman divides myth, legend, and folktale in Frazer’s terms but without Frazer’s eugenicist overtones. Ashliman ignores Frazer’s argument that myth is nascent science, and stresses the “elemental grandeur and cosmic authority” of myths as transmitters of powerful symbolic imagery. Legends, for Ashliman are distinctly human-centric, relate events about specific historical characters, and tend to be recorded in plainer language. Folktales, in contrast, are pure fiction, though not without didactic function (32-4).

Similarly, in Donna Rosenberg’s more elaborate introduction to *Folklore, Myths, and Legends: A World Perspective* (1997), “A myth is a *sacred* story from the past” and although “myths are religious in their origin and function, they may also be the earliest form of history, science, or philosophy”(xxiv-xxv). Rosenberg’s, definition of “legend” is quite standard—they are defined by their claim to historicity and their specific location in a geographical place and time, but her definition of “folktale” aggressively defends the didactic qualities of folktales as models of human behavior: “They present a realistic view of the world in that it is incomprehensible, unpredictable, and dangerous” (xxii).

Both authors are clearly descended from Frazer’s original argument, but they also adapt it to suit a contemporary agenda.

In all of these models, the tales that are recognized as the core canon of British “fairy tales” would be encompassed by the “folktale” heading, though even for folklorists, parsing out these categories with specific examples can be very tricky. In contrast with a legend, a fairy tale does not have such strongly individuated characters. If
individuation occurs, it’s often at the level of the plot. Cinderella (who might also be known as Ashpet, Ashputtle, Cindersoot, Cendrillon, Cinders Elly, or Aarne-Thomposon-Uther tale type 510 “The Persecuted Heroine”) will be recognizable in any story whose protagonist is physically outstanding, abused by his/her family, recognized by someone of great social significance at an important social event, temporarily removed from that person while leaving a token behind, recognized again by way of the token, and married. Mice, pumpkins, shoes, magic, reincarnated mothers and fairy godmothers function as variables within that basic structure, and Cinderella herself may be passive or active, weeping or brave, clever or dull – the recognizable elements have less to do with the character’s personality than with the key plot events. Even if one or two plot elements are inverted, the pattern remains recognizable. 6

And in contrast with “myth,” fairy tales do not explain a practical “truth” about the natural or supernatural world. Like the fairy tale, a myth may have symbolic characters who are defined by their social role (“the winterking,” “the trickster,” “the greedy man”), but unlike the fairy tale, a myth may also include specifically individuated characters (Grandmother Spider, Prometheus, Kali), and it will always describe something fundamental about how the world now operates. Tales like “How the Camel got his Hump,” “The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden,” and “How

6 For example, in San Souci’s Cinderella Skeleton (2000), Cinderella is the boniest ghoul in the graveyard. She is forced to dirty up the house by her stepmother and stepsisters, escapes to the Halloween ball, catches the eye(socket) of Prince Charnel, escapes leaving her shoe (and the skeletal foot inside it), is recognized when the shin reattaches properly, and marries Charnel under the full moon. Alternatively, in Emma Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Shoe” (1997), the story progresses as usual until the princess runs off with the fairy godmother instead of the prince, and the prince uses the shoe to find himself another beautifully petite bride. In either case, the tale type is enough of a guideline that the stories can be readily recognizable. Although key tales focused around specific characters (Cinderella, Aladdin, Snow White, etc.) have built up enough name-recognition to almost seem to function as legends in their own right, they are not associated with cycles of multiple stories, and their personal traits vary widely between tellings.
Coyote Brought Fire to Earth” would all count as “myths” rather than “fairy tales” in this respect.

1.1.2 How are Fairy Tales Defined by Fairy Tale Scholars?

The category of fairy tale scholarship is methodologically distinct from folklore scholarship, in large part because fairy tale scholarship has worked very hard to situate itself as an interdisciplinary genre that brings together registers of folkloric, literary, and theoretical scholarship, even though the most prominent scholars who identify themselves as “fairy tale scholars” tend to be from literary rather than folkloric/anthropological backgrounds. Ironically, such inclusiveness has made it exceptionally difficult for fairy tale scholars to define the material represented by the term “fairy tale.” In fact, the introductions to both *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* (2000) and *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (2007) revolve around detailed explanations of why no one quite agrees on the exact definition of “fairy tale”: “There is no such thing as the fairy tale; however, there are hundreds of thousands of fairy tales. And these fairy tales have been defined in so many different ways that it boggles the mind to think that they can even be categorized as a genre” (Zipes, *Oxford* xv). In *The Oxford Companion*, editor Jack Zipes goes on to argue, as he has since *The Art of Subversion* (1983), that literary scholars, to avoid confusion, should carefully distinguish between analysis of the “literary fairy tale” (material that was originally produced for print publication, not merely transcribed from the oral tradition) and the oral folktale, which requires different methodological and contextual treatment. However, although Zipes foregrounds the word “literary,” his definition does not preclude discussion of “fairy tales” recognized as canonical by the literary tradition but manifest in
other artistic contexts, as indicated by the title of his latest book *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (2010). In a similar vein, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia* editor Donald Haase suggests that audiences recognize the fairy tale in many different kinds of media, both literary and non-literary, and that critical discourse should reflect that diversity (xxxviii). That the two most visible scholarly works in the field should have such vague definitions of the genre can seem a tad worrying. However, both would agree that, to borrow Associate Justice Stewart Potter’s famous lines: “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But *I know it when I see it*.”

In practice, when asked to identify the core canon of fairy tales, Zipes and Haase produce basically identical lists. Off-hand, Zipes lists a wide variety of tales that can be found in a surprisingly small cluster of sources:


In at least one version, all but one of these tales can be found in works by: Gaimbattista Basile (c.1566-1632), Charles Perrault (1628-1703), Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1785-

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7 Jacobellis v. Ohio (1964). Perhaps the most famous line in U.S. Supreme Court history comes from Justice Stewart’s ruling against the censorship of the French film *The Lovers*. Stewart argued that the government could only censor “hard core pornography,” and the line comes from his somewhat vague definition of that phrase. The 7-2 ruling responded to a series of censorship cases like the United States v. One Book Called *Ulysses* (1933) and attempted to mitigate Roth v. United States (1957), which ruled works like *Ulysses* and Bocaccio’s *Decameron* to be “utterly without redeeming social importance.” Jacobellis v. Ohio remained the most definitive censorship trial until Miller v. California (1973).
1863, 1786-1859), Hans Christian Anderson (1805-1875), and probably the Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890) translation of The Book of One Thousand Nights and a Night (ten volumes, 1885), now more commonly called The Arabian Nights. Similarly, though in slightly different order, Haase identifies the “canonical tale collections” as European translations of the Arabian Nights plus “Hans Christian Anderson, Gimbattista Basile, the Brothers Grimm, and Charles Perrault” (Greenwood, xxxvi). If it is not readily categorizable, the canonical fairy tale is at least agreeably visible.8

1.1.3 How do Literary Theorists Define Fairy Tales?

For theorists, there is as much divergence in the genre categorization of “fairy tales” as there is in the conceptual deployment of the fairy tale genre to serve different theoretical requirements. The ubiquity of fairy tales in the Victorian period made them a genre that was lent itself to patterns of theorization that, although initially grounded in the late nineteenth century, continue to impact theory in the twenty-first. The long individual chapters of this dissertation will continue to parse out the key definitions of “fairy tale” and myth in different theoretical schools, but to offer a very brief, crude summary:

- From the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries, gender-liberal theorists have consistently discussed the fairy tale as a pattern of narrativity that strongly impacts the definition of social norms and imparts gender behavior patterns to children –either subversively or in a way that supports the status quo.

8 There are a few individual tales that are canonical in British culture but do not come from these source anthologies, but they are relatively few: “Jack and the Beanstalk,” “Babes in the Woods,” and “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” would be the most prominent.
• Colonial scholars applied the theorization of eugenics to the interpretation of folklore in the late nineteenth century, and postcolonial scholars have interrogated the language of “folktales” and “fairy tales” in relation to colonial theorizations of eugenics and contemporary non-Western traditions.

• For many Marxist scholars, myths and fairy tales are superstructural holdovers from a pre-class economic base and provide insights into early stages of social development. Storytelling, as a narrative form that privileges communal rather than individual authorship has also proven of increasing interest to Marxists, particularly during and after WWII.

• Structuralists and poststructuralist scholars have argued about whether fairy tales can represent an essential ur-narrative form and interrogated the implications of narrative structure for communication.

• Psychoanalysts have, at different points, construed the fairy tale as a socially formative narrative that impacts adulthood because it ubiquitously informs childhood, argued that fairy tales are one of the manifestations of the collective unconscious, and suggested that fairy tales are the most crucial symbolic key to understanding mental and social development.

The exact usage of “fairy tales” by each of these groups is exceptionally difficult to parse out because, unlike folklorists, theorists do not have a central context in which “fairy tales” are made distinct from potentially similar genre categories.
However, in general, theorists are uninterested in a nuanced definition of “legend” and tend to concentrate on “myth” and “fairy tale” as key terms. Fortunately, the relationship between “myth”/“fairy tale” tends to follow three general patterns: 1. “Myth and fairy tale” are grouped into one phrase to signify the kinds of material inherited most directly from oral traditions. 2. “Myth” is used as an umbrella term for a very large category of fictional material that includes “fairy tale.” 3. “Myth” is used as an ideological term to refer to what Angela Carter describes as “ideas, images, stories that we tend to take on trust without thinking what they really mean” (“Interview” 11-12), in the context of which, fairy tales may be used to either perpetuate myth or to deconstruct it.

Those theorists who use “myth” as an umbrella term, particularly historians and literary scholars, are usually drawing on a definition of “myth” that pre-dates the seventeenth century invention of the term “fairy tale” and the nineteenth century invention of the term “folklore.” The literary category “Classical Myth” or “Greco-Roman Myth” was established in English-language scholarship by the fifteenth century and its wide circulation allowed the term “Myth” (capital “M”) to refer to select collections of ancient tales from a particular cultural/geographical region. Greco-Roman Myth, for example, easily encompasses narratives that folklorists would define as fairy tale (“King Midas”), legend (*The Aeneid*), or myth in the more specific sense (Hades kidnapping Persephone explains the turning of the seasons). Similar usage arises in

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9 At the turn of the twentieth century, the primary terms would be “myth and folktale,” but by about 1940, it would be rapidly displaced by the binary grouping of “myth and fairy tale.” To minimize confusion in definitional terms, and because the category “folktale” almost always encompasses “fairy tale,” for this chapter I am going to concentrate on the latter grouping.
relation to categories like Norse Myth and Celtic Myth. Not all geographical regions have claim to a Myth tradition (or, to be precise, not all geographical regions have a Myth tradition that is recognized as such by Anglophone scholars), but the few that do tend to widely influence scholarly vocabulary.

In part stemming from this blanket understanding of “myth,” another key use of the term grew out of the interaction between folklore scholarship and psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century. Carl Jung (1875-1961) so admired Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941) and Frazer’s analysis of global “myth” in the *Golden Bough* (1890-1915) that in 1915 Jung began to extrapolate from it a crucial argument about human mental structures:

[…]

psychoanalysis [has recently entered] into the domains of mythology and comparative religion, whence we have derived a deeper insight into ethical psychological symbolism. […] Myths are, first of all, manifestations of unconscious currents, similar to dreams. These currents are caused by the libido in its unconscious forms. The material which comes to the surface is infantile material, hence, phantasies connected with the incest-complex. Without difficulty we can find in all the so-called sun-myths infantile theories about generation, childbirth, and incestuous relations. In the fairy tale of Little Red-Ridinghood, we find the phantasy that the mother has to eat something which is similar to a child, and that the child is born by cutting open the mother’s body. This phantasy is one of the most universal, to be found everywhere. (“Theory” 30, 36)

For Jung, the commonalities between “dream,” “myth,” “folklore,” “religion” and “symbolisms” which he finds in people with widely differing social, ethnic, and mental states are evidence of commonality between all humans and are interpreted by Jung as evidence for a universal, collective unconscious.¹⁰ In Jungian psychoanalysis and its

¹⁰ A year after Jung published this article, Louise Brink (1876-19—?) reviewed *The Golden Bough* in the same academic journal *The Psychoanalytic Review* and concluded that the sweeping global analysis of myth compiled by Frazer was entirely congruent with developments in psychoanalysis (44).
derivatives, a dream expresses an individual’s unconscious desires, but “myth” narratives articulate the unconscious desires of humankind. For Jung and Jungian scholars, “myth” rapidly became the encompassing term for any traditional narrative that relies heavily on symbolism and cannot be classed as history, including: religion, legends, myths (in the folkloric sense), fairy tales, and dreams.¹¹

The more obviously ideologically loaded use of “myth” has a double origin, primarily grounded in class and gender discourse. By the end of the Victorian period, the genre of fairy tales had been powerfully associated with children’s literature and domesticity, while myths were associated with “serious,” Classical, canonical literature. Of course, at the turn of the twentieth century, canonical literature was also predominantly patriarchal literature, and mid-century gender-liberal theorists appropriated the term “myth” to describe any false gender narrative that has been widely absorbed by dominant mainstream culture without question, as in the “myth of women’s passivity” (Aynsley and Grant 17). As fairy tales became increasingly important to gender-liberal writers on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1960s-80s, “fairy tales” were recognized as vehicles through which “myth” could be challenged, and as narratives which could detrimentally reinforce “myth” by reproducing patriarchal gender norms, as

¹¹ The conflation of religion and fairy tales was not unique to Jung, and, in poetry, was particularly characteristic of the popular Victorian writer Matthew Arnold (1822-1888). In *God and the Bible* (1875), Arnold writes: “For us, the God of popular religion is a legend, a fairy-tale; learned theology has simply taken this fairy-tale and dressed it metaphysically. Clearly it is impossible for us to treat this fairy-tale with solemnity, as a real and august object, in the manner which might be most acceptable to its believers. But for the sake of the happiness it has given, of its beauty and pathos, and of the portions of truth mixed up with it, it deserves, we have said, and from us it has received and always will receive, a nearly inexhaustible indulgence” (19). [In this volume, Arnold compares the Bible to fairy tales in four different chapters, building on his extensive reading of fairy tale and the Bible in *Literature and Dogma* (1873).]
in “the Cinderella myth” (Eddy 135; Elahi 29) or “the myth of the fairy-tale princess come true” (Ussher 356).12

1.1.4 How are fairy tales catalogued by librarians?


12 Cf. also Alicia Ostriker’s “The Thieves of Language” (1982): “[…] mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer. There we find conquering gods and heroes, the deities of pure thought and spirituality so superior to Mother Nature; there we find the sexually wicked Venus, Circe, Pandora, Helen, Medea, Eve, and the virtuously passive Iphigenia, Alcestis, Mary, Cinderella. It is thanks to myth we believe that woman must be either ‘angel’ or ‘monster.’” (71)

13 For the purposes of this list, I have not made an effort to find specifically British publications, in part because the recent interest in fairy tales pervades western literature which is globally accessible through major online retailers, and in part because the major genres are identified in similar ways by major English-language libraries and booksellers.
because at the turn of the twentieth century, the men who first designed the library
catalogue determined that “fairy tale” would be a secondary rather than primary genre
categorization.

And yet, the general reading public has no trouble identifying or enjoying fairy
tale material, even if they have to pick fairy tale titles out of a crowd of other books. In
their recent joint paper “Fairy Tales in Motion: Genric Complexity in Early 20c. Fairy-
tale Film,” John Rieder (b.1952) and Cristina Bacchilega (b.1955) have persuasively
argued that it is more useful to think of the fairy tale “genre” as an affiliation rather than
as a defining category, suggesting that a text can have several genric associations without
being limited by (or to) any single genric label; an argument that explains why fairy tales
are recognizable even when they are not formally grouped. And, indeed, any “Young
Adult” room will be very likely to include such popular contemporary British writers as:
Joan Aiken, Steve Augarde, Ian Beck, Susan Cooper, Peter Dickinson, Chris d’Lacy,
Stephen Elboz, Anne Fine, Catherine Fisher, Pamela Freeman, Neil Gaiman, Alan
Garner, Adele Géras, Elizabeth Goudge, Charlotte Haptie, Francis Hardinge, Stuart Hill,
Jane Johnson, Diana Wynne Jones, P.B. Kerr, Dick King-Smith, Katherine Langrish,
Tanith Lee, Margaret Mahy, Geraldine McCaughrean, Elizabeth McKay, Cliff McNish,
China Miéville, Michael Molloy, Christine Morton-Shaw, Jenny Nimmo, Elizabeth
Pewsey, Terry Pratchett, Susan Price, J.K. Rowling, Angie Sage, David Lee Stone,
Jonathan Stroud, Alan Temperley, Kate Umansky, Beth Webb, Jeanette Winterson, and
dozens of similar writers. In short—many, many, many adaptations, retellings, and
reinventions of readily recognizable fairy tales from around the world. But in each case,
the onus is on the reader to search through other patterns of primary genre headings:
“fantasy/sci fi,” “romance,” etc. to piece together a comprehensive list of fairy tales. Although fairy tales are all but ubiquitous in literature, they remain marginal to the conceptual structure of the most prominent library catalogues.

In fact, conflicting uses of cataloguing terms for fairy tales date back to the earliest formal bibliographic systems, and the early bibliographic structures help to explain the present difficulty of addressing a topic like fairy tales across departmental lines and even within departments. For example, at the time when English Departments were being formed, the divisions that turn-of-the-century bibliographers made between literary genres powerfully shaped the specializations of literary critics as they would develop in the twentieth century: “Literature” was organized by the national origin of the author and by century of publication, “Prose” was divided from “Poetry” and “Drama,” and “Juvenile Literature” became its own category. In part, the library itself made the study of categories such as “fairy tale poetry” counterintuitive.

In the late nineteenth century, British bibliographers like James Duff Brown (1862-1914),14 John H. Quinn (1860-1941),15 Richard Garnett (1835-1906),16 and William Swan Sonnenschein (1855-1934),17 corresponded with each other and with


widely influential American bibliographers like Melvil Dewey (1851-1931)\(^\text{18}\) and Herbert Putnam (1861-1955)\(^\text{19}\) to begin the monumental task of organizing all publications into coherent and accessible systems. A brief survey of just a few of these early systems gives evidence for the difficulty of classifying “fairy tales,” particularly in relation to “mythology” and “folklore.” In general, “fairy tales” tend to be classed as a literary category in contrast to the religious/philosophical sub-grouping “mythology and folklore,” but at least three systems list “folklore” under the social sciences, and a few systems suggest that all three categories heavily overlap. [See Table 1]

\(^{18}\) Melvil Dewey. *Classification and Subject Index for Cataloguing and Arranging the Books and Pamphlets of a Library*. 1876. (This pamphlet was revised and reprinted by Dewey in several editions over the next twenty years.) The Dewey Decimal system would eventually become the most widely used bibliographic system in public libraries in the U.K.

\(^{19}\) Chief bibliographer responsible for the creation of the *Library of Congress Classification* system (1897).
TABLE 1:  
EARLY BIBLIOGRAPHIC CLASSIFICATIONS

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<th>Religious/Philosophical</th>
<th>Social Science</th>
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<td><strong>British Museum Scheme (1877)</strong></td>
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<td>Belles Lettres</td>
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<td>→ <strong>Folk-Lore, Fairy Tales</strong></td>
<td>Theology</td>
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<td>→ <strong>Mythology</strong></td>
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<td>[Fairy tales collections are filed under these three sub-headings]</td>
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These divisions of “fairy tale,” “mythology,” and “folk tale” reflect a bias that owes much to nineteenth century eugenics and colonialism. “Fairy tales” are primarily coded as “literary,” but only when they are produced in Europe, Russia, and North America—regions that nineteenth century bibliographers considered culturally advanced enough to distinguish between entertaining, fictional narratives and narratives which are meant to be believed. “Mythologies,” in contrast, are primarily coded as religious, but only when they are produced by ancient cultures, primarily Greco-Roman and Norse. “Folk tales” are generally coded as narratives that are meant to be believed by members of the non-Western cultures in which they were produced, but are not accorded by bibliographers the more respectable status of “religion.” This kind of distinction acknowledges Anglophone literature’s debt to Classical Myth, but separates the relatively “high culture” Western fairy tales (which are not anthropologically significant) from “low culture” non-Western folk tales (which are anthropologically significant).

1.1.5 How are Fairy Tales Defined by Children’s Literature Scholars?

Children’s literature scholars are less troubled by “adult” genre categorizations like “myths,” “legends,” and “folktales” than they are by the somewhat arbitrary and frequently confusing distinctions between “fairy stories,” “fairy tales,” and “morality tales.” Historically, the use of these terms was never entirely consistent and frequently fluctuated through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when children’s literature evolved into a very prominent literary category of its own. Sometimes the terms “fairy story” and “fairy tale” were equivalent, and used to mean either a story about fairies or an imaginative tale more generally. On other occasions “fairy story” and “fairy tale” were used contrastively, usually in one of two ways: 1. where “fairy tale” refers to a specific
canon of stories that had been more or less solidly defined by the late nineteenth century ("Cinderella," "Puss in Boots," etc.), and "fairy story" refers to a story about fairies that does not overlap with the canonical tradition; or, 2. where “fairy tale” refers to folklore narratives from the oral tradition about brownies and goblins, but “fairy story” refers to literary tales in Madame d’Aulnoy’s courtly tradition, full of glittery princes and princesses and their very refined fairy godparents. In the context of that final definition, “morality tales,” particularly at the turn of the nineteenth century, were frequently categorized in contrast to “fairy tales” (which were coded as superstitious peasant narratives) but encompassed any number of “fairy stories” (where were coded as delicate and literarily refined).

For example, children’s literature scholars often point to a famous quotation in Practical Education (1798) by Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) and Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817) to suggest that fairy tales were not particularly popular at the turn of the nineteenth century:

> There is a class of books which amuse the imagination of children without acting upon their feelings. We do not allude to fairy tales, for we apprehend that these are not now much read, but we mean voyages and travels; these interest young people universally. […] No child ever read an account of a shipwreck, or even a storm, without pleasure. A desert island is a delightful place, to be equaled only by the skating land of the rein-deer, or by the valley of diamonds in the Arabian tales. Savages, especially if they be cannibals, are sure to be admired […] (110)

But what, exactly, do the Edgeworths mean by “fairy tales” in this context? Their term does not seem to encompass collections like The Arabian Nights, nor does it strictly exclude stories about fairies because, in the same volume, the Edgeworths include one complete fairy story ("Rivuletta") and take pains to specifically commend several “universally popular” collections of writing for children that include poems, stories, and
plays about fairies. And, in fact, Maria Edgeworth’s own subsequent collection of *Moral Tales* (1805) includes several fairy poem-songs, including the following excerpt from her children’s play *The Knapsack*:

I.
Ye fays and fairies, hasten here,
Robed in glittering gossamere;
With tapers bright, and music sweet,
And frolic dance, and twinkling feet

II.
And, little Mable, let us view
Your acorn goblets filled with dew;
Nor warn us hence till we have seen
The nutshell chariot of your queen;

[...] IV.
And bid us join your revel ring,
And see you dance, and hear you sing:
Your fairy dainties let us taste,
And speed us home with fairy haste. (198)

While Edgeworth is scornful of “fairy tales” she is clearly an author of “fairy poetry” that can be coded within the rubric of “moral tales” and endorses the reading of “fairy stories.” The only definition of “fairy tales” that makes sense in this context would be a definition of “fairy tales” that applied to peasant narratives about sprites and goblins, but not to the more dainty fairies that were popular in late-Enlightenment and early-Romantic writing more broadly.

At the turn of the twentieth century, “fairy stories” were subsumed within the popular categorization of “fairy tales,” and “morality tales” began a slide towards generic insignificance. Consequently, late-twentieth-century scholars have had a much easier

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20 Cf. Mrs. Barbauld’s *Lessons for Children* (1779); Joan Aikin’s *Evenings at Home: Consisting of a Variety of Miscellaneous Pieces, for the Instruction and Amusement of Young Persons* (published in six volumes between 1792-1796); the *Theatre of Education* (four volumes, 1781); etc.
time navigating these terms, except when contemporary scholars are negotiating the historical development of children’s literature, particularly statements like Edgeworth’s, which are exceptionally difficult to parse out in retrospect.

These kinds of variants have made interdisciplinary discourse all but incoherent. When the poetry critic Jan Montefiore claims that “European myth and fairy tale fascinate women poets to the point of obsession” (37) she is making specific reference to Classical Greco-Roman Myth, and the Victorian canon of fairy tales. For the psychoanalyst Marie Louise Von Franz, “Fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes” (1), and “fairy tales are an abstraction […] from a local saga, condensed and made into a crystallized form” (15). Von Franz identifies fairy tales in every culture and time period, as a very basic expression of human experience. For the film critic, Erika Engstrom, fairy tales are now predominantly a contemporary, Western concept: “we all know that Cinderella (or Rapunzel, or Snow White) marries her prince in a beautiful wedding and lives happily ever after. […] films and television shows have long given audiences their versions of “dream” and “fairy tale” weddings” (290). “Fairy tale” is one of the slipperiest of all genre categorizations, and one that functions on several different axes of literary meaning simultaneously, to the bafflement of even the scholars who most carefully parse out their key terms (Cf. Ashliman 32).
1.2 What does “Fairy Tale-ness” Imply to a Poetry Scholar?

Given all these competing definitions of “fairy tale,” the ethos of any particular fairy tale allusion is invariably complex and contradictory. Consequently, poets employ fairy tales to suit many different agendas, and a contemporary scholar who wishes to explain an allusion to any given fairy tale has at least four lenses through which to contextualize the text: 1. the twentieth-century “Disney” ethos of “fairy-tale-ness” — the category of tales that begin “Once upon a time” and always end “Happily ever after;” 2. the dominant versions of a specific tale in common circulation; 3. non-dominant patterns of the same fairy tale; 4. fairy tales as cultural metaphors. To briefly illustrate the applications of these categories I have taken the tale of “The Pied Piper” as a case study:

1. The twentieth-century “Disney” ethos of “fairy-tale-ness” — the category of tales that begin “Once upon a time” and always end “Happily ever after.” At the end of the Disney short version of “Pied Piper” (1933) the rats disappear into a magical giant cheese, and the children are rescued from hard labor in Hamelin and taken to Toyland. Norman MacCaig (1910-1996) draws on this idyllic magical glee in his brief poem “April Day in November, Edinburgh” (1988):

   And April, gay trespasser,
   Dances the dark streets of November,
   Pied Piper leading a procession
   of the coloured dreams of summer (42)

For MacCaig, the Pied Piper seems to be an untroubled metaphor for irresistible joy, and unexpected magic. The allusion is as much a genric reference to the ethos of carefree “fairy tale” innocence as to the actual plot of any Pied Piper narrative.
2. The dominant versions of the specific tale in common circulation. Even though there are thousands of variants of the most popular canonical tales, there are a few core texts/films that are central to the contemporary understanding of those tales. For “Cinderella,” the Disney film version is perhaps the single most well-distributed source in late twentieth-century popular culture; but for “The Pied Piper,” by far the most influential source text has been Robert Browning’s 1842 poem:

“Yet,” said he, “poor piper as I am,
“In Tartary I freed the Cham,
“Last June, from his huge swarms of gnats,
“I eased in Asia the Nizam
“Of a monstrous brood of vampyre-bats:”
[…]
Into the street the Piper stept,
Smiling first a little smile,
As if he knew what magic slept
In his quiet pipe the while;
Then, like a musical adept,
To blow the pipe his lips he wrinkled,
And green and blue his sharp eyes twinkled,
Like a candle-flame where salt is sprinkled; (12)

Browning’s piper is mysterious, otherworldly, artistic, and seductive, and when the prolific writer and artist Neil Gaiman (b.1960) refers to himself as “a leather-jacketed Pied Piper” (Burrell), this is precisely the image to which he refers. And similar honorifics draw on different elements of Browning’s story: Philip Pullman (b.1946) has been called “The Pied Piper of Atheism” for luring children away from their parents’ values with his appealing artistry, and Adrian Mitchell (1932-2008) was dubbed “The Pied Piper of Poetry” by Angela Carter (1940-1992) for his verses which seduce
audiences towards anti-authoritarian Left-wing platforms. This pattern of fairy tale ethos varies somewhat between tales and in different generations, depending on which tales and which versions of which tales are in prominent circulation; for example, Disney’s revival of any particular fairy tale into a feature film powerfully impacts the popular connotations of that tale for decades.

3. Non-dominant patterns of the same fairy tale. The playful titles given to Giaman, Pullman, and Mitchell would have had very different connotations if they were read in the context of the novelist Robert Paier (n.d.) or the criminal psychologist Ken Lanning (n.d.), who use the language of “Pied Piper” to describe serial pedophiles’ ability to entice children to follow them. In part, Paier and Lanning’s appropriation of the phrase “Pied Piper” grows out of the less-popular literary tradition in which the Piper is depicted as a demonic figure who comes to Hamelin to destroy it. For example, in the play Faust (1808, revised 1829) by Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), Faust carries a magic zither which allows him to seduce anyone he wants. In scene 19, Faust is confronted by the soldier Valentine who curses Faust for having seduced and impregnated Valentine’s sister Margaret:

“Whom wilt thou lure? God’s element!
Rat-catching piper, thou!—perdition!

21 In Mitchell’s obituary, The Times claimed that his poetry has now become “a part of the folklore of the Left” (Burgess).

22 Elements of this appear in Atom Egoyan’s The Sweet Hereafter (1997) which navigates a sub-plot of father-daughter incest.
To the Devil, first, the instrument!
To the Devil, then, the curst musician!"\textsuperscript{23}

In this darker, much more maturely sexual thread of the tale tradition, the piper is a tormented, tormenting figure, and the connotations which this minority rendering of “fairy tale” evokes is frightening and very far removed from the “sweet dreams” promised by Disney or the magical wonder implicit in the adaptations of Browning.

4. \textit{Fairy tales as cultural metaphors.} The core canon of fairy tales have become so ubiquitous that they have come to serve as cultural reference points, as evidenced by the fact that so many artists are referred to as “Pied Pipers.” What is less well known is that fairy tales are so important that they can overwrite preexisting cultural reference points. For example, the phrase “pay the piper” has become common on both sides of the Atlantic, and, in the wake of Browning’s popularity, in contemporary terms the expression is generally understood to be a reference to the “Pied Piper” tale meaning, loosely, “honor your contracts, especially with mysteriously powerful strangers.”\textsuperscript{24} Yet, according to the folklorist and German linguist Wolfgang Mieder (1985): “A check into standard proverb collections reveals that [the phrase “pay the piper”] is actually a shortened version of such proverbs as ‘Who pays the piper, calls the tune’ (1611), [or] ‘Those that dance must pay the music’ (1638)” (“To Pay,” 264). Although Mieder insists that such expressions are the oldest sources, he includes a caveat in his etymological

\textsuperscript{23} Goethe 32. Bayard Taylor (1825-78), the poet who produced the first complete and clearly attributed English-language translation of Goethe’s \textit{Faust}, suggested that this expression may date back to \textit{Romeo and Juliet} III.I Mercutio: “Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk?” (Cf. fn.121 p.160). The line is clearly insulting to Tybalt’s nobility, but to read “rat-catcher” as “seducer” is implausible in Shakespeare’s context. However, many eighteenth and nineteenth-century poets considered William Shakespeare (1564-1616) (esp. the “Queen Mab” speech from \textit{Romeo and Juliet}) to be foundational English-language fairy poetry, and that may be a partial motive for Taylor’s somewhat tenuous attribution.

diagnosis. Because people now use the phrase as an allusion to the Pied Piper tale, “Browning’s poem and the legend can, therefore, be regarded as a secondary and somewhat later additional source of the expression,” even though “they were not the primary origin.” Etymologically speaking, the popular legend retrospectively appropriated a general adage, and now both the legend and the adage are understood in the context of “fairy tales.” The concept of fairy tale not only impacts meaning, it can at times rewrite linguistic history and literary boundaries. In this kind of context, “fairy tale” connotes a symbolic sub-infrastructure in the English language that has impacted its shape over the course of the last several decades.

Writing from the twenty-first century, we cannot help but be influenced by the tales that are most popular in this time, but it is crucial to bear in mind that the category we think of as “fairy tale” (defined, in large part by its relationship to other narrative genres) means many different things at any given moment, even in the relatively brief three hundred years that the phrase has been in circulation. It is never quite fair just to speak of “the fairy tale tradition” or even the “literary fairy tale tradition” as if it is one cohesive thing. The goal of this dissertation is to begin to bridge some of these patterns of reading – to see how fairy tales develop over the arc of the twentieth century as poets use fairy tales to respond to their cultural context and to acknowledge that each artist who alludes to the fairy tale in the twentieth century may, in fact, be defining and contextualizing that “fairy tale” differently.

25 265-6. Mieder uses the phrase “additional source” (which implies origination), but it might be more accurate to say “additional referent” (which gestures at a shift in usage).
1.3 Yes, but why do Poets Like Fairy Tales?

_Fairy tales are experienced by their hearers and readers, not as realistic, but as symbolic poetry._ —Max Lüthi (1970) 26

In practical terms, fairy tales provide twentieth-century poets with several distinct formal advantages. For example, as the poet/critic Alicia Ostriker (b.1937) would argue in her groundbreaking theorization of myth and poetry in 1982, self-conscious revisionism is already at the heart of poetic innovation:

[…} revisionism correlates with formal experiment. This is important not only because new meanings must generate new forms—when we have a new form in art we can assume we have a new meaning—but because the verbal strategies these poets use draw attention to the discrepancies between traditional concepts and the conscious mental and emotional activity of female re-vision. (87)

In that context, the fairy tale is ideal because audiences expect the same story to be told over and over from different angles, and every time an audience encounters a new version of an old tale, they are listening both for what is there and what is not there. As fairy tale author, anthologist, editor, and artist Terri Windling has argued:

It is a relatively newfangled notion to believe a story’s worth (or that of any other art) must lie in its originality, in novelty, in a plot that cannot be anticipated from page to page or an idea that has never been uttered before. This has its place and its appeal, but our modern obsession with novelty has produced some of our most facile (and quickly dated) art. For many, many centuries the audiences for stories, drama, music, and visual art have better understood the particular fascination of an old, familiar story made fresh and new by an artist’s skill—much as a piece of jazz improvisation is best appreciated when one has a familiarity with the music on which it is built. (Snow 8)

26 Once 66.
As lifetime fairy tale experts, readers anticipate and instantly recognize deviation in: plot conventions (“Goldilocks and the Two Bears”), point of view (“The Three Bears Present: Porridge for all Palates”), cultural/political/historical context (“Sarah Palin and the Three Grizzlies”), moral (“The Three Peace-Loving Bears and the Child Vandal”), and linguistic play (“Dreadlocks and the Three Beauticians”). Confronted with a fairy tale, even an audience untrained in literary scholarship exhibits a remarkable degree of readerly facility, engagement, and expertise.

Moreover, because poets always draw attention to sophisticated nuances of language, the familiarity of the fairy tale ensures that poet can have maximum flexibility to fracture and recombine narratives. In fact, the full emotional weight of a traditional fairy tale narrative can be appropriated in one or two quick lines – two words, “Snow White,” can connote fear, betrayal, flight, exile, treachery, love, and redemption. Even more abstract combinations of words (“Beast,” “Rose,” “Marriage”) can refer not only to a specific tale, but also to any number of versions of that tale palimpsestically layered over each other (sometimes Beauty is entirely dutiful and obedient, sometimes she is passionate and willful) and the implicit morals and themes to which the tale generally refers (sacrifice, mystery, honesty, forgiveness, love).

Even when stories are conflated, as in W.H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939,” the thematic allusion is still very forceful:

All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are;
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good. (246)
With the phrase “Lost in a haunted wood,” Auden has instant, visceral access to tropes of abandonment (“Hansel and Gretel”), menace (“Little Red Riding Hood”), and imminent death (“Babes in the Woods”). He also has access to a more generalized ethos of bedtime fairy tales for children with happy, moral endings. The “Children afraid of the night” have no parents to tuck them into bed or promise security, and the children’s fear is unrelieved by the possibility of the “happily ever after” which is reserved for those who are “good.” Because most audiences are familiar with the moral structures of both individual fairy tales and a more generalized fairy-tale-ness, poets can use this extremely high-profile genre to effect very emotionally complex narratives most economically.

Additionally, because an individual fairy tale telling is both familiar and unfamiliar, poets have a great deal of scope to play with narrative conventions at a metatextual level. For example, in Robert Graves’ “The Frog and the Golden Ball,” the effect that Windling describes as the joy of finding “an old, familiar story made fresh and new by an artist’s skill” lies in the audience’s recognition that Graves is implicitly rejecting the most prevalent (and more patriarchally coded) variants of the tale in which the princess stupidly loses her ball, is blackmailed by the frog, and is forced by her father to take the frog to her room. This princess is actively engineering her own story. She wishes get out of an arranged marriage to another prince, “a cousin whose wide kingdom marched with theirs/ Who rode in a jeweled carriage” (Meider Disenchantments 24), and so:

She let her golden ball fall down the well
And begged the cold frog to retrieve it
For which she kissed his ugly, gaping mouth—
Indeed, he could scarcely believe it. (24)
If this were not a traditional tale familiar to both the reader and to the princess, her plan to get out of a wedding by “accidentally” dropping her ball and begging an amphibian for help would be insane. Graves achieves the suggestion of empowerment only because both reader and princess already know what sequence of events will be set in motion when a golden ball is dropped in a well.

Even before the canon of British fairy tales was solidified in the late nineteenth century, fairy tale poets responded to each other to define and contrast discussions about social roles and moral norms. For example, around 1802-1803, the German poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) published “Der Rattenfänger.” This poem is not strictly a tale at all, but more of a boastful lyric, narrated by an all-purpose traveling bard and rat-catcher. Goethe’s piper seduces audiences of all ages and species: rats, weasels, and children all follow his golden sounds through the town—yet the concluding stanza stresses the piper’s preference for a more human, adult demographic:

Sometimes the skillful bard ye view
In form of maiden-catcher, too;
For he no city enters e’er,
Without effecting wonders there.
However coy may be each maid,
Howe’er the women seem afraid,
Yet all will love-sick be ere long
To sound of magic lute and song. 27

Goethe’s moral: art is sensual, and skilled artists are seductive, selfishly irresponsible, and irresistible. (The poem seems to be a boastful advertisement as well as a moral

27 159-60. This is E.A. Bowring’s 1853 translation, one of the earliest English-language versions in common circulation.
warning.) In contrast, the more famous “Pied Piper of Hamelin” (1842) poem by Robert Browning (1812-1889) features a protagonist who is more of a magical businessman than a sensual artist. Consequently, Browning offers a very pragmatic, unsexy moral:

So, Willy, let me and you be wipers
Of scores out with all men—especially pipers!
And, whether they pipe us free, from rats or from mice,
If we’ve promised them aught, let us keep our promise! (18)

Browning’s moral: pay the piper.

At first glance, the poems seem to have little in common. Goethe’s piper is “earthy” in every sense. Browning’s piper is ethereal – he travels across continents in an hour, saves the Caliph of Baghdad from scorpions, and magically relocates Hamelin’s children to Transylvania. And yet, both the Goethe and Browning poems explore the relationship between a community and an outsider, both weigh the cost and value of art, and both consider the implications of being led astray. Both poems also articulate very fundamental human desires: for sex, for money, for power, for acceptance, for descendents. In *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), Bruno Bettelheim (1903-1990) argued that the staying power of fairy tales could be attributed to their ability to articulate the essential psychological concerns of successive generations of children. Bettelheim’s argument has since been severely criticized, however, more recent scholarship by Jack Zipes has recently introduced the concept of “memes,” or cultural artifacts that “indicate

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28 “Der Rattenfänger” was set to music in 1889 by Hugo Wolf who expanded Goethe’s poem with an additional bracketing stanza that makes reference to both the town of “Hamelen” and the bard’s skill at persuading rats to follow his music.

29 Browning wrote the poem for William Macready, the young son of Browning’s friend the English actor, and the final stanza is directly addressed to the child.
something significant about our genetically and culturally determined behavior and our interactions with our environment within a historical process that enables us to adapt to a changing world” (*Relentless Progress* 88). In any context, fairy tales have long been discursive medium through which authors and audiences have had opportunities to work out their own structural conceptions of society and social values.

The foundational argument of this dissertation is that the histories of poetry, fairy tales, and theory are deeply intertwined; in part because it is precisely the fairy tale’s constant renegotiation of power and desire that makes the genre so deeply attractive to both poets and theorists. And as fairy tales have come to powerfully impact theoretical historiographies, theory has become part of the fairy tale tradition. Responding to both gender and psychoanalytic conventions, *The World’s Wife* (1999) by Carol Ann Duffy (b. 1955) comfortably juxtaposes “Little Red Riding Hood” with both “Mrs. Beast” and “Frau Freud.” Similarly, poets like Liz Lochhead (b. 1947) are gleefully deploying new characters like the gender-hybrid “Rapunzelstiltskin” (1981) who are attuned to both fairy tale conventions and to self-help popular psychology texts. Yet other poets, including Jackie Kay or Grace Nichols, draw on the fairy tale traditions of the Caribbean, Nigeria, Scotland, and England to reclaim and recombine elements of pre-colonial narrative traditions that were nearly wiped out during the cultural and physical violence of colonialism; for them, fairy tales become a way of articulating post-colonial identity. For all of these authors, poetic re-vision constitutes a re-theorization of social norms that occurs through the retelling of tales. They are, in effect, responding to theorists as both fairy tale characters and as fellow storytellers who are participating in the collaborative process of seeking out new social norms.
1.4 Defining “Fairy Poetry” and “Fairy Tale Poetry”

*Most poets affirm that if we only kept our own eyes open we should discover that the true fairy-land is really our own world, or a part of it. —Alfred Noyes 1908 (p.xiii)*

Because “fairy tale” is such a complicated term, I would like to set the limits of my language as clearly as I possibly can. The phrase “fairy poetry” was coined in 1786 by the British dramatist and critic Richard Cumberland (1732-1811) to describe Shakespeare’s *Tempest (Observer 140)*, but I argue that the concept of fairy poetry dates back to 1691, when the poet laureate John Dryden (1631-1700) described imaginative poetic verse as “a fairy kind of writing” (*Critical 214*). For both of these writers, and for the many seventeenth-to nineteenth-century poets and scholars who quote Dryden or discuss the importance of fairies in poetry, “fairy poetry” is a light, lissome sub-genre characterized by delicacy, beauty, and imagination. “Fairy poetry” almost always includes descriptions of actual fairies, though, “fairies,” in this context, were loosely defined to encompass a large number of fantastical creatures, including witches, goblins, and brownies. For the eighteenth-century description of “fairy poetry” the important thing was that the fantastical creatures encompassed under the heading “fairies” were primarily recognized as British rather than Greco-Roman, i.e. pixies and sprites rather than chimeras and sphinxes.\(^{30}\) Although the term was invented in the eighteenth century, “fairy poetry” was retrospectively applied to the work of many Elizabethan and early seventeenth-century poets, most frequently Edmund Spenser,

\(^{30}\) There was some overlapping use of naiads and satyrs, however, such characters were generally unnamed and given secondary status in relation to more emphatically British fairies, elves, and sprites like Ariel or Puck.
William Shakespeare, and John Milton. The term remained in common circulation as a sub-genre characterization until the end of the nineteenth century when the aesthetic priorities of beautiful and ephemeral “fairy poetry” were apparently rejected by early Modernists, and when “fairies” were mostly absorbed into the category of “fairy tales” and were effectively recast as “children’s literature” by literary critics.

Tale-tellers have long mixed poetry into their recitations, and in historical terms, poems and ballads which recounted stories that we would now recognize as versions of canonical fairy tales like “Babes in the Woods” and “Little Red Riding Hood” have been in circulation for hundreds of years. However, these poems have very different cultural connotations than contemporary fairy tale poems, and I am going to limit my definition of “fairy tale poetry” into relatively narrow chronological terms for several reasons. 1. The term “fairy tale” was not widely imported from the French until the turn of the eighteenth century, and it was borrowed from a courtly register which associated “fairy tales” with a relatively high-culture, glittery, courtly pattern of narrativity that significantly distanced the early eighteenth-century association of fairy tales from local folklore and ballad traditions. 2. The canon of British “fairy tales” gradually cohered over the course of the nineteenth century, and (in part because fairy tales are associated with the national ritual of the Christmas pantomime) individually and collectively, the

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31 Milton seems to be an unlikely choice, but extracts from Comus and the poem “L’Allegro” were regularly cited as perfect examples of “fairy poetry.” See Chapter 2.2 “Validating Imagination by Redefining the Canon of British Poetry” for further discussion.

32 I say “apparently” because it was extremely difficult for any poet to entirely discard the long literary/historical precedent of “fairy poetry,” and many central and peripheral Modernist poets wrote fairies and fairy tales into their work. However, Modernists would generally avoid the term “fairy poetry” except in the context of children’s literature, and tended to emphasize allusions to Classical myth rather than British folklore. Cf. Chapter 6.3 “Mythmaking, Orientalism, and High Modernism.”
recognized canon of fairy tales gradually assumed an unprecedented and central location in British cultural vocabulary. 3. Before the nineteenth century, fairy tales were not exclusively or even primarily identified as “children’s literature,” but the contemporary connotations of childhood and childishness are now impossible to avoid—particularly in light of late nineteenth-century developments in psychoanalysis which radically altered the connotations of fairy tales, dreams, and imagination in relation to both childhood and adulthood. 4. As nineteenth-century British folklore scholars began to import tales from around the world, fairy tales became an important point of negotiation between British imperial culture and the cultures of the colonies, a connotation which has never quite been shaken, even in the twenty-first century. Consequently, I will suggest that modern “fairy tale poetry” began to appear in the mid-nineteenth century with such poems as “The Pied Piper” (1842) by Robert Browning (1812-1889) and “Goblin Market” (1859) by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894).

For the purposes of this dissertation, my primary focus is on British fairy tale poetry. In my terms, “poetry” is limited to material published in books, pamphlets, or periodicals that self-identify the contents of the publication as “poetry,” and “British poetry” includes all such material written by poets who are or were ever citizens of the British empire, including: poets like Grace Nichols, who was born in British Guyana before it became the Republic of Guyana; poets like T.S. Eliot, who became a naturalized British citizen; and poets like W.H. Auden, who was born and raised in Britain but
became a naturalized citizen of the United States. More specifically, “British fairy tale poetry”:

- descends from British “fairy poetry” and, consequently, carries some nationalist connotations.
- encompasses poems which draw on (by allusion or by reproduction of an entire narrative) a small, readily recognizable canon of “classic” “British” tales. This category includes narrative poems that mimic or parody the spirit and tone of the popular canonical tales. It also includes poems that draw on classic fairy tale phrases such as “deepest darkest woods,” “once upon a time,” or “happily ever after.”
- is sensitive to the association of “fairy tales” with children, especially when it radically dissociates “fairy tales” from childhood while recognizing that move as an act of transgression.
- includes poems that refer to fairies directly or describe individuals in terms of “fairy” or “fay” characteristics.
- is very likely to have colonial, anti-colonial, or postcolonial connotations.

For the purposes of this dissertation, “fairy tale poetry” excludes poems that explicitly and primarily draw on material associated with Celtic Myth or Celtic folktale traditions. The poetry of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh authors was primarily recognized as contributing to the tradition of British “fairy poetry” only when it conformed to the dainty

33 The one exceptional case included here is Ezra Pound, who never formally became a British citizen, but lived in London as an expatriate for many years and became a very active part of British literary culture in the early twentieth century.
characteristics of ethereal Shakespearian fairies. The prose fairy tale traditions are also very distinctive, in large part because Celtic tales were identified as colonial rather than as centrally British. Canonical British fairy tales exist in an imaginative space that is understood to be distinct from (and subordinate to) that of “real” space—children might playact the story of “Cinderella,” but no one expects to see Cinderella running past Big Ben at midnight. However, Celtic tales have always been somewhat external to the standard canon of fairy tale because in Celtic cultural contexts fairy tales and the related concept of the Faerie Otherworld are much more closely intertwined with day-to-day perception and suggest that anyone might hear a banshee wailing on a dark night or be tricked by a pooka in the shape of an ordinary farm animal; in Celtic traditions, “real” space and “imaginative” space much more comfortably coexist. There was a brief period at the turn of the twentieth century, when there was an important overlap between “British” fairy poetry and Irish fairy poetry at the time of the Irish Literary Revival, when Anglo-Irish poets like Yeats wrote about fairies in terms that would have fit neatly into the British tradition of dainty, child-sized fairies (“come away o human child/to the water and the wild/with a fairy hand in hand”), and, at the same time, authored poems that were very distinctively Irish and draw heavily on Irish myth traditions (“The host is riding

34 There are a very few exceptions. For example, the identical first and last stanzas of “The Fairies” by the Irish poet William Allingham have probably never been out of print: “Up the airy mountain/Down the rushy glen/We daren’t go a-hunting/For fear of little men/Wee folk, good folk, trooping all together,/Green Jacket, Red Cap, and White Owl’s Feather” (158, 160), and it is particularly well-known as a classic British “fairy poem.” However, the middle stanzas of the poem refer to uniquely Celtic locations and tale conventions, like “With a bridge of white mist/Columbkill he crosses/On his stately journeys/From Slieveleague to Rosses” (158), and they have been periodically excerpted from Allingham’s poem, which is, even in the twentieth century, often shortened to just the first stanza.

35 Cf. Irish-language poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill (b.1952): “After all, I used to believe that I came out of my mother’s belly and at the same time believed that I was found under a cabbage leaf. There was no conflict between the two” (“An Interview,” n.p.).
from Knocknarea/And over the grave of Clooth-na-Bare;/Caoilte tossing his burning hair./And Naimh calling Away, come away”).

His poems were in some sense, Anglo and Irish, but the formal awkwardness of the Anglo-Irish elements in any given poem highlight the underlying national tensions. However, the fact that Irish poets specifically drew on the language of fairies (both in the Shakespearian and in the traditionally Irish sense) to implicitly challenge and reconstellate the standards of British nationalism in poetry served to powerfully highlight the significance of the fairy poetry as a nationalist tradition in Britain.

Yeats’ blurring of English and Irish traditions made a significant impact on the juvenilia of a number of central Modernist poets, particularly Ezra Pound, but the coming-together of English and Irish fairy poetry coincided with the ongoing political and military struggle for Irish Independence, and the displacement of fairies by fairy tales in British poetics, therefore it had relatively little impact on the Britishness of twentieth century fairy tale poetry. Once the canon of British fairy tales was established, it was

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36 From “The Stolen Child” (18) and “The Hosting of the Sidhe” (Collected 55).

37 Cf. Jacquilyn Weeks, “Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill: (Re)forming Mythic Female Bodies in Twentieth-Century Irish Poetry”: […] while ‘the Hosting of the Sidhe’ ostensibly foregrounds a traditionally Irish mythological image, the two principal figures are depicted as binary on several levels: the male, Anglicised, civilised, contemporary, adjudicative poet writes about his encounter with an Irish, magical, archaic, seductive host led by a fairy woman. […] far from unifying two identities, the poem alienates and then entirely ocludes feminine Irish voices. Yeats’s fairy band is incarnated by the body of Niamh, who calls out to the poet, ‘Away, come away,’ and promises that whoever looks on the unbound hair, gleaming eyes, parted lips, and heaving breasts of the fairy band will lose his mortal (and moral) purpose: ‘We come between him and the deed of his hand, / We come between him and the hope of his heart’ (Yeats, 55). Niamh’s magical and physical allure combine so that her femininity becomes equivalent to her Otherworldly status. Her Irishness is metrically evident in the alliterative four-stress balladic line, but Yeats emphasises Niamh’s alien status by making a textual distinction that would not have been accessible to ancient Irish poets: her call is set apart by the use of italics which visually mimic the rush and sweep of the fairy band but also distance her (foreign) words from the “neutral” Roman font which represents the poet/narrator” (234-5).

38 i.e., the juvenilia of Ezra Pound regularly conflates Yeatsian fairy poetry with the British “fairy poetry” tradition, particularly through Tennyson. However, Pound only very rarely engages with canonical
rarely conflated with the Celtic tradition; relatively few of the twentieth-century poets that I have found engage with both Celtic folklore and canonical “British” fairy tales, and almost none engage with both traditions in the same poem. For example, out of the more than 450 poems in her *Collected Works*, Stevie Smith (1902-1971) has only two poems specifically related to Celtic tales, but dozens and dozens with some allusion to the canonical “British” tale tradition. Even though she refers to both traditions, it is clear that they are separate and that they have very different cultural connotations. Having said that, I continue to use the term “British” rather than “English” to describe this thread of fairy tale poetry because the connotations of empire are crucial, and because contemporary British poets who are not from England regularly engage with canonical British fairy tales while recognizing the canon’s colonial connotations.

1.5 Project Goals

My dissertation is designed to accomplish two things. First, by tracing one sub-genre across the usual chronological boundaries and through several poetic schools, I offer an alternative pattern for historicizing British poetics. Moreover, by demonstrating the importance of reading developments in twentieth century poetry in light of nineteenth-century and even earlier developments in British poetics, I hope that this kind of project will be able to spark useful discussions about the current highly chronologically divided structure of poetics as a discipline. I am not suggesting that all of British poetics revolves around fairies or fairy tales, but I believe that there is a

British “fairy tales” as such. For example, the juvenilia of Ezra Pound regularly conflates Yeatsian fairy poetry with the British “fairy poetry” tradition, particularly through Tennyson. However, Pound only very rarely engages with canonical British “fairy tales” as such.
compelling case to be made for the central importance of fairy tales to both formal and thematic developments in British poetics, and because fairy tales are present in poetry across the century, shifts in the poetic use of fairy tales can act as a useful barometer for broader shifts in poetic theme and style. Mapping these shifts may at times validate the currently accepted constellation of poetic schools and developments, and it may at times suggest new constellations of poetic alliances.

Second, by historicizing the mutually-informing developments of fairy tales, poetry, children’s literature, literary criticism, and literary theory I hope to smooth the way for future scholarship that transcends these genre lines. At present, very few children’s literature or fairy tale scholars extensively engage with poetry, especially complex experimental poetry. Similarly, very few poetry scholars engage with children’s literature or fairy tale elements in poetry in the context of cutting-edge developments within children’s literature and fairy tale studies beyond the work of three or four of the most visible scholars – Jack Zipes, Marina Warner, Alison Lurie, Maria Tatar, etc. By encouraging a more extensive engagement across genre lines, I also hope to raise the profile of both children’s literature and fairy tales in mainstream “adult” literary studies. It is easy to forget (but worth remembering) that children’s literature exists and develops in the same historical moments and conceptual spaces as every other kind of literature. And if “the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world,” then surely the hand that pens the picture book helps to shape the next generation of avid readers and writers.
CHAPTER 2:
THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY INVENTION OF “FAIRY POETRY”

As the introductory chapter contextualizes my argument linguistically, the second offers a historical context. In spite of the fact that dozens of leading eighteenth-century poets include fairy images and themes in their work, and in spite of the fact that debates about fairies appear regularly in eighteenth-century philosophical and literary circles, today, “fairy poetry” as an early literary sub-genre is not widely studied or even acknowledged. However, the structure of twentieth-century scholarship have occluded some patterns of writing in the eighteenth. Culturally, it has become very difficult to talk about fairies without the association of “fairy tales,” and because most literary scholars think of fairy tales as a prose genre marketed primarily to children, it can be counterintuitive to think about fairies as formative to long movements in poetry for adults. At the same time, children’s literature scholars, who might otherwise have been interested in fairy material, rarely look to canonical adult poetry and are rarely invested in pre-nineteenth century poetic movements. Folklore scholars tend to have more anthropological approaches and to prioritize the oral tradition; they are also unlikely to engage with canonical poetry except in glancing references that gesture at how the oral tradition has been translated into the literary tradition. Moreover, the eighteenth century

1 For a more detailed discussion of methodological divergences, see chapter 1.2 “Defining Fairy Tales in Departmental Terms.”
is defined by the Enlightenment and widely understood as the age of Reason, hardly an environment that would seem friendly to a genre like “fairy poetry.” And yet, the sub-genre categorization of “fairy poetry” was an eighteenth-century invention; and, partly because intellectual movements are defined by opposition, it is clear that “fairy poetry” played a central role in the powerful, ongoing debates about the limits and goals of pure imagination and mechanistic reason.

The first goal of this chapter is purely archival—I have pieced together more than 120 primary texts by poets, poetry critics, historians, and publishers that identify the formation and definition of “fairy poetry.” However, while making every attempt to demonstrate the widespread critical and poetic interest in fairy themes, I have made little attempt to contextualize my sources in twentieth-century scholarship relating to sixteenth-eighteenth century poetics because I am making an archival argument about pieces of text that have largely fallen between standard departmental specialties. This material will make evident four basic trends that I hope will open the door for further scholarship 1. In the eighteenth century, poets and poetry critics began to describe a sub-genre called “a fairy kind of writing” and, later, “fairy poetry,” which they defined as uniquely British and dated back to the Elizabethan era. 2. Enlightenment poets were invested in this revisionist historical project because—by appropriating canonical poets like Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), William Shakespeare (c.1564-1616), Ben Jonson (1572-1637), John Milton (1608-1674), and John Dryden (1631-1700) as authors of “fairy poetry”—eighteenth-century poets could dignify their own interest in imaginative fairy poetry (construed as the epitome of high art) while at the same time distancing themselves from any superstitious belief in fairies (a defining feature of low culture). 3.
Throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century, both proponents and antagonists of Enlightenment principles use fairies as a key symbol of something purely unreasonable in the context of much larger debates about the value of Reason and Imagination. 4. The broad interest in fairy poetics helped facilitate British interest in writing, translating, and publishing fairy tales.

From those four arguments I draw three conclusions. 1. Although fairies are regularly studied in the work of individual poets and poems from the sixteenth century through the nineteenth century—for example, the use of fairies in “The Rape of the Lock” (1712) by Alexander Pope (1688-1744)—I will argue both that fairies are thematically prominent across eighteenth century poetry and that they strongly inform the eighteenth-century interpretation of British poetic history. 2. Because fairies consistently functioned as a symbolic point of contention in defining “nature” and “imagination” from the earliest days of the Enlightenment, eighteenth-century “fairy poetry” functioned as a perfect segue for Romanticism, leading towards poems like Queen Mab (1813) by Percy Shelley (1792-1822), which had a direct and continuous lineage in eighteenth and seventeenth-century poems that all responded to Shakespeare’s Queen Mab. 3. The poetic legacy of the eighteenth-century invention of “fairy poetry” remains difficult to trace because it foregrounds an apparently paradoxical aesthetic. In part, fairies continue to be compelling in British poetics because they always represent both the greatest of high culture, which is claimed for British nationalism and used as evidence of British cultural 2

2 Pope’s poem was retrospectively coded as a “fairy tale” in such contexts as Matthew Concanen’s “Of Modern Poetry” published in The Speculatist (1725): “Mr. Pope has struck out a pretty Discovery in the Rosy-crucian Scheme which he uses in the Rape of the Lock, but it’s surprizing how the same Writer could stumble upon the School-boy Tale of Pan and Lodona in Win[d]sor Forest. Besides in light Poems, the Fairy Tales are a more amusing and palatable Superstition, than those of the Heathen Gods, better suited for our belief, and affording more Scope for Invention” (40).
superiority. But at the same time, fairies also represent the depths of low culture, and remain compelling because they were regularly used to disparage cultural groups who are portrayed as superstitiously believing in fairies. This division lingered long after the lineage of fairy poetry was gradually occluded by the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for fairy tales and continues to impact fairy tale poetry in the twenty-first century.

2.1 Fairies, Poetry, and Imagination in the Enlightenment

To begin to parse out how the definition of “imagination” came to be increasingly defined in terms of poetry and fairies, I would like to highlight a few key figures as representative of significant shifts in thought and vocabulary. The first major proto-Enlightenment philosopher to discuss fairies and poetry together was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1697). In his extensive commentary on the epic poem *Gondibert* (1651) by William D’Avenant (1606-1688), Hobbes praises the poem for refusing to include fantastical elements and focusing instead on human drama:

> For as the truth is the bound of Historicall, so the Resemblance of truth is the utmost limit of Poeticall Liberty. In old time amongst the Heathens, such strange Fictions and Metamorphoses, were not so remote from the Articles of their Faith, as they are now from ours, and therefore were not so unpleasant. Beyond the actuall works of Nature a Poet may now go; but beyond the conceived possibility of Nature, never. (D’Avenant and Hobbes, 135-7)

In a proto-Enlightenment context, to transgress the boundaries of the natural world would be to endorse archaic superstition, marking the poet a retrograde, barbaric “Heathen.” Hobbes’ strong emphasis on this point is echoed in both the poetic preface to *Gondibert* written by Edmund Waller (1606-1687) which identifies the poem as being written “In such a style as Courts may boast of now./Which no bold tales of Gods or Monsters
swell/But humane passions, such as with us dwell” (iii), and a second, even more
emphatic poetic preface by Abraham Cowley (1618-1667):

Methinks Heroick Poesie, till now
Like some fantastick Fairy land did show;
Gods, Devils, Nymphs, Witches, & Giants race,
And all but man, in mans best work had place. [But,]
Thou [D’a venant] like some worthy Knight, with sacred Arms
Dost drive the Monsters thence, and end the Charms. (iv)

D’Avenant and his supporters sought to associate “Gods and Monsters” with a literary
past and a peasant superstition which has since been outgrown by such “style as Courts
may boast of now”. But the redundant vehemence of their opposition to “fantastick Fairy
land” in late seventeenth-century poetry suggests that Hobbsian poetic principles were by
no means universally accepted.

In fact, the immensely popular poet laureate John Dryden (1631-1700) responded
directly to Hobbes in 1672 by defending the fantastical elements of heroic poetry in no
uncertain terms, launching a series of back-and-forth definitions of “imagination” that
would divide poets and philosophers over the course of the nineteenth century. Dryden
wrote:

[...] and if any man object the improbabilities of a spirit appearing, or of a Palace
rais'd by Magick, I boldly answer him, that an Heroick Poet is not ty'd to a bare
representation of what is true, or exceeding probable: but that he may let himself
loose to visionary objects, and to the representation of such things, as depending
not on sence, and therefore not to be comprehended by knowledge, may give him
a freer scope for imagination. [...] Some men think they have rais'd a great
argument against the use of Spectres and Magique in Heroique Poetry, by saying,
They are unnatural: but, whether they or I believe there are such things, is not
material, 'tis enough that, for ought we know, they may be in Nature: and what
ever is or may be, is not properly, unnatural. (“Of Heroique” 13-14)
Dryden’s attack is two-pronged. First, he defines “imagination” as a privileged space that can and should exceed lived, sensory experience and in which a poet has the responsibility to “let himself loose to visionary objects […] not to be comprehended by knowledge” because the poet’s task is intrinsically metaphysical and responds to the “natural” human capacity for belief in the unseen, for “in all ages and Religions, the greatest part of mankind have believ’d the power of Magick” (13). In Dryden’s terms, whatever can be imagined by human minds cannot be “properly unnatural.” Second, Dryden attacks Hobbes in Enlightenment terms by arguing that all things in Nature have yet to be comprehended, so that to exclude fairies as unquestionably “unreal” based on limited empirical knowledge is illogical. In sum, for Dryden, the poet has unique visionary fancy, and philosophers are not qualified to set limits on the bounds of the poet’s “natural” gift for imaging (imagining) things beyond the perception of other men. This argument already has proto-Romantic qualities to it, and helps clarify the fact that, in the context of fairy poetry, the transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism was more of a logical extension than a breaking-away.  

For Dryden’s more immediate literary descendants, the lasting effects of his disagreement with Hobbes are Dryden’s confirmation of the unique link between poetic imagination and the fantastical and his argument that the decision to follow “truth” too exactly limits a poet to “walk soberly a foot, when he might fly” (“Of Heroique” 13). In his 1677 “Apology for Heroique Poetry and Poetique Licence” Dryden further supports this point by arguing that:

3 Dryden returned to these themes in his “Apology for Heroique Poety; and Poetique Licence” (1677), further arguing that visionary imagination is essential to aesthetic principles.
Imaging is, in itself, the very heighth and life of Poetry. [...] Poets may be allow'd [...] liberty, for describing things which really exist not, if they are founded on popular belief: of this nature are Fairies, Pigmies, and the extraordinary effects of Magick: for 'tis still an imitation, though of other mens fancies: and thus are Shakespeare's Tempest, his Midsummer nights Dream, and Ben. Johnson's Masque of Witches to be defended. (“Apology” 15-6)

This move is particularly clever because Dryden claims that imagination is a real, natural human function and that, therefore, descriptions of imaginative things meet Hobbes’ “Resemblance of Truth” criterion. Moreover, by appealing to the work of unquestionably canonical British poets, Dryden forces advocates of pure Reason to either concede the value of “fancies” or to disown Shakespeare and Jonson, and with them the best of British literary achievement. 4 He also begins to marshal the collective force of British poetry into a more unified aesthetic position to better resist the attack of Enlightenment philosophy. Dryden would take the point even further in 1691 and suggest that “true taste of poetry” is defined by interest in “that fairy kind of writing which depends only upon the force of imagination” (Critical 214), and his line, “that fairy kind of writing” came to be quoted endlessly in the eighteenth century. Crucially, the shift from noun to adjective marks Dryden’s use of “fairy” to signify an aesthetic style rather than a particular imaginative character; this is the moment when “fairy poetry” became a nascent sub-genre. 5,6

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4 Incidentally, the rationalists who deride fairy poetry are mysteriously silent on the topic of Shakespeare; when they condemn any British poet by name for his investment in fairy writing, it is almost invariably an attack on Edmund Spenser. Although Spenser wrote the longest and most famous fairy-related poem, it has relatively few passages that describe fairy land or its denizens with the kind of gossamer detail that eighteenth-century fairy poets prized so much in Shakespeare’s work.

5 Note: the phrase was often slightly misquoted as “a fairy way of writing.”

6 Somewhat anachronistically, but for grammatical convenience and clarity, I am going to use the phrase “fairy poetry” over “a fairy kind of writing” from this point, whenever I’m discussing a text that is poetic and adheres to Dryden’s values.
Yet in spite of Dryden’s strong advocacy, the lovers of fairies and imagination did not have it all their own way. Building on Hobbes’ early critique of fairies in poetry, the foundational Enlightenment philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) became the symbolic figurehead of anti-fairy/anti-fancy rhetoric, not by directly attacking fairies in poetry, but implicitly through his more general definitions of “imagination,” “fancy,” and “reason.” For Locke, the word “imagination” simply describes the mind’s capacity to create an image. In his terms, a weak mental image has no correspondence in nature, but a strong image can be immediately related to experience; e.g. “fairy” would be a very weak image, but “elm tree” would be a very strong image. In work like An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), Locke warned his readers against filling their minds with weak images because weak images have the potential to dangerously misrepresent sensory experience. Rather, according to Locke, people should wholly invest in imaging things that are empirically verifiable because otherwise:

[If] any one will be so skeptical as to distrust his Sense, and to affirm, that all we see and hear, feel and taste, think and do, during our whole Being, is but the Series and deluding Appearances of a long Dream, whereof there is no Reality […] if our Dreamer pleases to try whether the glowing Heat of a Glass Furnace, be barely a wandering Imagination in a drowsy Man’s Fancy, by putting his Hand into it, he may, perhaps, be wakened into a Certainty greater than he could wish, that it is something more than bare Imagination. (254-55)

In this very pragmatic Lockean world, to foster dreams and fancies or to imagine the world in unnatural ways is to invite severe injury, dismemberment, and death. In such a world, to believe in fairies or to spend time pondering them is not only foolish but

7 Cf. Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693): 133, 152-3. Locke only directly engages with fairies and English-language poetry long enough to suggest that both constitute intellectually dangerous material that should be rigorously excluded from educational curricula.
extremely dangerous because an excess of dreaming nurtures credulity in every context.

Locke does not acknowledge the aesthetic properties of “wandering Imagination” nor value any kind of aesthetics over rational comprehension.

In stripping away the aesthetic function of “imagination,” Locke came to represent the antithesis of Dryden. For him, mental imaging is only useful or valuable insofar as it usefully corresponds to things that physically exist in the material world:

[…] having the Ideas of Spirits, does not make us know that any such Things do exist without us, or that there are any finite Spirits, or any other spiritual Beings, but the eternal GOD. […] our Senses not being able to discover them, we want the means of knowing their particular Existences. For we can no more know that there are finite Spirits really existing, by the Idea we have of such Beings in our Minds, than by the Ideas any one has of Fairies, or Centaurs, he can come to know, that Things answering those Ideas, do really exist. 8

Locke treats fairies under the rubric of science and concludes that they are unverifiable, unscientific, unempirical, and generally symbolic of the kind unenlightened superstition that that should be universally scorned. For other Enlightenment scholars tracking the debate between Lockean rationality and Dryden’s aesthetics, there did not seem to be any obvious reconciliation, but to reject one or the other would be to risk situating oneself as either superstitious or uncultured. Consequently, the major reference works emerging in the eighteenth century offered awkward and contradictory definitions of “fairy.” For example, the New and Complete Dictionary of Arts and Sciences: Comprehending all the Branches of Useful Knowledge (1754) suggests that although imaginative poetry in the

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8 Essay 323. Similarly: “When the Cartesians tell us, that Light is a great number of little Globules, striking briskly on the bottom of the Eye, they speak a little more intelligibly than the Schools: but yet these Words never so well understood, would make the Idea, the Word Light stands for, no more known to a Man that understands it not before, than if one should tell him, that Light was nothing but a Company of little Tennis-balls, which Fairies all Day long strook with Rackets against some Men's Foreheads, whilst they passed by others” (Essay 199).
tradition of Spenser’s *Fairy Queen* “entertains the reader’s imagination” and “amuses [the reader’s] imagination with the strangeness and novelty of the persons who are represented in it,” yet “the judicious object to it, as not having probability enough to affect the imagination.” In an attempt to bridge both sides, the dictionary’s authors separate “the reader” from “the judicious” but the definition more effectively represents conflict than coherence. The scope and widespread influence of this conflict is evident by the number and variety of reference works—including Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), and later the *Encyclopaedia Perthensis* (1816), *Patagonia: A New (Cabinet) Cyclopaedia* (1819), and the *London Encyclopedia* (1829)—that similarly reflected both Locke and Dryden’s influence in their definition of “fairy” right through the end of the Romantic period.

However, in spite of Locke’s longstanding influence in defining “fairy,” by the mid-eighteenth century, his generic definition of “imagination” as “mental imaging” was almost entirely displaced by the sense of “imaging things which do not exist in the material world,” and fairy rapidly became the quintessential example of such fantastical imagining. So much so that—although Dryden and Locke both made some distinction between religious and fairy texts—mid-century religious writers like the Jacobite non-juror bishop Jeremy Collier (1650-1726) took strong exception to the seeming interchangeability of the terms “fairy” and “imagination.” In *A Short View of the*

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9 Rationalist, Enlightenment uses of the term “fairy” also appear in the *NCDAS* definitions of “Existence” (borrowing directly from Locke, though without attribution): “We have ground from revelation, and several other reasons, to believe with assurance that there are such creatures [as spiritual beings]; but our senses not being able to discover them, we want the means of knowing their particular existence; for we can no more know that there are finite spirits really existing by the idea we have of such beings, than by the ideas any one has of fairies or centaurs, he can come to know that things answering to those ideas do really exist.” (1167)
Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage: Together with The sense of Antiquity

upon this Argument (1698), Collier vehemently protests that:

This Mr. Dryden very Religiously calls a Fairy way of Writing, which depends only on the Force of Imagination. What then, is the Fall of Angels a Romance? Has it no basis in Truth, nothing to support it but strength of Fancy, and Poetick Invention? After He had mention’d Hell, Devils, &c. and given us a sort of Bible-description of these formidable Things; I say after he had formed his Poem in this manner, I am surprized to hear him call it a Fairy kind of Writing. Is the History of Tophet no better prov’d than that of Styx? […] Is any Man so vain as to pretend to know the Extent of Nature, and the Stretch of Possibility, and the Force of the Powers Invisible? […] there may be such a Place as Hell; And if so, a Discourse about Devils, will be no Fairy Way of Writing. For a Fairy Way of Writing, is nothing but a History of Fiction; A Study of Imaginary Beings; such as never had any existence in Time or Nature” (qtd. in Kinsley 237-8).

By categorically encompassing all religious material as True and Natural, and all fanciful material as Imaginary Fiction, Collier actually intensifies Dryden’s usage of the word “imagination” into something like the twenty-first century meaning of the term, as “An inner image or idea of an object or objects no actually present to the senses; often with the implication that the idea does not correspond to the reality of things” (OED).

Ironically, although he was opposed to both fairies and fiction, Collier’s protest both refined and drew attention to the debates about fairies and imagination in eighteenth-century literary discussion. From this point, the debate became more about whether imaging unreal this could be beneficial or detrimental, not about whether they are in fact real in a material, empirical sense.

The more that Enlightenment philosophers began to tangle with fairy poetry, the more complex and self-contradictory the arguments became; several otherwise staunch defenders of Enlightenment philosophy were caught between intellectual rejection of imaginative fairies and aesthetic attraction to fairy poetry. In his essay series “The
Pleasures of the Imagination” (1712), the influential essayist Joseph Addison (1672-1719) begins by severely limiting his endorsement of imagination, and advocating for the beauty of nature over art, but his seventh essay is almost entirely devoted to fairy poetry:

There is a kind of writing wherein the poet quite loses sight of nature, and entertains his reader’s imagination with the characters and actions of such persons as have many of them no existence, but what he bestows on them. Such are fairies, witches, magicians, demons, and departed spirits. This Mr. Dryden calls “the fairy way of writing,” which […] depends on the poet’s fancy, because he has no pattern to follow in it, and must work altogether out of his own imagination. (1 July, 1)

Building on the distance between “fancy” and “nature,” like Locke, Addison associates this poetry with credulity and superstition, but like Dryden, Addison connects this work with great British poetry, particularly Shakespeare’s “noble Extravagance of Fancy” (1 July, 2). Rather than attempting to reconcile the two positions, Addison transforms the apparent binary into a spectrum. For him, too much imagination can lead to credulity, but too little imagination is also a fault: “Men of cold fancies and philosophical dispositions object to this kind of poetry, that it has not probability enough to affect the imagination. But to this it may be answered, that […] we do not care for seeing through the falsehood, and willingly give ourselves up to so agreeable an imposture” (1 July, 1).

Rather than asking his readers to reject one or the other, Addison suggests that people need sufficient

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10 Cf. In his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1727, 1733), Voltaire lists all the trite historical superstitions associated with fairies: “A hundred years ago […] there was hardly a castle which a fairy did not visit on certain marked days, like the fairy Melusina at the castle of Lusignan […] all these things were inexhaustible subjects of conversation which kept minds in exercise” (284), but he concludes with an unexpectedly sympathetic line: “In the present day we insipidly play at cards, and we have lost by being undeceived” (284). Cf. also Voltaire on epic European poetry (1727), in which he complains about the fairy mechanisms in the poetry of Torquato Tasso: “Ten Christian Princes turn’d into Fish in the Ponds of Armida, and a Parrot singing amorous Songs of his own making, are very strange Things in the eyes of a serious Reader” but in the same passage […] Still we should easily forgive such poetical Extravagancies for the sake of the Beauties which are mingled with them” (*Essay* 85).
capacity for imagining things that “do not directly treat of the visible Parts of Nature” (3 July, 1) to take pleasure in art and culture, but not so much as to be easily deceived.

Addison’s compromise seems very moderate, but it gestures at two very crucial scholarly developments: First, he challenges Locke’s investment in only imaging the physical world by arguing that the capacity to imagine things beyond the physical world is what allows people to negotiate abstract social concepts like morality, speculation, or criticism: “Truth in the Understanding […] reflected by the Imagination” (3 July, 1).11 Second, Addison launches a proto-psychological argument that the capacity to stimulate imagination allows a writer to “so exquisitely ravish or torture the Soul through this single Faculty, as might suffice to make up the whole Heaven or Hell of any finite Being” (3 July, 1-2).12 Even if fairy poetry does not reflect the natural world with one-to-one correspondence, it does both describe and impact emotional experience: “The pleasures of the imagination, […] are not so refined as those of understanding […] yet it must be confessed that those of the imagination are as great and transporting as the other” (June 21, 1). In offering some reconciliation of Dryden and Locke, Addison also raised the stakes by illuminating the psychological importance of imaginative writing, which is deeply compelling at a non-rational level.

In short, what began as a debate about the relationship of fairies to nature in poetry rapidly became a debate about the fundamental purpose and value of aesthetics

11 This argument has actually been borne out in recent anthropological studies on the role of fiction in human evolution. Cf. Brian Boyd in *Origin of Stories* (2009).

12 Unlike Collier, Addison does not find the image of “Hell” compelling because “there may be such a Place as Hell” (Collier 238); he uses the term “Hell” to describe a subjective, individually constructed mental state in the earthly realm. This argument would be greatly expanded in the work of William Blake (1757-1827) in the early Romantic period.
that merely took fairy poetry as a central test case. Twenty-five years after Addison’s death, his language was very much a key point of discussion, and the poet Mark Akenside (1721-1770) published his own *Pleasures of Imagination: A Poem in Three Books* (1744), in which Akenside combines Addison’s argument about the enormous impact of imagination with the increasingly popular use of the word “imagination” to describe only those aesthetically pleasing works which describe actions and personages beyond the natural world. Noting the still-lively conflict between poetry (via Dryden) and philosophy (via Locke), Akenside poses a pointed question: if imagination is so compelling that it can “ravish or torture the Soul” and philosophy polarizes itself against aesthetically rich, imaginative writing—who will bother to read philosophy? 13

For philosophy itself, to use the words of a noble philosopher, being thus sever’d from the sprightly arts and sciences, must consequently grow dronish, insipid, pedantic, useless, and directly opposite to the real knowledge and practice of the world. Insomuch, that a gentleman, says another excellent writer, cannot easily bring himself to like so austere and ungainly a form: so greatly is it changed from what was once the delight of the finest gentlemen of antiquity, and their recreation after the hurry of public affairs! From this condition it cannot be recovered but by uniting it once more with the works of imagination; and we have had the pleasure of observing a very great progress made toward their union in England within these last few years. It is hardly possible to conceive them at a greater distance from each other, than at the revolution, when Locke stood at the head of one party, and Dryden of the other. But the general spirit of liberty, which has ever since been growing, naturally invited our men of wit and genius to improve that influence which the arts of persuasion give them with the people by applying them to subjects of importance to society. Thus poetry and eloquence

13 Akenside constructs an abridged poetic history describing the rise of Italian poetry (abounding “in a wild and fantastic vein of fable, partly allegorical and partly founded on traditionary legends of the Saracen wars”) and its suppression by the Catholic church which, in Akenside’s opinion “established that abuse of the fine arts which has since been propagated over all Europe” (66). He then translates this to Enlightenment England by slyly equating Catholic censorship with the Enlightenment philosophers’ condemnation of too-imaginative poetry—a move which Locke and Hobbes would not have appreciated, particularly since they repeatedly construe Italian Catholics as barbarously retrograde and superstitious.
became considerable; and philosophy is now of course obliged to borrow of their embellishments, in order even to gain audience with the public.\textsuperscript{14}

Akenside takes for granted that there are multiple levels at which any piece of writing appeals, and reverses the hierarchy that Locke and Addison would have advocated. For Akenside, if a piece of writing is not aesthetically pleasurable, then it will not gain an audience long enough to be compelling to reason. He is one of the first to suggest that pure reason is not inherently pleasurable, and that aesthetics are the gateway to the mind, and hence to the rational faculties. Akenside made his point very cutting by quoting men who would have been recognized as key Enlightenment philosophers, Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) and Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3\textsuperscript{rd} Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713).\textsuperscript{15} Akenside is also one of the first to gloss over any suggestion that imagination and superstition are linked by making the proto-Romantic argument that imaginative writing stimulates the mind to greater sensitivity, and that heightened sensibilities are a sign of sophistication, not credulity.

2.2 Validating Imagination by Redefining the Canon of British Poetry

The Lockean argument against frivolous imaging of irrational, unreal things carried a great deal of weight during the Enlightenment, and, following Dryden’s lead, poets were careful to both make specific arguments about the aesthetic value of fairies

\textsuperscript{14} 66. Akenside is citing \textit{Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, Etc.} (1711) by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) and “An inquiry into the original of our ideas of Beauty and Virtue” (1726) by Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746).

\textsuperscript{15} The dig at Lockean principles would have been very specific because it was well known that Shaftesbury’s childhood education was personally supervised by John Locke.
and to anchor the aesthetics of fairy poetry in canonical British poetry—so much so, that several eighteenth-century poets and poetry critics invented the first histories of British poetry in terms that support a lineage of imaginative fairy poetics: it was a kind of self-fulfilling historicization that defined sixteenth-century canonical work in terms of fairy-usage and, simultaneously, validated eighteenth-century fairies because they could be found in sixteenth-century canonical work. These poems also, in emphasizing the highlights of great British poetry, make implicit arguments about the definition of “Britishness” and poetry’s role in supporting national identity. Of course, fairy poetry was not universal, but it was clearly of central importance, and, at some point in their careers, the majority of canonical eighteenth-century writers either wrote fairy poetry or wrote about fairy poetry in historical terms.

For canonical sixteenth-century poetry to fully validate the eighteenth-century investment in fairies, literary critics also had to bolster the canonicity of Elizabethan fairy poetry and to more carefully define the sub-genre’s aesthetic principles in terms that would be relevant to Enlightenment debates about imagination and reason. Among the most prominent poet-critics of the eighteenth century to invest in fairy poetry was the soon-to-be poet laureate Thomas Warton (1728-1790), who from his earliest critical publication in 1754 pays homage to the imaginative forces of Spenser’s *Faerie Queen*:

> For however monstrous and unnatural these compositions may appear to this age of reason and refinement, they merit more attention than the world is willing to bestow. [...] Above all, such are their Terrible Graces of magic and enchantment, so magnificently marvellous are their fictions and fablings, that they contribute, in a wonderful degree, to rouse and invigorate all the powers of imagination: to store the fancy with those sublime and alarming images, which true poetry best delights to display. (*Observations* 268)
While fully acknowledging his Enlightenment frame of reference, Warton goes well beyond Locke or Hobbes by suggesting that to “invigorate all the powers of imagination” and to stimulate the fancy is an unambiguously positive goal and, moreover, one that characterizes “true poetry.” Warton continued to built on this early investment in fantastical “fictions and fablings” as he wrote the first major *History of English Poetry* (1774-81), in which Warton describes “The age of queen Elizabeth” as “the golden age of English poetry,” which “may not improperly be styled the most poetical age of these annals” (III. 490), and whose “poetical” nature is evinced by “the predominancy of fable, of fiction, and fancy” (490). There were, of course, many themes and styles in Elizabethan poetry, so Warton’s specific interest in defining Elizabethan poetry through its fanciful aspects is probably more representative of the importance of fairies in the eighteenth century than in the sixteenth.

To situate fairy poetry as a broad poetic movement dating to “the golden age of English poetry,” Warton and his contemporaries had to not only appropriate Spenser but also to retrospectively identify many significant poets as having Dryden’s “fairy way of writing.” The general eighteenth-century claim was not that Elizabethan and other early seventeenth-century poets deliberately sought to create a canon of fairy poetry, but that the greatest and most imaginative of those poets wrote about a particular kind of lovely, delicate, sometimes wickedly playful gathering of sprites, the characters John Milton (1608-1674) called “pert Fairies and the dapper Elves” (*Comus* 6), and Shakespeare defined in his “Queen Mab” speech from *Romeo and Juliet* (c.1591-1595)

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O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you.
She is the fairies’ midwife; and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
On the fore-finger of an alderman,
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Drawn with a team of little atomies
Athwart men’s noses as they lie asleep: (I.iv.53-58)

Similar extracts were taken from longer plays and poems like *Endymion* (1591) by John Lyly (c.1553-1606), in which a ring of dancing fairies offer coy warning: “Saucy mortals must not view/What the queen of stars is doing,/Nor pry into our fairy wooing” (qtd. in Manly 107); and also from *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621) by Ben Jonson (1572-1637):

    The faery beam upon you,
    The stars to glister on you;
        A moon of light,
        In the noon of night,
    Till the fire-drake hath o’er-gone you!
    The wheel of fortune guide you,
    The boy with the bow beside you;
        Run aye in the way,
        Till the bird of day,
    And the luckier lot betide you!   (738)16

The pattern of quotation is both compelling and highly suspect; compelling because there are many fairy poems in the work of major Elizabethan and early-seventeenth-century poets, but also suspect because these “fairy poems” were retrospectively extracted out of context. Accurate representation of the seventeenth-century poets’ oeuvres or aesthetic values was not necessarily a priority in the eighteenth century. For example, the Milton passage given above was taken from a speech made by Comus, the eponymous villain of

16 Cf. also Jonson’s *Oberon, the Fairy Prince: A Masque of Prince Henry’s* (1611). It was less quoted than the passage from *Gypsies*, but more detailed in its preoccupation with fairies. It also seems to be a loose parody of the blessing of Aaron in Numbers 6:24-26: “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance to you and give you peace.” (NASV) There are dozens and dozens of sixteenth and seventeenth-century examples of “fairy poetry;” these few samples are fairly representative, but by no means comprehensive.
Milton’s 1634 masque. However, at the very least, it seems fair to say that fairies constituted an important thematic thread in British poetics that was significantly present in sixteenth and seventeenth-century poetry, though its role was certainly somewhat exaggerated by eighteenth-century historians who were in process of defending imagination from Locke’s call to pure Reason.

The canonicity of this early “fairy poetry” was itself given poetic credentials through grounding in Classical Greco-Roman poetry, a move which anchored the fantastical elements in artistic Classical imagination rather than in local British superstition. For example, in Dryden’s terms:

For my part, I am of opinion, that neither Homer, Virgil, Statius, Ariosto, Tasso, nor our English Spencer could have form'd their Poems half so beautiful, without those Gods and Spirits, and those Enthusiastick parts of Poetry, which compose the most noble parts of all their writings. and I will ask any man who loves Heroick Poetry, (for I will not dispute their tastes who do not) if the Ghost of Polydorus in Virgil, the Enchanted wood in Tasso, and the Bower of bliss, in Spencer (which he borrows from that admirable Italian) could have been omitted without taking from their works some of the greatest beauties in them (“Heroique” 1672, 13).

Here, Dryden’s aesthetic claim locates the fantastical at the heart of canonical art on a global scale—where, again, even hardened Enlightenment advocates of rationality would be slow to repudiate all of Classical art. Dryden’s move allowed prominent mid-eighteenth-century critics like Elizabeth Montagu (1720-1800) to both draw on the connection between Classical and Elizabethan poetry and to make a more refined claim

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17 And yet, at times Milton did write happy verse about fairies and the sharing of fairy stories, as in “L’Allegro” (1645): [...] Then to spicy nut-brown ale./With stories told of many a fear,/How fairy Mab the junkets eat./She was pincht and pull’d, she said./And he by fryar’s lathorn led./Tells how the drudging goblin swet/To earn his cream-bowl duly set [...] (49) Taking all of Milton into consideration, the extrication of his fairy verse from Comus may not be as unrepresentative as it seems.
about the unique contribution of English-language writing to global poetry, as in her nearly three-hundred page *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear Compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets* (c.1769):

Shakespear saw how useful the popular Superstitions had been to the ancient Poets: he felt that they were necessary to Poetry itself. […] Ghosts, Fairies, Goblins, Elves, were as propitious, were as assistant to Shakespear, and gave as much of the Sublime, and of the Marvelous, to his fictions, as Nymphs, Satyrs, Fawns, and even the triple Geryon [Gorgon], to the works of ancient bards. […] he adorns the Beldame, Tradition, with flowers gathered on classic ground, but still wisely suffering those simples of her native soil, to which the established superstition of her country has attributed a magic spell, to be predominant. Can anything be more poetical than Prospero’s address to his attendant spirits before he dismisses them? […]

Montagu appeals to the technical mastery of the Classics to validate the excellence of Shakespeare’s poetic style, and the fairies to validate the excellence Shakespeare’s uniquely British voice.

Notably, Montagu does not make any effort to find a history of fairy poetry in pre-Elizabethan ballads or the oral tradition, a critical move that was reflected in eighteenth-century poetry. For example, work like Mark Akenside’s *Pleasures* both

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18 Montagu’s personal correspondence also affirmed her fairy-mindedness. For example, in a private letter to the Dutchess of Portland, Monagu wrote: “I am forced to dine by myself, not being yet able to bear the smell of what common mortals call a dinner; as yet I live with the fairies” (156-7). The fairy connotations are playful and don’t bear any taint of retrograde superstition.

19 135, 137, 141 (Quotes taken from the third edition, 1772). Note: when the editor excerpted Montagu’s essay down for journal publication in 1781, all of these fairy arguments were condensed and foregrounded (Cf. p.24 of the 1781 edition).

20 The ballad traditions of fairy poetry largely came into critical prominence in the second half of the eighteenth-century, largely through Scottish writers’ efforts to reclaim Celtic traditions rather than through England or English poetry criticism. Cf. Andrew Lang’s *A Collection of Ballads* (1897) “When the learned first gave serious attention to popular ballads, from the time of [Bishop Thomas] Percy [1729-1811; *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765)] to that of [Sir Walter] Scott [1711-1832]…” Also Cf. Robert Heron’s *A New General History of Scotland* (1794): “Giants, dwarfs, soldans [sultans], necromancers, fairy palaces, and enchanted castles. {Subjects of the poetry of this Age} were also among those subjects which gave to the songs of the minstrels, the most powerful influence over the simple wonder of their rude and
structurally and explicitly situated itself as a direct descendant to Elizabethan fairy poetry and Classical poetic forms:

Indulgent FANCY! from the tuneful banks
Of Avon, whence thy rosy fingers cull
Fresh flow’rs and dews to sprinkle on the turf
Where SHAKESPEARE lies, be present: and with thee
Let FICTION come, upon her vagrant wings
Wasting ten thousand colours thro’ the air,
And, by the glances of her magic eye,
Combining each in endless, fairy forms,
Her wild creation. (Pleasures 10) 21

Akenside visually and thematically links the personification of FANCY to William SHAKESPEARE (c.1564-1616), suggests that “fairy forms” define the epitome of Shakespeare’s writing, and generally capitalizes on the ethos of the great bard to legitimate Akenside’s own investment in purely pleasurable, aesthetically lush imagination. Similarly, Akenside also links himself to Classical poetic forms, in this case introducing FICTION in the person of a modern adaptation of the Classical muse whose “magic eye” inspires “wild creation.” By tracing British poetics back to the Elizabethan period and then directly to Classical writing Akenside neatly foregrounds an impeccably illiterate hearers.” (403). Perhaps the most influential of the seventeenth-century Scots ballad composers/editors was Walter Scott. Cf. The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border (1802-3); The Lay of the Last Minstrel (1805); Ballads and Lyrical Pieces (1806). However, in eighteenth-century English criticism, Ballad fairy poetry is, for the most part, interesting only obliquely, as contributing fairy tropes (on par with fairy prose); it is not interesting as exemplary poetry. Cf. J.O. Halliwell’s Illustrations of the Fairy Mythology of Shakespeare: And Oberon’s Vision (from “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”) Illustrated by a Comparison with Lylie’s “Endymion” (1853),20 Joseph Ritson’s Fairy Tales, Legends and Romances Illustrating Shakespeare and other Early English Writers: To Which are Prefixed Preliminary Dissertations 1. On Pigmies 2. On Fairies. (2 vols. 1875), T.F. Thiselton-Dyer’s Folk-Lore of Shakespeare [Chapter 1: Fairies] (1884).

21 Although Coleridge would eventually distinguish between “imagination” and “fancy,” at the mid-century the terms were used interchangeably. Cf. Samuel Johnson in 1753: “Pastoral Poetry not only amuses the fancy the most delightfully, but it is likewise more indebted to it than any other sort whatsoever. It transports us into a kind of “Fairy-land […] It is a dream, it is a vision, which we wish may be real” (Adventurer, 48).
high-brow poetic lineage, but also retains the connotations of Britishness while sidestepping the low-brow connotations of superstitious, peasant folklore and ballad traditions.

Increasingly, however, “fairy” required less and less defense, and it became more of an aesthetic principle than a direct reference to fairy creatures, as such—so much so that the adjectival use of “fairy” was applied both to the poetry and to the poets; it transcended the specific use of otherworldly beings to connote delicacy and beauty. For example, in “Ode on the Poetical Character” (1746), the proto-Romantic poet William Collins (1721-1759) traced what he sees to be the trajectory of “perfect” English poetry from Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), “Him whose school above the rest,/His loveliest elfin queen has blest” (28), to Spenser’s worthy successor John Milton (1608-1674):

One, only one, unrivalled fair
Might hope the magic girdle wear, […]
   To whom, prepared and bathed in heaven,
   The cest of amplest power is given:
   To few the god-like gift assigns,
   To gird their blest prophetic loins,
   And gaze her visions wild, and feel unmixed her flame

The band, as fairy legends say,
Was wove on that creating day […] (28-9)

In this kind of poem, the language of fairy works at several levels, all of which are self-validating. Collins appeals to “fairy legends” for his metaphors of glory, reinforcing the authority of fairy legends through citation and then bringing the legends to life by describing the poet as one who wears the “magic girdle” and possesses the power of wild

22 Cf. Samuel Johnson: “The poet is a more powerful magician than his own Prospero. We are transported into fairy land; we are rapt in a delicious dream, from which it is misery to be disturbed; all around is enchantment” (Adventurer 242).
visions, presumably the sorts of visions that inspire more fairy legends. The laurels which validate the fairy poet are even metatextually bestowed by a fairy queen, whose tales the poet then goes on to tell. In 1746, Collins finds “fairy” language so compelling that it functions simultaneously as narrative subject, aesthetic principle, and source of poetic validation. It celebrates fairy poetry in British poetic history and is itself fairy poetry functioning as a second-generation homage.

The Britishness as well as the “fairy-ness” of this poetic lineage is also a paramount concern. Collin’s deployment of an “elfin queen” not only alludes to generic fairy delicacy but specifically foregrounds Spenser’s allegorical link between Queen Elizabeth I and his eponymous fairy queen, “chaste and angel-friend to virgin fame” (Collins 29). Spenser made fairies both powerfully British and powerfully associated with high courtly poetic culture; consequently, fairy allusions that are anchored in Spenser or the Elizabethan period were always partly allusions to Britishness and an emphatically British poetic history. The fact that the Union of the Crowns also happened in 1603 only ratified the turn of the seventeenth-century as a vanishing point for the creation of true British fairy poetry.

For Sidney, Elizabethan poetry represents the best of two intertwined but equal histories—the nationalist implications of which are highly evident in poems like “The Bard” by Thomas Gray (1716-1771). Gray’s poem is remarkable because it connects the introduction of fairy poetry to Britain with English conquest, and it is prefaced by the short note: “This Ode is founded on a Tradition current in Wales, that Edward the First, when he completed the conquest of that country, ordered all the Bards that fell into his hands to be put to death” (32). The long narrative poem is a lyrical tirade by a Welsh
bard, which is both a curse on Edward I and a prophecy of a future “genuine” British monarch whose “awe-commanding face” is “Attemper’d sweet to virgin-grace” (44) and under whose reign great poetry will reemerge:

The verse adorn again
Fierce War, and faithful Love,23
And Truth severe, by fairy Fiction drest.
In buskin’d measures move (45)

In long passages that praise “Brittania” embodied by Elizabeth, Gray suggests that the Elizabethan poets reconciled ancient Celtic fairy traditions with modern English poetic forms, perfecting the cultural unification of Britain. In this context, fairies represent both an explicit symbol of British culture and an implicit reminder of violent conquest haunted by the fact that Gray’s poem culminates in the Welsh bard’s dramatic suicide. 24 Gray seems to gesture at the possibility that the Britishness of fairy poetry was also, in some important sense, already tainted with overtones of English domination and English cultural appropriation—an argument that would return very powerfully in the nineteenth century colonial writing.

The rewriting of the Elizabethan era as one dominated by fairies was further underscored in the popular imagination when major writers like David Garrick (1717-1779) mined canonical British poetry for fairy extracts and presented them as part of a

23 Here Gray quotes the final line of the first stanza from Spenser’s *Fairy Queen*: “Fierce wars and faithful loves shall moralize my song.”

24 Cf. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586): “In our neighbor country Ireland, where truly learning goeth very bare, yet are their poets held in devout reverence […] In Wales, the true remnant of the ancient Britons, as there are good authorities to show the long time they had poets which they called bards, so through all the conquests of Romans, Saxons, Danes, and Normans, some of whom did seek to ruin all memory of learning from among them, yet do their poets even to this day last; so as it is not more notable in soon beginning, than in long continuing” (83).
collective project in remarkable works like *The Fairies: an Opera: Taken from A Midsummer Night’s Dream Written by Shakespear As it is Perform’d at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane: The Songs from Shakespear, Milton, Waller, Dryden, Hammond, &c.* (1755). Garrick’s move was reductive in that it homogenizes the nasty pinching fairies of Lyly’s *Endymion* and the complex slave-relationship that defines Shakespeare’s Ariel into a single strain of delicacy and magic, but his conflation suited the eighteenth-century resistance to Enlightenment rationality by implying that the whole of modern British history collectively contributed to a fantastical ethos of fairy visions.

The process of defining a canon is problematic both for what it includes and for what it excludes; to define British poetic history in terms of fairies and imagination, eighteenth century scholars had to gloss over texts like *An Anatomy of the World* (1611) by John Donne (1572-1631), which condemns any kind of belief in fairy superstition as deeply embarrassing to the national character: “[…] now, alas!/The fairies and the pygmies well may pass /As credible; mankind decays so soon,/We’re scare our fathers’ shadows cast at noon” (82-3). They also had to somewhat obfuscate Elizabethan fairy poems which acknowledged links to local ballad traditions rather than Classical traditions. For example, consider the opening lines to the immensely popular *Nymphidia: or, The Court of Fayrie* (1627) by Michael Drayton (1561-1631) cites literary sources dating back to Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343-1400), situating them in the context of a much broader tale tradition, and giving greatest visual emphasis to his oldest texts, Chaucer’s
tale of a child-knight in search of an elf-queen and a series of satirical novels about giants
by the French writer François Rabelais (1494-1553): 25

Olde CHAUCER doth of Topas tell,
Mad RABLAIS of Pantagruell,
A latter third of Dowsabell,
With such poore trifles playing:
Others the like haue laboured at,
Some of this thing, and some of that,
And many of they know not what,
But that they must be saying.

Another sort there be, that will
Be talking of the Fayries still,
Nor neuer can they have their fill,
As they were wedded to them (117)26

The significance of Drayton’s source arrangement was highlighted through the changes
that were made to it when Nimphidia was republished in 1751: in the eighteenth-century
edition, the publisher renamed Drayton’s Nimphidia “Queen Mab” in homage to
Shakespeare, deleted the emphatic type from “CHAUCER” and “RABLAIS” in the first two
lines, and added emphatic type to “FAIRIES” in the second stanza. In the 1751 edition, the
publisher also distracts from earlier sources by elevating Drayton’s place in poetic history

25 The poem was initially published as the third part of the long publication: The battaille of
Agincourt Fought by Henry the fift of that name, King of England, against the whole power of the French:
vnder the raigne of their Charles the sixt, anno Dom. 1415. The misieries of Queene Margarite, the
infortunate vvife, of that most infortunate King Henry the sixt. Nimphidia, the court of Fayrie. The quest of
Cinthia. The shepheards Sirena. The moone-calfe. Elegies vpon sundry occasions. (1627) Nimphidia was
regularly excerpted and became the most popular and enduring of Drayton’s long poems. Indeed, he was so
popular that the title page of one of the 1751 editions refers to Drayton (incorrectly) as “Poet laureate to
James I and Charles I”.

26 Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343-1400), The Canterbury Tales, “The Tale of Sir Topas”; François
Rabelais (1494-1553) Pantagruel (1532), the first in a series of five novels about the giants Pantagruel and
Gargantua; the “Dowsabel” allusion is likely to Drayton’s own verse (Cf. “Dowsabell,” 1619), or possibly
to William Shakespeare (Cf. Comedy of Errors, 4.1.110), or possibly to a more generic Medieval
incarnation of beauty, inspiration, and virtuous love: the name comes from “Dulcibella”: Latin “Dulcis”
(“sweet”) and “Bella” (“beautiful”).
by (inaccurately) describing him as “Poet Laureate to James I and Charles I.” In effect, by downplaying the earlier source material and highlighting both the fairies and Drayton’s location in the early seventeenth-century, the eighteenth-century publisher re-marketed *Nymphidia* as an exemplar of a seventeenth-century fairy poetic to suit both the eighteenth-century taste for fairy poetry, and the eighteenth-century association of the turn-of-the-seventeenth-century with exemplary fairy poetry.

The Elizabethan/Classical lineage is a neater history, and one that better suited the story that the eighteenth-century was telling about itself. As Warton wrote in the preface to his *History of English Poetry* (1774-81):

> In an age advanced to the highest degree of refinement, that species of curiosity commences, which is busied in contemplating the progress of social life, in displaying the gradations of science, and in tracing the transitions from barbarism to civility. […] We look back on the savage condition of our ancestors with the triumph of superiority; we are pleased to mark the steps by which we have been raised from rudeness to elegance: and our reflections on this subject are accompanied with a conscious pride, arising in great measure from a tacit comparison of the infinite disproportion between the feeble efforts of remote ages, and our present improvements in knowledge. (i)

In effect, Warton’s *History* was not only highlighting the best of British poetry but setting it apart from “the feeble efforts of remote ages.” The act of skipping over earlier poetry was not merely an act of omission but a comparative analysis raking seventeenth and eighteenth-century poetry above, for example, “jejune” Anglo-Saxon poetry “for the most

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27 Samuel Daniel (1562-1619), Ben Johnson (1572-1637) and Michael D’Avenant (1606-1668) were the official poets laureate during the reigns of James I (ruled 1603-1625) and Charles I (ruled 1625-1649).

28 Cf. the end of Samuel Johnson’s fairy tale “Amyntas and Amaryllis”: “Amyntas and Amaryllis lived a long and happy life, and governed the vales of Arcadia. Their generation was very long lived, there having been but four descents in above two thousand years. His heir was called Theocrigus, who left his dominions to Virgil, Virgil left his to his Son Spencer, and Spencer was succeeded by his eldest-born Philips” (*Adventurer* 69).
part little more than religious rhapsodies” (vi). Warton situates seventeenth and eighteenth-century poetry as a central proof of British cultural maturity on a global scale, raising the profile of poetry as a politically nationalist genre and making it much more difficult for Enlightenment rationalists to entirely dismiss aesthetics without repudiating material that was increasingly situated as the acme of British culture. However, in broader chronological terms, Warton’s move was particularly important because it paralleled work being done by the Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith (1723-1790) who, in the 1760s, theorized a linear economic development of human culture which he called “stadialism.” At the turn of the nineteenth century, Smith’s language was so influential that it was adopted nearly verbatim for the definition of “society” in such cutting-edge, widely-circulated works as the first Encyclopedia Britannica (1790-1798) and the first Encyclopædia Perthesis (1806), and by the mid-nineteenth century it powerfully impacted evolutionary arguments about the development of human culture. In the mid-eighteenth-century Smith and Warton lay the groundwork

29 The colonial implications are evident in Warton’s association of the moment “when our national character began to dawn” (I. vi) with the ascension of the Normans, i.e. the direct ancestors of the British monarchs reigning in the eighteenth century. Note: The only pre-Elizabethan poem that is given extensive consideration is Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, in which several revolve around fairy characters—though generally not of the dainty type popularized by Shakespeare.

30 Smith, Jurisprudence 14. For detailed discussion of nineteenth-century stadialism, Cf. 4.3 “Fairy Tales, Poetry, and Victorian Colonialism.”

31 For example, in Smith’s terms, “hunters” (such as “the native tribes of North America”) comprise “the lowest and rudest state of society” which “can never be formidable to the civilized nations in their neighborhood” (Wealth 408-9). Cf. Encyclopedia Britannica: or a Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature on a Plan Entirely New (1790-1798): “Where the human species are found in the lowest and rudest state, their rational and moral powers are very faintly displayed...Hunting and fishing are then their chief employments” (EB, “Society” 570); Encyclopædia Perthesis: or, Universal Dictionary of the Arts, Sciences, Literature &c. Intended to Supercede the Use of Other Books of Reference (1806) “Where the human species are in the lowest and rudest state, their rational and moral powers are very faintly displayed...Hunting and fishing are then their chief employments” (EP, “Society” 110). These reference works rarely mentioned Smith’s name, but they regularly copied his language almost word-for-word.
for what would become a powerful link between British imperialism, claims to British cultural superiority, and the cultural elevation of British “fairy poetry” dating back to the canonical work of Spenser and Shakespeare.

By the 1760s, the full debate about fairies, poetry, belief, nature, and imagination was widely understood to be a well-defined, international discourse that brought together great minds from across Europe. In his popular *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), the literary scholar Bishop Richard Hurd (1720-1808) was making an argument about nature and imagination, and he traced the sources for his position through the standing debate about about fairy poetry. Hurd began with Hobbes and Dryden; developed his point through Locke, Addison, and Voltaire; and referenced Tasso, Aristo, and Spenser as key examples. In twentieth-century scholarship, the thread of this argument may have been lost, but it was powerfully influential in the eighteenth-century.

2.3 Fairy Poetry, Imagination, and Eighteenth-Century Romanticism

After fairy poetry had become a standard genre, mid-century poets could draw on fairy imagery and achieve a reference to elevated, idyllic, fancy without apology and without even necessarily introducing fairy characters. Fairies had become both reputable and popular referents, and were used widely by a variety of major poets. Having achieved centrality, however, the genre began to change. At first the shift was subtle, and might seem to be more in emphasis than in kind:

Once, ere the gold-haired sun shot the new ray
Through the grey twilight of the dubious morn, […]
Dwelt on the prospect, sought the varied view,
Traced the meanders of the bubbling stream:
From joy to joy uninterrupted flew,
And thought existence but a fairy dream.
—from “Elegy” (1770) by Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770)

Ah! what a weary race my feet have run,
Since first I trod thy banks with alders crown’d
And thought my way was all through fairy ground,
Beneath thy azure sky, and golden sun;
Where first my Muse to lisp her notes begun!
—from “To the River London” (1777) by Thomas Warton (1728-1790)

Here glittering turrets rise, upbearing high
(Fantastic misarrangement!) on the roof
Large growth of what may seem the sparkling trees
And shrubs of fairy land. […]
—from “The Task” (1785) by William Cowper (1731-1800)

As in earlier fairy poetry, like Akenside’s “Pleasures of the Imagination,” there is an emphasis on glittering adjectives and verdant landscape (“gold-haired sun,” “azure sky,” “sparkling trees”) and an ecstatic tone (“joy to joy uninterrupted” “glittering turrets rise, upbearing high”). However, there no actual fairy characters; the word “fairy” is here used as an adjectival substitution that gestures at the ethos of the older fairy poetry without reproducing it in the same form. By the late eighteenth-century, the language of fairy and imagination had become so entangled and the debate about imagination had drawn so much attention to the poet’s own mind that the language of “fairy” became increasingly interiorized and symbolized. From the mid-century, “a fairy way of writing” became more emphatically a fairy way of perceiving. Chatterton “thought existence but a fairy dream,” Warton “thought my way was all through fairy ground” and Cowper saw in a mundane scene “what may seem the sparkling trees/And shrubs of fairy land.” Fairy poetics became an exercise in willful suspension of mundane perception, elevating the mind into a gilded aesthetic plane.
This transitional shift towards interiority facilitated three other significant changes in fairy poetry. 1. In the early part of the century, poets had been extremely careful to distance art from belief; particularly in the context of fairies; but from the mid-century, fairy perception came to represent a kind of spiritual experience to which a poet might abandon him/herself. Willing suspension of disbelief was still somewhat distanced from superstition, because to willfully believe is to acknowledge that disbelief is one’s base state, but it was still a substantial move to admit that thinking about fairies could change one’s world outlook. 2. In the first part of the century, poets deployed imaginative tropes as a defense against pure reason, but as the Industrial Revolution began to take off in the late eighteenth-century, poets built on that earlier use of imagination to further defend themselves against a new wave of scientific materialism and laissez-faire economics. 32 What began as a war between competing abstract ideals became, in large part, a war of the abstract, artistic, and spiritual versus the quantifiable, commercial, and material. 3. In that context, the word “natural” also gained fresh attention as, at the end of the century, the division between “natural”/“unnatural” was redefined to mean “naturally occurring”/“artificially constructed.” Fairies were coded as “natural” because they were coded as spiritual, pastoral, and aesthetic and because they were dissociated from the “unnatural” material, urban, commercial landscape of the Industrial Revolution.

For example, although the poet, printer, and illustrator William Blake (1757-1827) was a relatively marginal figure in his day, he is a very useful as case study of the

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32 As early as 1749, Thomas Warton boasted that though “Science walks with recent chaplets crown’d/With fancy’s strain my fairy shades resound/My Muse divine still keeps her custom’d state” (“The Triumph of Isis,” Poetical 9); but the polarization of science and fancy (which partly displaced the polarization of reason and fancy) was developed much further by William Blake, such that twentieth-century Blakean scholars widely construed him as “the only English poet whose central theme is the confrontation of science and imagination” [Cf. Eileen Sanzo quoting Kathleen Raine 255, 258 (fn.28)].
transition in fairy poetry because the extremity of his aesthetic makes the new developments in his work that much more apparent. In his early writing, Blake recreated fairly standard fairy poetry forms, as in his “Imitation of Spenser” (1783):

In lucent words my darkling verses delight,
   And wash my earthy mind in thy clear streams,
   That wisdom may descend in fairy dreams:
All while the jocund hours in thy train
   Scatter their fancies at thy poet’s feet;
   And when thou yields to night thy wide domain,
   Let rays of truth enlight his sleeping brain. (Complete 420)

In this poem, “fairy dreams” are coded as equivalent to “fancies,” and—like Thomas Gray (1716-1771), who defined great poetry as “truth severe by fairy fiction dressed,” and Mark Akenside (1721-1770), who argued that aesthetic pleasure stimulates the soul by stimulating the imagination—Blake connects “darkling verses” and “fairy dreams” with “wisdom” and “rays of truth.” He also takes a direct dig at Enlightenment rationality by slyly using the term “enlight” to describe the irrational, fanciful dreaming mind.

Blake’s early fairy poetry was perhaps more intensified and direct in its claims than earlier eighteenth-century fairy poetry, however, except for drawing attention to dream, it was not radically different in scope. 33

However, in the 1780s Blake more fully developed his theories of imagination, and that would radically change his use of fairy imagery. Locke had caricaturized the man “so skeptical as to distrust his Sense, and to affirm, that all we see and hear, feel and taste, think and do, during our whole Being, is but the Series and deluding Appearances

33 Cf. also pp. 482-3 “A fairy skipt upon my knee” (1793) which describes a fairy who dedicates his life to making women beautiful and seems to be a response to the sylphs of Pope’s Rape of the Lock; and Blake’s annotation to his illustrations of Milton’s “L’Allegro” (683-4). Blake was clearly very attuned to both eighteenth-century fairy poetry and its reliance on seventeenth-century sources.
of a long Dream” (Essay 254) and drawn a very clear distinction between the empirical (things that can be seen and touched) and the non-empirical (ideas or images that have no corollary in the material world). Blake responded to Locke by drawing on a Lockean understanding of “imagination” as mental imaging, but Blake argued that imagination supercedes reason because all sensory perception is, technically, imaginary: “in your own Bosom you bear your Heaven/And Earth, & all you behold, tho it appears Without it is Within/In your Imagination of which this World of Mortality is but a Shadow” (from “Jerusalem” 225). By arguing that it is only possible to know the world through the imaging of one’s subjective mind (“tho it appears Without it is Within”), Blake tries to explode Locke’s concrete distinction between “empirical” and “non-empirical.” Since fairies had come to represent the quintessentially “non-empirical,” Blake’s reconfiguration of imagination required a shift in his symbolic use of fairies.

Since, for Blake, fairies cannot be merely an indulgent foray into pleasurable aesthetics or cleanly made distinct from other patterns of perception, in practice, it seems as if Blake upended all the central conventions of fairy poetry. For Dryden, fairies symbolized delicacy and ethereal loveliness; for Blake, fairies are dark, dangerous figures that may be captured and tormented (“The Fairy,” “Motto to the Songs of Innocence & of Experience”) and who may fatally betray their captors (“Long John Brown & Little Merry Bell”). In Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream fairies benevolently attempt to bring lovers together and bless their marriages; for Blake, fairies are unreliable, and they may choose to assist people in becoming more artificial or abandon their charges entirely (“A fairy skipd upon my knee,” “William Bond”). Thomas Gray’s dying bard spoke about fairy aesthetics; for Blake fairies are themselves powerful prophetic figures.
A captive fairy narrates Blake’s longer poems “Europe: A Prophecy” (1794) and “The Everlasting Gospel” (c.1818); for Blake, fairies are powerful and therefore dangerous figures because they play a very real role in the mind. Yet Blake remains heavily indebted to the older pattern of fairy poetry as a familiar background against which he can demonstrate the implications of his reworking of imagination, and, in doing so, affirms the genre’s importance. And although he was relatively little-recognized in the eighteenth century, Blake’s reworking of both imagination and fairy poetry would have a lasting impact on fairy poetry and fairy tale poetry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Less extreme Romantic interpretations of “imagination” prompted less extreme shifts in fairy poetry, but Blake’s work shared common attributes with that of early Romanticists like Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1835). In his own definition of “imagination,” Coleridge argues that an ideal poet “brings the whole soul of man into activity […] He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.” (Biographia 12).34 Like Blake, Coleridge was

34 Coleridge’s terms require some clarification because he uses the terms “fancy” and “imagination” in new ways. In his Biographia Literaria (1817), Coleridge defined “fancy” as the part of the mind that deals with “fixities and definites” (Biographia 305)—fact, memory, history—things that are and have been. It is passive, mechanical and literal. Conversely, “imagination” deals with “perception” that flowers into “creation” (Biographia 304); it actively elevates the perceptions to a higher level and contemplates what could be or might be. Both are necessary for Coleridge: “GOOD SENSE is the BODY of poetic genius, FANCY its DRAPERY, MOTION its LIFE, and IMAGINATION the SOUL that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole” (Biographia 18). But what Coleridge means by “imagination” would encompass what previous generations would call “fancy,” and that explains why fairies survive the demotion of “fancy” in Coleridge’s work. He simply considers them “imaginative.” And, as the literary critic George Leonard slyly points out, there was a self-serving element in choosing a term as popular and powerful as “fancy” to describe the negative end of the binary with “imagination”: “After the redefinition, Wordsworth and Coleridge could, when they wished, dismiss traditional poetry, no matter how imaginative, as ‘fancy’—little better than wit” (Leonard 70).
preoccupied with perception and challenges the Lockean dismissal of non-empirical imagination, but he argues that the act of producing poetry uniquely elevates perception, defending the imaginative end of the real/unreal binary rather than exploding the binary entirely. For Blake, the full experience of imagination is constant; for Coleridge, the elevated state which imagination inspires is more ephemeral and must be consciously achieved, an argument which implies that a non-imaginative state is the base human register of perception. For Blake, all people have access to poetic vision; for Coleridge, fairy dreams are the exclusive provenance of those gifted with poetic sensibilities, and that more hierarchical aesthetic would become very apparent in Coleridge’s adaptation of fairy poetry.  

For Coleridge, fairy symbolizes the height of imaginative experience, and poetry embodies its most exquisite articulation; the sounds evoked in poetry are always mellifluous echoes of Fairy-Land:

Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes  
Over delicious surges sink and rise,  
Such a soft floating witchery of sound  
As twilight Elfins make, when they at eve  
Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,  
Where Melodies round honey-dripping flowers,  
Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,  
Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untam’d wing!  

In this poem “The Eolian Harp” (1795) Fairy-Land is represented as the standard of pure, eloquent sound against which other poetries are measured: the harp’s “witchery of sound”

35 A similar hierarchy is implied in Addison’s “Pleasures,” where he argues that every person has a different degree of natural imaginative capacity; a facility which poets have to an extraordinarily heightened degree (1 July, 1-2).

36 Complete 101. Cf. also “Song of the Pixies” (1793), p.40.
is music “as twilight Elfins make.” The beauty of the fairy sound is associated with luxuriant nature (it is like “gales,” “flowers,” and “birds”) and distanced from constrictive social norms (it is “footless and wild,” “hovering on untam’d wing!”). But its freedom is grounded in the fact that it is “witchery,” sensual enchantment that ensnares the mind by liberating it from mundane perception. In effect, Coleridge is expanding Dryden’s argument about imagination being a natural mental function to not only permit but to valorize the most fanciful imagination as natural, because it is uniquely distant from the artificial constraints of mundane rationality. 37

Not all of the early Romantic poets had such developed secondary arguments about imagination, but even very different patterns of Romantic fairy poetry take up the argument that it is the sacred task of poets to “charm the fairy-footed hours” with “loved lute’s romantic sound.”38 And the language of enchantment is particularly important because the idea that fairy represents an altered state of perception, one liberated from mundane social reality, became intertwined with the language of “dream,” an involuntary, natural state in which the mind does not function according to empirical

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37 Fairy beings appear in many of Coleridge’s works, including: “Christabel” (“A little child, a limber elf/Singing, dancing to itself,/A fairy thing with red round cheeks,/That always finds, and never seeks,” 235); “The Improvisatore” (“Poor Fancy on her sick bed lay;/Ill at distance, worse when near,/Telling her dreams to jealous Fear!/Where was it then, the sociable sprite/That crown’d the Poet’s cup and deck’d his dish!” 467); “Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” (“A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist!/And still it neared and neared:As if it dodged a water-sprite” 192); “The Rose” (“He struggled to escape awhile/And stamp’d his faery feet.” 45); “The Garden of Boccaccio” (“Yet radiant still and with no earthly sheen,/Whom as a faery child my childhood woo’d,” 479); “Constancy to an Ideal Object” (“Call to the Hours, that in the distance play, The faery people of the future day—” 455); “The Sigh” (“When Youth his faery reign began” 62); “Time, Real and Imaginary” (“On the wide level of a mountain’s head (I knew not where, but ’twas some faery place)” 419); “The Silver Thimble” (“Such things, I thought, one might not hope to meet/Save in the dear delicious land of Faery!” 104); “The Pang More Sharp than All” (“inly shrinking from her own disguise/Enacts the faery Boy that’s lost and gone” 459); “On the Author of ‘The Robbers’” (“Black Horror scream’d, and all her goblin rout/Dminish’d shrunk from the more withering scene!” 73).

38 “An Italian Song” 1782 (Rogers 116).
rationality or social conventions. For example, the poet Samuel Rogers (1763-1855) opens his comic, mock-epic poem “To a Gnat” (1798) with the image of his poet-narrator falling asleep: “Poetic visions charm my closing eye;/And fairy-scenes, that Fancy loves to weave,/Shift to wild notes of sweetest minstrelsy” (116). For Rogers, the dream is so enchanting that it redefines his narrator’s reality—an intrusive, buzzing gnat which threatens to wake the poet-narrator from his dream is itself encompassed by the dream and becomes a fairy-tale monster:

Now near and nearer rush thy whirring wings,
Thy dragon-scales still wet with human gore.
Hark, thy shrill horn its fearful larum flings!
—I wake in horror, and dare sleep no more. (116)

For Rogers, to fall asleep is to unleash the poetic subconscious and, in doing so, to change the rules of human perception, forcing them towards a more “natural” state of being. In William Wordsworth’s terms, in attentively listening to the sounds of nature with a poetic ear: “the earth we pace/Again appears to be/An unsubstantial, faery place.”39 By the turn of the nineteenth century, when the most famous of the second wave of Romanticist poets—John Keats (1795-1821), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), Lord Byron (1788-1824)—were coming into their own, the early Romantic poets had adapted fairy poetry to envision fairy land as a kind of pre-Freudian dreamscape uniquely inhabited by poets.

39 “To the Cuckoo” (1804), from The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth 311. Although Coleridge wrote more fantastical material than Wordsworth, fairy and changeling allusions do appear in Wordsworth’s “The Seven Sisters,” “Lucy Gray,” “Song for the Spinning Wheel,” and “The Faëry Chasm.”
2.4 Eighteenth Century Enchantment and the Importation of Fairy Tales

During the same years that Dryden and Hobbes were quarreling over “a fairy way of writing” and Locke was producing his famous treatise on human understanding in England, fairy tales were coming into vogue in the French court. Even more frequently than fairy poetry, fairy tales have been retrospectively coded as children’s literature. However, the archival records of the early British translations and imitations of the French fairy tale style suggest that eighteenth-century authors were interested in fairy tales as a sophisticated, politicized, often satirical adult genre—one that predates and then parallels the development of fairy tales as a children’s genre in Britain. I would further suggest that the intricacy of these eighteenth-century tales helps to explain how an apparently frivolous “children’s genre” came to play a formative role in so many theoretical schools in the nineteenth-century; from 1704, through the Enlightenment and into Romanticism, literary English-language fairy tales (original and in translation) were already engaging in complex negotiations of gender, class, nationalism, and colonialism, in forms that would be of interest to nineteenth-century structuralists and psychoanalysts.

Stories that modern audiences would recognize as “fairy tales” were told in English long before Chaucer came on the scene, but the actual phrase “fairy tale” was an eighteenth-century borrowing from the French of a courtier named Madame d’Aulnoy (c.1650-1705). With a coterie of friends from her exclusive salons, d’Aulnoy published a collection of glittering stories under the title Les Contees de Fées (1697), and the magical characters from these tales, like the fairies of Spenser and Shakespeare, were dainty, lovely, and articulate. The tales were works of refined art, calculated to stimulate the senses of a sophisticated, educated adult audience, not to be believed in any literal sense.
In 2001, the literary critic Elizabeth Wanning Harries (n.d.) persuasively argued that these courtly fairy tales:

[…] in all their glitter and artificiality, actually work against the emerging association of fairy tales with the primitive, with the folk, and with the oral tradition as they were beginning to be understood, with illiterate and anonymous female tellers of tales, and with children. The women’s tales, rather than existing in the supposed “timeless space” of folk culture, are consciously invented as a complex and ironic comment on the historical movement in which they were produced. The style, length, and timeliness of these narratives do not fit the ideology of the fairy tale as it has been constructed in the last three centuries.  

Harries’ re-reading of the French tales recognizes that these courtly fairy tales are not only different from the twentieth-century conception of “fairy tale,” but that they were recognized as a distinctively new genre at the turn of the eighteenth-century with innovative conventions in content, tone, form, audience, political immediacy, and cultural status. The French fairy tales, like British fairy poetry, derived elements from oral culture, but went far beyond transcription.

Because les contees de fées were a genre for wealthy, educated, adult authors and audiences, the tales were often complex negotiations of the kinds of political issues that concerned the court at any given moment, and the tales often featured concluding morals that offered direct commentary on accepted social norms. Like d’Aulnoy herself, many of the authors were women, and the tales often highlight the social roles that courtly women can (or should, or could) play, especially in the context of marriage relationships. For example, in the classic d’Aulnoy tale “The Blue Bird,” an ugly, graceless, pushy girl named Truitonne tries to coerce King Charmant into marrying her, even though

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40 24. Note: in 2009, Ruth Bottingheimer launched a more extensive attack on the historical links between courtly fairy tales and contemporary folk culture. Cf. Fairy Tales: A New History, 53-
Charmant was clearly destined to marry Truitonne’s stepsister, the incomparably beautiful and perfect Florine. In the *envoi*, the narrator censures Truitonne for trying to force an unhappy wedding:

Too many matches of this sort I’ve seen,
And wish that now there were some king magician
To stop these ill-matched souls at once and lean
On them with force to keep his prohibition.
He must be vigilant and forbid the banns,
Whenever true affection might be slighted.
And Hymen must be prevented from joining hands
Whenever hearts have not been first united. (qtd. in Zipes, * Beauties* 349)

The tale might seem to advocate a trite “happily ever after,” but in 1697 it was a fairly radical argument to be voiced by and for high-ranking women whose marriages were likely to be politically alliances orchestrated by a male authority figure less benevolent than d’Aulnoy’s “king magician.” In this context, the defense of love-matches was more than romanticized idealism; it was such an important political statement that the narrator’s personal voice intrudes metatextually: “Too many matches of this sort I’ve seen.” The tales became a forum through which women could articulate their unhappiness with patriarchal marriage structures and suggest that courtly women deserve greater personal and political autonomy. And the tales model that which they proscribe—they are calculated to be dazzling displays of women’s brilliance and political intuition that place the authors on par with the superlatively delightful, talented, and, above all, *deserving* heroines of the tales. From the beginning, the metatexual implications were of primary political significance, and audiences would be looking for coded contemporary references to politics and the author’s autobiography.
Historically, the interchange of British and French courtly writing was at an unusual peak because, at the turn of the century, James II was living in exile in Paris with a number of his favored courtiers; and for some of those exiles, most notably the British-born Count Anthony Hamilton (c.1645-1719), fairy tales offered an allegorical language through which to discuss inflammatory topics at a slight remove. And after a century of perpetual upheaval in the British court—the execution of Charles I, the interregnum, the reestablishment of the monarchy, the exile of James II by William and Mary of Orange—a delicately removed language through which to discuss politics was very attractive. In fact, the excessive degree to which the texts proclaim themselves to be imaginary draws attention to their grounding in real-life events. For example, Hamilton’s fairy tale *Zeneyda: An Exile*, was written in French during his own exile, and, in the opening lines, the exiled fairy Zeneyda appears to Hamilton in Paris and insists on telling him her story, even though it “may seem to you purely imaginary.” In execution, Hamilton’s “imaginary” fairy tale is almost an emotional autobiography of the exiled court. It is, at heart, a tale about loss of loved ones, changing social status, the stress of being a high-ranking courtier, and the loneliness of living in the aftermath of disaster. This British writer borrows d’Aulnoy’s pattern of implicit mexitextuality to suit his own political agenda and draw attention to the autobiographical connotations.

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41 The adult nature of the tale is evident in Hamilton’s description of Zeneyda, who appears to him by rising up out of a fountain: “she had on but a petticoat of the slightest possible material—a transparent gauze—and the moisture made it cling so around her, that she might as well have been without” (286). Frank sexual descriptions are characteristic of Hamilton’s style, and accent his central point, which is that pleasurable imagination may be an emotional solace when the rational response to one’s circumstances would be despair. His stories never conclude with an unambiguous happily ever after.
In fact, the layer of metatextuality sometimes functions at a self-reflective level that also acknowledges the act of story-telling as itself relevant to the author’s political and emotional state. Zenyeda concludes with the envoi:

Thus in the realms of fairy land,
I love ’mid elves and sprites to roam,
And ever leave the joyous band
With downcast heart to hie me home. […]
“Alas!” is all the social cheer
Reality can offer here.
Where truth in guise so sad is seen,
It serves but to engender spleen,
And wisdom from all grave concerns
In self-despair to folly turns.\(^42\)

The interaction between text and metatext allows the fairy tale to vocalize trauma, and to provide some anodyne to it—both through the cathartic act of finding language for traumatic experience and because the aesthetic stimulation of beautiful language can itself be spiritually consoling. Hamilton implies that the Enlightenment appeal to “rationality” and “truth” is political as well as philosophical, because a person in a secure social position derives more pleasure from seeing things as they are than a person whose social outlook can be summed up in the exclamation “Alas!” The layers of linguistic complexity even in these early texts foreground nineteenth century theorists’ interest in the fairy tale genre, both politically as a vehicle for encoded alternative histories, linguistically as a narrative form which lends itself to sophisticated, self-conscious literary convolutions, and psychologically as a text which both articulates trauma and works to resolve that trauma.

\(^42\) Fairy Tales 365. Hamilton’s works were written in French and translated into English in the mid-nineteenth century by a group of writers, including Monk Lewis (1775-1818).
Like their French-language counterparts, eighteenth-century English-language “fairy tales” need to be carefully reconsidered because the genre was promptly adopted into English in very similar contexts—as a forum for exchange between educated, well-connected writers and, moreover, one which could be readily intertwined with the emergent British tradition of fairy poetry. For example, translations of d’Aulnoy tended to stress her tales commonality with fairy poetry as in this 1750 re-titled collection of d’Aulnoy’s work: *The court of Queen Mab: Containing a select collection of only the best, most instructive, and entertaining tales of the fairies [...] Written by the Countess d’Aulnoi. To which are added, a fairy tale in the ancient English style, by Dr. [Thomas] Parnell [1679-1718]: and Queen Mab’s song*. The high literary register of British fairy poetry was validated in this respect by sharing credit for the production of elite narratives about fairies with the French court; the genre was being implicitly represented as something that was emphatically not a borrowing from superstitious peasants but a fashion among the eighteenth-century European elite.43

The first satirical fairy tale to make an impact in English poetry was “The Fairy Feast” (1704), a mad, marvelous pastiche of the Orpheus and Eurydice tale in which Orpheus has to pass through Fairy Land on his way to hell and spends a merry afternoon playing at the birthday party of “Queen Nab.” The poem was attributed to “the author of ‘The Tale of a Tub,’” Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) whose immensely successful debut satire had been released earlier that year, and even though the poem was actually written by William King (1663-1712), King only laid claim to it after it rode to prominence on

43 For further discussion of the gap between oral tales and literary fairy tales in the French court, Cf. Ruth Bottigheimer *Fairy Tales; A New History* 53-7.
Swift’s coattails. However, fairy tales were then associated both with Swift and with satire.⁴⁴

One of the first poems to actually use the words “fairy tale” in its title, “A Fairy Tale Inscrib’d to the Honourable Mrs. W—” (1717) by Jane Holt (c.1682-1717) borrows the whole cast of Shakespeare’s fairies from A Midsummer Night’s Dream and applies them to the kind of politicized romantic narrative favored by d’Aulnoy.⁴⁵ Holt’s tale features a complex marriage plot staged around a quarrel between Tatiana and Oberon that results in Tatiana being banished to India.⁴⁶ Like most of d’Aulnoy’s contemporaries, Holt follows the female’s point of view, and Holt goes on to represent Tatiana’s exile as an enjoyable and empowering time during which Tatiana and her attendant fairies learn to paint basins in an Eastern style. Like Hamilton, Holt rests the weight of her story on the interaction between text and metatextual connotation: the description of Tatiana’s trip imagines a subversion of patriarchal marital authority and, simultaneously, the act of tale-telling both spreads the idea that women’s communities are powerful and, in doing so,

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⁴⁴ Cf. Sixty years after Swift’s death, his name was again appropriated for a fairy tale publication, this time Richard Johnson’s The Lilliputian Library: Or Gulliver’s Museum in Ten Volumes. Containing Lectures on Morality, Surprising Adventures, Historical Pieces, Remarkable Lives, Interesting Fables, Poetical Pieces, Diverting Tales, Comical Jokes, Miraculous Voyages, Useful Letters: The whole forming a Complete System of Juvenile Knowledge for the Amusement and Improvement of all Little Masters and Misses. Whether in Summer or Winter, Morning, Noon or Evening by Lilliputius Gulliver Citizen of Utopia and Knight of the most noble ordre of human prudence (1782), a miscellany which incorporated several full-length fairy tales into its first volume, including a translation from the French of D’Aulnoy’s “The White Cat.”

⁴⁵ Alexander Pope (1688-1744) does something similar in “The Rape of the Lock” (1712), which features both general categories of fairies: “Sylphs and Sylphids […] Fays, Fairies, Genii, Elves, and Daemons” (14) and specific reference to Shakespeare, in Pope’s case, through the character of Ariel.

⁴⁶ The authorship of this poem is not entirely certain. It was published by “Mrs. Holt,” and Jane Holt (née Wiseman) is the only prominent actress, poet, and playwright who suits the timeline.
built up a real-world dialogue with a female peer. This phase in British fairy tale writing is vital because echoes of these adult patterns of exchange can be found consistently through nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing, particularly writing for communities of women. Although there was not a comparable salon network in Victorian or twentieth-century Britain, the sheer volume of fairy tales published in nineteenth-century women’s periodicals (Cf. Appendix B) suggest that they remained a focal discursive point in the Victorian era, and they unquestionably played a central role in gender-liberal discourse on both sides of the Atlantic in the late twentieth-century.

And although the majority of the French fairy tale authors from d’Aulnoy’s tradition were female, male fairy tale writers also used the fairy tale to negotiate gendered discourse. For example, in 1743 Horace Walpole (1717-1797) wrote “A Fairy Tale,” a very thinly disguised satirical account of the hasty wedding of Hon. Lepelle Hervey (1723-1780) and Mr. Constantine Phipps (1722-1775). In Walpole’s tale, the exiled but heroic “Prince Phippis” is being forced into marriage by “a Large Old Lady of a Frowning Aspect with the Head of a Medusa” otherwise known as “Buckinda, Queen of the Island of the Ducks” (74). It is, in effect, the gender-reversal of d’Aulnoy’s

47 The joke behind the tale is that Holt enclosed the poem with a pair of painted Eastern basins; the poem functioned as a backstory to the gift she sent to the Honorable Mrs. W— (Holt 1), and a brief explanation of the context was given when the poem was formally published.

48 In the eighteenth-century, many of these tales had some comical or satirical element to them. Cf. the anonymously published and extraordinarily titled 1746 volume: The gallant companion: or, an antidote for the hyp and vapours. Containing, [I]. The hobgoblin, or the amorous sylph. II. The heart a shittle-cock: or, the inconsiderate lover. III. The generous rival: or, the female volunteer. IV. The heroick victory: or, love and duty reconciled. V. The fatal mistake: or, beware of jealousy. VI. The fortunate slip: or, the successful intrigue. VII. The cat's paw; a fairy tale. VIII. The she-duellists: or, Don Quixot in petticoats.

49 Phipps was the nephew of the Duchess of Buckingham, and when her son died unexpectedly, the duchess summoned Phipps from Oxford and agreed to make him her heir on condition that he be immediately married to the daughter of Baron Hervey (1698-1743). Within twenty-four hours of first meeting both his aunt and his bride, Phipps was, indeed, married. (Cf. Walpole’s notes to “A Fairy Tale” p. 69)
complaint: a young man is being forced into a political marriage by a matriarchal authority figure—though in this case, the complaint is less about free choice than about Phippis being forced to marry a lady without knowing what she looks like. It is less a protest of loveless political marriages than a defense of man’s right to choose an attractive mate.\textsuperscript{50} Fairy tales represented a forum through which to discuss marriage and sexuality, but their value lay in the fact that they never perpetuated any one set of morals or one gendered point of view consistently. This writing has a lot of commonality with the juvenilia of nineteenth and twentieth-century male poets like Ezra Pound (1885-1972), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), and Thom Gunn (1929-2004) who use fairy tale language to describe young men’s first encounters with their own sexuality and with the social expectations and pressures that surround male sexuality.

Historically, fairy tale poetry by men has very often had queer sub-contexts, and that is also prefaced in Walpole’s tale—in terms that would foreshadow the use of fairy tales to negotiate non-normative sexuality by writers from Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) to Charlotte Mew (1869-1928) and Jackie Kay (b.1961), as well as the use of the term “fairy” in the context of male homosexuality. Consider the most extensive physical description in Walpole’s tale, his caricature of the bisexual father of the bride, Baron John Hervey (1698-1743):\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} In a letter to Horace Mann, dated 7 January 1742, Walpole wrote: “I forgot to tell you all our beauties: there was miss Hervey, my Lord’s daughter, a fine black girl, but as masculine as her father should be” (Correspondence 247).

\textsuperscript{51} For an extensive discussion of the historical figure of Lord Hervey and of the eighteenth-century reaction to his sexuality, Cf. Lucy Moore, \textit{Amphibious Thing: The Life of Lord Hervey} (2000) and James Dubro, “The Third Sex: Lord Hervey and His Coterie” (1976).
[...] on a sudden, the Doors flew Open, and in tript a Dainty little Figure. This Personage, whom [Phippis] takes for a Fairy (and He was not wrong in his conjecture) was most delicately Fair and Light, only not quite so limber in it’s motions as one generally figures Ariel Beings. [...] A Whimsical Attire made [Phippis] doubt of it’s sex; or rather doubt, if it were of any sex—That too might the unnecessary to Fairies; yet He had always heard They were of the Feminine gender—This determin’d Him to treat it upon that foot; and accordingly He began to address it with—Bright Goddess—when the Being screwing up its Shoulders, and stretching out a long bony little finger, said; “What a Terrible Creature!—I am not a woman; I am My Lord Hervey”! (That was the Name the Fairy apurn’d) (74)

Because of Shakespeare’s memorable Ariel, Puck, and Oberon, eighteenth-century British fairies were just as likely to be male as female, so Walpole’s extended complaint about Hervey’s feminine fairy status should seem excessive. However, recent scholars including Raymond Bentman (n.d.) have noted that Walpole was associated with a group of lifetime bachelors, men who demonstrated in their writing “considerable interest in sexuality when it related to men, telling each other sexual anecdotes and jokes that centered on male bodies” (277). In that context, it is possible to recognize the queer suggestiveness in the tale’s fascination with Hervey’s sexuality, for Hervey was, indeed, the eponymous “fairy” of Walpole’s “A Fairy Tale.” The language of fairy tale allowed Walpole to dwell on the details of Hervey’s body with an obsessive hyperbole that would

52 The OED first records the use of “fairy” to describe homosexual men in an article for The American Journal of Psychology dated January 1896, but the article describes whole societies of “inverts” who identified themselves as “The Fairies,” suggesting that the term was in common circulation much earlier. Walpole’s tale is, chronologically, the first source that I have found which defines “fairy” in this way.

53 [Walpole’s footnote:] “John Lord Hervey, Eldest son to the Earl of Bristol was vice-chamberlain to King George 2nd & afterward Lord Privy Seal. Often mentioned in Pope’s books by the Names of Paris, Sporus, Lord Fanny [etc.?]. He died before his Father in August 1743.”

54 Bentman also goes on to point out that “Walpole and several of his friends were considered effeminate in ways that were not socially acceptable at the time an that were, at times seen as signs of sodomitical behavior” (277), and it is possible to read “A Fairy Tale” as overly-defensive on the topic of male effeminacy.
be out of place in a less florid genre, but which is politically permissible in the magic “once upon a time” in the kingdom of the Ducks. The implausibility of fairy tales allows for a kind of poetic license.

In d’Aulnoy’s tradition, the combination of ambivalence and implicit metatextuality also allowed authors to present multiple perspectives on broader political issues without necessarily endorsing one above the others. Consider the fairy tale biography of “The Princess Caimon” (1743) by Mlle. de Lubert (c.1710-1779), written within a generation of the looming French Revolution (1789-1799):\(^{55}\)

My father was king of a country near Mount Caucasus. He reigned to the best of his ability over a people of incredible wickedness. They were perpetually revolting, and often the windows of his palace were broken by stones they hurled. The queen, my mother, who was a very accomplished woman, composed speeches for him to make to the disaffected, but if he succeeded in appeasing them one day, the next produced new troubles. The judges became tired of condemning people to death, and the executioners or hanging them. At last things reached such a state that my father saw that all our provinces were united against us, and he decided to withdraw from the capital so that he would no longer have to witness so many unpleasant scenes. He took the queen with him and left the government to the kingdom to one of his ministers, who was very wise and less timid than my father. […] Our wicked subjects joyfully fired guns at their departure and strangled our minister the next day, saying that he had wanted to carry matters with too high a hand and that they preferred their former sovereign. My father was not at all flattered by their preference and remained hiding. (Zipes, Beauties 274)

This astonishing sub-plot is hidden in a much longer narrative, but its centrality to Lubert’s tale is made evident in the “happily ever after,” when the prince and princess are finally united and the fairies shower blessings down on their heads:

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\(^{55}\) As a fairy tale author, Mlle. de Lubert was most active several years after d’Aulnoy’s death, but she was very much writing in the same tradition and with similar conventions.
After a week spent overwhelming them with good things, [the fairies] departed and conducted the king and queen, Camion’s father and mother, back to their kingdom, where they had punished the old inhabitants and repopulated it with new people faithful to their master. (292)

Lubert draws attention to the balance of power between rulers and subjects in zero-sum, life-or-death terms: the lavish royal celebration depends on the “punishment” and “repopulation” of the “disaffected” peasant class. Although the romantic sensibilities of the tale suggest that the prince and princess are the priority, Lubert’s narrative leaves questions hanging. Is the princess likely to be a good ruler? She never understood what the peasants were unhappy about, or why they were so united in their effort to depose the king. Her royal training has led her to believe that peasants’ appeals should be met with empty rhetoric and mass execution until “judges became tired of condemning people to death, and the executioners or hanging them.” Where, exactly, does the satire begin and end? To what extent is the story simply royal wish-fulfillment in a politically unstable age (trading “wicked” peasants for “faithful” ones), and to what extent is it a story that gives voice to the “wicked” peasants and highlights the genocidal, selfish cruelty of the ruling class? This more political/economic use of fairy tales would be exploited in the Victorian period by writers like John Ruskin (1819-1900) and George MacDonald (1824-1905), then carried over into twentieth century writing by Stevie Smith (1902-1971) and Carol Ann Duffy (b.1955).
Figure 2.1 “The Plum Pudding in Danger” by James Gillray (1805)

The Victorian colonial use of fairy tales to distinguish between “low” cultures from “high” cultures also has its roots in the eighteenth century. Certainly, the question of colonial expansion was crucial in the eighteenth-century as both Britain and France participated in the race to carve up the world’s resources and claim vast colonial tracts, particularly in North America, Africa, and Asia. In France, the eighteenth-century fascination with creating new fairy tales was also paralleled by the importation of exotic tales from the near east. The orientalist and archaeologist Antoine Galland (1646-1715) had begun publishing translations of The Thousand Nights by 1704, and the official Arabic interpreter for the French court François Pétis de la Croix (1653-1713) produced
his own *Turkish Tales* in 1707.\(^{56}\) Within a year of first composition, both works were re-translated, this time from French into English. Although such tales were often populated by peris and geniis (Galland’s more so than Pétis’), they were not initially identified as “fairy tales,” a fact that speaks to the distinctive nature of that genre. In the preface to the 1708 edition of Pétis’ work, the translator also makes a distinction between Turkish tales and the native fairy stories of Britain: “In a Word, these Tales are equally instructive, tho’ not so insipid as those of *Pilpay*; and have all the Beauties, without the Extravagance of our own Tales of the Fairies” (ii).\(^{57}\)

However, by the mid-eighteenth-century, there was significant conflation of fairy tales and exotic tales, as indicated by the definition of “fairy” in *New and Complete Dictionary of Arts and Sciences: Comprehending all the Branches of Useful Knowledge* (1754):

[... ] The fairies are a peculiar species of divinities, that have but little relation to any of those of the antient Greeks or Romans, unless perhaps to the larvæ; though others, with great reason, will not have them ranked among gods, but suppose them an intermediate kind of beings, neither gods, angels, men, or devils.\(^{58}\) They are of oriental extraction, and seem to have been invented by the Persians and Arabs, whose religion and history abound with relations concerning them: these have a particular country which they suppose the fairies to inhabit, called Fairyland. (1198-9)

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\(^{56}\) Galland’s translation was anticipated by his earlier anthropological work: *The Remarkable Sayings, Apothegms and Maxims of the Eastern Nations; Abstracted and Translated out of their Books, written in the Arabian, Persian, and Turkish Language: With REMARKS. By Monsieur Galland, who liv’d many Years in those Countries*, which was translated into English in 1695.

\(^{57}\) *Pilpay’s Fables* (also *The Fables of Bidpai*) were a loose English translation of the *Panchatantra*, an ancient, traditional Indian collection of animal fables. The collection was first introduced into English in 1570 by Sir Thomas North (Cf. Doni *Morall*), but a fresh translation was also released in 1699. The *Fables* served as an inspiration for Galland and as a source text for the second volume of *La Fontaine’s Fables*.

\(^{58}\) This line is borrowed from Addison’s “Pleasures of the Imagination.”
The several factual inaccuracies in this paragraph are what indicates a blurring of genre: by marking Arabian and Persian tales about geniis and peris as a matter of belief (“religion and history”) rather than art, the authors associated them with superstition and cultural lack of refinement, and the subtle line about “Fairy-land” further associates these “oriental” tales with the peasant beliefs of the British lower classes.\(^{59}\) The move to then sequentially locate these tales as antecedents (“larvae”) of Greco-Roman myth also helps situate them into a chronological, developmental hierarchy that hints at the same kind of proto-anthropological stadialism that was being developed by Adam Smith and foreshadows the much more extensive theorization of colonial “primitivism” that would appear in the mid-Victorian period.\(^{60}\)

In the eighteenth-century as in the nineteenth, these exotic tales were useful as a way of helping British citizens who did not have the chance to travel the world to catch a glimpse of oriental life. The fact that this glimpse was highly mediated probably made the tales more, rather than less, persuasive as representatives of Eastern culture because the tales were mediated to suit and reinforce the existing prejudices of a Western audience. In addition to the translations of Eastern texts, (faux-)Eastern fairy tale influences began to appear in the work of major writers: Samuel Johnson’s “Almerine and Shelimah” (1753), Oliver Goldsmith’s fairy tale in *The Citizen of the World: or*  

\(^{59}\) In most Persian and Arabic fairy texts, the peris inhabit and routinely interact with the ordinary mundane world; genii are supposed to have their own country, but the land of the genii is very unlike any native British or Celtic concept of “Fairy-land.” The editors of the dictionary should have been aware of the differences because the next definition after “Fairy” is “Fairy-Circle,” a phenomenon that is common in British and Celtic traditions, but not to Middle Eastern traditions.

\(^{60}\) In this context, superstitious fairy stories and Eastern tales would be held in some degree of contrast with artistic courtly fairy tales and fairy poems, though defenders of Enlightenment rationality would group all these categories under the collective heading of dangerously “imaginative” misleading tales.
Letters from a Chinese Philosopher (1760), and Horace Walpole’s “A New Arabian Night’s Entertainment” (1787). Like the adaptations of the French fairy tales, these spin-offs often borrowed liberally from the fairy poetry tradition, as in Arimant and Tamira: an Eastern Tale in the Manner of Dryden’s Fables (1707) by “A Gentleman of Cambridge” which employs Dryden’s call for imagination to justify maximally shocking, maximally foreign plot-elements like virgin sacrifice and a grieving widow’s self-immolation on her husband’s funeral pyre. The colonial implications of The Arabian Nights and its derivatives have been well mapped by twentieth and twenty-first century scholars; the point I wanted to make here was that although these were not originally coded as “fairy tales,” but they helped draw attention to stories as not only representatives of national culture but markers of relative socio-cultural development. Furthermore, because fairy tales were already being used to think about national politics, and the role of the court, and because fairy poetry was already coded as profoundly nationalist, the blurring of these genre lines in the nineteenth-century would reinforce the nationalist implications of tales—both those written from the seat of the Empire and those imported from the colonies and far corners of the world.

61 For a more complete list of eighteenth-century (faux-)oriental tales, Cf. Martha Pike Conant’s The Oriental Tale in the Eighteenth Century (1908) which divides eighteenth-century tales into four groups: imaginative, moralistic, philosophic, and satiric. For a more balanced, contemporary historicization, Cf. The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West (2008), edited by Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum.

62 The adventuring, exploring aspect of these tales also helped underwrite a genre of satirical travel narratives [Cf. Anthony Hamilton’s Four Facardins (c.1720), Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1727), Rudolph Erich Raspe’s Baron Münchausen’s Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia (1785)] After fairy tales and adventure narratives were grouped under the general aegis of “children’s literature” in the nineteenth century, a blending of fairy tale and adventure narratives would resurface at the turn of the twentieth century; and the hyperbolic satirical elements of the eighteenth century texts would reemphasize the links between early twentieth-century nonsense writing and fairy tale writing. Cf. Chapter 6.2 “War and Fairy Tales” and 6.3 “Mythmaking, Orientalism, and High Modernism”
2.5 Fairy Tales as Children’s Literature

Once upon a time (in 1697), the French author Charles Perrault (1608-1723) published a volume of fairy tales, *Histories ou Contes des Temps Passé: Contes de ma Mere l’Oie* (*Histories and Tales of Times Past: Mother Goose Tales*). Unlike the many courtiers writing fairy tales for adults in the salon tradition, Perrault uniquely marketed his work as a collection of tales for children. Indeed, the frontispiece associated with this work is now iconic: an elderly, illiterate, peasant woman spins thread and tales by the domestic hearth with a cluster of children around her feet:

![Figure 2.2 Les Contes de ma Mère l’Oie: Frontispiece (1697)](image1)

![Figure 2.3 Les Contes des Fées: Frontispiece (1698)](image2)

The domestic element and the presence of children are all the more striking, compared against the frontispiece to the collection *Les Contes des Fées* (*Fairy Tales*), which was published by Madame d’Aulnoy (c.1650-1705) in 1698 and which depicts a young, wealthy, powerful woman author as the goddess Athena, with the worlds she manipulates...
in the background and her adoring, adult, sophisticated courtly audience in the foreground (53).

Like d’Aulnoy and her coterie, Perrault was very invested in using fairy tales to engage with social values, and, from its inception, the links between poetry and fairy tales was very strong because, by appending a brief poetic envoi, both Perrault and d’Aulnoy could clarify the moral of a tale in a few pithy, highly memorable lines. For example, the envoi to Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood” functions as a warning against sexual predators:

One sees here that young children,
Especially pretty girls,
Who’re bred as pure as pearls,
Should question words addressed by men.
Or they may serve one day as feast
For a wolf or other beast. […]
Alas for those girls who’ve refused the truth:
The sweetest tongue has the sharpest tooth. (Perrault 9)

Perrault’s tales are calculated to initiate children into an adult sphere of social values, teaching them early on how men and women, children and adults, peasants and kings function in social relations. In this case, “little girls” are being taught that to be “pretty” is to be vulnerable, and that it is their responsibility to know when to “question words addressed by men” lest they be devoured. However, the specific moral is less important than the manner in which it is delivered. Because Perrault’s tales were figured as being told from adults to children, they were more clearly didactic than discursive. There is no personal and subjective “I” voice, only the voice of authority. And where d’Aulnoy’s

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63 Not all fairy tale writers do this, but it is a very common practice from the seventeenth through the end of the nineteenth centuries. It is relatively rare in twentieth century British poetry, and generally appears as a parody of the earlier envoi pattern in the work of poets like Stevie Smith or Liz Lochhead.
morals tend to assume that both the narrator and the audience are in sympathy with the heroine/protagonist and tend to chide society or a third-person figure for causing harm, Perrault’s tales do not assume that a common perspective will be shared by narrator and audience; sometimes, as in the case of “Little Red Riding Hood,” he chides the audience for vulnerability rather than pointing towards a broader social problem. d’Aulnoy wants to persuade her audience to help change society; Perrault wants his audience to understand and fit into society as it is represented by his adult narrator.

In part, Perrault’s move to target a child-audience was still very innovative because children’s literature had not yet grown up as a major industry. Although literacy rates were improving somewhat, at the turn of the eighteenth century, printing was still very expensive and there was not yet a widespread demand for children’s texts in Britain. However, new arguments about children and education were being made that would eventually pave the way for such a market. The full scope of educational history is beyond this chapter, but I would like to outline a few key shifts in didactic theory as they relate to fairy tales. Four years before Perrault and d’Aulnoy begin to publish their tale collections, John Locke (1632-1704) published his treatise Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693) which engaged with both the role of verse and the role of imaginative tales in children’s education. Famously, Locke argued that children are not simply miniature adults but developing beings who need material suitable for their stage of intellectual, social and moral growth. For Locke, there was no possible division between academic and moral learning, so although he allowed for some imaginative tales (on the grounds that they are memorable and pleasant to read), he only made room for stories with clear morals: “To this Purpose, I think Aesop’s Fables [c.620-564 BC] the best,
which being Stories apt to delight and entertain a Child, may yet afford useful Reflections to a grown Man…” (198). Consequently, Locke also carefully tempers his endorsement of “pleasant” reading by cautioning his readers to avoid works that might “fill [a child’s] Head with perfectly useless Trumpery, or lay the Principles of Vice and Folly” (133). Although Locke has a weakness for Greco-Roman texts, which have some aura of literary and artistic respectability, he had no patience for tales that hinted of local peasant traditions. For Locke, aesthetic considerations must always bow to moral ones, and with this argument he foregrounds a crucial split between “good” and “bad” children’s literature defined in strictly moral terms. In adult material, Locke always condemned texts that might foster superstition, and he extends this criticism even more emphatically to children’s literature because children have less empirical experience with which to balance exposure to potentially misleading tales.

For similar reasons, although Locke (like d’Aulnoy and Perrault) recognizes the memorability (and therefore effectiveness) of pithy verse morals, his endorsement of imaginative tales was tempered by his strong bias against vernacular poetry. Because verse is highly memorable, it is also therefore potentially dangerous if it includes

64 The immense popularity of Aesop translations (and bastardizations) at the end of the seventeenth century may be indicated by the exaggerated advertising in such effusively titled texts as: Æsop Improved: or Above Three Hundred and Fifty Fables, mostly Æsop’s With their Morals Paraphrased in English Verse: Amounting to About One Hundred and Fifty More than do Appear to have Been so Rendered by Any Other Hand (1673).

65 For a broader argument about the religious reception of fairy tales for children, Cf. Zipes, Victorian xii-xiv.

66 Locke does make allowance for translations of Classical morals; certainly, most editions of Aesop’s fables published in the seventeenth century included morals paraphrased in English verse. But he clearly preferred Greek and Roman morals to be undiluted: “That which Parents should take care of here, is to distinguish between the Wants of Fancy, and those of Nature; which Horace has well taught them to do in this Verse: Queis humana sibi doleat natura negatis” (84).
inappropriate material, and Locke positively rails against wasting a child’s brain and risking a child’s morality in such an unprofitable arena as contemporary vernacular Poetry. His speech against it is so deliciously spiteful and overwrought that it deserves quotation in full:

I have much more to say, and of more Weight, against their making Verses; Verses of any Sort: For if he has no Genius to Poetry, ‘tis the most unreasonable thing in the World to torment a Child and waste his Time about that which can never succeed; and if he have a poetick Vein, ‘tis to me the strangest thing in the World that the Father should desire or suffer it to be cherished or improved. Methinks the Parents should labour to have it stifled and suppressed as much as may be; and I know not what Reason a Father can have to wish his Son a Poet, who does not desire to have him bid Defiance to all other Callings and Business; which is not yet the worst of the Case; for if he proves a successful Rhymer, and get once the Reputation of a Wit, I desire it may be considered what Company and Places he is like to spend his Time in, nay, and Estate too: For it is very seldom seen, that any one discovers Mines of Gold or Silver in Parnassus. ‘Tis a pleasant Air, but a barren Soil; and there are very few Instances of those who have added to their Patrimony by any thing they have reaped from thence. Poetry and Gaming, which usually go together, are alike in this too, that they seldom bring any Advantage but to those who have nothing else to live on. Men of Estates almost constantly go away Losers; and ‘tis well if they escape at a cheaper rate then their whole Estates, or the greatest Part of them. If therefore you would not have your Son the Fiddle to every jovial Company, without whom the Sparks could not relish their Wine nor know how to pass an Afternoon idly; if you would not have him to waste his Time and Estate to divert others, and contemn the dirty Acres left him by his Ancestors, I do not think you will much care he should be a Poet, or that his School-master should enter him in versifying. But yet, if any one will think Poetry a desirable Quality in his Son, and that the Study of it would raise his Fancy and Parts, he must needs yet confess, that to that End reading the excellent Greek and Roman Poets is of more Use than making bad Verses of his own […] (152-3)

Locke underwrites a distinction between “verse” which is merely text that rhymes and is memorable, and “poetry” which purports (in this period) to elevate verse to an art form. Yet his binary division between Classical poetry and English-language is so absolute that they seem to have no discernable relationship, and his deep bifurcation of “good”
(Classical, moral) educational material from “bad” (vernacular, wasteful) educational material would be repeatedly cited in British educational practice for centuries.

Locke’s opinions would not be accepted completely without contestation, and even in the eighteenth century, anthologists marketing introductory poetry to children would draw on the idea that cultivating an ear for poetry and heightening one’s aesthetic sensibilities can inspire the soul and, more importantly, help children situate themselves as culturally refined members of an elite, literate, upper-class: *A Collection of Poems, From the Best Authors: Adapted to Every Age, but Peculiarly Designed to Form the Taste of Youth* (James Elphinston ed. 1764); *Epistles, Elegant, Familiar, & Instructive: Selected from the Best Writers, Ancient as Well as Modern; Intended for the Improvement of Young Persons and for General Entertainment* (Anon. 1791); *The Young Gentleman and Lady’s Poetical Preceptor: Being a Collection of the Most Admired Poetry: Selected from the Best Authors, Calculated to Form the Taste to Classic Elegance; And, while it Delights the Fancy, to Improve the Morals, and to Harmonize the Heart* (Anon. 1795).67

In effect, these anthologies are elevating English-language poetry in a way that elevates British culture. British culture is not inferior to Greco-Roman culture because it has its own “Classical Elegance,” and by including both English-language poetry and English-language translations of Classical poetry in the same volume, anthologists could imply that English-language poetry is the natural descendent of Classical poetry, not merely an inferior imitation. They would further argue that English-language poetry is not, as Locke

67 There are dozens of similar anthologies. Cf. also *The Virgin Muse: Being a Collection of Poems from Our Most Celebrated English Poets: Designed for the Use of Young Gentlemen and Ladies at Schools* (1717); *The Poetical Preceptor; or a Collection of Select Pieces of Poetry; Extracted from the Works of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1777).
argues, frivolous and immoral, but capable of “Improving,” “Forming Taste,” and inspiring “Harmonious Hearts.” In the nineteenth century, these volumes would be heavily criticized and, eventually, almost entirely reserved for older children, though younger children would be given less morally and aesthetically sophisticated “verse.”

Unfortunately, and in spite of Locke’s qualified endorsement of Aesop’s fables as exemplary imaginative writing, imaginative tales would also soon fall afoul of his sharply established moral binary. In 1762, the French education theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) agreed that children should be taught to read using enticing stories rather than dull histories, but clarifies this point by suggesting that children should be educated exclusively by means of explicit ethical texts because fantasy will only confuse them. His examples are strikingly literal and speaks to Locke’s endorsement of Aesop directly by posing the questions: if a child reads about “Mr. Fox” speaking to “Mr. Crow,” will he think that animals converse? and will a child the be bitterly disappointed when he finds out that he cannot speak with animals?:

[… the words of fables are no more fables than the words of history are history. How can one be so blind as to call fables the morals of children, without reflecting that the apologue, while amusing them, also deludes them; that, while seduced by the fiction, they allow the truth to escape them; and that the effort made to render the instruction agreeable, prevents them from profiting by it? Fables may instruct men, but children must be told the bare truth; for the moment we cover truth with a veil, they no longer give themselves the trouble to lift it. (79)

In the same terms, he also cautions parents not to bewilder children with poetry or other emotive, impractical, symbolically-driven “nonsense”:

Do not address to the child discourses which he can not understand. Let there be no descriptions, no eloquence, no figures of speech, no poetry. Neither sentiment nor taste is now at stake. Continue to be simple, clear, and dispassionate[...] 69

Like Locke, Rousseau suggests that there is “bad” and “good” children’s literature, but by making his moral distinction a question of “truth” rather than moral intuition, he polarizes misleading, poetic fantasy against enlightening, literal morality tales. Although he does agree that poetry can be spiritually enlightening for older students, he strongly advocates against exposing young children to its “eloquent figures of speech.”

Yet although both Locke and Rousseau would be quoted endlessly in debates about whether or not imaginative fairy material was suitable for educational purposes, fairy tales themselves were being used as vehicles through which adults might allegorically discuss educational principles, as in the anonymously published Education, A Fairy Tale (1744).70 In this long-winded tale, the seven-foot tall, athletic Prince Typhon is raised by the Fairy Rustick to have every imaginable physical skill but no mental refinement whatsoever; at the same time the three-foot tall Princess Sensible is raised by the Fairy Townley to have every intellectual refinement but to be so physically delicate that she is stricken by every hint of noise, mildest scent, or glimpse of sunlight. The prince and princess were fated to marry but, unsurprisingly, each finds the other unbearable until the Fairy Capable reeducates both the prince and princess towards moderation in body and mind and magically alters their respective heights. Subtle

69 139, Rousseau is not necessarily arguing against poetry or fables for adults, but he considers both a very minor facet of healthy intellectualism (252).

70 The sub-title to this work is “From the French,” but since there is no authorial attribution, this may indicate an affiliation with the French style rather than imply that the text is a direct translation of a French tale.
allusions to contemporary writers like Addison, sly digs at court politics, and the moral itself suggest that the tale is meant for adults: it is about how to educate properly, not about how to be educated. Because fairy tales did not initially function as children’s literature, they were an excellent genre through which to discuss children.

Having said that, parsing out the history of children’s fairy tales can be difficult because most scholars work backwards from the existing canon of fairy tales and include the trajectory of developing fairy tales, early British translations of d’Aulnoy and *The Arabian Nights* which were sexually explicitly, politically sophisticated texts with prefaces, asides, and morals addressed towards a peer audience of adults. These were not necessarily understood to be instructive tales, and they were certainly not understood as tales targeted at child-audiences: in a 1723 letter to a friend, the famous poet and satirist Alexander Pope (1688-1744) wrote that “I have long had an inclination to tell a fairy tale, the more wild and exotic the better; therefore a *vision*, which is confined to no rules of probability, will take in all the variety and luxuriancy of description you will; provided there is no apparent moral to it. I think one or two of the *Persian Tales* would give one hints for such an invention” (*Letters* 32).

A word-for-word edition of Perrault’s tales was published and addressed to children in 1726, however, Ruth Bottigheimer’s archival research has made it clear that this text was not widely published or read until the 1770s when there was an upsurge in fairy tales published in volumes specifically marketed to child-audiences. Yet it is likely that child-audiences had some exposure to the concept of “fairy tales,” if not through reading the adult fairy tales or fairy poetry, than through the theatre. *The Drury Lane Calendar 1747-1776* makes note of more than 10 plays that were specifically called
“fairy tales” and dozens of productions of the immensely popular play *Queen Mab* by David Garrick (1717-1779). As a venue for developing fairy tales, drama had two major advantages over poetry. First, it reached a much broader class audience and was consequently less invested in distancing itself from “low class” superstition. Second, fairies and fairy tales make for wonderful visual spectacle in an era when theatre patents limited the number of theatres that could perform “spoken plays” and during which other theatres relied heavily on visual and musical effects to draw audiences. Dramatic productions that drew wide audiences from upper and lower classes were quick to add “fairy tale” to the titles of adaptations of earlier work, notably *A Fairy Tale In two acts. Taken from Shakespeare* (1763) by David Garrick (1717-1779). There were also productions of tales adapted from the oral tradition like *The tragedy of tragedies; or, The life and death of Tom Thumb the Great* (1731), by Henry Fielding (1707-1754), and original fairy tales like *Edgar and Emmeline; a fairy tale: in a dramatic entertainment of two acts* (1761) by John Hawkesworth (c.1715-1773). Garrick’s production of *Queen Mab* (adapted from Michael Drayton’s poem *Nymphidia*) in particular seems to have been very popular with family audiences. In fact, the enduring popularity of Queen Mab inspired John Newberry to make her the spokesperson in the advertising campaign for *The Lilliputian Magazine: or the Young Gentleman & Lady’s Golden Library* (1750), even though Newberry was a sturdy Lockean, who included no fairy tales, fairy stories, or fairy poems, but does include a brief reference to Garrick’s play.\(^7\)

It was towards the end of the century that fairy tales first appeared in pantomime,\(^7\)

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71 “[The Angelicans] boarded the ship, however, and, upon so near a view, appeared to be no more than a gigantic sort of Lilliputians, about the size of the fairies in Mr. Garrick’s *Queen Mab*” (*Lilliputian Magazine* 69). For more details about Newberry’s ad campaign, cf. Bottingheimer, “Mispereived” 12.
and although the rage for annual Christmas pantomime took some time to become
established, in the nineteenth century, it unquestionably played a major role in forming
the British canon of fairy tales and in seamlessly incorporating foreign tales into the
canon that would be emphatically claimed as “British.”
Figure 2.4 Pantomime Production Ephemera 1788-1890 (pp.112-113)

a.) Aladin; or, *The Wonderful Lamp* at Covent Garden (1788): first fairy tale panto.
b.) *Cinderella* at Drury Lane (1838): one of the first fairy tale Christmas pantos.
gesturing at the variety of tales encompassed in the fairy tale canon.
ALADIN;
OR,
The Wonderful Lamp.
A PANTOMIME ENTERTAINMENT.
PERFORMED AT THE
THEATRE ROYAL,
COVENT GARDEN.
The Music composed by Mr. SHIELD.

THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY-LANE.
THIS EVENING will be performed the new Grand Fairy Opera of CINDERELLA.
Felix, Mr. Frazer; Baron Pumpolino, Mr. Giubelei; Alidoro, Mr. S. Jones; Dandini, Mr. E. Seguin.
Cinderella, Miss Romer; Clorinda, Miss Forde.
To conclude with the new Grand Christmas Pantomime called HARLEQUIN JACK-A-LANTERN.
Harlequin, Mr. Howell; Clown, Mr. T. Matthews; Pantaloon, Mr. F. Sutton—Columbine, Miss Lane.
After 1770, adaptations and carefully chosen extracts taken from adult fairy tales and new original fairy tales began more regularly appearing in miscellanies specifically marketed for children, such as *The Lilliputian Library, or Gulliver’s Museum in Ten Volumes [...] the Whole Forming a Complete System of Juvenile Knowledge* (1782). New editions of Perrault were released, and translations of select tales by d’Aulnoy were re-marketed with child-audience-friendly titles like: *Queen Mab: Containing a Select Collection of Only the Best, Most Instructive, and Entertaining Tales of the Fairies* (1770). Likewise, dubious fairy/morality tale hybrids were published under such odd titles as *The Prettiest Book for Children; Being the History of the Enchanted Castle; Situated in One of the Fortunate Isles, and Governed by the Giant Instruction: Written for the Entertainment of the Little Masters and Misses of Great Britain, by Don Stephano Bunyano* (1770). Clearly, the definition of “fairy tale” was still very much in flux, but in some respects it followed a pattern set in adult fairy poetry. As Katherine Briggs (1898-1980) has famously argued, there were many native British fairy tales, but very few of the stories that came directly from the folk tradition (“Babes in the Woods,” “Tom Thumb”) would eventually gain anything like the status of the more glittery tales which followed the courtly patterns of writing (“Cinderella,” “Snow White,” “Sleeping Beauty,”

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72 Earlier miscellanies with promising titles tended to include tales or scientific accounts set in exotic locations, but to eschew magical action or fairy characters. Cf. *Puerillia: or, Amusements for the Young* (1751), *A Museum for Young Gentlemen and Ladies* (1760), *The Amusing Instructor* (1769), etc.

73 The tale does feature a blue-bearded magical figure with a white wand, and claims to be published for the purposes of “entertainment,” but the whole is a classic example of a morality tale and frequently pauses the narrative action to offer moral injunctions, prayers, and religious reflections. (To the point where there are, word-for-word, more asides than narrative plot.)
etc.),” or fairy characters like Queen Mab that were borrowed directly from Shakespeare.  

And although advocates of Lockean educational principles were heard to say disparaging things about fairy tales, at the turn of the century, they would often turn around and include fairy poems or fairy stories in the more courtly writing pattern in the same anthologies. For example, in her volume *Poetry for Children* (1801) Lucy Aikin (1781-1864) argued that:

Since dragons and fairies, giants and witches, have vanished from our nurseries before the wand of reason, it has been a prevailing maxim that the young mind should be fed on more prose and simple matter of fact. A fear, rational in its origin, of adding, by superstitious and idle terrors, to the natural weakness of childhood, or contaminating, by anything false or impure, its truth and innocence—has, by some writers, and some parents, been carried to so great an excess, that probably no work would be considered by them as unexceptionable for the use of children, in which any scope was allowed to the fanciful or marvellous. It may well be questioned, however, whether the novel-like tales now written for the amusement of youth, may not be productive of more injury to the mind; by giving a false picture of the real world, than the fairy fictions of the last generation, which only wandered over the region of shadows [...] Poetry has many advantages for children over both these classes of writing. The magic of rhyme is felt in the very cradle—the mother and the nurse employ it as a spell of soothing power.

The charge of fostering “superstition” is here repeated almost verbatim from the Hobbesan arguments at the beginning of the century, but, ironically, Aikin only applies it


75 iii-iv. Note: A brief passage from this long quotation has often been cited in children’s literature histories as evidence that there was a downturn in fairy tale production and reception at the end of the century. Such arguments have since been archivally refuted, but the out-of-context excerpt remains in common circulation. Cf. Michael Grenby: “A number of often-quoted pieces make the point succinctly. […] Lucy Aikin observed in *Poetry for Children* (1801) that ‘dragons and fairies, giants and witches, have vanished from our nurseries before the wand of reason’”(3).
to prose and oral tales, and excuses poetry on the Dryden-esque grounds that poetry is aesthetically stimulating. The arguments which had been played out in adult terms over the course of the eighteenth-century would be reiterated constantly in the nineteenth century in context of children’s literature.

Even in prose tales, the line between morality tales and fairy tales was much less clear that most modern might seem to suggest. For example, consider the “autobiographical” work: *The Renowned History of Primrose Prettyface who by her Sweetness of Temper and Love of Learning was Raised from being the Daughter of a Poor Cottager to Great Riches and to the Dignity of the Lady of the Manor: Set forth for the Benefit and Imitation of those Pretty Little Boys and Girls: Who by Learning their Books and Obliging Mankind/Would to Beauty of Body add Beauty of Mind* (“Printed in the year when all little boys and girls should be good,” i.e. 1782). The story is essentially a “Cinderella” trope; a neglected, disadvantaged girl with a harsh life prospect exhibits such beauty, sweetness of temper, and pleasantness of discourse that, against all odds, she catches the attention of a high-ranking suitor. As in the fairy tale, beauty of body and beauty of character are equivalent, but magical dresses are redundant for a heroine adorned by “sweet temper” and “love of learning.” In fact, a number of morality tales seem to have simply replaced magic with a miraculous universal reverence for morals and manners, but the structure of the tale remained almost exactly the same.76

76 As such, “Cinderella” was well recognized enough by the turn of the century to function as a subject of parody. Cf. the (rather bizarre) anonymously published 1798 poem “Loves of the Triangles,” which offers the following parodic argument for its first canto: “*Warning to the profane not to approach—Nymphs and Deities of Mathematical Mythology—Cyclois of a pensive turn—Pendulums, on the contrary, playful—and why?—Marriage of Euclid and Algebra—[...] Hyde-Park Gate on a Sunday morning—Cockneys—Coaches.—Didactic Poetry—Nonsense.—Love delights in Angles or Corners—Theory of Fluxions explained—Trochaï, the Nymph of the Wheel—Smoke-Jack described—Personification of elementary or culinary Fire.—Little Jack Horner—Story of Cinderella—*
For Locke and Rousseau both imaginative tales and verse are ideal for teaching small children because they are, respectively, pleasant and memorable; and the increasing rage for fairy tales made it clear that they were very popular with late eighteenth-century child audiences. However, it was also understood that fairy tales and poetry both have the potential to be so ambiguous or so decadently pleasurable as to be morally misleading. Consequently, determining the exact role of verse and stories in didactic practice became a crucial issue that carried over well into the nineteenth-century. To wit: is it possible for an educator to capitalize on pleasure without sacrificing virtue?

For educators like Lucy Aikin and her contemporary Maria Edgeworth, the answer was clearly “yes,” because both women included fairy poetry in their anthologies at the same time that both women were noting the “death” of magic and fairy tales in the nursery. Fairy poetry had gained such an implicit degree of respectability that it was given a pass, even by educators who were strong advocates of rationality and morality tales. Aiken’s “The Fairy’s Song” invites dainty child readers to imaginatively join with dainty Shakespearian fairies led by Queen Mab. Together fairies and children would dance their way into the new century:

Come follow, follow me,
Ye fairy elves that be,
Light tripping o’er the green;

RECTANGLE, a MAGICIAN, educated by PLATO and MENECMUS—in love with THREE CURVES, at the same time—served by GINS, or GENII—transforms himself into a CONE—The THREE CURVES requite his Passion—description of them—PARABOLA, HYPERBOLA, and ELLIPSISS—ASYMPTOTES—Conjugated Axes—Illustrations—REWBE, BARRAS, and LEPEAUX—the THREE virtuous Directors—MACBETH and the THREE WITCHES—The THREE Fates—the THREE Graces—KING LEAR and his THREE Daughters—Derby Dilligence—Catherine Wheel.— […]” the mad summary continues for another half a page (167-8).

77 For more detail on Edgeworth’s use of fairies, cf. Chapter 1.1.5 “How are fairy tales defined by children’s literature scholars?”
Come follow Mab your queen!
Hand in hand we’ll dance around,
For this place is Fairy ground. (Aikin 112)
PART II:
FAIRIES, FAIRY TALES, POETRY, AND
THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FOUNDATIONS OF LITERARY THEORY

[The folklorist] finds that he must bring to his work more talents than one man can easily possess. Literary critics, anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and aestheticians are all needed if we are to hope to know why folktales are made, how they are invented, what art is used in their telling, how they grow and change and occasionally die.
-Stith Thompson, 1946

Problems of folklore are acquiring more and more importance nowadays. None of the humanities, be it ethnography, history, linguistics, or the history of literature, can do without folklore. Little by little we are becoming aware that the solution to many diverse phenomena of spiritual culture is hidden in folklore.
-Vladimir Propp, 1946 (Trans. 1984)

If the eighteenth century saw the inception of fairy poetry as a genre, the nineteenth century fostered its development to a whole new level: new fairy poetry was being written by dozens of canonical and non-canonical authors, the development of pantomime helped to codify fairy tales into a coherent canon, fairy verse was established as a children’s genre, fairy tales and allusions to fairy tales began to appear regularly in prose and poetry, fairy tales became an important resource for nascent literary theorists, and folklore was organized as a formal area of research. Ironically, although many of

\[1\] Folktales 4-5.
\[2\] Theory 3.
these developments borrowed ideas and language from the eighteenth century, the
process by which those developments happened helped to occlude the eighteenth-century
investment in fairies and fairy poetry, both critical and artistic.

As anthologies of prose fairy tales began to flourish in the nineteenth-century
British literary market, many of the volumes would capitalize on the literary prestige of
what Warton had called “the most poetical age” by looking back to sixteenth- and
seventeenth-century fairy poets for their epigraphs. In doing so, even new anthologies
like *Fairy Tales: Now First Collected* (1831) could fit themselves into a doubly
longstanding British fairy tradition.\(^3\)

—Fairy Elves
Whose midnight revel, by a forest side,
Or fountain, some belated peasant sees,
Or dreams he sees; while over-head the moon
Sits arbitress, and nearer to the earth
Wheels her pale course; they, on their mirth and dance
Intent, with jocund music charm his ear:
At once with joy and fear his heart rebounds.
—John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)\(^4\)

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\(^3\) The pieces that they chose functioned metatextually in that they almost always chose fairy poetry
passages that gesture nostalgically at a distant past in which fairies were more populous. For additional
fairy epigrams, cf. *Fairy Tales: Selected from the Best Authors* (1794) citing John Dryden; *The Fairy
Mythology* (1828) citing Michael Drayton; *Two Fairy Tales Arranged in Dramatic Form* (1851) citing

\(^4\) The most popularly identified sources of English-language fairy poetry include: Shakespeare’s
*Midsummer Night’s Dream* (c.1594-6) and *The Tempest* (c. 1610-11), though *Hamlet, Macbeth, Romeo and
Juliet*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* also get repeated consideration. More controversially, Edmund
Spenser’s (1552-1599) *The Faerie Queen* (1596), and selective extracts from John Milton are also cited as
influential to the history of fairy poetry. Some scholars, particularly those invested in Celtic tales and the
ballad traditions, were very dismissive of Spenser’s fairies as such. Cf. Walter Scott (1771 -1832) *Letters on
Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830): “Of Spenser we must say nothing, because in his Faery Queen, the
title is the only circumstance which connects his splendid allegory with the popular superstition, and as he
uses it, means nothing more than an Utopia, or nameless country” (184). Similarly, Milton’s extensive
metaphoric comparison of demons to fairies (Cf. *Paradise Lost* I.777-792) is odd in the context of the
popular Celtic argument that the fairies are the angels who refused to fight on either side of Lucifer’s
rebellion. God, deeming them not wicked enough to go to hell, but not fit enough to stay in heaven, sent
The epigraphs implicitly asserts the literary quality of the volume’s contents by suggesting that if a cultural giant like John Milton (1608-1674) can share the “joy and fear” of watching “Fairy Elves” in “midnight revel” through the eyes of a “belated peasant,” then fairy tales must be suitable for nineteenth-century British audiences. But the epigraph also (particularly in volumes that include foreign fairy tales) draws on canonical British poetry to assert the collections’ status as emphatically British cultural material.

At the same time, a new wave of literary critics, borrowing arguments from eighteenth-century critics like Elizabeth Montagu, Thomas Warton and Mark Akenside, widely claimed that there was a genre of fairy poetry established in the late sixteenth century, that fairies combine the best of Classical poetic forms and British fairy imagination, and that this development marked a crucial new phase of British poetry and an entirely new conception of “fairy.” Ironically, the nineteenth-century critics’ focus on the Elizabethan era and their insistence that it represented an acme of fairy poetry severely diminished the work produced by following generations of fairy poets:

Lilly, Drayton, Ben Jonson, and other contemporaries and successors, took full possession of the fairy world for their poems, in part evidently influenced by Shakespeare, but none of them has understood how to follow him even upon the path already cleared. (201)

—Georg Gottfried Gervinus c.1849

Shakespeare, with the truer instinct of genius and poetry, than that of Spenser, stopped first to the night-tripping Elves of England, and the familiar Lares. But he poetized, at the same time, and refined the popular ideas of them; gave them a king, of Gothic derivation […] and a queen, Titania […] brought from the classic mythology, with the moony attributes of the night—a very graceful theory, in them to earth, where they live as amoral beings, outside the normal boundaries of time, good, or evil. The extensive debates about who can be included in the fairy poetry tradition signify its importance.

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which the court system of faëry romance is blended with the more vivid and attractive plebeianism of the village supernaturals. (10)
—William Dowe, 1853

No such fairy poetry existed anywhere in English literature before Shakespeare. The tiny elves, to whom a cowslip is tall, for whom the third part of a minute is an important division of time, have a miniature perfection which is charming. (72)
—Edward Dowden, 1877

[Shakespeare’s] fairy poetry was a new and exquisite creation in English literature […] the English stage had previously possessed no group of humorous figures to compare with that formed by “sweet bully Bottom” and his compeers. (xlvii)
—Frank Marshall, 1890

Even though the genre of fairy poetry was invented by eighteenth-century poets who were justifying their own interest in fairies and defending Imagination from pure Reason, throughout the nineteenth century, critics increasingly associated the British tradition of fairy poetry exclusively with the Elizabethan period, further occluding eighteenth-century work.

This strong emphasis on Shakespeare the definitive fairy poet also made the connection between nineteenth-century fairy poetry and Elizabethan fairy poetry more direct, and, by the turn of the twentieth-century, new anthologies of fairy poetry like *Elfin Music: An Anthology of English Fairy Poetry*, 1888 and *The Magic Casement: An Anthology of Fairy Poetry*, (1908) identified a very broad sixteenth- and seventeenth-century selection of fairy poets, but then skipped over most of the eighteenth-century to the work of Romantic poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), followed by a generous representation of work by major and minor Victorian fairy poets.6 Like the

5 “Night-tripping elves” is a quote from Thomas Keightley’s *The Fairy Mythology* (1828), p.21. “Lares” were ancient Roman protective deities, often depicted in sculpture.

6 In *Elfin Music*, the editor Arthur Waite (1857-1942) includes work by: Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599), Ben Johnson (1572-1637), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Robert Herrick (1591-1674), and
anthologists, they clearly identified fairy poetry with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century innovation, and directly linked nineteenth-century work to that phenomenon, (ironically, using that canonical poetry to validate their own work in exactly the same way that eighteenth-century poets had done). Inheriting this Victorian pattern of fairy poetry scholarship and these fairy poetry anthologies, twentieth-century scholars have, I believe, been led to misestimate the eighteenth-century influence on Victorian fairy writing.

It was also in the nineteenth century that fairy tales become most emphatically associated with childhood and child-like qualities, and, after English departments backed away from children’s literature at the turn of the twentieth century, that association created a double-blind: first, nineteenth-century fairy tale literature was neglected, even when it appeared in the work of otherwise canonical authors; and even after new attention was paid to these works, the attention drawn to them as children’s literature helped occlude the fact that nineteenth century fairy tales were also responsive to prior generations of fairy tale writing for adults. This development has made it very difficult for contemporary prose scholars to process the implications of Victorian fairy tale writing. For example, a groundbreaking critical study *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (2007) was recently released by Jarlath Killeen (b.1976), but in the introduction Killeen opens by noting that:

"This book is the first full-length study of Oscar Wilde’s two collections of children’s literature, *The Happy Prince and other tales* (1888) and *A House of..."
Pomegranates (1891). Although the tales which comprise these collections have received some important critical attention they remain marginal in Wilde Studies, simply because most critics are unsure what to make of them. Wilde is collectively understood, and written about, as a subversive writer, an amoral aesthete and an enemy of Victorian social and sexual values, a judgement based on the corpus of works that generally engage interpreter’s critical faculties [...] in a strange way the two collections of fairy tales he wrote appear somehow anomalous, tangential, if not entirely unrelated to his canon and attempts to incorporate them have been, while often significant, few and far between. This is partly because children’s literature in general is considered a didactic and conservative form by many of the best writers on Wilde, and due to this there has seemed little to gain in looking at such theoretically conformist work when trying to put forward a case for Wilde as a social subversive. (1)

The tension that Killeen unveils is extraordinary. The marginality of children’s literature in mainstream literary criticism is so pronounced that the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde are coded as “marginal,” “anomalous,” and “tangential” to canonical literature because they are grouped with children’s literature, which is understood to be unfathomably “didactic,” “conservative,” and “conformist.” (Their literary marginality is confirmed by their cultural centrality.) However, if the Wilde scholars that Killeen mentions had been familiar with Horace Walpole’s “A Fairy Tale” and its mad descriptions of Lord Hervey as a flamboyant “fairy,” perhaps they might have been more likely to recognize subversion in tales like Wilde’s “The Fisherman and His Soul” (1888), a thinly-veiled queer allegory about risking life and soul to love someone forbidden in spite of church condemnation. Although efforts to reclaim individual canonical writers’ fairy tales are entirely worthwhile projects, such work will itself be coded as marginal and subversive until the much broader framework of fairy tales can be reconsidered. Instead of working backwards from twentieth-century assumptions about children’s literature and fairy tales, the goal of this section is, as faithfully as possible, to work chronologically through developments in fairy and fairy tale writing, relying on broad archival resources to parse
out developments in fairy and fairy tale writing that sometimes support and sometimes run counter to conventional twenty-first century scholarly readings.

This dissertation project is valuable because the assumptions that characterize different strands of literary criticism have created different blind spots in our reading of Victorian fairies and fairy tales. For poetry scholars, Victorian fairy tales tend to be a focal point in studies of an individual or a small group of artists. “Goblin Market” (1859) by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) garners the most attention as “fairy poem,” but even in her case, many critics are so interested in the allegorical possibilities of the text (for which the fairies are considered pretty window-dressing), that they can overlook the importance of fairies as literary trope. Dolores Rosenblum (n.d.) sees the poem as a “puzzle that decodes to subversive meanings” (1986; 63), but does not make the further step to tie the poem to a history of fairy poetry in which imagination subverts reason and bypasses mundane rules. Similarly, Jan Marsh (b.1942) reads the poem as fraught with biographical “double meaning” (1995; 237), but does not fully consider the fairy-saturated literary culture in which Rossetti was raised. Constance Hassett (b.1943) argues that “Goblin Market” “probe[s] the compulsive illogic of desire” (2005; 12) but does not consider it part of a zeitgeist in which, within twenty years of Goblin Market’s publication, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) would begin theorizing the role of fairy tales in the formation of memory and sexual consciousness. Poetry scholarship has something substantial to gain by interacting with fairy tale scholarship.

Likewise, for gender theorists, fairy tales are important because in the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, fairy tales became central to artistic and critical discourse surrounding feminist and women’s power movements on both sides of the Atlantic. In much of that
work, the widespread appearance of fairy tales was welcomed as something radical, new, and highly political. In a 1989 article by Elizabeth Keyser (b.1942), she argued that:

> Despite Tolkien’s warning about the perils of exploring and reporting on the “realm of fairy-story,” men—and increasingly women—persist in doing so. […] many questions are being asked, and the tongues, or pens, of the reporters are hardly becoming tied. In fact, in the case of women reporters, tongues once bound are now being loosed, and the tales themselves are being freed to speak in unprecedented ways. And although Tolkien goes on to condemn the “analytic study of fairy-stories…[as] preparation for the enjoying or the writing of them,” contemporary writers, especially women writers, appear to have based their revisions of familiar tales, as well as their creations of new ones, on just such analysis. (156)

The language implies dramatic change: through the process of conscious analysis, what was “bound” has become “loosed” and “freed.” The implication is that prior generations of tale-tellers were not analytic and did not find liberation in the process of writing fairy tales. In fact, on both sides of the Atlantic, influential critics and poets spoke out against “traditional” myths and fairy tales. In 1972, Adrienne Rich (b.1929) called for “revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (18); in 1984 Jan Montefiore (n.d.) insisted that women needed a “recasting…of myth and fairy-story.” It was not until relatively recently that authors like Elizabeth Wanning Harries (n.d.) began to resituate “the great feminist fairy-tale debates of the 1970s” (“Mirror,” 99), in a context that acknowledged the long-standing gender-liberal functions of adult fairy tale writing. Harries herself is most famous for her renegotiation of sixteenth-century French courtly writing, but further historical analysis of the gender-liberal fairy tale archives suggest that gender theory would greatly benefit from the broader historical scope of fairy tale literature—which indicates that, in spite of the many patriarchal tales which are pervasive enough that they have been called
“traditional” tales, women have been “reacasting…myth and fairy story” constantly from the inception of fairy tales as a literary genre in the late-sixteenth century.

Yet as fractured as they are, gendered considerations of fairy tales have achieved much more recognition as a movement than other theoretical treatments of the same material, in spite of the fact that colonial, Marxist, structuralist, and psychoanalytic considerations of fairies and fairy tales, were profoundly influential on the nineteenth and twentieth-century developments of both literary theory and British poetics. Recent historicist readings of Victorian fairy tales have been most inclusive in bringing together literary and theoretical texts, but these readings tend to focus on prose works in patterns that minimize the importance of poetry, largely because the history of fairy poetry has rarely been connected to the few central fairy tale poems (like Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” and Robert Browning’s “Pied Piper of Hamelin”) that have garnered a lot of attention in the twentieth-century, so the full scope of poetic influence has been largely misrepresented. Perhaps the most comprehensive recent study of fairies in Victorian art and culture is Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness (1999) by Carole G. Silver (n.d.), which takes an innovative step beyond the bounds of literature and considers a much broader scope of “fairy” influences in British culture:

That the Victorians were utterly fascinated by the fairies is demonstrated by the art, drama, and literature they created and admired. Their abiding interest shows in the numerous, uniquely British fairy paintings that flourished between the 1830s and the 1870s—pictures in part inspired by nationalism and Shakespeare,

7 Newly compiled twentieth-century anthologies of fairy tales from the Victorian period such as The Victorian Fairy Tale Book (1988) and Victorian Fairy Tales (1989) have also focused on prose rather than poetic sources, and the relative accessibility of the prose work seems to have contributed to the critical focus on prose fairy tales.
in part as protest against the strictly useful and material, but in either case, as attempts to reconnect the actual and the occult. (When fairy painting lost its glamour, the impulse that had spawned it issued in the fairy illustrations of Dulac and Rackham and in the photographing of the fairies themselves.)

The same preoccupation with the elfin peoples is manifested in the constant staging, throughout the era, of spectacular productions of Shakespeare’s fairy plays. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*, as well as repeated performances of romantic fairy ballets (including *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*), operas, and children’s plays and pantomimes, some derived from the Bard, others from actual folklore or from literary fairy tales—and all immensely popular. As this enthusiasm for the fairies swept all branches of the arts, their images appeared on the wallpapers in Victorian bedrooms and nurseries […] The Victorians’ enthrallment is vividly revealed in the fairy tales and fantasies, written for both children and adults, that surface to create the “Golden Age of Children’s Literature” and to begin the passion of the twentieth century for fantasies for grownups. That authors as diverse as Thomas Carlyle [1795-1881] and Oscar Wilde [1854-1900], participated in exploration of the elfin world says much about its power and centrality.

But the fascination with the fairies manifests itself in other ways, as well. It is evidenced in the society’s concern with the “occult beings” found at séances; with the spirits, poltergeists, and elementals of Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Theosophical belief; and the attempts to connect these creatures to the elfin species known to folklore. Yet, above all, the enchantment that the fairies wrought shows in the flood of information on their habits and lifestyles, the materials collected, analyzed, published, and made famous by the British folklorists. (3–4)

As a contribution to the field, Silver’s work is extraordinary, however, by primarily foregrounding prose and dramatic works to represent the literary development instead of parsing out the somewhat different developmental trajectories of prose, poetry, and drama, she has not quite done justice to the distinctive history of Victorian fairy and fairy tale poetry which far exceeds the few most recognizable poems by authors like Robert Browning (1812-1889) and Christina Rossetti (1830-1894). Her trajectory is also

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8 In the book, Silver does engage with poetry, but in a way that makes it seem peripheral to the prose work. For example, according to her index, Charles Dickens is mentioned on fourteen pages, J.M. Barrie on thirteen, and Arthur Conan Doyle on seventeen, but Christina Rossetti and Robert Browning get only one page apiece, and the most extensively mentioned poet Walter de la Mare is only referenced on five pages. (Shakespeare is mentioned on thirteen pages, but Silver primarily treats him as a dramatic rather than a poetic source.) The tendency to focus primarily on prose texts is common; cf. *Ventures into*
somewhat confused because she understands prose fairy tales as primarily a children’s
genre that comes to be of interest to adults without fully recognizing that the “passion
[…] for fantasies for grownups” is more of a hold-over from the sixteenth-century than a
Victorian or twentieth-century innovation.9 A further consideration of fairy and fairy tale
poetry in the work of both canonical and non-canonical poets writing for adult audiences
would help round out the history that Silver has begun to outline.

In Part II of this dissertation, I will outline some of the most important
innovations in fairy poetry that occur in the nineteenth century, but my broader goal is to
use this explication of poetic development to bring together some of the excellent
scholarship that has already begun to describe the role of poetry, fairies, fairy tales, and
theory in Victorian culture, and to mortar in some of the gaps that have grown up
between disciplinary factions. For folklore and children’s literature scholars, I would like
to foreground the crucial importance of fairies in poetry for children and for adults. For
poetry scholars, I would like to foreground the nineteenth-century poetic use of fairies
that extends in a continuous lineage from Percey Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) to Charles
Algernon Swinburne (1837-1909) so clearly as to re-historicize the context in which
numerous poets turn to fairies and fairy tales for inspiration in the twentieth century. For
literary theorists, I would also like to gesture at fairy tales’ eventual importance for

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9 To begin in the Victorian period is also to miss the historical sixteenth-century conflation of
fairies and ghosts with “daemons” and “genius spirits” which would (as Silver points out) be of interest to
the nineteenth century Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Theosophical societies.
gender studies, racial studies, and postcolonial theory, to build on Silvers’ very apt observations on the appearances of fairies in the social sciences, and to outline how fairies and fairy tales were, at the end of the Victorian period, largely excluded from literary scholarship, but absolutely central to the social sciences.
CHAPTER 3:
DOMESTIC, GENDERED FAIRY DISCOURSE

[...] Victorian popular verse can be indicted for being normally mawkish, pompous, bombastic, and mealy-mouthed. In their introduction to The London Book of English Verse, Herbert Read and Bonamy Dobrée comment distastefully on “what we are almost compelled to describe as the pathological condition of sentimentality which set in about 1810.” One might quarrel with the force of “almost,” but not dare to quarrel with their assessment. — Michael Turner

It was only at the very end of the eighteenth century that fairy tale imagery in Britain became significantly associated with children and children’s literature, and although fairy tales and fairy poetry had been used to discuss gender roles by male and female writers, it was not (especially in poetry) specifically coded as a feminine genre. Yet the popular twentieth-century understanding of fairy tales has a great deal to do with princess narratives that end in “happily ever after,” targeted primarily at young girls—Disney currently promotes a multi-billion dollar “Princess” label featuring all of its fairy tale heroines, but no equivalent “Prince” label marketed to boys. Clearly, there were developments in nineteenth century culture that provide key answers to the questions: how did the genre of fairy tales become infantilized and feminized? and how are the two shifts related?

1 Turner ix.
Part of the difficulty of answering that question is that fairy tales, fairy poetry, and a new genre “fairy verse” all have distinct, though overlapping, developmental trajectories. The second major difficulty in answering these questions is that the commercial development of children’s literature as an arena of publication had an enormous impact on women’s material lives and ability to function as educators, publishers, editors, and authors. Consequently, fairy tales, fairy poetry, and fairy verse continued to function as forums through which gender roles could be discussed, but the genres collectively (in the process of being published, particularly as children’s literature) had a direct impact on the gendered environment of the Victorian period—in essence, the discourse and practice of gender-liberal theory overlapped heavily over the course of the century, and both were highly evident in context of fairy tales, fairy poetry, and fairy verse. Consequently, the different sub-chapters in this section overlap chronologically because each focuses on a different aspect of fairy development in Victorian literature. Although these trajectories are contradictory as often as they are complementary, the differences between them will help to explain why apparently incompatible twentieth-century poets from all different schools turn to fairy tale language when they are engaging with complex discussions of gender.

3.1 Nineteenth-Century Fairy Poetry

Eighteenth-century fairy poetry had linked imagination to spiritual enlightenment and poetry to heightened perception of visions beyond the mundane world. The collection *The Beauties of English Poetry* (c.1800) summarized this aesthetic in the claim that:
Poetry may be said to claim our first attention, as it was originally intended to teach mankind the most important precepts of morality and virtue, by which the human soul is not only exalted and refined, but the heart is fortified against all the various assaults of human calamities, and by which we are taught to consider happiness as entirely depending on the reflections of our own minds. (2)

The equation of poetic aesthetics with moral virtue and spiritual enlightenment was an elision of a very similar eighteenth-century claims made specifically on behalf of “imaginative poetry” and “fairy poetry.” Around the turn of the century, “imagination,” “poetry,” and “fairy” had become so associated with exquisite aesthetics that the concepts began to be conflated, and the very specific arguments about the value of “imagination” began to be displaced by arguments about the value of “aesthetics,” and as fairy poetry became very mainstream, the imaginative component of those aesthetics became increasingly implicit rather than explicit.

For example, the first long work by Percy Shelley (1792-1822), *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem* (1813), was a homage to the fairy poetry of the eighteenth-century and the fairy poetry of the Elizabethan era; although, with a touch of mextatextual irony, in opening stanzas, Shelley claims that the fairy queen is more beautiful than the most exquisite thing Shelley can think of—fairy poetry:

```
Oh! not the visioned poet in his dreams,
When silvery clouds float through the wildered brain,
When every sight of lovely, wild, and grand,
   Astonishes, enraptures, elevates,
   When fancy, at a glance, combines
   The wonderous and the beautiful,—
So bright, so fair, so wild a shape
   Hath ever yet beheld […] (5-6)
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The queen is at once “enrapturing” and, by sheer force of loveliness, “elevates” her beholders by inspiring them with “wonder.” In the poem, Queen Mab has descended to
speak to the soul of Ianthe, and to show her the scarcely imaginable beauties of the world from a flying chariot’s point of view: “billowy clouds/Edged with intolerable radiance/Towering like rocks of jet/Crowned with a diamond wreath” (14). This sensory adventure fulfills the fairy’s task, which is to:


For Shelley, the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility can loose “The chains of earth’s immurement” (1); radiant beauty is identified as the catalyst for spiritual enlightenment because no spirit can be selfish or petty in the face of such overwhelming wonder.

The spiritual pursuit of beauty, represented by fairy land characterized the bulk of Victorian fairy poetry, most especially the oeuvre of the man who would reign as poet laureate for the second half of the century, Sir Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892). For him, as for Samuel Rogers (1763-1855) and Samuel Coleridge (1772-1834) a generation earlier, it is the duty of the poet to help readers sense the elevating, glorious fairy world that hovers just beyond mundane perception. In his fairy poetry collection The Princess (1848), Tennyson, like Shelley, describes an elevated vision of the most beautiful scenes in nature and then he stretches the boundaries of aesthetic perception by gesturing at the even more exquisite beauties of fairyland:


O hark, O hear! how thin and clear,
   And thinner, clearer, farther going!
O sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing! (152)

Even Tennyson’s alternating line indentations seem to represent the narrator’s double-vision as the poem flickers between the mundane world and Elfland.

At the same time that “imagination” was being displaced by “aesthetics” as the driving imperative of fairy poetry, it was increasingly deployed less against pure reason than against the utilitarian commercial values of the Industrial Revolution. For example, Samuel’s daughter Sara Coleridge (1802-1852) opens her novel Phantasmion: A Fairy Tale (1837) with the following “L’envoy”:

Go little book, and sing of love and beauty,
To tempt the worldling into fairy land;
Tell him that airy dreams are sacred duty,
[And] better wealth than aught his toils command—

Employing delicate fairy phrasing, Coleridge argues quite forcefully that “airy dreams” have a moral imperative, a spiritual “sacred duty,” antagonistic to the quest for quantifiable mercantile success. Partly for this reason, fairies were associated with an idealization of women and children, childhood and domesticity, because those were understood as being sequestered from the adult, masculine, earthly commercial realm.

However, the fairy-vision that Shelley and Coleridge achieve with such confidence would prove to be more elusive for many other poets of the early nineteenth century who were convinced that fairy sensibility was being overwhelmed by greed,

2 ix. Paradoxically, the “l’envoy” (literally, “the ending”) is situated at the front of her work—a move that literally foregrounds the fairy tale’s “moral.”
rationality, and the kind of logic that sacrifices emotion and empathy for a bottom line. ³

To give a small selection of examples from a very pervasive theme:

Here didst thou dwell, here schemes of pleasure plan,
Beneath yon mountain’s ever-beauteous brow;
But now, as if a thing unblest by men,
Thy fairy dwelling is as lone as thou!
Here giant weeds a passage scarce allow
To halls deserted, portals gaping wide

—Lord Byron (1788-1824), from *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Canto I (1812)

Ah! woe is me! poor silver-wing!
That I must chant thy lady’s dirge,
And death to this fairy haunt of spring,
Of melody, and streams of flowery verge, —

—John Keats (1795-1821), from “Faery Songs” (1817)

Signs, miracles have pass’d with days of yore;
Wonders have ceased, and witchcraft is no more;
Gnomes and hobgoblins now no longer scare;
Sylphs, fairies, elves, have vanish’d into air […]
Yet spirits still stalk forth in blaze of day,
Spirits that feed on worth, on honour prey:
Fierce, active spirits, dangerously allied—
Prate, Envy, Scandal, Prejudice, and Pride!
These fiends, inversely, and in various ways,
Bloat by their breath, or wither by their praise;
Disfigure Truth, or taint a spotless name,
And riot on the mangled corse of Fame!

—from the editor of *La Belle Assemblée* (1819)

A lake and a fairy boat
To sail in the moonlight clear—
And merrily we would float
From the dragons that watch us here!
[…]
But Fairies have broke their wands,
And wishing has lost its pow’r!

—Thomas Hood (1799-1845), from “Song” (1827)

³ This tope was not entirely new, but it was more pronounced in the early nineteenth-century than
in the late eighteenth. For one exception, cf. “Sonnet II: Written at the close of Spring” (1784) by Charlotte
Turner Smith (1749-1806): “Ah! poor humanity! so frail, so fair./Are the fond visions of thy early day./Till
tyrant passion and corrosive care/Bid all they fairy colours fade away!” (*Elegaic Sonnets* 2).
A moment let me stand—
Before me lies a desert waste;
Behind, a fairy land.
—Jane Taylor (1783-1824), from “A Retrospect” (pub. posthumously 1832)

Although there is an air of passive nostalgia to such work, these poets are actually defying the demons, deserts, and dragons of the mercantile spirit of the age with a cunning use of unreasonable illogic: they are lamenting the loss of beauty, musicality, fairies, and spirituality by writing beautiful, musical, fairy-laden, soul-inspiring poetry.

Across the entire arc of the Victorian period, both prominent and minor poets did their best to provide this access. In a popular poem that was set to music in the 1830s, M.C.B. Wilson (1789-1846) asked: “What fairy-like music steals over the sea,/Entrancing our senses with charmed melody?”  

(What Fairy-Like Music 1) Dancing to that tune in 1844, William V. Dodsworth (1789-1861) looked up from contemplating a brilliant sunset to discover that he had been transported: “And when the sunset’s mellow sheen/Was o’er the landscape glancing,/Our startled eyes have often seen/A troop of fairies dancing” (“To an Early Friend”), and that was repeated fifty-five years later by Graham R. Tomson (1863-1911) in “The Fairies’ Cobbler” (1889): “The curlew cried, and I raised my head,/For I felt the good folk near;/Slim little shapes in the fading light,/Dusk and dim, but their eyes gleamed bright,/And they hailed me thin and clear” (416). That magic transitional hour also enchanted Mary Elizabeth Coleridge (1861-1907) at the very end of the century: “While the sun was going down,/There arose a fairy

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4 Byron, 602; Keats 311; “A Fugitive Poetry” 174; Hood 169; J. Taylor, Writings 326. Hood actually published an entire volume titled The Plea of the Midsummer Fairies (1827).

5 Note. The British Periodicals Index records over 550 different poems containing the word “fairies” published between 1830-1899.
town./Not the town I saw by day,/Cheerless, joyless, dull, and gray/But a far fantastic
place./Builded with ethereal grace” (“St. Andrew’s” 24).

Many other tropes were common to Victorian fairy poetry. There was a whole
strain of fairy poetry specifically devoted to fairies that appear in nature; in 1861, Charles
Algernon Swinburne (1837-1909) found fairies in the seasonal changes: “For all the
hours,/Come sun, come showers,/Are friends of flowers,/And fairies all” (“Four Songs of
Four Seasons,” Collected 411). Other fairy poems had darker themes, like “Into the
Wood” (1861) by Adelaide Anne Procter (1825-1864), which describes a young woman
who has been seduced from the safe and duteous path: “In the wood where shadows are
deepest/From the branches overhead,/Where the wild wood-strawberries cluster/And the
softest moss is spread./I met to-day with a fairy,/And I followed her where she led” (“Into
the Wood” 75-6); or Earthly Paradise (1868) by William Morris (1834-1896) which
describes some of the treacherous hollow-women: “dancers of the faërie,/Who, as the
ancient stories told,/In front were lovely to behold,/But empty shells seen from behind”
(49). Across the century, poets were clearly using “fairy” tropes to different effect, but
they are unified in imagining “fairy land” as an alternative space in which the rules are
different: where time and age are transcended, where colors and emotions are heightened,
where everything is more astonishing and marvellous and sometimes terrifying. None of
these poets write exclusively about fairies, but is an astonishing testament to the deep
alliance of fairy and poetry that the same images and themes can be echoed by such

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6 Fairies found in nature was a particularly common trope in fairy verse for children: Cf. “Flower
Fairies” by M.E.T. (1868), and “Buttercups and Daisies,” (1853) by Eliza Cook (1818-1889).

7 Her poem has much in common thematically with Christina Rossetti’s fairy tale poem Goblin
Market (1859).
wholly different poets as Alfred Tennyson, William Morris, Charles Swinburne, and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge.8

But although fairy poetry was characteristic throughout the Victorian period, and although fairy tales and fairy tale allusions appear in British verse across the nineteenth century, canonical fairy tales only very rarely appeared in canonical poetry. For example, although there are hundreds of fairies in Tennyson’s work, there is only one oblique reference to even that most popular fairy tale, “Cinderella”—and it is tucked in the middle of “Gareth and Lynette” (1872, from *Idylls of the King* 1856-85): “My fortunes all as fair as hers who lay/Among the ashes and wedded the King’s son” (ln 881).

For the most part, fairy tale poetry remained marginal to the literary canon in spite of its enormous popular success. In fact, the association of fairy tale with literary marginality was so extreme that the association of fairy tales could diminish the literary status of otherwise canonical work. As one odd review of Annie Smith’s *The Cinderella Poetry Book for Infants* (1894) states:

The title is a misnomer. The book is pure doggerel, and there is not a line of poetry in it from beginning to end. Shakespeare, Scott, Burns, Blake, Allingham, R.L. Stevenson, and a host of English poets, old and new, have written lyrics well within the comprehension of the kindergarten, and we see no reason why children should not be fed on literature from the nursery upwards.9

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8 For further examples of pre-twentieth-century British fairy poetry encompassing work by nearly 200 poets, see Appendix A.

9 401. Derisive reviews of fairy tale verse was common, and sometimes self-imposed (and often half-comical) as in the poem published in *Atalanta* by Florence Pike (n.d.): “Cinderella and Father Christmas; or, a Christmas Dialogue in Doggerel Verse, Being Very Much Doggerel and Very Little Verse” (1891).
Even when canonical poets write about fairies or fairy tales, and even when that work is recognized as a persistent trend in poetry, the work is collectively dismissed as “doggerel.” And even if this reviewer is using the term somewhat tongue-in-cheek, the pronouncement was nearly prophetic, and neither fairy poetry nor fairy tale poetry would garner much attention as such from later generations of literary critics.

3.2 Women and the Early Nineteenth-Century Publication of Fairy Verse

As fairy poetry was flourishing under a new generation of Romantic poets, the development of works like *Queen Mab* (1813) coincided with the development of children’s literature as a distinct genre and the rise of a new register of fairy writing that can be grouped under the name “fairy verse.” Although this might not seem like a gendered event, the fact that fairy verse was established initially as a children’s genre indirectly ensured that the gradual development and perpetuation of the genre was dominated by women. In the eighteenth-century, educational theorists like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1717-1776) had advocated strongly in favor of women’s education: “Nature […] would have them think, and judge, and love, and know, and cultivate their mind as they do their form” (262), but only within strict boundaries:

They ought to learn multitudes of things, but only those which it becomes them to know. […] the whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, and to make life agreeable and sweet to them—these are the duties
of women at all times, and what should be taught them from their infancy. (262-3)\textsuperscript{10}

As patriarchal as Rousseau’s educational plan clearly is, there were a number of gender-liberal opportunities that his widely accepted structure opened up, most importantly, the apparently small concession that women should be in charge of early childhood education. Women used their position as de-facto experts in children’s education in the domestic sphere to play an increasingly central role in the public theoretical discussions about what education should be, regularly adapting eighteenth-century arguments from John Locke and Rousseau to argue about what material would be suitable for children.\textsuperscript{11} Although there were a wide variety of opinions articulated in this period, there was general agreement on four points that collectively facilitated the introduction of children’s literature:

First (borrowing loosely from both Locke and Rousseau), verse is the most memorable literary form and is therefore exceptionally useful for teaching very young children both moral and academic lessons. \textit{Rosa, the Educating Mother: Written for Mothers and Young Ladies of Age} by H.M. Cottinger advises women that:

One of the faculties of the tender child which is most capable of culture is memory. Who is not astonished by the extent of knowledge which it acquires in the first years of life, and, in fact, without our help? What must it become if its memory through the whole life were so active? Its careful cultivation is the duty of every mother. On the first grades of life, single words and sentences offer

\textsuperscript{10}Although anti-French sentiment was very high at the turn of the nineteenth-century, Rousseau’s ideas (often uncredited) had already been widely influential in debates about education in Britain.

\textsuperscript{11}For further discussion of Locke and verse, cf. Chapter 2.1 “Fairies, Poetry, and Imagination in the Enlightenment”
material for exercises of memory. To these belong chiefly memorable verses and fables. (159)\textsuperscript{12,13}

To that end, verse was applied as a didactic tool in almost every academic subject, as whimsically titled works like *Marmaduke Multiply’s Merry Method of Making Minor Mathematicians: or, the Multiplication Table* (1816) taught young readers that “Twice 3 are 6/You’re always playing tricks./Twice 4 are 8/Your bonnet is not straight” (5-6), improving math, language, and social skills simultaneously. Similarly, texts like *Food for the Mind: or, A New Riddle Book* were calculated to improve children’s verbal facility and moral consciousness:\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{verbatim}
GREAT virtues have I  
There is none can deny,  
And to these I shall mention an odd one;  
When apply’d to the tail  
It is seldom I fail  
To make a good boy of a bad one. (31)
\end{verbatim}

Particularly slow children who might not have otherwise understood the riddle were given a pictorial hint.

\textsuperscript{12} Cf. Issac Watts, *Improvement of the Mind*: “The Memory of useful things may receive considerable aid if they are thrown into verse; for the numbers and measures and rhyme, according to the poesy of different languages, have a considerable influence upon mankind, both to make them receive with more ease the things proposed to their observation, and preserve them longer in their remembrance” (139-40).

\textsuperscript{13} In 1799, one small point of dissent was voiced by the English educator and playwright Hannah More (1745-1833), who posed the question: “while due praise ought not to be withheld from improved methods of communicating the elements of general knowledge; yet is there not some danger that our very advantages may lead us into error, by causing us to repose so confidently on the multiplied helps which facilitate the entrance into learning, as to render our pupils superficial through the very facility of acquirement?” (168), but her writing had apparently no effect on the rate at which verse educational texts were being published, and she herself published many children’s rhymes and prose tales (including *Village Politics* 1792 and the Cheap Repository Tracts, 1795-97) so her condemnation of verse should be understood as limited.

\textsuperscript{14} Originally published in 1778 by “John-the-Giant-Killer,” the book was updated and re-illustrated several times in the early nineteenth century.
Figure 3.1 Educational Illustrations in the Early Victorian Period

a.) “The child improver” (*Food for the Mind*)
b.) “4 times 11 are 44/Pray make this noise my dears no more” (*Marmaduke*)
Verse was used, like the rhymed morals appended to the eighteenth-century fairy tales, to highlight and render memorable the most important part of the lesson.  

Second (borrowing directly from Locke and Rousseau), rhymed material is so memorable that it must be carefully chosen because children will retain what they’ve learned from it. Moreover, sophisticated adult poetry has the potential to mislead young minds; therefore, material for young children should be simple, literal, and direct, even at the expense of artistry. For example, in the preface to *The Parent’s Poetical Anthology: Being a Selection of English Poems Practically Designed to Assist in Forming the Taste and Sentiments of Young Readers* (1814), Elizabeth Mant (1769-1852) notes that: “some productions of our most admired poets have not been admitted, however justly they may have been applauded for their poetical excellence. For, when the plant is poisonous, it is likely to prove more pernicious in proportion to its actual beauty” (v-vi). Consequently, educators began to call for a new kind of poetry specifically written for children, and it is out of this discussion that the distinction between “verse” (aesthetically poor but morally unexceptionable material for children) and “poetry” (aesthetically rich but morally complex material for adults) began to emerge. And even after children’s

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15 The memorability of moral verse designed for children is evident was validated by the somewhat tongue-in-cheek introduction to *Parlour Poetry: A Casque of Gems* (1969), in which Michael Turner fondly and ruefully reflects on Victorian didactic verse: “Countless children committed poems of the highest moral rectitude to memory, poems with plain, easy rhythms, uncomplicated heroics, and unabashed pathos. Most people over the age of sixty can still recite chunks of them” (v).

16 The biographical dates for Mant are uncertain. There was an Elizabeth Mant, daughter of Rev. Richard Mant and Elizabeth Roe, who lived from 1769-1852; it is likely but not certain that she is the same Elizabeth Mant who authored this anthology.

17 Cf. *Poetry for Children* (1801), Lucy Aikin (1781-1864) uses “verse” and “poetry” interchangeably, but she articulates a desire for two categories of poetic writing, one for children and one for adults, that would eventually be divided in those terms: “when we consider how many of the subjects of verse are unintelligible to children, or improper for them—how few poems have been written, or how few poets could be trusted to write, to them—we shall not be surprised to find it a frequent complaint with
verse was established as a genre, its low poetic quality was considered a point of pride by prominent editors like Jane Taylor (1783-1824), who prefaced *Original Poems* (1868) by noting that: “The deficiency of the compositions as poetry is by no means a secret to their authors; but it was thought desirable to abridge every poetic freedom and figure, and to dismiss even such words as, by being less familiar, might give perhaps a false idea to their little readers, or at least make a chasm in the chain of conception” (v-vi). Verse became the dominant form in hundreds of children’s publications, but at the same time it functioned as a marginal form, because it always defined itself as second-class material in literary terms.18

Third (borrowing most directly from the Lockean tradition), because all education should be both moral and academic, narratives in the form of stories (both verse and prose) are the pleasantest medium in which to communicate social values.19 In the words of Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880): “Who has not been delighted and improved by the perusal of Miss Edgeworth’s charming tales […] which not only amuse as stories, but inculcate sound moral principles, awaken the reflective powers, and promote those kindly feelings without which mere learning is valueless” (Child *Girl’s* 400). The narrative form

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18 For further discussion of the inadequacy of popular verse production, cf. also Joseph Carpenter’s *A Handbook of Poetry* (1868) v.

19 Cf. *The Governess* (1855): “Fiction has been used for the purposes of instruction from the earliest ages. The great, the good, and the wise of every age and of every nation have adopted it with success. Long before His time who was the greatest of all teachers, Fable, Allegory, Myth, and Story, whether in rude verse or still ruder prose—in the melodious dialects of sunny Greece, or the barbarous jargon of the frozen North—were listened to and received with delight and profit. Under the wildest fable, or the most fanciful legend, oftentimes lay hid some deep spiritual truth—truth which in fact was as a soul to the fiction which enshrined it. (373-4) For the next two pages, she defends “fairy stories” as the acme of fiction for Victorian children.
was presumed to be most sympathetic because “tiny readers” could imagine themselves in the roles of the protagonists, and gender-liberal authors took advantage of this sympathy to introduce texts that were not, perhaps, as unambiguously supportive of “relative” gender roles as Rousseau might have wished. For example, the verse morality tale Cobler! Stick to your last; or The Adventures of Joe Dobson (1807) was adapted from a popular European folk tale in which a farmer complains that his wife sits at home all day while he plows the fields, so he and his wife agree to trade tasks for the day.20 The wife successfully plows the field, but her husband nearly destroys the house while she is gone and fails to complete a single one of the household chores properly. Moral: “Joe sullenly confessed/He was convinced that wives could do/The household business best.”21 The tale explicitly confirms standard gender roles, but only because Joe could not do “woman’s work.” Joe’s sulky moral glosses over the fact that his wife completed a man’s chores with perfect competence, but that narrative is still present.

Finally (departing here from both Locke and Rousseau, and adapting the eighteenth-century counter-arguments about imagination), aesthetics impact the development of the human soul, and the aesthetic material best suited to the development of young children is, in an adjective repeated *ad nauseum*: “pretty.” A particularly inauspicious shelf of Victorian children’s literature might go so far as to defy alphabetization (and explain the number of madwomen who were driven into attics):

20 This story has since been anthologized as a “fairy tale” in such works as *A Time for Trolls: Fairy Tales from Norway* (1960).

21 Qtd in Tuer, 66. Note: Cobler!, along with *Marmaduke Multiply* and *A New Riddle Book* were popular and well-illustrated enough to be reprinted several times and anthologized in *Old-Fashioned Children’s Books* (1900), edited by Andrew Tuer (1899-1902).
Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children (Sara Coleridge, 1834)
Pretty Little Poems for Pretty Little People (Louisa Watts, 1849)
Pretty Little Stories for Pretty Little People (Catharine Maria Sedgwick, 1862)
Pretty Peggy and Other Ballads (Rosina Sherwood, 1880)
Pretty Pictures and Pleasant Rhymes for Dear Children (J.P.W., 1860)
Pretty Pictures for Tiny Pets (Anon., 1885)
Pretty Poems for My Children (E.C. Somers, 1848)
Pretty Tales for my Children: Adorned with Pretty Pictures (E.C. Somers, 1848)  

To be “pretty” is to be dainty, polite, morally unexceptionable, and free of any substantial conflict. These texts were considered educational because they linguistically and thematically modeled an aesthetically charming and inoffensive pattern of childhood behavior.

Out of this nexus of requirements, fairy verse presented itself as an ideal genre: it was written in simple rhyme, it could be coded into moral terms, it had some narrative framework, and the injunction to “prettiness” could manifest as an adaptation of the extant genre of fairy poetry—fairy verse was essentially fairy poetry scrubbed of mischief, double-entendre, intertextuality, sexual conflict, adult allusion, and sophisticated poetic language. For example, in the play The Knapsack, which was anthologized in her six-volume collection Moral Tales for Young People (1805), Maria Edgeworth introduces a conversation between two children who repudiate the existence of fairies in their prose lines but celebrate fairies in brief verses:

22 Not to mention The Pretty Alphabet for Good Children (anon., c.1826), Pretty Book (Thomas Bewick, c.1821), Pretty Lessons (anon., 1820), Pretty Pastime for Little Folks (John Evans, 1800), A Pretty Picture Book (William Tyler, 1830), Pretty Poems, Songs, &c.: In Easy Language, for the Amusement of Little Boys and Girls (Tommy Lovechild, 1805), A Pretty Riddle Book (Christopher Conundrum, 1805), Pretty Stories About Lions, Sheep, Dogs and Other Animals (anon. 1862), Pretty Stories for Children: Containing Popular Tales with Amusing Pictures (anon. 1860), The Pretty Primrose Girl (anon., 1800), and reams of similar material.
Little Girl: I am sure I heard some voices this way. Suppose it was the fairies!
Little Boy. It was only the rustling of the leaves. There are no such things as
fairies; but if there were any such we have no need to fear them.

Little Boy Sings:

I.
Nor elves, nor fays, nor magic charm,
Have power, or will, to work us harm;
For those who dare the truth to tell,
Fays, elves, and fairies wish them well.

II.
For us they spread their dainty fare,
For use they scent the midnight air;
For use their glow-worm lamps they light,
For us their music cheers the night. […]

Little Boy: If there were really fairies, and if they would give me my wish, I
know what I should ask.

Little Girl. And so do I: I would ask them to send father home before I could
count ten.

Little Boy. And I would ask to hear his general say to him, in the face of the
whole army, “This is a brave man!” 23

In this context, the fairy material functions at several levels. Structurally, the pretty song
lightens up an otherwise very dense and preachy moral script. Thematically, children are
taught to associate goodness (in this case truth-telling) with the reward of nature’s
harmony and beauty (wild fruit, fresh air, fireflies, cricket songs), bounties so richly
lovely and so appreciated that they are described metaphorically in magical, fairy
terms—that it is metaphor rather than superstition is indicated by the repeated assertion
that fairies are not literally “real.” Finally, the context of heightened imagination invites
the children to think about major moral questions like: of all the things to wish for in the

23 Moral Tales 197-8. This play was written, probably in Ireland, not long after the ruthlessly
repressed 1798 Irish Uprising. In five months, there were between 10,000-40,000 military and civilian
deaths on the side of the United Irishmen and 1,500-3,000 casualties among the British military and loyalist
and Suffering Loyalists after the 1798 Rebellion” (100). The turn of the century also marked the
resumption of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) which eventually resulted in between 3.4 and 6.5 million
deaths.
world, which is most important? For Edgeworth’s characters, having their father return safely from war is the appropriate moral answer, but the grand-scale language of magic wishes is what allowed them to articulate that value. Edgeworth’s formal and thematic use of pretty fairy verse and moral fairy themes is largely representative of the genre’s presence in educational writing on a broader scale.

However women’s success in carving out space for their own work in the realms of children’s literature and fairy verse came at expense of having that work coded as minor and marginal—even to the point where it was presumed to have a different process of creation than true (masculine) poetry. In 1827, Reverend Alexander Dyce had edited the volume *Specimens of British Poetesses*, which acknowledged that women had, until that time, “been carefully excluded” from major poetic anthologies and attempted to redress this by:

[…exhibiting] the growth and progress of the genius of our country-women in the department of Poetry.

It is true that the grander inspirations of the Muse have not been often breathed into the softer frame. The magic tones which have added a new existence to the heart—the tremendous thoughts which have impressed a successive stamp on the fluctuation of ages, and which have almost changed the character of nations,—these have not proceeded from woman; but her sensibility, her tenderness, her grace, have not been lost nor misemployed: her genius has gradually risen with the opportunities which facilitated its ascent. 25

24 This wish-context is also Edgeworth’s way of writing against the better-known fairy tales of her day because the children do not wish for selfish things like glass slippers and ball gowns or Arabian treasures and flying carpets.

25 iii-iv. Dyce points out that “The present volume was planned, and partly executed, before we were aware of the existence of perhaps the only similar publication in the language,—viz. *Poems by Eminent Ladies*, in two small volumes, printed in 1755…” (v). Such volumes were few and far between, though they offer fascinating glimpses into the theorization of women’s “genius.” The themes and subjects chosen by female poets were under very close scrutiny, simply because they had little competition.
Yet, as Dyce’s half-apologetic advocacy suggests, the extent and quality of women’s “genius” was very much in question. With verse (as with the Mother Goose icon of fairy tales), the suggestion that women have a “different” genius was both advantageous (offering them free access in an important arena) and strongly disadvantageous (denying them access to any other arena, and diminishing the social value of the arena in which they are allowed free participation).

By the mid-century, many women had published educational texts for children, but for most female poets, success was treated with damning, backhanded praise. For example, consider the introduction to *The Female Poets of Great Britain* (1854) in which the editor and anthologist Frederic Rowton (n.d.) describes the successful and popular poet and morality tale writer Mary Howitt (1799-1888) in the following terms:

> Equally fine is [Mrs. Howitt’s] sympathy with lowliness. Anything that is humble, or dependent, or patient, or uncomplaining, or enduring, has a charm which attracts the whole intellect and heart of Mrs. Howitt at once. And such sympathies proclaim her to be the possessor of one of those true, earnest, loving souls which alone (humanly speaking) can save us from sinking into that yawning gulf of pride and selfishness which now threatens to devour and close over all that is noble and self-denying in the heart of man. We need to be more childlike: and to be this we want writers who see with the true eyes, and speak with the fearless souls of children. […] In her volume entitled *Birds and Flowers*, there is a large amount of positive instruction: and most delightful it is conveyed to the mind of the youthful reader; not merely inculcating facts, but inducting sympathies: not merely fastening the young mind on intellectual Knowledge, but fixing it deeply in the rock of moral Truth. Her style contains everything that can attract the young imagination; fervour, simplicity, harmony, affectionateness, and pictorial power. (355)

Although Rowton uses the term “poet” for his title rather than the second-class euphemism “versifier,” his praise is reserved for her “soul,” her “charm,” and her “true

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eyes,” and he avoids Dyce’s suggestion that education contributes to poetic genius; for Rowton, Howitt’s virtue is in her being rather than in her talent. Her work appeals to young children, because she is herself “childlike.” Moreover, because her work is prized for “lowness” and “humility,” its defining virtue is that it will never “pridefully” or “selfishly” challenge the work being done in the literary mainstream. The last will be first in spirituality and authenticity, but the last will remain (at its own behest) last in terms of public prestige and intellectual standing.27

Towards the very end of the century, there were occasional challenges to the assumption that the common denominator in women’s writing is natural sensibility. Forty years after Rowton, for example, Elizabeth Amelia Sharp (1856-1932) editor of Women’s Voices: An Anthology of the Most Characteristic Poems by English, Scots, and Irish Women and Women Poets of the Victorian Era (1887) made a strong argument for poetry by women, and specifically for the link between education and poetic success:28

It is […] not generally recognized how much of verse of high intellectual and artistic quality has been written by women during the last two centuries. One or two names have a high place on the roll of fame; others are rewarded with honourable if somewhat patronizing mention and approval; and many whose productions are of a quality exceptionally noteworthy are totally forgotten, or –as

27 Protestations of inferiority published by female versifiers were remarkably common. Cf. the editorial introduction to Lilies and Violets (1855) by Rosalie Bell: “It would be quite superfluous for me to make formal disclaimer of attempts at literary display in the preparation of this volume; for the obvious absence of any conquests in that sphere will, I think, suffice to shield me from the suspicion of such an aim./On the other hand, I would not be insensible to the naturalness of that criticism which should characterize as temerity, the placing of a name so obscure, and productions so imperfect as my own, among those of authors whose company should be intruded upon only by the selectest presence. If, therefore, this presumption on my part shall appear to any to be the offspring of egotism, I can, while simply disavowing any such feeling, commend myself to their charity, on the score that, reflected in such radiance, mediocrity must so much more certainly find itself exhibited in disparaging contrast” (v).

28 Although Women’s Voices was her first anthology, Sharp had made such a reputation for excellence as an editor that by 1890, she was entrusted with the Walter Scott Press’ edition of Tennyson’s Lyrics and Poems: With Maud and In Memorium.
in the case of living authors—strangely, and one is inclined to say, ungenerously neglected. In the great and ever-increasing pressure of literary production it would be unreasonable to expect that every true voice should make itself heard, even for the brief while of its singing-days: many, indeed most poets, must be content with the selfish reward of their art. (iv-v)

Sharp sets herself against “patronizing” editors like Rowton by carefully emphasizing “selfish art” rather than “fervour, simplicity, and harmony,” but her defensive tone and repeated assertion that “the selection is not inferior to any that might be made from the poetry of men of similar standing” (viii), make it clear that the Rowton-esque opinion was the dominant frame of reference.

Due to developments in prose children’s literature and the gradual codification of fairy tales into a canon of children’s literature, fairy verse and fairy poetry briefly co-existed with the additional new genres fairy tale verse (mostly published in popular periodicals for women and children) and fairy tale poetry (which began to appear in the work of established poets like Christina Rossetti and Robert Browning). At the turn of the twentieth century, however, these categories would all collapse into the more general heading “fairy tale poetry” which did not have to be distinguished from verse because fairy tales had become so irrevocably associated with children’s literature, that the separate denomination became redundant.

3.3 Nineteenth-Century Educational Theory: Fairy Tales and National Morality

Because prose was considered less intrinsically aesthetic and therefore less useful for developing artistic children’s sensibilities, prose fairy tales were challenged much more frequently than fairy verse, often in debates that would echo the language of the eighteenth-century arguments about “imagination.” Yet, as the genre became more
coherently defined, by mid-century, even strong advocates of the morality tale like Lydia Maria Child began to argue for the cautious reading of fairy tales, claiming that:

“Imagination was bestowed upon us by the Great Giver of all things, and unquestionably was intended to be cultivated in a fair proportion to other powers of the mind. Excess of imagination has, I know, done incalculable mischief; but that is no argument against a moderate cultivation of it” (*Mother’s* 93). In her very practical way, she then ruefully argues that:

> [...] we should indulge children in reading some of the best fairy-stories and fables [because] we cannot possibly help their getting hold of some books of this description and it is never wise to forbid what we cannot prevent: besides, how much better it is that their choice should be guided by a parent, than left to chance. (400)

But encoded in this amusing point is an implicit question. Children love imagination, but to what extent can imagining unreal things have concrete educational value in the real world? The somewhat defensive language used by fairy tale advocates suggest that fairy tales continued to be to some extent marginal as an educational genre, but the number and variety of fairy tale advocates in the nineteenth century deserves some attention because their arguments gradually lead up to the twentieth-century argument that fairy tales play an important formative role in children’s social education, particularly in gendered terms.

Eighteenth-century debates about nature and imagination were largely centered around the question of whether or not the two concepts were in binary opposition, but in the nineteenth century, fairy tales were situated as a gateway for other patterns of

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29 For an extended discussion of the relationship between fairy tales and morality tales, see also Liman vii-x.
scholarship, especially scientific study of nature. This new development depended on having a more coherent pattern of fairy tales to draw on, because it requires an assumed idea of fairy tale-ness; but it also built (at least tangentially) on the sense that fairy narratives transport the reader’s mind into an elevated state of consciousness.30 For example, In The Temple of Education (1853), T. Elford Poynting argued that fairy tales inspire the human capacity for wonder, which can then be translated to the study of the natural world: “Fairy tales, properly understood, are true tales, foreshadowing—or hinting beforehand—to the young the real wonders of the world” (91). 31 This shift implies a deeper appreciation for the psychological process of what John Locke had called “imaging.” For Locke, the concern was whether or not “imaging” corresponded to the empirical world, but for Poynting, teaching young children to imagine unreal things was valuable because it helped the children’s mind practice imaging, and imaging is a valuable mental skill. In 1881, the London-based Journal of Education expanded this premise somewhat, by arguing that fairy tales not only help inspire wonder but that the process of working out how physical laws pertain in fictional worlds helps children build rational mental patterns that will help them scientifically investigate the material world of science:

Fairy lore is a much better preparation for the serious study of science than the conversational book about a scientific subject. Myths and fables develope [sic] those imaginative faculties which, it is now universally recognised, are almost indispensable to any original discovery or intelligent understanding in science

30 Cf. Chapter 2.3 and the discussion of early Romanticism and fairy poetry.

31 Cf. also Samuel Prout Newcomb (1824-1912): “If man had made such an account by himself, people would have said, ‘It is a fairy tale.’ But, ah! in God’s great ‘book of nature’ there are wonders greater than man can invent; and if we could only once peep into the secrets of the Creator, we should say, ‘We have never known such strange fairy tales before’” (342).
The power which in childhood realizes vividly the conditions of fairyland, where all things work logically according to fairy law, is the same power which later on realises vividly the abstract laws of science. (“Reading Books” 4)

As debates about nature and education were beginning to focus more attention on patterns of mental development than pure fact retention, the subtle implication that fairy tales and imagination can usefully develop mental perception made fairy tales increasingly popular with educational theorists.

This enthusiasm for fairy tale narratives also grew into a conviction that the pattern of fairy tale narrativity was uniquely valuable and that many educational subjects could be adapted to mimic fairy tale forms. In 1863, *The Museum and English Journal of Education* made the bold suggestion that:

Well, then, why not make these very tales teach them, while they are too young to care about books? Tell them fairy tales out of history; there are plenty to choose from. Is not the life of Mahomet a fairy tale? Is not the rise of Greece a fairy tale? Is not the early history of Rome a collection of the best fairy tales ever written? to say nothing of more modern times. And don’t you think that when they meet with all these stories in their lessons by and by, they will welcome them as old friends, instead of wearying of them as task-work? […] look at what a playground you have in the telescope and microscope; they were my favourite toys as a child. Tennyson speaks of ‘The fairy tales of science, and the long result of time;’ and he is quite right; there is scarcely a marvel in the whole range of our nursery literature which science has not realized. (210)

The *Museum* is not advocating a collapse of fiction and non-fiction, but they are suggesting that fairy tales not only help us to practice imagining complex concepts but

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32 Similar arguments were made through the end of the century in periodicals such as “The Passing of the Fairies” in *The Educational Times* (1895): “It may be true that the facts of electricity and of light, and their modes of motion, may be made as interesting as the stories of the seven-league boots, or Aladdin’s carpet. The lecturer contended that they are superior to these for educational purposes, because they are true. We venture to suggest that this begs the question. *Ex hypothesi*, we are not teaching either set of stories for the value of their facts, but as a method of awakening that wonder which is the source of all knowledge, the imagination and sympathy which lie at the basis of all science, all discovery, all poetry, all religion” (524).
that there is a unique kind of readerly empathy with fairy tale narrativity that they hope to apply in other contexts. Abstract facts are difficult to memorize, but if they are presented in narrative form with characters to which an audience can relate, facts, historical narratives, and scientific processes are much easier to retain; and at this point, fairy tales had become such an immensely popular narrative form that they represented the quintessential amusing narrative form.

In addition to teaching children how to imagine and how to retain narrative forms, fairy tales were also held up as narratives that allegorically teach children how to function in society. Indeed, works like *Intellectual Education* (1858) by Emily Shirreff (1814-1897) argued that insipid morality tales are less realistic than imaginative fairy tales. In doing so, Sharif effectively shifted the paradigms of “reality” to suit a moral rendering of the term rather than a material rendering of the term. The “real” world may not be literally populated by ogres or dragons, but the population of the human world certainly includes cruel and powerful individuals. Individuals, moreover, who are unlikely to be miraculously transformed by the nearly supernatural infant piety of morality tale protagonists:

Fairy tales have fallen so sadly under the ban of educational censure that they would require a longer apology than I have space for to reinstate them in favour. In my opinion it is at once a false view of fiction, and a narrow view of truth which would force children away from those pleasant old paths ‘to dwell in dull realities for ever.’ I believe fairy tales afford a far more healthy form of amusement to children than most of the stories of so-called real life that our modern libraries teem with. Those wonderfully good or clever little boys and girls who instruct and reform their parents; or those young reprobates held up as patterns of corruption for doing the mischief which most children have a sympathy with, and yet cannot feel themselves to be so very wicked for loving;

33 Cf. also *Fairy Tales and Allegories in Verse for Young People* (1860) by Edith Elizabeth Pym.
these are what really teach untruths, for they give false notions of actual life, and lead to false expectation and estimation of character. 34

In shifting the paradigms of “reality” to social psychology rather than empirical sensory data, Shirreff draws increasing attention to fairy tales as social allegories that, in the words of educator Alfred Ewen Fletcher (1841-1915), “exert a powerful influence in the development of the intellect and the emotions, and in the formation of character” (121). This argument relies heavily on the assumption that children can distinguish between the literal and the allegorical, but it was persuasive enough that, by the end of the century, fairy tales would eclipse morality tales in educational texts. 35

The twentieth-century arguments about how fairy tales shape children’s introduction to social and gender norms is only an echo of an argument that was well-established a century before. For example, although the contemporary Pulitzer-prize winning author and academic Alison Lurie (b. 1926) seems not to have been aware of Shirreff’s strain of criticism, Shirreff’s sentiment is echoed nearly verbatim in Lurie’s

34 178-9. Cf. also The Governess (1855): “B. says, ‘No, we will not feed them entirely on facts, but, instead of such trash as fairy stories, they shall read good moral tales from their earliest years. Accordingly, poor little Henry and Mary are told, in the ‘Moral Spelling Book,’ of a Master Tommy Bad Boy, and Master Johnny Good Boy: one the incarnation of all wickedness, as a boy, a youth, and a man; and the other equally absurd and impossible, as the walking epitome of all that is good and virtuous, who never did a wrong thing or said a naughty word; who never made a dirt pie or went near the water; never through of himself, but always first of his dear mamma and papa; who preferred going without his breakfast to eating it, &c., &c., ad nauseam. […] It is supposed possible that children relish, enjoy, understand, appreciate, and profit by such outrageous twaddle as this; while they fail to see, or feel, or imitate the beauty of truth and courage, good nature and good will in […] Andersen’s charming Red Shoes!!” (424-5).

35 Even at the end of the century, the line between fairy tales and morality tales was not entirely clear, however it would be fairy to say that at the beginning of the century, for the most part fairy tropes were incorporated into morality tales and at the end of the century, it was more likely that moral overtones would be added into fairy tales. Cf. Sommenschein’s Cyclopaedia of Education (1889) which divides children’s literature into six rough categories, including “fairy tales” and “tales with a moral purpose.” In this popular scheme, the key example of “tales with a moral purpose” are the works of Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875), the Danish fairy tale author (Fletcher 196).
When I was small it was believed in high-minded progressive circles that fairy tales were unsuitable for children. [...] I could read about The Grocery Man ("This is John’s Mother. Good Morning, Mr. Grocery Man") and How Spot Found a Home. The children and parents in these stories were exactly like the ones I knew, only more boring. They never did anything really wrong, and nothing dangerous or surprising ever happened to them [...] After we grew up, of course, we found out how unrealistic these stories had been. The simple, pleasant adult society they had prepared us for did not exist. The fairy tales had been right all along—the world was full of hostile, stupid giants and perilous castles and people who abandoned their children in the nearest forest. To succeed in this world you needed some special skill or patronage, plus remarkable luck; and it didn’t hurt to be very good-looking. The other qualities that counted were wit, boldness, stubborn persistence, and an eye for the main chance. Kindness to those in trouble was also advisable—you never knew who might be useful to you later on. (42)

Lurie’s argument, like Sherriff’s, is that fairy tales are not “true” because they reflect social reality in literal terms, but that they are “true” insofar as they outline patterns of social behavior and, in shaping social perception, play a crucial role in shaping social interactions. From the eighteenth century and through the twentieth century, this debate about “realism” and “truth” is an ongoing adaptation of the very basic disagreement between Locke and Rousseau: can imaginative tales contain a pragmatic, symbolic truth even though they are openly untrue in a literal sense? In debates about educational theory, mid-Victorian fairy tales for children had now returned to the status that fairy tales had as an adult genre at the turn of the seventeenth century and would have again (in texts for children and adults) in the late twentieth-century.

The gap between the Victorian and late twentieth-century gender-liberal production of fairy tales was bridged in part by a development in bibliographic technology. In the face of monumental social, technological, and intellectual
developments, librarians had been faced with the task of literally and metaphorically mapping out structures of knowledge. Between 1895-8, early influential systems like the Quinn-Brown and “Adjustable” systems provided a subsection for “Juvenile Literature” that would segregate out whatever pieces of “fiction,” “poetry,” or “drama” might be marketed to a child audience. John Bowman has suggested that these divisions were mostly likely a matter of practicality for librarians who were well aware that (as today) general audiences primarily read fiction and who shelved accordingly as a matter of convenience.36 Yet, while very helpful for librarians who wish to make materials available to a broad reading public, this move had three inadvertent side effects: first, it obscured links between fairy tales that were produced for adults and fairy tales that were produced for children, as well as fairy tales produced as prose and poetry respectively. Second, all of the fairy tales grouped (rightly or wrongly) as “Juvenile Literature” were distanced from the academic, literary canon right at the time when universities (Oxford in 1894, Cambridge 1919) were establishing fledgling English Departments. And third, the segregation of “juvenile material” made it possible to conceptualize and then establish libraries dedicated to children’s literature (and, crucially, to hire librarians who specialized in the acquisition of children’s literature).

In effect, at the turn of the century, the fairy tale as a literary object of study was largely relegated to the provenance of the public library. And since women were far more likely to be children’s librarians and elementary school teachers, the Victorian link between women, didacticism, and fairy tales continued to flourish outside of the

36 Personal correspondence. Cf. also J.H. Bowman’s “Classification in British Public Libraries: A Historical Perspective.”
academy. For example, in 1915 the American librarian Mary Huse Eastman (1870-1963) published the *Index to Fairy Tales, Myths and Legends* as a tool for teachers and children’s librarians:

> The increased use of the story hour in work with children and the ever-widening use of fables and myths in school work have shown the need of an index which would save time by indicating at a glance the source of an asked-for story. When eight out of ten versions of a myth are given in their respective books under different titles bearing little or no resemblance to the one sought for, when each new translator or compiler may give an entire set of new titles to old favorites, mechanical aid is necessary to save reason as well as time. (vii)

It is also interesting to note that as this particular series was expanded, updated, and reprinted over the course of the century, the title of her work was contracted to *Index to Fairy-Tales* (1926) by Hulse’s successor Norma Olin Ireland (b.1907). The content and scope of the work did not change, but the emphasis on the title is suggestive of an increasing distance between “light” fairy tale material (for children/librarians) and “serious” myth and legend material (for adults/scholars). As in other contexts, women’s dominance in this public arena was tempered by the marginalization of that area of specialization.

3.4 Nineteenth-Century Educational Prose: Fairy Tales and National Morality

The developments in theory which gradually allowed educators to appreciate the moral and social influence exerted by tales on child audiences was echoed in developments in original fairy tale writing. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, morality tale authors appropriated the language of fairies wholesale, hoping to dress up an otherwise dry message in lively, attractive fairy forms. For example, “A Fairy Tale:
Education” by Catherine Talbot (1721-1770) begins (as so many fairy tales do) with two young child protagonist meeting with a mysterious “wrinkled old woman” with “unpleasing” looks in a meadow. But this particular kind fairy in disguise is the allegorically-named crone Instruction who carries the boys off to her castle to introduce them to such figures as Truth and Modesty and to warn them against the enchantress Flattery and the filthy puddle of Disgrace. Although it has little plot, the tale’s imagery is beautiful, delicate, and full of magical terminology. Likewise, early nineteenth-century tales like Midsummer Eve: A Fairy Tale of Love (1818) by Anna Maria Hall are peppered with moral asides and conclude with explicit morals like: “woman’s true happiness—the only happiness her pure soul can taste of, unalloyed—consists in LOVING AND BEING BELOVED” (251). In many, many of the tales directed at a child audience, the line between morality tale and fairy tale was nonexistent. Yet, in this genre, the specific nature of the morals varied widely. Where Hall idealizes love relationships, another 1831 fairy tale opens with a declaration of feminine strength and independence and a princess whose virtues exceed her beauty: “Once upon a time […] there was a beautiful princess named Eleanora, whose god-mother was a very good Fairy, and promised the Queen, when she was dying, that she would give the princess fortitude in the hour of trial, firmness in that of temptation, and resignation when assailed by misfortune: under these consolatory promises, the Queen died” (“Tales Told” 77). Even though they used the phrase “fairy tale” in their titles, for the most part, these hybrid stories were morality tales that drew on fairy imagery without drawing directly on the narratives that would become canonical fairy tales.
However, in the second half of the Victorian period the massive expansion of the British Empire coincided with an importation of tales from around the world. Scholars traveled around the world collected and anthologizing tales from the far corners of the empire. Some of these collections were adapted into children’s anthologies, but many of them were originally marketed as research works for adults rather than as entertaining or educational texts for child audiences. For that reason, the morals of these tales functioned at a very different level—they were meant to represent the values of a foreign people group, not necessarily to guide the reader’s own moral development. Unlike the French tales translated in the early eighteenth century, these tales were not usually understood as being from peer cultures with valid moral authority; they were generally coded as being from relatively underdeveloped cultures and having more “primitive” moral lessons. Consequently, scholars who produced these anthologies were usually very adamant about identifying their texts as serious scientific work. For example, in the preface to the revised and expanded *Fairy Mythology* (1850) Thomas Keightley (1789-1872) quotes reviews from his original edition (1828) and the subsequent volume *Tales and Popular Fictions* (1834) that situate his writing, not among prose fiction writers, but as an object of admiration for scholars in several fields, including: the Orientalist Joseph von Hammer (1774-1856), the antiquarian Francis Douce (1757-1834), and “Dr. Jacob Grimm” (1785-1863) who is presented as a folklore authority rather than an author (*Fairy* [1850] v-vi). Because such works were coded as academic, they were excused from having morals that supported the values of the Victorian status quo.

37 For more detailed discussion of colonialism and fairy tale development cf. Chapter 4.2. “Colonialism and Fairy Tales in Pantomime an Poetry.”
However, this influx of fairy tales inspired a great deal of “original” fairy tale writing among prominent British prose authors. According to *The Morning Post* (1861) “the masters of all the great arts have not disdained to stoop to the innocent fancy and credulous apprehension of childhood” (“Fairy Land” 3), and certainly by the mid-century a gallery of canonical writers including William Thackeray (1811-1863), Charles Dickens (1812-1870), John Ruskin (1819-1900), George MacDonald (1824-1905), and many others stepped up to the task of producing fairy tales that might appeal to readers of all ages. Without acknowledging their debt to the eighteenth-century fairy tales for adults, these new tales were presented as an outgrowth of nineteenth-century children’s fairy tales. And because children’s literature had become so widely associated with moral literature, that, in Jack Zipes’ terms: “To write a fairy tale was considered [...] a social symbolical act that could have implications for the education of children and the future of society” (*Victorian* xix).

In the mid-Victorian period, the acceptance of fairy tales into the canon of acceptable, “moral” children’s literature was both advantageous (since it made fairy tales available) and potentially disadvantageous (since the available fairy tales tended to have very heavy-handed moralizing elements). For example, at the end of *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) by George MacDonald (1824-1905), the lovely Princess Irene has

38 In this context, “original” fairy tales are defined as fairy tales that follow the narrative structure and conventions of established canonical fairy tales without claiming to be transcriptions from oral culture or other fairy tale sources. Cf. Chapter 1.4 “Defining ‘Fairy Poetry’ and ‘Fairy Tale Poetry.’”

39 “Fairy Land” (3). Cf. One anonymous review of *Andersen’s Danish Fairy Tales* (1861): “Here is a book for children, and also for grown-up and even grey-headed men, who have green spots in their hearts, and can recal [sic] the time when as little boys they prattled at their mother’s knee, or with delight that deepened into awe listened to the stories of an aged grandfather or a wonder-loving, talkative, old-fashioned nurse” (7).
learned bravery escaping from the Goblin mountain, helped by the courageous miner boy Curdie who learns compassion and trust. The good king recognizes and rewards them both while the ugly, selfish, and destructive Goblins are trapped, drowned, and swept away from the kingdom in a symbolically charged cleansing flood. The simplified moral lesson is laid out in clear terms and reinforced by the aesthetic loveliness and ugliness of the heroes and villains respectively. Thus far, the fairy tale seems to be simply an acutely imaginative framework for the perpetuation of normative social values in traditional morality tale.

However, in many respects, MacDonald’s gender politics are revolutionary; both his female and male protagonists develop a broad range of physical, social, and emotional virtues that broke with normal gender roles in the Victorian period. Encouraged by her grandmother, Princess Irene embarks alone on a physically demanding quest into the heart of a goblin-infested mountain. In contrast, Curdie’s quest is for spiritual and emotional development, and he learns to implicitly trust and to accept the authority of his mother, the princess Irene, and Irene’s mysterious grandmother. As Horace Walpole had done in the eighteenth-century, MacDonald uses the extraordinary context of fairy tale magic to indirectly introduce an extraordinarily bold gender message. In the mid-Victorian period, the phrase “Once upon a time” often thinly veiled a very radical social critique because the overwhelming presence of so-harmless-as-to-be-unreadably-inane “pretty” moral children’s literature from the first part of the century inadvertently acted as a moral guarantee for edgier tales—like John Ruskin’s fairy tale critique of capitalist economics and the Industrial Revolution, *King of the Golden River* (1841)—and allowed very risky topics to be discussed even in the most polite and conservative circles without
fear of censorship. In Charles Dickens’ wry terms: “Our English red tape is too
magnificently red ever to be employed in the tying up of such trifles” (“Frauds” 326)

Even when they were morally radical, authors like Dickens, Ruskin, and
MacDonald were all invested in a clearly delineated moral agenda, but towards the end of
the nineteenth century, fairy tale authors began to step back from the confident
moralization of the mid-century writers. Rejecting the popular notion that children are
pure and innocent of worldly taint who need only to make the “right” moral decisions,
James Barrie (1860-1937) wrote at length about the self-absorbed, anarchic cruelty of
children. And in the hands of writers like Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), fairy tales made yet
another crucial shift from clear moralization to the interrogation of morality as such:

“No you mean to say that the story has a moral?” [screamed the Water-rat.]
“Certainly,” said the Linnet.
“Well, really,” said the Water-rat, in a very angry manner, “I think you
should have told me that before you began. If you had done so, I certainly would
not have listened to you; in fact, I should have said ‘Pooh,’ like the critic.
However, I can say it now;” so he shouted out “Pooh,” at the top of his voice,
gave a whisk with his tail, and went back to his hole.
“And how do you like the Water-rat?” asked the Duck. [...]”
“I am rather afraid that I have annoyed him,” answered the Linnet. “The
fact is that I told him a story with a moral.”
“Ah! that is always a very dangerous thing to do,” said the Duck.
And I quite agree with her. (182)

In Wilde’s tale, the intervention of the previously invisible third-person narrator unifies
the characters and the author (who is now written into the story as a character), and, in an
implosion of narrative authority, the tale concludes with the self-critical moral that telling
stories with morals is, indeed, a very dangerous thing to do.\textsuperscript{40} By refusing a coherent moral course of action, Wilde employs the fairy tale genre as a site of social critique, but one that attacks stable notions of morality rather than elements of the status quo moral system.\textsuperscript{41}

There was some backlash against both the extreme moral and the extreme anti-moral fairy tales in production, mostly voiced by educators like Stella Scott Gilman (1844-?) who protested in her volume \textit{Mothers in Council} (1884) that:

\begin{quote}
Among the fairy tales, the old familiar ones—“Beauty and the Beast,” “Cinderella,” and the many like them that we know so well, and the “Arabian Nights”—are better than any of modern times. They are better because of a certain matter-of-fact realism in the style in which they are told which almost compels belief. Their modern successors generally lack this. They either make the child suspect a lesson when he wants a story, by weaving in an obvious moral, or they puzzle him by a mocking tone that sounds as if the story-teller were laughing at his own tale. (64)
\end{quote}

In effect, she outlines three patterns of fairy tale writing that twentieth-century authors could turn back to: the moral tale (liberal or conservative), the anti-moral tale, and the tales whose value lies in nostalgia and moral ambivalence. Because fairy tales can imply contradictory things at all times, it is no surprise that poets, and particularly gender-

\textsuperscript{40} Of course, the transition from trustworthy and authoritative moral lessons to contradictory and inconclusive narrative plots is more gradual and overlapped than these examples suggest, but the overall shift in tone and structure is dramatic.

\textsuperscript{41} Again, this is a return to eighteenth-century models of adult fairy tale writing. Cf. Oliver Goldsmith (1760) “I begged leave to repeat a fairy tale. This request redoubled their laughter: but, not easily abashed at the raillery of boys, I persisted, observing, that it would set the absurdity of placing our affections upon trifles in the strongest point of view; and adding, that it was hoped the moral would compensate for its stupidity. For Heaven’s sake, cried the great man, washing his brush in water, let us have no morality at present; if we must have a story, let it be without any moral” (\textit{Citizen} 154); and Alexander Pope (1723) “I have long had an inclination to tell a fairy tale, the more wild and exotic the better; therefore a vision, which is confined to no rules of probability, will take in all the variety and luxuriancy of description you will; provided there is no apparent moral to it” (\textit{Letters} 32).
liberal poets, turn to the fairy tale genre in the late twentieth century because, by drawing on this genre, they have multiple angles through which to tap into a long-standing forum for debating gendered social mores. The scholarly tradition of ostensibly representing moral and cultural frameworks from foreign tale traditions had to be reconsidered in postcolonial terms. In the tradition of Ruskin, Rossetti, and MacDonald, fairy tales allow for discussion of how gender roles work within an author’s status quo social and moral framework; in the twentieth century this re-mainfested in mainstream productions like Disney’s “princess” patterns of femininity, and as the counter-movement to Disney which validated a more empowered moral framework for young women, including tales that call for *Rapunzel’s Revenge* and argue that “Snow Fight” can take down the evil dwarf “Patri Archy.” Conversely, in the amoral tradition of Wilde or Lord Dunsany, post-modern writers have used the fairy tale genre to interrogate the frameworks of social morality, as in James Finn Garner’s mocking *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (1994), rather than arguing for one moral within the larger pattern. And, in spite of the aggressively (anti-)moral fairy tales being produced to serve every imaginable agenda, throughout the twentieth-century there are constant reproductions of the tales that Gilman would identify as “the old familiar ones” told in the style popularized in the Victorian era which do not overtly signify a moral agenda beyond a vague nostalgia and idealization of childhood stories. The irony that these “old familiar” tales were made into nostalgic icons to serve

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43 I am not suggesting that they do not have significant morals encoded in them (even direct adaptations of the Grimms and Perrault tend to make subtle changes to the plot so that some of the gorier tales will be more “appropriate” for contemporary audiences), just that they do not foreground either a
a Victorian moral agenda also helped occlude the fact that most of them had been published in the eighteenth-century as strongly moral tales (written primarily for adults) with cutting critiques or strong endorsements of the social systems in which they were produced. At all times, fairy tales seem to be significantly central and significantly peripheral to contemporary moral discussions, and their inside-outside status allows for a unique platform from which to engage with the theorization of both social morals and (consequently) social moralization.

3.5 Women and Fairy Tale Poetry for Adults

The transition from “fairy poetry” to “fairy tale poetry” was dependent on a number of factors: the gradual definition of a canon of literary fairy tales, the gradual recognition of that canon and reference to it in many kinds of cultural production, and the gradual association of that canon with contexts like childhood and morality. But there was no clean evolutionary step from fairies to fairy tales; fairy poetry in the eighteenth-century tradition continued to flourish in mainstream work through the end of the century. Charles Algernon Swinburne (1836-1909), for example, uses fairy imagery and the language of poetic dreaming to celebrate the delicacy and beauty of great Elizabethan writing in his description of Shakespeare’s Winter’s Tale:

Here in Shakespeare’s vision, a flower of her kin forsaken, […]
Perdita, bright as a dew-drop engilt of the sun on the sedge.
Here on a shore unbeheld of his eyes in a dream he beheld her
Outcast, fair as a fairy, the child of a far-off king.  

In these respects, Swinburne’s 1880 poem would not have been out of place in the 1780 canon of early Romantic fairy poetry. However, concurrently with the ongoing production of fairy poetry, fairy tale poetry began to appear around the mid-century.

In literary terms, fairy tale poetry grew out of a synthesis of fairy poetry, fairy verse, and fairy tale prose, but different fairy tale poems draw on these lineages in different proportions, and its development was somewhat confused by the appearance of “fairy tale verse.” Briefly, works that identified themselves as “fairy tales in verse,” particularly towards the beginning of the century like The Flowers; or, The Sylphid Queen: A Fairy tale in Verse by Alicia Lefanu (1809) or Fairy Tales in Verse by Elizabeth Pipe Wolferstan (1830) were longer, narrative versions of “fairy poetry” (drawing on fairy imagery, but not on the cluster of narrative plots that would later be included in the canon of fairy tales). Because all these categories overlap, it is worth mentioning the key contexts in which they differ; in very loose terms:

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### TABLE 2:
FAIRY WRITING CHARACTERISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Primary Audience</th>
<th>Aesthetic Quality</th>
<th>Fairy Story/ Fairy Tale</th>
<th>Full Narrative</th>
<th>Came to Prominence</th>
<th>Explicit Moral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fairy Verse</td>
<td>children</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>fairy story</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>late 18c.</td>
<td>rarely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairy Poetry</td>
<td>adults</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>fairy story</td>
<td>rarely</td>
<td>late 16c.</td>
<td>rarely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairy Tale Prose (for adults)</td>
<td>adults</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>fairy tale</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>late 17c.</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairy Tale Prose (for children)</td>
<td>children</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>fairy tale</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>early 18c.</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairy Tale Prose (for scholars)</td>
<td>adults</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>fairy tale</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>late 17c.</td>
<td>variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairy Tale Verse*</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>mostly low</td>
<td>usually fairy story</td>
<td>often</td>
<td>early 19c.</td>
<td>rarely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairy Tale Poetry</td>
<td>usually adult</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>usually fairy tale</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>mid 19c.</td>
<td>variable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*For the purposes of this dissertation, I will be grouping “fairy tale verse” with “fairy verse” and keeping “fairy tale poetry” as a distinctive category because, at the turn of the twentieth century, all of these categories would be loosely grouped as “fairy tale poetry” and I want to be as clear as possible about the literary developments that lead up to that moment.*
Recognizing these different categories makes it easier to compare apparently very different fairy tale poems that emerge around the same time; for example, Robert Browning’s “The Pied Piper” (1842) (a complete tale narrative addressed to a child audience, that draws on high poetry structures, and concludes with a concrete moral) and Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (c.1859) (a complete tale narrative primarily addressed to an adult audience, that draws on high poetry structures, and concludes with a more ambivalent moral). Neither poem is anomalous, but they are drawing on different strains of the fairy tale and fairy poetry tradition.

In addition to providing better context for the few exceptionally well-known fairy tale poems, recognizing this pattern can also help to draw attention to the prolific but less recognized network of mid-Victorian fairy tale poetry. These fairy tale poems were fairly diverse and appeared in a number of different venues: fairy tale poems written for popular women’s journals tend to be written for adults but to be doggerel-ish and to nod heavily at fairy verse in terms of style; in contrast, fairy tale poems published in single-author volumes of poetry tend to draw on fairy poetry stylistics but fairy tale prose content. In this period, fairy tale poets borrowed freely from all previous patterns of fairy writing, though in significantly varying proportions, and the ability to reference all these previous patterns of writing also pluralized the potential connotations of any fairy tale poem. 46

46 For example, when a poetry critic like Kooistra argues that “Certainly our modern equation of picture books with juvenile literature, together with our virtually exclusive identification of the fairy tale with a child audience—biases not shared by the poem’s Victorian readers—are two important influences in our retrospective reconstruction [of Victorian work]” (15), she is both accurate and inaccurate. The division of children’s literature and adult literature was most absolute in the mid-twentieth century, and relatively lax in the late Victorian period – but it is becoming so again as vast adult audiences have discovered a love for novels like *Harry Potter, The Golden Compass,* and *Twilight.*
In fact, fairy tales had become so popular that they were entering the vocabulary of the Victorian period at a very fundamental level. Popular periodicals were starting to represent everyday events in fairy-tale terms: “The following, which we take from Thursday’s Morning Herald reads more like some Eastern fairy tale than a matter-of-fact announcement of the present day, which in substance it is.”\(^\text{47}\) Similarly, a cautionary poem titled “The Cinderella Season” \((\text{Judy} 1893)\) winkingly advised young ladies to watch their step during dances: “Be not on the slippery floor./Cinderella slippers” (219), and gossip columns about famous people were often studded with fairy tale pseudonyms, as in “The Mayor’s Ball: A Rhyming Rigmarole” (1863), in which “A fair CINDERELLA was flirting with a fellah/Whose hair was gray, while his heart was green”\((\text{Disorganized} 73)\). Victorian authors (like d’Aulnoy’s coterie) were very much aware of the satirical and allegorical potential of fairy tales as forum for commenting on the “Cinderellas” of their immediate political environment. In this case, however, because a handful of key tales were widely known, the whole tale functions as a referent: “Cinderella” implies a beautiful, young, unattached woman in precarious circumstances on the hunt for a suitable prince charming.

Like their seventeenth-century French counterparts, these women were extremely concerned by the question of marriage and the negotiation of social gender roles, but the established system of fairy tales made it possible for them to employ whole tales as allusions. For example, the effectiveness of “Cinderella” (1891) by Helen Smetham,  

\(^{47}\) \textit{John Bull} 415. Cf. also \textit{The Pathfinder} (1859): “Light, which is the cause of colour, presents us with a series of phenomena of a most wonderful kind, and some of the scientific facts regarding it, read more like some Eastern fairy tale, than aught else.” (“Light and Colours” 202)
depends on the reader’s knowledge of, not only the characteristics associated with Cinderella herself, but also the idea of fairy tales as representing “happily ever after”.  

Poor little Cinderella!
What did she feel, I wonder,
When that dread stroke of midnight
Snapped her bright dreams asunder?

[...]
My sister, Cinderella,
I, too, went to your ball;
Light, magic, silk and splendour,
Fairy prince and all.

[...]
Now fairy-land has vanished,
Wishes once more are vain.
“Back, little Cinderella,
Back to your hearth again!”

Ah! happy fairy stories,
With morals quaint and old!
That was the age of magic,
This is the age of gold.

[...]
For those were fairy ages,
But never, never since
Has little Cinderella
Wedded the fairy prince.  

The aesthetic value of this piece is relatively low, heightening its association with the moralizing genre of fairy verse to a degree that makes the message more piquant: it is a  

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48 No dates are available for Helen Smetham, but it is likely that she was the Helen Smetham who was the only daughter of the artist James Smetham (1821-1889). John was known for his visionary landscapes, his admiration for William Blake (1757-1827), and his extensive correspondence with Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) and John Ruskin (1819-1900) until he had a severe mental breakdown in 1857 and worsening insane episodes that led to his complete seclusion in 1877.

49 240. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, “Cinderella” was parodied regularly in gendered contexts like “A Little Cinderella” by Ellis Walton (pseudonym for Mrs. F. Percy Cotton, n.d.) and also in more bizarre contexts like “Cinderella the First” (1898) by Albert O’Donnell Bartholeyns (c.1851-1922) and the anonymously published “Moral Reflections Written on the Cross of St. Paul’s” (1822).
morality tale about the immoral lies told by fairy tales. Like the prose tales of George
MacDonald or John Ruskin, this poem uses all the signifiers of moral discourse to
challenge the moral strictures of the status quo. Like the prose tales of D’Aulnoy’s court,
it is an adult discourse among women preoccupied with the problem of marriage in a
patriarchal society. Like the eighteenth-century British fairy tales, it has a strong satirical
streak. Her poem works as a counter-narrative because all of these strands of fairy tale
narrativity were already in circulation. This work deserves more detailed scholarly
acknowledgement because hundreds of poems like Smetham’s were produced for
women’s periodicals in the second half of the Victorian period.

Moreover, Smetham’s poem is almost an exact corollary to the fascinating trans-
Atlantic explosion of fairy tales in poetry and gender theory that happened between the
1960s-80s, and included poems like “Cinderella” (1971) by Dorothy Reid:

They never knew or never cared to know
Why Ellen stirred the coals so wistfully
In early evening, when the flame was low;
They never saw, and would have laughed to see
The tattered book she read and read again
For breathless words of slippers and a prince.
When she grew older, she would look at men
With quick surmising interest; but since
Young Elmer wed and took her to his farm
Ellen has grown more meek, and settled down
To honest labour. There was not much harm
In her quaint notions, for she cut the gown
That she was married in, all frills and laces
Up into christening dresses for her brood.
At first she used to sit in quiet places
And moon alone, between the beds and food
But now she rocks quiescent, mending holes,
And never seems to see between her lashes
Young Elanora lingering by the coals
To poke a wistful finger in the ashes. (73)
Reid’s poem is set in a rural, patriarchal once-upon-a-time in which children are allowed to poke in fireplaces and women had no control over their marriages or any serious prospect of leaving the domestic space. This poem presents the “Cinderella” tale as a passive dream about ultimate romantic and communal acceptance so enrapturing that it prevents generations of women from achieving romance, actively interacting with their actual communities. Like Smetham, Reid depicts a “Cinderella” dream being negotiated between generations of women who are enchanted by it, even as they find themselves being destroyed by it. The message of both poems is that in wanting the fairy tale to be true, women are made vulnerable because the “Cinderella” tale misrepresents the real world. Remarkably, the arguments made by gender theorists like Mariana Valverde (b.1955) in 1985 apply equally to the 1971 and 1891 poems: “Women know heterosexual reality is not like either fairy tales or Harlequins. However most women learned this only after some years of experience. Because we are surrounded by heterosexist ideology we enter heterosexual relationships accompanied by a whole series of expectations and ideals about what ‘it’ is supposed to be like” (85). 50 Now that accessing these more obscure Victorian texts is readily possible, it is time to consider the extent to which even the canonical fairy tales have a much longer history of gendered “re-vision” than criticism from the 1960s-1990s would suggest.

50 In fact, her point would apply just as well to the writing done by d’Aulnoy and her salons.
3.6 Gender and Victorian Fairy Tale Illustration

In terms of print technology, there were also specific concessions made to women that further reinforced the oddly empowering-disempowering dynamic of fairy tales in publication. One area of book production that was very open to women was the art of illustration, particularly for the hundreds of “pretty” fairy works for young children. Illustrators like Kate Greenway captured the imaginations of Victorian book-buyers so thoroughly that her pastel creations, often illustrating verse for children, dominated British culture for decades. Not only was she responsible for a large quantity of publications, but also a wider variety of kinds of publications – including gift books, illustrated storybooks, and her own calendar, *Kate Greenaway’s Almanack*. In the late Victorian period, women like Helen Allingham (1848-1926), Ameila Bowerley (d.1916), Mary Ellen Edwards (1839-c.1910), Cecilia Levetus (1874-1936), Elanor Fortiscue Brickdale (c.1871-1945), Alice Hayers (1850-1890), Jessie M. King (c.1875-1949), Helen Stratton (1891-1925), and Marcella Walker (pub.1872-1917) were making a living and, in some cases, building international reputations on the strength of these immensely popular illustration.

Their work may not appear to be directly relevant to this history of fairy or fairy tale poetry, but it is significant on two fonts: first, the development of illustration technology paralleled and reinforced the division between high and low fairy art signified by the distinction between fairy verse and fairy poetry. Second, it provides a historical backdrop of fairy and fairy tale illustration against which to read: the sketches of twentieth-century poets like Stevie Smith (1902-1971), the picturebooks edited by Grace Nichols (b.1950) and John Agard (b.1949), and direct poetic allusions to Victorian
illustrators and illustrations. The visual aspect of fairy and fairy tale book production has a long and lingering influence on fairy tale poetry, particularly in areas that draw most heavily on associations with children’s literature.

Figure 3.2 “Come Dance in the Meadows” (n.d.) illus. by Kate Greenaway

Greenway’s aesthetic was dominated by scenes of flowers and nature, minute fairies with charming outfits and jolly dispositions, pastel color palettes, and perfectly clean and starched children in immaculate costumes and courteous poses. In short, the illustration perfectly complements the aesthetic of the anonymous fairy verse that it accompanies:

```
THE BLUE BELLS make music
Which we cannot hear,
And play for the fairies,
Whose delicate ear
Can catch all the talk
```
Of each insect and flower
And see in my eyes
Love increasing each hour.

Together, these artistic works represent the acme of pretty Victorian children’s art—and Greenway’s pattern of illustration became so enormously popular that direct allusions to her work stand as representative of the whole of Victorian fairy art. For example, in “Forget-Me-Not” (1962), Austin Clarke (1896-1974) defines her as emblematic of delicate, floral, optimistic sentimentality:

[…] Coleridge had picked
That phrase for us—vergiss-mein-nicht, emblem
Of love and friendship, delicate sentiments.
Forget-me-nots, forget-me-nots:
Blue, sunny-eyed young hopeful! He left a nosegay,
A keepsake for Kate Greenaway.

The tone of Clarke’s poem is half-mocking, half-admiring, but he gestures at the importance of illustration as it is linked to the poetic tradition of the Victorian period and the fact that historical figures like Kate Greenaway are subsumed by the fiction they produced and can be treated as archetypal in their own right.

The idealization of childhood in the Victorian period makes it hard for contemporary critics to appreciate the extent to which being “child-like” could be simultaneously valorized and marginalized as “childish.” However, the international award-winning illustrator Maurice Sendak (b.1928) has argued persuasively that there is a powerful sense in which Victorian childhood has nothing to do with children or children’s perception, but with an adult longing for what childhood could/should be.

I don’t think a book like [Kate Greenaway’s] *Mother Goose* is really a children’s book. It’s what an adult would go into a store and buy, thinking: “This is perfect
for little Jane.” but what he or she is truly saying is: “It’s perfect for me. It frightens me not; it daunts me not. It’s pretty, it’s loveable—I can even put it under my pillow and not have a nightmare. Thus, it must be good for my child.”

Children may have loved Greenaway, they probably still do. But this really is a book for safe adulthood with the preconception and warped view of a saccharined childhood that most of the human race never has experienced. We have moments of it, but that isn’t what childhood is all about. (qtd. in Cott xv)

For gender-liberal poets in the nineteenth and in the twentieth century, the trick was to navigate the subtle gap between childhood and childishness—in large part, a question of perspective. A “childish” narrative is ostensibly told from the point of view of a child, and because of that, it is assumed that because childish narratives are not from an adult frame of reference that they do not engage with the world in complex codes and are therefore not worth “serious” consideration. In contrast, “childhood” as a romanticized idyll is an adult concept that interprets children’s experience from a nostalgic frame of reference. The recovery or extended consideration of the childish point of view is therefore necessarily a critique of an idealized representation of childhood.51

There is evidence that illustrators, even in child-related genres like fairy tales were at times challenging this ideal; fairy tale illustration was not always defined by Greenaway-esque delicacy. For example, Florence Harrison (active 1887-1937) was very well known for her powerful illustration both fairy tales and canonical poetry, particularly the work of Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Morris, and Christina Rossetti.

51 This pattern of idealization would be particularly important for both poets who endorse a sentimentalized vision of childhood (Cf. Chapter 5.2 “Fairy Tales, Nostalgia, and ‘Childishness’”) and for poets who are constantly resisting that pattern of writing.
a.) “Rapunzel”  
b.) Detail from the illustration for Tennyson’s “Sea Fairies”  

Her work is dramatic and full of sweeping movement. The strong color contrast in the “Rapunzel” image and the gloomy dark background enveloping the solitary figure remind the viewer of the scary aspect of fairy tales: this princess was kidnapped and held prisoner in a tower, and she is soon to be abandoned, pregnant and alone, in a terrible desert. The “sea fairies” image is full of rainbows and frothy bubbles, but also adult, athletic fairies who clearly enjoy the rushing movement of the high ocean waves. Both Greenway and Harrison made careers out of imaginative landscapes, but the contrast between these samplings of their work mimics the distance between fairy verse (cute, pastel, and non-threatening) and fairy poetry (more artistically risky, adult, and dramatic).
Harrison’s work, however, is exceptional. Like the gendered division between fairy verse (primarily coded as feminine) and fairy poetry (primarily coded as masculine), there are significant trends that distinguish the fairy tale illustrations produced by male and female artists in this period, in large part because women had more access to the children’s literature market and made their living illustrating books exclusively for children. In the work done by female illustrators, fairies and mythical figures tend to be nearly androgynous and to blend into their environment. The focus is generally on plot action or the natural setting rather than on a character study of a particular figure. For comparative purposes, consider the following illustrations of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” produced by some of the most successful female illustrators at the turn of the twentieth century:
Figure 3.4 Victorian Fairy Tale Illustrators: Female

a.) “The Little Mermaid” by Elenore Pliestead Abbott (1875-1935)
b.) “The Mermaid’s Sisters Bring a Knife” by Anne Anderson (1874-1930)
c.) “…she mounted with the other children of the air to a rosy cloud that floated through the aether” by Honor Appleton (1879-1951)
d.) “She threw herself from the ship into the sea…” by Margaret Tarrant (1888-1959)
Figure 3.5 Victorian Fairy Tale Illustrators: Male

a.) “The Little Mermaid 3” by Arthur Rackham (1867-1939)
b.) “The Little Mermaid 4” by Edmund Dulac (1882-1953)
c.) “The Little Mermaid Meets the Sea-Hag” by Harry Clarke (1889-1931)
d.) The Little Mermaid” by John William Waterhouse (1849-1917)
In the paintings done by Abbot, Anderson, and Appleton, it takes a moment to even find the title character, but in all four of the pieces done by men, the little mermaid is a bold focal point of the image, even when there are other characters present. Rackham and Dulac focus on scenes that move the plot forward, but Clarke and Waterhouse have produced character studies that work beside (if not against) the descriptive language of Andersen’s text. The images by female illustrators depict the little mermaid as nearly ageless in her androgyny, while the images by Dulac, Clarke, and Waterhouse are far more sexualized and represent the mermaid’s body as both physically mature and unquestionably feminine. The distinctions in their artwork are important, partly because most contemporary readers think of Victorian illustrations as pastel, pretty, and polite; but also because the illustrators who were least pastel, pretty, and polite are, with the exception of Kate Greenaway, the ones who have been in constant reprint since the Victorian period. Twentieth century readers are fascinated with the concept of idealized childhood illustration, but more often than not, it seems to be the exceptions to that tradition or the parodies of it that audiences most enjoy.

The troubling legacy of the Victorian period is of a generation of women who largely found public fame by navigating a very fine line of identity—largely making names for themselves as adults through a childish medium, but as the explosion of women’s pamphlets and periodicals at the end of the Victorian period suggests, in spite of these limitations, female publishers were able to take on and fulfill all of the same editorial and material production tasks as their male colleagues—and they stretched the boundaries of materials targeted at girls and women to include radical suffragette
publications as well as journals celebrating domesticity (implicitly challenging any unified definition of “women” or “women’s interests”).

The intertwined fates of poetry and illustration were most evident as the parodies of moral verses and morality tales were accompanied by illustrations that were also parodies of traditional work, as in the work of the irreverent Edward Lear (1812-1888) whose comic illustrations accompanied his own humorous verse as well as the work of several poetic contemporaries:

Figure 3.6 The 1988 Edward Lear commemorative stamp series

Although there is something kindred in the fantastical elements of both fairy verse and nonsense verse, the nonsense poets very rarely drew on fairy or fairy tale imagery because men with wings and women with marvelously long noses are perfectly reasonable characters to have in a fairy tale; in a magical world, guitar-playing owls are
not nonsensical at all. However, the movement is important to acknowledge because at the turn of the century, even sub-genres that are not readily compatible were grouped bibliographically as “children’s literature” and came to have some shared connotations.

In the early twentieth century, the association of sketches and drawings with children’s literature had became so powerful that when the poet Stevie Smith (1902-1971) produced poetry accompanied by original illustration in the mid-1930s, it took some time for her writing to be recognized or processed by the critical academy as adult (i.e. “serious”) poetry. Philip Larkin’s half-apologetic article “Frivolous and Vulnerable” is fairly representative of the first critical responses to Smith’s work:

Finding Stevie Smith’s Not Waving but Drowning in a bookshop one Christmas some years ago, I was sufficiently impressed by it to buy a number of copies for random distribution among friends…they were, I think, bothered to know whether I seriously expected them to admire it. The more I insisted that I did, the more suspicious they became. An unfortunate episode…

I am not aware that Stevie Smith’s poems have ever received serious critical assessment, though recently I have seen signs that this may not be far off. They are certainly presented with that hallmark of frivolity, drawings, and if my friends had been asked to place Miss Smith they would no doubt have put her somewhere in the uneasy marches between humorous and children’s. [emphasis Larkin’s] (“Frivolous” 75)

Although Larkin’s comment is clearly a bit tongue-in-cheek, “frivolity” and “drawings” are perceived as resistant to poetic admiration, which, in Larkin’s terms, is reserved for pieces that can be “seriously.”

52 Although Smith and Larkin were contemporaries, there is no evidence that Smith’s sea creature was intended to look like Philip Larkin. But it is a remarkable likeness, nonetheless.
In more recent years, critics like Romana Huk have greeted with relief the prospect of finally “taking [Smith’s] work seriously” (“Misplacing” 508) and (in a move Larkin would find paradoxical) have articulated that project by foregrounding the importance of the “frivolous” drawings,\textsuperscript{53} and celebrating Smith’s “ex-centric” position in relation to stable, central kinds of social and poetic discourse. As Smith’s most prolific contemporary critic, Huk has insightfully argued that:

Although most of the feminist poets read by critics or gathered together in anthologies have avoided traditional forms, conceiving of them as the historical vehicles of patriarchal order, Smith’s work both acknowledges her inescapable construction by that dominant centralized order and, by bringing other “ex-centric” voices into play, acts to hybridize or change it along with our very conception and valuation of the stable, balanced, and therefore “right-thinking” subject as it has evolved from classical models. (“Misplacing” 508)

However, taken in the context of the Victorian tradition, it is possible to see Smith’s work less “ex-centric” than Huk implies. For although illustration and children’s literature might signify marginality in relation to the canon of texts examined by literary scholars, they function as reference points that are often far more culturally central than canonical texts which are little known outside of the academy. And, whether or not Smith or Larkin recognized this, the interaction between her drawings and poems builds on a complex and well-known literary tradition in which gender is focal; she draws on the playful rhythms of fairy verse (which the Victorians coded as feminine) and also the parodic nonsense sketch tradition (a genre coded as primarily masculine and specifically critical of effeminate, ethereal patterns of Victorian fairy tale illustration). Recognizing these traditions uncovers the complexity of what Huk calls Smith’s “hybridized” sense of culture.

3.7 Fairy Tale Imagery and Gender-Liberal Writing

To appreciate the influence that prior gendered patterns of fairy tale writing have on twentieth century authors, it is important to consider not only which fairy tales were passed on but how fairy tales came to function as social symbols—individually, collectively, and in key fragments—because it increasingly became the case that fairy tales could function as forums for gender discussion and also as signifiers of gender
discussion. To take one narrow example from the broader history of fairy tales and poetry, consider Perrault’s image of the elderly crone sitting by the domestic fireplace with a cluster of children at her feet. The image represents the woman as socially peripheral in every sense—she is illiterate, she is poor, she is speaking to children rather than publishing in a public, adult forum. However, as Allon White and Peter Stallybrass have argued, that which is socially marginal is often symbolically central.\textsuperscript{54} And symbolically, the spinning and weaving of tales has continued to represent a powerful and primarily feminine mode of discourse so central that competing and sometimes completely opposing implications were attached to this iconic image even in the same historical moment.

In the first half nineteenth century, the Perraultian association of tale-telling with domestic “women’s work” flourished in texts like \textit{Verses for Little Children: Written by a Young Lady for the Amusement of her Junior Brothers and Sisters} (1813) that extolled verse and song as the pleasant facilitators to domestic chores, “And while her wheel goes quickly round/With heartfelt joy she sits and sings;/No tiresome languor there is found,/Her moments fly like fairy wings.” In this poem, women not only describe the icon of spinning threads and tales, they aspire to enact it. Although Perrault’s frontispiece was published as a seemingly misogynist alternative to d’Aulony’s representation of the fairy tale authoress as the goddess Athena, his image was taken up by female authors and audiences throughout the nineteenth century as a positive symbol of both women’s creativity and women’s competence in domestic chores, essentially inverting the gender-liberal value of the icon.

\textsuperscript{54} Cf. \textit{The Poetics and Politics of Transgression}, especially pp.20-3.
Although twentieth-century readers are likely to assume that images of women eternally working by a domestic hearth would be restrictive and reductive, many of the tales themselves interpreted the act of spinning and storytelling as uniquely empowering to successive generations of women. For example, the protagonist of the popular fairy tale “The Three Aunts” is in misery because she cannot spin, but she is rescued by three older women who have an equal knack for manipulating thread and relationships:

“And here I am, wretch that I am, shut up to spin all that heap in a day and a night, when I have never even seen a spinning wheel in all my born days.”

“Well, never mind, child,” said the old woman, “If you’ll call me Aunt on the happiest day of your life, I’ll spin this flax for you, and so you may just go away and lie down to sleep.” (Dasent 195)

As the story progresses, the lass’ beautifully crafted embroidery earns her the right to claim the prince as a husband (in spite of the fact that she herself cannot spin, weave, or sew), and as the bridal feast is being celebrated, the three aunts appear, one “with a long nose—I’m sure it was three ells long,” the second, “with a back so humped and broad, she had hard work to get through the door,” and the third “with eyes as large as saucers, and so read and bleared, ’t was gruesome to look at her.” Undaunted, the lassie immediately greets each Aunt politely, but the horrified (indiscreet) prince gasps, “how, in all the world can my bride, who is such a lovely lassie, have such loathsome mis-shapen Aunts?” Unoffended, the three Aunts calmly explain that their bodies had become warped by eternal spinning, weaving, and sewing, until the bridegroom cries out “So, so! [...] ’twas lucky I came to know this; for if folk can get so ugly and loathsome by all this, then my bride shall neither spin, nor weave, nor sew all her life long” (198). The comic tale hinges on two key themes: young women succeed by obeying and gratefully acknowledging older women, and all women can trade on men’s ignorance of the
language of domesticity to manipulate their social circumstances, even from a position of apparent social marginality.

The links between women’s language and fairy tale imagery are reinforced in many similar fairy tales that describe an intertwined inheritance of threads and lore passed down from woman to woman and argue for its immense social power. Domestic language and domestic craft allow women to communicate in a register that men cannot comprehend and to manipulate social circumstances at a level that most men cannot perceive—suggesting that public masculine power is illusory. For example, “Spindle, Shuttle, and Needle,” describes another female protagonist who succeeds in snaring a husband because of a gift of craft-skills gratefully received from an older woman:

Then she sat down to her work once more and span on, and as she did so an old saying which, she had often heard her godmother repeat whilst at work, came into her head, and she began to sing:

Spindle, spindle, go and see,
If my love will come to me.

Lo, and behold! The spindle leapt from her hand and rushed out of the room, and when she had sufficiently recovered from her surprise to look after it she saw it dancing merrily through the fields, dragging a long golden thread after it, and soon it was lost to sight. (Lang 328)

In this tale, the prince has the social authority to choose his spouse and the maiden does not, but his apparently active, authoritative role is belied when her magical golden thread draws him to her. The power she inherited from her grandmother allows her to manipulate him into choosing only what she wants him to choose. 55

55 Male writers also stressed the magical and effectively manipulative nature of women’s capacity to spin threads and tales. Cf. also George MacDonald, The Princess and the Goblin (1872) and Emile Souvestre, “Fairy Fingers” (1865)
In children’s verse, Mother Goose had become so deeply associated with fairy tales that she could be coded as the archetypal producer of all fairy tales and all nursery rhymes, as in “Johnny’s Visit to Wonder Land” (n.d.). In the poem, the magical “old woman” who mysteriously replaces the young nurse Margery in Johnny’s dream adventure to Wonderland is clearly Mother Goose in one of her many, many guises:

John finds himself sitting stuck fast in a tub,
Margery’s shawl for a sail,
An old woman holds him quite fast by the hand
And laughs when she sees him grow pale
Just now it seemed Margery, rosy and fair
But yet she bends double, and white is her hair
[…]
The strange old woman jumped out of the tub,
And demanded to have a see-saw:
“I was nurse to the fair Cinderella herself,
And you all know Miss Margery Daw;
This is Blue Beard’s cousin, so kiss his hand,
And crown him King Johnny of Wonderland […] (409-10)

This woman is powerful: she is a master of disguise, she spryly leaps and boldly demands a dance, she floats down crocodile-infested rivers in a tub, and she authoritatively directs all of the characters in the world of Wonderland. She may not, like D’Aulnoy’s author-goddess, manipulate worlds from the comfort of a writing-desk, but she most actively instigates and then gleefully includes herself in all the boy’s adventures. The illustration retains some aspects of domesticity—the sail is a woman’s shawl, and the boat is a laundry tub—but they are all repurposed to suit the imaginative adventure.

56 Mother Goose was given nominal control over nursery and fairy tales in many popular contexts. Cf. “The House the Jack Built” (Christmas, 1824), collected in R.J. Broadbent’s general description of “the fairy-like grandeur” and “other fairy-like scenes of the English Pantomimes and Extravagances” (1901, 30). It was from these blurred genre-lines that Mother Goose came to grace the cover of so many nursery books in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Even in its most empowering manifestations, the association of women with magical domesticity is necessarily reductive and essentialist, but throughout the twentieth century, writers return again and again to these Victorian tropes. Women have been able to use this kind of culturally pervasive icon to both enforce essentialization—claiming special social and linguistic power for women through their uniquely inherited feminine traditions—and, more intriguingly, to signify with it, exploding the essentialization by drawing attention to the women who reject (or are driven mad by) segregated gender roles. The point is not that women do (or do not) have some essential connection with thread or tale-telling but rather that the image of the female spinner (for better and worse) helped shape the cultural definition of femininity in the twentieth century.
By the turn of the century, an iconic association of women with tales/thread was so widespread that it could readily be appropriated as a kind of feminine history. To illustrate this, I will expand the scope of the study slightly by incorporating an example from an American writer, yet the sheer breadth of her claims demonstrates the broad trans-Atlantic scope of this symbol. In 1903, Elizabeth Cynthia Barney Buel (1868-?) wrote *The Tale of the Spinning-Wheel*, an epic work that traces European and American history through the development of spinning, literal and literary, from Ancient Greco-Roman Myth into the beginning of the twentieth century:57

The Spinning-wheel—symbol of the dignity of woman’s labor—What wealth of memory gathers around the homely implement, homely indeed in the good old sense of the word—because belonging to the home. Home-made and home-spun are honorable epithets, replete with significance, for in them we find the epitome of the lives and labors of our foremothers. (3)

In this passage, Buel foregrounds a specifically feminine code inherited through the domestic material object (“homely implement”) which is only interpretable if one understands its “significance” through the memories passed on by foremothers. In Buel’s symbolic register, this code is immensely important because there is no distinction between the domestic, material spinning of thread and the public, symbolic creation of

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57 Buel opens with the story of Arachne recorded in the sixth book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (175-80). Arachne is the low-born daughter of a dyer who gains fame for the quality of her weaving, but refuses to attribute her skill to the blessing of Minerva. The goddess, enraged by this, disguises herself as a crone and confronts Arachne who imprudently challenges the goddess to a weaving contest. They begin at once, and while Minerva weaves the scene of an epic battle between herself and Neptune, Arachne weaves seventeen scenes of the gods raping and seducing human women. Both weavings are equally magnificent, and this so infuriates Minerva (also stung by Arachne’s subject matter) that she destroys Arachne’s weaving and repeatedly beats her over the head with “an arras weaver’s comb of box.” Embittered by this, Arachne hangs herself, but Minerva “did stay her in the string/From death and said, ‘Lewd callet, live; but hang thou still for me./And lest hereafter from this curse that time may set thee free,/I will that this same punishment enacted firmly be/As well on thy posterity for ever as on thee’” (179), and used the juice of Hecate’s flower to turn Arachne into a spider. (Incidentally, that is why the taxonomic classification for spiders is “Arachnids.”)
culture. For example, in describing the legendary siege of Troy, she argues that: “In those
days of war and pillage the garments a man wore were the best tokens of his identity; the
handiwork of the matron and her daughters was an individual seal set, as it were, upon
the lives of their male relatives […] Penelope sees through the wiles of the false
Odysseus when he describes the garments she had made for the real one.”58 It is not
important that the men recognize that they have been so marked, it is enough that the
women employ and interpret their own code.

In effect, Buel’s argument posits a women’s discourse that comprehends but is
not comprehended by male discourse. In that respect, her thesis should not be confused
with the influential argument made by her contemporary Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)
who suggested that intelligent women must negotiate a divided self: “if one is a woman
one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness […] when from being
the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien
and critical” (96). For Buel no such challenge exists because women and men inhabit
different communicative spheres and treat the other sphere with an indulgent
benevolence. In fact, to attempt to enter the register of male discourse would be a
significant loss for Buel because to abandon a coded female discourse would be to
abandon the domestic power that, in sustaining everyday life, both defines individuals (as
the Trojans are identified by their cloaks) and quietly determines the symbolic structures

58 19. In book nineteen of Homer’s Odyssey, the long-lost Odysseus arrives home but instead of
announcing his return, he disguises himself as a beggar and speaks to his wife Penelope. In the character of
the beggar, he claims to have met the real Odysseus and convinces her that he has actually seen him by
accurately describing the clothes she had given her husband before he went to war. In book seven,
Odysseus is also closely questioned by Queen Arete because she recognizes that he is wearing clothes
woven by herself and her handmaidens.
of the world. Men can only carry on with their own discourse because the infrastructure of feminine care is in place.\textsuperscript{59} She goes so far as to claim that:

\begin{quote}
Of such pious women Chaucer could scarcely have said:\—
\textit{Deceite, weepyng, spynnynge, God hath give To wymmen Kyndely that they may live."
\textit{For not only did these women live, but also their families and their country because of their spinning.} (43, emphasis added)
\end{quote}

From this gender binary point of view, men are not the central arbiters of language and culture, but peripheral figures, beneficiaries of the benevolent generosity of female labor and its coded symbolic power.

The widespread popularity of the image of the female spinner made it a useful, but also highly politicized archetype. For women looking for a heritage of feminine lore and feminine language, and who therefore embrace the essentializing elements of the image, the spinner can (as Buel declaims most beautifully, and as the stories suggest) represent a generous feminine history where feminine discourse is respected and revered by women and misunderstood or underestimated by men. This is symbolically important in a direct sense (the majority of the fairy tale poems in the first half of the century include some allusion to spinning, thread, string, weaving, cloth, or sewing as part of the magical imagery), but also as emblematic of the connection between women and

\textsuperscript{59} In Buel’s terms, if a woman weaves a blanket, a man would only understand that it keeps him warm and somewhat vaguely appreciate the comforting idea that it was made by a woman who cares about him. Seeing the same blanket, a woman not only decodes a great deal of information about the weaver from its make and pattern, she understands that the country and men who define and defend it cannot not function without well-made blankets. To make her point, Buel defines the Civil War by focusing on the efforts of one devoted mother “[…] not in the darkest period of the conflict, when many faces were pale, and many hands were on their loins, did this woman’s confidence fail her in the least,—and her actions corresponded with her words. Four different times did she fit out her own son Theodore for the battlefield, and gave him her parting blessing; and with her own hands did she make five soldiers’ blankets, not to sell, but sent them a present to the poor soldiers, who, after the battles of the day, had neither bed nor covering for the night. Could soldiers thus sustained ever relinquish the cause of their country? Never!” (46).
storytelling which makes magical, fairy tale space a site of specifically feminine narrative. It is possible for men to see that there is some kind of fairy tale narrative, but the depth of the symbolism is completely beyond their comprehension.

For example, in the oeuvre of Charlotte Mew (1869-1928), fairies and fairy tales are depicted as irrelevant or inaccessible to a strong masculine discourse, but frequently appear in descriptions of the perception and discourse accessible to women, children, and adults of both sexes who have some kind of mental handicap which prevents them from assimilating mainstream social patterns of perception or communication. Published posthumously in 1929, “Monsieur qui passe” (translated literally as “Mr. who passes” or more helpfully as “Passing man”) explores a gap between masculine and feminine language through the metaphors of magic and of thread. The narrator describes meeting a woman at a friend’s home and then walking out with her by the quay in a bedazzlement of light and emotion:

God knows precisely what she said--
I left to her the twisted skein,
Though here and there I caught a thread,--
Something, at first, about “the lamps along the Seine,
And Paris, with that witching card of Spring
Kept up her sleeve,--why you could see
The trick done on these freezing winter nights!
While half the kisses of the Quay--
Youth, hope,--the whole enchanted string
Of dreams hung on the Seine’s long line of lights.”

The conversation between the two women is intense and deeply passionate: “Then suddenly she stripped, the very skin / Came off her soul,” but the intuitive thread of their dialogue falters and abruptly snaps, cut off by the thoughts of the man who passes by. The flowing hair of her interlocutor, seen by the narrator as “blood dipped in gold,” is
brusquely dismissed by the man as “Some sort of beauty once, but turning yellow, getting old.” The poem ends on a note equally dismissive of both women and magical discourse: “Pouah! These women and their nerves! / God! but the night is cold!” In this poem, and in others, Mew deftly manipulates the free indirect discourse to make it clear that the powerful male voice cannot or will not have access to imaginative fairy tale space, and she makes that gendered association archetypal through the genreic title. This “Man Passing” could clearly be any man, for no man will properly understand the magic of the feminine connection any more than he can understand the mystical power of string and thread.

Mew’s poem is unusual in that it draws the domestic metaphor into the public space of the quay—for twentieth century poets, images of spinning and weaving most frequently appear in the home and are often used as a way of thinking about living life according to unusual patterns, resistant to the repressive roles prescribed by patriarchal culture. The idea of resisting patriarchy by performing domesticity makes much more sense if the female discourse encoded in domesticity represents a symbolic space inaccessible to male discourse. Yet, although when threads or wardrobes take on otherworldly significance they are represented as positive alternatives to mundane existence, in poetry, the use of the essentialist, magical, feminine weaving-space is not necessarily equivalent to an essentialist celebration of women. In fact, Buel’s address was made to the Daughters of the American Revolution and would not have acknowledged the spinning done by generations of African American slaves. Her transcendent feminine discourse would immediately collapse under a more nuanced reading of gender, class, or race. The icon of women spinning and weaving threads and tales would continue to
appear in fairy tale poetry consistently through the century, usually as an iconic image of patriarchally defined domesticity to parody or defy:

For example, in “An Embroidery (I)” from *Poems 1968-1972*, Denise Levertov (1923-1997) takes the story “Catherine and her Destiny” and unravels it so that that instead of being obedient to her fate, Catherine abandons both her fated misery and her fated reward to make her own life – leaving behind the magical skein of thread that would bring her a prince.60 Similarly, in the gender-hybrid “Rapunzelstiltskin” (1981), Liz Lochhead (b.1947) assigns her protagonist the traditional “Rapunzel” task of deftly weaving hair, ladders, and the fabric of her sexual/emotional relationship:

So there she was, humming & pulling all the pins out of her chignon, throwing him all the usual lifelines till, soon, he was shimmying in & out every other day as though he owned the place, bringing her the sex manuals & skeins of silk from which she was meant, eventually, to weave the means of her own escape. (89)

But for Lochhead, such a trite role can’t be sustained.

She pulled her glasses off. ‘All the better to see you with my dear?’ he hazarded. She screamed, cut off her hair. ‘why you're beautiful?’ he guessed tentatively. ‘No, No, No!’ she shrieked & stamped her foot so

60 In the traditional story, Catherine’s Fate appears and offers her the choice of having a happy youth and a miserable adulthood or a miserable youth and a happy adulthood. Catherine chooses the latter, and her Fate causes her to be fired from every job that she takes, and hounds her from town to town for years until eventually Catherine takes a job with another Fate who pays her with a magical thread that ensures Catherine’s marriage to the prince.
hard it sank six cubits through the floorboards.
‘I love you?’ he came up with
as finally she tore herself in two. (89-90)

Although the story begins as a “Rapunzel” plot, the title foreshadows an identity crisis, suggesting that the protagonist was always already unable to fit into a gender binary. In Lochhead’s poem, communication is a mutual failure of masculine/feminine discourse because the gender-hybrid Rapunzstiltskin may emphatically reject the trite language which structures the failed romance, but s/he cannot come up with a viable linguistic alternative. In both poems, female protagonists struggle with traditional fairy tale plots. Both find the plots unsatisfying, and the violent struggle to resist the patterns of language (and fated gender roles) laid out by those tales defines this generation of fairy tale poetry.

Of course, resisting the traditional pattern is not the same as resisting the fairy tale genre. Tudor Balinisteanu has argued that Lochhead’s writing answered Adrienne Rich’s call for revisioning traditional and patriarchal narrative patterns. In the 1970s, Scotland inherited a field of “old battle-grounds of religion and national identity” and a literary landscape that was dominated by male lyric voices and reflected men’s public role as guardians of the cultural heritage. Lochhead’s voice found its distinctiveness by exploring the conditions under which women could express their identities and experiences in this cultural environment. (325)

Yet Balinisteanu (and, indeed, Rich) both miss the fact that the image of weaving as escape from marginalization is powerful because the image of spinning and weaving has served an image of feminine domesticity for so long, even in proto-gender-liberal discourse and certainly in fairy tale poetry. Almost paradoxically, the female spinner is a

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symbol but not an example of women’s marginality in relation to male “guardianship of the cultural heritage.” In fact, it can only be an effective, instantly recognizable symbol because it is culturally ubiquitous, and poets have been very effectively trading on that omnipresent “marginality” for more than a century.
CHAPTER 4:
NATIONAL AND RACIAL DISCOURSE:
FAIRY TALES, COLONIAL THEORY AND EARLY MARXIST THEORY

In a utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that fairy tales should be respected.
—Charles Dickens “Frauds on the Fairies” (1853)

Dickens’ line echoes the sentiments of the eighteenth-century Romantic poets who believed that fairy poetry and imagination could inspire the soul and resist the dehumanizing effects of pure reason and cold mercantile logic. In fact, the language of economics, as well as the language of nationalism and colonialism, continued to impact the development of fairy tales, fairy poetry, and the new genre of fairy tale poetry; and, appropriately enough, developments in fairy tales and fairy poetry affected Victorian discourse about colonialism, nationality, and economics.

The three sections of this chapter outline the aspects of development that would have the greatest impact on twentieth-century fairy tale poetry and literary theory. In the case of colonialism, I have mostly parsed out the theoretical developments from the literary developments because the trajectories are fairly distinct, and so they each get their own sub-section. However, in the nineteenth-century, Marx’s own work had only a tangential impact on the theorization of fairy tales (though Marxists in the early twentieth century would broadly apply his work to the reading of fairy tales, myth, and folklore),
but there were four major ways in which class discourse and fairy (tale) discourse intersected, and so I have broken up the Marxist material according to those points of contact rather than trying to divide the theoretical and literary developments.

4.1 Fairy Tales and Colonial Theory

As it developed into a formal area of scholarly inquiry, folklore powerfully defined itself as a science, not a more subjective art like literary criticism. This claim to a scientific objectivity both validated the status of folklore scholarship and gave it an authoritative weight in the evaluation of material from “less developed” cultures. The denomination of “science” also acknowledged folklore scholarship’s continuance with the breakthrough scientific theory that most preoccupied scholars in late nineteenth-century Britain: evolution—biological, cultural, mental—on the grandest chronological and geographical scales. In biology, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) had released his groundbreaking argument “Developmental Hypotheses” (1852), which was, in turn, expanded and supported by Charles Darwin (1809-1882) in On the Origin of Species (1859). At the same time, in economics and political theory, Karl Marx (1818-1883) had theorized several additional linear stages of human economic development, which he closely linked to a parallel development of culture in his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859). In anthropology, Sir Edward Tylor (1832-1917) had published Primitive Cultures (1871) in which he condensed the stages of human development into three (savagery, barbarism, and civilization) based on “mental development” as evidenced by beliefs and customs, and he related broad social development to the biological maturation of an individual from childhood (savagery) to adulthood.
Combining anthropological methodology with new genetic research, Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911) had released the handbook of eugenics, *Inquiry into Human Faculty and its Development* (1883), which translated Darwin’s theory of natural selection to an argument for selective breeding in human populations based on the assumption that different people existed at more or less advanced stages of human evolution:

![Figure 4.1 Victorian Eugenic Chart of Human Development](image)

Cumulatively, the atmosphere of evolutionary inquiry was one of heady enthusiasm and bold confidence that spread across all fields of scholarship. And although the language used to describe human development was helpfully impacted by evolutionary arguments,
from a twenty-first century perspective, the problem with this movement was the application of scientific language to dangerously subjective evaluations of moral and social development.

In 1878, the amateur, individual study of folklore was regularized and centralized through the formation of the London-based Folklore Society. The founding scholars all had marked investment in evolutionary theories and were enthusiastic about the possibility of adapting those theories towards an analysis of human mental and cultural evolution through folklore. And because so many of the officers were also members of the Society of Antiquarians, or like Darwin, Galton and Tylor, members of the Royal Society, they were able to assimilate and cross-apply new developments and discoveries very quickly. The Folklore Society president Andrew Lang (1844-1912) had studied with Edward Tylor, and adapted Tylor’s concept of “survivals” for his volume *Custom and Myth* (1884). Folklore Society vice-president Augustus Pitt-Rivers applied Spencer and Darwin’s theories to his ethnographic work and founded an innovative anthropology museum whose artifacts were arranged typologically and chronologically to highlight evolutionary trends in human culture. The prominent and prolific Folklore Society council member Joseph Jacobs (1854-1916) studied with Galton and incorporated eugenic theories into his studies of Jewish cultural history (1880s-90s). By deliberate

1 “Survivalists” interpret artifacts of folk culture as survivals of previous generations; in contrast “diffusionists” associate beliefs and customs as evidence of cross-cultural interaction. Cf. Chapter 6.1 “Overview of Fairy Tales in Marxist and (Post-)Colonial Theory.”

2 Today, the Pitt Rivers Museum is still a major attraction at Oxford University, and elements of his organizational system are still in place, though Pitt-Rivers’ original 20,000 artifacts have been augmented so that the collection now has more than 500,000 items.

3 Galton conducted survey research for his first book by distributing surveys to his FRS colleagues. At this time, the society was very active, and it was extremely common for fellows to share research or to volunteer as case studies for their colleagues’ research.
self-positioning among cutting-edge evolutionary theorizations, the science of folklore was dedicated to both mapping historical patterns in culture and preserving narratives, particularly from the oral tradition, that would almost certainly have otherwise been lost. In part because published literary material required less effort of preservation, and in part because it was largely produced by educated, elite classes, contemporary literary material had tended to receive minimal attention from folklore scholars.

List of Officers of the Society.

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Vice-Presidents.
EDWARD B. TYLOR, LL.D., F.R.S.
THE RIGHT HON. THE EARL BEAUCHAMP, F.S.A.
THE RIGHT HON. SIR JOHN LUBBOCK, BART., F.R.S., M.P.
LT.-GEN. PITT-RIVERS, D.C.L., F.R.S., F.S.A., ETC.

Director.
G. L. GOMME, F.S.A., 1, Beverley Villas, Barnes Common, S.W.

Council
THE HON. JOHN ABERCROMBY.
WALTER BESANT, M.A.
EDWARD BRABROOK, F.S.A.
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MISS C. S. BURNE.
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J. G. FRAZER, M.A.
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W. F. KIRBY.
ALFRED NUTT.
T. FAIRMAN ORDISH, F.S.A.
PROFESSOR A. H. SAYCE, M.A.
CAPTAIN R. C. TEMPLE.
HENRY F. WHEATLEY, F.S.A.

Figure 4.2 Officers of the Folklore Society, as listed in the *Handbook of Folklore*, 1890.
At the same time, the ties between Victorian imperialism and folklore were very strong; the great advantage of folkloric scholarship in the late nineteenth century was its collation of source material from around the globe, but, of course, the Folklore Society relied heavily on imperial resources for travel and access to foreign cultures. Even though hugely influential works like *The Golden Bough* (1890), produced by then Folklore Society council-member James George Frazer (1854-1941), have since been read as respectfully documenting many different kinds of religious and cultural practices around the globe, in its moment, Frazer’s work was more likely to be read as a colonial text largely used to validate the authoritative perspective of the culturally advanced British scholar who maps all the cultures of the world.\(^4\) Sir James George Frazer was knighted in 1914 for services rendered to the imperial crown along with other groundbreaking folklore scholars like Richard Burton (1886), Walter Besant (1895), Edward Brabrook (1905), George Laurence Gomme (1911), and Edward Tylor (1912), presumably because the theoretical work accomplished by the members of the Folklore Society was understood to be significant, not only for science, but for the justification of late-Victorian British Imperialism.

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\(^4\) Cf. Theodore H. Gaster (1906-1992): “It may be said without reasonable fear of contradiction that no other work in the field of anthropology has contributed so much to the mental and artistic climate of our times. Indeed, what Freud did for the individual, Frazer did for civilization as a whole. For as Freud deepened men’s insight into the behavior of individuals by uncovering the ruder world of the subconscious, from which so much of it springs, so Frazer enlarged man’s understanding of the behavior of societies by laying bare the primitive concepts and modes of thought which underlie and inform so many of their institutions and which persist, as a subliminal element of their culture, in their traditional folk customs” (xx).
In that context, it is unsurprising that when George Laurence Gomme (1853-1916) agreed to produce *The Handbook of Folklore* (1890) in collaboration with his fellow officers, he executed his commission in powerfully colonialist terms: ⁵

Much of the material of the folklorist must be obtained from the religious beliefs and customs of savage or barbarous peoples. [...] But observing that what is religion or law to one stage of culture is superstition or unmeaning practice to another, the beliefs and customs of all savage peoples are considered and examined by folklorists, not because of their prevalence among savage peoples, but because of their accord with the superstitious and customs of the “Folk” or less advanced classes in cultured nations. Anthropology is the science which deals with savage beliefs and customs in all their aspects; Folk-lore deals with them in one of their aspects only, namely, as factors in the mental life of man, which, having survived in the highest civilizations whether of ancient or modern times, are therefore capable of surrendering much of their history to the scientific observer. ⁶

In effect, the Folklore Society dedicated itself to the task of mapping human mental development in a global, linear progression, and in doing so, the Folklore Society set itself up to be an arbiter of belief – distinguishing material that they perceived to be valid “religion and law” from invalid “superstition and unmeaning practice”—by right of having the point of view of “highest civilization.” ⁷ By examining the belief structures of a people-group, the Folklore Society could then, in terms very sympathetic with eugenic

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⁵ In his 1959 editorial address to the readers of *Folklore*, journal of the Folklore Society, Professor E.O. James (1888-1972) attributes the primary compilation of the *Handbook* to Charlotte Burne (383). I’m not sure if this is a mistake on his part, or if she played a more pivotal role in the *Handbook*’s composition than the volume’s title page and preface suggest.

⁶ 1.4. Anthropology would become a formal department at Oxford in 1905, and although Folklore was not formalized as an academic department, folklore scholars like Andrew Lang were considered major influences on early Anthropological methodologies. [Cf. Antonius de Cocq *Andrew Lang a Nineteenth-Century Anthropologist* (1968); Robert Crawford “Pater’s Renaissance, Andrew Lang, and Anthropological Romanticism” (1986); George Stocking *After Taylor: British Social Anthropology 1888-1951* (1998)]

⁷ This progression was linear, but not universally on the same chronological scale. For these scholars, it would be perfectly reasonable to expect one people-group to be at the “savage” stage at the same chronological moment when another people group might be at a “civilized” stage.
theory, make judgments about mental life, specifically the degree of “savagery” or “civilization” that should be ascribed to any particular class or culture. In a feat of circular logic, the scientific perspective validated the folklorists’ status as culturally evolved, and their status as culturally evolved validated the scientific qualities of their research. Methodologically, the Folklore Society situated itself in such a way that its members would not have to account for their own subjective bias or be tainted by their apparent fascination with culturally underevolved, superstitious material associated with savages, women, and children.

The balance of cultural analysis was very complicated because (in spite of concurrent Marxist critiques) it both validated British class structure by defining stratified degrees of culture within nations and at the same time represented British national character as a whole when contrasting “civilized” (colonizing) nations with “savage” (colonized) nations. In its mildest form, these national characterizations were largely congenial attempts to map out national quirks and stereotypes. Consider the preface to the volume of the series *Folk-Lore and Legends* (1880s-90s) that examines German material:

> It has been well said that “the legendary history of a nation is the recital of the elements that formed the character at that nation; it contains the first rude attempts to explain natural phenomena, the traditions of its early history, and the moral principles popularly adopted as the rules for reward and punishment; and generally the legends of a people may be regarded as embodying the popular habits of thought and popular motives of action.”8 […] Some of the stories are invested with a charming simplicity of thought which cannot but excite admiration. Others are of a weird, fantastic character fitted to a land of romantic natural features, of broad river, mountain, and deep forest. […] The general lesson they convey is the sure punishment of vice and the reward of virtue; some way or another the villain always meets with his desert. In future volumes we shall deal

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8 “Legends” in this context would be a category of oral tale-telling that would encompass both fairy tales and ghost tales.
with the legends of other countries, hoping that the public will bear us company in our excursions. (v-vi)

The phrasing suggests that topography is a key factor in cultural development and a commonality around which a national culture might be formed, but the language is still value-based; it is an assessment of German national character (“charming simplicity,” laced with “weird, fantastic” elements) and national morality (which prizes justice: “sure punishment of vice and the reward of virtue”). Although crude, such assessments preface work by scholars like the cultural historian Robert Darnton (b.1939), who would mine fairy tale texts for detailed information about the cultures in which they were created and contrast crucial trends in common tales recorded in different nations (Cf. Great Cat Massacre, 9-74).

The assessments made of fellow European nations tended to be congenial, making allowances for difference without necessarily making the comparison unfavorable; however, the assessment of colonial nations or “exotic” nations at the fringes of the empire tended to be much more overtly biased. As a tool for defining national culture, the adjudicative evaluation of cultural beliefs gave folklorists a framework through which to evaluate (generally by contrast) national development on an evolutionary scale. For example, in the now-infamous preface to his translation of the Thousand Nights and a Night, Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890) exaggerates the alien qualities of the British colonies in his claim to have written most of the text “during…long years of official banishment to the luxuriant and deadly deserts of Western Africa, and the dull and dreary half-clearings of South America.” But he also stresses the contrast between imperial morality and the “coarseness and crassness” of the social values is captured in the tales themselves:
In accordance with my purpose of reproducing the Nights, not *virginibus puerisque*, but in as perfect a picture as my powers permit, I have carefully sought out the English equivalent of every Arabic word, however low it may be or ‘shocking’ to ears polite; preserving, on the other hand, all possible delicacy where the indecency is not intentional and […] not exaggerating the vulgarities and the indecencies which, indeed, can hardly be exaggerated.

In effect, Burton’s readers are invited to enjoy the immoral scenes of the *Nights* because they validate British morality by contrast and because they are a nearly “perfect” representation of scientific, folkloric scholarship, not a cheap translation that would “degrade a chef d’oeuvre of the highest anthropological and ethnographical interest and importance to a mere fairy book, a nice present for little boys.” The scientific register ensures that the scientific reader/recorder is not tainted by the “vulgarities and indecencies” of the content.9

There were also parallel debates among educators about the value of all kinds of fairy tales, in the same sort of high-register scientific terms. Eighteenth century educators had defined the “primitive” or untutored state of being as a state that was common to both children and evolutionarily underdeveloped people, and then divided “primitives” into two opposing groups, “children” and “savages”—both of which terms could be applied to actual children and to entire people groups. In this formulation, both the child and the savage stand in an inferior relationship to adult civilization, however, a “child” humbly

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9 There were also, of course, counter-movements and differing methodologies within the early field of folklore studies. For example, *The Science of Fairy Tales: An Inquiry into Fairy Mythology* (1891) by Edwin Sidney Hartland (1848-1927) offered an alternative categorization method for tales, dividing them into two general groups: “serious” cultural material (“sagas”) and “amusing” stories (“Nursery tales or *Märchen*”). Such works were not hugely influential in their moment, but a lot of the ideas first articulated through these discussions seem to recur through the century, for example (in this case) in Hannah Arendt’s distinction between “story” and “fiction” (Cf. Schutter, 215-32). Note: *Märchen* is a German word without a good English equivalent. The most common translation is “wonder tale,” though it overlaps heavily with the common conception of “fairy tale.” See Ch. 1 for a more complete etymology.
desires to attain civilization while a “savage” is rebellious and retrograde. For example, 
the sinful narrator of “The Backslider Reprov’d” (1782) tearfully confesses that, “I’m 
neither meek nor mild;/A rebel, not a little child;/More like a savage of the wood” (16) 
and learns over the course of the poem that it is only by allowing himself to be taught that 
he can move out of savagery and re-establish a father-child relationship with God.10 In 
this context, both childhood and savagery are depicted as temporary states that all people 
(individually or collectively) will eventually surpass.11 In contrast, adult civilization is 
coded as not only the natural physical goal of evolution, but also its spiritual end, and 
each individual must choose whether he or she will actively participate in his/her own 
evolution. To be “childlike” rather than “savage” is to be obedient to the process of social 
maturity.12

Working from this language, most nineteenth-century educators accepted the idea 
that there was a correlation between childhood and primitive culture, but the implications 
of that correlation were hotly contested and tended to be phrased in scientific rather than 
religious terms. Herbert Spenser (1820-1903) described children’s mental development as 
“self-evolution” or the educational “progression from simple to complex, and from

10 The poem was written by Edward Perronet (1721-1792) who was himself an Anglican minister. 
This language seems to have been popular with poetical clergy. Cf. The American minister Timothy 
Dwight (1752-1817) in Greenfield Hill: A Poem in Seven Parts (1794): “O meek Religion! second-born of 
Heaven,/Clothed with the sun, the world beneath thy feet! […]/Thy solar aspect every storm serene,/And 
smooth the rugged wild man to peace;/So here thy voice (fair earnest of the bliss!)/Transform’d the savage 
to the meekly child.” (102-103)

11 A few eighteenth-century texts went so far as to metaphorically link individual development 
(child to adult) to social development (savagery to civilization), as when the Presbyterian Samuel Davies 
(1723-1761) thanked God that he was “born in the adult age of the world, when the improvements of art 
are carried to so high a degree of perfection […] born, not among savages in a wilderness, but in a 
humanized, civilized country” (481, emphasis added).

12 In Tales of the Hall (1819), George Crabbe (1754-1832) uses similar language to describe a 
woman comforting a wailing infant: “she with meekness took the wayward child,/And sought to make the 
savage nature mild” (285).
concrete to abstract,” arguing that “if the steps in our curriculum are so arranged that they can be successively ascended by the pupil himself with little or no help, they must correspond with the stages of the evolution of his faculties” (154). Consequently, Spenser argued strongly that early education should amusing and interesting: “Hence the defense of nursery rhymes, and fairy tales” (109). But for every scholar who argued that fairy tales were a natural evolutionary step, another suggested that children should not be taught using retrogressive cultural artifacts. If education and evolution are the cure for belief in fairies, then including fairies in the educational process would be sheer folly. In a provocative piece titled, “The Passing of the Fairies” (1895) the Educational Times notes that:

In an interesting lecture delivered at the College last Saturday, and printed in this number of the Educational Times, Mr. Holman delivered a vigorous attack on the use of fairy-tales in education. The race, it appears, has outgrown fairy-tales, and “to use them for early educational work is practically to bring about a reversion to type.” They express “the ideas of a profoundly ignorant primitive man, in conditions generally very far removed from those of the little learner.” Again, fairy-tales are for adults, not for children, because “they are the prose-tales of the primitive adult, not the primitive child.” […] It appears, then, to Mr. Holman that an edition of fairy-tales for school purposes may be called a “polite form of cannibalism […] or an improved shorter catechism of idolatry.”

13 For an elaboration of this theory in context of similar arguments being made by Spenser’s peers, including Johann Herbart ((1776-1841) and Tuiskon Ziller (1817-1882), Cf. Henry Felkin and Emmie Felkin’s An Introduction to Herbart’s Science and Practice of Education (122-3). In Felkin’s system, there are eight stages of educational literature, the first of which is “epic fairy tales” (xi, 122-5, 153).

14 534. Cf. also William Edward Hartpole Lecky’s History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne (1869) “The question of the credibility of fairy tales has not been resolved by an examination of evidence, but by an observation of the laws of historic development. Wherever we find an ignorant and rustic population, the belief in fairies is found to exist, and circumstantial accounts of their apparitions are circulated. But invariably with increased education this belief passes away. It is not that the fairy tales are refuted or explained away, or even narrowly scrutinised. It is that the fairies cease to appear” (371).
Like eighteenth-century scholars, these educators were trying to promote imagination and distance themselves from the taint of superstition, though here their arguments have more pronounced colonial and eugenic implications. Still, as ever, the language of fairies and fairy tales was continuing to function as a focal point to the theoretical discussion.

4.2 Colonialism and Fairy Tales in Pantomime and Poetry

Twentieth-century poets regularly return to fairy tales and fairy tale symbolism to navigate national identity—particularly in context of war, at times when nationalistic fervor is being stressed to the utmost, but also very frequently in postcolonial contexts, as a focal point through which poets can negotiate multiple cultural heritages. In large part, these twentieth-century usages are a direct response to developments in nineteenth century fairy tale artistry. Both the idea that canonical fairy tales are so central to national identity that they can represent Britain symbolically and the idea that fairy tales are somehow linked to colonial identity came to fruition through mid-to late-nineteenth century poetry and drama. In part, the systematic introduction of fairy tale prose and fairy verse into national educational curricula facilitated the development of a fairy tale canon, but even before the Elementary Education Acts (1870-1872) began to institute national literacy, literate and non-literate members of the British public from every class had already become intensely familiar with a key selection of fairy tale plots through a non-literary medium, the Christmas Pantomime. Both of these developments worked

15 An act making public education accessible to all children between the ages of five and twelve was passed for England and Wales in 1870, with Scotland to follow in 1872. It was not, however, made mandatory until 1880. Neither the early education acts nor their amendment immediately affected Ireland or the colonies.
together to cohere a canon of fairy tales and to simultaneously reinforce the status of those tales as British. As such, the canonical tales that were being produced and reproduced with increasing frequency were subtly anchored in previous iterations of British fairy and fairy tale writing, including extensive reference to the sixteenth-century fairy poetry of Shakespeare. Even though the canon of fairy tales did not encompass fairy poetry, the roots of the genre’s development still show, and the complex, and sometimes contradictory, connotations of those roots ensured that fairy tales were never a simplistic facet of British identity, even when they came to be associated with childhood innocence and holiday joy.

Eighteenth-century dramatists had appropriated the genre of fairy poetry for fairy drama in the form of Garrick’s *Queen Mab* and similar productions which were popular with audiences of adults and children; the development of nineteenth-century fairy tale pantomime was more overtly child-oriented and (rather than drawing on the canonical fairy poetry of Shakespeare and Spenser, or even on virtuoso nineteenth-century fairy poetry by Shelley or Swinburne) situated itself as less artistically highbrow by fusing together the sing-song rhythms of children’s fairy verse and the loose narrative plot structures of fairy tale prose marketed to child audiences. ¹⁶ The patterns of fairy verse both affected the scripts of pantomime productions and a whole pattern of verse devoted to descriptions of the pantomime experience, including works as “At the Pantomime” (1869): ¹⁷

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¹⁶ Cf. the mention of Garrick’s work in Chapter 2.2 “Validating Imagination by Redefining the Canon of British Poetry” and the discussion of fairy drama in Chapter 2.5 “Fairy Tales as Children’s Literature.”

¹⁷ The central role assigned to the pantomime fairy in these nineteenth-century fairy tale productions contributed to the conceptual conflation of fairy story and fairy tale in early twentieth century
The groups of children in each box,  
With smiling looks and sunny locks,  
Their glances bent  
With looks intent,  
Upon that curtain green,  
Expectant, hot,  
They wonder what  
Behind is to be seen.  
Now, up it goes,  
The stage then shows  
A dismal demon scene.  
The children fear  
That demon drear,  
They do not like his mein,  
Soon off he limps,  
With all his imps,  
Before the Fairy good,  
Who with a song  
Rights ev’ry wrong,  
As a good Fairy should.  
Now we’re convey’d to a beautiful valley,  
And introduced to a glittering ballet: [...]  
When [the Hero] fights the giant and cuts of his head,  
And rescues the Princess fair.  
The children all shout till their faces are red,  
And applaud the happy pair. [...]  
The children grow sleepy, the pantomime’s done,  
Come, it’s time to go home, and so end the fun;

children’s literature. Cf. “A Fairy Tale” by Celine (1860) “Fairies are always ‘objects of interest,’ whether they appear in the likeness of a miniature doll, wand in hand, erected on the summit of a Christmas tree, to represent the guardian spirit of its treasures and dispenser of its stores, or we read of them as rescuing lovely damsels (generally Princesses) in distress! [...] But there is another species of Fairy more familiar, an annual, which blooms radiant and fair at Christmas-time, so lightly appareled, yet so warm and genial looking, that it seems impervious to cold, and in blissful indifference to frost and snow. This is the Pantomime Fairy, who generally grasps her wand, like the conjuror, lest her magic influence should fail; it is her staff of office, her symbol of state, but it is more potent than the black rod, or the gold stick in waiting, for do we not see how clouds will gather or disperse, and flowers will bloom, and cars descend at the wave of the Fairy’s wand? In her moments of recreation and revelry she will exchange her scepter for a garland or a scarf to embellish and assist her terpsichorean evolutions; for the Fairy always regales herself and friends with dancing. There are vocally inclined Fairies in Oberon’s train, and occasionally some sprightly and demonstrative Fairy will indulge in a strain of communicative melody; but generally there [sic] fetes consist of dancing [...] What would Christmas be without its Pantomime, and what would Pantomime be without its Fairies?” (202) The fairy became a central part of the dramatic convention and was imposed on even those fairy tales with established plots that did not previously have fairy characters, for example, “Babes in the Woods.”
All their thoughts and their dreams of this one will be
Till Christmas next year brings another to see. 18

Like other educational verses for children, this verse (published in the children’s magazine *Judy*) employs a memorable and approachable format to teach children the rules of the panto experience: what to expect on stage, how to interpret it, and how to behave during the play. The ritual of pantomime was a formative cultural experience for British children, and, as the poem suggests, pantomime conventions require constant participation from both players and audience, so the shared anticipation and enactment of each convention (the “demon scene,” “the glittering ballet,” “the transformation,” and so on) gradually evolved into an enjoyably predictable pattern, an experience that was particularly memorable because of its ritual aspects and verse lines. Largely because it was marketed to all British children across class lines, at the performative level, pantomime became a shared cultural reference into which generations of British children were inducted and which successive generations of British adults could remember nostalgically.

The immense cultural popularity of the pantomime genre would also ensure that the stage conventions of British fairy tale pantomime shaped the characteristics associated with canonical fairy-tale-ness in every media. For example, in spite of the wide variety of plots and conventions represented by previous generations of French

18 110. Dozens of similar verses and articles appeared in periodicals each year around Christmas. “Slightly Mixed” published “By a Conscientious Pantomime-Goer” (1879) who claims to have seen so many pantomimes that they all blurred into one giant fairy tale plot: “It seems to me I’ve watched young Jack—/The ‘killer,’ who would giants ‘sass’ —/Climb up a Beanstalk in a crack,/While wearing slippers made of glass.[…] Aladdin, too, that Eastern ‘sly,’/I cannot but recall that he,/With night-cap very much awry,/Devoured Red-Ridinghood for tea!” (14). Cf. also “The Round of the Theatres: Arranged for One Voice—Mr. Fun’s” (1880).
courtly fairy tales, satirical eighteenth-century adult fairy tales, and anthologies of
translated fairy tales from around the world, the canon of British fairy tales from the
nineteenth-century disproportionately foregrounded stories in which (as the previous
verse suggests) a Hero, helped by “a Fairy good,” “rescues the Princess fair.” This pattern
became so pervasively dominant that the English-language phrase “fairy tale ending”
continues to be associated with a royal wedding even in the twenty-first century, in spite
of the fact that fairy tales end in many different ways and many end unhappily. Likewise,
twentieth and twenty-first visual icons like “the princess dress” are theoretically
associated with an ahistorical “once upon a time,” but are, in practice, almost invariably
captured somewhere between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century royal couture: frothy,
corset-waisted, wide-skirted constructions with lots and lots of petticoats. The stress on
courtly figures and glittering fairies, which make for marvelous visual spectacle on stage,
also helped to identify the emergent canon of fairy tales with an urbane, lushly aesthetic
pattern of fairy-tale-telling, even though it was marketed to child audiences.

The urbanized canon of fairy tales was implicitly distanced from connotations of
rural, peasant, superstitious storytelling. Although pantomime is driven by ritual, and
ritual can be associated with belief, in context of pantomime, the ritual is very carefully
contained. Celtic myths and fairy tales always suggest that a leprechaun might be burying
gold or mending shoes behind the nearest bit of brush or that a brownie might be lurking
in the basement; they implicitly suggest that fairy creatures are part of the natural world.
In contrast, the British Christmas pantomime begins when the children arrive in the boxes

19 Although even non-scholars often assume that fairy tales are many hundreds if not thousands of
years old, the visual iconography of the fairy tale dates the “princess dress” and similar outfits to a
relatively narrow, relatively modern pattern of costume.
and ends when they are taken home to bed; it is a shared moment of suspended disbelief that happens once a year. The emphasis on “suspended disbelief” however, stresses the fact that “disbelief” is the default frame of reference for the other 364 days of the year. The audience is more clearly being invited to believe in wonder and art and community than to believe in fairies or to skulk around the gates of Buckingham palace in hopes of seeing Cinderella escape in a pumpkin-shaped carriage as Big Ben strikes twelve. The canon formation was not just a process of natural selection that picked out traditional fairy tales that children liked, the process of canonization defined an innovative and unique cultural and conceptual context for fairy tales as a children’s space, a space in which heroes marry princesses and good triumphs over evil, a space full of glitter and fairy spectacle, an idealized space of happily ever after, a holiday space of suspended disbelief. This combination of connotations had never existed before, but it would have an irrevocable impact on the genre of fairy tales from that moment forward.20

But although fairy tale pantomime became a culturally central reference point with an unmistakable impact on British art, as a children’s genre and as a cordoned-off space for suspended disbelief, pantomime fairy tales were also coded as culturally marginal. Writing for The London Star, longtime drama critic A.E. Wilson (1885-1949)

20 The French courtly fairy tales and the eighteenth-century British satirical fairy tales had been glittery and marriage-driven, but they were highly political and by no means naïve or a context for suspended disbelief. The children’s tales of Perrault were heavily moralizing, less spectacular, and less wonder-driven than the nineteenth-century pantomime fairy tales (also less likely to have cleanly happy endings). The fairy plays of the eighteenth-century had a less coherent narrative structure, less emphasis on the triumph of good over evil, and less archetypally defined roles for characters like the Hero and Princess. Oral folkloric precedents for these fairy tales (insofar as they can be identified) are unlikely to be primarily targeted at child audiences and, in Britain, had no strong precedent for the “fairy Good” who was largely adapted from the French tales and who has no real place among the local brownies, changelings, sprites, etc.
celebrated the pantomime’s audience-inclusiveness as an almost spiritual achievement, but he does so in somewhat defensive terms:

Can any of you, however low or highbrow in your theatrical tastes, resist the spell of Boxing Day in the theatre? However severe and fastidious you may be, do you not melt in that warm and congenial and friendly atmosphere? Pantomime calls upon you for complete surrender. Isn’t it a fact that you put aside all those rigid standards of taste, of wit, and of reason at the pantomime and let yourself go? […] Why pantomime should have this particular disarming and potent quality I really cannot say. […] I can say at least that I love pantomime for its wild inconsequence. It defies all theatrical conventions, bless it. It makes sport, I am glad to say, of the “unities.” Its incongruities and absurdities enchant me. It gives a truce to reason, a holiday to common sense. Give the comedians the chance and pantomime will lead you into a realm that knows nothing of time, space, and human bondage to tyrant nature and its laws. (King Panto 22-3)

In arguing that panto should be accepted by the “fastidious” in spite of their cultivated “theatrical tastes,” Wilson implies that culturally ambivalent status of the fairy tale is a large part of what makes it effective: because pantomime exists on the margins of established categories of “theatrical taste,” it is theatrically central; because it is distant from the normal conventions of “time, space, and […] nature” in the moment of enactment, it is perfectly suited to act as a cultural unifier in that same moment; it is so culturally mainstream that every audience participant understands its rules, yet those rules are coded as “incongruous” and “absurd” violations of “reason” and “common sense.” In effect, the new pattern of fairy tale associated with the pantomime was coded as a culturally central symbol of cultural marginality.

Because of pantomime’s central/marginal status and because it grew out of the urban, cosmopolitan theatres rather than the native countryside, pantomime was able to incorporate foreign fairy tale elements while still maintaining its status as a quintessentially British art form. In this respect, it mimicked the colonial atmosphere of
the British empire which appropriated luxuries from the colonies (like tea) as central features of British identity. The British canon of fairy tales readily encompassed excerpts from the *Arabian Nights* like “Aladdin” and “Ali Baba” as easily as it encompassed French tales like Charles Perrault’s “Cinderella” and Marie de Beaumont’s “Beauty and the Beast,” German tales like “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” and “Hansel and Gretel,” or the Danish fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. The fact that relatively few of the canonical tales are identifiable to any native British storytelling tradition was actually helpful for the canon’s acceptance because, in distancing itself from local tale traditions (including Celtic fairy tales which might have had incurred local loyalties or oppositions), pantomime foregrounded fairy tales that were alien enough to everyday British experience to act as a common ground for the urban audiences who approached its magical borders.\(^{21}\) Moreover, because pantomime was associated with children, its canonical fairy tales could be coded nostalgically and therefore largely excused from the sociological analysis of organizations like the Folklore Society. Fairy tales, in this context, were in some respects understood as being a conceptually distinct category from the folk tales of the British oral traditions and from folk tales of foreign cultural traditions.\(^{22}\) For Victorian readers and theatre-goers, the foreign elements of pantomime fairy tales were coded as just an aspect of the magical world of fairy tales—ebony flying

\(^{21}\) The most common exceptions being “Babes in the Woods,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and “Tom Thumb.” Note: these are all tales with no brownies or any other species of fairies uniquely associated with the British tale traditions that might confuse the role of the pantomime fairy.

\(^{22}\) In most library systems of the day, they would not even have been filed in the same part of the library. Cf. Chapter 1.1.4 “How are fairy tales catalogued by librarians?”
horses and magic lamps had less to do with appreciating the actual culture of the Middle East than with celebrating the British capacity for wonder and spectacle.²³

The use of fairy tale as a symbol of British culture also changed the way in which it could be used as a literary referent: in the eighteenth-century “fairy tale” primarily functioned as a satirical medium; in the nineteenth-century, fairy tale satire worked at a meta-level because fairy tale had become a central, recognizable facet of national identity. In fact, pantomime fairy tales were coded as so British that the pantomime fairy could stand in as a personification of the nation (a role usually reserved for the more generic lady Brittania), even in discussions of the empire and colonial policy. For example, the verse satire “Arbitration” (1872) by the anonymous author “Vindex” envisioned colonial warfare in terms of the “demon scene” from pantomime, and the intervention of the good fairy as symbolic of a new British policy of peaceful arbitration:

It was not yet Christmas-time;
   I, in midnight’s rumination,
Dreamt a dream of Pantomime,
   Saw a scene of Transformation.
War the fiend had passed away;
All the people met to pay
Homage to the peaceful sway
   Of the Fairy Arbitration.

There was nothing more to dread
   From a neighbour’s irritation,
No more knockings on the head
   Through a statesman’s machination,

²³ Contemporary works like The Emperor’s Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney’s Magic Kingdom (2003) have critiqued Disney’s Aladdin for making exactly this kind of reductive representation of Middle Eastern culture, arguing that “Those who did not find Aladdin offensive are probably not of Middle Eastern descent” (76), and that “the indisputable fact that Aladdin is thoroughly and dangerously racist in its depictions of Arabs” (105), but the authors have not fully recognized the extent to which dramatic productions of fairy tales, particularly the Nights have been in service to colonialism since Garrick’s production in 1788.
At the most, a State could rue
Loss of millions just a few,
And a colony or two
By pacific Arbitration. (67)

Although the new “fairy” policy seems to be a useful alternative to war, the satirist suggests that it is a fantasy and an illusion because this British fairy, while promising a cessation of active “knockings on the head,” institutes a far more insidious magic of adjudication in the kangaroo court of “Minos” who will “the claims of them admit/Who have smallest use for it” (67). In this context, however, the exact complaint of the satirist is less important than the satirist’s very politically complex use of pantomime and fairy tale terms. Like the fairy tale satires of the eighteenth-century, this verse uses hyperbolic terms to critique national policy at a metaphorical remove, but it is effective partly because the pantomime had become associated with the most idealized aspects of British culture—children, wonder, nostalgia and innocent aspiration. The grotesqueness of the foreign policy is made emotionally powerful by the satirist’s representation of an innocent, hopeful, invariably good character like the pantomime fairy as a greedy, nation-destroying thief. In creating a parallel between a cruel British policy and an idealized aspect of British culture, the satirist indirectly implies that, as a nationalist referent, pantomime is a lie that the nation tells itself about its own fundamental innocence and commitment to moral justice, or, more optimistically, the poem functions as a warning that Britain is not living up to the high moral standards valorized in its children’s literature. In either case, the nationalist associations of pantomime fairy tales make it a perfect metaphorical context through which to discuss national values.

The representation of the nation as a particular kind of fairy also inspired nineteenth-century writers (like their eighteenth-century predecessors) to look back to the
values of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century canonical fairy poetry for artistic and ideological validation of their own work. In particular, readings of the fairies in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* (1610-1611) were reworked in eugenic, colonial terms: the lovely, ethereal Ariel, like the pantomime fairy, was associated with the positive aspects of highly developed British culture and art, harnessed to serve the controlling figure of Prospero (i.e. the British Empire), while the grotesque figure of Caliban came to symbolize the “brutish” culture of “less advanced,” colonial people, controlled by Prospero for his own good. \(^{24}\) In nineteenth century contexts, the anagrammatic slippage between “Caliban” and “Canibal” became so popular that “Caliban” the witch’s son had come to be used as a general archetypal derogatory name for colonial people, most frequently for Africans, African-Americans, and American Indians, as in the serial novel *Jack Sheppard* (1839-40) by William Harrison Ainsworth (1805-1882):

> Behind Mrs. Spurling stood her negro attendant, Caliban; a hideous, misshapen, malicious monster, with broad hunched shoulders, a flat nose, and ears like those of a wild beast, a head too large for his body, and a body too long for his legs. This horrible piece of deformity, who acted as a drawer and cellerman, and was a constant butt to the small wits of the gaol, was nicknamed the Black Dog of Newgate. \(^{25}\)

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\(^{24}\) In describing Caliban as an “Abhorred slave,/Which any print of goodness wilt not take, Being capable of all ill!” Shakespeare was thought to have drawn on fantastical, hyperbolic descriptions of savage Caribbean cannibals like Pietro Martire d’Angheira’s *The history of trauayle in the VWest and East Indies, and other countreys* (1577) which describes fierce battles with “Canibales, or Caribes, whiche were accustomed to eate mans fleshe (& called of the olde writers, Anthroponopagi)” (11), and finding a survivor, “who with teares runnyng downe his cheekes, and with gesture of his handes, eyes, and head, significted that sixe of his companions had been cruelly cut in peeces, and e aten of that mischeous nation, and that he shoulde haue ben likewise handled the day folowying” (57). For further discussion of Shakespeare’s Caribbean source material and the etymology of caliban/cannibal, cf. Vaughn and Vaughn, *Shakespeare’s Caliban: A Cultural History* (1991): 26-37; Edmond Malone (ed.) *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare* (1821): 212.

\(^{25}\) 227. There are dozens of similar usages in mid-nineteenth century texts. *Jack Sheppard* was published in *Bentely’s Miscellaney*, and the very same volume (Sept 1839) that introduces “Caliban” to the
In this context, fairy referents came to function as a kind of cultural shibboleth: to be associated with the “right” (glittering fairy) tradition was to prove one’s cultural and physiological advancement, but to be associated with the “wrong” (monstrous) tradition was to prove one’s cultural and physiological primitivism. ²⁶ Because Shakespeare himself had largely come to represent the highest of high British artistry, his work was as useful for validating colonial and eugenic principles as it had been for validating eighteenth-century fairy poetry.

Similar re-readings of famous texts to serve a nineteenth-century colonial agenda resulted in the “discovery” of heightened racist and eugenic principles in other literarily central fairy and fairy tale contexts. For example, by the mid-eighteenth century, characters from Antoine Galland’s *Arabian Nights Entertainments* (trans. 1704-1714) including Aladdin, Sinbad, and Ali Baba had become mainstays of pantomime productions and children’s anthologies of tales. The widespread popularity of the tales warranted a new translation and, in 1885-86, Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890) released a new ten-volume version of the *Nights*.²⁷ However, a comparison of Galland and Burton’s description of the same scene makes it clear that Burton’s new translation was also a new novel’s plot also includes an anonymous piece “Uncle Sam’s Peculiarities: American Niggers—Hudson River Steam-Boat Dialogues.” In this tale, a British spectator, observing a free African-American man in the northern United States observes: “A monstrous ill-looking fellow, indeed! With some long hair, and a bear-skin, he would make a perfect representative of Shakspeare’s [sic] Caliban” (266). For the rest of the piece, the British observer refers to the African-American as “Caliban.”

²⁶ Such writers both stressed the application of Shakespeare’s work for colonial purposes and, in describing this Caliban’s most horrible features Ainsworth specifically draws on patterns of fairy terminology associated with the “worst” of British peasant tale tradition: in British folklore, the “Black Dog” is a shape-shifting fairy figure somewhat like a pooka. Ainsworth also refers to Caliban as a “sooty imp” (326), usually a minor demon, and his home in the basement cellar suggests his implicit affiliation with the underworld.

²⁷ Burton’s was not the first translation of the *Nights* directly into English (John Payne had published the first translation in 1882-84), but it was the longest and, eventually, by far the most influential and well-known.
cultural conceptualization of the *Nights*. Consider the scene from the frame narrative, in which an Arabian queen is caught having an affair with one of her servants. Galland writes:

[…] the Persons who accompanied the Sultaness threw off their Vails, and long Robes, that they might be at more freedom, but was wonderfully surpriz’d when he saw ten of ‘em to be Blacks, and that each of ‘em took his Mistress. The Sultaness on her part was not long without her Gallant. She clapp’d her Hands, and call’d *Masoud, Masoud*, and immediately a Black came down from a *Tree*, and run to her in all haste. //Modesty will not allow, nor is it necessary to relate what pas’d betwixt the Blacks and the Ladies. […] the Sultan saw more than enough to convince him plainly of his Dishonour and Misfortune. //O Heavens, cry’d he, What Indignity! What Horror! Can the Wife of a Sovereign, such as I am, be capable of such an infamous action?  

In this version, written primarily for nobles of the French royal court, Galland’s king is primarily occupied with the insult to his station and the shocking misbehavior of a royal personage. The racial profile of the lovers is mentioned, but almost incidentally, and they are referred to as “gallants” which is a term that could be applied to any male lover in the eighteenth-century.

In contrast, Burton devotes much more attention to this scene and stresses the physical and racial details of the encounter, using many of the exaggerated eugenic terms that Ainsworth had used to describe his Caliban. In Burton’s version, the queen and her ladies:

[…] walked under the very lattice and advanced a little way into the garden till they came to a jetting fountain a-middlemost a great basin of water. Then they stripped off their clothes, and behold, ten of them were women, concubines of the King, and the other ten were white slaves. Then they all paired off, each with each. But the queen, who was left alone, presently cried out in a loud voice, “Here

26 7, 12-3. This quotation was taken from a 1713 edition with an anonymous translator.
to me, O my lord Saeed!"// And then sprang with a drop leap from one of the trees a big slobbering blackamoor with rolling eyes which showed the whites, a truly hideous sight. He walked boldly up to her and threw his arms round her neck, while she embraced him as warmly. Then he bussed her and winding his legs around hers, as a button loop clasps a button, he threw her and enjoyed her. On like wise did the other slaves with the girls till all had satisfied their passions, and they ceased not from kissing and clipping, coupling and carousing, till day began to wane, when the Mamelukes rose from the damsels’ bosoms and the blackamoor slave dismounted from the Queen’s breast. The men resumed their disguises and all except the Negro, who swarmed up the tree, entered the palace and closed the postern door as before. […] When King Shahryar saw this infamy of his wife and concubines, he became as one distraught, and cried out: “Only in utter solitude can man be safe from the doings of this vile world! By Allah, life is naught but one great wrong!” 29

Burton makes note of the queen’s betrayal, but here the central issue is racial. The narrative voice here echoes king’s horror at the body of the “blackamoor slave”: he is “slobbering” and “hideous” with “rolling eyes;” he enters by dramatically springing down from a tree and exits by swarming up it, more like a monkey than a man. Internally, the narrative validates condemnation of Africans as physically deformed and racially underdeveloped. Yet the narrative as a whole was used to showcase the sexual and cultural depravities of Arabian culture; remember that in his preface Burton stressed the moral and cultural superiority of the British when he rather fatuously promised that he will be preserving “all possible delicacy where the indecency is not intentional […] not exaggerating the vulgarities and indecencies which, indeed, can hardly be exaggerated” (xxx). Burton is not only creating a moral binary, but suggesting (in classically eugenic

29 5-6, 9. Burton’s translation was released decades after Britain passed the Slave Trade Act (1807) and the Slavery Abolition Act (1833), but those acts should not be confused with any declaration of racial equality. In many respects, the need to demonstrate superiority culturally supplanted the legal dominance enforced by the British military. India, where British profits were highest and control the least secure, was exempted from the 1833 abolition of slavery. An 1843 Indian Slavery Act nominally banned slavery in India, although it was not until the Indian Penal Code was passed in 1861 that slave-owning became a criminal offence.
terms) that there is an evolutionary ladder of human development and that the bottom rung is occupied by dark-skinned Africans, a slightly higher rung by the Arabs, and a superior position reserved for the white, British readers whose sexual morals are implicitly beyond question or scrutiny. 30

In sum, twentieth century fairy tale poets who were drawing on nineteenth-century material were drawing on a canon of fairy tales and connotations of fairy-tale-ness that were refined by the nineteenth-century production of pantomime and prose as well as fairy verse and fairy tale poetry. However, the difficulty of parsing out the relationship between fairy tales and colonialism is that colonialism could appear as a thematic trope within fairy tales, but fairy tales as a genre also functioned symbolically in discourses about colonialism and national culture. That inside-outside status of fairy tales often created slippage between individual and genric engagements with colonialism. The tales included in the canon excluded Celtic material, but fairy tales were celebrated as a space of national, cultural unity. Likewise, individual tales included material from many different countries, but the canon as a whole, particularly in context of pantomime, was defined as quintessentially British and specifically symbolic of idealized British childhood. Taken together, these maddeningly intertwined influences explain both why fairy tales were so popular with twentieth-century poets who were struggling to define national and (post)colonial British identity, and why the apparently very disparate

30 Similar racial/developmental hierarchies were being construed in folkloric terms by a number of Burton’s peers. Cf. especially Andrew Lang’s *Custom and Myth* (1884). There were also a number of translations of Middle Eastern work that were less obviously biased than Burtons, but they were not collections of fairy tales or as culturally influential as the *Nights*. Cf. *Persian Poetry for English Readers* (ed. Samuel Robinson 1883) and *Arabian Poetry for English Readers* (Ed. William Clouston, 1881); the popular *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* translated by Edward FitzGerald (1809-1883) was also released in five separate editions from 1859-1889.
twentieth-century poems which draw on different elements of this tradition have not been recognized as being related.

4.3 Marx, Fairy Tales, Myth, and Class

Karl Marx (1818-1883) himself wrote a fairy poem and made a number of telling fairy tale allusions in his writing, however, the first major Marxist theorizations of fairy tales were not Victorian. They would be made (primarily in Russia) in the early twentieth century as extrapolations Marx’s work on economics and culture. But even though Marx did not make a specific critique of British culture and class in terms of fairy tales, as a reference point for twentieth-century poets, the classist implications of fairy tale production and distribution are highly significant: throughout the Victorian period, fairy tales were used to talk about class in both ways that reinforced class stratification and ways that challenged it; but, ultimately, there were mitigating contexts of book production which worked against a simplistic reading of fairy tales as class-libratory.

Marx’s own earliest use of fairy tale terminology was in an early love poem written to his fiancée Jenny von Westphalan (1814-1881). Like many twentieth-century English poets, as a young man, Marx could not resist writing a fairy tale poem, though his “Transformation” (1836) was rather soppier than most. It is clear from the tone of

31 Cf. Chapter 6.1 “Overview of Fairy Tales in Marxist and (Post-)Colonial Theory”

32 The poem was originally written in German, and collected in The Albums of Poems Dedicated to Jenny Von Westphalen (1837); this passage is from a translation by Meta L. Stern originally published in 1910. (Cf. fn.194 in Marx’s Collected.) Marx himself eventually took a very dim view of his own early poetry, and his daughter Laura wrote that “My father treated his verses very disrespectfully; whenever my parents mentioned them, they would laugh to their hearts’ content” (qtd in Collected, fn.191). In 1852 Marx also published a scathing critique of the autobiography of the German poet Gottfried Kinkel (1815-1882) for, among other crimes, repeatedly describing an elusive true love as a “glorious fairy-tale blossom” (Collected 237-8).
the poem that as young man Marx associated fairy tales with romance, idealism, and fantastical imagination:

Mine eyes are so confused,  
My cheek it is so pale,  
My head is so bemused,  
A realm of fairy-tale. (528)

What begins as a declaration of bewilderment soon took on the language of an epic quest; the besieged narrator transforms himself into a sorcerer:

With magic power and word  
I cast what spells I knew  
But forth the waves still roared  
Till they were gone from view. (529)

Overcome by his opposition, the sorcerer fails: “My powers were gone,/And all the heart’s glow lost” (529), until he meets his redemption through true love, and his soul and powers are rekindled in “triumph heavenly,/And in sheer happiness” (530). However, the poem is less significant, as such, than as a marker of how culturally influential fairy tales and poetry were in all of northern Europe, and as an indicator that fairy tale ideology impacted the work of theorists in any number of fields. (And it was impossible to resist including an unstudied fairy tale poem by Karl Marx.)

Yet it seems unlikely that Marx’s juvenile poetry or even the few allusions to fairy tales in his more formal political work were directly inspirational to successive generations of Marxist scholars.33 However, given the importance of Russian

33 For example, in 1843 the Communist press Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung was closed by the Prussian government, ostensibly for printing a small factual error while reporting on a labor conflict that had been heavily censored in other presses. In protest, Marx wrote: aa’Above all, a people which is only just awakening to political consciousness is less concerned about the factual correctness of an occurrence
theorizations of folklore and fairy tales, especially the work of Vladimir Propp (1895-1970) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) it worth recognizing that during his years in London, Marx was sharing the British Museum library with scholars like W.R.S. Ralston (1828-1889), an eminent folklorist specializing in Slavic texts.34 At the end of the Victorian period, British and Russian folklorists were collaborating extensively; Ralston himself was a long-time correspondent of the well-known Russian folklorist Alexander Nikolaevich Afanasyev (1826-1871), to whom he dedicated his first collection.35 Similar work was being produced in London by a whole group of British and Russian collaborators through the onset of WWI.36 Whether or not these folklorists would have been directly influenced by Marx, they would have had direct access to the bourgeoning scholarship of the Folklore Society and the methodologies that were grounded in a linear, developmental understanding of social development. 37

than about its moral soul, through which it has its effect. Whether fact or fiction, [the press] remains an embodiment of the thoughts, fears and hopes of the people, a truthful fairy-tale” (“Ban” 313-4).

34 Ralston was particularly known for his translation of the fables of Ivan Krylov (c.1869) and Russian folk anthologies including The Songs of the Russian People: As Illustrative of Slavonic Mythology and Russian Social Life (1872), and Russian Folk-Tales (1873), which was translated from material collected by Nikolaevich Afanasyev.

35 For a more extensive list of Ralston’s collaborators, cf. Songs v-xii. Note: there are many alternative spellings of the Russian names in English, e.g. “Afanasyev” as “Afanasyef” or “Afanasiev,” “Potebnya” as “Potebnya,” etc. particularly around the Victorian period, when all of the relevant scholars were philologically trained and had strong beliefs about phonetic representation. For the sake of continuity and clarity, however, I have chosen to standardize spellings of all Russian names that are represented in several variations in my source material, noting in the bibliography significant orthographic variations.

36 Albert Henry Wratislaw (1822-1892) published Sixty Folk-Tales from Exclusively Slavonic Sources (1889), Charles John Tibbits (1861-1935) produced Folklore and Legends, Russian and Polish (1890), and a few collaborative publications were released in the following years, including Russian Fairy Tales: From the Skazi of Polevoi (1892) by Petr Polevoi (1839-1902) and Robert Nisbet Bain (1854-1909), and Russian Folk-Tales (1916) by Leonard Arthur Magnus and Alexander Nikolaevich Afanasyev.

37 The influence of British and European folklore methodology was extensive enough in Russia that mid-twentieth century Russian folklore scholars were forced to formally repudiate it under pressure from the government of the USSR. Cf. Chapter 6.1 “Overview of Fairy Tales in Marxist and (Post-)Colonial Theory.”
For that reason, Marx’s less direct but more lasting contribution to the field of fairy tale scholarship was his expansion of the stadial theory developed by the Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith (1723-1790). Smith had argued that human development could be broken into four stages defined by method of production, but Marx argued that any system of human development had to accommodate both the method of production and the distribution of labor. More importantly in this context, Marx argued that, in every stage of human development, there is a direct link between material production and socio-cultural development:

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness. (Contribution 44-5)

Read in context of developments in sociology and eugenics being made by Galton and Tylor, the argument that a given stage in economic history would produce an identifiably distinct culture was inverted to suggest that traditional texts like fairy tales could be interpreted as survivals of previous cultural stages. The applications of this theory for

38 Cf. Chapter 2.3 “Fairy Poetry, Imagination, and Eighteenth-Century Romanticism.”
39 Smith’s posited only four historical stages: “First, the Age of Hunters; secondly, the Age of Shepherds; thirdly, the Age of Agriculture; and fourthly, the Age of Commerce.” Adam Smith 14. For additional discussion of Smith’s stadial system, cf. David Garrett, “Anthropology: The ‘Original of Human Nature’ (2003): 82 and Chris Dalglish Rural Society in the Age of Reason (2003): 135. Marx also identified four historical stages (the Asiatic, the Ancient, the Feudal, and the Modern Bourgeois), but he then posited two additional, hypothetical stages (Socialism and Communism) that had not yet manifested in human social development (Cf. Marx, Contribution 44).
But there were a number of important class-based developments that would shape that way that myths and fairy tales would be interpreted in the twentieth century and which deserve detailed mention. The difficulty, though, is that Victorian fairy tales functioned at a number of different levels in cultural terms and, in different contexts, they (sometimes simultaneously) reinforced and challenged the status quo class-stratification.

In this sub-chapter I will be focusing on four ways in which fairy tales impacted the discussion of class. 1. Primarily because of developments in educational curricula, (frivolous, feminine) fairy tales and (serious, masculine) myth were separated into distinct, hierarchical categories. 2. Fairy tales were associated with an idealized upper-class childhood. 3. Fairy tales are often thematically about the success of the social outcast, and this opened up technical possibilities for authors with a more liberal class agenda. 4. That no matter how liberal the fairy tales themselves might be, the material production and distribution of fairy tales always reinforced class boundaries.

4.3.1 The Stratification of Myths and Fairy Tales

In many respects, developments in folklore, like Sir James Frazer’s landmark *Golden Bough*, brought together the study of all kinds of traditional narrative and ritual, including material that would now be categorized as myth, folklore, and fairy tale into a single, massive argument about human belief and cultural development. However, because folklorists were committed to studying, in the words of the *Handbook*, “factors in the mental life of man” manifested primarily in “the religious beliefs and customs of
savage or barbarous people” and “the superstitions and customs of the ‘Folk’ or less advanced classes in cultured nations,” the canon of fairy tales that was defined and developed as a contemporary, urban genre through pantomime was excluded from sociological analysis by folklorists. Their exclusion of fairy tales from scientific study validated fairy tales’ status as a product of highly developed culture and, conversely, implied that fairy tales were not serious enough to warrant scientific study. In the twentieth century, folklorists would distinguish between fairy tale and myth in material drawn from oral traditions, but in technical rather than hierarchal terms, and they would continue to pay minimal attention to recently produced literary fairy tale material.40

At the same time, as fairy tales became a standardized facet of early education, in designing new curricula, educators found it expedient to separate out fairy tales (introduced to the youngest readers) from myth (reserved for older, more advanced scholars), in much the same way that verse was reserved for the youngest readers, but older children would be increasingly introduced to adult, canonical poetry. For example, the *Heart of Oak Books* educational series (1895-98), which promised to send young readers through successive stages of materials that graduated from simple to complex:

> These books are not intended for the quasi-mechanical processes of learning to read. On the contrary they are graded selections of the best and choicest literature. Beginning with the rhymes and jingles of child-literature and passing through the various stages of fairy stories, tales from mythland, and hero-stories, the higher books contain the gems of classic literature. The fundamental design of these

40 Cf. Chapter 1.1.1 “How are fairy tales defined by folklorists?”
books is the cultivation of a taste for good reading, and by this means a cultivation of the supreme intellectual faculty—the imagination. 41

This system privileged all forms of “imaginative” fiction, but also implied that whole genres fit into the ranking, rather than, for example, distinguishing between relatively easy fairy tales and more complex, satirical ones that could be introduced at a later stage. This process facilitated the perception of these genres as homogenous. Likewise, in this context, “myth” was not a very inclusive term, and primarily meant “Greco-Roman Myth,” specifically stories about ancient gods and heroes. However, even after public education was made mandatory towards the end of the century, and even though some myths were introduced at the upper levels of that curriculum in some places, the formal study of Latin and Greek and the close reading of Classical poets like Homer and Virgil, were almost exclusively reserved for upper-class, privately educated boys. For non-specialists, and in popular culture more broadly, the connotations of fairy tales as childish, effeminate, domestic, and frivolous situated them in an inferior hierarchical position to myth, which was coded as adult, masculine, scholarly, and serious.

In twentieth century poetry, the hierarchical division between fairy tale and myth would become important in terms of gender, age, and class. For example, although poets like Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) would write both fairy tales and myths, they do not draw upon them equally. Eliot is more likely to use fairy and fairy tale references in his children’s poetry, and both Pound and Eliot had more fairy allusions in their juvenilia than in their mature poetry. The distinction is also important for literary

41 “Heart” 225. This kind of tiered system was not universal, but it was widespread in the U.K. and U.S. Cf. “Language Training in Primary Schools” (1893), published in The Ohio Educational Monthly: 113-4.
critics who are far more likely to analyze the mythic influences in their work than the fairy and fairy tale influences, as such.42

4.3.2 Fairy Tales and Class Stratification

The discussion of class is important, however, because, particularly in early twentieth-century poetry, fairy tales in poetry tended to be associated with an idealized upper-class childhood. The image of children reading fairy tales by a domestic hearth became almost a kind of national fairy tale in and of itself, where the happily ever after is the space in which one reads fairy tales—a kind of static, protected domestic space built for children, but to which adults can return. This pattern of imagery would be particularly important for the poets of WWI like Robert Graves (1895-1985), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), and Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) who struggled to reconcile national fairy tale narratives about how the world should be with their immediate, traumatic experiences of how the world is—an experience dominated by the immediacy of young men dying for king and country.43 Certainly, the image of war is difficult to reconcile with the kind of idealized mid-Victorian morality outlined in the epic defense of fairy tales written by Charles Dickens (1812-70) in 1853:

> It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels. Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force—many such good things have been first nourished in the child’s heart by this powerful aid. It has greatly helped to keep us, in some sense, ever young, by persevering through our worldly ways one

42 Cf. Chapter 6.4 “Mythmaking, Orientalism, and High Modernism”

43 Cf. Chapter 6.2 “War and Fairy Tales.”
slender track not overgrown with weeds, where we may walk with children, sharing their delights. 44

For Dickens, the printed fairy tale both defines and fosters “simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance” (232)—it is an untainted space in a morally complex and often cruel world. That this idealized space is reserved for relatively wealthy children (and child-like adults) is indicated by Dickens’ list of virtues: only the rich can offer “consideration for the poor,” have the mobility to escape the city and contemplate “love of nature,” and can afford to take the time out of the working day to “walk with children, sharing their delights.” Although the heroes of fairy tales are often peasants, the virtues ascribed to the readers of fairy tales are the exclusive virtues of a leisured class.

Similarly, in the mid-Victorian period, poetry was regularly being used to signify, to describe, and to reinforce class difference. In 1802, Richard Edgeworth explained this very clearly in his Poetry Explained for Young People: it is not enough to read poetry, the cultivation of “poetic taste” requires young readers to develop keen literary awareness. For example, students must learn that flowery, ornamental poetic language is not an indication of true poetry; in his metaphor: “lackeys do not become gentlemen by strutting in the cast clothes of their masters” (vii-viii). For Edgeworth, poetic taste is a class-based sensibility absorbed from early childhood that signifies and inculcates educational class-segregation and class-based aesthetics (viii). Edgeworth suggests that exposure to verse in childhood and poetry in young adulthood forms good moral values and good aesthetic values, and although such virtues are clearly the product of a careful, thorough education,

44 “Frauds on the Fairies,” 232. The essay was originally published in Dickens’ weekly journal Household Words, but it reprinted in a number of other periodicals.
Edgeworth describes people who have achieved such virtues as having “natural sentiment” (vi). In other words, the fruits of education are naturalized as a virtue of the upper classes, and upper class identity is partly defined by mastery of literature, especially verse and poetry.

For this reason, as print technology improved, books became cheaper, and education became somewhat more accessible, poetry had an increasing potential to blur class and cultural lines. For example, the “New Poetical Anthology” appended to Joseph Carpenter’s *A Handbook of Poetry* (1856) promises that:

> To the student who has not a poetical library at hand to refer to, the following pates will, in some measure, supply the deficiency. By them he will be enabled to see how the same subjects have been treated by different hands, and how, as has been before observed, “a generality becomes special in he hands of a poet.” […] No doubt it could have been considerably extended, but not without swelling this work to a bulk which would have placed it, in price, beyond the means of those for whom it is intended. As it is, nearly five hundred “gems of thought” have been included, in which many quotations from the standard poets have been blended with the lighter graces of modern verse. In all cases, however, the selections are made from such authors only as have been acknowledged by public and critical approbation. (93)

Carpenter has clearly identified a new market for his anthology; the narrow group “for whom it is intended” is relatively poor because the editor expects that his readers will not have access to a library and will be likely to be concerned with the book’s price. Carpenter also expects his readers to be more concerned with maximum exposure to “the lighter graces of modern verse” as determined by “public and critical approbation” than with achieving anything like “true taste in poetry” or “natural sentiment.” Rather, this volume is a pragmatic, abbreviated selection of poetry largely broken into quotable chunks (“five hundred ‘gems of thought’”), calculated to make its readers functionally conversant in upper-class literary referents, not a book one might read just for the
pleasure of the poetry. Obviously there was a market among upwardly-mobile but presently middle-class adults who wished to purchase, at modest price, access to more upper-class patterns of poetic language. At one level, the book seems very democratic because it seeks to blur the cultural lines between classes, but the existence of the book makes it clear just how deeply classist literary knowledge was in the mid-Victorian period.

4.3.3 Fairy Tales and Class Subversion

There was also a second context in which the image of children reading fairy tales become almost a national fairy tale in its own right: in spite of the fact that only literate children from relatively wealthy families had ready access to literary fairy tales for most of the century, fairy tales were understood to be a genre for underdogs that would give heart and hope to despised and abused Cinderellas everywhere. For example, consider the long narrative verse “The Cinderella of 1851”:

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45 The “rags to riches” fairy tale would eventually be more associated with American patterns of fairy tale telling (and, very directly “the American dream”), but it had roots in a lot of British work; it was a favorite trope of the immensely successful novelist Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924), whose child-protagonists often told themselves and each other fairy tales and who almost always consciously tried to live up to the standards of fairy tale princes (Cf. Marco Loristan, The Lost Prince, 1915; Cedric Errol, Little Lord Fauntleroy, 1885-6) and princesses (Cf. Sara Crewe, A Little Princess, 1905). In all of Burnett’s material, however, there is minimal class-subversion in the majority of her books because (like Beauty in de Villanueve’s “Beauty and the Beast”) all the protagonists turned out to be secretly wealthy and most of them turned out to have noble blood. The only striking exception would be Burnett’s The Secret Garden(1910)

46 The author of this verse had every reason to believe that an 1851 periodical-reading audience would be familiar with the “Cinderella” story in poetic narrative form. Cf. “Cinderella, or the Little Glass Slipper” (Monthly Magazine and British Register 1813): “How fair a huge ball where the violins sound, Where tapers and ladies are sparkling around,/And the knight, who in tournament shook his proud lance,/Condescends to lead down thro’ the maze of the dance./‘But I am forbidden to revel and roam,/Must burn only cinders while they are from home,/And at twelve heat their kettle—I wish I could go—/Yet let me not murmur at ought here below.” /So spake Cinderella […]” (234). Similarly straightforward narrative poems appear by the dozen in diverse popular journals including the Literary Gazette (Cf. Anon. 1820), the Mirror of Literature, Entertainment, and Instruction (Cf. Fanny Lucy, 1847), Chambers’s Edinburgh
In the workhouse school-room, choky and small,
that looks out on the workhouse wall,
Sit the pauper children, drearily,
   Under the pauper mistress’ rule, […]
But on the side that’s out of the sun,
In the furthest corner, and darkest one,
Two little pauper heads are mingling
   Their scanty growth of pauper curls,—
Two little pauper faces tingling,—
   Two pair of pauper eyes rain pearls,
As two little hands go slowly singling
   The sense, word by word, of those tattered pages,
   Hoary and brown with the thumbing of ages.
What is the lesson that so engages
The thoughts of those little pauper girls?
   […] ’tis the school-room’s hidden treasure,
   Bann’d and banish’d, but loved the more,—
The book of mystery, awe, and pleasure,—
   The glorious book of fairy lore,
That charms even pauper childhood’s leisure […] (130)

This verse is difficult to interpret because it is clearly written for a relatively wealthy audience. It was published in a large compendium of children’s stories and poems, not a cheap periodical, and the narrative voice clearly assumes that there is a substantial distance between the audience and “the pauper children” who are referred to collectively, almost as a distinct species. The representation of childhood misery, though not exaggerated, is couched in strikingly romanticized terms: the children’s hair, which was probably shorn because long hair is dangerous in a factory, is still charmingly “curly;” their weeping eyes “rain pearls;” their battered fragment of a book is “Hoary and brown with the thumbing of ages;” and the time spent huddled in a dreary classroom where they are clearly not being taught is generously described as “pauper childhood’s leisure.”

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Realistically, in 1851 literate children in workhouses were remarkably exceptional; although funding for public education was gradually improving over the course of the century, few children from the poorest classes could spare the time to attend school, even if the available schools taught anything worth learning. The opening stanzas of the poem are no more representative of workhouses than Burton’s translations of *The Arabian Nights* are representative of Middle Eastern culture—which is to say that there are glimpses of accuracy, but the overall effect is a kind of exotification that stands in place of dialogue or direct engagement with the “other” culture on its own terms.

However, partly because it was such a stark representation of class, and partly because popular fairy tales like “Cinderella” already offered Victorian children much the same romanticization of oppression, there is significant subversive potential in the poem. The same children who could afford this book were from the demographic of children who flocked to the boxes of the Christmas pantomime and regularly imagined themselves in fairy tale roles like that of Cinderella, but this poem gives the starring role to the children in the workhouse:

And the two are reading the story old,  
Wherein of CINDERELLA is told  
How she crouch’d at the kitchen fender,  
   And how, in her poor clothes and worn,  
She was fairer than in their splendour  
   Her sisters stately and full of scorn;  
For loveliness lives not with hearts untender;  
   And how, with their plumes and trains a-sweeping,

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47 In the landmark public education bill that William Edward Forster (1818-1886) presented to the English parliament in 1870, he noted that in 1869 surveys, only 40% of working-class children between the ages of 6 and 9 and 30% of children between the ages of 10 and 12 were enrolled at nationally funded schools, and, moreover, that those percentages were misleading because truancy rates were extremely high, especially among the poorest classes whose families could not survive without the children’s wages and the quality of education in many of the schools was questionable at best (440-443).
They drove to the ball, and she went creeping
Back to her ashes, and there sat weeping;
And how, to the maiden all forlorn,

Came the fairy godmother true;
And then—oh, wonders ever new!— (131)

Because the prospect of imagining yourself as Cinderella was familiar to the reading audience, it would have the potential to create an empathetic connection between the reader and the children described in the poem far more readily that the stylized description of “pauper childhood” in the opening stanzas. The idea that these despised children in workhouses could see themselves as deserving a fairy godmother and imagine themselves dancing with princes humanizes those children and gives them a dignity they were denied in the stanzas about weeping “pauper eyes” in sad “pauper faces;” as such, it was blow to the inevitability of class lines. Moreover, if the children dressed in rags in the workhouse are Cinderellas, then the well-dressed and comfortable readers might find themselves occupying the position of the villainously indifferent stepsisters who have ready access to carriages and clothes and never think to care about Cinderella, a shocking role for complacent children who would, at the panto, doubtless be more likely to imagine themselves in the role of the heroine and hero. Given that moral juxtaposition, the readers might be inspired to take a more genuine interest in workhouse conditions and the lives of the children who are forced to live there.

The concluding stanza of the poem builds on an assumed degree of empathy with the workhouse children to make a metatextual argument about fancy and fact. In doing so, the verse appropriates the eighteenth-century fairy poetry argument that fancy and
imagination are spiritually enlightening and resistant to cold mercantile reason, but applies those polarized concepts in a much more literally mercantile context.  

Oh, blessed Fancy, that chases the gloom  
Even of that blank workhouse room!  
Their little heads and hearts are working,  
And wond’ring if fairy god-mothers now  
In chimney-corners may be lurking—  
When comes the sharp word and sharper blow:  
“Drat you! take that, your tasks for shirking!”  
Alas! the chiding and cane so ready  
Are Fact’s stern warning to fancies heady,  
That back to the workhouse jog-trot steady  
The world’s poor paupers is quick to cow. (131)  

Having established the idea that the children trapped in workhouses have vibrant, hopeful, dreaming hearts and minds—the verse concludes with an image of physical and psychological repression. The dream dignifies the child, but the beating, the yelling, and the constant “workhouse jog-trot steady” batter the hope and the dreams and the love of stories out of these children. In effect, the final stanza of this verse de-naturalizes the gap between wealthy, educated, confident children with carefully cultivated “natural sentiment,” and impoverished, abused, intimidated children who are “cowed” by a lifetime experience of heartless “Fact.” The author reserves the most brutal lines for after empathy was established by the fairy tale.

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49 130-1. The image of children reading fairy tales when they should have been doing work was common, though it was rarely portrayed in such stark terms. Cf. the absentminded protagonist of “Dorothy Grey” by T.E.D. (1875): 87-89.

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Taken as a whole, “The Cinderella of 1851” gives a concrete moment to what would normally be an ahistorical “once upon a time” fairy tale narrative. Consequently, there is a gleam of hope in the poem because one fairy tale role is obviously unclaimed—where is the fairy godmother who could be intervening and setting everything to rights, “As a good Fairy should” (“At the Pantomime” 110)? I would suggest that the poem leaves its readership with the choice of continuing to be an indifferent stepsister or picking up a fairy wand and doing something more substantial for the children who, except for their circumstances, are just like the children reading the poem. The verse is ultimately an appeal for charity in the Dickensian sense of cultivating “consideration for the poor” (“Frauds” 232) but although the verse apparently opened as a standard charity appeal for money and distant pity, it was transmuted through the common ground of the fairy tale narrative into an appeal for empathy, for dignity, and for a serious commitment to the problem of social justice in a dehumanizing, fact-driven mercantile culture.

In the twentieth century, a very similar use of fairy tales to give double-meaning and conflicting dimension to an apparently simple poem would be a very popular tactic with poets as diverse as Denise Levertov (1923-1970), Liz Lochhead (b.1947), and John Agard (b.1949) throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Because fairy tales continued to have a variety of (often conflicting) social connotations, many of which were inherited from the Victorian period, these double- and treble-tongued tales were

\[\text{50 The library volume of } \textit{Punch} \text{ from which this verse comes was missing its first forty pages, including the cover, so the date of the poem’s publication is uncertain. Presumably, it was published in 1851 and the title indicates the immediacy of the problem of child labor; as far as I have been able to discover, there was no landmark child labor or education law passed in 1851 or 1852 that would otherwise justify the poem’s specific date.}\]
very often applied in contexts with some mix of gendered, classed, and colonial implications.\textsuperscript{51}

4.3.4 Class and the Material Production and Distribution of Fairy Tales

Unfortunately, and although the message of individual fairy tales was often class-radical, in the Victorian period, the material process of book creation and distribution reinforced class lines in child-populations, even when the content of such books was potentially class-liberal. While some children were delighting in the reams of “pretty” fairy books, many of their less privileged counterparts were employed under brutal factory conditions to physically produce those very volumes. In the introduction to Andrew Tuer’s \textit{Old-Fashioned Children’s Books} (1899), the editor notes that the gaudy illustrations for some expensive, color volumes had been “laid on, by the way, with a brush by young children” (x), almost certainly illiterate or nearly-illiterate working-class children who had no other access to printed fairy tales. The “golden age,” late-Victorian era of children’s literature idealized the image of a child reading fairy tales by the domestic hearth, but the marketing of that image relied on a social system driven in part by cheap child-labor.\textsuperscript{52}

Likewise, the high demand for fairy tales and fairy verse meant that editors constantly sought out fresh material to fill such books. In 1848, the poetry editor George Bethune (1805-1862) argued that, “there are offices necessary to the elegant perfection of

\textsuperscript{51} Cf. Chapters 5.4 “Fairy Tales, Gendered Narration, and Gender Revolution,” and 6.4 “Trans-Continental Mythmaking.”

\textsuperscript{52} This should continue to be of concern in the twentieth century – particularly now that so much of the material production of Western goods (including fairy-tale books, toys, etc.) is being delegated to third-world factories with highly unethical labor laws.
society, which can be discharged only by the delicate and more sensitive faculties of woman,” triumphantly concluding that:

In all pertaining to the affections, which constitute the best part of human nature, we readily confess her superiority; it is, therefore, consistent with her character that the genius of woman would yield peculiar delight when its themes are love, childhood, the softer beauties of creation, the joys or sorrows of the heart, domestic life, mercy, religion, and the instincts of justice. Hence her excellence in the poetry of the sensibilities. […] The much- vexed question as to the superiority of male or female intellect, is one that should never be discussed, because the premises are so different that it can never be settled. (iii-iv)

Because editors like Bethune defined “excellent” women’s writing as “poetry of the sensibilities” and printed accordingly, they perhaps failed to consider the degree to which such market claims are self-perpetuating. Many writers who were not independently wealthy, particularly women, were creatively bound by the demand for cheaply, rapidly produced rose-colored images of childhood; to be published at all, they had to market their work according to these very biased standards of “excellence” and were essentially forced by economic necessity to limit their writing within this trite genre form. 53

Even brilliant, established poets like Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) were financially pressured into publishing intellectually reductive pieces. This, of course, presents a huge problem for twentieth-century scholars who are forced to reconcile a body of work that includes both Goblin Market (1859), which is known for its bold themes and lush imagery:

[...] Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest
Folded in each other’s wings,

53 Though, as “The Cinderella of 1851” indicates, they often snuck subversive material into poems that, at a glance, might seem to be standard sentimental rubbish.
They lay down in their curtained bed:
Like two blossoms on one stem,
Like two flakes of new-fall’n snow,
Like two wands of ivory
Tipped with gold for awful kings.
Moon and stars gazed in at them,
Wind sang to them a lullaby,
Lumbering owls forebore to fly,
Not a bat flapped to and fro
Round their rest:
Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
Locked together in one nest. […]

and, much later, Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book (1872), which was known for being
“pretty”:

Angels at the foot,
   And Angels at the head,
And like a curly little lamb
   My pretty babe in bed.

Glimpses of Rossetti’s talent shine through, even in Sing-Song, but the totality of her
collected works is very disjunctive in scope and quality—implicitly posing a conundrum
for scholars who like to think of poetic writing as primarily a matter of talent and
individual development. For female poets like Anna Wickham (1884-1947) who were
actively writing through the early twentieth century, to engage with fairy language was
often to engage with a history of economic marginalization and with the apparently
irrevocable association between women and domesticity; for that reason, Wickham’s
poetry is full of female narrators who struggle with fulfilling Victorian standards of
femininity in fairy tale terms: witches stirring imaginative cauldrons in kitchens, fairy-
minded housewives who lock their dreams in attics, and queens who refuse their fairy
tale happy endings. In that context, fairy tales are alternately a medium through which to discuss social justice and, as a genre, a signifier of idealized Victorian domesticity that could be endorsed or defied.

In short, class was often an apparently invisible factor but it impacted the shape and interpretation of the fairy tale genre at every point. As with the gendered developments, these nineteenth-century evolutions in fairy tale writing work both at a level that is significant to the conceptual development of colonial and Marxist theory, and at a level that directly affected the material well-being of British citizens along class and racial lines.

54 Cf. 5.3 “Gender, Trauma, and Social Power in Poetry.”
PART III:

TWENTIETH-CENTURY FAIRY TALE POETRY AND THEORY

Come with me, ladies and gentlemen who are in any wise weary of London: come with me: and those that tire at all of the world we know: for we have new worlds here.
— Lord Dunsany, The Book of Wonder (1912)

The turn of the twentieth century coincided with the gradual disappearance of fairy poetry, and by the 1940s fairy poetry had been almost entirely displaced by fairy tale poetry. The emergence of the genre of fairy tale poetry was made possible by both the codification of a core canon of fairy tales and the popular association of those tales with a whole range of widely recognized cultural connotations including children, pantomime, education, nationalism, and imagination—the very connotations that had made fairy tales such a valuable tool for theorists in many different schools. Consequently, from the beginning of the twentieth-century, fairy tale poets drew heavily on both artistic and theoretical traditions for language and context in ways that are not always distinguishable.

But the implications of “fairy” had changed radically from the turn of the nineteenth-century. Now only tangentially associated with high poetry, fairies had become conflated with fairy tales under a general context of “children’s literature.” Fairy tale poems had absorbed the fairy tale poetry’s association with imagination, but they were so thoroughly associated with children that even cynical, adult poems involving
fairy tales were understood as being commentaries on innocence, imagination, and childhood, if not endorsements of them.

Because early twentieth-century British folklore scholars continued to express only minimal interest in contemporary literature and less in contemporary poetry, and because new scholars of English literature were trying to prove their place as serious academics, fairy tale poems generally received very little critical attention as such, and the consistent recurrence of fairy tale themes in British poetry was not recognized as a significant movement. Yet, in spite of the apparent indifference of literary critics, fairy tales continued to flourish in poetry and in theory, and, in fact, fairy tales’ association with literary marginality became a useful metatextual connotation, and poets often turned to fairy tales to discuss all kinds of social marginality.

Because theoretical and poetic applications of fairy tales continued to develop in mutual conversation, the two chapters of this section are divided along theoretical lines. The divisions are somewhat arbitrary because nearly all of the poets mentioned in these chapters have writing that could situate them in either chapter, and, for that reason, some poets are mentioned in more than one theoretical context. However there are so many developments in fairy tale poetry and theory over the course of the century that dividing the analysis into parts helps to contain a non-linear argument into a roughly linear narrative.

Each chapter is prefaced by a brief summary of some of the most important theoretical developments cast in fairy tale terms. These theoretical sections are cut off roughly around the beginning of the 1980s, in part because after that point the number of
fairy tale sources in theory increased exponentially, in part because more recent fairy tale sources have received significant critical attention, and in part because (particularly in context of fairy tales) the theory begins to overlap the categories that I have outlined so heavily that dividing the arguments into three parts becomes increasingly unhelpful and misrepresentative. Once the implications of postmodernity had impacted academic writing on a very broad scale, the theoretical categories blurred irretrievably (and for good reason). It is now very difficult to find, for example, a twenty-first century postcolonial argument that does not acknowledge gendered, economic, and psychoanalytic dimensions. The convenient categorization of knowledge into bibliographic categories that was so revolutionary in the 1880s was substantially eroded by applications of poststructuralism in the 1980s and further broken down by the poly-referential archival metadata and digital search engines that have been steadily displacing Victorian bibliographic practice since the 1990s.

The following chapter sub-sections outline different patterns of fairy tale poetry, that correlate thematically to the developments occurring in literary theory many of which were adapted (directly or indirectly) from conflicts and concerns raised in fairy and fairy tales discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Each subsection foregrounds the work of two or three poets in contrasting case studies of the most significant trends, and the focal poets are all prefaced by brief biographical information. In part, this information serves to contextualize an otherwise extremely unlikely grouping of writers historically, but also, because fairy tale poetry so often thematically negotiates the concerns of centrality/marginality, acknowledging the authors’ social situation (in
gendered, economic, colonial, racial, parental, military, literary, and sexual terms) can helpfully contextualize the thematic concerns of their work.
CHAPTER 5:
GENDER, FAIRY TALES, AND POETRY

I have seen many fairies with my mind’s eyes (that is, clairvoyantly.) [...the third] kind is poem fairies. They are more ethereal, and of a violet shade. If you can imagine Perdita in the Midsummer Night’s Dream, translated from the stage into a real fairy, you would have a good idea of the poem fairy. She has a very beautiful girlish character. The same might be said of Miranda, but she is more sentimental. –Eva Longbottom, L.R.A.M., A.R.C.; testimony recorded by Arthur Conan Doyle (1922)

In the “poetry” entry of the Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folk Lore and Fairy Tales (2008), Wolfgang Mieder (b.1944) argued that “there are literally countless poets who have written at least one if not two fairy-tale poems,” and, after providing a lengthy list of examples, went on to argue that: “As these names indicate, it would be a mistake to delineate fairy-tale poetry along gender lines. Both female and male poets draw on fairy-tale motifs, with women occupying themselves somewhat more with issues inspired by feminism” (752). However, at least in Britain, the gender identities of the authors who have contributed to the development of fairy tale poetry are a crucial factor, and the participation of both male and female authors in the construction of fairy tale poetry by no means implies that they approached or interpreted fairy tales in the same way; in fact, developments in fairy tale poetry can very often be segregated thematically by the author’s gender.

For example, at the beginning of the century, gender is vital to the construction and interpretation of fairy and fairy tale poetry because patriarchal norms placed a
premium on idyllic domesticity where boys, by reading fairy tales, were taught to think of themselves as heroes and appreciate the domestic comforts that are the hero’s just reward—and the early twentieth-century fairy tale poetry of Alfred Noyes and G.K. Chesterton captures that pattern of language. In contrast, the male poets who were involved in the active fighting during WWI were producing what Mieder would call “anti-fairy tales,” whose measures always had a connotation of violation—as with Robert Graves’ “In Spite” (1916), whose narrator refuses:

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the might
And the right
Of classic tradition
In writing
And reciting
Straight ahead (9)
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because he associates that with the mindless obedience required of soldiers who, “[…] march,/Stiff as starch,/Foot to foot […] Blade to blade” (9). Rather, he says, “My rhymes must go/Turn’ee, twist’ee,/Twinkling, frosty,/Will-o’-the-wisp-like, misty” for:

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How petty
to take
A merry little rhyme
In a jolly little time
And poke it,
And choke it
Change it, arrange it,
Straight-lace it, deface it […]
And chop and chew,
And hack and hew
And weld it into a uniform stanza (9-10).
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The barrage of short sharp rhythms and shrapnel-like batter of alliteration ensures that the formal structure of the poem echoes the thematic struggle; by contrasting the desire to
revel, fairy-like, “jolly” and “twinkling” and the command to execute uniform metric feet, Graves articulates the experience of a quirky poetic mind being hammered into the life of an active soldier, of being “chopped and chewed,” poked and choked,” “defaced” and then “welded” into an alien shape. Although women certainly wrote about the war in fairy and fairy tale terms, the contrast between the call to male heroism and the experience of an officer in the trenches was unique to men.

Similarly, in that same generation, the language of “fairy” in context of homosexuality also had substantially different connotations for men than for women, because only male homosexual acts were illegal according to British law, and societies of transvestite and homosexual men in Europe and North America had, for years, self-identified as “fairies.” ¹ Male poets have used fairy tales to both endorse and challenge patriarchal gender models in discussions of both masculinity and femininity. However, the cultural structures of patriarchy have strongly impacted the context in which fairy tale poetry was produced and read—a fairy tale in a man’s voice has a different connotation than the same tale told in a woman’s voice.

Women writing in the same period were socially constellated with a different relationship to domesticity. Poets like Rose Fyleman celebrated the same domestic patterns as Noyes and Chesterton, valorizing the wonder of the everyday in her most famous pieces, like “Fairies at the Bottom of our Garden” (1928)—though often in language that justified Victorian gender values, as in “Consolation” (1928):

¹ Graves himself was one of the soldiers who moved almost directly from the public schoolroom (where he admitted to having romantic feelings for a fellow student) to the battlefield, where his first poems were full of “fairy” language. It was not uncommon for male British poets to write about early sexual experiences (heterosexual and homosexual) in terms of “fairy” or “fairy tale” over the arc of the twentieth century.
You may be very ugly and freckledy and small
And have a little stubby nose that’s not a nose at all;
You may be bad at spelling and you may be worse at sums,
You may have stupid fingers that your Nana says are thumbs
And lots of things you look for you may never, never find,
But if you love the fairies—you don’t mind. […] (4)

The poem urges its young readers to see into fairy land and revel in that excitement, but then to channel that experience of “loving the fairies” into endurance of social humiliation in the mundane world. Fairies are situated as the anodyne to social marginalization. Yet other female poets used the language of “fairies” to protest women’s vulnerable social status, particularly in domestic terms. Charlotte Mew’s eponymous “Farmer’s Bride” (1916) is so traumatized by the forced sexual experience of her early marriage that she stops speaking and runs away from home; her husband describes her behavior as inexplicably “fey” because she cannot act within the bounds of what he would perceive as appropriate for “a woman” (1). Likewise, Anna Wickham’s “The Fairy Wife” (1921) is a lament, voiced by a fairy woman who has left her people for a human husband, “Slippery slippery spending Jack” who cares only for buying “a farm with [his] minted gold” (225). Unlike Mew’s farmer, who drags his wife home and locks her in the attic, Wickham’s farmer is totally indifferent to his wife and “will never miss [her]” when she runs away to find “a cave and a bed of [her] own” (255). As wives, both women are denied freedom and control in their marriages, but the price of leaving is any association with human civilization: the only non-patriarchal space in which their desires and behavior makes sense is Faerie itself. Although women, like men, may either challenge or reinforce patriarchal gender norms, the patterns are very distinctly different, particularly at the beginning of the century.
This chapter outlines three influential patterns of fairy tale poetry in gendered terms, focusing on stylistic as well as thematic developments in gendered terms, and emphasizing the relationship between the various authors’ social/historical context and their use of fairy tales to achieve very diverse poetic effects.

5.1 Theorizing Gender, Fairy Tales, and Poetry

In the early twentieth century, librarians like Mary Huse Eastman (1870-1963) and her successor Norma Olin Ireland (b.1907) were tracking new developments in fairy tale writing, indexing them, and making annotated bibliographies available to children and to primary school educators. However, at the same time that fledgling English literature faculty were making a bid to be taken seriously as robust academics, the early generations of women who were in the academy were also trying very hard to be taken seriously as scholars; none of them could afford to associate themselves with anything that could be considered foolish and childish. In *Kiddie Lit* (2003), Beverly Lyon Clark (n.d.) traced the anxiety associated with children’s literature across the arc of the twentieth century, suggesting that:

The relationship between feminism and childhood is complicated [...] because adulthood is exactly what many feminists want to claim. The cost of doing so is that we grind children under our heels. [...] If Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued that women have suffered not so much from a Bloomian “anxiety of influence” as from a more fundamental “anxiety of authorship,” a being unable to create, a fear that writing will destroy them, then I would add that women (and other) critics also suffer from an “anxiety of immaturity.” They—we—fear that literary creation will be so associated with procreation, and with that which is

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procreated, that we ourselves might be considered childish. And thus we become
anxious to dissociate ourselves from immaturity. (5-6)

Although both fairy tales and children’s literature retained connotations of domesticity
and effeminacy, particularly in the first half of the century, the gender-liberal theorization
of fairy tales was mostly striking in its absence.

At the same time, folklore scholars, who were still negotiating fairy tale material,
were also drawing heavily on the structure and methodology of the Folklore Society, and
in spite of the fact that two members of the Folkloric Society Council were women, the
early gendered frameworks were heavily patriarchal and far more notable for their
Victorian theorization of “woman” and “woman’s nature” in abstract terms than for their
recognition or development of gender-liberal thought. Ironically, this methodology
became vitally important for gender-liberal writers because it represented a perfect
distillation of everything that critics of patriarchal norms wanted to repudiate. In fact, a
number of texts became such wonderful straw-targets that they were reprinted throughout
the twentieth-century, probably less on their scholarly or literary merits than on their
value as representations of gross patriarchy. To take what became one of the more
infamous examples—in 1905, the prolific folklorist T.F. Thisleton-Dyer (1848-1928)
produced a slim but remarkable volume titled *Folk-Lore of Women: as illustrated by
legendary and traditionary tales, folk-rhymes, proverbial sayings, superstitions, etc,
recently re-titled by one satiric editor as the “Folklore of Misogyny.”*  
3,4 In it, Thistleton-Dyer notes that “Proverbial philosophy has long agreed that woman is a complex

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3 Thiselton-Dyer’s work has been reprinted 27 times, most recently in 2007 by Gardner’s Books.

4 Cf. the anonymous editorial preface to the electronic version of this text published by
*SacredTexts.Com.*
creature, little understood” (1), and, apparently without a scrap of irony, proposes to enlighten his implicitly male audience by bringing together quoted adages collected, selected, and written by men that, together: “express more or less correctly the estimate of mankind relative to the subject specially handled” (vii). The volume is a textbook of condescension that offers none of the close-reading of literature scholarship or the historical contextualization of anthropology. Because patriarchal values were coded as highly evolved, Thistleton-Dyer was not required to account for the biases in his selection or presentation of these texts beyond the general claim to tolerable scientific accuracy based on the fact that, in his source materials, “the judgment passed on [woman is] in most cases fairly divided between what is in her favour or the reverse” (vii).

In the absence of critical support from English Departments, which might have recognized the consistent and often gender-radical use of fairy tales in poetry and in prose, marginalized gender-liberal fairy tales from the first half of the century were so effectively occluded by texts and methodologies like Thistleton-Dyer’s that by the time scholars like Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) began to systematically critique patriarchal culture, their tendency was to reject myth, fairy tales, and folklore as intrinsically patriarchal genres and to reject wholesale the methodologies of folklore scholarship.

With the publication of *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir urged her readers to consider the implicit standards and methodologies of folklore and psychoanalysis, and she waged war on the pervasive influence of patriarchal myths in perpetuating patriarchal culture. Of Beauvoir’s twenty-five chapters, three were dedicated entirely to “Myth,” a term she uses to encompass all material that contributes to a culture’s underlying belief
structures—including religious material as well as legends and fairy tales—although the latter take the most prominent place in Beauvoir’s examples. In doing so, Beauvoir appropriated the Folklore Society’s argument that folklore represents a framework through which a culture can be judged, and then she turned that adjudicative gaze back on “highest civilization” as practiced by “modern civilized countries” to expose the gender implications of patriarchal culture.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir outlined five arguments about “myth” that would profoundly impact the development of gender theorization on both sides of the Atlantic, and traces of which can be found in gender theory from the 1960s to the present day:

1. Myths train women to understand that men are heroes, and that there is no inhabitable place for women in the pantheon of the powerful.

   Children’s books, mythology, stories, tales, all reflect the myths born of the pride and the desires of men; thus it is through the eyes of men the little girl discovers the world and reads therein her destiny. The superiority of the male is, indeed, overwhelming: Perseus, Hercules, David, Achilles, Lancelot, the old French warriors Du Guesclin and Bayard, Napoleon – so many men for one Joan of Arc; and behind her the great male figure of the archangel Michael!” [...] There are in legend and story, to be sure, witches and hags who wield fearful powers. [...] But these are not attractive personages. More pleasing are the fairies, sirens, and undines, and these are outside male domination; but their existence is dubious, hardly individualized; they intervene in human affairs but have no destiny of their own (288-9)

2. After discouraging women from taking up direct physical and social authority, myths encourage women to cultivate an ephemeral, spiritual, manipulative power through victimization. After all, a hero is not heroic until he rescues a damsel in distress:

   She learns that to be happy she must be loved; to be loved she must await love’s coming. [...] woman assures her most delicious triumphs by first falling into depths of abjection; whether God or a man is concerned, the little girl learns that she will become all-powerful through deepest resignation: she takes delight in a
masochism that promises supreme conquests. St. Blandine, her white body bloodstreaked under the lion’s claws, Snow-White laid out as if dead in a glass coffin, the Beauty asleep, the fainting Atala, a whole flock of delicate heroines bruised, passive, wounded, kneeling, humiliated, demonstrate to their young sister the fascinating prestige of martyred, deserted, resigned beauty. (291)

3. Myths not only encourage women to spend years passively waiting, they preoccupy her mind during that time; the young girl wallows in daydreams and fantasies, understanding that her desirable body and her feminine power (to draw a hero) are completely equivalent, and therefore imagining herself to be both passive and magical:

From this narrow and paltry existence she makes her escape in dreams. [...] she tells herself silly fairy stories. She sinks so often into such foolishness because she has no hold upon the world; if she were supposed to act she would have to see clearly, but she can wait in a fog. [...] Magic involves the idea of a passive force; because she is doomed to passivity and yet wants power, the adolescent girl must believe in magic: in that of her body, which will bring men under her yoke; in that of fate in general, which will crown her desires without her having to do anything. As for the real world, she tries to forget it. (341)

4. The mythic association of women with magic (made by both men and women) leads to a depiction of the adult woman as Other—distanced from society, politics, and the “real” world. This Otherness is a kind of power, but it is used to justify male control over women because her power is antithetical to civilization.

[...] the misbehavior of a man in more modern societies is only a minor folly, often regarded indulgently; even if he disobeys the laws of the community, man continues to belong to it; he is only an enfant terrible, offering no profound menace to the order of society. If, on the other hand, woman evades the rules of society, she returns to Nature and to the demon, she looses uncontrollable and evil forces in the collective midst. Fear is always mixed with the blame attached to woman’s licentious conduct. (190)

5. Moreover, when people build their lives around achieving a mythic “happily ever after,” both men and women delude themselves into thinking that marriage offers
archetypal perfection and are unpleasantly surprised find themselves married to human beings. For women, who have dedicated their lives to a domestic myth, this disillusionment is particularly traumatic:

A fallen god is not a man: he is a fraud; the lover has no other alternative than to prove that he really is this king accepting adulation—or to confess himself a usurper. If he is no longer adored, he must be trampled on. In virtue of that glory with which she has haloed the brow of her beloved, the woman in love forbids him any weakness; she is disappointed and vexed if he does not live up to the image she has put in his place. If he gets tired or careless, if he contradicts himself, she asserts that he is “not himself” and she makes a grievance of it. [...] Hence such disillusioned sayings as: “One must not believe in Prince Charming. Men are only poor creatures,” and the like. They would not seem to be dwarfs if they had not been asked to be giants. (655)

From birth to miserable adulthood, Beauvoir argues that modern women are trapped in glass coffins and walled towers and that women’s entrapment irrevocably damages men as well. In Beauvoir’s gendered reckoning, myths are culturally fatal.

Yet in spite of the fact that Beauvoir’s work would leave a very strong imprint on the last three decades of the twentieth century, the first piece that influentially revived the discourse between gender and fairy tales after Beauvoir came, not from Folklore or Gender Theory, but out of the new sub-field of the English Department, Children’s Literature.5 In 1970, the American scholar and writer Alison Lurie (b.1926) wrote a very brief piece for the New York Review of Books titled “Fairy Tale Liberation,” provocatively claiming that:

The traditional folk tale […] is one of the few sorts of classic children's literature of which a radical feminist would approve. Most of these stories are in the literal

5 Bearing in mind that fairy tale study had largely become the provenance of children’s librarians, this connection was not entirely surprising. Cf. Chapter 3.2 “Nineteenth-Century Educational Theory: Fairy Tales and National Morality.”
sense old wives' tales. Throughout Europe (except in Ireland) the storytellers from whom the Grimm Brothers and their followers heard them were most often women; in some areas, they were all women. [...] These stories suggest a society in which women are as competent and active as men, at every age and in every class. Gretel, not Hansel, defeats the Witch; and for every clever youngest son there is a youngest daughter equally resourceful. The contrast is greatest in maturity, where women are often more powerful than men. Real help for the hero or heroine comes most frequently from a fairy godmother or wise woman; and real trouble from a witch or wicked stepmother. With a frequency which recalls current feminist polemics, the significant older male figures are either dumb, male-chauvinist giants or malevolent little dwarfs. (42)

Capitalizing on the turn-of-the-century association of fairy tales with children’s literature, Lurie challenges patriarchal trends in Folklore methodologies by arguing that women’s contribution to the oral tradition was vital rather than incidental, offering a gender critique which re-reads popular fairy tales as thematically as well as contextually gender-empowering, and implicitly challenging the patterns of literary scholarship which had ignored fairy tales for decades. The lack of contextualization with any scholarship beyond Lurie’s own re-reading of a few volumes of fairy tales gestures at just how marginal fairy tales had become for literary scholars, but the sheer boldness of her arguments dragged the whole field of fairy tales back into literary discourse.

Because Lurie’s sweeping claims could not go unchallenged, the discussion that they provoked is widely credited as being the “catalytic exchange” (Haase 1) that launched the new field of Fairy Tale Studies. 6 Although there were other responses, the most famous reaction to Lurie was a full-length scholarly article titled “‘Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale’” (1972) published in

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6 Both Jack Zipes (1986) and Donald Haase (2005), credit the contemporary field of fairy tale scholarship (a fusion of literary, historical, language, and folkloric criticism) to Alison Lurie and Marcia Lieberman, whose debate united “the inchoate discourse of early feminist fairy-tale research and the advent of modern fairy-tale studies” (Haase 2).
College English by Marcia Lieberman (n.d.) in which she Lieberman challenged Lurie on three fronts. First, Lieberman limited the scope of the debate to a narrow canon of “those fairy tales that children actually read” (383), narrowing further even the canonical literary collections by the Grimms and Perrault, and foregrounding the canon established during the late Victorian period. Second, Lieberman raised the stakes by making larger claims for what children (especially girls) learn from fairy tales:

[… ] behavioral and associational patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances [… ] Millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales. (384-5)

And third, like Beauvoir, Lieberman concluded that the most regularly reprinted, canonical fairy tales teach women to inhabit reductive social roles, noting that: “the beautiful single daughter is nearly always noted for her docility, gentleness, and good temper” (385); “Girls win the prize if they are the fairest of them all; boys win if they are bold, active, and lucky” (385); and “Marriage is the fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale” (386). From the 1970s, the writers who contributed to the discussion of fairy tales through literature and gender theory drew on both Beauvoir and Lieberman’s compelling characterization of popular “myth” as deeply patriarchal and Lurie’s

7 The year after Lieberman published this landmark article, she was denied tenure by the University of Connecticut on the grounds that she had failed to produce significant scholarship: “in answer to her objection that she had written a sufficient number of scholarly articles, [the chair told her] that the trouble was quality and not quantity, and that she must write on essay that would convince the committee of the quality of her mind” (Lieberman v. V Gant). Lieberman took the decision to court as part of a class action lawsuit alleging gender discrimination on the part of the university, but although the court case dragged on through appeals for six years, it was repeatedly ruled in favor of the university. Her final academic publication was a chapter titled “The Most Important Thing for You to Know” to an MLA anthology Rocking the Boat: Academic Women and Academic Processes (1981).
compelling suggestion that it is possible to find gender-radical arguments in (especially non-canonical) fairy tales.\(^8\)

The debate was significant because of Liebermand and Lurie’s analysis of the fairy tale canon, but also because the literary methodology of their debate (for example, their focus on literary sources rather than a broad spectrum of tales documented from oral traditions) helped foster more direct connections between gender theory and literary scholarship than with work being done in folklore departments. And because fairy tales had been neglected by literary scholars for so long, there was a sense of freshness and discovery in their approach to the genre.

Although many writers drew on multiple techniques for responding to “patriarchal myth,” by and large, there were five major patterns of response made by gender-liberal theorists, artists, and scholars in the 1970s-early 1990s.

1. *Expose the patriarchal implications of the most popular myths.*

Scholars, and particularly poetry scholars of the 1970s, were consistently defining and reacting against “patriarchal” (“traditional,” “canonical,” “classic”) myth, often in overtly psychoanalytic terms and by addressing multiple patterns of myth rather than focusing on an individual tale. For example, in 1975 Rachel Blau Du Plessis would define “traditional myth” as deeply patriarchal and identify a movement that was also a “critique of consciousness and myth” in the work of major poets like Denise Levertov,

\(^8\) The fact that this debate was largely trans-Atlantic may also have helped distract from the significant role of pantomime in defining the fairy tale genre, and especially the romanticized context of “happily ever after” which would be more recognizable in America in context of Disney princesses than the Christmas panto. Early Disney films always foregrounded their literary sources (Snow White to the Grimms, and Cinderella to Perrault) and they were cross-marketed in book form even in the 1940s.
Adrianne Rich, and Muriel Rukeyser (“Critique” 280-300). In fact, in the same 1972 volume of *College English* where Lieberman had published her attack on twentieth-century literary fairy tales, the poet Adrianne Rich (b.1929) demanded a gender-liberal re-thinking of women’s most constrictive formative narratives, particularly “the myth-making tradition, the romantic tradition,” which is embedded “deep into the psyche of the woman writer” (19) where it functions most powerfully because it functions unconsciously and is not subject to rational inquiry.

Partly in response to this scholarly movement, a great many popular gender theorists turned toward the fairy tale. In the vein of Beauvoir, authors like Ursula Bloom (*Life is No Fairy Tale*, 1976), Madonna Kolbenschlag (*Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye*, 1979), Robert Fisher (*The Knight in Rusty Armor*, 1989), and Gilda Carle (*Don’t Bet on the Prince*, 1993) tend to draw on agglutinative concepts of patriarchal fairy-tale-ness rather than specific versions of specific texts. For example, the multi-million volume bestseller *The Cinderella Complex* (1982) also published by Colette Dowling (n.d.) offered the thesis that “personal, psychological dependency—the deep wish to be taken care of by others—is the chief force holding women down today […] Like Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to transform their lives” (16). She does not reject the Grimm’s “Cinderella” or even Disney’s “Cinderella” but the whole history of patriarchal “Cinderella” tales. In part, texts like Dowling’s achieved immense popularity because they can so powerfully define and reject patriarchal culture in sweeping terms, but the lack of nuance reinforced Beauvoir’s implicitly zero-sum

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9 In this context, “myth” refers to any mainstream gender narrative that has been so widely assimilated into mainstream culture that it is accepted without question. Cf. Chapter 1.1.1 “How do literary theorists define fairy tales?”
relationship between investment in gender-liberal principles and an investment in the “traditional” tale.

2. **Re-read canonical myths, looking for subversion**

However, the recognition that fairy tales can shape subconscious impulses led to the argument that, to achieve any kind of political revolution, the unconscious absorption of language and social narrative must be made conscious. This very postmodern argument identifies the act of meaning-making as, first and foremost, an act of reading consciously. In that 1972 article, Adrienne Rich expanded her argument about the dangers of myth by arguing, not that patriarchal myths should be rejected, but that they should be reinterpreted:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh. (“When” 18)

In effect, Rich makes the distinction between “patriarchal myth” and “revisionist myth” a matter of reading, approaching texts with a profound sensitivity to nuance of language and deep skepticism of myth-structures. As the article as a whole indicates, however, the act of re-reading is also an act of re-making; if a myth is concept that is accepted without question, then the act of reading it analytically is always an act of re-vision.

The call for attentiveness to language, to narrativity, and to the motives and interactions of different characters in context of a challenge to mainstream cultural values
also inspired complex re-evaluations of “goodness” and “villainy.” Famous texts like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), defined new paradigms of sympathy for traditionally unsympathetic characters like, for example, the wicked queen in “Snow White,” and offered new language in which to weigh the social vales that would generally situate the Queen as a villain:

[…] the Queen, as we come to see more clearly in the course of the story, is a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily, and self-absorbed as all artists traditionally are. On the other hand, in her absolute chastity, her frozen innocence, her sweet nullity, Snow White represents precisely the ideal of “contemplative purity” we have already discussed, an ideal that could quite literally kill the Queen. An angel in the house of myth, Snow White is not only a child but (as female angels always are) childlike, docile, submissive, the heroine of a life that *has no story*. But the Queen, adult and demonic plainly wants a life of “significant action,” by definition an “unfeminine” life of stories and story-telling. And therefore, to the extent that Snow White, as her daughter, is a part of herself, she wants to kill the Snow White *in herself*, the angel who would keep deeds and dramas out of her own house. (38-9)

From the tales circulated in the French court, fairy tale characters represented social roles, and could be used to postulate alternative social roles because, in the course of the tale, “kings” and “peasants” could transgress their expected social performance; however, by interpreting all of these social signifiers as descriptive of different impulses in the reader’s mind (the Queen represents a desire for “significant action” even if it is transgressive and the princess represents a conflicting desire to obey the rules) rather than descriptive of external social context (where the queen would represent a more literal authority figure), Gilbert and Gubar reorient social marginality and social centrality as, at least in part, a matter of one’s own perception and acceptance of one’s social role.

3. *Revise myths and change the endings/morals.*
Lurie and Lieberman’s debate launched the discussion, but it was not until the publication of Jack Zipes’ anthology *Don’t Bet on the Prince* (1987) that the discourse surrounding gender and fairy tales and the collaborative nature of the critical and artistic writing began to be mapped out as a coherent field of study, and one of the notable things about the anthology was its combination of original short stories and critical texts. From the beginning, a striking number of the scholars most invested in reclaiming fairy tales for a gender-liberal agenda were also poets, novelists, and short story writers who were actively producing new fairy tale narratives—or at least theorists whose use of language was highly experimental: Angela Carter, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Adrienne Rich, Denise Riley, Alicia Ostriker, Denise Levertov, Alison Lurie, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida. The trans-Atlantic fascination with fairy tales coincided with a surge in experimental writing that foregrounded its own constructedness and resisted easy, unconscious absorption; an apt artistic innovation for gender theorists who were concerned about insidiously widespread, unchallenged cultural “myths.” For DuPlessis, myth functions as a formal catalyst: the active process of re-telling myth “guides the central acts of perception in the poems. [….the new] myths have an unusual dimension, for criticism [of prior myth] becomes the heart of the myth” (281). In Zipes’ terms: “It is no longer possible to ignore the connection between the aesthetic components of the fairy tales, whether they be old or new, and their historical function within a socialization process which forms taste, mores, values, and habits “ (*Don’t* 2).

A tone of breathless, gleeful excitement pervaded much of the writing of the 1970s-80s, both scholarly and artistic. When asked by an interviewer why she chose to
write about fairy tales in her volume *Transformations* (1971), the American poet Anne Sexton (1928-1974) replied:

[…] I’m reading the Brothers Grimm, over and over and over obsessionally, so […] little sparks go and I think, “I wonder if this is something I might…Well I don’t know what I’m doing, but –if you could do *Snow White*, Anne, after Disney and all that, and make it something that’s yours, and Snow White’s, and the Queen’s and the cast, then you’ve got it licked.” (Heyen Interview 318)

That playful, transgressive tone – the tone that suggests that, after being polite for far too long, now one might run amok and sympathize with the wicked Queen—was both part of the aesthetic project and a demonstration of part the gendered argument: the best way to practice not being a passive princess is to think like a meddling witch.

But perhaps the most remarkable phenomenon that grew out of this writing were the increasingly large claims made on behalf of stories and the act of storytelling. For theorists like Cixous who challenged language at very foundational levels, reinventing the gendered social consciousness could not be possible without reclaiming the act of storytelling:

If it were to come out in a new day that the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to found (fund) phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself?

*Then all the stories would have to be told differently*, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies, another thinking as yet not thinkable, will transform the functioning of all society. Well, we are living through this very period when the conceptual foundation of a millennial culture is in process of being undermined by millions of a species of mole as yet not recognized [sic].

When they awaken from among the dead, from among the words, from among the laws… (“Sorties,” 93)

Cixous’ ellipsis trails off into the not-yet-sayable, not-yet-thinkable future in which narrative and language itself are wholly transformed. Unlike Snow White, these dead
must awaken themselves, and, by reclaiming stories, become the not-yet-recognized moles who undermine our conceptual foundations.

4. Revise mythmaking itself, and invent new narrative structures that can be more open-ended.

In pursuit of Cixous’ “not-yet-sayable,” artists who explored new narrative patterns, were working under the assumption that to alter one’s social frame of reference is to effect social change because it restructures the limits of human imagination. For that reason, it inspired and became particularly central to experiments in poetic form. In 1975 DuPlessis argued that the re-visioning, re-making, and transmutation of myth in poetry will literally, linguistically transform the imaginative structures of the language and therefore the culture – both by reconfiguring historicity and by allowing for the possibility of new, not-yet-thinkable social frames of reference (“Critique” 288).

By the early 1980s, some poet critics like Alicia Ostriker (b.1937) and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (b.1941) were using the link between formal experimentation in poetry and gender-liberal revisionist mythmaking to partly rehistoricis twentieth century poetic development by arguing that modernist poetic mythmaking was patriarchal and defined by canonical male poets, but that postmodern poetic mythmaking is liberatory, gender-radical and uniquely associated with a new wave of female writers:

In contrast to classic modernists—Yeats and Eliot are examples—who use myth as a framework by which a total culture can be organized, postmodern use of myth is distinguished by attention to inwardness, to the energies of process, to learning to inhabit a world, not creating one. (Du Plessis 299)

[…] the work of these poets is conspicuously different from the Modernist mythmaking of Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Auden because it contains no trace of nostalgia, no faith that the past is a repository of truth, goodness, or desirable social organization. […] Far from representing history as a decline, or bemoaning
disjunctions of past and present, [the revisionist woman’s] poems insist that past and present are, for better or worse, essentially the same (Ostriker 87)

Instead of trying to control culture by perpetuating a new myth in place of the old (“a framework by which a total culture can be organized”) or by idealizing an older myth to displace the present myth because the past is not “a repository of truth, goodness, or desirable social organization.” These women demand a new internal liberation that displaces the process of mythmaking, not myth.

Yet even in Ostriker’s article “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” she gestures at the difficulty of this project: “A major theme in feminist theory on both sides of the Atlantic for the past decade has been the demand that women writers be, in Claudine Herrmann’s phrase, *voleuses de langue*, thieves of language, female Prometheuses” (69). Her careful choice of the awkward formulation “female Prometheuses” implies that women are, metaphorically, breaking into a very narrow mythology that does not already contain any suitable female role models. To engage with myth essential for the poet as an individual because, the process of re-conceiving herself as the kind of authority who can remake history and redefine imagination with the stroke of a pen, requires her to have broken out of out of the system of suppressive “angel”/“monster” archetypes by situating herself as the wicked/wise witch. “[T]he poet simultaneously deconstructs a prior ‘myth’ or ‘story’ and constructs a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself” (212).

5. *Reclaim myths from beyond the largely patriarchal canon.*

It was Lurie’s claim that fairy tales could be gender-liberal that helped launch the discourse of gendered fairy tale scholarship, but the argument that fairy tales are not overwhelmingly “a male chauvinist form of literature” (“Liberation” 6), was relatively
slow bear fruit. Anthologies of older fairy tales with active, creative heroines did not widely appear until the 1990s, in part because they required a great deal of research to produce, and in part because the scholars who set out to recover these tales were fighting the spectre of the “traditional patriarchal fairy tale” against which so many popular writers had reacted in the 1970s-80s. But the 1990s, a whole spate of gender-liberal tales culled from little-known folkloric collections, including, Spells of Enchantment by Jack Zipes (1991), The Virago Book of Fairy Tales (1990), and The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales (1992) by Angela Carter (1940-1992), Allan Chinen’s Waking the World (1996), Clarissa Pinkola Estes’ The Dangerous Old Woman (1996), Marily Jurich’s Scheherazade’s Sisters (1998), and Kathleen Ragan’s Fearless Girls, Wise Women, and Beloved Sisters (1998). Yet even though the number of anthologies being produced should have been encouraging, Ragan’s preface indicates both the difficulty of collecting a substantial volume of empowering tales, even in the late 1990s:

My studies of folklore had indicated that in most oral traditions folk and fairy tales naturally contain heroines as well as heroes. However the tales we read in anthologies are not simply literal transcriptions of every tale in a culture’s oral tradition. First someone collects tales, selecting and transliterating the ones perceived as the best. Then an editor selects from among the collected tales, translates and possibly edits these tales to make an anthology. It seems that male editors have simply—and understandably—picked their favorite stories. As one man said to me, “Who wants to read ‘Cinderella’?

Instead of searching through several books, I began to search whole libraries for folktales with positive female protagonists. In reviewing over 30,000 stories, I unearthed inspiring stories from all over the world. […] (xxiii)

The rise of gender-liberal anthologies of tales from around the world coincided with the rise of gender-liberal considerations in folklore studies, and a radical reconsideration of the process by which fairy tales are recorded and anthologized.

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Because narrative form and experimentation (especially as carried out in poetry) were so theoretically crucial to the development of these arguments about gender and fairy tales, a more extensive consideration of how the poetry of the whole twentieth century led up to these theoretical breakthroughs should be useful for scholars of children’s literature, fairy tale, poetry, or theory.

5.2 Fairy Tales, Nostalgia, and “Childishness”

In late eighteenth-century poetry, dreams of fairies most often appeared to adult, male poets, but the Victorian period had inextricably associated fairies and fairy tales with both childhood and domesticity. This pattern of fairy tale poetry grew out of the blurring of several categories of writing into one bibliographic grouping under the heading, “children’s literature.” It has the verve of adventure stories, the wonder of fairy verse, fairy tale quests, the nationalism implicit in pantomime, and very often an atmosphere of bold curiosity that was particularly associated with stories written for Victorian boys. It is a sub-genre of fairy tale poetry that became associated with an idealized British childhood and an unparalleled child-like capacity for imagination and dreaming. As such, it was developed in deliberate counterpoint to mainstream modernist writing as poets like G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) and Alfred Noyes (1880-1958) adapted the eighteenth-century deployment of fairy poetry and imagination to resist cold,

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10 Chesterton, Noyes, and their critical admirers tend to use the umbrella term “fantasy” rather than “myth,” in part to distance themselves from the colonial association of myth with primitive belief systems, and to validate the association of this material with dreams. It would preface the kind of writing done by the Inklings.
mercantile reason to endorse spiritual truth in a modern, pragmatic, commercially-driven world.

The fairy tales poems (and, more rarely, fairy tale prose) in this tradition very often encourage the reader to try to see the marvelous in the mundane, as in “The Way to Fairyland” (1910) by the children’s author and poet Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953):

If you get in far enough trees and rocks change into men, rivers talk, and voices of people whom you cannot see tell you all sorts of things in loud and clear tones close to your ear. But if you only get a little way inside then you know that you were there by a sort of wonderment. The things ought to be like the things you see every day, but they are a little different, notably the trees. (On Something 93)

Seeing the everyday through new eyes, the things that “ought to be like the things you see every day” is a theme constantly repeated. The quintessential image was captured by Rose Fyleman (1877-1957) in Fairies and Chimneys (1918):

There are fairies at the bottom of our garden
   It’s not so very, very far away;
You pass the gardener’s shed and you just keep straight ahead—
   I do so hope they’ve really come to stay. […]
There are fairies at the bottom of our garden!
   They often have a dance on summer nights;
The butterflies and bees make a lovely little breeze,
   And the rabbits stand about and hold the lights. (13)

This fairyland that these poems create is very often delicate and delightful, populated by figures who have the dainty appeal of seventeenth-century Shakespearian fairies, the domestic immediacy of eighteenth-century fairies which so often appeared in dreams at the poet’s home, and the whitewashed moral impeccability of the Victorian pantomime fairies who dance in the ballet. It is hybrid amalgam of previous iterations of fairy poetry and fairy verse that endorses child-like imagination in the fullest.
Yet this pattern of fairy tale poetry is less straightforward than it seems. It was ostensibly published for juvenile audiences and celebrates the child’s point of view, but it is also very often a nostalgic genre that represents a simplified adult dream of what childhood should be rather than a more realistic, frighteningly complex representation of an actual child’s point of view. It also frequently situates itself as culturally and literally marginal in its unapologetically naïve endorsement of domesticity, childhood, and imagination, but it was a kind of marginality that fit very comfortably within lingering Victorian patriarchal structures. For Noyes and Chesterton, central modernity is a harsh place of spiritual vacuity and pessimism, and marginality is a space of loving comfort and spiritual optimism; however, by looking nostalgically to fairyland for salvation without interrogating the terms of that fairyland, they also fail to question the nature or the cost of “enchantment.” In this world, all mothers are kind and gentle, children’s perception is transcendent, and fathers (on the rare occasions when they make an appearance) are wise and protective. In large part, this pattern of nostalgic fairy tale poetry is the kind of material that gender-liberal theorists like Beauvoir would specifically react against when they cite the dangers of patriarchal myths. In aspiring to the best of idealized domesticity, these fairy-narratives fail to account for women’s aspirations or the possibility that domesticity might not offer perfect refuge to everyone.

5.2.1 G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936)

Chesterton was born into an upper-middle class family and was educated privately at Colet Court and St. Paul’s School before moving on to a drawing school in St. John’s Wood and the Slade School of Art. He married Frances Alice Blogg in 1901, but they never had any children of their own. Although he was prolific in almost every
literary media, G.K Chesterton made his reputation as a polemical essayist, and his politics spilled over into all of his literary publications: “Whatever the form, the point of view is recognizable as Chesterton’s, and this is usually characterized as ‘conservative’ or ‘reactionary,’ stances associated with his Roman Catholicism and his patriotism.”11 His fervent endorsement of fairy tales may seem out of character for an author who primarily wrote in adult media, but it was certainly the arena in which he was most universally accepted. As the Times Literary Supplement (1922) concedes:

[…] if Mr. Chesterton cannot always win us in controversy, when he indulges his talent for fantasy, he is irresistible. We have all had the experience of hearing a familiar word become strange to us by repetition, of seeing a familiar object become grotesque, even elfish, while we gaze at it. Ten thousand times we look at our teapot; and then, looking once more, for the first time we see it—see it as a monstrous and unsignifying shape in matter. This ordinary faculty of seeing things, as with the eyes of a new-born child, denuded of their rational and sentimental associations, is one that Mr. Chesterton possesses in an extraordinary degree; and to it we owe some of his happiest whimsies. (“Modern” 779)

Yet in spite of the apparently innocuous wonder associated with all fairy tale poetry, fairy tale poetics suited Chesterton’s political agenda very well. In the early twentieth century, they were a marginal genre with connotations of Victorian domesticity that allowed Chesterton to textually and metatextually negotiate marginality (which Chesterton associated with his own conservative, essentially Victorian values) and centrality (which Chesterton associated with new, liberal modernist values).

Chesterton uses the binary good/evil dynamic of fairy tales to represent fairy tale values (good) in contrast with modernity (evil), and rewrites a traditional fairy tale quest in highly metatextual terms, since in poems like “Modern Elfland” (1900), the questor is

11 Reference Guide to English Literature 377. Henceforth, REGL.
a modern hero in search of the kind of spiritual truth which Chesterton associates with
donically-faithed fairy tales:

I cut a staff in a churchyard copse,
   I clad myself in ragged things,
I set a feather in my cap
   That fell out of an angel’s wings.

I filled my wallet with white stones,
I took three foxgloves in my hand,
I slung my shoes across my back,
   And so I went to fairyland. 12

The poem rejects commercialism and capitalism by clothing the hero in “ragged things”
made wondrous by magical accessories like a holy staff and angel feathers. 13 It similarly
draws on traditional fairy tale numbers and items to piece together a traveling-kit that is
wholly in accordance with fairy tale logic (where foxgloves have magic properties and
white stones always find a use) but completely irrational by modern, mundane social
rules. The quest that this poem describes is all about the ratification of true belief, and, at
some level, the quest is complete as it is begun, because the quest is its own end. It is an
act of belief in a world of unbelief.

Yet because Chesterton’s champion sets out in pursuit of faith and fairyland, the
paradox implied by the title “Modern Elfland” (“Elfland” is always a timeless place) is
actually very apt because the quest is a flight from modernist values that would not be

12 Wild 34. The alternating indentation of the lines was characteristic of nineteenth-century fairy
poetry, especially Tennyson’s, and it signified the double-vision of mundane and otherworldly poetic
perception. Cf. Tennyson’s “The Horns of Elfland.”

13 Chesterton’s language is slightly unusual in that he conflates religious and fairy tale symbology
but avoids the term “myth” under which these two concepts were more regularly grouped. In doing so, he
was probably, as a Roman Catholic, trying to avoid the derisive colonial association of mythic belief with
primitive, superstitious peoples. (In the first decades of the twentieth century, Catholicism was a huge
colonial concern in Britain, particularly in context of the ongoing Irish rebellions.)
necessary if the hero did not live in a modern context of unbelief. In folkloric terms,

Regina Bendix (n.d.) argues persuasively that, at the turn of the twentieth century:

The quest for authenticity is a peculiar longing, at once modern and antimodern. It is oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiments created in modernity. [...] The continued craving for experiences of unmediated genuineness seeks to cut through what Rousseau called “the wound of reflection,” a reaction to modernization’s demythologization, detraditionalization, and disenchantment. (8)

For Chesterton, this reaction was a forceful, conscious quest to re-mythologize, re-traditionalize, and re-enchant. In Chesterton’s poetic terms, Fairyland is represented in as the living heart that is hidden within the dead mechanisms of modernity:

But Lo, within that ancient place
Science had reared her iron crown,
And the great cloud of steam went up
That telleth where she takes a town.
[...]
‘In vain,’ I cried, ‘though you too touch
The new time’s desecrating hand,
Through all the noises of a town
I hear the heart of fairyland.’ (335-6)

The argument of Chesterton’s poem was an inversion of the *Journal of Education’s* claim that the wonder of fairy tales and the wonder of science were related.14 However, it is very much in keeping with the eighteenth-century fairy poetry by writers like Thomas Warton and William Blake which polarized science and fairy imagination.15 Chesterton draws on this tradition to invest fairyland with a purity that precedes and transcends the

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14 Cf. Chapter 3.2 “Nineteenth-Century Educational Theory: Fairy Tales and National Morality”

corruption of iron and steam and Science. To achieve Fairyland, the poet must be persistent and must live in a very heightened state of sensory perception that mimic’s the super-sensitivity of childhood and children’s capacity for wonder—he sees through clouds of steam, and hears through distracting noise. The success of the hero is also echoed formally, as the narrator gains confidence from his unique perception: the tone of the first-person narrative is increasingly strong and aggressive.

As such, Chesterton’s fairy tale quests are significantly gendered in terms of their archetypal characterization; although the call to fairy belief in a modern world would seem to be gender-transcendent, the heroes of Chestertonian adventures are always male:

For this is the best of a rest for men
That men should rise and ride
Making a flying fairyland
Of market and country-side,
Wings on the cottage, wings on the wood,
Wings upon pot and pan,
For the hunting of the Dragon
That is the life of a man. (“Hunting of the Dragon” 222)

Male heroism is characterized by action (the call to “rise and ride”), transformative imagination (seeing the mundane world as a “flying fairyland), and violent aggression (“hunting of the Dragon”). If a female character appears on this quest, she tends to be symbolic of the quest’s reward: “Beauty on beauty called us back/When we could rise and ride,/And a woman looked out of every window/As wonderful as a bride” (222), and even on the occasions when Chesterton writes about “the child” or “the baby” gender-neutrally, it is clear that he really means “the boy”: “The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon. […] it accustoms him for a series of clear pictures to the idea
that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies, that
these strong enemies of man have enemies in the knights of God” (*Tremendous* 130).
Here Chesterton is making the point that Simone de Beauvoir would refute so forcefully
in 1949: men aspire to rescue and join the brotherhood of heroes; women have no place
there, and only function to validate heroism through by rewarding the hero for his
heroism.16

Chesterton’s fairy tale quests are also significantly gendered as children’s
narratives, because the imaginary reward of fairy tales for the boy-hero is not the bride so
much as the mother, who rewards her son with domestic comforts. For example, in his
critique of the modernist aesthetics of George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Chesterton
falls back on the kind of Victorian idealizations of women that gender-liberal writers like
Simone de Beauvoir would come to powerfully protest:

[...] on all this side of historic and domestic traditions [George] Bernard Shaw is
weak and deficient. He does not approach them as fairy tales, as if he were four,
but as “folk-lore” as if he were forty. And he makes a big mistake about them
which he would never have made if he had kept his birthday and hung up his
stocking, and generally kept alive inside him the firelight of home. [...] Here is a
whole fairy literature which is almost exclusively devoted to the unexpected
victory of the weak over the strong; and Bernard Shaw manages to make it mean
the inevitable victory of the strong over the weak—which among other things,
would not make a story at all. It comes of that mistake about not keeping his
birthday. A man should be always tied to his mother’s apron strings; he should
always have a hold on his childhood, and be ready at intervals to start anew from
a childish standpoint. Theologically the thing is best expressed by saying, “You
must be born again.” Secularly it is best expressed by saying, “You must keep
your birthday.” Even if you will not be born again, at least remind yourself
occasionally that you were born once. (George 154-5, 158)

16 Cf. Chapter 5.1 “Theorizing Gender, Fairy Tales, and Poetry”
Chestertonian heroes embark on quests to find inner truth, guarded by the safety net of the feminine domestic space, which is the origin and endpoint of all journeys undertaken by the male hero. Chesterton calls for, not just child-like vision, but a child-like faith that is akin to blind dependence: “A man should always be tied to his mother’s apron strings.” Although women might, in theory, be empowered by tales where the weak overcome the strong, Chesterton distances women from participating in any overt acts of heroism by implying that women’s contribution to heroism is limited to guarding “the firelight of home” and comforting boy-heroes.

5.2.2 Alfred Noyes (1880-1958)

Noyes was born into an academic family; his father taught Classical literature in Aberystwyth, Wales, where Noyes lived from the age of four until he left to attend college at Oxford. He married an American woman, Garnett Daniels in 1907 and traveled extensively in the U.S. between 1913 and his death in 1958. After the death of his first wife in 1927, he married Mary Angela Weld-Blundell, with whom he had three children. Much of his fairy tale poetry and his anthology of fairy poetry were written before his first marriage, but he continued to produce children’s poetry, including the comic-autobiographical *Daddy Fell into the Pond and Other Poems for Children* (1952) until the end of his life. Described by *The Saturday Review* (1922) as “the last of the

\[17\] Hugh (1929), Veronica (n.d.), and Margaret (n.d.). The *RGEL* also notes that Mary Angela also had a daughter by her first marriage, but the child’s name is not readily available. For many of the early twentieth-century male poets, the sexes of their children are listed in standard autobiographies, and occasionally dates for the boys, but it is far more difficult to track down birth/death dates for the girls, particularly for writers like Alfred Noyes who are peripheral enough to the literary canon that there are no full-length scholarly biographies written about him. The children of male poets are rarely considered significant to the development of the poets’ work, though the children of female poets are nearly always foregrounded in critical readings.
Edwardians” (“Last” 42), Alfred Noyes has since primarily made his reputation as a determinedly anti-Modernist poet whose great hero was Tennyson,” most remarkable for his “numerous poetic journeys to the Land of Faerie,” and whose enduring popularity as a children’s poet has outlasted the reputation of his religious poetry or war poetry (SJGFW). Noyes was particularly conscious of the historical trajectory of British fairy poetry and, early in his career, edited *The Magic Casement: An Anthology of Fairy Poetry* (1909).

Like Chesterton and like the eighteenth-century fairy poets, Noyes associates fairies and fairy tales with a heightened sense of perception that sees beyond the mundane world to glorious fairyland: “Brave birds that climb those blue/Dawn-tinted towers,/With notes like showers of dew/ From elf-tossed flowers” (“Earth and her Birds” *ABP* 5) and with a romanticized, imaginative, dream-space both lovely and delicate: “Mirrored colours, mystic gleams,/Fairy dreams” (“Butterflies” 63), “the fairy gleam/that flutters thro’ the unfettered dream” (“Forest of Wild Thyme” 124). As such, Noyes’ poetry is an adult, nostalgic genre in which every child is a perfect dreamer and has both leisure and inclination to stop and ponder the fairies, but because his storytellers are usually adults with a confident understanding of the world and all things in it, Noyes tends to use “fairy” as an adjective representing heightened perception (“rare it is and fair it is/O, like a fairy rose it is,” “Song of England” 55) rather than child-like belief. In spite of the fact that Noyes’ fairy tale poetry is generally read as children’s poetry, it draws primarily on adult patterns of fairy poetry and more often comments on childhood from an adult point of view than it comments on life from a child’s point of view.
However, Noyes’ fairy and fairy tale poetry is, like Chesterton’s, generally construed as children’s literature because of his apparently wholehearted enthusiasm for the comfort of an idealized Victorian domesticity. For Noyes, every fairy tale adventure, however harrowing, ends safely at home, in the space where fairy tales are read:

> While the firelight, red and clear,  
> Fluttered in the black wet pane,  
> It was very good to hear  
> Howling winds and trotting rain.  
> For we found at last we knew  
> More than all our fancy planned,  
> All the fairy tales were true,  
> And home the heart of fairyland. (“Flower of Old Japan” 46)

In fact, the security of home is what makes imagined fairy tale danger and adventure pleasurable; the “howling winds and trotting rain” serve to reinforce the comfort of the “firelight, red and clear.”¹⁸ Yet, unlike Chesterton’s unambivalent writing, this poem works in two ways: in one sense, the establishment of a peaceful home with a loving family is the goal of every fairy tale quest; in another sense, the poem suggests that if fairyland is imaginary and home is its heart, then this kind of perfected domesticity may also be the stuff of “fancy” and “fairy tale.”¹⁹

In spite of brief moments of ambivalence about domesticity, however, Noyes generally supported the most standardized Victorian gender roles. His poems about

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¹⁸ The sacrosanct quality of domesticity is emphasized as, throughout Noyes’ oeuvre, and any potentially tragic elements are cast in a strongly romanticized light. For example, in “The Progress of Love,” Noyes declares that love “hath no beginning hath no end” (96) and that even if lovers are parted by a trivial thing like death, they will be faithfully reunited in immortal stories: “Oh, Once upon a time, and o’er and o’er/As aye the Happy ever after came/The enchanted waves lavished their faery lore” (103).

¹⁹ The ambivalent approach to idealized home spaces would be crucial for the poets of WWI. Cf. Chapter 6.2 “War and Fairy Tales.” Noyes himself was a pacifist and lectured against the Boer war, but supported both World Wars, and served in the Foreign Office as a propaganda writer when his poor eyesight barred him from active service on the front. Cf.
seeing fairies are often gender-inclusive for girls, however, much of his fairy poetry contains elements that are mixed-in with traditional adventure stories with traditionally male protagonists that were most frequently marketed to young male audiences. For example, “A Song of Sherwood” (1911) is a fairy-adventure hybrid poem about the revival of the spirit of “Oaken-hearted England.” Although both Robin and Marian are mentioned, the revival of the spirit of fairy tale and adventure is coded as masculine; the only female character is there in a largely passive, decorative capacity:

Robin Hood is here again: all his merry thieves,
Hear a ghostly bugle-note shivering through the leaves,
Calling as he used to call, faint and far away,
In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

All the gnarled old thorn-trees are blossom-white for June.
All the elves that Marian knew where here beneath the moon—
Younger than the wild thyme, older than the trees,
Lob and Mab and Bramblescratch, on their unbridled bees. […] (9)

Although Marian is given the passive privilege of knowing fairies, Robin and his merry men are the focal actors in the long narrative poem. The men wake, ride, blow bugles, crash through the underbrush, and gather to Robin’s call (10-11) while “Marian is waiting [for Robin] with her laughter-loving eyes” (10). She assumes that Robin will claim her, and does not move to answer to the general summons. Even the nation personified as

20 For Chesterton, fairy tales are only one facet of hero-quest, and the fairy tales that he does tell in his poetry also tend to be muddled in with accounts of Robin Hood and St. George (Cf. “Hunting the Dragon,” “Ballad of the White Horse”). This phenomenon also has some precedent in pantomime, which occasionally encompasses plots taken from Robinson Crusoe, Robin Hood, and Dick Whittington. (Though Robinson Crusoe has become much less popular in a postcolonial era as the racist aspects of it have been recognized as culturally offensive.)

21 In the same year, Noyes produced his only full-length play Sherwood, whose cast includes Oberon, Tatiana, Puck, and a cluster of anonymous fairies.
forest (“Oaken-hearted England”) calls out for male leadership: “Oberon, Oberon, the hazel copses ring” (10), “Robin! Robin! Robin! […] shivers through the leaves” (10).

Taken as a whole, this pattern of fairy tale poetry was literarily marginal because of its associations with child audiences and rejection of modernist aesthetics; it was also culturally marginal in terms of its general mistrust of scientific rationality and modern progress. However, it was very culturally central in its gender values and idealization of middle-class domesticity; the literary source materials (fairy verse, adventure stories, etc.) for this kind of fairy tale poetry would also have been very widely culturally familiar and central to a popular conception of British culture, if not to the literary canon.

This pattern of very masculine fairy tale poetry would strongly impact the work of the Inklings, including the epic hero-quests (and very nominal use of female characters) outlined by J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* (1937-1949) and the idea of escaping the modern, magic-less world in pursuit of a timeless, magical world in C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* (1949-1954). However, like the folkloric study of women by T.F. Thistleton-Dyer, the fairy tale poetry produced in the tradition of Noyes and Chesterton would be at least as influential in negation as in imitation for future generations of writers. The idea of idealized fairy tale adventures would very powerfully affect the work of the poets associated with the trenches of WWI, including Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, and Wilfred Owen, all of whom were haunted by the disjunct between the clean image of glorious fairy tale heroism and the immediate experience of violent and grotesque trench warfare.22 Poetry in the tradition of Chesterton and Noyes would also

22 Cf. Chapter 6.2 “War and Fairy Tales.”
act as foil for the gender-liberal poets of the 1960s-90s who were calling for “revisionist
mythmaking” to very forcefully reject morally-simplified, patriarchal patterns of fairy
tale narrativity.

5.3 Gender, Trauma, and Social Power in Poetry

Although Chesterton and Noyes wrote in a fairly gender-conventional pattern of
fairy tale poetry, the fact that fairy poetry and fairy tales had a very long history of far
more outrageous social radicalism was not entirely forgotten. Throughout the Victorian
period and into the early twentieth century, it was quite common for writers to use
“Faerie” or “fairies” as a symbol for an individual or group who could/would not fit into
their social mainstream: an eccentric person, especially a woman, might be called “fey;”
an extremely absent-minded person, or a person with a mental disability might be
characterized as “gone with the fairies;” a person who felt socially isolated might self-
identify as a “changeling;” and homosexual men regularly gathered in societies of
“fairies” across Europe and North America (Scott 216). Although many sophisticated and
morally complex fairy tales fell into relative critical obscurity when the newly established
Departments of English drew attention away from fairy literature, these texts continued to
influence generations of poets who would finely navigate the language of fairies and fairy
tales, recognizing that the genre could be associated with harmless, conservative,
domestic pap for children and (simultaneously) with the complex nuances of radical
social marginality in every possible form.

In spite of their vast formal and thematic differences, Charlotte Mew, Walter de la
Mare, and Anna Wickham all capitalize on the association of fairies with social
marginality to explore physical, intellectual, and emotional trauma of social alienation. Ironically, it was partly the critical dismissal of fairy tales as literary rubbish for women and children that made fairy tales the perfect venue through which to critique the coziness of domesticity under patriarchy and to belie the intellectual vapidity of those who were trapped by the Victorian idealization of the domestic sphere. As such, the poetry in this subsection largely functions in counterpoint to the work being produced by Chesterton and Noyes, recognizing that an idealized standard of domesticity put enormous pressure on women and children to live up to an impossible standard. This pattern of fairy tale poetry plays off of that idealized context to represent domesticity in a much harsher light—where marginality is not a whimsical alternative to overly-serious rationality but a serious social concern for women and children whose marginal social status has potentially very painful and dangerous consequents—the women and children in the following narratives are not only individually unhappy and socially dislocated; they carry the guilt of embodying the failure of harmonious domesticity which is supposed to be shelter from all the world’s ills. This pattern of fairy tale poetry explores both the radical failure of domestic bliss and radical alternatives to traditional patterns of domesticity.

5.3.1 Charlotte Mew (1869-1928):

Charlotte Mew was tiny, self-effacing, brilliant woman who was well-known for her tragic life history: “seven children, little money, and much grief. Three sons died in childhood. […] Her only brother became schizophrenic, soon followed by a much-loved younger sister. Her father died, leaving no money. Her mother, with a tiny inheritance, kept her and her sister alive, in a drifting lifeboat of gentility” (Boland 113). Mew’s poverty and social marginality were compounded by a lifelong fear of insanity, which
caused her to constantly doubt her own physical and psychic health. Although Mew was extremely reclusive, her thematically marginal poetry was highly praised by such central literary lights as Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, Siegfried Sassoon, Virginia Woolf, and Thomas Hardy—but even her literary associations were not an unqualified success. In 1914, one of her only close friendships, with novelist May Sinclair, was shattered by accusations that Mew had made sexual advances on Sinclair; mortified by the rumors, Mew withdrew more than ever. After the death of her remaining sister Ann in 1928, Mew voluntarily checked into a nursing home, where she committed suicide by drinking Lysol. In response, the poet, Anna Wickham wrote in her diary that: “I feel that women of my kind are a profound mistake. There have been few women poets of distinction, and, if we count only the suicides of Sappho, Lawrence Hope and Charlotte Mew, their despair rate has been very high” (*Writings* 53).

For a poet like Mew who lived in a much more vulnerable social position than Noyes or Chesterton, the discussion of marginality and its implications was much more urgent and much less romanticized. For example, in her most famous poem “The Farmer’s Bride” (1916), Mew narrates a fairy story from a farmer’s point of view. Yet as he describes his young wife in “fairy” terms, Mew undermines the cozy connotations of the domestic space by making it clear that the wife retreats into “fey” behavior as a disturbed reaction to her too-hasty marriage:

```plaintext
Three Summers since I chose a maid,
Too young maybe – but more’s to do
At harvest-time than bide and woo.
    When us was wed she turned afraid
Of love and me and all things human;
Like the shut of a winter’s day.
Her smile went out, and ‘twasn’t a woman—
```
More like a little frightened fay.
One night, in the Fall, she runned away. (1)

Presumably, it was after the sexual trauma of her wedding night that “she turned afraid,” and, crucially, the bride’s fear is what determines her status as “fey.” To be a “woman” would be to smilingly accept her husband’s “choosing,” his amorous attention, and therefore, according to him, “all things human.” Her refusal of his body and his authority confirms, at least in his mind, her absolute exclusion from human society. Mew’s fairy story is a nullification of any “happily ever after.”

In repudiating the myth of bucolic marital bliss in fairy terms, Mew offers a very linguistically sophisticated critique of patriarchal domesticity. In part the critique is successful because, as folklorist Regina Bendix has argued: “Folklore has long served as a vehicle in the search for the authentic, satisfying a longing for an escape from modernity” (7); but for Mew, the wife’s designation of “fay” is so dependent on the interpretation of those with the power of articulation (in this case the farmer) that it calls the process of authentication into question. Grammatically, the narrator shifts from the strong first-person “I chose” to the mutual, active construction “us was wed.” But after the farmer’s voice is established, and the relationship sours, the action shifts to the wife. It is not the case that “I frightened her” but rather that “she turned afraid.” After that, the narrative dissolves into the passive voice “her smile went out, and ‘twasn’t a woman.” The husband linguistically dissociates himself from her misery, ascribing it to an unknown agent. Throughout, her actions are described but never her thoughts, and the increasingly distant narrative structures suggest that the farmer has no language in which to access or sympathize with her point of view.
Indeed, the bride’s physical body is much more obviously the focus of the farmer’s consideration, but her physiological deficiency is coded (by her husband) as a failure of her humanity because her body is not ready for, or responsive to, his needs. Over the following stanzas, the body of the “fay” bride is reduced to a series of plant and animal metaphors that repetitively identify her as beyond the pale of humanity:

She does the work about the house
   As well as most, but like a mouse:
       Happy enough to chat and play
       With birds and rabbits and such as they,
       So long as men-folk stay away.
   “Not near, not near!” her eyes beseech
When one of us comes within reach.
   The women say that beasts in stall
       Look round like children at her call.
I’ve hardly heard her speak at all.

Shy as a leveret, swift as he,
Straight and slight as a young larch tree,
Sweet as the first wild violets, she,
To her wild self. But what to me? (2)

She is “like a mouse,” “shy as a leveret,” “slight as a young larch tree,” and “sweet as the first wild violet.” Although these seem like harmless metaphors, mice and rabbits damage crops, larch trees are not cultivated in orchards, and the violets are wild.23 Mew’s network of symbols relating to vulnerability (children, women, animals) and wildness (feyness, madness, non-human languages) become inversely linked to their exclusion from the human community. The bride’s wildness flourishes when she refuses to

23 Mew uses violets and trampled violets as a metaphor for fragile or dead women in several poems and may be alluding to Christina Rossetti’s 1893 volume of nursery rhymes, in which flowers often symbolize the transience of life, “Why did baby die?/Making Father sigh,/Mother cry?/Flowers, that bloom to die, Make no reply/Of “why?”/But bow and die.” (232), though for Rossetti fragile violets underfoot “Make the turf so sweet” (232).
communicate with her husband or the villagers, and her fragile happiness persists only
“So long as men-folk keep away.” In literary terms, the bride is the changeling in the
house, not the angel. Mew’s wages war on the fairy story of patriarchal domesticity by
demonstrating its consequences for individual women who live in a community that
embraces static, archetypal definitions of women and women’s roles.

In her wider oeuvre, Mew draws on many different fairy tales, and many different
kinds of “fairy” referents, but none of Mew’s stories conclude with easy “happily ever
afters.” Characteristically, the final stanza of “The Farmer’s Bride” returns our attention
to the fragile body of the wife and the husband’s sexual desire—the same factors that
cause the bride’s trauma in the first stanza:

She sleeps up in the attic there
   Alone, poor maid. ‘Tis but a stair
   Betwixt us. Oh! my God! the down,
   The soft young down of her, the brown,
   The brown of her—her eyes, her hair, her hair! (2)

By calling attention to legally and socially marginalized women who had few marital
rights in 1916, Mew invites the reader to recognize how social differences are being
enforced through language. These poems are both an acknowledgement of trauma and a
resistance to the circumstances that make it mundane.

5.3.2 Walter de la Mare (1873-1856)

Although he was by no means rich, Walter de la Mare was far more socially and
financially secure than Charlotte Mew could hope to be, in part because Civil List
pensions were more likely to be awarded to men than to women. Educated at St. Paul’s
Cathedral Choristers’ School in London, de la Mare worked as a clerk for Standard Oil
from 1890 to 1908, when he was awarded a Civil List pension that enabled him to support his family while writing full-time. De la Mare had married Constance Elfrida Igpen in 1899, and together they had four children. De la Mare was associated with the Georgian Poets, but of all the poets in this subsection, de la Mare was the only one to have a reputation as primarily a children’s poet and a fairy poet, but of him, the famed folklorist and fairy expert Katherine Briggs (1898-1980) would write: “It is impossible not to think of Walter de la Mare when one talks of fairies. The air of Fairyland blows through his poems” (*Fairies* 217).

During his prolific lifetime, de la Mare produced more than fifty verse collections, thirty volumes of short stories, and a number of critical essays that were all very popular with general audiences, yet de la Mare’s literary heritage remains something of a puzzle. In retrospect, much critical weight has been given to F.R. Leavis’ dismissal of de la Mare in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) as “the belated last poet of the Romantic tradition,” and he has since been read as marginal to the poetry of modernity. However, de la Mare’s substantial literary and critical following was made evident on his 75th birthday, when Faber and Faber published *A Tribute to Walter de la Mare* (1948)

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24 Florence 1899; Richard, 1901; Jinnie, 1903; and Colin 1906. At several points, de la Mare said that he preferred to write from a boy’s point of view because he had little experience with a girl’s point of view, even though two of his children were female. Cf. De la Mare’s “Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination” (1907).

25 Specifically those published in the five anthologies of *Georgian Poetry* by Harold Monro, including: Robert Graves, John Maesfield, William Davies, and D.H. Lawrence. Charlotte Mew was a protégée of Alida Monro, Harold’s assistant and, later, wife; and de la Mare and Mew were published together in Monro’s expanded anthology *Twentieth Century Poetry* (1933) with Wickham, Chesterton, Noyes, and Sitwell (as well as Robert Graves, T.S. Eliot, Rudyard Kipling, A.A. Milne, Ezra Pound, Siegfried Sassoon, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and W.B. Yeats).

featuring over forty contributions in prose (including pieces by Edward Marsh, Graham Greene, J. Dover Wilson, Edith Olivier, David Garnett, J.B. Priestley), poetry (T.S. Eliot, John Masefield, Lord Dunsany, C. Day Lewis, Siegfried Sassoon), and visual art (Max Beerbohm and William Rothenstein). Which is to say that de la Mare had the singular honor of being revered by literary figures with totally incompatible aesthetics who claimed to love him for remarkably similar reasons:

G.K. Chesterton: The nearest I could ever come to judging imaginative work would be simply to say this; that if I were a child, and somebody said to me no more than the two words Peacock Pie, I should pass through a certain transforming experience. […] A sacramental instinct within me would give me the sense that there was somewhere and somehow a substance, gorgeously coloured and good to eat. Which is indeed the case. (Autobiography 274)

T.S. Eliot:
[...] When the familiar is suddenly strange
Or the well known is what we have yet to learn,
And two worlds meet, and intersect, and change;
[…]
By whom, and by what means, was this designed?
The whispered incantation which allows
Free passage to the phantoms of the mind?

By you; by those deceptive cadences
Wherewith the common measure is refined;
By conscious art practised with natural ease;

By the delicate, invisible web you wove—
The inexplicable mystery of sound. — “To Walter de la Mare” (1948)

Over and over, de la Mare is praised for a visionary, child-like imagination that transcends dull, adult sensory perception. Echoing the most common assessment of de la Mare’s work in The Reference Guide to English Literature (1991), Margaret Willy describes his aesthetic in rapturous terms: “Through his perception of the miracle shining out from the accepted commonplace, tiny and transient things may mirror, and often
illuminate, the nature of the tremendous and timeless” (456). But, like Felicia Heman’s poetry of a generation before, de la Mare’s “deceptive cadences” trod a very fine line—in this case, between a celebration of childish wonder (for which he would be associated with fairy tale poetry in the tradition of Chesterton and Noyes) and a profound sense that a child’s fresh, wondering point of view is also characterized by a painful dislocation from synchronicity with a confusing, alienating adult world.

In Chesterton’s work, an adult point of view and “the child’s” point of view (as represented by adult narrators) were in harmony because they were conflated; de la Mare’s formal and narrative techniques denaturalize that nostalgic, idealizing adult lens. Stylistically, de la Mare’s poetry is characterized by simplicity in rhyme, rhythm, and vocabulary, which complements his regular use of children’s narrative voices. Yet although critics like Leavis rejected de la Mare’s work for failure to engage in complex allusion or formal experimentation, Leavis himself failed to fully appreciate the complexity of de la Mare’s allusive, formally experimental engagement with fairy tale narratives. In spite of his often comic work, for de la Mare, childhood and childish narratives are profoundly serious. In his lecture “Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination” (1907), de la Mare maintains that although “we speak indulgently of childish make-believe, childish fancy” (“Rupert” 9), childish perception is never simplistic. The child never quite understands adult reality because children “are not bound in by their groping senses […] between their dream and their reality looms no impassable abyss” (7-8); yet because of that, “there is no solitude more secluded than a child’s” (8):

27 This entry was originally published in Great Writers of the English Language (1978).
What are the salient characteristics of childhood? Children, it will be agreed, live in a world peculiarly their own [...] Children are in a sense butterflies, though they toil with an almost inconceivable assiduity after life’s scanty pollen and nectar, and though, by a curious inversion of the process of nature, they may become the half-comatose and purblind crysalides which too many of us poor mature creatures so ruefully resemble. (“Rupert” 7)

For de la Mare, childish perception is more marvelous than adult perception because it is less controlled, less concrete, and less comprehensible; but their ability to transcend mundane perception also places them in a marginal relationship to that mundane perception. Like Mew, de la Mare suggests that imaginative enlightenment and access to fairy perception comes at a cost: it is always inversely related to comprehension of, and participation in, the adult, mundane, social world. And social marginality has very painful real-world consequences; children’s choices and ability to manipulate their circumstances are severely limited by their lack of adult social knowledge.

Because de la Mare completely dislocates child-experience from adult reality, even when he engages with strongly canonical fairy tales, de la Mare tends to radically abstract them from the familiar narratives that give them explanatory value in the adult world. This move might be considered patriarchal because it both represents childhood gender-homogenously and glosses over the impact of patriarchal fairy tale structures on children’s social formation (if fairy perception bears no reality to adult reality, then fairy tales lose their socially didactic function). But on the other hand, de la Mare seems to be engaging in the same project as the gender-radical poets of the 1970s-80s; he restructures fairy tale narrativity away from patriarchal norms. For example, in most contexts “Sleeping Beauty” is a marriage narrative, but for de la Mare (1922), it is a static image of otherworldliness:
The scent of bramble fills the air,  
   Amid her folded sheets she lies,  
The gold of evening in her hair,  
   The blue of morn shut in her eyes

How many a changing moon hath lit  
   The unchanging roses of her face!  
Her mirror ever broods on it  
   In silver stillness of the days.

Oft flits the moth on filmy wings  
   Into his solitary lair;  
Shrill evensong the cricket sings  
   From some still shadow in her hair.

In heat, in snow, in wind, in flood,  
   She sleeps in lovely loneliness,  
Half-folded like an April bud  
   On winter-haunted trees. (Down 90)

The poem has none of the urgency or obvious trauma of the gender-radical fairy tales
being produced by Charlotte Mew or Anna Wickham. But, in spite of the beautiful
imagery, the vocabulary through which de la Mare represents Sleeping Beauty’s
experience is frightening: “shut in,” “brooding,” “unchanging,” “stillness,” “solitary,”
“shrill,” “still shadow,” loneliness,” “winter-haunted.” Moreover, because de la Mare
cuts off the fairy tale rescue, the princess becomes an unambiguously tragic figure, not
one whose desirability is validated by her victimization.28

De la Mare’s façade of unthreatening simplicity actually strengthens rather than
diminishes the dark undertones of the work. As Margaret Bremser has argued, de la Mare

28 The poem was, in part, prefaced by the Sleeping Beauty passage in de la Mare’s early novel
Henry Brocken (1903), where the protagonist stumbles upon the enchanted castle and is met by the
princess’ sinister brother Prince Ennui and his hounds Safte and Sallow, the only members of the castle
unaffected by the spell.
[...] suggests that the child is more honest about accepting [horror’s] presence in our lives. There are poems about unexplained disappearances, untimely deaths, and disturbingly peculiar or eccentric characters; fairies, who can be magical and gossamer in one verse, are “shrill” and “mocking” in the next; nature, the child’s own home, turns gray, eerie, and forbidding. (67)

In de la Mare’s terms, childhood is always broken down to symbolic terms, where abstract, psychic constructions feel more real than the material world, and nothing is more frightening than Fear:

I know where lurk
The eyes of Fear;
I, I alone,
Where, shadowy-clear,
Watching for me,
Lurks Fear. (Poems 117)

Yet de la Mare’s representation of childhood, childish narratives, and childish points of view are always also a metaphor for an adult sense of dislocation with the world. De la Mare represents childhood is a symbolic state through which an adult might recapture the most profound sense of social dislocation and through which an adult might marvels at the baffling incomprehensibility of social norms. De la Mare’s “childish” poems about fairies, magic, and monsters are the opposite of nostalgic, but retain an air of wistfulness, and they nearly always end in stillness, and loneliness, and lamentation, and vanishing.

5.3.3 Anna Wickham (1884-1947)

Anna Wickham is the pen name of Edith Alice Mary Harper. She was born in England, but raised in Australia. After returning to England in 1905 to pursue a career in opera, she almost immediately entered into what would prove to be an extremely tempestuous marriage with a London solicitor, Patrick Hepburn. In her autobiography,
Anna suggests that she and Patrick both had a mix of strongly liberal and strongly conservative ideas about marriage and domesticity, but their beliefs never seemed to line up in a complementary way. Anna was adventurous, articulate, and enthusiastically committed to social reform, but she was also utterly absorbed with the idea of fulfilling a traditional role as a mother and homemaker and baffled by the prospect of adult romantic love: “I was a passionate, puritanical and energetic girl, but with a bitter distrust of passion. [...] I was entirely submissive in my love relation with my husband. I considered it my duty that coition should be pleasureless” (Writings 150). Patrick was wholly uninterested in politics and very concerned that their relationship be “proper” and not shocking to his conservative family, but he also thought of his marriage as a partnership grounded in loving companionship: “Patrick did not in the least want to be a father; he wanted me. He wanted love experience, the companionship of a woman civil enough to listen to him, and even a woman clever enough to understand” (150). The vast majority of Wickham’s writing is dedicated to articulating the impossible pressures of patriarchal domesticity.

Although her writing seems to represent women as aggressive, articulate denouncers of social injustice, Wickham also represents women’s trauma under patriarchy as at least partly self-inflicted. In that context, fairy and fairy tales play two important roles in Wickham’s work. First, fairy imagination represents an escapist, fantasy space in which women hide from the mundane drudgery of life under patriarchy. For example, in “The Mummer” (1915), Wickham’s narrator carefully describes her commitment to the performance of her domestic role: “Strict I walk my ordered way/Through the straight and duteous day/The hours are nuns that summon me/To

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offices of huswifry” (Writings 178), but the same narrator divides her time between the
duteous, mundane day and the magical night filled with “elfin Folly”:

When that compassionate lady Night
Shuts out a prison from my sight,
With other thrift I turn a key
Of the old chest of Memory.
And in my spacious dreams unfold
A flimsy stuff of green and gold,
And walk and wander in the dress
Of old delights and tenderness. (178)

Although she delights in escapist dreams and envisions her daily life as a “prison,” the
narrator herself holds the keys—acting as both prisoner and jailer. For her, the
dreamscape remains a “flimsy,” temporary escape, most unsatisfyingly locked in the
past-tense of “old delights;” it does not inspire any action in the physical world. In effect,
Wickham suggests that women play a vital role in defining and maintaining gender-
biased cultural norms, a connotation which is both disempowering (potentially blaming
women for complicity in their own victimization), but also empowering (if women have a
controlling influence in the construction of patriarchy, women also have the power to
change the patriarchal context).

Wickham also draws on the association of fairy tales and domesticity by using
fairy tales as a highly metatextual metaphor for long-standing social gender patterns. For
example, “Song of a Low Caste Wife” (1911) seems to be a coda to a traditional
“Cinderella” tale, but it is a fairy tale that’s highly conscious of its status as a fairy tale.
The king is both a participant in the story and representative of patriarchal narratives in
which women are consigned to secondary, domestic roles. The narrator queen is, like
Mew’s “farmer’s bride,” defined by her marital role, but she is also trying to lay the groundwork for a new pattern of fairy-tale from within an old pattern of fairy tale:

What have you given me for my strong sons?
O scion of kings!
In new veins the blood of old kings runs cold.
Your people thinking of old victories, lose the lust of conquest,
Your men guard what they have,
Your women nurse their silver pots,
Dead beauty mocks hot blood!
What shall these women conceive of their chill loves
But still more pots? (165)

Wickham’s narrative begins where many fairy-tales end, after the wedding of the charming prince and the beautiful peasant, but she emphatically denies the cozy sufficiency of the traditional “happily ever after” for either men or women. The narrator’s rage is directed at her husband, the “scion of kings,” but seems equally to implicate the women whose life ambition is to silently preside over an exquisitely expensive silver tea service. For Wickham, the silver pot functions equally as a symbol of a woman’s domestic status; as a metaphor for cold, metallic wombs; and as a funerary urn for the culture whose legacy is a generation of children with cold, empty minds who can only reproduce the same sterile, reductive social values.

Initially, the poem seems to be a description of the problem and a solution to it: in passionately describing women’s failure as a failure of passion, the narrator seems to set herself apart from the frozen-spirited women who unquestioningly participate in the process of traditional, patriarchal, fairy-tale domesticity:

But I have conceived of you new men;
Boys brave from the breast,
Running and striving like no children of your house
And with their brave new brains
Making new myths. (165)

The multifaceted pun on “conception” suggests that women must be the authors of new tales: because the “bravery” which inspires the “new brains” comes specifically from the breast, the feminine acts of “conceiving” new men and new myths are functionally identical—yet in spite of its flourishing challenge, much of the poem’s anguish comes from the paradoxical assertion of a new myth that has no place for the myth-conceiver. The narrator’s “new myths” are never articulated, and they seem to be passed exclusively to her sons. She makes no provision for her daughters, and she shares her vision with no one but the patriarch. Having a voice, but no name and no substantive identity of her own, the narrator can only aspire to a limited, as-yet-inarticulable freedom:

All my experience, all my thoughts and dreams,
Bubble together, and the mixture steams; […]
For from the viscid liquor make I shapes,
Fairies and goblins, little goats and apes. (“The Artificier,” Writings 206)

Of the early gender-liberal fairy tale poets, Wickham was one of the first to adopt an overtly aggressive tone (the kind of authoritative tone that Chesterton assumes by right of patriarchy). She’s also among the first to explicitly call for a gender-libratory revolution in storytelling, but she committed suicide in 1947, almost twenty years after the suicide of Charlotte Mew, six years after the suicide of Virginia Woolf, two years before the publication of Beauvoir’s Second Sex, and less than twenty years before the trans-Atlantic resurgence of radical fairy tale poetry in the 1960s.
Out of the apparently innocuous medium of fairy tale poetry grew Mew’s powerful representation of a silenced voice, de la Mare’s intense vocalization of alienated child-like perception, and Wickham’s urgent resistance to patriarchal gender-restraints, both social and internal. Writing about de la Mare, Lissa Paul, the poetry editor of the *Norton Anthology of Children’s Literature* (2005) argues that “As twentieth-century modernism fades into the past, so does criticism of de la Mare as not stylistically experimental or fractured,” concluding that “the archetypal nursery rhythms and psychological dreamscapes of his verses seem increasingly in tune with contemporary sensibilities” (1201). I would take her point a step further. Although Wickham, Mew, and de la Mare’s work merits all individual praise, their formal and thematic innovations represent just a facet of a much larger movement in poetry, connecting the gender-liberal fairy (tale) poetry written in the Victorian period by women like Christina Rossetti, Felicia Hemans, Helen Smetham, and the many anonymous authors of verse like “The Cinderella of 1851” to the rich tradition of gender-liberal fairy tale poetry that sprang up at the end of the century.

5.4 Fairy Tales, Gendered Narration, and Gender Revolution

There are many poets who could have fit into a subsection on narrative experimentation and gender revolution, including all the poets of the previous subsection. However, I grouped Mew, Wickham and de la Mare because they all seemed to be particularly preoccupied with idealized domesticity; the poets in this section are less directly invested in the connotations of fairies and fairy tales as childish or domestic, more extensively invested in canonical fairy tales, and much more preoccupied by
exceptionally radical experimentation in narrative form. For these poets, revolution
begins in language, and imagining new rhythms in language is part of imagining
alternative social realities. This pattern of fairy tale poetry specializes in very complex,
adult discourse that could never be mistaken for children’s poetry. But it is also a very
specifically feminized fairy tale poetic and tends to foreground tales with female
protagonists who are manipulating the language of fairy tale archetypes to negotiate adult
concerns like career, childbearing, marriages (chosen and otherwise), sex, adult
friendships, and social responsibility.

For this subsection, I have included Edith Sitwell to gesture at the authors, like
Mina Loy (1882-1966) and Stevie Smith (1902-1971), who bridge the gap between the
early twentieth-century fairy tale poets and the well-known wave of gender-radical fairy
tale poets whose came to prominence in the 1960s-80s, including Denise Levertov (1923-
1997) and Denise Riley (b.1948), known for both new myths and new patterns of myth-
making, using palimpsest, parody, and fragmented language to achieve unprecedented
narrative effects.

5.4.1 Edith Sitwell (1887-1964)

Daughter of Sir George Sitwell and Lady Ida Denison, Edith Sitwell had access to
the privileges of country aristocracy, but at the cost of being given only a traditional girl’s
education (which is to say, very little formal education at all) and of being the eldest child
of an uncomfortable and unhappy marriage. In part because of her parents’ conflicts,
Sitwell became very close to her younger brothers Osbert (1892-1969) and Sacheverell
(1897-1988). However, it seems as if the solitude of her childhood affected her later
literary life; although she was friends with such major literary lights as T.S. Eliot, Aldous
Huxley, and Virginia Woolf, Sitwell always maintained an independent aloofness and
never fully affiliated herself with any poetic school or movement, except, perhaps to
identify herself as opposed to the Georgian Poets. Her early writing, which included most
of her fairy tale poetry was not well-received, although she received every literary honor
in her later years, and in the late 1980s, when experimental fairy tale poetry was in
vogue, her early work was re-read by critics like Geoffrey Elborn as “the best of Edith
Sitwell’s poetry, written with a highly individual use of language still unsurpassed for its
peculiar, inimitable artifice. Far from being trivial, these early poems by one 'a little
outside life' should now find a greater acceptance in an era more concerned with Sitwell's
concepts than her own age” (n.p.). Today, Sitwell’s exact place in poetic history remains
hotly contested; Robert K. Martin writing for the Dictionary of Literary Biography
suggests both that: “Of all the modern poets who came of age during the second decade
of the twentieth century, Edith Sitwell remains the least understood and least
appreciated,” and that “With her contemporary Eliot, she remains one of the most
important voices of twentieth-century English poetry” (Martin n.p.).

Throughout her poetic oeuvre, Sitwell was particularly fascinated by rhythm and
sound, and although she preceded the authors who called for formal and ideological
change in the same breath, she aims for much the same effect: “At the time I began to
write, a change in the direction, imagery, and rhythms in poetry had become necessary,
owing to the rhythmical flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected patterns,
of some of the poetry immediately preceding us” (Collected xv). The violation of
“expected patterns” in both her linguistic structure and her fairy tale plots (which never
do seem to work out to the remembered “happily ever after”), she attributes to a complex
variety of early influences, including the architect Monsieur Le Corbusier, the
philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, the fairy tale filmmaker Jean Cocteau, the poet
Villiers de l’Isle Adam and his critic Arthur Symons, Pablo Picasso, Satie, the scientist
Henri Poincaré, and the naturalist John Ray—a list which simultaneously indicates her
isolation from any community of intellectual women, and signifies her interested in a
trans-genre, trans-national, trans-gendered artistic discourse. Sitwell was not specifically
interested in women’s poetry/writing/issues in the same way that a poet like Anna
Wickham or Charlotte Mew would be; but her thematic obsessed with shadows and
margins (both mystical and metaphorical) is very much in sympathy with their desire to
re-draw the bounds of cultural and linguistic centricity/marginality.

Sitwell’s description of her own work is largely technical and articulated in terms
of the visions that can be implied by the sound of word dissonances/assonances/rhymes
and new rhythms—an emphasis on sound that almost seem to dismiss the literal content
as largely nonsense. However, the poems in her first collection, *Bucolic Comedies* (1923)
are, as the title suggests, mock pastoral; Sitwell uses them to experiment with sound and
narrative, twisting fairy tale, and mythological tropes in counterintuitive, but not
disjunctive ways. Like Wickham, Sitwell seems to favor the image of the meddling,
creative witch in such poems as “Three Poor Witches,” “Two Kitchen Stories,” and
“Spinning Song.” 29 And she mimics that love of meddling in the narrative structures of
her poems, which tend to break fairy tales down to their component parts and then to mix

29 “Three Poor Witches” seems to allude to Macbeth’s trio in a few off-beat dissonant lines. The
poetic connection dating “fairy poetry” back to Shakespeare is very consistent in twentieth-century poetry;
Shakespeare’s characters are a key source for many fairy tale poets, including Noyes, de la Mare, Graves,
etc..
them in with fragments of many other kinds of cultural and literary referent. Many of Sitwell’s poems, like “The Man with the Green Patch,” reference dozens of sources, apparently indiscriminately: Gilbert and Sullivan, the Bible, mythology, Coleridge, and fairy tales all collide in a rhythmic hodge-podge that levels conventional, canonical distinctions between “high” and “low” culture, as well as “masculine” and “feminine” narrative patterns. Yet Sitwell retains continuity through her volumes of poetry through repeated images that survive her narrative fracturing: gold, hair, water, flowers, moon/heavens/stars, pink, green, snow, and roses. The collection of symbols that feature strongly in fairy tale narratives hold together the sense of elusive fairy-tale-ness, even when the narrative disintegrates beyond recognition.

Unlike any of the other female poets publishing at the beginning of the twentieth-century, Sitwell carries a supreme confidence in her own narrative authority, and does not seem to have the edge of desperation that characterizes Mew and Wickham’s fairy poetics, in spite of the fact that her one full-length fairy tale poem is based on a traditionally misogynist narrative, The Sleeping Beauty (1924). Its bizarre and lovely lines weave together dozens of different kinds of narrativities to cobble together a tale in which women seem to take primacy of place: the evil fairy Laidronette, the Princess Cydalise, the spirits of Helen, Deirdre, Daphne and other mythological women, the portrait of Queen Anne, the ghost of Princess Jehanne, archetypal courtly matrons like “Madam Cards” and “the Marchioness of Gout.” The women are represented as common female “types”—wicked fairies, queens, ghosts, serving girls, crabby matrons—but the types are presented in such disjunctive forms that they draw attention to the absurdity and inadequacy of archetypal characterization. The emphasis on types highlights Sitwell’s
obsession with aggressively naming women—her characters are both generic “serving maids” and emphatically individuals, “Phoebe” and “Audrey;” characters who exceed their typical social function just by having names, and who blur the lines between types—is Phoebe a mythic character or just a maid? In any case, the bustling descriptions of all these women—living and dead—believe the static image of a princess quietly dreaming.

Her interest in the tale is not just a vindication of women—it anticipates Beauvoir’s concern that fairy tales severely damage men as well as women. The frame narrative to *The Sleeping Beauty* is a discourse between two unnamed male archetypes—the questing prince and the gardener who tends the enchanted castle; and although in a traditional Sleeping Beauty narrative, it is the princess’ unconsciousness that is the focus of the tale, in Sitwell’s version, the prince is the most obviously passive character. 30 Ultimately the tale concludes with gardener telling the prince a story woven between a traditional fairy tale and a series of Biblical tales that seems to imply that it is the prince himself who is lost in eternal “sleep as snug as in the grave”:

The sea was sharper than green grass,  
The sailors would not let him pass,  
And the sea was wroth and rose at him  
Like the turreted walls of Jerusalem […]  
The sailors took and bound him, threw  
Him in among those towers to drown.  
And oh, far best,’ the gardener said,  
Like fruits to lie in your kind bed,  
To sleep as snug as in the grave  
In your kind bed, and shun the wave,

30 The pairing of the gardener and prince is an unusual narrative combination, but it would recur much later in the century in pieces like Patricia C. Wrede’s “Stronger than Time” (1994).
Nor ever to sigh for a strange land
And songs no heart can understand.’ (109)

The gardener seems to be a counterpart to the spell-casting fairy Laidronette, keeping the prince locked in a kind of suspended animation that powerfully represses the prince’s passion and curiosity. This fairy tale curse, is, in a sense, a curse to be immune to the lure of imagination and poetry: the worst possible outcome for a fairy tale hero is to be lured into listlessness and indifference for fear of encountering danger. In spite of Sitwell’s gleeful and transgressive fracturing of narrative, the conclusion ends in refusal and silence, not with any confidence that the transgression has resolved gender archetypes or found a new, successful pattern of “happily ever after.”

One of the most important innovations in this period was the abandonment of a traditional moral framework and any kind of decisive conclusion; like Ostriker and DuPlessis, but sixty years earlier, Sitwell expressed far less interest in revising “myth” than in revising “mythmaking.” As such, her poetry connects that adult pattern of writing with the eighteenth-century rejection of pure reason in favor of imaginative spiritual enlightenment. Sitwell’s fairy tales are not meant to instruct in a traditional sense, but to entice readers into epiphany that sidesteps logic, social norms, or rationality:

Technically, I would come to a vital language—each word possessing an infinite power of germination—I would attain to the ‘hard and bounding line’ that Blake said was necessary to all art, as to all virtue. Spiritually, to give holiness to each common day. […] To produce poetry that is the light of the Great Morning, wherein all beings whom we see passing in the common street are transformed into the epitome of all beauty, or of all joy, or of all sorrow […] My poems are hymns of praise to the glory of Life.” (xlv-vi)
5.4.2 Denise Levertov (1923-1997)

Levertov’s family background was highly cosmopolitan and included a mixture of religious beliefs, her mother was from Wales and her father was a Hassidic Jew from Germany who converted to Christianity before emigrating to the U.K. and became an Anglican priest. Denise Levertov is a British poet by birth, though she married the American writer Mitchell Goodman in 1947 and became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1955, at age thirty-two. They had one son, Nikolai, but divorced in 1972. At age twelve, the precocious Levertov sent some of her poems to T.S. Eliot, who sent her an encouraging letter in response—and fairy-saturated. In her autobiographical statement for *Contemporary Authors Online*, Levertov notes that:

I started my reading of poetry with *A Child’s Garden of Verses*. (There were also the fairy poems of Rose Fyleman, which I enjoyed for their content, but I seem to have been aware of a qualitative difference: Stevenson’s had an emotive resonance, Fyleman’s seemed made up—not because they were about fairies but because of their words; though of course I could not have analyzed this.) Then came Palgrave’s “Golden Treasury,” Tennyson, Walter de la Mare; and soon, Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, the many poets of the so-called “Georgian” years, […] and de la Mare’s wonderful anthology *Come Hither*. (n.p.)

What that lush background of fairy poets, it’s not particularly astonishing that Levertov’s first substantial work was a fairy poem: “It was a rambling account of a visit to fairyland, with detailed description of the fairies’ wings and clothes. Fairyland was entered by way of a hollow tree. […] I had nothing as yet to say, but was captivated by luscious-sounding, romantic and unusual words.”31 Like de la Mare, Levertov would write about

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31 *CAO*, n.p. Cf. “The Poet in The Nursery,” in which Robert Graves articulated a very similar infatuation with fairy tales and poetic language, “extraordinary and monstrous phrases […] metre twisting like a chain of daisies/With great big splendid words a sentence long […] wonderful words no one could understand” (3).
the parallel strangeness of adult and fairy worlds from a child’s point of view; her earliest writing of fairy poetry was both a moment of social integration (feeling grown-up by using these words) and a moment of social alienation (being conscious that she did not have anything “as yet to say”).

Perhaps because fairies were so important to Levertov’s childhood, she returns to them as a mature poet during the most overtly political phase of her writing in a collection titled *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970). Levertov made a point of enacting an adult re-reading of the language of children’s literature with a fully adult comprehension of social metaphor. The poems in this collection are not children’s poems, or even poems about childhood, but about the influences of the narratives that were absorbed in childhood and internalized into what would become an adult consciousness. Her sequence “An Embroidery” requires a very sophisticated level of palimpsestic reading that would only be associated with a trained adult audience. The four parts of the poem each represent different approaches to re-reading childhood narratives and each evokes a different tale: “Snow White and Rose Red,” “Catherine and her Destiny,” “Red Snow,” and an unnamed lost poem.

In “An Embroidery (I)” Levertov distracts attention from the plot established in the *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, and displaces narrative development with complex internal monologues and psychological development. The poem begins with an opening hint that language is going to be important and that Levertov is mis-remembering the familiar tales

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32 Writing for the *Twentieth-Century American Nature Poets* (2008), Christopher Todd Anderson describes Levertov’s adult career as “encompassing three distinct stages: first, an early period concerned primarily with the development of American diction and experiment with form; second, the period ranging from the mid-1960s into the 1980s, marked by Levertov’s [highly political] ‘poetry of estrangement,’ […] last, the final ten to fifteen years of her life, in which Levertov explored religious faith.” If that assessment is correct, then the bulk of Levertov’s fairy tale poetry was written in the middle of her political years.
when she rechristens “Snow White and Rose Red” as Rose White and Rose Red. In Levertov’s version of the tale, which is told by an unnamed narrator, the Roses lie down to dream. Rose Red dreams “in a cave that smells of honey/dreams she is combing the fur of her cubs/with a golden comb” (32). Rose White, however, “is lying awake,” so the last few lines must be a “dream” in the sense that they are an “ambition” or “aspiration”:

Rose White shall marry the bear's brother.
Shall he too
when the time is ripe,
step from the bear's hide?
Is that other, her bridegroom,
here in the room?

Rose White’s dreaming is so powerful that it obscures the voice of the omniscient storyteller with her own questions. The counterpoint use of the proscriptive “shall marry” which is transformed to the interrogative “shall he” suggest that the language is being wrenched into a new form. In the Brothers Grimm version, a marriageable prince would step from the bear’s hide, but in an older version by Caroline Stahl, the bear remains a bear – a circumstance that Levertov’s Rose Red would apparently prefer. By mentioning but refusing to choose from among the available options, Rose White is becoming what Alicia Ostriker (also writing in the 1970s) calls a “thief of language:”

Though the language we speak and write has been an encoding of male privilege, what Adrienne Rich calls an “oppressor’s language” inadequate to describe or express women’s experience, […] we must also have it in our power to “seize speech” and make it say what we mean. (Ostriker, 69)

Obscuring a fixed ending with her questions, Rose White has appropriated the language of the archetype without being bound by it. She “seizes speech” to define her own “happily ever after” as sequence of possibilities rather than as a closed narrative.
Indeed, Levertov develops this idea even more explicitly in the next two of the four strands of “An Embroidery” because she subtitles her poems as responses to specific written texts, and appropriation of famously patriarchal archetypes draws attention to both the prototypical moments in which those archetypes were composed and to the prototypical points of departure that she makes “from” those specific templates. This technique is more challenging than composing an original fairy tale might have been because she’s not just making a statement; she’s demonstrating the process of assertive “thievery”. The second poem responds to Andrew Lang’s version of “Catherine and Her Destiny,” and it is spoken in the first person rather than the third as the carnivalesque breakdown of omniscient narrative authority begun by Rose White carries over into the second poem. The narrator recalls H.J. Ford’s second illustration from the story where she stands by the “heaped-up treasure” as the king tosses in his crown – but the “glinting” fire in the “great hearth” is not actually in the illustration.

Figure 5.1 “Catherine and Her Destiny” by J.H. Ford
Rather, Levertov’s description of the illustration recalls the red and gold of the fireplace from the first poem in a disjunctive moment echoed by the disjointed arrangement of words on the page.

The events
were blent in this light,
out of sequence. (33)

This visual and verbal disarrangement, echoing the flickering remembered firelight, suggests an unconscious dissection of the plot, but the narrator quickly moves on to question Lang’s plot consciously: “If, as it said, she chose sorrow in youth,/what power would she have to welcome joy/when it came at last to her worn hands”? She proposes an alternative: “my Catherine, who would have chosen joy at once,” but then stops to query the conditional term “would.”

(yes, surely she did choose so:
the tale as told breaks down, grows vague) (33)

And in that vast blank space left by the fragmentation of Lang’s narrative, Levertov inserts a new ending, now in the present rather than the conditional tense. The newly written Catherine travels to Destiny’s home, laughs her to shame, “merrily” takes the magic thread to weave her own adventures, scorning both the threat of unhappiness and the obnoxious king:
and set out barefoot, strong from her years of pleasure to wander the roads of the second half of her life. (34)

As with the first poem, this story emphasizes possibility rather than closure, and promises neither unabating happiness or unending misery. But there is a meta-process that is more important than the actual terms of the retelling. First, the narrator recalls a story, then she questions it, then she wistfully considers alternatives, then she aggressively, joyfully rewrites it. Levertov revels in the process of revisionist mythmaking.

The third poem in the sequence is adapted from the bombastic morality tale “Red Snow,” by Margaret Gatty (1809-1873). The story describes a little boy who was taught “all wrong” by his mother and pastor, but saved by a visiting male Naturalist who reeducates the boy, elevating him from peasant superstition to true belief in science by telling the family that the magical and mysterious red snow they had seen up the mountain is actually white snow populated by minute red plants. In Gatty’s tale, the mother and “simple” child are tearfully grateful to the Naturalist. However, in Levertov’s version, the boy is attracted to a reddening snow that appears every sunset:

Evening upon the heights, juice of the pomegranate:
who could connect it with sunlight? […]
faithful before night, crimson.
He knew it was red snow (35).

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33 Cf. Cixous’ “Sorties”: “A boy’s journey is the return to the native land […] the nostalgia that makes man a being who tends to come back to the point of departure to appropriate it for himself and die there. A girl’s journey is farther—to the unknown, to invent. / How come this privileged relationship with voice? Because no woman piles up as many defenses against instincntual drives as a man does.”

34 Gatty always published under her married name “Mrs. Alfred Gatty,” validating her authority as a respectably married woman and, implicitly, as a mother.
Deprived of any guide, this boy “grows tall” and finally “sets out” to find the red snow himself. However, the boy is preoccupied with the object, and not the narrative, and so “The story, inexorably, is of arrival long after, by dark” (35) where the boy waits, only to discover a new view:

the height of his home, snowy, red, taunted him. Fable snuffs out.

What did he do?

He grew old.
With bloodbright hands he wrought icy monuments.
Beard and long hair flying he rode the whirlwind, keening the praises of red snow. (35)

This strand of the poem is told in the third-person, but where in Gatty’s world, exploration leads to rational, scientific discovery, and confidently assured closure - in this narrative, when the object of the boy’s obsession seems to be snuffed out, like the fable, like a candle, like sunset, he grows into a madman or, perhaps, a wizard.

In this passage Levertov is acknowledging the fact that there are potentially anarchic consequences that follow from the process of making new myths. The man who ventured up Gatty’s mountain became the archetypal patriarch, but the man who climbs Levertov’s becomes both an artist and an elemental – he is not powerful as a mythmaker because he is pushed beyond the community of storytellers and hearers, indeed beyond articulate language, but he himself has become mythical. If you really unhinge the happily ever after, there is no end to the moment of carnivalesque inversion – the natural and the unnatural have been turned upside down, and there can be no reassuring return to the status quo.
This terrifying sense of what might be lost is most emphatic in the final poem, which is troubling because Levertov’s titular reference is the refusal of a reference: “An Embroidery (IV) Swiss Cheese/ (after a lost poem, 1947).” Instead of offering a literary anchor for interpretation, this poem instigates questions: What poem? Lost in 1947? Written in 1947 and lost in 1967? By whom? Why? What on earth does she mean by “Swiss Cheese”? 

Levertov’s fourth poem is, like the colloquial “Swiss cheese memory,” full of holes. The poem describes a pastoral ideal/idyll that seems anonymous except for its repetition of the words “lost” and “wooden”:

Lost wooden poem,  
cows and people wending 
downmountain slowly 
to wooden homesteads

In Switzerland, the local woodcarvings are described as “wooden poems,” but the image that Levertov has lost is also wooden in the sense that it is static. Like the boy in the previous poem, families and cows continually descend into the same sunset. Unlike that boy, they are perpetually tranquil, perfectly communal, and seemingly, perfectly sheltered by their:

[…] wood walls, what

did I do with you, I’m looking through holes, in cheese, or pine knotholes, and

who were these peaceful folk, the poem was twenty years ago, I need it now.
As an interpreter of memory, the narrator is, like the Babes of fairy tale fame, lost in the deepest darkest woods.

It is possible to tie the poem to a historical context: in December 1947 a *New York Times* article about post-WWII Switzerland opened with these lines: “Switzerland, whose children mirror the healthy, prosperous condition of their country, has taken on heavy burdens in helping children of her less fortunate neighbors. Last winter 1,000,000 children in seven countries received one meal a day from Don Suisse […].”

The article goes on to praise the high quality of dairy products distributed to these child refugees. But of course, the most eye-catching event in Switzerland in late 1966 was the vote against women’s suffrage. Perhaps the poem’s self-conscious forgetting suggests that, even though anarchic change is not safe, it may be even more unsafe to devote attention to a static image, however lovely, which potentially glosses over the need for change: half of the peaceful peasants descending the mountain had no legal right to choose the leaders who would protect their peace or their livelihoods. Collectively, the sequence is an adult negotiation of mythmaking that is not just about powerful ex-princesses striding alone into the sunset, it is about letting go of a trite, wonderfully reassuring “Happily ever after,” and it is about finding some balance of social responsibility and anarchy—both in metaphorical and literal terms. For this poet, there can be no stable closure of “the end.”

Both Sitwell and Levertov depend on narrative fracturing, but the fracturing is only effective because the narratives being fractured are so familiar and so laden with cultural connotations that they are recognizable (even in fragmented form) and

35 “Switzerland a Haven,” (4).
interpretable (both at the level of the plot and as a metatextual comment on narrativity). For that reason, the full effect of this kind of fairy tale poetic would not have been possible if fairy tales and fairy poetry did not have a multi-stranded history. Both Sitwell and Leverov draw on several traditions at once to achieve a multi-layered connotative effect. Since by the turn of the twentieth-century, children’s literature (including fairy tales and morality tales) was associated with idealized domesticity, stability, and patriarchal Victorian values—consequently, to use those same narratives to fracture idealization, stability, and the mechanisms of social valuation is exponentially shocking. Likewise, because fairy tales had a longstanding literary tradition (dating back to at least the seventeenth-century French court) of being deployed by women to negotiate adult social values, and a secondary tradition of being redeployed in support of Victorian patriarchal values, twentieth-century poets had access to a pattern of language that is always-already socially self-conscious in gendered terms. And because Victorian educators rigidly deployed fairy tales and morality tales to communicate social morals, these patterns of literature became a perfect forum for challenging the process of morality-making.

Towards the end of the century, this pattern of narrative fracturing would strongly influence the work of poets like Liz Lochhead (b.1947), Denise Riley (b.1948), and Grace Nichols (b.1950) as well as poems like “Instructions” (2000) by Neil Gaiman (b.1960) that ingenuously reverse the process of fragmentation and restore coherence to the reading of fairy tales by breaking it down to a series of rules.\(^{36}\)

\(^{36}\) Cf. also Austin Clarke “Forget me Not” (1967).
Touch the wooden gate in the wall you never saw before.
Say “please” before you open the latch,
go through,
walk down the path.
[...] 
Once through the garden, you will be in the wood. 
The trees are old. Eyes peer from the undergrowth. 
Beneath a twisted oak sits an old woman. She may ask for something; 
give it to her. She 
will point the way to the castle. 
Inside it are three princesses. 
Do not trust the youngest. Walk on. [...] (30-1)

After walking through dozens of the classic fairy tale plot conventions, the poem ends, 
like Noyes’ “Flower of Old Japan,” at home—though this home is, literally and 
metaphorically, of a very different making. By 2000, the domestic space of fairy tale 
dreams had been so-often fragmented, witches so often valorized, and princesses so often 
liberated or demonized, that fairy tales could no longer be contained by connotations of 
patriarchal Victorian domesticity, even in contexts where home is the end of a fairy tale 
journey:

When you reach the little house, the place your journey started, 
you will recognize it, although it will seem much smaller than you remember. 
Walk up the path, and through the garden gate you never saw before but once. 
And then go home. Or make a home.

Or rest.

Home is both diminished by the transformative journey, and transmuted by it because the 
adventurer now how has the capacity to decide what home is, the power to make a home, 
and the security to find rest in a space of the adventurer’s own choosing—and in this 
context, gender ambivalence no longer implies a male hero and a female homemaker; all
children are invited to take both roles and to understand both roles as being part of the fairy tale adventure.
CHAPTER 6:
FAIRY TALES AND “BRITISHNESS”:
WAR, TRAUMA, AND (POST-)COLONIAL POETICS

The gendered contexts of fairy tale development also had tremendously important implications for postcolonial and Marxist readings, and I will continue to contextualize the poets from the previous chapter with this pattern of developments. However, there is one methodological shift in this chapter that requires some explanation. In the previous chapter, I argued that there was an important departure between mythopoetics and fairy tale poetry in gendered terms; however, in this chapter I have made little effort to preserve the standard categories of “myths,” “folktales,” “legends,” and “fairy tales” because the division between mythopoesis and fairy tale poetry between the 1930s and the 1950s was done primarily in a context that situated mythopoesis in a culturally superior (colonial-esque) position that ratified its (white, usually male) authors’ scholarly/artistic appropriation and manipulation of global texts; in contrast, postcolonial acts of tale-telling produced by minority writers tend to bring together stories from an author’s own ancestral tale traditions to pluralize the canon of tales in circulation in Britain. The fact that some of these tales would be technically be categorized as “myth” rather than “fairy tales” by most folklorists has a very different cultural connotation, because “myth” in a colonial context was associated with “primitive” belief rather than “civilized” entertainment. Moreover, juxtapositions of imperial/colonial tales and
narrative patterns are central to poetic negotiations of national identity and cultural values. To exclude half of these texts would defeat their purpose.

6.1 Fairy Tales in Marxist and (Post-)Colonial Theory

At the turn of the twentieth-century, the Folklore Society defined its purpose and methodology in terms that are at once synchronic and diachronic. The tales that were being collected by Society members from around the globe were being systematically recorded, collected, and compared in vast archives, most of which abstract the tales from their historical and geographical contexts to synchronically map out common tale-elements found in stories from around the world.¹ Yet, folklorists also used collections of tales from different cultural regions to compile diachronic evaluations of the cultures and people-groups from which the stories were taken. The synchronic aspects of the Folklore Society’s work would become particularly useful for structuralists and early psychoanalysts. In contrast, twentieth-century Marxist and postcolonial scholars share a primarily diachronic approach to the interpretation of fairy tales and culture, as well as shared roots in an intellectual movement that theorized a stratification of human culture into historical/developmental stages. Twentieth-century postcolonial scholars have been particularly intrigued by Victorian folklore scholarship, in part because colonial folklore scholars grouped whole cultures at the bottom of the “evolutionary” scale in very judgmental terms that had everything to do with colonial culture validating itself and very

¹ The most famous of these was invented by Antti Aarne (1867-1925) in 1910; it is still under construction, and has been substantially revised and updated by Stith Thompson (1885-1976) as the Aarne-Thompson System, in 1961 and, eventually, by Hans-Jörg Uther (b.1944) as the Aarne-Thompson-Uther System in 2004.
little to do with “objective science,” as it claimed. In contrast, twentieth-century Marxists became particularly invested in the Victorian idea that culture bears direct relationship to economic production and environmental factors, and in challenging the idea that “cultural evolution” is always a matter of improvement for all members of society. In the twentieth century, Marxism gives credence to pre-class narratives as alternatives to capitalist historiography while postcolonialism becomes deeply invested in recovering and validating narratives that were dismissed as “underdeveloped” “primitive” rubbish. Both groups of scholars generally focus on: first, how myths and fairy tales can be used to define, assess, and map cultural development on a broad scale (diachronic historiography that assesses all of human history through assessment of whole categories of folklore); and second, what the details of dress, language, mannerism, etc. embedded in individual tales reveal about the storyteller’s cultural values and practices (diachronic historiography that closely analyzes smaller clusters of comparable folkloric texts and analyzes sometimes minute variation attributable to chronological, cultural, or geographical differences). Both groups are more invested in using folkloric texts as cultural indicators than in pulling meaning out of the texts as such.

I have chosen to separate the Marxist/(post)colonial chapter from my readings of gender and to exclude psychoanalytic readings in this context, in large part because Marxist scholars who engage with fairy tale writing have tended to define themselves in opposition to psychoanalytic scholars with a wholly synchronic interpretation of myths and fairy tales (particularly as the theories of Bruno Bettelheim and his contemporaries Erich Fromm and Marie Louise Von Franz gained a wide popular audience in the 1970s). And because early twentieth-century Marxist scholars tended to be invested in the
explanation of huge cultural developments over hundreds of years, the most prominent scholars did not engage specifically with gender as a primary area of concern until the mid-1980s. Gender, Marxist, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist scholarship begin to conceptually and methodologically overlap much more heavily in the 1970s-80s, but before that time, Marxist and postcolonial scholars are the least likely to rely on direct literary analysis of individual texts, and the most likely to base cultural analysis in the reading of broad patterns of folk-narrativity and assumptions about the relationship between tales and cultural beliefs/values. In the same period, Marxist and postcolonial scholars have relatively little interest in the significance of any given text, but they are very interested in meta-analysis of the production and transmission of folklore as a whole.

6.1.1 Folklore Scholarship the U.K. before WWII

At the turn of the century, the Folklore Society was still preoccupied with collecting and comparing new material from around the world, but folklore scholarship was divided around methodological debates about how to interpret the material that was being collated. The first debate was framed in terms of recovery and preservation, and divided into two camps: “the diffusionists” and “the survivalists.” Edward Tylor (1832-1917) and Andrew Lang (1844-1912) had suggested that folklore be interpreted as bits and fragments (“survivals”) of an ur-culture: “‘survivals’…are processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved” (Tylor 16). Alternatively, folklorists like George Laurence Gomme (1853-1916)
contended that: “In savage life all these things are extant, not as survivals but as actual portions of the prevalent state of society” (Folklore Society, 4). This methodological division would persist through the end of WWI, when, in his 1917 presidential address, R.R. Marett suggested that the two methodologies are fundamentally compatible tactics in the exploration of what he called “the psychology of culture-contact” (29), a declaration which long-time Folklore Society member and Folklore editor E. O. James (1888-1872) would later identify as a fundamental shift in folklore scholarship towards a joint, complementary study of contemporary and historical material in tandem: “In short, folklore must be treated as a living and changing growth, not palaentologically [sic] as a study of fossils. Old-fashioned stuff it might be, but it belonged to the here and now, and might at any moment renew its youth, as indeed, is constantly the case.”

However, this innovation should not be confused with a call to cultural studies because the scope of folklore continued to be limited by the definition of “folk” as, in James’ terms, “peasants in Europe, Australian aborigines, North American Indians, Polynesians or Bantu negroes in Africa” (383). It was, in effect, a lingering Victorian, colonial tradition of validating a developmental parity between lower-class Europeans and colonized peoples from a “scientific” frame of reference.

The second major methodological debate was a question of the scope of folklore: reflecting on his early years in the Folklore Society, the celebrated anthropologist E.O. James (1888-1972) claimed that the majority of folklorists, including the authors of the

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2 384. Folklore is the tri-annual academic periodical produced and edited by the Folklore Society since 1878 (originally released under the title Folk-Lore Record).

3 It was precisely this sort of limit that excluded pantomime and new fairy tale writing from consideration by folklore scholars.
Handbook of Folklore, believed that folklore should be “confined to beliefs, practices, superstitions, traditional customs, narratives and sayings to the total exclusion of material culture” (383). However there was substantial and ongoing dissent from scholars like Edwin Sidney Hartland (1848-1927), who was president of the Folklore Society from 1899-1901, and the Celticist Alfred Nutt (1856-1910) who argued that folkloric study should consider aspects material culture (specifically arts and crafts) to the exclusion of biology (James 383). Although it was a minority position in its day, their work would become particularly important to folklore scholars who, in the wake of WWII, would be disillusioned with eugenic theory and invested in finding less racially coded methodologies.

Reflecting on developments in folklore scholarship in the early twentieth century, in 1989 another editor of Folklore, Jacqueline Simpson (b.1930) suggested that until the late 1950s, folklore was undergoing a gradual shift away from overarching anthropological claims towards a more modest sociological scope. At the end of WWI, in his final presidential address to the Folklore Society, R.R. MARETT (1866-1943) asked a crucial question that would come to fruition at the end of the WWII as folklorists were inspired to theorize about human relations by stressing the commonalities rather than the differences between contemporary human cultures:

During the greater part of the time covered by my term of office a world-war has raged; nor is the end yet in sight. If, however, much else remains obscure, this at least grows plainer every day, that the war is a war of ideals—that no mere redistribution of territory and of political influence is involved in its issue, but a reconstruction of civilized society, according to one or another of certain conflicting doctrines of human nature and destiny.

Now as students of folklore we are not concerned with problems of social reconstruction. Our business is to cultivate a particular corner of the field of science, and to raise a godly crop of truths; whereas it is for the practical man—the food controller, as it were—to see to it that our produce is not wasted.
Nevertheless, how can we afford to shut our eyes to the meaning of this phase of
downright revolution through which the world is passing? (362)

Marrett argued two things: first, that war is not about resolving immediate physical needs
but about ideology and cultural domination. Second, that folklore represents a
phenomenal resource, because folklore scholars have undergone a massive project of
archiving the collected wisdom of successful and failed social practice worldwide.
Although folkloric practice had, until that point, avoided close reading all of this material
(leave it to the “practical man” to analyze and apply folkloric resources), his question
invites folklore scholars to move past collation to analysis. But although Marett’s
interrogation of the methodologies and purpose of folklore signify the beginning of a
breaking with Victorian traditions, in spite of his warnings, the colonial methodologies
continued to dominate folklore scholarship through WWII.

6.1.2 Folklore Scholarship in Russia through WWII
In part because Marxist scholarship was focal to the development of Russian
folklore scholarship, and in part because Russian folklorists like Valdimir Propp (1895-
1970) eventually had a very formative influence on Western scholarship, a discussion of
folklore and Marx in the twentieth century would not be complete without a nod in the
direction of Russian scholarship. In Britain, a few collaborative publications were
released in the early twentieth-century, including *Russian Fairy Tales: From the Skazi of
Polevoi* (1892) by Petr Polevoi (1839-1902) and Robert Nisbet Bain (1854-1909), and
*Russian Folk-Tales* (1916) by Leonard Arthur Magnus and Alexander Nikolaevich
Afanasyev, however, there was relatively little overlap between British and Russian
folklore scholarship between that 1916 collection and the end of the second World War,
and many major Russian philologists, linguists, and folklorists who published in the mid-century, including Alexander Potebnya (1835-1891) and M.M. Bakhtin (1897-1975), were not translated into English until the 1980s.

The primary reason for the lapse in scholarly correspondence was due to a long series of violent civil and international conflicts—the Russian Revolution of 1906, which established a state parliament; World War I; the February Revolution of 1917, which overthrew the tsarist autocracy; the October Revolutions of 1917, where the Bolshevik party overthrew the provisional government; the Russian Civil War between White anti-communist and Red communist factions, which dragged on from 1917 until the unification of the Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922—during which scholarly interchange between Russia/the USSR and Europe was severely hindered, and the two traditions of folklore scholarship developed almost independently for several decades. In Russia, the methodological break with British folklorics inspired five new methodological developments that all reflected the current political environment. 1. In a time of national identity crisis folklore always becomes more important as a marker of cultural union and as a central reflection of cultural values (which, in general, are used to retrospectively assign a cultural history that justifies the values articulated by the current revolutionaries). 2. Because the Russian revolution was predicated on Marxist principles, Marx’s cultural theorizations of stadial history and base/superstructure were immediately appropriated by scholars in diverse fields. 3. Because of the Marxist emphasis on the proletariat and the classification of folklore as “oral, traditional, collective, and anonymous,” folklore came to a more prominent position in Russia than it did in countries with a more hierarchical understanding of the “folk.” 4. The emphasis on
folklore was increasingly understood to be resistant to the Western literary canon and its valorization of virtuoso authorship. Because Russia was not as deeply invested in global empire as the U.K., the work of Russian scholars tends to conceptually construe both “primitive” and “folk” in more positive terms that would be helpful to postcolonial Marxist scholars in Britain at the end of the twentieth century.

Pioneering stadial scholars who were highly influential in their day include the philologist Aleksander Potebnya (1835-1891), author of *Thought and Language* (1862) and widely understood as the forerunner to Russian Formalism (Cf. Cassedy 39-54); Alexander Veselovsky (1838-1906), who traced a comprehensive, sequential evolutionary history of the arts from a mythological time in which music, dance, poetry, and ritual were undifferentiated (Cf. A. Lieberman, lvii); and Nicholas Marr (1865-1934), who dominated Russian folklore and philological scholarship in the 1920s-30s (Cf. A. Lieberman lvii-lviii). However, today, these scholars are more likely to be mentioned as peripheral influences in studies of Vladimir Propp (1895-1970) or M.M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) than in their own right. Of the early stadial scholars, Veselovsky was one of the scholars to wed Marxist principles with work produced by the Folklore Society (by using the idea of linear social development, but not applying it along class lines) and acknowledge a direct debt to British authors like Lang and Tylor for his theorization of “primitive” culture; in consequence, the Russian scholar and translator Michael Holquist notes that “On August 14, 1946, the Central Committee issued a resolution condemning ideological laxity in Soviet literature and scholarship. In particular, kowtowing to the bourgeois West was attacked, a tendency that was labeled ‘Veselovskyism’” (xx). Though Veselovsky’s work was officially condemned, and Marr’s work in its turn, later
scholars including Propp and Bakhtin would build on those early attempts to comprehensively historicize literary and cultural developments on a massive evolutionary scale.\(^4\)

M.M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) was less interested in myths and fairy tales produced in the twentieth century than in the development of the novel, and, drawing on stadial principles, his work characterizes literary and oral folklore as preserved specimens of the ancient past rather than as examples of an evolving narrative/genre form.\(^5\) This assumption is most clearly outlined in Bakhtin’s collection of essays written in the 1930s, later published as *The Dialogic Imagination*, wherein he suggests that differences in narrative development can be most observed in the representations of time within different narrative genres.\(^6\) For example, in his reading of folklore, Bakhtin argues that because it grows out of pre-class agricultural societies, folklore relies heavily on cyclical, seasonal time rather than a more individuated linear plot development. For example, many stories begin with the birth of an extraordinary child and end with the child’s marriage, and the implication of a new birth. Consequently, Bakhtin argues that “primitive” people would understand time, “not as a function of his abstract thought-processes or consciousness, but as an aspect of life itself—in a collective laboring with nature, in the collective consuming of the fruits of his labor and in the collective task of

\(^4\) Marr’s work would be officially condemned by the Stalinist government in the 1950s: “Marr’s school had been taught to believe in stadialism, which is indeed part and parcel of Marxism. Although the whole of Marr’s teachings was repudiated and dismissed as folly, Stalin did not touch on this particular problem; so the position of stadialism remained unclear and still is.” (A. Lieberman, lviii).

\(^5\) Fairy tales as well as myths, legends, and early religious texts would be encompassed by Bakhtin’s term “folklore.”

\(^6\) Typically for Bakhtin, whose work was almost invariably delayed or denied publication, the volume would not be published even in Russian until 1975, and not released in English until 1981.
fostering the growth and renewal of the social whole” (211). It is this distance that makes the “Once upon a time” space of the folktale possible because it exists in an endlessly repeating, cyclical present. The stadial language is tricky because Bakhtin is suggesting that timelessness is a quality of a particular historically locative phase of writing, but this aspect of his writing can be understood as contributing to a concrete developmental framework in which folklore is inexorably coded as “primitive” and in which those (non-scholars) who participate in the production and transmission of folklore are coded as anachronistic and as possessing fundamentally different (underevolved) mental structures and social values.

Yet even though his work fosters a broad reading of folkloric material on a massive scale, Bakhtin also makes way for the other major pattern of diachronic historiography—individuated readings of single tales in their historical moments. Bakhtin argued that it is characteristic for folkloric texts to articulate unpleasant aspects of human life (both experienced and anticipated) by representationally mapping them onto an unfixed imaginary space: “Images of the future were inevitably located in the past, or transferred to some Land of Cockaigne, beyond the seven seas; their dissimilarity to a cruel and evil present-day reality was measured by temporal and spatial distancing” (149). This aspect of Bakhtin’s characterization of folklore draws attention to its disguised political content: one of the many uses of folklore is to articulate political/social concerns in terms that are likely to be recognized by some audience members (who, perhaps, share the speaker’s concerns) and missed by others (who are, 7 In folklore, the land of Cockaigne is a carnivalesque land where everything is topsy-turvy: donkeys chase hares, hawks swim, children give birth to goats, and hens crow. (Cf. Grimm 474)
perhaps, the cause of the speaker’s concerns) due to “temporal and spatial distancing.” Bakhtin codes these early communities as fairly single-minded, but this pattern of reading events that took place “once upon a time” would be extremely important to both Marxist and postcolonial authors in the second half of the twentieth century.

Vladimir Propp, though contemporary with Bakhtin, seems to have had little direct contact with him; certainly Propp’s application of stadial principles leads him to somewhat different conclusions. In *The Historical Roots of the Wondertale* (1946) Propp suggests that, if for Marx “the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life processes in general,” then for Propp, “It follows that we must find in history the mode of production that gave rise to the wondertale” (103).8

The folktale is an ideological phenomenon, a reflection of the world in men’s minds. It is not a reflection of itself. We know what calls forth phenomena of the superstructure, and what causes them: there is no need to go into the theory of basis and superstructure. If the folktale reflects the forms of production that existed at very early stages, one may speak about the paleontological analysis of a folklore motif. (125)

This methodology strongly reinforces the anthropological function of the folklorist because it suggests that readings of the text come from (and therefore serve to reveal) characteristics of class development in key stages.

Although, thus far, Propp’s argument seems congruent with Bakhtin and even the Folklore Society’s reading of folklore, Propp also outlines an important distinction between his own methodology and that of Western folklorists in “The Nature of Folklore” (1946):

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8 Propp borrows the term “wondertale” from the German. It encompasses roughly the same material that would be identified as “fairy tale” by English-language literary scholars.
We […] do not consider folklore as it is defined in the West to be a special area of knowledge but at best recognize it as the popular-scientific study of one’s native country. In the West it is the poetical works of the peasants and always of the contemporary peasants that are studied, though only insofar as their contemporary culture has preserved elements of the past. […] Such a point of view is unacceptable to us because we study all phenomena in the process of their development. Folklore had existed before the emergence of the peasantry. (4)

Propp suggests that Western folklorists are blinded to the canonical narrative productions of their urban, educated classes (whose work is primarily literary), because Western folklorists assume that such works are the cultural acme to which all other patterns of narrative (including peasant tales) are but steps, and that it is their task to map out such steps. In contrast, Propp suggests that Marxist folklorics are more forward-looking because Marxist scholarship describes current cultural production (literary and oral) as still-evolving, actively adapting as a developing superstructural response to changing economic bases. In one key respect, this argument was well ahead of its time. Although Victorian British folklorists assumed that folklore is intrinsically primitive compared with canonical literature, Propp suggests that folklore methodologies not only can, but should be applied to all contemporary oral and literary material, not just material produced by people of lower classes or (as the Folklore Society implies) people of “lower” stages of cultural development —effectively advocating a shift towards cultural studies. However, the tension between Propp’s stadialist commitment to a linear evolution of human culture and his suggestion that folklore can be applied equally to all contemporary material does not always sit comfortably. ⁹

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⁹ This contradiction causes some difficulty for his followers, particularly Alan Dundes, who was primarily responsible for introducing Propp’s work in the Anglophone world (Cf. A. Lieberman x).
6.1.3  Postcolonial Treatments of Folkloric Material in Britain after WWII

In the wake of WWII, the global disillusionment with eugenic theory, and the parallel rise of civil rights movements around the world, members of the Folklore Society substantially reevaluated both their purpose and methodologies. In her 1959 presidential address, Sona Rosa Burstein (n.d.) cited Marett’s 1918 call to arms and declared that folklorists had discovered a new sense of purpose and dynamism:

Our science of folklore must be a social science and in the light of many of the findings of the social sciences in the last twenty years, I think we must examine some of our folklore survivals with some anxiety. The stresses of the tragedies of these years have directed the social sciences more and more towards problems of human relations. The ‘reduction of tensions’ has become a phrase common to sociology, anthropology, mental health and industrial research. […] It is felt that the problem of group hatred, prejudice and intolerance must be solved before mankind can hope to live in peace. […] I should say that now, less than ever, can folklorists afford to shut their eyes to what is going on. [sic] For many of these prejudices which are so occupying the minds of all earnest thinkers are made of the very stuff of folklore. (361-2)

Burstein went on to argue that stereotypes are sustained through folkloric narratives like nursery rhymes and tales with prejudicial representations of raced, religious, gendered, or aged characters: the thieving Welshman, the cheating Jew, the wicked stepmother, and so forth (363-4). Yet if folklore can be a vehicle for passing prejudice on to the next generation, so folklore scholarship might trace these prejudices back to their original rumors, misconceptions, or generalizations and, acknowledging them, to determine whether a folkloric survival should “be fenced around to protect it from destructive human hands, or to hold back its destructive influence on the living human individual and group […] Such consideration and such judgment are among the grave responsibilities of those who work with folklore” (381). This call for folklorists to actively engage with culture at every level as well as to purposefully document historical narratives marked a
new ethos in folklore studies which largely inverted the priorities of the Victorian and early twentieth-century scholarship.

However, even in the 1950s, folklore retained some of the reputation of its Victorian, racist, colonial origins. For example, in his early work, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), the Martiniquan postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) initially argues in favor of the collection of folk material, especially in the form of anecdote:

[…] the fact that it has taken shape and survived through the years is an unmistakable indication that it addresses a tension, explicit or latent, but real. Its persistence underscores the fact that the black world subscribes to it. In other words, when a story survives in folklore, it expresses in some way a region of the “local soul.” (44-5)

However, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1962), Fanon becomes much warier of the association of black culture with the language of folklore scholarship and argued that it has been used in ways that are anthropologically reductive (167). To redress this, Fanon proposes a change in language and emphasizes the term “national culture” as an alternative to the tainted term “folk culture”:

We must work and struggle in step with the people so as to shape the future and prepare the ground where vigorous shoots are already sprouting. National culture is no folklore where an abstract populism is convinced it has uncovered the popular truth. It is not some congealed mass of noble gestures, in other words less and less connected with the reality of the people. National culture is the collective thought process of a people to describe, justify, and extol the actions whereby they have joined forces and remained strong. National culture in the underdeveloped countries, therefore, must lie at the very heart of the liberation struggle these countries are waging. (168)

His emphatic conclusion is that “Negro-African culture grows deeper through the people’s struggle, and not through songs, poems, or folklore” (178).
In spite of Burstein’s bold agenda, Fanon’s wariness has validity in light of the anthologies produced well into the 1960s. For example, in 1965 the American professor of English and Anthropology, John Greenway (n.d.) released *The Primitive Reader* as a sequel to *Literature Among the Primitives* (1964). In it he states that:

The standard for inclusion in *The Primitive Reader* is esthetic value—what the broadminded reader prepared to go a little way out of his own culture will be able to read with profit and enjoyment. […] In making my choices frankly by value judgment, I have been renegade to my profession, which is reluctant to find any differences among the races of mankind or their works. […] I retain too the adjective “primitive” in this book, though few of my colleagues in anthropology would be caught dead with so pejorative a modifier in their possession. My colleagues in folklore might advise the classification “folklore” for this material, but I reserve this term for the work of another phase in cultural evolution, and while some folk groups might be nonliterate (or illiterate), they are not primitive, except in sanitary facilities. (2)

Though he identifies his work as anthropological rather than folkloric, this preface powerfully echoes Gomme’s language from the 1890 *Handbook of Folklore*: Greenway is absolutely confident in his own authority to determine aesthetic value and cultural status, he stresses terms like “primitive” and “cultural evolution,” and he assumes that his readers are of “his own culture.” Greenway’s table of contents also makes it evident that he targets most of the same people groups identified as most suitable for folk-analysis in the nineteenth century: Africans, aboriginal Australians, and Native Americans. (The significant difference being his exclusion of “peasant European” narratives.)

In the crudest possible sense, Greenway also draws on stadial terminology to assure his readers that the language of “primitivism” is not pejorative because a primitive state is neither the fault nor the destiny of the people so defined:

The fate of primitive peoples is to become civilized; the destiny of their literature is to change from a medium for marveling to a medium for thinking. Whether this
destination is an unhappy one, as most nay-sayers since Rousseau allege it to be, and whether philosophy is a higher function of literature than wonder, are questions quite beside the point so far as the affected peoples themselves are concerned, for one of the inevitable results of the clash of cultures is the abandonment of the old ideas by the materially inferior society. However sentimental we in our guilt may feel about the nobility of the savage, the savage himself takes a more practical view of life and cultural evolution. From the “gibbet sixpence” stage until complete integration (or extermination) he takes as much from the dominant culture as it will permit, and gives up as much of his own. (118)¹⁰

The extreme condescension of his language, the equanimity with which he compares “integration (or extermination),” and the absurdity of his claim to speak on behalf of “the savage himself” are outrageous, but they are also the logical outgrowth of the foundational, colonial assumptions of the Folklore Society which decreed in the 1890s that a only scholar from a “civilized,” “thinking” culture can make proper evaluation of “materially inferior,” “savage” societies.

Building on Fanon’s argument in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1985), Giatryi Spivak (b.1942) further added a gender-liberal dimension to the postcolonial critique of folklore methodologies:¹¹

Figures like the goddess Athena—‘father’s daughters self-professedly uncontaminated by the womb’—are useful for establishing women’s ideological self-debasement, which is to be distinguished from a deconstructive attitude toward the essentialist subject. The story of mythic Sati, reversing every

¹⁰ According to the curators at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, the English letters “v” and “f” are often pronounced as “b” by native speakers of Aboriginal languages, and the phrase “gibbet sixpence” is a pidgin phrase meaning “give me sixpence.” Essentially, Greenway is using the false cognate to crudely characterize the first cross-linguistic communication by Aboriginal speakers of pidgin English.

¹¹ That material that Spivak is talking about would generally be coded as “Hindu Myth” (capital “M”), signifying its status as folklore that is both believed in religious terms and (implicitly) linked to a geographical region. It is not strictly “fairy tale” in the Western sense of the term, but its division from “folklore” proper is somewhat arbitrary, and aspects of the canon of Hindu Myth have been appropriated for fairy tale anthologies like Lang’s; the theoretical point also has relevance for folklore methodologies that warrant its inclusion in this discussion.

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narrateme of the rite, performs a similar function: the living husband avenges the wife’s death, a transaction between great male gods fulfills the destruction of the female body and thus inscribes the earth as sacred geography. To see this as proof of the feminism of classical Hinduism or of Indian culture as goddess-centered and therefore feminist is as ideologically contaminated by nativism or reverse ethnocentrism as it was imperialist to erase the image of the luminous fighting Mother Durga and invest the proper noun Sati with no significance other than the ritual burning of the helpless widow as a sacrificial offering who can then be saved. There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak.12

Here, Spivak is concerned with the process by which foreign tales are interpreted and forced into ideological frameworks that validate pre-existing assumptions. She’s arguing that reading this tale as “feminist” in Western terms can be just as problematic as stripping away Sati’s willful, defiant, voluntary act of self-sacrifice. Any unilateral Western process of myth-interpretation (whatever its stated agenda) will fail to promote cultural interchange; Spivak urges Western audiences to listen and to let their vocabularies be altered because, in the terms through which Western audiences interpret their own patterns of myth, “there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak.”

6.1.4 Marxist Treatments of Folkloric Material in Britain after WWII

Like the gender-liberal scholars writing at the same time, Marxist scholars tended to use the word “myth” in a metaphorical sense to describe the kinds of dangerous

12 307. To crudely summarize the tale to which Spivak refers: Sati was married to the god Shiva, but Sati’s arrogant father Daksha refused to respect either Shiva or his daughter’s marriage. In his arrogance, Daksha invited all of the gods to a grand ritual sacrifice but rudely neglected to send invitations to his daughter and her husband. Sati attended the event hoping to reconcile with Dashka, but he received her coldly. That evening, they quarreled ferociously about Shiva’s virtues, and enraged by her father’s disrespect, Sati prayed that she might, in her next life, be born to a father that she could respect and immediately immolated herself. Sensing her death, an infuriated Shiva appeared and wreaked havoc in Daksha’s house, slaughtering him and all of his guests, though, in the morning, Shiva forgave them and brought them all back to life. Sati was reincarnated the daughter of a great devotee of Shiva named Parvati who, when she came of age, sought and married Shiva again. (The story is recorded in the Hindu Tantras).
stereotypes and generalizations that are absorbed by a people-group unconsciously and taken for granted. They used the concept of “story” in contrast with “myth” and foregrounded the argument that direct human communication, particularly through new patterns of storytelling, could re-humanize conflict enacted on an incomprehensible scale and encourage participants to empathize with each other.

In part, this development in Marxist theory paralleled the nineteenth-century development of British fairy poetry that set spiritually rich fairies and fairy stories against the cold, impersonal forces of commercialism and sterile rationality, but the argument was adapted and updated by theorists like Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). In his essay “The Storyteller” (1936), Benjamin expresses less interest in the grand stadial development of narrative form than in privileging storytelling (as a pattern of narrativity that most directly and personally communicates human wisdom garnered through experience) over written information (where the impersonal dissemination of facts resists any build up of empathy between the author and audience as individuals): “Experience passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among the writers who have set down the tales, the great ones are those whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (157). For Benjamin, the joint, ongoing production of an oral narrative that is passed back and forth through the human community through personal retellings is unifying and humanizing, collectively owned in a way that a work which is attributed to a single author can never be.

In addition to ratifying personal communication in human communities, for Benjamin the story also requires active mental exertion: facts require nothing but “prompt
verifiability” because information is always “shot through with explanations”; stories, however, can communicate timeless, global “wisdom” because they are always open-ended (147). For that reason, Benjamin would argue that the act of telling a fairy tale is a primary mode of resistance to the vast publication of “myth”: 13

“And they lived happily ever after,” says the fairy tale. The fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest. This end was the need created by myth. The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which myth had placed upon its chest […] The wisest thing—so the fairy tales taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day— is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits. (157)

In effect, fairy tales empower individuals and small communities to resist “myth” through the active reiteration of human wisdom (which is both an end and a means, since sharing wisdom through the act of storytelling is itself a wise thing to do.) Like the gender-liberal writers who would call for aggressive, self-conscious new patterns of reading (what they would call “revisionist mythmaking”), Benjamin is arguing that the process of transmission (active rather than passive) is at least as important as the content itself.14

After the WWII which reduced so many human beings to numbers, the desperate need to reconnect people through language inspired many writers besides Benjamin to

13 By “stories,” Benjamin means tales that communicate human wisdom and experience at a metaphorical remove that requires an active process of interpretation; by “myth” he implies pre-digested information that is believed without question (“Storyteller” 147). Cf. Anatoly Lieberman: “Marxism requires not only the treatment of artistic activity as belonging to the superstructure but also a class perspective in literary analysis. […] It was said that folklore must be traditional, collective, oral, and anonymous” (l).

14 This argument also segues nicely into Roland Barthes’ argument about reader-responsibility. Cf. “Death of the Author” (1977).
privilege the story as a site of healing and interpersonal communication. For example, reading Hanna Arendt (1906-1975), Dirk de Schutter (n.d.) finds a similar insistence that story must displace the potentially de-humanizing meta-narratives of traditional historiography:

History will only be restored to honor, if historiography renounces its scientific character, that is, if it relinquishes its privilege to explain what has happened and fit it into all-encompassing schemes and if it learns to tell stories. Science eliminates the meaning of occurrences by inserting them in impersonal processes and attributing them to the dynamics of historical movements [...] These explanatory models are the scientific equivalent of fiction: they usurp the meaning of historical tale. They smother every singularity [...] as the application of a general rule. Finally, these models intend to prove only one thing: there are no events, everything has already occurred, we have always been underway toward the end of history; or stories are superfluous, we have already understood everything. (230)

This passage is slightly confusing because Arendt uses specialized and not entirely intuitive definitions of “story” (an individuated tale about past experience, literal or metaphorical) and “fiction” (a narrative of pastness that fits all stories into a coherent structure), but her work importantly expands Benjamin’s argument about immediate processes of communication backwards chronologically into an argument about historiography. In terms of fairy tales, this argument is partly a critique of the Victorian anthropological applications of folklore that fit cultural groups into a “scientific” linear framework stretching from “primitivism” to “civilization.” It is also an echo of Spivak’s call to cultural humility because the scientific models assure readers (falsely) that they can categorize and contain all patterns of human experience and discourage readers from noticing or considering any narrative which does not fit into the mainstream model.

For Benjamin and Arendt, the crucial call was for re-personalization, making human communication smaller in scale and therefore more direct and more validating,
maximizing opportunities to foster human empathy. Similar goals were also being
pursued by folklorists on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly as they began to theorize
the difference between oral and literary communication. In 1946, the hugely influential
American folklorist Stith Thompson (1885-1976) claimed that, “It is impossible to make
a complete separation of the written and oral tradition. Often, indeed, their interrelation is
so close and so inextricable as to present one of the most baffling problems the folklore
scholar encounters” (*Folktale* 4), however, Thompson goes on to confer a unique weight
to oral communication:

> It is clear that the oral story need not always have been oral. But when it once
habituates itself to being passed on by word of mouth […] Its effects are no long
produced indirectly by association with words written or printed on a page, but
directly through facial expression and gesture and repetition and recurrent patterns
that generations have tested and found effective. 15

For Thompson, as for Benjamin, the story itself is only a facet of the value of storytelling;
the teller and audience’s mutual commitment to sharing experience connects them both to
each other and, implicitly, to previous generations of storytellers. In this case the
ancientness of the tales affirms humanity through the generations. In Benjamin’s terms:
“Intelligence that came from afar –whether over spatial distance (from foreign countries)
or temporal (from tradition) – possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it
was not subject to verification” (157), and in Thompson’s: “the teller of a folktale is
proud of his ability to hand on that which he has received. He usually desires to impress
his readers or hearers with the fact that he is bringing them something that has the stamp

15 *Folktale* 4-5. It is precisely this argument about the deeper efficacy of oral communication that
would prompt Derrida’s critique in “Structure, Sign, and Play.”
of good authority, that the tale was heard from some great story-teller or from some aged
person who remembered it from the old days” (4). Both arguments resist the stadial
progression from “primitive” to “civilized” by valorizing tradition and validating ancient
patterns of human wisdom.

In the 1970s and 80s, folklore scholars struck a balance between the pre-WWII
investment in mapping fairy tales into a linear pattern of development and the post-WWII
investment in breaking down meta-historiographies by instituting a historicist move to
mine individual texts (and shifts in tellings within a particular tale tradition) for historical
information about the moment in which they were composed.16 In 1984, Robert Darnton
(b.1939) argued that “folktales are historical documents. Far from expressing the
unchanging operations of man’s inner being, they suggest that mentalités themselves
have changed”(13). This move privileged all the variations of a similar tale that occur in
slightly different places or times (as evidence of distinct/changing cultural concerns)
rather than emphasizing their similarity or fitting them into a framework like the Aarne-
Thompson-Uther system. In doing so, Darnton seems to be returning to the late
nineteenth century thesis of the Folklore Society (as, for example, set out in the series
Folk-Lore and Legends, 1880-1890) by arguing that a broad historical analysis of fairy
tales from a particular cultural/geographic region would allow historians, folklorists, and
anthropologists to identify patterns of social development:

One can study it at the level of structure, noting the way the narrative is framed
and the motifs are combined, instead of concentrating on fine points of detail.

16 For some scholars, this shift was also cast in terms that were explicitly resistant to developments
in psychoanalytic theory; Darnton specifically attacked “universal” Jungian readings of fairy tales laid out
by scholars like Erich Fromm (1900-1980) and Bruno Bettelheim (1903-1990).
Then one can compare it with other stories. And finally, by working through the entire body of French folktales, one can distinguish general characteristics, overarching themes, and pervasive elements of style and tone (18-19).

The primary differences between this pattern of historicization and the turn-of-the-century historicization of fairy tales were the lack of value judgments and the presumption that fairy tales and folk tales offer clues about cultural values and concerns of the many people whose voices were not recorded in official historical accounts. Writing from a postcolonial context after a century of global warfare, Darnton is interested in mapping cultural differences in these alterative histories without being invested in using those differences to demonstrate cultural superiority/inferiority.

This cluster of theorists does not represent every important development in relation to Marxism, (post)colonial theory, or folklore scholarship—even through the relatively narrow scope of fairy tale theorization—however, this material does highlight a few important arguments that would have implications for the development of fairy tale poetry. Briefly:

• The colonial Victorian methodologies of folklore scholarship (including scope and pattern of analysis) which grew up alongside the theorization of eugenics were challenged during WWI and changed irrevocably by the end of WWII, when folklore shifted its analysis from an adjudicative model to a model that stressed cultural commonalities.

• As civil rights movements gained traction worldwide in the 1960s, postcolonial scholars challenged folklorists to consider the extent to which adjudicative folkloric models beg the question and challenged the potentially racist/sexist
implications of identifying cultural productions as “folklore” rather than national “cultural output” in more general terms by suggesting that there is an implicit qualitative (low culture/high culture) distinction between the two. (To what extent does a focus on “oral culture” reproduce the same objects of study as the rough grouping of “peasants” and colonial people?)

- At the same time, there were scholars, like Greenway, who held on to the racist applications of the older models. The structure of the present folkloric divisions between “myth” and “folklore” and “legend” were inherited from the turn-of-the-century system established by Frazer and, insofar as they distinguish between “belief”/“entertainment” and “real history”/“wholly imaginary,” still have some connotations of a Victorian, Western, colonial bias.17

- In Russia, Marxists interpreted of folkloric texts (including fairy tales) as representative of a “superstructure” tied to a particular economic “base” in a stadial model. They also stressed nationalist interpretations of folklore because economic structures were generally delineated along national lines.

- In Europe and North America, several mid-century Marxists argued that storytelling (particularly the telling of fairy tales) breaks down social barriers and counters the dehumanizing effects of information.

- Later Marxists sometimes adopted a more historicist model, less invested in mapping a stage of social development than in mining texts for clues about historical values and concerns that were not recorded in official histories.

17 Cf. Chapter 1.1.1 “How are fairy tales defined by folklorists?”
At times these arguments would parallel arguments being made in fairy tale poetry, and at times they offer frameworks through which it is helpful to interpret the shifts in fairy tale poetry. It is not always easy to distinguish between the historical contextualization of the theoretical developments and the applications of those theories over a substantial historical period, but in the treatments of the following groups of poets, I have tried to maintain that distinction. For example, although none of these theorists mentioned in this chapter were specifically invested in childhood (except insofar as “primitive” cultures were identified as “child-like” by colonial scholars), poetic accounts of fairy tales always had to engage with its connotations as children’s literature. And because fairy tale poetry had roots in both adult, high culture, British “fairy poetry” and children’s, popular culture, (appropriated-as-)British “fairy tales” the sub-genre’s cultural connotations at any given moment were highly complex.

6.2 War and Fairy Tales

As you might expect, colonialism informed not only historical folklore but also turn-of-the-century poetry, not least in genres for children. Texts like An ABC for Baby Patriots (1899) by Mary Frances Ames (n.d.) included such informative rhymes as: 18

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18 Note: Mary Francis Ames always published under her married name Mrs. Earnest Ames, validating her authority in the arena of children’s literature by virtue of marriage (and, implicitly, motherhood).
A is the Army
That dies for the Queen;
Its the very best Army
That ever was seen.

E is our Empire
Where sun never sets;
The larger we make it
The bigger it gets.

I is for India,
Our land in the East
Where everyone goes
To shoot tigers, and feast.

K is for Kings;
Once warlike and haughty,
Great Britain subdued them
Because they'd been naughty.

Figure 6.1 Illustrations from *An ABC for Baby Patriots* (1899)\(^9\)

\(^9\) My thanks to Lissa Paul for introducing me to this text. Note: The “E is for Empire” rhyme from this picture book is discussed by Jo-Ann Wallace and Stephen Slemon, in the article “Empire” in *Keywords for Children’s Literature* (2011).
Ames’ texts, shocking as they seem today, were the primers on which many of the poets and folklorists of the early twentieth century had been raised, and this genre of poetic/patriotic children’s literature was characterized by five key formal and thematic traits. First, at a very basic narrative level, the commanding tone is enacting the attitude of colonialism, and, from the very first page, the language of life and death: “This is the army that dies for the queen.” Second, the indirect quotation of political rhetoric: “E is our Empire/Where sun never sets” is an echo of a phrase from the Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee: “The sun never sets upon the British empire.” Third, the pronouns: India is our land, where everyone goes. The implication is that the people who live there already do not count as people. Fourth, the accommodation of all the animals, who either assist in the adventure of baby colonialism or considerately line up to be shot, as required. Nature, in this representation, validates colonialism by passive and active consent. Fifth, the dehumanization of “other” people. The costumes in the “K” image represent the “kings” as failed British citizens—one king has trousers and suspenders, the other has a collar, but neither of them understand European clothing or wear the uniform of empire “properly,” and, like the animals, they are also very accommodating of their own destruction. The second “king” in this image is carrying a spear, which he could, presumably, use to impale the European kings, but he chooses not to. And the monkey-like, distorted face of the kings situates them very specifically in context of Francis Galton’s eugenic scale:

20 Ames also published a sequel to the ABC titled The Tremendous Twins or How the Boers Were Beaten (1900).
In the context of colonial expansion, Galton’s principles were extended and applied in broader terms to suggest that culturally and evolutionarily “superior” people have a right and, indeed, a responsibility to forcibly advance the other groups. In other words, colonized people are not just unlucky, they are underevolved. The illustration does
suggest that Ames’ “warlike king” is clearly two steps down from Apollo Belvedere on the evolutionary scale. Presumably recognizing their place, the captive kings are not distressed in these images; they are calm and relaxed, even cheerful. The children who read this book are being taught that colonialism is fun for everyone, that it is natural, and that it is inevitable.

Today, Mary Frances Ames is little known, but there are powerful colonial elements in the work of the children’s authors that we most know and love, and they echo the same kinds of rhetoric found in Ames. These books both make apparent the connection between war and childhood in the British Empire and contextualize the colonialist perspective implicit in the work of immensely popular poets whose children’s verse is filled with the language of ownership, racism, and violent domination:

And all about was mine, I said,
The little sparrows overhead,
The little minnows too.
This was the world and I was king;
For me the bees came by to sing,
For me the swallows flew.
—R.L. Stevenson (1850-1894), from “My Kingdom,” *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (1885)

Land of our Birth, we pledge to thee
Our love and toil in the years to be;
When we are grown and take our place,
As men and women with our race.

Father in Heaven who lovest all,
Oh help Thy children when they call;
That they may build from age to age,
An undefiled heritage.
[...]  
Land of our Birth, our faith, our pride,
For whose dear sake our fathers died;
O Motherland, we pledge to thee,
Head, heart, and hand through years to be!
—Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), from “The Children’s Song,” *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906)

When I go up the Amazon,
I stop at night and fire a gun
To call my faithful band.
And Indians in twos and threes,
Come silently between the trees,
And wait for me to land.
And if I do not want to play
With any Indians today,
I simply wave my hand.
And then they turn and go away—
They always understand.
—A.A. Milne (1882-1956), from “Nursery Chairs,” *When We Were Very Young* (1924)

The links between children’s colonialism and fairy material may not be immediately apparent, but the connection is quite strong. For the children featured as the protagonists of these verses, the colonies are an exotic imaginary space every bit as fantastical as a fairy-land, and often represented in similar terms. In Stevenson’s *Garden*, the poem “Foreign Lands” actually ends with the claim that “If I could find a higher tree/Farther and farther I should see […] To where the roads on either hand/Lead onwards into fairy land’’(27). Likewise, Kipling’s “Children’s Song,” functions as the coda to his novel about children who meet with fairies, *Puck of Pook’s Hill*. Milne’s poetry is full of fairy tale fragments, and he was well-known as an author of fairy-tale short stories, novels, and plays for children, including “The King’s Sons,” “Prince Rabbit,” “The Princess who Could Not Laugh,” *Once on a Time* (1917), *The Ivory Door* (1929), and *The Ugly*

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21 Cf. also Stevenson’s “Historical Associations”: “Dear Uncle Jim, this garden ground/That now you smoke your pipe around/Has seen immortal actions done/And valiant battles lost and won” (75).
Duckling (1946). At the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the colonial adventure and the fairy tale were coded as part and parcel of the same nursery experience. 22

Even the illustrations for such innocuously titled works as *A Child’s Garden of Verses* were illustrated in such a way as to link childhood with colonialism:

![Figure 6.3 A Child’s Garden of Verses (1885), early twentieth-century cover illustrations](image)

22 The kind of aggressive, violent hero fairy tale poetry being written by G.K. Chesterton and Alfred Noyes also contributed to this atmosphere. Cf. the title poem from Alfred Noyes’ *The Flower of Old Japan: A Dim Strange Tales for All Ages* (1903): “You that have known the wonder zone/Of islands far away;/You that heard the dinkey bird/And roamed in rich Cathay;/You that have sailed o’er the unknown seas/To woods of Amfalula trees/Where craggy dragons play/Oh, girl or woman, boy or man,/You’ve plucked the Flower of Old Japan!” (23). Excursions to the Far East (“islands far away”) are conflated with nonsense terms (“amfalula trees,” “dinkey bird”) and magic (“wonder zone,” “craggy dragons”), but they are also made accessible to imaginative readers of poetry, who are invited to “know” and then to claim, to “pluck” the experience of Japan. It is this reconciliation of adventure in the (imaginary) abroad and comfort at home that has influenced the twenty-first century reading of Noyes’ work as fundamentally colonial. Cf. RGEL 1032.
In the first image, the children are, literally, practicing the art of war. With paper soldier’s hats, and little wooden swords, they encourage each other to march boldly into the world to claim treasure and adventure in the name of the nation—which is represented by the uniforms in miniature and by the flag that is carried by the baby. The illustration of the second piece more clearly complements Stevenson’s poem “Foreign Children” (1885), addressed to: “Little Indian, Sioux or Crow,/Little frosty Eskimo/Little Turk or Japanee” to pose the question, “Oh! don’t you wish that you were me?” because although foreign places are beautiful, adventurous, and “Such a life is very fine […] it’s not so nice as mine./You must often as you trod,/Have wearied not to be abroad (34).” In addition to conflating all “foreign children” into one cultural group (“not-British”), this poem and image naturalize British childhood as the ideal childhood and British culture as globally central. Like Ames, Stevenson is suggesting that everywhere else is “foreign” (“abroad”) even to the people who live there and further implying, from the cover illustration to the final poem, that the world marvels at British culture with jealous eyes.

Of course, not all children in Britain had access to an upper-middle-class imaginative nursery space, but all British children were allied under the implicit nationalism implied by those childhood narratives. As these poems further imply, the “baby patriot” being fostered by Ames, Stevenson, Milne, and Kipling is clearly wealthy, white, Christian, and (in action, though not in patriotism or planning) exclusively male; however, all of the British (and even American) children who were exposed to this category of nursery writing had some sense of an idealized British childhood—enacted in a warm, safe space that contains both an infinity of magical adventures and perfect domestic comfort, and in which the child is an absolute monarch. For everyone who is
familiar with this iconic image, it becomes a powerful register through which to discuss the actual experiences of war. In pro-war poetry and rhetoric, the us-them language of villainy and heroism transcribes neatly to the language of allies and enemy force. Conversely, because this polarized image of us-them was so strong, the violation of this image (fairy tale adventures that do not end happily ever after) speaks very powerfully against a polarized language of us-them in an actual wartime context and implicates the language of the nursery in structuring and supporting the colonial mindset.

The narratives of childhood are particularly significant in the context of Britain’s soldier-poets of the First World War, none of whom seem to be able to talk about the conflict without referencing the nursery narratives through which they first learned about (and practiced) war and empire. Surprisingly, this holds true even for poets who reject schoolroom patriotism. For example, the second poem in the best-selling collection *Rhymes of a Red-Cross Man* (1916) by the Scottish poet Robert Service (1874-1958) was titled “The Fool” and described a classic transition from school-room to front line:

> “But it isn’t playing the game,” he said,  
> And he slammed the books away;  
> “The Latin and Greek I’ve got in my head  
> Will do for a duller day.”  
> “Rubbish!” I cried; “The bugle’s call  
> Isn’t for lads from school.”  
> D’ye think he’d listen? Oh, not at all:  
> So I called him a fool, a fool. […] (295) 23

23 Similar motifs are echoed in “Young Fellow My Lad,” “Carry On!,” and “Over the Parapet,” but in Service’s very heteroglossic work, they mostly serve as a counterpoint to the alternately grim and tragic-comic accounts of soldiers and civilians caught in the trenches, on the razor wire, and between the ever-shifting front lines.
The standard register locates the poem in an upper class social context, and the allusion to a classical “Latin and Greek” education reinforces the assumption that the speaker is from a privileged background. Here, the expression “playing the game” (a public school metaphor for a British, upper-class, “stiff-upper-lip” code of conduct) serves a double function—first as class marker, but second by juxtaposing the bizarre reductiveness of the application—for a young man, going to war would be “playing the game,” and staying at school to play cricket would not. In Service’s poem, the unnamed hero is killed almost instantly, and although the official report has no details, the grieving narrator knows the boy’s fate: “Part of him mud, part of him blood,/The Rest of him—not at all” (296).

However, Service further raises the question of identity and nation through the final two stanzas of his poem, in which the narrator becomes, not more cynical, but suddenly nostalgically appreciative of (and weepingly grateful for) school-room patriotic rhetoric:

And I called him a fool…oh, how blind was I!
And the cup of my grief’s abrim.
Will Glory o’ England ever die
So long as we’ve lads like him?
So long as we’ve fond and fearless fools,
Who, spurning fortune and fame,
Turn out with the rallying cry of their schools,
Just bent on playing the game. […]
And though there’s never a grave to tell,
Nor a cross to mark his fall,
Thank God! we know that he “batted well”
In the last great Game of all.24

The poem is unsettling because the “Glory o’ England” as defined by schoolroom rhetoric seems to become self-sustaining; as it is needed to justify the dead, it will be that much more emphatically used to train the living because without this rhetoric the boy’s death (and the war itself) seems to be meaningless. In the end, the reader wonders whether the title is meant to apply to the boy soldier, to his grieving guardian, to those who can call war a game, or to those who cannot be comforted by the rhetoric of the game. Other poets shared Service’s confusion on this point. Robert Graves (1895-1985) noted that “If any shirk and doubt they know the game,/There’s one to teach them how” (“The Dead Fox Hunter” 20) because the game is neverending:

Another War soon gets begun,
A dirtier more glorious one;
Then, boys, you’ll have to play, all in;
It’s the cruelest team will win.
So hold your nose against the stink
And never stop too long to think […] (from “The Next War” 54)

The problem with writing poetry in a warzone is that it requires the soldier to stop long enough to think.

The poems in this pattern of fairy tale writing are the poems of traumatized minds spinning with incomprehensible images. Over and over, they recite, like a mantra, the promise of cheerful, heroic, patriotic fairy tale adventures and happy domestic reunions recorded by poets like Milne, Kipling, and Stevenson, but those images never seem adequate—they cannot occlude the horror, they cannot explain it, and they cannot justify it. However, the most central preoccupation of fairy tale poetry written in WWI, is the hopeless, helpless, obsessive attempt to reconcile memories of fairy tale with immediate
experience. Reflecting on his war years in “Vigils” (1934), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) writes:

They were not true, those dreams, those story books of youth;
I left them all at home; went out to find the truth;
Slammed the green garden gate on my young years, and started
Along the road to search for freedom, empty-hearted.

But dreams have secret strength; they will not die so soon:
They haunt the quiet hours through idle afternoon;[…]
For, having grown world-wise through harshly unlearned illusion,
The traveler into time arrives at this conclusion,--
That life, encountered and unmasked in variant shapes,
Dissolves in dust and cloud, and thwartingly escapes.
But in remembered eyes of youth my dreams remain
They were my firstling friends. I have returned again. 25

All of the war poets recognize the idealized domestic space as a lie, but cannot help obsessing over it “returning again,” for “dreams have secret strength” and the escape from them into “unlearned illusion” is still defined by “illusion.” At the same time, poets love fairy tale domesticity for the security it promises (“youth” behind a secure “green garden gate”) and they hate it for never having been true. But under the duress of war, a choice between “true” or “not true” can “dissolve in dust and cloud” into a choice between memories which are bearable and memories which are unbearable. 26 The illusion, however unlearned, can be willfully relearned.

25 Sassoon, “Vigils” 212. In this context the common twentieth-century definition of “fairy tale” as “idealized” makes perfect sense because the home space in which “those story books of youth” were read had become a kind of fairy tale in its own right.

26 In 1913 Freud published “The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales” in which he argued that severely traumatic events can be repressed and then displaced by “screen memories” taken from fairy tales. It is extremely unlikely that the war poets were familiar with his work, but their poetry seems to support Freud’s point.
Almost paradoxically, the second most common theme in fairy tale war poetry is found in the tales themselves, rather than the icon of fairy tale domesticity, and it is a language of trauma—fairy tales are full of betrayals, casual cruelties, meaningless violence, and grotesque deaths. So in 1918, when Wilfred Owen (1839-1918) sees the bodies of young men strung on barbed wire, he thinks of the princes who died outside of Sleeping Beauty’s tower, their bones suspended by the thorns (“Kind Ghosts”). The hyperbolic language of fairy tales: demons and geniis, kings and queens, fairies and giants are so much larger than life that they can be used to metaphorically articulate larger-than-life experiences. In Benjamin’s terms, this group of fairy tale poets is processing a new experience in terms of human experience and recognizing that the process of transforming horror into art is as much part of the human experience as the horror itself. If nothing else, the shared action of participating in the tradition of tale-telling provides the poets with a sense of community that blossomed into a more immediate community as Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and David Jones (1895-1974) found each other, corresponded encouraged each other as both fellow writers and fellow soldiers.27

6.2.1  Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)

Sassoon was born into a prosperous family that owed its wealth to successful transactions in the Middle East and India. He began publishing at the age of 20 and released eight poetry collections before the onset of WWI. These early poems tend to be

27 I have avoided engaging with Jones’ *Anathemata* (1952) for this project, in spite of the fact that it has a long passage where a group of soldiers encounter a fairy because the pattern of his description of fairies, particularly the Queen of the Wood, has more in common with the Celtic folklore tradition than the British fairy tale tradition as I’ve narrowly defined it. Cf. Chapter 1.4 “Defining Fairy Tale Poetry.”
characterized in bland terms. Rupert Hart-Davis describes them as “agreeably derivative” (9); Peter Kemp claims that they evoke “a pastoral dream-world, stocked rather conventionally with Georgian fauna and flora” (RGEL1181). Sassoon enlisted in 1914, and fought with both the Sussex Yeomanry and then with Royal Welch Fusiliers alongside Robert Graves and David Jones. At various times between his enlistment and his official retirement from the army in March 1919, Sassoon was invalided out of battle with wounds but served actively throughout the entirety of the war.

Biographers of Siegfried Sassoon are always struck by the contrast between his privileged, idyllic childhood and the horror of his tenure as a soldier, perhaps because the contrast seems to have been hypnotic for Sassoon himself: his verse alternates between “a small firelit room” with “kindly books that hold me late” (“When I’m Among a Blaze of Lights” 14) and his immediate experience “Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden books/And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky/Haggard and hopeless” (“The Troops” 67): In his diaries of December 1915, he writes:

Everything out here goes past me like a waking dream. My inner life is far more real than the hideous realism of this land of the war-zone. I never thought to find such peace. If it were not for Mother and friends I would pray for a speedy death. I want a genuine taste of the horrors, and then—peace. I don’t want to go back to the old inane life which always seemed like a prison. I want freedom, not comfort. […] The last fifteen months have unsealed my eyes. I have lived well and truly since the war began, and have made my sacrifices; now I ask that the price be required of me. I must pay my debt. Hamo went: I must follow him.28

In this mind-shattering landscape, all values are topsy-turvy, and neither memories nor experiences seem “real;” in fact, Sassoon’s remembered domestic spaces seem to be most

28 22. Hamo was Sassoon’s younger brother, killed after a battle in Gallipoli on November 1, 1915.
hauntingly present when they are most achingly absent in reality. The war is “like a waking dream” but in it, he has “lived well and truly.” He feels like he has yet to experience a “genuine taste of the horrors” though “the last fifteen months have un-sealed my eyes.” He has “made […] sacrifices” but in doing so, acquired an inexplicable life-debt. When dreams become more real than reality, it is unsurprising that Sassoon turns to the formative language of imagination and dreams, which is also unreal but has the advantage of being comforting. Sassoon continually struggles with childhood narratives of adventure and fantasy, twisting them so that they are recognizable as nursery adventures gone unimaginably wrong, so that they tortuously represent both absolute domestic comfort and the absolute violation of that comfort. 29 Sassoon is known for his minimal formal experimentation because his double-language is all accomplished obliquely at the level of genre.

Some scholars have suggested that Sassoon’s earliest war poetry was still caught up in “the enchantment of a chivalric ideal” very like the fairy tale poetry tradition of G.K. Chesterton. 30 However, even in “The Dragon and the Undying” Sassoon’s use of fantastical fairy tale imagery is ambivalent. The war itself is described as the Dragon who “beats upon the dark with furious wings” (Collected 12) shattering spires and towns, leaving devastation in his wake. The dragon seems to be inevitable and unassailable, but all of the dead he leaves behind become part of the larger natural world (“Their faces are the fair, unshrouded night,/And planets are their eyes, their ageless dreams,” 12), and by

29 Cf. Graves’ “In Spite”: “How petty/to take/A merry little rhyme In a jolly little time/And poke it./And choke it/Change it, arrange it./Straight-lace it, deface it […] And chop and chew./And hack and hew/And weld it into a uniform stanza” (9-10). [Chapter 5: “Gender Fairy Tales and Poetry”]


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renewing life through death, even the slain refute the dragon, singing an anthem to life and rising up as “dawn-lit trees, with arms up-flung,/To hail the burning heavens they left unsung” (12). On one level, this kind of poem seems unduly romanticist and seems to draw on an almost Chestertonian sense of the heroic quest where a hero faces fearsome, monstrous otherworldly forms; however, a crucial part of this rhetoric is missing. The poem carefully refuses an easy nationalist rhetoric that would pitch an English St. George against the draconian Central Powers because the war itself is the dragon, and the dead are indistinguishable advocates of life in epic terms, not victory in nationalist, mundane terms. Even then, the singing dead are no true comfort, and Sassoon’s fairy tale tropes rapidly dissolve into a kind of crippled heroism with no promise of redemption, rescue, or happily ever after.

Sassoon’s rejection of heroism suggests that the old stories are inadequate to describe the new warfare; in “A Whispered Tale,” the narrator rejects “fool-heroes […] with stories of the glories that they’d seen” because the true, “good simple soldier […] Was muted when they shot [him] in the throat” (21). The wordless rasp of the shattered voice is only sufficient to tell “Sour jokes for all those horrors left behind” (21). Of all the fairy tale characters, the only ones that seem plausible on the battlefield are the monsters. Sassoon uses the language of otherworldliness to emphasize the traumatic incomprehensibility of warfare. Sassoon’s Lyrical Poems were written between 1908-1916, but it can be hard to tell which of the poems relate to the war, and which do not, because, in poems like “Goblin Revel” and “Night-Piece,” Sassoon describes traditional fairy tale villains in terms that also describe the nightmarish qualities of trench warfare: “I watch them come; by two, by three, by four,/Advancing slow” the goblins spill into the
moonlight with horrid music “jangled dulcimers, and fiddles thin/That taunt the twirling antic through once more” (50). Such poems seem to slip between the horror of a soldierly reality and the terrors of an overly-imaginative childhood.

Yet in spite of his skepticism of the tales, and perhaps because they gave him access to such rich and complex metaphorical language, Sassoon is continually drawn back to the cozy, iconic image of reading fairy tales by the domestic hearth. Through his war and post-war poetry, they continue to be the spaces through which imaginative, magical adventures occur, in terms that strikingly echo Milne’s “Nursery Chair” from an adult point of view:

To-night while I was pondering in my chair  
I saw for the first time a circle of brightness  
Made by my patient lamp up on the ceiling  
It shone like a strange flower; and then my stare  
Discovered an arctic snowstorm in that whiteness;  
And then some pastoral vale of rayed revealing.

White flowers were in a bowl beside my book;  
In midnight’s miracle of light they glowed,  
And every petal there in silence showed  
My life the way to wonder with a look. 31

In his later poetry, the adventures promised by the colonial bedtime stories are depopulated of both enemies and allies, and then transmuted into natural images of flowers, snow, and peaceful valleys. Sassoon recaptures wonder through imagination, but his enlightenment is also, by contrast, revealed to be a refusal of narrative. He no longer acts out a proscribed role on a national or global scale, he ponders existence in disembodied timeless space. Once returned to the safety of domestic space, it is

31 “Midnight Interior,” The Heart’s Journey (1928), 190.
transformed into a new ideal that also seems to slip beyond his grasp because it is
depopulated even of any human presence.

Because this domestic fairy tale space is still an imaginary space, it is, like the
space of childhood, fundamentally solitary even though the images have been shared with
other storytellers. When Stevenson’s child narrator imagines himself to be the
uncontested monarch of all (‘all about was mine’), he has no peers or parents. And when
Graves’ narrator imagines himself in a transmuted world with no violence or risk, he also
imagines himself to be in a world without kindness or love. Solitude seems to be a
defining aspect of this pattern of masculine fairy tale poetry.32

6.2.2 Robert Graves (1895-1985)

Of the fairy tale war poets, Graves was the only one to achieve a substantial
reputation as a children’s poet, but although fairies and fairy tales populate his war poetry
from 1916 on, the fairy and fairy tale poems are never selected by such anthologies as
*The Oxford Book of War Poetry* (1984), and the treatments of the “children’s” language
in his war poetries have been very conservatively phrased. For example, in *The Oxford
Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry* (2007), Fran Brearton (n.d.) noted very briefly
that that in a letter to Sassoon, “Owen described Graves’s technique in *Fairies and
Fusiliers* as ‘perfect’” (219), and that at times Graves’ “deliberately childlike idiom takes
on a more sinister aspect” (219), but she qualified her praise immediately:

32 The key difference between this masculine pattern of solitude and the feminine pattern of
isolation articulated by Mew and Wickham is that the male narrators can retain social comforts and social
standing in their self-imposed solitude. The female narrators are, in contrast, forced out of the
community—shunned, punished, or imprisoned—because of their “fay” characteristics.
This is not to make claims for Graves’s’ early war poems beyond their merits, but to note that his presence and influence complicate the wartime picture in ways not always fully acknowledged. Graves’s poetic voice in the war years is by no means as easily identifiable as Sassoon’s satirical one; nor does it have at this stage the maturity of Owen’s. But it was a familiar voice to both Owen and Sassoon, one that both pre-empts some of their thematic concerns and finds some stylistic echoes in their poems. (220)

Brearton is very perceptive about the persistent importance of the language of children’s literature in the work of these war poets, but her conservative and carefully qualified assessment of the quality of Graves’ war poetry is widely held. In his volume *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves* (2002), Frank Kersnowski (b.1934) complained that:

Graves’ war poetry lacks the immediacy and power of his later poetry [...] the poems Graves wrote during the war express neither the horror nor the outrage that characterize the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. He accepted the Victorian world of his parents so well imagined by Stevenson in Dr. Jekyll, the scientist who respected the properties of his society yet turned into what he denied himself to consider. [...] In brief, he accommodated himself to the world in which he lived, a world of unquestioned cause and effect. If the great Queen ruled the Empire, Aristotle ruled the minds of her subjects: reason and predictability were the essence of reality. And the task of the poet was to sing, without irony, of a world in which all is right, in which the past succumbs reasonably to the future [...] (80)

However, when Graves’ early work is read in the context of the genre conventions of children’s poetry, it becomes clear that Graves’ verse is conflicted, ironic, and questioning; it constitutes a violent protest, particularly against the things he’d been taught by Victorian nursery verse.

The first poems that he wrote as a soldier in 1915 (published in *Over the Brazier* in 1916), and even in this very first collection, Graves’ narrators desperately want the war to be a safe adventure just as the nursery tales promised, so much so that when Graves sees discrepancy between the tales and experience, he finds fault with himself rather than with
the narrative. For example, the adventure narrative promises that English boys are brave soldiers, and when Graves’ narrator finds himself to be terrified, he identifies himself not as a brave boy but as possessing “a tender, girlish heart/Tempered it with a man’s pride,/Learning to play the butcher’s part/Though the woman screams inside—“(‘A Renascence” 14). It is easier for the narrator to believe that he is not (at least unambiguously) a man than to give up the gender expectations that he learned from the nursery. The helpfulness and intrusiveness of these remembered patterns of nursery language are the central complication of Graves’ fairy and fairy tale poetry.

The sense of dislocation between adult experience and child narratives is heightened by Graves’ choice of changeling narratives. Changeling stories are always about a person who does not fit into the world in which they are living, a condition that very well describes a young soldier’s first experience in war. Graves’ “On Finding Myself a Soldier” describes a Thumbelina narrative where the narrator expects to find “Furled petal-tips of creamy rose” surrounding “A pretty baby-queen,” but instead finds “Twelve flamy petals ringed around a heart more red than blood” (13). It is a changeling narrative within a changeling narrative—the fairy tale itself has been usurped and corrupted—and the connotations of loss and disillusionment are very clearly standing in for the grander loss and disillusionment of a young man confronted with a war of horrors, not grand adventures, and the second poem in the collection affirms this feeling: “Some bad fairy stole/The baby I nursed:/Was this my pretty little soul,/This changeling accursed?”(13).

In many respects, Graves’ frantic turn towards nursery tales is both an affirmation of his youth and a confirmation that his youth is impossibly inaccessible. But these are
the terms through which he was first able to process trauma, and he doesn’t seem to have
enough life experience to use more adult contexts through which to persuasively interpret
his sensory perception of the war. For example, in the sequence “Nursery Memories”
(1916) Graves remembers the childish language he once used to explain death, heroic
adventure, and fear; juxtaposing those memories with italicized epigraphs about his
immediate war experience. In “The First Funeral”:

(The first corpse I saw was on the
German wires, and couldn’t be buried)

The whole field was so smelly;
   We smelt the poor dog first:
His horrid swollen belly
   Looked just like going burst. […]
Rose whispered: ‘That dog’s dead.

‘You bury all dead people,
   When they’re quite really dead,
Round churches with a steeple:
   Let’s bury this,’ Rose said.

And let’s put mint all round it
   To hide the nasty smell.’ […]
We through brown earth right over
   And said: ‘Poor dog, Amen!’ (15-6)

As a child, Graves learned that there are words (“Poor dog, Amen!”) and rituals (the
burial, the church, the mint, the ceremony) that ratifies death (“You bury all dead
people, When they’re quite really dead”) but diminishes and contains its traumatizing
effects, here represented most by the “nasty,” “horrid” smell. As a child Graves learned
the rituals of death, the proper rites, but is unable to fulfill those functions on the
battlefield, and the violation of ritual seems to be just as traumatic as the knowledge of
the death itself. From the children’s point of view, the adult rituals that they mimic are
arbitrary and incomprehensible, but comforting nonetheless because they represent order and control even in the face of death. In recreating this language, Graves is symbolically returning to a time in which he at least believed that incomprehensible adult rituals could have meaning and offer resolution. For the adult, however, this language fails to be comforting or to provide the illusion that in some future, adult world that the rituals surrounding death will make sense.

Graves uses this childhood language to talk about adult perception, and to show how pre-constructed it is by the narratives absorbed in childhood. Over the poetic sequence, the failure of ritual death narratives in the first poem is contrasted, in the second and third poems of the sequence, with the similar failure of the language of adventure stories and of folktales. In “The Adventure,” which was “Suggested by the claim of a machine-gun team to have/annihilated an enemy wire party: no bodies were found however” (16), Graves recalls a childhood excursion in which he persuaded his little brother that he “killed a tiger […] it must have been,/Because his hide was yellow, striped with black,/And his eyes were green” (16). The parallel between the two narratives infantilizes the soldiers who have persuaded themselves of their successfully completed heroic adventure, and gestures at the extent to which the soldiers, as adults, are still reciting the same patterns of adventure narrative and seeking the same kind of approval from their “brothers” (in this case, fellow soldiers) for having achieved them.33

These childhood narratives validate his fears and give them structure and linguistic precedent. The third poem, “I Hate the Moon,” written “After a moonlight

33 This process seems to be a kind of inversion of what Freud theorizes as the “screen memory” because it is a conscious recontextualizing of adult language in the language of childhood, identifying the patterns that have been appropriated to make sense of adult experience.
“patrol near the Brickstacks” (17), describes the contrasting myths told about the moon, both positive (“it makes most people glad./And they giggle and talk of silvery beams”) and negative (“the look of the Moon drives people mad,” 17); of the two tale traditions, he finds that, on patrol in revealing moonlight, he finds the nightmare tales more persuasive than the happy stories: “I hate the Moon and its horrible stony stare./And I know one day it’ll do me some dreadful thing” (17). By juxtaposing memories from childhood with his experiences of war, Graves makes it clear that as a child, he dealt with trauma by enacting a mimicry of adult rituals and fictions; as an adult, however, he deals with the trauma of war by returning to the language of childhood, and The adult retrospective creation of childhood experiences does not endorse Victorian domesticity, but fully articulates the bleakness of the pretense that the Victorian idealization of home offers to children and to adults.

This treatment of adult experience is also very specifically a British experience and the connotations of the fairy and fairy tale references bear this out. Graves’ third published war collection was titled, *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917), but it contains remarkably few fairies, which draws the reader’s attention to the fairy poems all the more; and they seem to follow in a very specific progression from a longing for an ideal that Graves knows to be illusory (“The Cottage” 36-7) to a deep empathy with a faun who has lost his fairy kingdom (“Faun” 40). The first poem, describes a “snug” domestic space full of warmth and color where the poet is safe, “Planning poem, book, or fable/At my darling beech-wood table” (“The Cottage” 36). For Graves, this peaceful domesticity is a kind of enchantment, and poetry is the magic through which the perfect space is created and preserved, however, for Graves, the idyll cannot hold:
Nor can kindliness of Spring,
Flowers that smile nor birds that sing,
Bumble-bee nor butterfly,
Nor grassy hill nor anything
Of magic keep me safe to rhyme
In this Heaven beyond my time.
No! for Death is waiting by. (“The Cottage” 37)

He knows that this space never existed, and can’t exist. “The Cottage” represents an ideal that more faulty (more real) British domesticity uses to gloss over its defects, and the more attention that the narrator focuses on the home, the more quickly the narrative fails to hold up in the face of death.

In fact, all of Graves’ representations of nationalism fracture in context of violence. Not only the representations of “home” but the representations of “empire” show these kinds of fault lines. The second fairy poem “Familiar Letter to Siegfried Sassoon” (37-9), rewrites the “marvellous journey” of the nursery adventure tale as it had been outlined by Kipling and Stevenson—in the voices of “Robert” and “Siegfried”—yet this tale is distinct because, rather than seeking out violence, they visit only places where violence is mythical and displaced to an ancient past:

[…] back in the high hinterland
You’ll see the grave of Shawn Knarlbrand
Who slew the savage Buffaloon
By the Nant-col one night in June […]
You’ll see where in old Romany Days,
Before Revivals changed our ways,
The Virgin ‘scaped the Devil’s grab,
Printing her foot on a stone slab
With five clear toe-marks; and you’ll find
The fiendish thumb-print close behind. (38)

Even when, in best Treasure Island style, the boys “sail away across the seas,” Robert claims that his peaceful task will be to learn the local customs while Siegfried, pied piper-
like, “learns the piccolo/To charm the people as we go” (39). The poem is still phrased in
carelessly confident colonialist terms, the boys are welcomed without question wherever
they go: “Bitlis and Mush will know our faces,” we will be:

Hobnobbing with the Chungs and Mings
And doing wild, tremendous things
In free adventure, quest and fight!
And God! what poetry we’ll write! (39)

In the end, his ambivalence to war is also an ambivalence to poetry—“fight” rhymes with
“write,” as if poetry is itself a kind of violence. For Graves, colonial poetry is linked with
colonial expansion; and although he keeps wanting poetry to be something else—to be
ideal and cozy, he seems aware that the ideal cozy space of nursery poetry is funded by
the colonial expansion.

This volume also includes a changeling narrative, “Faun” (40), which express the
point of view of someone whose own country has been taken from them:

Here down this very way,
Here only yesterday
    King Faun went leaping.
He sang, with careless shout
Hurling his name about;
He sang, with oaken sock
His steps from rock to rock
    In safety keeping
    ‘Here Faun is free,
    Here Faun is free!’

To-day against yon pine,
Forlorn yet still divine,
    King Faun is weeping.
‘They drank my holy book,
My strawberries they took,
My private path they trod.’
Loud wept the desolate God,
    Scorn on scorn heaping,
In part the poem represents a sympathy for the King Faun who has gone from “careless” freedom and joyful, proud self-awareness to being completely “forlorn,” his territory violated and his resources stolen, and in this sense the poem is sympathetic to colonized people—both within the British empire and among the countries taken over by WWI. In part, the poem stresses the importance of place and identity: the faun is King of his land, and without his land, he has lost himself; in this sense, the poem could well be about the soldiers who have been dislocated from their homes and found their innocent joy violated by conflict.

In this pattern of fairy tale poetry is also partly a discussion of social marginalization, because normal and abnormal are made indistinct when soldiers and civilians have a different frame of reference. The nursery adventures promised young boys absolute agency, that the child could control all worlds; but both Sassoon and Graves have tremendous difficulty parsing out their own agency—what of their actions are chosen and what of their actions were forced. Ultimately, the script of the boy hero is as impossible as the script set out for the soldier, and these poems articulate the trauma of failing to completely fulfill either set of expectations.

6.3 Mythmaking, Orientalism, and High Modernism

In general, this pattern of fairy poetry was also dominated by male writers, and is more associated with mainstream modernist poetics, and the elements of their poetry
associated with Classical Myth have been studied much more frequently than the fairy and fairy tale elements of their poetry, which tend to be considered marginal to the mainstream poets’ oeuvres. This pattern of poetry was highly academic, and even in their juvenilia, the poets associated with this development made an enormous effort to include both overt and oblique canonical literary references from both British and Classical traditions, and, as such, they included many quotations and influential patterns of writing from the eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century fairy poetry traditions. They also draw most directly on the compilations and methodologies of the Folklore Society, particularly the work of James Frazer as he, in The Golden Bough, began to constellates all the myths of the world into one comparative archive. However, their reliance on mainstream scholarship and canonical poetry situated them powerfully amid patriarchal, colonial, and nationalist patterns of language inherited from the late Victorian era. As adult British men, they also tend to speak with an authoritative voice, deftly manipulating literary references into a tightly controlled pattern more cohesive, for example, than the self-destructing poetry written by the men more directly involved in WWI.

Like Noyes’ fairy poem about “plucking” “The Flower of Old Japan,” these poems also often adopt both a specifically Orientalist and more broadly colonial pattern of language that sexualizes the Other as both female and ripe for the taking. Particularly in their juvenilia, the men who write this pattern of fairy and fairy tale poetry tend to be very reductive of women—who are either cast as femme fatales or (generally mute) idealized objects of sensual desire—in either case, the poems imply that women are only relevant as they impacts male experience and male desire. From this patriarchal point of view, women are frequently associated with Otherworldly or fairy status and are very
frequently construed as having nature magic, as in “What the Thunder Said” (1922) by T.S. Eliot (1888-1965): “A woman drew her long black hair out tight/And fiddled whisper music on those strings/And bats with baby faces in the violet light/Whistled, and beat their wings” (48). Such poems are almost invariably told from an adult, male point of view and assume an invariably adult, male readership—the poet and reader are “we,” and the fairy women and objects in nature are “they.” For gender-liberal writers, this poetry would become a prime target, particularly in terms of Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*. And because the most famous poetry written by these poets would foreground “Myth” rather than “fairy tale” as such, and because “myth” was used (by gender-liberal theorists) as a term for unconsciously absorbed patriarchal values, in the second half of the twentieth century, myth came to widely (though not universally) represent a masculinized alternative to fairy tale, which was coded as more feminine.

There were a few women who contributed more directly to this Myth-centric pattern of writing than to fairy tale writing, like the American poet Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961). She only wrote one fairy poem, “Halcyon” published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (1927), but it is, intriguingly, sympathetic to the changeling narratives written by women like Charlotte Mew.

Perhaps they said
when they sent you here,
“No one will see,
certainly no one will care;

“an elf, no grace,
an odd little castaway,
not fit for the gods yet;
we’ll let her drift

“In and about the hulk
of the old world—
Like Mew’s poem, “The Farmer’s Bride,” this is a narrative of silencing, and the female changeling identified by the narrator does not speak. In this poem, the fairy is even further ostracized because she is an object of contemplation for the poet, but otherwise ignored “No one will see/certainly no one will care.” In this poem, the fairy can be interpreted metaphorically as a magical, poetic dream that has been excluded from the grim “hulk/of the old world” closed to visions and imagination. Alternatively, she could be interpreted metaphorically as representing the marginalized people who float around the edges of “a dead place” finding no place to cling that is not “thick with barnacle.” (The poem would be an apt description of Mew herself.) In either case, however, the poem concludes with the casual rejection of the otherworldly character, who is perceived by the narrator as inconvenient: “I’m ill; I want to go away/where no one can come./O little elf, leave me alone,/don’t make me suffer again” (124). H.D.’s one fairy poem describes the rejection of a “fairy” aspect of self, which is too vulnerable and too strange to exist in a harsh world with old rules. She does not have access to the patriarchal vision of “fairy” that finds fragility attractive, she finds it depressing to contemplate the “fairy,” not empowering.

This strain of modernist writing also came to fruition in the work of trans-Atlantic expatriate poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound at the time when poetry editors like Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson (editors of The New Poetry, 1917), and Harold Munro (editor of Twentieth Century Poetry, 1929) were trying very hard to advocate an international fraternity of poets, identifying trans-Atlantic developments in
themes and styles which might have made the more specifically British fairy tale poetry (the kind that relied on an absorption of pantomime and the longstanding fairy verse nursery tradition) seem parochial and marginal in comparison. Certainly, the idealized domestic space is not as compelling for Eliot or Pound as it would be for any of the native-born British poets mentioned in these chapters.

6.3.1 T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born into a respectable New England family with Puritanical roots, and he completed his undergraduate education in the United States. In 1910, he pursued studies in several institutions around Europe, completing his dissertation in Oxford in 1916. During that time he had also met and married an Englishwoman, Vivien Haigh-Wood (1888-1947). In 1927, Eliot affirmed that he was “Anglo-Catholic in religion, royalist in politics, and classicist in literature” by formally converting to Anglicanism and naturalizing himself as a British citizen. In the 1930s Eliot primarily wrote and published verse dramas and a series of lectures on religion and literary criticism. The bulk of his later poetry was written during WWII, between 1940-1942. In 1948, Eliot received both the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Order of Merit, a royal recognition of his distinguished service in literature.

Eliot’s early collection *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) has some isolated elements that are sympathetic to (and drawn from) the boyhood nursery adventures and stories of mermaids and jungle animals:

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34 Eliot, quoted in his entry in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (n.p.).
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. ("Love Song for J. Alfred Prufrock" 7)

And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression…dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.
Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance— ("Portrait of a Lady," 11)

But in these contexts, Eliot seems to be defining his aesthetic by contrasts. His poems blend “lunar incantations” and prostitutes (“Rhapsody on a Windy Night” 14); centaurs and sirens with table talk and bitten macaroons (“Mr. Apollinax” 18). Fancies seem to curl around the edges of everything, clinging to the more forcefully realist images. In these poems, the fantastical elements seem to highlight the absurdity of realism, and demonstrate the extent to which the narratives of childhood continue to inform adult perception. Derek Traversi (n.d.) has identified Eliot’s first volume as, “composed of observations, detached, ironic, and alternately disillusioned and nostalgic in tone. […] the mood is one of reaction against the comfortable certainties of ‘Georgian’ poetry, the projection of a world which presented itself to the poet and his generation as disconcerting, uncertain, and very possibly heading for destruction” (RGEL 537). Yet the poems’ aura of “detachment” also diminishes any sense of urgency; compared to Graves’ “Nursery Memories” or Owen’s “Kind Ghosts,” Eliot’s disjunctive perception seems to express quirky inquisitiveness rather than mind-shattering trauma.

His deep mistrust of the ideal of fairy tale domesticity may be attributed to his conservative, American, Puritan upbringing; but regardless of the cause, Eliot is clearly not as desperate to achieve even the illusion of idealized domesticity, and Eliot tends to draw on the full adult scorn of childishness to use children’s literary contexts as a
weapon. Even when relies heavily on a fairy tale narrative structure and creates narrative poems defined by self-evident fairy tale logic ("Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," 23-4), Eliot does so without communicating affection, longing, or idealization. For example, in Poems (1920), though Eliot uses a lot of nursery elements, particularly in his consideration of exotic animals like "The Hippopotamus," he does so to make adult religious or other institutional contexts look foolish, not to express a repressed longing for a marvelous creature from the adventure stories of his childhood:

The hippo's feeble steps may err  
In compassing material ends,  
While the True Church need never stir  
To gather in its dividends. [...]  
The hippopotamus's day  
Is passed in sleep; at night he hunts;  
God works in a mysterious way—  
The Church can sleep and feed at once. (30-1)

This adventure narrative does not enticing the reader to imagination, rather the imaginative narrative is itself symbolic of the gullibility of believers. Similarly, Eliot uses the narrative forms of nursery rhymes to dethrone religious text in poems like "Ash-Wednesday," in which fairy women and holy women are indistinguishable: "Blesséd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden" (67) and "The Hollow Men," in which Eliot adapts a folkloric image (hollow men are frightening bogey figures made to lure real human beings to their doom), but in Eliot's rendering all living men are hollow men, devoid of substance and having already been led astray. These bleak fairy stories are tales of enchantment, but only in the most miserable sense where to be

35 In this sense, children's literature in Eliot's writing has the same functional role as fairies in Locke's—as an example of utter intellectual folly. Cf. Chapter 2.1 "Fairies, Poetry, and Imagination in the Enlightenment."
enchanted forfeits mind and will to the enchanter (in this case, the church) without receiving even an illusion of comfort in return.

In Eliot’s entire oeuvre of adult poetry, he seems to argue that childhood narratives only perplex and deceive. For example, his poem “Animula” (1930) describes the mental development of a child who begins to learn adult patterns of language and perception. It is narrated from a child’s point of view, but told in third person which preserves the sense that the poet-narrator is an adult commenting on child-development. In the poem, the child first enters into the world as a “simple soul” surrounded by a baffling array of sensory input “flat world of changing lights and noise […] light, dark, dry or damp, chilly or warm” (71). As the child begins to achieve mobility and to put names to perceived objects, connecting “light” to a more sophisticated recognition of “sunlight,” he also has to learn the complex distinction between the “actual” and the “fanciful”:

Studies in the sunlit pattern on the floor  
And running stags around a silver tray;  
Confounds the actual and the fanciful,  
Content with playing-cards and kings and queens,  
What the fairies do and what the servants say.  
The heavy burden of the growing soul  
Perplexes and offends more, day by day (71)

In an inversion of the ideals of eighteenth-century British fairy poetry, Eliot depicts the struggle to comprehend fairies and fancy in Rousseauian terms as a “heavy burden” that “perplexes” and erodes “contentment,” not as libratory or spiritually enlightening. For

36 Except for the poetry written explicitly for children, Eliot maintains this cynical stance towards childhood and belief even in the years following his dramatic 1927 religious conversion.
Eliot, they represent the “pain of living and the drug of dreams,” “Shadow of its own shadows” (71), and they are coded as superstitious (in Folkloric terms) rather than wondrous (in fairy poetry terms) because they exist in an adult world of blood and misery: “Pray for Gutierrez, avid of speed and power,/For Boudin, blown to pieces,[…]Pray for us now and at the hour of our birth” (71). This is a bitterly cynical representation of human experience that codes all “fanciful” tales as deceptive myths, and moreover as myths which primarily function to expose other myths, never to enchant or enlighten in a more directly positive way. Eliot’s poem offers no alleviation from discontentment except for the hollow satisfaction of achieving adult scorn for the folly of childhood. Yet even in his most cynical moments, by consistently tearing down fairy and fairy tale rhetoric, Eliot acknowledges both their pervasiveness and their power—if they were insignificant, he would not have needed to write about them at all.

Ironically, all of the longing for enchantment is reserved for Eliot’s children’s poems, which have received relatively little critical attention and can be found clustered apologetically (and achronologically) under the heading “minor poems” in the back of Eliot’s *Collected Poems 1909-1935*. Eliot’s extreme dismissal of fairies and childish untruths in his early adult poetry are reversed in some of the children’s work written after his conversion, including “Landscapes” (1933-34) and “Children’s voices in the orchard”

37 This is exactly the pattern of modernism which Chesterton most wanted to refute. Cf. Chapter 5.2 “Fairy Tales, Nostalgia, and ‘Childishness.’”

38 In the *Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*, the editor maintains the biased structure of the earlier anthology and achronologically situates *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* at the end of Eliot’s later poetry. The *Complete Poems* also neglects to include individually published poems that draw on children’s literature like “The Marching Song of the Police Dogs” and “Billy M’Caw the Remarkable Parrot” (published in *The Queen’s Book of the Red Cross*, 1939) or “To Walter de la Mare” (published in *Tribute to Walter de la Mare*, 1948).
However, even in his children’s poems, Eliot articulates a longing for fairy wonder that is always somewhat backhanded. For example, in “Five Finger Exercises” (c.1932) Eliot describes himself in derisive comparison with a friend and fellow-poet Ralph Hodgson (1871-1962):39

How delightful to meet Mr. Hodgson!
(Everyone wants to know him).
He has 999 canaries
And round his head finches and fairies
In jubilant rapture skim.
How delightful to meet Mr. Hodgson!
(Everyone wants to meet him).

[...]
How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!
With a bobtail cur
In a coat of fur
And a porpentine cat
And a whopsical hat:
How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!
(Whether his mouth be open or shut). (92-3)

Unlike the pleasant, delightful, fairy-coated Mr. Hodgson, Mr. Eliot is cast as a grim, distant and nonsensical figure who cannot engage in the joyful abandon of Mr. Hodgson. Even when he creates fairy fun, Eliot refuses ownership of it. In an odd sense, this may be the voice of an expatriate, raised on Puritanism rather than pantomime, who is feeling marginalized by his inability to embrace the marginal. To be too adult, patriarchal, and cynical is to be excluded from all the fun, relief, and consolation of the fairy stories.

39 Hodgson was one of the more pastoral poets included in Marsh’s *Georgian Poetry* anthologies and a good friend of Walter de la Mare. Hodgson was known for his voluminous correspondence with Japanese scholars and distinguished himself for translating a vast collection of classical Japanese poetry into English in the mid-1930s, for which he was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun by the Japanese government.
Aside from Eliot’s own ambivalent stance toward fairy adventure, the fact that audiences have to work very hard to parse out the allusions in Eliot’s adult poetry can make his children’s poetry seem deceptively simple by contrast. However, it is still formally complex and allusive, and it draws on a mix of linguistic registers—of colonialism, of fairy tale, of nonsense verse, etc. For example, although he may not have been raised on British children’s adventure poems like Stevenson’s, Eliot’s most direct engagement with colonialism, and possibly his most subversive engagement with colonialism, is articulated through another of his children’s poems, “Growltiger’s Last Stand” from the *Book of Practical Cats* (1939). In this work, Eliot reconstructs a colonial childhood narrative, but in terms that are subtly critical of the tradition of colonial childhood narratives:

Woe to the bristly Bandicoot, that lurks on foreign ships,
And woe to any Cat with whom Growltiger came to grips!

But most to Cats of foreign race his hatred had been vowed;
To Cats of foreign name and race no quarter was allowed.
The Persian and the Siamese regarded him with fear—
Because it was a Siamese had mauled his missing ear. (152)

Growltiger’s nationality is not given except in absentia—the reader is informed that he hates “foreigners,” which implicitly codes him as “not a foreigner,” and therefore British. From the opening lines, Eliot links Growltiger’s violent tendencies to an inflated sense of national identity that is characteristic of the genre, but not something that Eliot will ultimately endorse.

In the second part of the poem, in retaliation for Growltiger’s persecution, “the Siamese came creeping in their sampans and their junks” to prepare an ambush for Growltiger and his crew.
Then GILBERT gave the signal to his fierce Mongolian horde;
With a frightful burst of fireworks the Chinks they swarmed aboard.
Abandoning their sampans, and their pullaways and junks,
They battened down the hatches on the crew within their bunks
[…]
The ruthless foe pressed forward, in stubborn rank on rank
Growltiger to his vast surprise was forced to walk the plank.
He who a hundred victims had driven to that drop,
At the end of all his crimes was forced to go ker-flip, ker-flop.

O there was joy in Wapping when the news flew through the land;
At Maidenhead and Henley there was dancing on the strand.
Rats were roasted whole at Brentford, and at Victoria Dock,
And a day of celebration was commanded in Bangkok. (152-3)

In many ways it seems to be a standard colonial narrative characterized by a careless,
ignorant authoritative tone—the attacking Asian cats are represented in an undignified
confusion as Siamese-Mongolian-Chinks who travel about in Chinese “sampans” and
“junks” and whose victory is celebrated in Bangkok.40 Also characteristically of this kind
of colonial narrative, the Asian cats are led by a male, apparently British commander,
Gilbert, who controls his “Mongolian horde” with the same ease that Milne’s child
controlled his “silent” “Indian band” in “Nursery Chairs” (1924). All the principal,
named actors are British, even in this mini-colonial narrative, and Gilbert’s leadership
mitigates the defeat of a British pirate by Asian scavengers. However, the rebellious
aspect of this narrative is that Eliot is inhabiting all the interesting points of view at once.
The free indirect discourse invites the reader to sympathize with the vengeful (colonial)
Growltiger, the bold (anti-colonial) Gilbert, the Asian cats desperate to stop the mass-
murder of their people, and the magically unified people of London and Bangkok who

40 In spite of the fact that by 1939 Mongolia had been independent of Chinese rule for 18 years,
and neither Siam (renamed Thailand in 1939) nor its capital city Bangkok had never been colonized by
Mongolia, China, or a European power.
celebrate the death of a colonial killer together. Eliot shows the disproportionate retaliation exacted by Growltiger, who commits himself to genocide because of a mauled ear; and celebrates the piratical life made famous by such adventure stories as Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883).41

Although Eliot’s engagement with fairies is perhaps half-hearted, his engagement with the adventurous end of the fairy tale/children’s literature spectrum (for this story owes much, directly or indirectly through adventure story poetry, to the tales of Sinbad and the more murderous of the adventure stories recorded by Lang) is far more rich. Eliot uses this culturally central language which had fostered children’s self-identification as British citizens to cast subtle but very pointed aspersions on the “glories” of the colonial British Empire—and to do so less than ten years before India would secede and British rule in Asia would begin to fragment.

6.3.2 Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

The Idaho-born poet, Ezra Pound was largely raised in Pennsylvania and received his first education in dame schools, some of which were run by Quakers, but moved on to college at the University of Pennsylvania at the age of 15. He first visited Europe as a child, and returned as a graduate student to study literature in London and Madrid, accompanied by the American poet Hilda Doolittle. He returned to the United States and taught briefly at Wabash College in 1907, where he was miserable in an environment that he considered stiflingly conservative and left to teach in Venice, where he privately

41 *Treasure Island* was another exceptional novel that was regularly adapted as a Christmas fairy tale pantomime.
published his first printed volume *A Lume Spento* (1908).\(^{42}\) That year he moved to London, where lived for the next twelve years, and where he gained a reputation for fostering brilliant young writers, including James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. He had a number of famous affairs, and a fifty-year open relationship with Olga Rudge, but he remained married to Dorothy Shakespear from 1914 until his death. Between 1921-1945, the Pounds moved around Europe, until Ezra was arrested for treason after producing and publishing a wide variety of anti-semitic and pro-fascist material. He spent 1945-58 imprisoned in the U.S. and returned to Italy after his release in 1958, where he remained until his death in 1972.

In his London years, Pound was known for his role in developing Imagism in reaction to Georgian poetry, but only after he had written a great deal of juvenilia in Victorian/Georgian styles that owed much to R.L. Stevenson, Charles Algernon Swinburne, and W.B. Yeats. His early experiments with fairy poetry specifically reflect many standard Victorian characteristics and can be loosely divided into two categories—the first represents fairies as childish and fragile, the second associates them with seduction and the exotic female body. Pound does borrow from the rhythms of nursery verse and the language of nursery adventure, but much more sporadically than his British colleagues, and in his 1909 collections, *Hilda’s Book, Personae,* and *Exultations,* Pound increasingly surrounds his nursery verse with complex, archaic adult language that is more likely to make the childish language seem isolated and frail rather than comforting

\(^{42}\) *Hilda’s Book* was written between 1905-07, but not published until later.
and nostalgic.\textsuperscript{43} For example, in \textit{Hilda's Book}, Pound borrows his early conceptualizations of Faerie straight from Yeats, representing it as an unspoiled, perfect, eternal place of enchanted delights and freedom from the sorrows of human existence. “Child of the grass” describes eternal youth and magical adventures that the poet achieves through the narrative patterns of folklore: “All the old lore/Of the forests & waterways/Shall aid us; Keep we the bond & seal/Ne’er shall we feel/Aught of sorrow”\textsuperscript{44}

However, in \textit{Personae}, this promise of folkloric salvation seems remote, and the nursery language of childish “elf words” seems to be a sad and feeble defense against the “travail” of adult experience:

\begin{quote}
Lo, I am worn with travail  
And the wandering of many roads hath made my eyes  
As dark red circles filled with dust.  
Yet there is a trembling upon me in the twilight,  
And little red elf words crying “A song,”  
Little grey elf words crying for a song,  
Little brown leaf words crying “A song,”  
Little green leaf words crying for a song.  
The words are as leaves, old brown leaves in the spring time  
Blowing they know not whither, seeking a song. ("Praise of Ysolt" 83)
\end{quote}

Although the narrator can hear the cry “for a song” and the words “A song,” the song itself is the description of the “little” words crying back and forth. The poem’s metatexual contexts are circular –folklore itself is the fairy gold, which, according to

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Exultations} (1909) is particularly redolent with the language of high adventure as the narrator Guido calls the reader, who is “bound about with dreams” (105), out to swashbuckling adventure on the high seas “Lo, I would sail the seas with thee alone!” for “I have no life save when the swords clash” (105). On the voyage in this volume, the reader encounters dream after dream from “the forest of my mind” (107).

\textsuperscript{44} 3. This poem is particularly resonant with W.B. Yeats. Cf. “The Stolen Child” (1889): “For he comes, O human child! /To the waters and the wild /With a faery, hand in hand, /From a world more full of weeping than he can understand.” (Yeats, \textit{Collected 19})
\end{quote}
folkloric legend, transmutes into withered leaves by morning. Pound must turn to folklore to express its failure to satisfy and turn to nursery rhythm patterns of “little” words to voice a soul-wearying adult sorrow. This paradoxical refusal of fairy language in fairy language, characterizes Pound’s engagement with fairy—trying to escape from fairy is like trying to escape from narrativity itself. He loves it and hates it and needs it and tries to fragment it all at once—it represents an impossible literary quandary.

Pound’s experimentation with fairy poetry is important because he pushes the limits of narrative fragmentation and recombination; for that reason, Pound’s work bridges the gap between eighteenth-century fairy poetry and twentieth-century gender-liberal poetry in his turn of the century work. “Purveyor’s General” (1908) describes the work of the folklorist and the poet in comparable terms. The narrator is plural and, like the eighteenth-century poets who dream and the nineteenth-century folklorists who travel, has unique access to magical narratives: “We, that through all the world/Have wandered seeking new things/And quaint tales, that your ease/May gather such dreams as please[…]
That new tales and strange people/Such as the further seas/Wash on the shores of,/That new mysteries and increase/Of sunlight should be amongst you./you, the home-stayers” (71). Pound proposes that the best method for accomplishing this is to first “borrow” and then pass on dreams and tales from around the world: “borrowing/Out of all lands and realms of the infinite/New tales, new mysteries/New songs from out the breeze” (72). This vision is very generous and advocates careful listening as well as careful telling to create what Pound’s friend and advocate Hugh Kenner (1923-2003)

would identify as, “an organic statement capable of yielding moral and emotional nourishment, rather than a propositional cross-section of reality” (291). It is nourishing in part because of its aesthetic richness, in part because it has no conclusive ending within the poem, in part because it situates itself as one step in an infinite process of storytelling (always assuming that there were previous acts of telling and that there will be later act of retelling), in part because it fosters community between poet and reader, and in part because it refuses to delimit perception to a single, authoritative interpretation of mundane reality.

Yet, perhaps ironically, it was more or less a Poundian conception of mythmaking that gender-liberals most dearly wanted to revise. There are moments when Pound is sympathetic with myth and women’s voices: “I see my greater soul-self bending/Sybilwise” (“Scriptor Ignotus” 38), but throughout his early poetry, Pound also stresses the erotic implications of Faerie as an objectified, seductive, feminine space, as in the sonnet “The Wind” (c.1909):

“I would go forth into the night” she saith.
The night is very cold beneath the moon
’Twere meet, my Love that thou went forth at noon
For now the sky is cold as very death.
And then she drew a little sobbing breath
“Without a little lonely wind doth crune
And calleth me with wandered elfin rune
That all true wind-born children summoneth
Dear, hold me closer! so, till it is past
Nay I am gone the while. Await!”
And I await her here for I have understood.
Yet held I not this very wind—bound fast
Within the castle of my soul I would
For very faintness at her parting, die. (16)\textsuperscript{46}

This sonnet characterizes all the elements that gender-liberal writers at the end of the century would work against: the implicit voice is masculine, only the woman’s voice is set in quotation marks; the male narrator chides his lover and tells her what behavior is “meet” for her; the woman is fey, a true “wind-born child” and femininity is conflated with otherworldliness; the woman is helpless, and does nothing except sob and beg for protection until she is forced to leave; the narrator’s internalization of feminine, fairy language is described in terms of imprisonment—he understands that he must bind the wind, not that he should listen to it; and even the traditional sonnet form for a love poem gestures at Pound’s recreation of a very traditional motif.

The poets who wrote in this strain of fairy tale poetry were among the first to enact the kind of complex formal experiments with narrativity that post-modern fairy tale writers would take advantage of, and perhaps it is appropriate that the “thieves of language” would “borrow” and adapt Pound’s call to “new tales” and “new mysteries.” Yet even in the work of these poets, their engagement with fairies was marked off from their engagement with myth. Eliot preserved (and, since then, his editors have reinforced) a very strong division between his adult “serious” poetry and his “minor” poetry for children. This kind of split helped to further a division between “myth” and “fairy tale” that grew out of the division between folkloric texts (objects of serious, masculine

\textsuperscript{46} Cf. Yeats “The Riding of the Sidhe,” which demonstrates many of the same gendered characteristics.
scholarship) and popular culture texts (including fairy tale pantomime for families and children); in doing so, it reinforced the masculinization of myth as well as its association with academic scholarship.

6.3.3 Mythopoesis

In this sub-chapter, I have been avoiding the term “mythopoesis,” in part because of its etymological complexity, in part because it developed in more than one trajectory in the twentieth century, and in part because the development of a masculine “mythopoetic” tradition (fostered by such scholars as Joseph Campbell and Robert Bly) functioned largely as a counterpoint to the gender-liberal appropriation of fairy tale texts as a genre of unique importance to women in the 1960s-80s. However, it is an important development and deserves a brief acknowledgement in this context.

At the turn of the century, the term “mythopoetic” was already in circulation among scholars in the social sciences and humanities, usually in derisive reference to “primitive” belief systems that predate “science” in modern terms—as in phrases like “mythopoetic illusion” or “mythopoetic taint”.47 One of the first significant defenses of “mythopoesis” as an aesthetic principle was articulated by the American art historian S.R. Koehler in “The Future of Art” (1897), who suggested that a new kind of mythmaking would supersede Classical mythopoesis and reflect the new social consciousness of democracy: “Although our efforts are aided by the study of the works of those who have gone before us, we are yet striving for means of expression peculiar to ourselves, and

47 Cf. James Scully’s extensive discussion of “mythopoetic illusion” in Illusion: A Psychological Study (1881). Note also the discussions of art, belief, and science in philosopher Hartley B. Alexander’s “Drama as a Cosmic Category” (1929).
hence the great preponderance of the technical element in our art” (74). However, his use of the term to express evolving aesthetics was by no means uncontested; for example, the Egyptologist and Orientalist Henri Frankfort carried over the earlier scientific argument into the 1940s with works like *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (1946) in which he identifies “mythopoetic thought” as a past phase of human development.\(^{48}\) These discussions were mostly conducted in folkloric terms and in relation to “primitive” belief and how that belief might impact the interpretation of twentieth-century cultures.

Yet in spite of its trans-Atlantic provenance and global scope, the debate about mythopoesis had some nationalist elements to its construction. For example, the British poet, philologist, and later novelist J.R.R. Tolkein was one of the first to take up Koeler’s suggestion that there could be a new “mythopoesis” for a new age, and in his poem “Mythopoeia” (1931) outlined what the literary critic Kirstin Johnson has recently identified as a new mythology for the British nation.\(^{49}\) In this poem, Tolkien entangles the act of making myth with the act of making language, and writes the poem as an argument from “Philomythus” (lover of myth) to “Misomythus” (hater of myth, i.e. C.S. Lewis [1898-1963], to whom the poem is dedicated) “who said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though ‘breathed through silver’”:

\[
\begin{align*}
[&\ldots\text{]}\text{trees are not ‘trees’, until so named and seen} \\
&\text{and never were so named, till those had been} \\
&\text{who speech’s involuted breath unfurled,} \\
&\text{faint echo and dim picture of the world }[\ldots] \\
&\text{He sees no stars who does not see them first}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{48}\) That particular volume was co-authored with Henriette Frankfort, Thorkild Jacobson, John Wilson, and William Irwin; though the mythopoetic argument would most extensively characterize Henri Frankfort’s scholarly oeuvre.

of living silver made that sudden burst
to flame-like flowers beneath an ancient song,
whose very echo after-music long
has since pursued. There is no firmament,
only a void, unless a jeweled tent
myth-woven and elf-patterned; and no earth,
unless the mother’s womb whence all have birth. 50

The Classical terms in which the poem was framed and the central argument of the poem—
that language is always-already mythic and that the narratives created in language
structure individuals’ understanding of the world by giving sensory perceptions definition
and context—is, in fact, a blending and extension of poetic and folkloric arguments that
had been specifically circulating in Britain for two hundred years.51 It borrows
assumptions from Victorian folklore (the “survivalist” concept that present myths are
fragments “echoes” of “ancient song”) and from eighteenth-century fairy poetry (arguing
that poetic vision heightens human perception and fosters new thresholds of imagination,
and validating the seriousness of British fantasy by referencing the structures of Classical
Greco-Roman poetry and mythology), to weigh in on John Locke’s argument about

50 Although written in 1931, the poem was not formally published in a poetic collection until the
release of Tree And Leaf (1964). The argument was, apparently, persuasive to C.S. Lewis, who wrote a
letter to Arthur Greeves in October 1931, stating that he had finally been able to reconcile his
understanding of myth with his own religious beliefs: “what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if
I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn’t mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god
sacrificing himself to himself […] I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it […] provided I
met it anywhere except in the Gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth
as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho’ I could not say in cold prose ‘what it
meant.’ Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others,
but with this tremendous difference that it really happened: and one must be content to accept it in the same
way; remembering that it is God’s myth where the others are men’s myths” (“To Arthur” 288-9)

51 In some sense, this is the final, complete inversion of Locke’s purely rationalist position, but the
terms have, again, shifted so much that the Enlightenment call to “pure Reason” was no longer a fully
functional concept by the 1930s, when modernist psychological and philosophical arguments had troubled
both the idea of pure perception and pure reason. It is safer to think of this poem as a logical extension of
William Blake’s poetic arguments about myth. Cf. Chapter 2.3 “Fairy Poetry, Imagination, and Eighteenth-
Century Romanticism.”
whether fantasy materials help or hinder the mental development of a person who must learn to interact with the “real” world.

As a matter of belief, however, mythopoesis became important to twentieth-century discussions of religion, particularly since central poets like Eliot became so invested in linking religious and literary discussions in terms of myth. These debates were largely centered around whether mythic language could usefully contribute to an understanding of Christian scripture or whether even a comparison of the two would be heretical. In 1927, the Classical historian F.E. Adcock (1886-1968) used the term “mythopoeia” to mean “unscrupulous literary fiction” (102) distant from the belief systems of “mature” cultures. However, Tolkien’s poetic argument was persuasive to C.S. Lewis, who wrote a letter in 1931 stating that he had finally been able to reconcile his understanding of myth with his own religious beliefs: “the story of Christ is simply a true myth […] God’s myth where the others are men’s myths” (“To Arthur” 288-9). But the terms remained very much a point of contestation; for example, in the same year, the American theologian William Knickerbocker harshly critiqued a theological argument made by the American poet and essayist John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974) by saying that: “His science happens to be what the Greeks would call “mythopoeia”, or the science of myth-making. I seriously doubt whether any religious person, certainly any Christian would consent for the moment to the definition orthodoxy which makes up Gods as one went along for his own private purposes” (109). From the 1930s-50s, the question of how myth and modern belief intersected became a question of vital importance, in terms that...

52 Cf. Robert Graves’ later critical work, including The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth (1948) and David Jones’ essay collection Epoch and Artist (1959). This discussion seems to have been carried on furiously on both sides of the Atlantic through at least the 1960s.
borrowed heavily from the canonical folkloric text, James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*; it was in this period that Frazer’s work was re-interpreted as making connections between all kinds of human belief rather than as stratifying primitive belief structures from civilized belief structures.

Lewis and Tolkien would famously pursue mythpoetics in terms of prose, both in their work for adults and in their writing for children; as a poetic movement, however, “mythopoesis” was still poorly defined in terms of scope and unifying purpose by the mid-century. The 1966 *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* notes in its definition of “myth” that:

> As the attitude toward mythology becomes more overly sophisticated—e.g., in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Goethe’s *Faust*, and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*—the problem of finding a stable unifying philosophy by which to interpret a given subject matter becomes of increasing concern to the poet. The spiritual problems of the poet in contemporary society arise in part out of the lack of myths which can be felt warmly, envisaged in concrete and contemporary imagery, and shared with a wide body of responsive readers. (540)

This editor defines Mythopoesis as a return an eighteenth-century philosophical discussion of nation and myth, fuelled by a modern internationality that left people feeling dislocated in terms of communal identity. In doing so, the editor only identifies three twentieth-century examples of new mythmaking, and he chose central figures who had plural national identities: the Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, the Anglo-Irish poet W.B. Yeats and the Anglo-American poet T.S. Eliot (541). Much of the identification of a mythopoetic movement in poetry has been done retrospectively since the mid-century, generally around the very basic definition of “mythopoesis” as the creation of a new pattern of myth based on ancient Myth traditions from around the world or the inclusion of (fragments of) such myths in literature.
In a key historical sense, mythopoesis and fairy tale poetry can be identified as mutual descendents of a similar source; the term was even retrospectively used to encompass the poet William Blake and fairy tale authors like George MacDonald and Lord Dunsany. Their inclusion in the canon of mythopoetic authors elevated the status of these authors in critical terms and distanced them from the childish/feminine associations of fairy tale. Indeed, as mythopoesis staked out a literarily central role for itself, it more and more usefully functioned as a symbol of centrality in counterpoint to the fairy tale that continued to function as a symbol of marginality. It may also have been a helpful touchstone between fairy tale and myth in the 1960s-80s call for “revisionist mythmaking.” As postcolonial theory has come into prominence and Frazer’s definitions of “myth,” “legend,” and “folk-tale” in terms of “belief,” “history,” and “entertainment” become increasingly untenable, it may be that the categories are beginning to overlap. In very contemporary terms “mythopoesis” has recently been associated with the immensely prolific British fairy tale poet, novelist, graphic novelist, and screenwriter Neil Gaiman (b.1960), who is far better known for his revision of fairy tales than myths.53

6.4 Trans-Continental Mythmaking

For postcolonial writers, and particularly those with a split heritage of colonizing and colonized ancestors, storytelling, poetry, and folklore are uniquely overloaded concepts. For them, to engage with fairy tales and folklore in poetry is to engage with both sides of the cultural shibboleth, established by the Victorian Folklore Society, that

53 Cf. the discussion of Gaiman’s “Instructions” at the conclusion of Chapter 5.4 “Fairy Tales, Gendered Narration, and Gender Revolution.”
polarized “primitive” colonial oral folklore and “highly developed” British literary fairy poetry. This negotiation has become all the more complex as fairy tales and folklore have been increasingly published as children’s literature, since much of the most beloved and endlessly reprinted British children’s literature was originally published in “The Golden Age of Children’s Literature,” a period from roughly 1865-1928 that not-coincidentally coincides with the height of British Imperialism. This literary phase was described by Abby Wolf (n.d.) as a vital shift in the newly-forming genre of children’s literature:

Instead of offering dry moral instruction, children's literature after [1865] made these lessons playful and exciting: To be moral was not to sit about the house with hands-folded piety put rather to gad about the sea, the Empire, and secret gardens with what we now would call childlike abandon. The “golden age of children's literature” [...] idealized the child as fanciful and free and, most importantly, it insisted that the child could best learn how to be good through a storyteller's appeal to the imagination rather than through an adult's assertion of the rules of behavior. (n.p.)

Any avid reader has some image of the idealized Victorian nursery—a warm safe, cozy space that is both perfectly safe and populated with the most deadly monsters, pirate ships, evil magicians, and war raids that a child can imagine. The golden age of British children’s literature coincided with the height of British colonial expansion—when Britain controlled about a quarter of the earth’s landmass—and the images that are brought to the nursery of exotic lands and foreign adventures were, in some key respects, very real training for life as a burgeoning citizen in a colonial empire.

For the children who were raised in the British Empire with mixed ancestry, inheriting language from both ancestors who were colonizers and ancestors who were colonized, the question of children’s literature becomes even more urgent, and even more urgently tied to the problem of national identity. The poets in this pattern of fairy tale
writing draw on the British national tradition of fairy poetry and colonial fairy tales to create new myths that are hybrids in every possible sense. In the Victorian period, high “civilized” culture (associated with British fairy poetry) and low “primitive” culture (associated with colonial fairy tales), and these writers weave those categories back together, redrawing the assumptions and the linguistic frames of reference inherited from colonial models.

These poems had some direct literary precedent in British publications from the first half of the century. For example, the remarkable 852 page anthology *Negro*, published by the British poet and heiress Nancy Cunard (1896-1965) in 1934, included hundreds of stories, images, essays, and poems, all of which were crafted by people with some African ancestry. The racial identity of all of these authors was further reinforced by the fact that Cunard included photographs of as many of the authors as possible.54 The “West Indian Poetry” section included pieces with powerful representations of Caribbean magic:

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With the circle of the equator
Girdled about her waist
As though about a little world,
The black woman,
The new woman,
Comes forward […]
Like a newly arrived goddess,
She brings the unpublished word,
The unknown gesture,
The strong haunches, voice, teeth,
The morning and the change. […]
Never wearying feet
```

54 Many of the 1934 copies of this volume were destroyed when a warehouse was bombed in WWII; however, there was a second edition published in 1969 by Negro University Press and a third (464 page) edition abridged by Hugh Ford and published by F. Ungar Publishing Company in 1970.
For the deep music
Of the bongo. (428)

—“Black Woman” by Nichlás Guillén (1902-1989)
   [trans. into English by Langston Hughes (1902-1967)]

Your heart trembles in the shadows
like a face reflected in troubled water.
The old magic rises from the pit of the night.
You know the sweet sorcery of the past:
A river carries you far away from the banks,
carries you toward the ancestral landscape. […]
Your soul is a reflection in the whispering water
where your forefathers bent their obscure faces.
Its secret movement takes you into the darkness.
And the white that made you mulatto
is only a bit of foam thrown away,
like spit, on the face of the river. (429)

— “When the Tom-Tom Beats” Jacques Roumain (1907-1944)
   [trans. into English by Langston Hughes (1902-1967)]

These poems would share several key characteristics with the poetry of authors like John
Agard, Grace Nichols, and Jackie Kay: the association of women with “old magic” and
“sweet sorcery,” the language of creation, and the reference to old, oral tales:
“unpublished words” and “unknown gestures,” the emphasis on the rhythms of Caribbean
bongos and tom toms, the celebratory descriptions of strength and beautiful bodies, the
emphasis on “ancestral landscape,” the direct confrontation with colonial heritage, and
the navigation of dual ancestry. Unfortunately, although these poetic precedents existed,
they were not well publicized in the U.K. or taught in schools within the British Empire.
In part, later poetry of the Caribbean, specifically, would be both an echo of these themes
and an emphasis on including such work in the literary canon, particularly educational
contexts.

As political activists, later twentieth-century writers Agard, Nichols, and Kay
have all been deeply invested in producing children’s poetry and in promoting poetic
education for young children. Nichols and Agard have also spent a great deal of time volunteering in British schools, specifically to help educate British children about the Caribbean. They have also published many picturebooks as well as regular poetic volumes, and jointly edited collections like *No Hickory, No Dickory, No Dock: Caribbean Nursery Rhymes* (1995), and *Under the Moon and Over the Sea: A Collection of Caribbean Poems* (2002) that bring heteroglot voices and images into conversation. Both poets’ work, like Jackie Kay’s, has been regularly featured in the nationally standardized British school exams.

6.4.1 John Agard (b.1949)

John Agard was born in Georgetown, in what was then British Guyana. As a child, he attended a Roman Catholic boarding school where he received a standard British education; even in school, he was involved in debate, theatre, and began to write poetry. In *The Twenty-First-Century “Black” British Writers* (2009), David Gunning notes that:

> The priests who taught him inspired in him a love of literature and language, but they did so solely through the canons of English literature and Christianity; they made no reference to the local culture or its particular vernacular. Agard has often commented on their neglect of local forms of expression, which are, in his view, the most appropriate for that location. (n.p.)

Certainly his own work, both for adults and children, begins to redress that gap, bringing in both “non-RP” orthographies and Caribbean folktales into English-language poetry.55

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55 Though not all of these poems acknowledge the British literary heritage gratefully. Cf. “Listen Mr Oxford don” and “Memo to Professor Enoch Powell” from his first collection *Mangoes and Bullets* (1985)
As a young writer, Agard worked for the *Guyana Sunday Chronicle* until he and his partner Grace Nichols moved to London in 1977 with their daughter Kalera and Nichols’ daughter from a previous relationship, Lesley. He has since published prolifically and worked at various times for the Commonwealth Institute, the BBC, and the National Maritime Museum. His poetry has won numerous national and international awards, and in 2007 he was invested as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (an organization that had previously included fairy poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and colonial fairy tale poets like Rudyard Kipling).

Although he was raised on canonical literature, and presumably the work of a great many fairy poets, Agard never writes about fairies and only very rarely and obliquely references fairy tales from the British canon; his own work (not unlike Shakespeare’s synthesis of Classical forms with British fairies) often incorporates traditional Caribbean tales and a pantheon of Caribbean characters into his English-language poetic forms. For example, the entire collection *Come Down Nanci* (2000) is a sequence about the spider god Anansi, a trickster who goes by many names:

- Nansi
- Anansi
- Ananse
- Anancy
- Nancy

however spell me
merely invoke me

and from my web-bed

---

56 The society was founded by King George IV in 1820, and it is a good indicator of which British poets have been recognized as canonical during their lifetimes because the membership is limited to roughly five-hundred authors at any given time.
I will rise

the eightlegged one
will take on twolegged guise

will answer to the name
of uncle or aunty

and give flesh to fancy (‘Flesh to Fancy’ 36)

“Nansi,” in any spelling, rhymes with “me” and with “fancy”—setting the tone for the volume by suggesting that the poet himself is acting in the persona of a trickster. He is more active (and meddlesome) than a fairy dream, though personifying “fancy” in either male or female “guise.” The poem specifically draws attention to sound, and to the difficulty of translating oral cultures into a fixed orthography, but the variation in spellings suitably draws attention to the plural nature of both the shapeshifting Anansi and to traditional tales that can have many interpretations.

Some of Agard’s Anansi poems have anti-colonial messages embedded in them, both at the level of form and content. For example, in Agard’s version of the traditional tale “How the Tiger Played Dead and How Anansi Played Along,” the Tiger’s wife persuades Tiger to play dead so that all the other animals will come to the wake and he will be able to jump up and eat them. Anansi figures out the trick, and then himself tricks Tiger into farting loudly in the middle of the wake: “A farting corpse, needless to say,/sent all the creatures scurrying away./Don’t thank me, I said. Thank the wind./And returned pronto to my ceiling” (42). As a narrative about a small opponent deftly tricking

57 In many North American tale traditions, the trickster is generally a shapeshifter and can become male or female, human or animal at will. There are also, however, a long sequence of tales in several traditions about “grandmother spider” who is a distinct character from the trickster Anansi.
a ferocious and rapacious opponent, the tale is fundamentally anti-colonial; and as a tale which foregrounds both the potential impact of a carefully dropped sentence and the vital importance of “sound.” But the poem and the collection function in the same way, drawing attention to Guyanese tale culture in the U.K. through a carefully chosen collection of tales in Anansi’s voice.

Storytelling as an action in its own right is also centrally important to Agard’s poetic agenda, particularly in context of a postcolonial discourse, though this aspect of his writing has often been underestimated. For example, the collection that he edited with Grace Nichols, Under the Moon, Over the Sea (2002) was reviewed by the School Library Journal as “an exuberant tribute to one of the world’s enchanted places” and by Kirkus Reviews as “a lively mix of rhythms, stories, and descriptions.” But the anthology is neither as sunny nor as innocuous as the reviews imply; one whole section of the anthology is devoted to frightening “Jumbie” tales, including Agard’s own poem “Duppy Dan.” “Duppy Dan” is a ghostly figure (“done dead and gone”) with severed limbs (“nah have foot,” “nah have hand”) who rides a white horse “pon pitchdark night,” and Agard advises his riders to “Run like-a-hell stranger/when Duppy Dan tell you good night” (30). This kind of “jumbie” poetry introduces child-readers to the nightmares of the Caribbean, not the comforts of a hearth in England. It is a different emotional register.

In doing so, these narratives build up empathy with the readers through the experience of shared fears that then have the potential to extend readers’ emotional understanding of the poetry in the following section, which talks about Caribbean

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59 “Jumbie” is Guyanese for “ghost,” and “jumbie tales” are roughly equivalent to the English-language genre “ghost stories.” Cf. Under 26, fn 1.
colonial experience. For example, in his poem “Old World New World” (2003), Agard works against the colonial rhetoric of the “Golden Age” children’s poets by bearing witness to the vibrant beauty of the Caribbean without glossing over the horror of colonial history:

Spices and gold once cast a spell
On bearded men in caravels.

New World New World cried history
Old World Old World sighed every tree.

But Indian tribes long long ago
had sailed the archipelago

They who were used to flutes of bone
translated talk of wind on stone.

Yet their feathered tongues were drowned
when Discovery beat its drum.

New World New World—spices and gold
Old World Old World—the legends told.

New World New World cried history
Old World Old World sighed every tree. (Under 23)
While referencing the kind of acquiescent “silence” that characterized Milne’s Indian
band, in this poem, Agard describes the “Indian tribes’” silence as a violation (Cf.
“Nursery Chairs”). They do not, like Milne’s accommodating followers, “understand” the
“bearded men in caravels;” these tribes have been drowned by them. Agard implicates
colonialism for exactly the things that made the “Golden Age” poetry so apparently
marvelous—the child’s aspiration to “gad about the sea, the Empire, and secret gardens
with what we now would call childlike abandon” (Wolf) is reenacted through the
“bearded men’s” desire to “discover,” to “make history,” to acquire “spices and gold,”
and to play with guns. The result, as the illustration suggests, is a land stripped of people,
life, and color.

Moreover, Agard insists that the “new world” was not “new,” but that it had
thousands of years of human history and culture, etched into the land and trees, that were
forcibly displaced by Western “history”: “New World New World cried history/Old
World Old World sighed every tree.” Agard implies that Western “history” is itself the stuff of “legends”: in the Folklore Society’s evaluation, “what is religion or law to one stage of culture is superstition or unmeaning practice to another,” and Agard turns their framework on its head.60 It was the superstitious European legends of “fountains of youth” and quests for El Dorado that drove much of the most egregious colonial violence; it is the unimaginable assumption that it is acceptable to perpetuate genocide and slavery on a massive scale that is “religion and law” to colonizers and “unmeaning practice” to the Caribbean natives. In the poetic anthology, it can be difficult to distinguish nightmare mythic figures like Agard’s “Duppy Dan” from the terrifying, terrorizing colonial experience: could even the terrible jumbie man possibly be worse than the bearded men in caravels?

6.4.2 Grace Nichols (b.1950)

Grace Nichols was also born into the British commonwealth in Georgetown, British Guyana in 1950, sixteen years before the Republic of Guyana declared independence from the United Kingdom. As a result of her work at the University of Guyana, Nichols traveled to some of the remote corners of Guyana and had the opportunity to listen to native tales of Guyana and of South-Central America before moving to London with her family in 1977. Her work has also won many literary honors, and she was invested into the Royal Society of Literature in the same year as her partner, John Agard.

In her autobiographical essay “The Battle with Language” published in *Caribbean Women Writers* (1990), Nichols describes her poetry-writing in the kind of interactive terms that Benjamin would associate with oral storytelling: “I write because writing is my way of participating in the world and in the struggle for keeping language and the human spirit alive (including my own). It is a way of sharing a vision that is hopefully life-giving in the final analysis” (288).61 Although Agard’s work also had very gender-liberal dimensions, these were stressed even more in Nichols’ work, specifically in terms, like Spivak’s, that unpick the complex, interactive connotations of race and gender in national discourse.62

To that end, Nichols has been well known for her use of traditional tales, and for her deep desire to pluralize British children’s exposure to different narrative traditions.

Literature is not static. The myths of the old were created by the poets of old and remain powerful sources of imagination, to be drawn on again and again. Odysseus in his rolling ship did a lot for mine as a child and I am grateful. But we have to keep on creating and reshaping. We have to offer our children something more than gazing at *Superman 1, Superman 2, Superman 3*, and possibly *Superman 4*, so that when they look out on the world they can also see brown and black necks arching toward the sun so they can see themselves represented in the miraculous and come to sing their being. (“Battle” 288)

In drawing on a variety of literature and myths from British, Guyanese, Greco-Roman, and global traditions, Nichols weaves together language that had been prominent in eighteenth-century fairy tale discourse about the power of “creating and reshaping” aesthetics, dreams, and imagination, which are all spiritually inspiring and help to orient

61 In a sense, this is a combination of Benjamin and Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author,” which suggests that the act of reading is highly interactive and dependent on readerly interpretation.

readers in national culture. To that end, in the collection *I Is a Long-Memoried Woman* (1983), Nichols repeatedly declares the importance of dreaming: “Even in dreams I will submerge myself” (12); “We must hold fast to dreams” (14); “I was the Ashanti spider/woman-keeper/of dreams” (35). In each of these poems, she describes the act of dreaming as a way of connecting with the tales of the past and charting courses for the future; in her work, dreams do not signify the poet’s heightened perception so much as a strong sense of self as part of a living, changing community aware of its own myths and tale traditions. As Nichols said, her purpose is not to demonstrate her elevated status as a poet but to “participate in the world” and “share a vision” by drawing readers into a more multi-faceted awareness of the tale traditions underlying all the different aspects of culture that have contributed to the British Empire and continue to contribute to the culture of the U.K.

She also, like the canon of eighteenth-century fairy poets, constantly validates the quality of her own writing in her own contemporary culture, though less by appealing to Shakespeare or the tradition of British fairy poetry than by situating herself in terms of Guyanese tales and a specifically feminine tradition of storytelling and magic-making; the female narrators of her poems frequently declare themselves to be potent creators, makers of myths and worlds. The magic terms she draws on, however, tend to be poignantly poised between worlds—as in “Abra-Cadabra” from *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989). The word “Abracadabra” has a colonially coded etymology in British English; according to the *OED*, it was borrowed from Latin and has been used (in an

63 All page citations for Nichols’ poems refer to the anthology *I Have Crossed an Ocean* unless specifically noted otherwise.
unhyphenated form) in English as a magic word of incantation since the sixteenth-century. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, at the time when eugenicists and folklorists were stratifying “primitive” and “civilized” national cultures in terms of myth, “abracadabra” took on a second definition, meaning: “obscure, nonsensical, or mystificatory language; mumbo-jumbo, nonsense, gibberish” (OED). The hyphenated word “mumbo-jumbo” was itself borrowed from the name of a West African God, and used as a derisive term for “an object of superstitious awe” or “meaningless language or ritual” in British English since the eighteenth century. So, for Nichols, to claim the Latinate-West-African name Abra-Cadabra is to tease out a very longstanding bias in the English language and in British culture—overturning the associations with primitivism and nonsense while acknowledging the colonial context of the English language and remaking the words into something hybrid, alive, and positive.

Like the work of the late Victorian women writing fairy tale poems with doubled-edged meaning, Nichols’ poem is layered with double- and treble-entendres. But, as the title indicates, hers are conducted in subtle poly-linguistic registers:

My mother had more magic in her thumb than the length and breadth of any magician
Weaving incredible stories around the dark-green senna brew […] Knowing when to place a cochineal poultice on a fevered forehead Knowing how to measure a belly’s symmetry kneading the narah pains away (84)

In this tale, the mother figure is magical by right of storytelling and by right of potion-making, not poisonous witchly brews, but healing domestic remedies. The magic spell
she makes is, however, shaped by the taxonomy of colonial conquest: “senna” is the Latin name for a plant which grows wild in tropical regions, applied by colonists to a species native to the Caribbean that has been used in herbal tea for centuries. Similarly, “cochineal” is a Spanish word (derived from the Latin name “coccus cacti”), given in the sixteenth-century to a traditional red dye made from the crushed bodies of insects native to Mexico. The vocabulary of the mothers’ potions is Latinate, even when the applications are Caribbean. But the mother, magic thumbs dyed green from senna, also has private, feminine language of creation that escaped colonization. “Narah” is not a colonial term, a Latin root, nor a word that has been adopted into the *OED*. The magic of pregnancy and birth remains sacrosanct, passed on from mother to daughter.

The second half of “Abra-Cadabra” seems to be entirely un-magical and linguistically simple, but it speaks to the efficacious power of common sense and to the argument posed by scholars like Robert Darnton that tales contain embedded alternate histories:

Once my baby sister stuffed
a split-pea up her nostril
my mother got a crochet needle
and gently tried to pry it out

We stood around her
like inquisitive gauldings⁶⁴

Suddenly, in surgeon’s tone she ordered,
‘Pass the black pepper,’
and patted a little
under the dozing nose

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⁶⁴ “Gaulding” is a Caribbean name for a native species of egret (Latin genus, *Ardea*).
My baby sister sneezed.
The rest was history. (84)

Nichols’ phrasing draws attention to and validates the kind of family tale that begins with a very personal phrase like “Once my baby sister” instead of the fairy tale formula “Once upon a time.” In this case, the act of storytelling functions at several levels: it brings the family together around a shared memory, it teaches younger generations a traditional remedy, and it valorizes both the mother’s authority and her very practical problem-solving attitude. In other words, this pattern of poetry changes the rhythms of storytelling to encompass a hybrid kind of magic suitable to a poet who is very consciously and conscientiously bridging cultural and linguistic registers.

That Nichols is always highly conscious of language is evident in all of her work, but explicit in her preface to the long poem *Sunris* (1996): “As a child, steelpan, calypso, in fact anything that came from the ordinary folk including the everyday creole speech were regarded as ‘low-class’ not only by the colonial powers that be (in our case British) but also by the more snobbish of the upper and middle classes who frowned on folk-culture as common” (89). To redress this, the narrator of Nichols’ poem “dreams” herself a unified, though poly-stranded identity:

I’m a hybrid-dreamer
An ancestral-believer
A blood-reveller
Who worship at the house of love. (93)

Nichols interprets the poem herself, saying that: “In this act of reclaiming the various strands of her heritage she engages with both historical and mythological figures and like the calypsonian sometimes resorts to verbal self-inflation to make her voice heard; ‘I
think this time I go make history”” (91). However, in context of magic, dreams, nation, identity, and British poetry, this act of making history is a reclaiming of the kind of events overlooked in standard histories, a validation of female voices and alternate historigraphic patterns, and a dreaming/imagining of a future that can not only accept ancestral beliefs but revel in a visceral history with distinctive narrative rhythms; she is transmuting the blood-history of colonial violence into a passionate, familial blood-history through the creative acts of sex and childbirth that pass on the celebration of love and hybridity with future generations.

6.4.3 Jackie Kay (b.1961)

Kay was born in Glasgow, Scotland; her mother was Scottish and her father was Nigerian, but she was adopted as an infant by a white Scottish couple and raised in the Glasgow suburbs with her brother Maxwell, who had already been adopted by the Kays. She studied English at the University of Stirling, where the famous Scottish novelist Alisdair Gray (b.1934) persuaded her to pursue a career in writing, and Kay has since gone on to publish more than a dozen volumes of poetry, as well as a libretto, a children’s novel, and several collections of children’s poetry. She has won numerous awards for her writing; in 2002 she was elected to membership in the Royal Society of Literature, and in 2006 she became a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE).

If Grace Nichols is, of these three poets, most often associated with discussions of hybrid identity, Jackie Kay is most frequently associated with discussions of marginal identity. In 2009, Michaela Schrage-Früh tried to capture all the axes of social marginality along which Kay’s poetry has been read:
Being a black child adopted by white parents, being black in Scotland, being gay in a predominantly heterosexual society, being a woman writer in a male-dominated literary tradition—all these borderline experiences have generated Kay’s sense of otherness as well as her need to write into existence her supposedly impossible identity as a “black,” Scottish, lesbian woman writer. But Kay constantly transcends this autobiographical impact, which has fueled and shaped much of her writing, using her own experiences as a starting point from which to explore the ambiguities of racial, cultural, social, gendered, and sexual identities. (n.p.)

Like so many of her poetic predecessors, Kay translates a very personal experience of marginality into one that “transcends the autobiographical” by appealing to the culturally central and literarily marginal genre of fairy tales. Of the three authors represented in this section, because Kay was the only one raised in the U.K., for her the rhythms of childhood tales are not Caribbean or even African, but overwhelming taken from the British canon—which is to say, the fairy tales, fairy verse, and nursery tales inherited from the Victorian period.

From her earliest collection, fairy tales are deeply formative to her most basic use of language. As with the poets of WWI, Jackie Kay often finds trauma in fairy tale language, but she is not nostalgic about it. Rather, it represents a kind of national narrative that never seems to orient her narrators fully in their own life experiences. For example, in “The Telling Part” chapter from Adoption Papers (1991), Jackie Kay demonstrates the extent to which fairy tale narratives can give children language through which to (often inaccurately) interpret adult behavior:

After mammy telt me she wisnae my really mammy
I was scared to death she was gonnie melt
or something or mibbe disappear in the dead
of night and somebody would say she wis a fairy
godmother. So the next morning I felt her skin
to check it was flesh, but mibbe it was just
a good imitation. How could I tell if my mammy
was a dummy with a voice spoken by someone else? (27)

The child-narrator’s fears borrow language and imagery from a number of well-known fairy tales—she’s worried that her adoptive mother will melt like the Wicked Witch of the West, disappear like Cinderella’s fairy godmother, turn out to be an animated puppet like Pinocchio or any one of dozens of fairy tale characters operating under the compulsion of a spell. As Locke and Rousseau warned in their eighteenth-century treatises on child education, for Kay’s narrator, fairy tale language is misleading and disorienting rather than consoling or enlightening. At the conclusion of this stanza, Kay protests that the imagery did not harm the narrator: “So I searches the whole house for clues/but I never found nothing. Anyhow a day after/I got my guinea pig and forgot all about it” (27), but the following poems in the sequence continue to suggest that minority children can be especially disoriented by a genre which had, for more than a century, been very central to children’s initiation into British culture.

In the next chapter of Adoption Papers, “Black Button,” Kay’s narrator describes an early childhood encounter with racist language through a very popular colonial British fairy tale, Little Black Sambo (1899).65 The story was composed and illustrated by the expatriate Scottish children’s writer Helen Bannerman (1862–1946), who spent most of her life in India. Ironically, like Kay, Bannerman was publishing new tales to introduce

65 This story was in constant reprint through the mid-century: the tale itself is about a clever little boy who persuades a succession of hungry tigers not to eat him by giving each one of them an article of his clothing. The tigers quarrel about which of them is the most handsome in his new clothes, and they chase each other in circles until they all dissolve into yellow butter, which Sambo, after recovering his clothes, gives to his delighted father. Two contemporary versions of “Little Black Sambo,” have been released in the last twenty years. The Story of Little Babaji (1996) by Fred Marcellino (essentially unchanged except for the names) and Pancakes for Supper! (2006), rewritten by Anne Isaacs as an American tall tale in which a group of New England animals dissolve into maple syrup.
Scottish readers to a broader cultural frame of reference; of course, unlike Kay, Bannerman was doing so as a white writer in a colonial context. However, except for the fact that Sambo’s parents were named “Black Mumbo” and “Black Jumbo,” the text of the tale was not exceptionally racist, yet it had become associated with caricature “darky iconography” around the turn of the century, and, consequently, the name “sambo” was used as a racial slur for decades. Kay’s poem strips the “Little Black Sambo” story of its narrative content, her narrator encounters only the word, thrown out in a hateful manner by another child:

I chase his *Sambo Sambo* all the way from the school gate.  
A fistful of anorak—What did you call me? Say that again.  
*Sam-bo.* He plays the word like a bouncing ball  
but his eyes move fast as ping pong.  
I shove him up against the wall,  
say that again you wee shite. *Sambo, sambo,* he’s crying now. (29)

Like the other poems in this pattern of fairy tale writing, the text emphasizes sound. But here the sound does not have a positive, empowering connection with drums; rather, the word “Sambo” disintegrates into nonsense syllables, and then into the rhythm of the boy’s crying. At the same time, the narrator, who is labeled as “other” by the term “Sambo,” retaliates in very characteristically Scottish terms by calling the boy a “wee shite,” linguistically proving her Scottish heritage. Both children are trying very hard to negotiate identity in terms of a fairy tale adapted to serve a nationalist purpose. The poem does not suggest that either child is familiar with the actual story, but it does suggest that language is a kind of social play (“He plays the word”) that children must participate in to establish their place in a social network. In this context, understanding the implications of
tale fragments and knowing how to deploy them and how to react to them is a definitive, often cruel, aspect of the children’s cultural development.

In her later work, Kay continues to rely on fairy tale fragments and uses them to create immensely complex emotional registers in her poems. She invariably associates fairy tales with socially marginal points of view, though in poems with adult narrators, Kay tends to employ several conflicting registers of marginality and centrality all at once. For example, her poem “The Underground Baby Case” from the collection *Severe Gale 8* (1991) describes a kidnapping from the point of view of a woman who picked up a baby (“a black boy/a beautiful black boy” 66) out of pram in a crowded car on the Victoria Line and held on to him when the mother, overwhelmed by juggling her shopping and the buggy, disembarked:

He is my boy now. My boy. […]
When we go out in the big old fashioned pram
he pretends he is my washing.
At night I make him stories out of things
I’m trying to remember:
Little Red. Puff Puff. King’s Horses.
Her with the dreadful long hair. (66-7)

For this narrator, fairy tales represent her best attempts to perform good parenting. The woman’s behavior is socially marginal to the extreme of being illegal and possibly insane, but also socially central because the telling of fairy tales is an iconic act of idealized British domesticity. The emotional effect of the poem is to inspire horror at the woman’s actions and sympathy because her loving attempts to tell fairy tales are deeply familiar.

In the same poem, fairy tales also give the narrator context in which to understand and validate her own actions. She increasingly associates the baby’s birth mother with
Rapunzel: “I have not watched TV/for fear she will appear,/her long ropes of hair” (67), and herself as the witch with the stolen child, though the tale is mis-remembered and the symbolism is adapted and muddled in with other tales to make sense of her scenario:

I would climb up her hair
And uncover her ear.
I would whisper Peter, Peter
is all right. Peter loves me.
And ever so gently I’d climb down
lock by lock, bone by bone
trying to put her together again. (68)

Through fragments of fairy tale language, the narrator obliquely expresses her guilt for being a child-stealing witch, her fairy-godmother-like desire to care for the mother to whom she would whisper reassurances, and her deep recognition that she has caused an irrevocable harm: Humpty Dumpty was never reassembled, and the fairy tale heroine who allowed her bones to be turned into a ladder was remade incorrectly and incompletely. Here, Kay is using the familiarity of fairy tale narratives to add depth to her emotional registers very quickly; she does not have to explain the emotions explicitly because she can access contexts in which the reader shares knowledge of emotionally powerful narrative moments.

However, in this context the telling of fairy tales is also symbolic of their shared acts of pretending (“he pretends he is my washing” 67), symbolic of the falsehood that the missing “Baby Kofi” was truly meant to be her own boy “Peter” (67), and symbolic of the lies that she tells to herself about the whole situation: “his mother/gave him to me really, she must have wanted/me to have him—perhaps she planned it/for weeks” (67). In this case, the “fairy tales” function as consciously-erected screen memories almost powerful enough to blot out the actual context. But the selection of fairy tales also
gestures at their inappropriateness—“Peter” is a reference to Peter Pan, who “ran away” as a baby when his pram rolled away from an inattentive nurse, but “Kofi” is not the name of any of the lost boys or the name of any canonical British fairy tale hero. His African name further highlights the inappropriateness of the kidnapper’s imposed fantasy context—Kofi has been forced from a multi-faceted British cultural context with diverse names and narratives into a narrow British cultural context with only fragments of colonially constructed tales to hold it in place. Kay’s use of fairy tales most powerfully shows how standard British narratives can painfully exclude as well as powerfully include citizens of the nation.

For all three of these authors, tales are crucial because the act of storytelling simultaneously passes on memories from generation to generation and creates new memories in the shared experience of telling/hearing/knowing a story. For Agard and Nichols, the act of telling increases vocabulary and draws attention to the colonial scars in language. Stories, in Kay’s oeuvre often mislead and confuse the narrators of her poems, but the metatextual act of storytelling is always a kind of truth-sharing in and of itself that affirms the importance of the relationship between the teller and the hearer. Conversely, every reader who can unpick her complex of fairy tale referents is validated in his/her knowledge of canonical tales even though the implications of the canon are being constantly challenged. Yet in every case, in addressing British fairy tales as a key facet of national identity Agard, Nichols, and Kay are striking at an aspect of culture so central that to change its patterns would be to change the dreams and the language of the nation.
CONCLUSION

...unless we grasp the particular fairy thread of thought the poet rather hazily flings to us, we cannot grasp anything whatever.
–G.K. Chesterton

This dissertation was written in response to an apparently minor quirk of twentieth-century British poetics: In spite of the fact that throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, dozens of influential British poets have written fairy tales into their poetry, poetry critics have largely failed to consider fairies and fairy tales as substantial or even significant factors in the development of British poetics. In the rare cases where fairy tale poems are analyzed directly, their cultural implications tend to be overlooked or oversimplified—as when Helen Vendler dismissively suggested that, “fairy tales […] put forth a child’s black and white ethics, with none of the complexity of the Gospels, and none of the worldliness of the Greeks.” From the beginning I felt that fairy tales were important, both because of their ubiquity in poetry and (as I later discovered) in theory and also because they have been so oddly neglected by literary critics. I suspected that following the wandering thread of fairy tales outside of the usual chronological or movement-based limits of poetry criticism would reveal something important about both the development of British poetics and the structure of literary criticism through which British poetics are most commonly interpreted. And, in doing so, I hoped to outline

1 “The Victorian Age in Literature,” 221.
several fresh strategies for engaging with fairy tale poetry specifically and with British poetics in broader terms. As such, my project constitutes an important intervention into six patterns of argument in contemporary poetry scholarship:

1. *It allows poetry scholars to make more robust, historically contextualized arguments about apparently opaque or dissonant fairy tale poems in the work of otherwise canonical poets.* (For example, this kind of intervention encourages a fresh approach to Wilfred Owen’s war poetry, and specifically his complex entanglement of the language of nationality, family, sexuality, and trauma through fairy tale poems like “The Kindly Ghosts.”)

2. *It encourages poetry scholars to recognize highly political arguments encoded in apparently innocuous or apolitical fairy tale poems, especially those poems that have been dismissed as marginal because of their apparent moral and political “simplicity.”* This pattern of intervention both substantiates the recovery and validation of work by long-neglected poets like Anna Wickham and Charlotte Mew, and it also freshly recognizes and challenges the political implications of constantly reprinted but rarely analyzed work by poets like Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, A.A. Milne, and Alfred Noyes.

3. *It enhances critical discussions of the relationship between “centrality” and “marginality” in British poetics.* This intervention functions textually and metatextually. Textually, fairy tales often highlight exceptional protagonists who have been marginalized or exiled from their communities: Cinderella sits alone in the ashes; Rapunzel is locked in a tower; Hansel and Gretel are lost in the woods. Consequently, they are very often deployed in contexts where authors are drawing attention to socially
marginal experiences of, for example, race, gender, economics, or sexuality.

Mexatextually, the genre of fairy tales is, as a whole, widely considered marginal to the literary canon, in part because of their centrality to mainstream popular culture and children’s literature. Recognizing this nuance allows scholars to more fully appreciate the complexity of fairy tale language in, for example, the poetry of Stevie Smith—which is doubly rebellious because it has the potential to simultaneously challenge the patriarchal values of mainstream popular culture (which foregrounds fairy tales with heroes who rescue damsels) and patriarchal conventions of mainstream mid-century canonical literature (which dismiss fairy tales as marginal, effeminate, and childish), even though fairy tales are partly marginal to the literary canon because of their centrality in popular culture. Her poetry simultaneously functions on several axes of centrality/marginality.

4. *It also recognizes the extent to which whole facets of British poetic history can be retrospectively made marginal or central by the structure and priorities of literary scholarship in any given historical moment.* For example, eighteenth century scholars retrospectively defined and highlighted a history of fairy poetry dating back to the sixteenth-century. Conversely, twentieth-century scholars have neglected “fairy poetry” so emphatically that its existence as a central eighteenth- and nineteenth-century genre has been almost entirely occluded.

5. *It offers poetry critics a distinctively British context through which to delimit and redefine poetic nationalism.* For example, by teasing out the colonial history of fairy tales and folklore, this intervention suggests that, in spite of the push towards globalization and the cultural hegemony of corporations like Disney, the development of fairy tales in the UK has been so uniquely entangled with the development of British
colonial nationalism that fairy tales always-already associated with unifying cultural homogeneity (for example, that all true “British” people know the rules of fairy tale pantomime) and with cultural stratification (that, for example, in most British libraries “European” fairy tales are classified as “literature” and non-European fairy tales are classified as “anthropology”). In this context, my project illuminates the importance of postcolonial fairy tale writing by poets with plural cultural inheritance, including Jackie Kay, John Agard, and Grace Nichols—who are not making minor, frivolous arguments for children, but central, powerful arguments that specifically draw attention to colonial British literary history.

6. Because redefining “fairy tale” also redefines parallel terms like “myth,” this dissertation also equips poetry scholars to reconsider the language and implications of major movements like “Mythopoetics” and the gender-liberal trend that Alicia Ostriker would call “revisionist mythmaking.” For example: in the work of T.S. Eliot, critics have minutely analyzed all references to Myth (which is implicitly coded as masculine, serious, complex and adult) but largely ignored references to fairies and fairy tales (which are implicitly coded as feminine, frivolous, simple, and childish). However, in doing so, few scholars have stopped to question why and how “myths” and “fairy tales” came to represent such polarized categories, or to what extent that division might reflect an implicit patriarchal and colonial bias inherited from Victorian bibliographers and folklorists.

Yet, although my central argument has been primarily couched in terms of twentieth-century poetry, only the two final chapters are specifically devoted to
twentieth-century fairy tale poetry because every one of these interventions in contemporary poetic scholarship relies heavily on a new reading of pre-twentieth century British literary history. My endpoint was twentieth-century “fairy tale poetry,” but I quickly discovered that there were many strands that led to the formation of this genre, each with a complex history of influences: nineteenth-century pantomime, eighteenth-century prose fairy tale satire, sixteenth-century fairy poetry, nineteenth-century fairy verse. Consequently, this dissertation has been structured to encompass a very long, often overlapping chronology that could allow for a re-synthesis of both canonical and non-canonical poetry, in context of developments in literary theory and literary criticism.

Retreading the same chronological ground through subtly distinct sub-genres (and sub-sub-genres) may seem redundant, but one of the reasons that fairy poetry and fairy tale poetry have fallen between disciplinary lines is that different disciplines have focused on single facets of textual development. For example, in literary analysis of the eighteenth-century: children’s literature scholars tend to focus on the kind of prose fairy tales that would eventually be encompassed in the nineteenth-century fairy tale canon, but to neglect the extensive influence of canonical fairy poetry; poetry scholars might focus on the language of “imagination” and the shift between Enlightenment and Romantic literary movements, but tend not to devote substantial analysis to prose fairy tales or their possible significance in this context.

However, bringing these kinds of narratives together can resolve problems particular to each field—for example, among children’s literature scholars and fairy tale scholars, there has been an ongoing debate about the relationship between late eighteenth-century “morality tales” and “fairy tales” which has been vexed by apparent
paradoxes: the fairy tale critic and morality tale advocate Maria Edgeworth in the same volume where she dismissed “fairy tales” and declared that they “are not much now read,” she both published and praised moral stories about fairies in prose and verse. Read in context of the eighteenth-century debates about fairy poetry, however, Edgeworth’s position is entirely logical: advocates of fairy poetry had, for more than a century, been carefully distanci
question had very important methodological implications because using a phrase
dissociated from familiar chronologies allowed me to extend my argument into
unexpected territory. Who could have known to look for a politically satirical,
homosexually-coded fairy tale for adults written by a prominent British critic in 1743 to
protest a man being forced into marriage by a dominant female relative? (Antedating by
more than 150 years, the Oxford English Dictionary’s first etymological association of
“fairy” with male homosexuality) But Horace Walpole’s “A Fairy Tale” exists
nonetheless, and its existence should, perhaps, challenge contemporary gender theorists
(and in this case queer theorists) to find language that will help to rethink chronological
boundaries and account for anomalies that problematize more familiar accounts of gender
history.

Also, by applying relatively generic descriptors like “gender liberal” to poetic,
theoretical, and critical texts equally, I want to draw attention to the fact the artistic works
being produced by poets have historically very often performed the kind of work
primarily associated with literary theory by (implicitly and explicitly) contributing to
powerful international debates about social power and social relationships. For that
reason I particularly wanted to stress the mutual development of poetry and literary
theory (particularly in moments when those mutual developments have been overlooked
by literary critics). But, having said that, I think that my methodology could benefit from
a better contextualization of more familiar key terms in my long chronological
historicizations of literary theory,—and this is something I’d like to do more as I continue
to develop the dissertation into a monograph.
In an earlier stage of the writing process, I had hoped to include a discussion of developments in nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry and theory relating to Psychoanalysis, Structuralism/Poststructuralism, and Queer Theory. In addition to suggesting that fairy tales inhabit every major aspect of what we think of as literary theory; this expansion would also allow me to make it clear that poets regularly use fairy tales to engage with layers of theoretical concepts—Jackie Kay is just as important as a Queer poet as a Postcolonial poet, and situating poets like Kay in multiple theoretical contexts will usefully indicate how some of these concepts overlap. However, there is also a sense in which this dissertation could be expanded into nearly any theoretical territory. For example, the language of fairy has been important to discussions of “nature,” science, technology, industrialization, and the modern British nostalgization of the countryside since the eighteenth century; and it could be very helpful for contextualizing contemporary Eco-Theory. For that reason, it was helpful to delimit the initial dissertation project to gender, Marxism, and (post)colonialism.

Ultimately, the purpose of this dissertation is to firmly refute reductive readings of fairy tale poems and to make the case that fairy tales are not only relevant but also vital to the study of twentieth-century British poetry. Having said that, my goal was not to present a definitive reading, but to draw attention to a pattern in the history of British poetry that could be valuable for scholars in several fields and to draw attention to a number of wonderful texts that have previously been overlooked (including the marvelous and very unexpected fairy tale pieces by Karl Marx and Horace Walpole). This dissertation is very much a work in progress, the cartoon rather than the finished
painting. I have spent a lot of time conversing with senior scholars in all of the fields that I have been attempting to bring together, and I think that the gist of each major argument will hold, but there is no way to represent this much material with all of the context that it deserves, and it is entirely possible that I have overlooked key authors or underrepresented important theoretical developments.

I think that the greatest weakness of this project as it now stands is its fairly minimal engagement with secondary scholarship. I had two reasons for doing this, most obviously that a major part of my thesis is that contemporary patterns of scholarship naturalize the obfuscation of fairy tale poetry; there are very, very few pieces which give robust consideration to either “fairy poetry” or “fairy tale poetry” in the work of more than one or two isolated writes, and (to the best of my knowledge) none exclusively dedicated to the history of fairy tale influences in literary theory dating back to the Victorian period, particularly as those influences appear across theoretical schools. For that reason, it was already so difficult to map a new archive of primary material into something like a linear narrative that I poured my attention into that part of the project, thinking that once I had mapped out the bones of my historicization that I could then do a better job of contextualizing my project with other patterns of historicization. At the moment, I believe that I am in a strong position to do exactly that—I have read a great deal more secondary material than I have properly represented here, but I could keep refining this dissertation for years, and there has to be a moment at which I can say that the project is “done enough” to be a dissertation and to save some of the next developments for the monograph, and more developments for the monograph after that,
and a few side arguments for a handful of articles that did not quite fit into the monographs.

All caveats aside, I think that this dissertation is a robust accomplishment as it stands. I have enjoyed working on it immensely, and I hope that enough of it is in place to give you a sense of what I will eventually accomplish with this project.

Again, many thanks for your time and consideration!
APPENDIX A:
FAIRIES AND FAIRY TALES IN THE INDEX TO POETRY AND RECITATIONS (1918)

To illustrate one example of the pervasiveness of fairy themes, I include here the “fairy” poems and excerpts from Edith Granger’s An Index to Poetry and Recitations: Being a Practical Reference Manual for the Librarian, Teacher, Bookseller, Elocutionist, Etc. (1918, revised and enlarged from the 1904 edition). The collection includes English and American material plus a few pieces translated from other languages; it also spans several centuries. However, the sheer prevalence of “fairy” allusions evident from just the list of titles and first lines is worth consideration.1 Since I was looking for a roughly chronologically identifiable grouping, however, I have excluded the many anonymous “fairy” poems and ballads, and, for brevity’s sake, avoided the dozen fairy pieces excerpted from Shakespeare’s The Tempest and Midsummer Night’s Dream. All of the pieces included in this bibliography were previously anthologized in English-language volumes (often six or seven times), and considered both well known and well established. Although Granger’s Index includes “poems, recitations (both prose and verse), orations, drills, dialogues, selections from dramas, etc.” (v), the vast majority of “fairy” pieces are stand-alone poems and a few are poems embedded in plays.

1 This list does not include poems that reference fairies outside of the title or first line.
It is also important to note that although the Granger offers the book to “students of all ages,” the volume was primarily designed for non-university use; the title page specifically avoids the terms “lecturer” and “professor,” and the preface points toward the expectation that this volume will primarily be used in primary school classrooms: “An Appendix has been added, which will be of especial use to teachers and pupils. This Appendix gives lists of selections suitable for Arbor Day, Lincoln’s Birthday, and other special days; also lists of drills, tableaux, etc., and temperance selections” (v). This is exactly the kind of publication that helped exclude fairy tales from the new Departments of English by associating fairies and fairy tales with children and “lesser” educational contexts, even though many of the authors listed here are otherwise considered canonical.

Note: the first line of each text is given in parenthesis if the “fairy” or “fairy tale” influence is not evident in the title. The anthology brings together texts from across Europe and North America, but I have starred the known British authors, who make up more than half of the total list.²

Ackerman, [Louise Victorine Choquet]. “Sleeping Beauty.”


Allen, [Mrs. M.E.]. “Song Revels” (“Once upon a time, in beautiful Dreamland, Queen Fancy”).


² The proportion of British authors may be even higher. A few of the authors have fallen into obscurity and could not readily be identified by nationality (i.e. Allen, Boyd, Burrell, Clement, Dean, Denton, Duffin, Glazener, Lyman, Macqueen, McNeill, Morris, Morrison, Murray, Pruitt, Ritter, Rook, Ruey, Short, Sullivan, Thayer, Thomson, Turner, Webb).
*Baillie, Joanna. “To a Child” (“What imp art thou, with dimpled cheek”).
*Barnes, William. “A Witch.”
*Barr, Matthias. “Hetty and the Fairies.”
*Bayly, Thomas Haynes. “Child and the Bird” (“Oh! where do fairies hide their heads”).
Benton, Joel. “Hallowe’en” (“Pixie, kobold, elf, and sprite”).
Boyd, Louise E.V. “The Fairy Queen’s Decision.”
Bradley, Mary Emily [Neeley]. “Frost Work” (“No fairies left! You need not tell me so.”).
Brainerd, Elanor Hoyt. “Nancy’s Cinderella” (from The Misdemeanors of Nancy).
Brown, Anna Sharpless. “Cinderella.”
*Browne, William. “A Fairy Banquet” (from “Britannia’s Pastoral”).
Bryant, William. “The Little People of the Snow.”
Burrell, B.M. “Quentin’s Fairy Palace.”
Byner, [Witter]. “Young Eden” (“Flushed from a fairy flagon”).

*Byron, Mary C. G. “The Fairy Thrall.”

Carman, William. “Mr. Moon: A Song of the Little People.”

Carryl, Guy Wetmore. “Red Riding Hood.”


Case, Lizzie York. “Fairy Land.”


*Chesterton, G[ilbert] K[eith]. “The Song of Elf” (from Ballad of the White Horse).

Choate, Isaac Bassett. “Fairies’ Work.”

Clement, Ella H. “A Christmas Eve Adventure,” (“Harry, don’t you wish there were fairies nowadays!”)


Cooke, Rose [Terry]. “A Wish” (“Be my fairy mother”).

Coolbrith, Ina Donna. “The Mariposa Lily” (Fragile, fairy thing.).


*Crabbe, George. “Sleep the Detractor of Beauty” (“We indeed have heard of sleeping beauty”) (from Edward Shore).

*Cunningham, Allan. “Song of the Elfin Miller.”

*D’arcy, Hal. “An Erris Fairy.”


Dean, [Harry]. “Mother’s Rocking Chair” (“Once upon a time she’d take me”).

Deland, Margaret Wade [Campbell]. “The Fairies’ Shopping.”

*De la Mare, Walter. “The Mocking Fairy.”

Denton, Clara. “A Search for the Fairies.”
*Drake, Joseph Rodman. “A Fairy in Armour,” “Elfin Song,” and “Gathering of the Fairies” (from *The Culprit Fay*).

*Drayton, Michael. “The Palace of the Fairies,” “Nymphadia: the Court of Fairy,” “The Palace of the Fairies,” “Queen Mab’s Chariot,” “Queen Mab’s Maids of Honor.”


Ellis, Katharine Ruth. “Frances’s Fairy Letter.”


*Fox, Moireen. “The Faery Lover.”

*Gall, [Richard]. “The Hazel Wood Witch.”

*Gale, Norman [Rowland]. “The Fairy Book.”

*Gay, John. “Mother, Nurse and Fairy.”


Gilman, Caroline [Howard]. “The Household Woman” (“Graceful may seem the fairy form”).

Glazener, Robert Butler. “Star-magic.”

*Gwynn, Stephen Lucius. “Out in the Dark” (“Oh, up the brae, and up and up, beyont the fairy thorn”).

Hadley, Lizzie M. “The Rainbow Fairies.”


Heine, Heinrich. “The Water Fay” (from *Pictures of Travel*).

*Hemans, Felicia Dorothea. “Fairies Recall,” “Fairy Song,” “Water-lilies” (Come away, elves, while the dew is sweet”).

*Herford, Oliver. “The Elf and the Doormouse.”

*Herrick, Robert. “The Beggar to Queen Mab the Fairy Queen,” “The Fairy Temple, or Oberon’s Chapel,” “The Fairies.”

*Higginson, Ella. “A Fairy’s Love Song.”

Higginson, Mary T. “Changelings.”

*Hill, George [Birkbeck Norman]. “Song of the Elfin Steersman.”

Holmes, Oliver Wendell. “The Broomstick Train or The Return of the Witches.”

*Hood, Thomas. “A Lake and a Fairy Boat,” “Queen Mab,” “A Parental Ode to My Son: Aged Three Years and Five Months” (“Thou happy, happy elf!”).


*Howitt, Mary. “The Fairies of the Caldon Low.”


Hunter-Duvar, John. “Mermaid’s Song.”


*Joyce, Robert Dwyer. “Song of the Forest Fairy.”

*Keats, John. “Faery Song.”

*Kelly, Myra. “In Loco Parentis” (“Cinderella had a fairy godmother”).

*Kennedy, [Patrick]. “The Grateful Beasts” (“There was once a young man on his way to a fair”).

*Kipling, Rudyard. “The Story of the Gadsbys” (“Wake up, my sleeping beauty!”).

Kopisch, August. “The Fairies’ Passage.”

*Lamb, Charles. “The Offer” (“Tell me, would you rather be changed by a fairy”), “The Broken Doll” (“An infant is a selfish sprite”).

Lathrop, George. “The Lily Pond” (Some fairy spirit with his wand).


*Le Fanu. [Sheridan]. “Abhrain and Bhuideil” (“From what dripping cell, through what Fairy glen”).


Low, Benjamin R.C. “For the Dedication of a Toy Theatre” (“You banished fairies and then outlawed elves”).


*Lucas, Edward [Verral]. “Mr. Lang’s Fairy Books.”


Lyman, George F. “My Little Tease” (“A mischievous fairy”).


*Mackenzie, Donald A. “My Fairy Lover,” “The Wee Folk.”

*Maclean, Letitia Elizabeth [Landon]. “Little Red Riding Hood.”

Macqueen, [Lucy Hayes]. “The Long Ago” (“Once upon a time, long ago”).³


*Marston, Philip Bourke. “Garden Fairies.”

*McManus, S[eumas]. B. “Jack and the King who was a Gentleman.”

McNaught, Rossmond Livingstone. “Christmas Fairies.”


Mifflin, Lloyd. “To a Maple Seed” (Art thou some winged sprite, that fluttering round”).


³ The play-excerpt was attributed to Macqueen, but was actually her translation of an unattributed French text The Long Ago.
*Moore, Thomas. “No, not more Welcome” (“No not more welcome the fairy numbers”), “The Mountain Sprite.”

Morris, S. Walter “Dreams for Sale” (“Some tiny elves, one evening, grew mischievous, it seems”).

Morrison, Margaret. “Grammar as Taught in Fairyland.”


Murray, [E.]. “The Dragon Drink.”

*Nutty, [Tommy?]. “An Afternoon Call” (“An old witch went a-walking”).

[O’]Brien, Edward J. “Magic.”


*Owen, F[rances]. M[ary]. “The Children’s Music” (“We asked where the magic came from”).


Poe, Edgar Allen. “Fairyland.”

*Pound, Ezra. “The Choice” (“It is true that you say the gods are more use to you than fairies.”).

*Praed, Winthrop Mackworth. “Fairy Song.”


Pyle, Katharine. “The Dandelion” (“I found a little old elfin man”).

*Raleigh, Walter. “Vision upon this Conceit of the Fairy Queen.”

*Randolph, Thomas. “Fairies’ Song” (from “Amyntis: or, The Impossible Dowry”).


Ritter, Hugo. “Ballad of the Mermaid.”

Rook, E. Celia and Lizzie J. “A Troublesome Visitor” (“A most mischievous sprite was abroad all last night”).

*Rossetti, Christina. “Goblin Market.”

Rückert, Friedrich. “Barbarossa” (“The ancient Barbarossa by magic spell is bound”).


*Russell, George [A.E.]. “The Three Counsellors” (“It was the fairy of the place”).

Sangster, Margaret Elizabeth [Munson]. “A Little Fairy.”


*Shelley, Percy. *Queen Mab.*


Short, Marion. “Fairy Bell.”


*Sims, George R. “The Magic Wand.”

*Smedley, A. Constance. “Red Pepper” (“Whist, whist, whist! Here comes the Brownie Men.”).

Smith, Francis Hopkinson. “A Kentucky Cinderella.”

*Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queen*

Spofford, Harriet Elizabeth [Prescott]. “The Pines” (Couldst thou, Great Fairy, give to me.”).


*Stevenson, Robert Louis. “Fairy Bread,” “From a Railway Carriage” (“Faster than fairies, faster than witches”), “Princess Otto.”

*Sweetman, Elinor. “Fairy Song.”

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*In 1917, this poem was translated into a black and white silent film directed by Rupert Julian.*

Thayer, Julia M. “The Bottle Imp.”

Thomson, Carrie W. “Kitty Clover” (“Midget, gypsy, big-eyed elf, little Kitty Clover”).

*Thorley, Wilfred*. “Buttercups” (“There must be fairy miners”).

*Thornbury, George*. “Dirge on the Death of Oberon, the Fairy King.”

Tietjens, Eunice. “Bacchante to her Babe” (“Come, sprite, and dance! The sun is up.”).

*Todhunter, John*. “Fairy Gold.”

Turner, Edward F. “A Fairy Tale.”

*Walpole, Horace*. “Anna Grenville, Countess Temple Appointed Poet Laureate to the King of the Fairies.”

*Warton, Thomas*. “Fairies.”

*Watson, Rosamund Mariott*. “The Last Fairy.”


Winter, William. “Unwritten Poems” (“Fairy spirits of the breeze”);


*Yeats, William Butler*. “Faerie’s Song.”
APPENDIX B:
FAIRY TALES IN VICTORIAN WOMEN’S PERIODICALS

The following list is by no means a complete or comprehensive; even so, I hope that the diversity of periodicals represented is indicative of the scope of nineteenth-century women’s interest in fairy tales. To that end, I have attempted to include only periodicals with at least 100 issues published between 1800-1900, and only periodicals primarily or exclusively targeted at female audiences. The following symbols should be used as a key to the list of periodicals:

* Published prose fairy tales or fairy stories

** Published fairy poetry or fairy tale poetry (and prose fairy tales or fairy stories)

x Did not publish fairy tales, stories, or poetry

## Not available for examination. ¹

Note: all issues are listed chronologically by first date of publication under the journal’s original title; later titles given in brackets only if substantially different (e.g. British Mother’s Magazine includes The British Mothers’ Magazine, The British Mother’s Journal, and The British Mothers’ Journal and Domestic Magazine).

¹ Journals which were examined as fairy tale sources were available through either 19th Century UK Periodicals or British Periodicals Online as of July 2010. Additional Sources include: Wolff (ed.) The Waterloo Directory of Victorian Periodicals (1824-1900) and Fulton (ed.) Union List of Victorian Serials.
**The Ladies’ Monthly Museum: or Polite Repository of Amusement and Instruction** (1798-1829) [as The Ladies’ Museum (1829-32), merged with The Ladies’ Magazine in 1832 Cf. La Belle Assemblée]

**La Belle Assemblée, or, Bell’s Court and Fashionable Magazine Addressed Particularly to the Ladies** (1806-32) [merges with The Ladies’ Magazine: or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex (1770-1832) and The Ladies’ Museum (1829-32) and reissued as Court Magazine and Belle Assemblée (1832-48), The Ladies’ Companion at Home and Abroad (1849-1850), in 1852 merges with The Ladies’ Companion and Monthly Magazine (1850-1870) and The Ladies’ Cabinet of Fashion, Music, and Romance (1852-1870)]

## The Ladies’ Fashionable Repository (1809-1895) [Pewsey’s Ladies, etc.]

## The Ladies’ Pocket Magazine (1824-1840)

**World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons** (1824-51) [also The World of Fashion: A Monthly Magazine of the Court of London Fashions and Literature, Music, Fine Arts, the Opera and the Theatres, as The Ladies’ Monthly Magazine (1852-79), as Monde Élégant or the World of Fashion (1880-91)]

## The Ladies’ Gazette of Fashion (1834-1894) [poss. 1832-1835, 1842-1894]

## Christian Mother’s Magazine (1844-1845) [as Englishwoman’s Magazine and Christian Mother’s Miscellany (1846-1854) as Christian Lady’s Magazine (1854-1857)]

*The British Mothers’ Magazine* (1845-1864)

**Le Follet** (1846-1900)

**The Lady’s Newspaper and Pictorial Times** (1847-1863)

## The Mother’s Friend (1848-95)

**Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine, &c.** (1852-1881)

## The Englishwoman’s Journal (1858-64)

**The Ladies’ Treasury: An Illustrated Magazine of Entertaining Literature, Poetry, Fine Art, Education, Domestic Economy, Needlework and Fashion** (1858-95)

**Englishwoman’s Review: A Journal of Woman’s Work** (1866-1910),

440
**Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal (1867-1907)**

## [National Society for Women’s Suffrage Journal (1870-1890)]

## Woman’s Work in the Great Harvest Field (1872-1894)

x Journal of the Women’s Education Union (1873-1881)

*Myra’s Journal of Dress and Fashion (1875-1912)*

x Women’s Union Journal: Organ of the Women’s Protective and Provident Association (1876-1890) [as Quarterly Report and Review (1891), as The Women’s Trades Union Review (1891-1919)]

**Sylvia’s Home Journal: For Home Reading and Use, of Tales, Stories, Fashion, and Needlework (1878-1891) [as Sylvia’s Journal (1892-1894)]**

**The Girl’s Own Paper (1880-1927) [as Woman’s Magazine and Girl’s Own Paper (1928-30), as Girl’s Own Paper and Heiress (1931-50), as The Heiress (1950-n/a)]**

## The Englishwoman’s Year Book (1881-1916)

## The Ladies’ Pictorial (1881-1921)

x The Lady (1885-present)

x British Women’s Temperance Journal, (1883-1892) [as Wings (1892-1925)]

**Atalanta (1887-1898)**

## The Lady’s World: A Magazine of Fashion and Society (1886-7) [as Woman’s World (1887-1890)]

*Women’s Penny Paper (1888-90) [as The Woman’s Herald (1891-93); as The Woman’s Signal (1893-?)]*

**Hearth and Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen (1891-1914)**

Of the nineteen periodicals available for examination, sixteen featured fairy tales, fairy stories, fairy poems, or fairy tale poems. They vary widely in price and quality, and clearly transcend class lines, primarily targeting leisure audiences or religious audiences.
The three journals which do not feature fairy tales all date to the end of the century (after fairy tales had been associated with children’s literature), and all are exclusively dedicated to overtly political agendas such as temperance, suffrage, and women’s education. A nuanced discussion of the morals, themes, and quality of these periodical fairy-writings is beyond the scope of my project, but it is a rich resource that deserves further scholarly attention.
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