

FAIRIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ART AND LITERATURE

Although fairies are now banished to the realm of childhood, these diminutive figures were central to the work of many nineteenth-century painters, novelists, poets and even scientists. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Victorians were obsessed with fairies: yet this obsession has hitherto received little scholarly attention. Nicola Bown reminds us of the importance of fairies in Victorian culture. In the figure of the fairy, the Victorians crystallised contemporary anxieties about the effects of industrialisation, the remoteness of the past, the value of culture and the way in which science threatened to undermine religion and spirituality. Above all, the fairy symbolised disenchantment with the irresistible forces of progress and modernity. As these forces stripped the world of its wonder, the Victorians consoled themselves by dreaming of a place and a people suffused with the enchantment that was disappearing from their own lives.

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NICOLA BOWN



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O happy, happy season,
Ere bright Fancy bent to Reason;
When the spirit of our stories
Filled the mind with unseen glories;
Told of creatures of the air,
Spirits, fairies, goblins rare,
Guarding man with tenderest care;
When before the blazing hearth,
Listening to the tale of mirth,
Sons and daughters, mother, sire,
Neighbours all drew round the fire;
Lending open ear and faith
To what some learned gossip saith!
 But the fays and all are gone,
Reason, reason reigns alone;
Every grace and charm is fled,
All by dulness banished;
Thus we ponder, slow and sad,
After Truth the world is mad;
Ah! believe me, Error too
Hath its charms, nor small, nor few.
 Epigraph to J. C. and W. C. Grimm,
 German Popular Stories, 1824

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