

FAIRIES IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
ART AND LITERATURE

NICOLA BOWN



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Fancies of fairies and spirits and nonsense

‘Whose is that?’ ‘Fuseli’s’ – ‘La! What a frightful thing! I hate his fancies of fairies and spirits and nonsense. One can’t understand them . . . It’s foolish to paint things which nobody ever saw, for how is one to know if they’re ever right?’¹

This snatch of conversation was overheard by the critic T. G. Wainwright in front of pictures exhibited by Henry Fuseli at the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy in 1821.² At least, Wainwright claimed he heard it; he may have made it up, since his aim was a jibe against the frivolous and fashionable crowd who failed to appreciate Fuseli’s work. The chief carper at Fuseli is a woman: her coquettish tone underlines the superficiality of her feminine judgement. Nevertheless, her comment is worth taking seriously, whether it is genuine or not, because the terms in which she dismisses Fuseli’s work are, by implication, the qualities admired by connoisseurs such as Wainwright. He has a taste for ‘fancies of fairies and spirits and nonsense’, she does not; she complains that we can never know if imaginary beings are ‘right’ compared with real things, while he, we infer, realises that ‘things which nobody ever saw’ have their own reality. Wainwright’s larger purpose in this satire is to draw attention to the contempt with which the public view the noblest and highest genre of art, history painting, and to ridicule the public’s shallow, populist taste. (Whether an elevated taste had ever been general is debatable; certainly by 1821 the cause of history painting was as good as lost.) It is not surprising that for the purposes of Wainwright’s invective the public takes on a feminine face. What is surprising is that the dispute in taste, and its submerged political and social meanings, should be framed in terms of a masculine interest in and feminine distaste for fairies.

Interest in the supernatural has recently come to be seen as an important aspect of late eighteenth-century culture. In *The Female Thermometer*

(1995) Terry Castle explores the persistence of the dead in spectral forms which troubles the 'explained supernatural' in the fictions of Anne Radcliffe, and argues that this is symptomatic of a new, modern tendency to regard others as themselves spectral and to 'supernaturalise' the mind. E. J. Clery, in *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction 1762-1800* (1995), connects the ghosts which populate the eighteenth-century literary and popular imagination to Adam Smith's ghostly 'hidden hand of the market'. She argues that the popularity of supernatural fiction should be understood as an effect of the growth of a market in culture, but also as a symptom of the social and psychic effects of market capitalism. Clery and Castle connect the supernatural with aspects of modernity, and see the rationality of Enlightenment as producing a barely repressed, ghostly shadow. Both are interested in the special connections between women and the supernatural in the literature of the period but, because they limit their attention to ghosts and spectres, neither examines the interest in fairies which paralleled the fascination with ghosts which they investigate; and they fail to notice the marked fascination of men, and women's equally marked distaste, for fairies.

Among the hundreds of artists and writers who wrote about or painted fairies between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, only a very few were women. Among women who wrote for an adult audience, only Charlotte Brontë often used the fairy as a motif in her novels; Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, Rosamund Marriott Watson and a small number of others wrote fairy poetry; the obscure Amy Sawyer (none of whose works survives) and Eleanor Fortescue Brickdale were among the few women artists to depict fairies. Though Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862) is an apparent exception to women writers' and artists' general indifference to fairy subjects, in fact her goblins are not at all fairy-like, and have little in common with fairies as they are generally represented in Victorian literature and art. In *Goblin Market* the goblins are most frequently referred to as 'little men', but they are also given animal characteristics: 'One had a cat's face, / One whisked a tail . . . One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry, / One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.'³ During the 1850s and 1860s fairies were very often identified with insects, but Rossetti's furry goblins are quite different from insect-fairies with antennae and iridescent wings.⁴ In the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, then, it was overwhelmingly men who were interested in fairies, who wrote about and painted them; women were largely indifferent.

The masculine taste and feminine distaste for fairies can be explained simply. Fairies, one tends to think, are mostly female, tiny and beautiful; the word 'fairy-like' seems a perfect epithet for that ideal of Victorian femininity which required that women be diminutive in relation to men, magical in their unavailability, of delicate constitution, playful rather than earnest. Why should women be interested in a figure which offered them only an image of a femininity from which so many were struggling to escape? Women's ambivalence about this form of femininity is amply demonstrated in Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1863), in which the child- or doll-like Lucy Audley uses her femininity as a screen for her ruthless manipulation of the men around her. But the deceptiveness of her charm is signalled to the reader from early on in the novel by the contrast between Lucy Audley's super-femininity and the candour and assertiveness of Alicia Audley. Significantly, descriptions of Lucy Audley frequently allude to fairies: her boudoir filled with jewels and satins is 'fairy-like'; so is the handwriting in the note to Alicia which proves the fateful link between Lucy Audley and Helen Talboys. And at the crisis of the narrative, when Lucy Audley decides to attempt to murder Robert Audley, the narrator asks: 'Did she remember the day in which the fairy dower of beauty had first taught her to be selfish and cruel, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others, cold hearted and capricious, greedy of admiration, with that petty woman's tyranny which is the worst of despotisms?'⁵ The epithets 'fairy-like' and 'fairy dower' carry the weight of Braddon's (and by implication, her readers') disapproval of this extreme form of femininity.

But this is only part of the reason for women's indifference to fairies in the face of men's interest in them. Their dislike of fairies originated at the same time as men's fascination with them was born, in the late eighteenth century. Women were not simply rejecting what had become a female stereotype, but were responding to exactly those meanings of the fairy which attracted men in the first place, only one of which was the fairy's use as a caricature of femininity. As we shall see, these meanings have a great deal to do with the comment that 'fancies of fairies and spirits and nonsense', which 'nobody ever saw', 'can't be known to be right'.

Thomas Keightley's *The Fairy Mythology* was the first attempt systematically to catalogue fairy belief in the British Isles, Europe and beyond. Studies of fairy lore were numerous enough by 1826 that Keightley could draw upon a wide variety of scholarly works for his information. In his

introduction he proffered a theory of the origins of fairy belief commonly held by scholars and antiquarians:

If, as some assert, all the ancient systems of heathen religion were devised by philosophers for the instruction of rude tribes by appeals to their senses, we might suppose that the minds which peopled the skies with their thousands and tens of thousands of divinities gave birth also to the inhabitants of field and flood, and that the numerous tales of their exploits and adventures are the productions of poetic fiction or rude invention. It may further be observed, that not unfrequently a change of religious faith has invested with dark and malignant attributes beings once the subject of confidence and veneration.⁶

The fairies are, in small and local forms, the vestiges of ancient deities, viewed by Keightley from an Enlightened perspective as consoling fictions for the common people. Once upon a time, these gods were venerated because they animated the world; now they are diminished into the subject of fireside tales of mischievous ‘exploits and adventures’.

Another connoisseur of fairy lore, John Black, suggested a slightly different explanation of fairy belief. Black maintained that fairies fill up the gaps in the common people’s empirical knowledge of the natural world. Instead of seeking proper scientific explanations of natural phenomena, superstitious folk think of the world as inhabited and animated by the supernatural:

In such cases, where the ideas are few, fancy is ever busy to fill up the void which the uniformity of external objects leaves in the mind. The imagination blends itself with the reality, the wonderful with the natural, the false with the true. The ideas acquire strength, and mingle in such a manner with external impressions as hardly to be distinguished from them. And the laws of nature are yet unknown, the problem of probability is unlimited, and fancy grows familiar with chimeras which pass for truth.⁷

Though different, the two theories of fairy origins have much in common. Whether fairies were survivals of ancient deities or supernatural explanations for natural phenomena, both theories suppose that fairies originated in an un-Enlightened age: before knowledge of true religion, before the truth of the world was revealed by science.

The study of fairies is a child of the Enlightenment in several senses. It can be seen as part of the Enlightenment’s drive to make knowledge systematic, and the consequent establishment of scholarly disciplines, of which folklore was to become one. More importantly, the impetus

behind the study of fairies came from what Isaiah Berlin has called the 'counter-Enlightenment'.⁸ The Enlightenment sought universal, rational laws based on a conception of human nature as unchanging, and fought against prejudice, tradition and superstition as impediments to the discovery of demonstrable truths. The 'counter-Enlightenment' opposed these aims by arguing for relativist and historicist views of human society, human knowledge and human nature. Instead of pursuing general truths which would reveal immanent laws governing the functioning of the universe, 'counter-Enlightenment' thinkers sought knowledge in the myriad and changing and equally valuable particulars of human existence.

Berlin identifies Johann Gottfried Herder as one of these thinkers. Herder 'believed that to understand anything was to understand it in its individuality and development, and that this required a capacity which he called *Einfühlung* ("feeling into") the outlook, the individual character of an artistic tradition, a literature, a social organisation, a people, a culture, a period of history.'⁹ For Herder the lives of individuals, works of art, stories and religions must be understood as the creation of particular societies at particular times: the *Iliad*, for example, was the creation and expressed the nature of the savage, heroic phase of Greek culture; likewise the Scandinavian sagas and the lays of Ossian drew their special beauty and character from the people from whose lives and character they sprang. Nothing could be more stupid than the Enlightenment's rejection of tradition, its insistence on universal standards and rules, and its assumption that history should be seen as the progressive development of a single culture. Instead, 'indissoluble and impalpable ties of common language, historical memory, habit, tradition and feeling' bound peoples into a plurality of national cultures.¹⁰ A nation had to cherish its culture and traditions in order to understand its own character.

One of the most important fruits of Herder's influence on his contemporaries and successors was the impetus to collect national traditions such as stories, songs, customs and superstitions. The Grimms' folktale collection *Kinder und Hausmärchen* (1812) was an indirect result of Herder's championship of tradition, for he saw national cultures as the creation of the whole of the people, not merely the educated few. And if the great myth cycles and sagas are the most glorious monuments of tradition, even its smallest creations were perceived to be valuable, hence the interest in fairies. In fact, as scholars of traditional stories and beliefs frequently remarked, the fairies were one of the most widespread and 'poetical' of all superstitions.

The 'counter-Enlightenment' and later the Romantic interest in fairies was a criticism of the Enlightenment, a sense that the latter had destroyed, or would destroy, the cultures which fostered the fairies. Fairy beliefs had to be collected lest they be lost, for the traditions of the common people were fast being forgotten. Industrialisation, urbanisation, new forms of social life, news, novels: as these encroached on the life of the common people they displaced the stories and customs which had been handed down as tradition through generations.

It is the association between fairies and the attack on the Enlightenment which underlies men's fascination with fairies and women's lack of interest in them. In general, the claim of reason's supremacy which is at the Enlightenment's centre had little new to give to men (at least, not to the middle-class men who were interested in fairies), for they were already established as the reasoning sex. Enlightenment thinkers sought to ground the universal rules which would guarantee human happiness and build the good society on ideas of paternity and fraternity which were already in place.¹¹ By contrast, it was women who were associated with those things which the Enlightenment wished to discard or destroy as enemies to reason, or obstacles to the discovery of truth: ignorance, superstition, prejudice, tradition, fantasy, and, most of all, unreasoning emotion.

The 'counter-Enlightenment' wished to rescue tradition, emotion, fantasy, prejudice and so on because, as Gadamer says in *Truth and Method* (1965):

In contrast to the Enlightenment's belief in perfection, which thinks in terms of the freedom from 'superstition' and the prejudices of the past, we now find that olden times, the world of myth, unreflective life, not yet analysed by consciousness, in a society 'close to nature', the world of Christian chivalry, all these acquire a romantic magic, even a priority of truth.¹²

But, he goes on to argue, this reaction to the Enlightenment takes place wholly within its own terms: 'the romantic reversal of this criterion of the Enlightenment [the 'prejudice against prejudice'] actually perpetuates the abstract contrast between myth and reason'.¹³ The Enlightenment's declaration of the autonomy of reason is the precondition and ground of the 'counter-Enlightenment's' rediscovery of the irrational. In this sense, it was because men were already in possession of reason, were already sovereign subjects, that they could turn to the 'dark side' of Enlightenment: to myth, unreason, tradition, superstition and emotion. Because the language of progress had installed them at its centre, men

could turn back to the 'unreflective life' of the past, and seek out its denizens: the fairies.

The 'dark side' is, of course, also the feminine side. When the Grimm brothers went looking for traditional stories, they asked women to tell them fairy tales.¹⁴ Women are the bearers of tradition, the adherents to superstition (as the phrase 'old wives' tale' suggests), the gossips and witches; and, of course, they think with their hearts rather than their heads. The wearisomely familiar idea that women have no access to reason, and therefore cannot be fully educated, become political subjects or citizens, or escape from the guidance of fathers and brothers, was repeated in the eighteenth century across a whole range of discourses from political theory to the novel. Early feminism had to make the claim for women's access to reason, and therefrom to education, independence and political subjecthood; indeed, women's claim to rationality was feminism's most important, foundational assertion.

That assertion had its costs, because reason had to be claimed at the expense of emotion, tradition, superstition and so on. The association between women and what Gadamer calls the 'unreflective life' of myth and unreason had to be broken in order to secure for women an equal stake in Enlightenment modernity. That is why the 'counter-Enlightenment' could not appeal to women in the same way as to men; why the world of the past imbued with poetry and enchantment held little nostalgia for them; and why women, by and large, did not turn in their writing and art to the figure of the fairy. It was, in a sense, a metaphor for all that feminism was struggling to rescue women from.

Feminism in the late eighteenth century is almost synonymous with the name of Mary Wollstonecraft, and this characterisation of feminism is, broadly, that of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In order to show how and why men's and women's attitudes to fairies differed, I shall compare the meanings of fairies for Henry Fuseli, the Swiss painter who became Keeper of the Royal Academy, one of the most important and influential exponents of history painting in the English art establishment of the late eighteenth century, and for Wollstonecraft and a few of her female contemporaries. Fairies were central to Fuseli's art precisely because they symbolise unreason and tradition, although, as we shall see, he renders the association between femininity and unreason pathological; in contrast, Wollstonecraft's dismissive reference to fairies shows them to be utterly bound up with her general repression of the claims of unreason and emotion.



Figure 2. Henry Fuseli, *Titania and Bottom*.

Henry Fuseli's pair of paintings *Titania and Bottom* (fig. 2) and *The Awakening of Titania* (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum) were made in the late 1780s, about ten years after his arrival in London following a protracted stay in Rome, during which he taught himself to draw and paint by copying the classical and Renaissance masters. The paintings were later bought by Josiah Boydell for display in his Shakespeare Gallery, which opened in 1792 on Pall Mall. The aim of the Shakespeare Gallery was to collect together the work of the leading British artists of the day, each of whom would illustrate scenes from the greatest of British playwrights. Among the contributors were Sir Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy, and other leading Academicians. However, Fuseli's paintings went beyond the gallery's purpose of providing saleable illustrations of well-known passages from Shakespeare, for he used his *A Midsummer Night's Dream* paintings to explore wider concerns about the effects of the imagination on the human mind. As Petra Maisak has argued, Fuseli 'was not concerned at all with merely illustrating a text (in the sense of

illuminating or embellishing it); he wanted, instead, to interpret and stage it anew from a subjective point of view'.¹⁵

Fuseli's illustrations of scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were very favourably received. *The Public Advertiser* wrote that 'if Shakespeare had been a painter, he would perhaps have given somewhat of a similar picture', and opined that when Fuseli rendered 'those objects, which being formed by fancy, are not fettered by rules', he was almost always successful; another praised Fuseli's 'wild and extravagant luxuriance of fancy'.¹⁶ It is clear that contemporary reactions to the pictures centred on their expression of and appeal to the fancy or imagination. One further review will make clear how central this notion is to these paintings. This time the commentator is Fuseli himself, in an unsigned article published in May 1789 in the *Analytical Review*. This is his description of *Titania and Bottom*:

This is the creation of a poetic painter, and the scene is peculiarly his own; a glowing harmony of tone pervades the whole; and instead of being amused by mere humour, an assemblage calculated to delight the simple correct taste bursts in on us to relax the features without exciting loud laughter. The moment chosen by the painter, when the queen, with soft languor, caresses Bottom, who humorously addresses her attendant, gave him licence to create the fanciful yet not grotesque group, which he has so judiciously contrasted as not to disturb the pleasurable emotions the whole must ever convey to a mind alive to the wild but enchanting graces of poetry. The elegant familiar attendants seem to be buoyed up by the sweet surrounding atmosphere, and the fragrant nosegay bound together with careless art, yet so light, that the rude wind might disperse the insubstantial pageant. The soft and insinuating beauty, the playful graces here displayed, would, without reflection, scarcely be expected from the daring pencil that appears ever on the stretch to reach the utmost boundary of nature.¹⁷

On one level, of course, Fuseli is taking the opportunity to talk up his work, including the forthcoming engravings of the pictures, to the middle-class readers of the *Analytical Review* who might be expected to be patrons of the Boydell venture. The reader is instructed how to view the pictures: '... the assemblage ... bursts in on us to relax the features without exciting loud laughter'; at the same time he is flattered on his connoisseurship: the picture is 'calculated to delight the simple correct taste'. On another level, the terms in which Fuseli describes his picture are extremely telling. In particular, the phrases 'poetic painter' and 'insubstantial pageant', and the description of a composition which 'gave him licence to create the fanciful yet not grotesque group' that will especially appeal to 'a mind alive to the wild but enchanting graces of

poetry', together work to frame the painting's attraction almost wholly in terms of its appeal to, and representation of, the imagination. It is this appeal to the imagination which links Fuseli's work to the 'counter-Enlightenment'.

As a young man, Fuseli had come within the orbit of German thinkers like Bodmer and Klopstock, who contributed to the trend in German thought which led to Herder and to Romanticism. Up to the mid-1770s he was reading Herder's and Goethe's latest works, sent to him by his friend Lavater. One of the works he read was Herder's essay on Shakespeare, one of a number by contemporaries arguing against what they saw as the pernicious influence of French neo-classicism, and in favour of an authentic, 'northern' poetic drama such as that to be found in the genius of Shakespeare. For Fuseli, Shakespeare was, together with Milton, the greatest of writers (notwithstanding his familiarity with and respect for the classical authors), and his two major projects of the years 1780–1800 were the Shakespeare Gallery (which he later claimed as his original idea) and his own Milton Gallery.¹⁸

Herder's essay on Shakespeare, published in 1773 as part of a pamphlet entitled *On the German Character and Art*, attacks the doctrine of the classical unities and defends Shakespeare on the grounds of the power of his imagination to conjure up places and times, to move the reader, in imagination, to a different world:

Have you never perceived how in dreams space and time vanish? What insignificant things they are, what shadows they must be in comparison with action, with the working of the soul? Have you never observed how the soul creates its own space, world and tempo as and where it will? . . . And is it not the first and sole duty of every genius, every poet, above all of the dramatic poet, to carry you off into such a dream?¹⁹

Just as Shakespeare carries the reader off into a dream, Fuseli intends his Boydell pictures to have a similar effect on the viewer. The mind of the spectator 'alive to the wild but enchanting graces of poetry' will be carried to fairyland, an imaginary dream-world where 'space and time vanish', and where pleasure, not reason, holds sway.

If we look closely at Titania and Bottom we can see, however, that the sway that pleasure holds is an ambiguous and perhaps even dangerous one. The lovers are shown attended by Titania's train, just before they fall into the sleep from which they will wake disenchanting. The composition is circular, centring around the figures of Titania and Bottom. The light,

however, which comes from the left, highlights the ring of fairies who encircle them while at the same time casting their shadows on Bottom, who thus recedes into the dark background. This arrangement of figures into a highlighted circle around Titania is emphasised by the wand she holds in her raised hand, as if she has just used it to describe the circle which encloses the composition. Because Titania's wand is positioned in such a way as to imply that the scene is within its compass, it seems as if Titania, rather than Oberon, has the power of enchantment in this scene. This suggestion is strengthened by the fairy above Bottom's head, whose arms and body imply a semicircle which is carried on through the figures to the right-hand side of the picture. This fairy's outstretched arm meets the end of Titania's wand, thus closing the circle of enchantment over Bottom's head.²⁰ Although it is Oberon who has cast the spell which the painting illustrates, its composition suggests instead that Titania is the one wielding powers of enchantment.

The most prominent figures in this picture are all female. The largest of the fairies are female, and Cobweb, Peaseblossom and Moth, all male fairies, are indistinguishable as individuals. Though the largest figure in the painting is Bottom, all the other male figures – for example, the three male fairies to be found along the left, centre and right of a horizontal line running through the centre of the composition – are considerably smaller than the painting's female figures. Overall, the difference between the full-sized and smaller fairies, those on Titania's left and the smaller ones at their feet, for instance, seems less marked than the difference in size between female and male fairies. This is accentuated by the relative prominence or obscurity of the female and male fairies, and the degree to which they are lit; in general the female fairies are larger, more prominent and highlighted, compared to small, insignificant or shadowed males. And the dominant femininity that these compositional features embody is also present thematically. The most prominent fairy on the right-hand side holds on a leash a bearded male fairy many times smaller than herself, and this figure of female dominance is repeated in the hooded figure to her right who holds a small male fairy on her lap, and the female fairy to the left-hand side who clutches a small male fairy as if he were a baby. In the background a row of female fairies is arranged as if in parody of a rank of (male) angels or seraphim.

The relationship of Titania and Bottom is central to the picture. Bottom is the largest figure of all, which should be predictable given the convention that fairies are miniature versions of humans. However, the size of the painting (215.9 × 274.3 cm) works to naturalise Titania's

size rather than Bottom's because she is life-size, even though in the scale of the picture she is smaller in relation to him than a woman would be to a man. The effect of this is that he appears gigantic, unwieldy and perhaps even gross. Although it is true that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Bottom is never intended to be a fine figure of a man, nevertheless the transformation of Man into beast worked upon him by Oberon's (Titania's) enchantment is figured less importantly in this painting by the ass's head than by the distortion of scale between fairy and human, male and female. As if to underline this point, Bottom, whose pose is partly drawn from Michelangelo's Florence and Palestrina *Pietàs*, stares down at a tiny, Michelangelesque figure in the palm of his hand. For Fuseli, Michelangelo's work was the embodiment of the heroic ideal, the noblest achievement of European art, and its closest attempt at picturing the bodily perfection of human virtue. (On the other hand Raphael, from whose painting of Eve in the Vatican Loggias Titania is derived, is associated in Fuseli's writings with the expression of character through emotion.²¹ The values Fuseli attaches to these painters are thus implicitly gendered.) Bottom is hardly Christ-like; the figure in his hand is no divinity or hero, but a fairy.

Bottom's gigantic grossness in relation to Titania, the dominance of the female fairies, and the tiny figure at whom Bottom gazes are all examples of a distortion of scale which signifies a disturbance in the stature and centrality of man. The reversal of male by female dominance is thus linked to a reversal of the relation between fairy and human; the human is displaced from its central position only to have that centre occupied by the fairy; the figure of the fairy mocks the human by reference to the ideal beauty which, in neo-classical aesthetics, represents the perfection of the human form. The figure which most nearly corresponds to the most fully achieved realisation of this ideal is the smallest figure in the painting, a figure which graphically represents the displacement of the male by a perversely dominant femininity, and is evidence of how closely the masculine and the human are intertwined in the concept of the ideal. The degradation of the one and the displacement of the other are represented by their grossness or miniaturisation. Titania's flirtatious glance at the two figures confirms whose body is to be considered both beautiful and powerful in this scene, and reminds us just how far this female body is from the virtuous ideal.

In this painting, and indeed throughout Fuseli's work, there is a clash between neo-classical and Romantic aesthetics, Enlightenment and 'counter-Enlightenment' values. At a theoretical level Fuseli

espoused the neo-classical theory of the ideal, expounded at length in his *Lectures on Painting* (1806–31), and this is central to the representation of the body in his work. But his subject matter, both in the Boydell pictures and elsewhere (he painted many subjects from northern myths as well as dream and nightmare subjects), is drawn from ‘counter-Enlightenment’ or Romantic interests. This is due to Fuseli’s pessimism about progress and the perfectibility of human nature: he believed in neither. He had no faith in reason to counter the excesses of appetite, and thought that great art was inevitably the production of excess and barbarity. Eudo C. Mason comments of him that

nearly all along the line Fuseli is in conflict with the cherished beliefs, hopes and ideals prevailing amongst the advanced minds of his day. He not only fails to share their optimistic faith in civilisation and its power; he does not even want to share it . . . He was content that the absolute, ineradicable, tragic imperfection of all things human should bear witness to the splendour of the perfect as an unattainable ideal.²²

The depravity of human beings changes according to historical circumstances; in this sense Fuseli is perfectly in accord with Herder that art is an expression of a people at a particular moment. But Fuseli takes this one step further to imply, both in this picture and in his writings, that the present age is the most depraved of all.²³

This is expressed in a number of ways, for example in his comments on the French Revolution. But most relevant to this painting are his comments on women. ‘In an age of luxury,’ he wrote in one of his aphorisms, ‘women have taste, decide and dictate; for in an age of luxury woman aspires to the function of man, and man slides into the offices of woman. The epoch of eunuchs was ever the epoch of viragos.’²⁴ In this painting, the fairies stand for a vision of human nature in the late eighteenth century, an age of feminist viragos in which the imagination has been allowed to run wild and overturn the relation between men and women – and indeed to make men effeminate. The erotic charms of Titania cover over the castrating effects of the free play of the unbounded fancy; the dominance she exercises over the scene represents the tyranny of an imperious, emasculating imagination disguised as an erotic fantasy. If such a scene is pleasurable, at least to the male spectator, it can only be perversely so. It is only because they are imaginary and not human that the fairies can represent in a pleasurable form a vision about the depths to which the human might sink.

Fuseli’s pessimism about human nature and his ambivalent attitude to the imagination can also be seen in the Boydell *Puck* (1790; fig. 3).



Figure 3. J. Parker after Henry Fuseli, *Puck*.

In this image Puck flies (or rather, seems to stride) purposefully through the air on his exploits in a wood rather stormy than dreamy; there are no Titania and Bottom swooning here, but instead a horse and rider splashing through the stream, and on the left fairies running or flying through the undergrowth. The composition, full of movement, serves to foreground the figure of Puck himself, as he rushes towards the viewer, backlit by moonlight, and with the streamer he holds circling around him as a kind of decorative emphasis. In particular, the shape, features and contours of Puck's body are emphasised by these means, and it is this that forms the compositional and thematic centre of the image.

The disposition of Puck's limbs, with the streamer and the patch of moonlight that together imply a circle enclosing the figure, recalls William Blake's famous print *Albion Rose* (1794). *Albion Rose* is derived from a version of Vitruvian Man from Scamozzi's *Idea dell' Architettura Universale* (1615), which attempts to realise the proportions of man in terms of the golden mean and to picture a geometrically perfect human form, and it is very possible that *Puck* is derived from the same source.²⁵ Puck's wings are positioned just as the arms are in Scamozzi's engraving and his limbs are arranged in such a way as to gesture to the perimeter of the Vitruvian circle, partly sketched by the streamer. The allusion Fuseli makes to the Vitruvian man implicates the figure of Puck in the discourse of the ideal, central to the neo-classical theories of art which dominated the teaching (if not the practice) of the Royal Academy. The theory of the ideal was drawn from Renaissance writings on art, and was invariably illustrated by recourse to examples of Antique sculpture and Renaissance painting. Both Fuseli's own writings on the ideal and those of Joshua Reynolds, first President of the Royal Academy and the most influential exponent of the theory in this period, concentrate on the representation of the human body: indeed, the human figure is the only example of the practice of the ideal which is fully elaborated either in Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* (1778) or Fuseli's *Lectures on Painting*.

For Reynolds, the essential of the ideal is the elevation of the particular over the general, an 'abstract idea of . . . forms more perfect than any one original', and it is only in these abstract ideas that can be found 'the perfect state of nature'.²⁶ The pursuit of the ideal consists in the observation of nature in order to reject what is particular and select only what is general and thus truly beautiful: 'Deformity is not nature, but an accidental deviation from her accustomed practice. This general idea therefore ought to be called Nature, and nothing else, correctly speaking, has a right to that name.'²⁷ The artist must learn to distinguish Nature

from deformity in order to give pictorial form to ideal beauty, which is Nature in its highest state. In particular, the artist is to depict the human body in its highest, ideal form, and to portray 'the heroick arts and more dignified passions of man' in order to exemplify virtue. Art should lead the spectator to venerate virtue, for 'the nobility or elevation of virtue itself, consists in adopting this enlarged and comprehensive idea'.²⁸ The ideal, therefore, is both an aesthetic and a moral term, so that the perfection of the depicted human body is inextricably bound up with the perfection of human nature.

Puck, however, falls far short of ideal beauty and perfect proportion as envisaged in the Vitruvian man. His limbs, for example, are too short in proportion to his body. Both they and his torso are over-muscled, with the contours of the body emphasised through the use of chiaroscuro. The pectorals seem especially enlarged, and this draws attention to the very prominent nipples. Even without the wings it is clear that Puck's body is a grotesque rather than ideal body, a perverse parody of Vitruvian man: it is out of proportion and excessive, representing bestial deformity rather than ideal perfection. Though not much is visible of Puck's face because of the angle of the head, what can be seen appears to follow the conventions for representing the African face: curly hair, heavy-lidded eyes, a broad nose and thick lips. The apparently African, exaggerated features of Puck's face must be linked to the black of his wings, and suggests that for Fuseli the grotesque had a racial dimension. (It is striking that in his illustration of *The Tempest* for Boydell, Fuseli makes Caliban, Prospero's 'thing of darkness', look very similar to Puck.²⁹) This in turn is correlated with a suggestion of goat-like characteristics: the separation of the toes of the right foot, and the twin tufts of hair on his chin. Having no iconography to follow in representing fairy wings, Fuseli has given Puck bat's rather than insect's wings, and this adds yet another sinister connotation to those suggested by his body. The bat's wings imply that Puck's ability to fly itself carries with it something unnatural or even evil. Even before the appearance of the vampire in the early nineteenth century the bat was associated in popular superstition with witchcraft and black magic. This implication may also be reinforced by the sign Puck makes with his left, sinister hand. Not only has he a grotesque, bestial, racialised figure; he is also linked with dangerous forms of femininity through the implied association with witchcraft. As Puck rushes threateningly towards the spectator he draws a train of sinister figures behind him. Particularly significant are the moth (symbol of sleep), and the horse (a night-mare?) rearing with its rider clutching onto it. The latter's closed

eyes suggest that this is an enchanted sleep-rider. These elements, which relate to the spell Puck puts on the human characters in the play, indicate that Puck's enchantments are far from innocent, and are instead dark and dangerous ones. Giving him bat's wings is perfectly consonant with a representation of the 'merry wanderer of night'³⁰ which uses every aspect of the body to show just how far from the ideal Puck really is.

Both in its composition and its subject this picture parodies the moral ideal and replaces it with a figure which is deformed and grotesque in ways which strongly suggest that the anti-ideal is a figure not of austere virtue but of dangerous, possibly erotic, fantasy. Such a painting undoubtedly makes its appeal to the spectator on the basis that it represents a fancy or fantasy for the spectator's pleasure. Like *Titania and Bottom*, *Puck* represents the effects upon the human subject of an unbound, dangerous fancy. It shows that what humans who have allowed their fancy free play might really look like is equivalent to the anti-ideal. The other side of Fuseli's 'counter-Enlightenment' interests is his dependence on the neo-classical theory of the ideal which forms the basis of his *Lectures on Painting* (1806-31), and which informs the values attached to the representation of the body in his work. His treatment of the allegorical relation between the human and the ideal in his lectures shows how he conceived the connection between the dangerous imagination and the anti-ideal embodied in the figure of Puck.

Fuseli's lectures to the Royal Academy students were given over twenty-five years and do not consistently maintain one coherent theoretical position. They are also composed in the convoluted style that contemporary observers noted was characteristic of his English. However, a theme Fuseli returned to several times is the role of metaphor in relation to the ideal. Although fairies could not be part of the ideal for Fuseli, they could stand metaphorically for humans, but this made the way in which the ideal could be said to represent human qualities very problematic. Fuseli solves this problem by suggesting that fairies and other supernatural creatures can be allegorical figures only in certain circumstances. He approaches the problem in the two lectures on 'Invention', where he suggests (almost in passing, *à propos* of his wider scheme of producing a hierarchy of genres within the grand style) his idea of the metaphorical relation of the ideal to the human. In the second of the two, Lecture Four, in a discussion of the types of subjects appropriate to Fuseli's three classes of grand-style painting (epic, dramatic and historic), Fuseli makes a long digression on allegory.

Allegory, or the personification of invisible physic and metaphysic ideas, though not banished from the regions of invention, is equally inadmissible in pure epic, dramatic and historic plans, because, wherever it enters, it must rule the whole . . . the epic, dramatic and historic embellish with poetry or delineate with truth what either was or is supposed to be real; they must therefore conduct their plans by personal and substantial agency if they mean to excite that credibility, without which it is not in their power to create an interest in the spectator or reader. The great principle, the necessity of a moral tendency or of some doctrine useful to mankind in the *whole* of an epic performance, admitted, are we therefore to lose that credibility which *alone* can impress us with the importance of that maxim that dictated to the poet narration and to the artist imagery? Are the agents sometimes to be real beings and sometimes to be abstract ideas? . . . What becomes of the interest the poet and artist mean to excite in us, if in the moment of reading or contemplating, we do not believe in what the one tells and the other shows?³¹

Allegory is inadmissible in the highest genres of painting because their moral importance lies in their credibility. Fuseli seems here to be grounding the moral claims of art in a kind of aesthetic realism. Unless Zeus appears as himself, that is, as a deity rather than a personification of might or justice, the maxim or principle he embodies is lost because he is not believable. Mythical or superhuman figures must be given some kind of realism to 'work' both morally and aesthetically: 'When Minerva, by her weight, makes the chariot of Diomede groan, and Mars wounded, roars with the voice of ten thousand, are they nothing but the symbol of the battle's roar?'³² To be credible, mythical deities must be more than simply the metaphorical representations of human qualities, because it is their imagined autonomous existence that invests them with precisely the qualities which they are being used to show in the plan of the picture.

The theory of the ideal is central to the problem Fuseli is tussling with in this passage. In the highest genres of painting it would be impossible not to represent Zeus, Minerva or Mars in idealised forms, since the whole notion of the ideal is derived from classical representations of just such personages, and it derives its moral importance from secular reinterpretations of them as personifications of justice, wisdom, war and so on. Fuseli implies here that the ideal works morally only if its metaphorical bonds with the human are loosened or even broken. The gods, who are ideal, must be different from men, who are not. Significant, too, is the way in which this moral function of the ideal is also an aesthetic function. To communicate the maxim, the picture must 'excite' the viewer, and the verisimilitude of the painting produces a magical effect on the

viewer which enables the moral lesson to be communicated: 'It is that magic which places on the same basis of existence, and amalgamates the mythic or the superhuman, and the human parts of the *Ilias*, of *Paradise Lost*, and of the *Sistine Chapel*, that enraptures, agitates and whirls us along as readers or spectators.'³³ It is only when the difference between man and the gods is represented realistically or credibly that the viewer is enabled to perceive the relations between them through the aesthetic experience of viewing the picture. The ideal can only function if it is not metaphorically secured to the human.

In contrast to this position, a passage from the preceding lecture outlines (in the midst of a general introduction to invention and a discussion of its limits) in what way the supernatural, be it mythical or legendary, might be understood in relation to the human:

Such were the limits set to invention by the ancients . . . guarded by these, their mythology scattered its metamorphoses, made every element its tributary, and transmitted the privilege to us, on equal conditions. Their *Scylla* and the *Portress of Hell*, their daemons and our spectres, the shade of *Patroclus* and the ghost of *Hamlet*, their *naiads*, *nymphs* and *oreads* and our *sylphs*, *gnomes* and *fairies*, their *furies* and our *witches*, differ less in essence than in local, temporary and social modifications. Their common origin was in fancy, operating on the materials of nature, assisted by the legendary tradition and the curiosity implanted in us of divining into the invisible; and they are suffered or invited to mix with or superintend real agency, in proportion of the analogy which we discover between them and ourselves.³⁴

Here *Fuseli* seems to be suggesting that the supernatural can be represented within the same scenes as human beings only on the basis of allegory; the supernatural must stand for some aspect of the human – 'the analogy which we discover between them and ourselves' – in order to be considered credible, 'suffered or invited to mix with or superintend real agency'. Indeed, representations of the supernatural can be credible in serious works of art or literature (rather than 'tales too gross to be believed in a dream') only if such 'imaginary creations' are 'connected with the reality of nature and human passions': 'Without this, the fiction of the poet and the painter will leave us stupefied rather by its insolence, than impressed by its power; it will be considered only as a superior kind of *legerdemain*, an exertion of ingenuity to no adequate end.'³⁵

In apparent contradiction to the view developed in *Lecture Four*, in this passage *Fuseli* promotes allegory as being both more credible than, and morally superior to, simple verisimilitude. However, the examples used there, *Zeus*, *Minerva* and *Mars*, among other classical deities, are

very different from the kinds of supernatural being cited here. While it would be impossible to think of Zeus being represented in any terms but the ideal, the opposite is true of the examples in this passage. Indeed, such figures as Scylla and the Portress of Hell, furies and witches, daemons and spectres, might call for an anti-ideal in which the horrid and ghastly would find their most perfect representation. Though the shade of Patroclus and the ghost of Hamlet seem a long way from such frightful phenomena, they are presumably included because of their fearful and weird aspect. By their inclusion in this list, sylphs, naiads, nymphs, gnomes and fairies are classed among those subjects which are inappropriate candidates for the ideal body. Even though they are not perhaps horrid or terrifying, still they cannot be beautiful; nor, because they cannot be beautiful, can they be invested with the moral qualities of the ideal. It is these aspects of the supernatural, and only these, therefore, which can function allegorically in painting, and which can be understood in a programmatic way as representing the human: not the human in its most exalted, but in its most degraded, least general and most particular form.

The fairies in *Puck* and *Titania and Bottom* are anti-ideals which represent the debauched condition of modern humanity. Fuseli's fairy paintings are not merely erotic fantasies freed from historical context, but on the contrary comment on the nature of the human, as Fuseli understood it. Indeed, if they are erotic fantasies, it is in this mode that they engage most urgently and comment most stringently on what it is to be human. Viewed as allegories, they show the vitiating effects of an unbound fancy on the human body – and by a further allegorical extension, on the social body. If Fuseli's lectures appear contradictory on this point, this is because its implications are imperative yet disturbing: the troubling implications are 'hidden' by the labyrinthine complexities of Fuseli's style and his attempts in the passage from Lecture Four to draw back from the point he has made in Lecture Three. In a similar way, the disturbing quality of the representation of fancy in the paintings is concealed beneath what Fuseli himself calls their pleasing, poetic and playful qualities. Yet again it is precisely these qualities that provide a clue to the simultaneous presence of a dire warning about the workings of fancy.

It would be wrong to see as merely personal to Fuseli this vision of fairies as a representation of human nature debased by the imagination. His fairy paintings attracted comment, both admiring and detracting, precisely because they intersected with a general anxiety about the effects of the imagination circulating in late eighteenth-century culture. This has several sources, in particular the campaign against an unbridled