

Introduction

Old wine is often all the better for being
re-bottled; perhaps old wives' tales
are like that, too.

—*Big Claus and Little Claus*

How do you breathe new life into forms considered archaic, dated, passé, old-fashioned, or, worse yet, obsolete? Peter Davies set himself that challenge when he published *The Fairies Return*, an anthology described on its dust jacket as a “Christmas book written by a number of distinguished authors. It is a collection of well-known fairy stories retold for grownups in a modern setting.” Moving the tales from times past, from the nursery to the parlor, and transforming the wondrous into the quotidian (and vice versa) was a challenge he issued to “several hands”—fifteen contemporaries, most of them on familiar terrain when it came to fairies and folklore. Together, they created a rich mosaic, with each vibrant tile telling us as much about Great Britain in the era

following World War I as about the culture from which it was drawn.

2] *The Fairies Return* offers sophisticated fare for adults rather than primal entertainment for children. Moving in a satirical mode, it delivers on the promise of what “satire” originally meant: *satura*, or a mixture of different things blended to suit discerning tastes.¹ Not only do we have a variety of tales drawn from Denmark, Germany, France, and the Orient (in addition to England), but we also have authors who choose targets that include evils ranging from predatory behavior and political corruption to drug addiction and social ambition.

The fairies invoked in the title of this volume made their first official print appearance in 1890. “Who says that English folk have no fairy tales of their own?” Joseph Jacobs asked in his preface to *English Fairy Tales* published in that year.² For over half a century, Edgar Taylor’s 1823 translation of tales by the Brothers Grimm had dominated the fairy-tale marketplace. *German Popular Stories*, illustrated by George Cruikshank, consisted of tales selected from the Grimms’ *Children’s Stories and Household Tales* (published in two volumes in 1812 and 1815), and it was an instant bestseller. Nearly every decade after 1823 witnessed a new translation of selected German tales into English, culminating in Margaret Hunt’s 1882 rendition of the complete corpus of tales, along with a critical apparatus. Jacobs was not wrong to be defensive when he assembled eighty-seven British tales from oral traditions and put them between the covers of a book.

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Why did it take so long for the British to publish their answer to the Brothers Grimm? Jacobs attributes the lag to “the lamentable gap between the governing and recording classes and the dumb working classes of this country—dumb to others but eloquent among themselves” (1). He concedes that many of the stories in *English Fairy Tales* are imports: “I have acted on Molière’s principle, and have taken what was good wherever I could find it” (2). There are some imports from America, Scotland, and Australia, but the collection as a whole is English, and Jacobs is careful to concede that other national collections contained some of the same *classes* of tales but that he sought out the uniquely English version of international tale types. In sum, the British tales are not derivative of the German, the French, or the Italian but constitute an indigenous body of lore.

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Jacobs’s introductory remarks go far toward understanding the Anglicizing of tales from Europe and the Orient in *The Fairies Return*. The settings are Devonshire, Scotland, Ireland, and London—anything but the native soil from which some of the tales sprang. As importantly, the untroubled appropriation of stories from the world over suggests that the tales have truly become British, that they have migrated with ease into a new culture and medium, making themselves available for literary adaptation and refashioning, once they established themselves as part of a native storytelling tradition.

The half-century between Jacobs’s *English Fairy Tales* and Peter Davies’s *The Fairies Return* witnessed what Virginia Woolf famously described as a change in “human charac-

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4] ter,” a change that took place “on or about December, 1910.”³ Her observations about the novel complement Walter Benjamin’s pronouncements about a sea change in traditional storytelling after World War I. The eloquence so prized by Joseph Jacobs had vanished: “Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed.”

For Benjamin, the key year in the great shift from an era that narrated lived experience to the age of information is 1918: “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? . . . For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power.”⁴ The storytellers who once passed experience “from mouth to mouth” and whose lives were intimately bound up with the stories they told are no longer with us.

The Fairies Return reminds us that stories endure nonetheless, particularly once what Jacobs called the “recording and governing classes” saw the tales as bonding agents for national identity. The British writers who took up tales by “Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Hans Andersen, the authors of *The Thousand and One Nights* &c.” made them their own. In the international thicket of characters and plots, they found plenty of material for fashioning stories that they could make their own—and in many cases had already been

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made their own—with the local colors of social and political satire. The tales themselves migrated into the *terra firma* of literary invention, with authors who, for the most part, had been writing novels and plays for adult audiences. Peter Davies, head of the publishing house that issued *The Fairies Return*, must have decided it was time for a comeback for fairy tales, on this occasion with stories that would be British, literary, and, for the most part, playfully satiric rather than experientially communicative and unmediated.

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Pairing satire with fairy tale seems, at first glance, to be a marriage of two supremely incompatible partners. Satire, in the traditional sense of the term, has a historical specificity and strong social mission generally absent from traditional tales, which take place in a vague and remote “once upon a time” with characters hungry for wealth and power. It engages in what one critic calls “demolition work,” with a view toward reform in its indictment of vice and praise of virtue. But precisely in its juxtaposition of extreme vice and extreme virtue, satire comes to resemble the fairy tale, which often stages something of a morality play by punishing vice and rewarding virtue.⁵ The tellers of tales, like literary satirists, see the world as “a battlefield between a definite, clearly understood good . . . and an equally clear-cut evil.”⁶

The moral crusades enacted in fairy tales can easily degenerate into grotesque excess and a playful carnivalesque spirit, erasing or discrediting all attempts to impose a moral or message. Satire too can operate in a more open-ended mode, engaging in inquiry and exploration rather than in a prede-

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terminated plan of attack. Mikael Bakhtin tells us that the Menippean satirist creates extraordinary situations to provoke and test philosophical ideas rather than to convey definitive answers.⁷ In *The Fairies Return*, satire occasionally takes a back seat to playful provocation. When E. M. Delafield, for example, takes up the Grimms' "Fisherman and His Wife," she imagines how modern-day desires would change the course of the wife's requests and of the husband's relationship to those wishes for wealth and power. Instead of flattening out the tale and turning it into a straightforward condemnation of female ambition, Delafield poses questions about the nature of wealth and power and provokes speculation about how the vibrant "What if?" of fairy tales can evolve, later in life, into the disenchantments of "If only!"

Both satire and fairy tale are driven by lack, by a sense that something vital is missing and that social circumstances have made life short, nasty, and brutish. They may begin in a dystopic setting, with dire need, messy fixes, and cruel injustices, but they also offer or point the way to a better world, where wrongs are made right and injuries repaired. If satire is missing the rainbow promise of the "happily ever after" found in fairy tales, it contains the Enlightenment promise that reason and wit will lead to steady improvements. Both satire and fairy tale, by aiming to expose social injustice, contain within them the principle of hope so carefully theorized and elaborated by Ernst Bloch.

Bloch's essays on fairy tales emphasize their utopian spirit. "Once upon a time" refers not just to the past but points for-

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ward to a “more colorful or easier elsewhere,” a place where courage and cunning can help you change your station in life, to win “the herd of elegant cattle and ninety bucks in cash” that enables Little Claus to live happily ever after in the version of the tale told by R. J. Yeatman and W. C. Sellar in *The Fairies Return*. For Bloch, the element of hope—the anticipatory illumination that allows us to imagine a better world—also endows fairy tales with “a piece of the Enlightenment that emerged long before there was such a thing as the Enlightenment.”⁸

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If *The Fairies Return* reveals just how comfortably satire can settle into the fairy tale, modernizing it and equipping it with a critical edge sometimes lacking in its traditional forms, the volume also reveals what is lost when satire’s rhetoric of exposure invades fairy-tale discourse. Satire, with its historical specificity and commitment to topical issues, does not inhabit a “once upon a time” but the “here and now.” Gone are the wonders of Cinderella’s magnetic beauty and the horrific snarls of a talking wolf in Grandma’s bed. What we have instead are stockbrokers and socialites, rubber stamp makers and shopkeepers, ordinary folk beleaguered by villains and monsters that haunt the real lives of adults rather than the imaginations of children.

In an anthology of fairy tales and fantasies by Victorian women writers, Nina Auerbach and Ulrich Knoepf-macher comment on how quickly fairy tales can undergo a sea change: “The wild magic of fairy tales, so guardedly approached even by the finest of didacticists who dominated

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earlier juvenile literature, now seemed to license a new generation of writers as well as readers to be deviant, angry, even violent or satirical.”⁹ The writers for *The Fairies Return* felt almost duty-bound to tap into the transgressive energy of folk narratives and to provoke, unsettle, and inflame in ways that the Victorians had never even imagined.

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Satirists, as Matthew Hodgart has shrewdly observed, have “always accepted the risk of failure.” Committed to exposing public abuses, they can become ensnared by the “ephemeral and transitory events of [the] day.”¹⁰ In *The Fairies Return*, we may occasionally feel lost in the woods. Why are the giants in Coppard’s “Jack the Giant Killer,” named Demos, Kudos, and Osmos, and why are they persecuting the inhabitants of London? But some things never change, and A. G. Macdonell’s “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” remains as topical and on the mark today, in its indictment of fraud and corruption, as it was in its own day. Peter Davies’ volume may not always be completely transparent, but it gives us all the abundance, variety, excitement, and revelation we might expect to find in the hybrid form of satire and fairy tale.¹¹

The Fairies Make Mischief

“Jack the Giant Killer” introduces *The Fairies Return*, and it is one of two British tales included in the volume. A. E. Coppard’s Jack is a trickster, outwitting and slaying three oafish ogres terrorizing England, “husky, fascinating, agile levia-

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thans” who seem friendly and well disposed to the British but in reality feed off them. Their cannibalistic activities are ignored for a time, but soon London is covered with “stays and stockings, kimonos, pants, wraps, hats, and shirts.” How do the people react? First there is denial (the kindly giants must have been distributing clothes to the poor), then the government orders an “enquiry,” and finally there is retreat into isolation: “But a dark terror invaded every private mind; all ran from the presence of the giants and hid as best they could.” It takes a fisherman from Cornwall—a likeable fellow who is willing to slay the giants for love as much as for money—to deliver the country from evil.

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The breeziness of Coppard’s pastiche of one of Britain’s most celebrated folktales (only “Jack and the Beanstalk” is perhaps better known) ought not to blind us to the political message embedded in it. The date of publication is 1934, and only a year earlier, Hitler had already begun to violate the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Just a year later came the occupation of the Saar, followed in early 1937 by the move into the demilitarized Rhineland to occupy what had been intended as a buffer zone between Germany and France. It is hard to imagine that Coppard did not have German military might in mind when he made creative mischief with his trio of predatory giants. The slaying of the final giant at sea hints at the importance of naval preeminence at a time when England was moving into an era of political and economic decline.

Clemence Dane’s “Godfather Death” reminds us of how Britain had not yet recovered from the casualties of the First

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World War. She begins her version of the folktale by quoting from the Grimms' story of that title, and she hews closely to its plot. Drawing attention through citation to the moment at which Death gives his godson the gift of a career as physician, she moves in an elegiac mode, revealing that mortality throws its shadow over everyone. The Grimms' tale too emphasizes Death as the great leveler, and, for the two German tale collectors, it represented a democratic principle in a world otherwise ruled by strict hierarchies dividing rich and poor and creating social injustices. Both the Grimms and Dane show Death making its one great exception. Seeking some connection to life, Death agrees to serve as godfather to a boy who grows up to be a celebrated physician. A superb diagnostician, the young man has divined Death's secret of standing at the head of a bed when hope is lost and at the foot of the bed when recovery is possible.

Clemence Dane, also known as Winifred Ashton, creates an *alter ego* named Clement, a boy who grows up in an era permeated by disease and warfare. Death has "harvested" the field of war, and it does equally well in the "swamp mists" of the Devon village in which Death's godson is born. In those precincts, Death flourishes and befriends the local doctor, the one man willing to invite him in and shake his hand. When he becomes godfather to the doctor's son, he also becomes ensnared in a situation in which he must, one day, betray the person he has promised to protect. Not to be outwitted, Death, by making his godson a physician and imparting a secret to him, creates a loophole for himself. The Grimms'

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Death wants his revenge once the secret is betrayed, and he engineers an accident that leads to the physician's death. Godfather Death has a similarly "malicious look" on his face when he acts "clumsily" and fails to position the physician's candle stub on the taller candle that is his son's. There may be occasional reprieves, but Death cannot be cheated.

"The Fisherman and His Wife" moves readers from war zones to the battle of the sexes. E. M. Delafield, prolific as diarist and novelist, modeled her tale on a story borrowed by the Brothers Grimm from the painter Philipp Otto Runge. Written in a Low German dialect, the tale seemed to possess, in its colloquial qualities and pungent ingredients, a folkloric authenticity lacking in some of the items collected by the brothers. The Grimms seemed unaware of the tale's kinship with "The Fisherman and the Genie," a narrative gem from *The Thousand and One Nights* in which a poor man casts his net into the sea three times, each time retrieving worthless objects. On the fourth try, he pulls out of the sea a copper jar, opens it, and finds himself at the mercy of a genie's wrath. The fisherman manages to trick the genie and put him back in the jar.

The German tale is inflected quite differently, with a husband and wife, the one content to live in a pigsty, the other with unbridled ambition that reveals not only the monstrosity of greed but also of feminine power. Delafield gives us a new twist, with a young author named Alured as husband, and a wife named Barbara, who is described as "an unreasonable and overbearing young modern if ever there was one."

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The knowing narrator is on to the fictional author/fisherman, who has a bad case of writer's block and not much talent in the first place. Alured knows that "poetry does not come forth from palaces," and he longs for quarters more modest than the estates and castles conjured by the magical flounder he catches. In a climax that parodies the wife's desire to become omnipotent and usurp God's role, Barbara's last wish backfires, and the Papal palace is turned back into the tiny cottage of the story's beginning. Alured, unlike his folkloric kinsmen, does not discover contentment. Instead, he longs to have had Barbara's opportunities and to have taken advantage of the offices she occupied. Ambition does not know gender in Delafield's moral calculus.

Edward Plunkett, who published under the name Lord Dunsany, was an expert in chess, a cricket player, a supporter of scouting, and an avid hunter who advocated for animal rights (he was known for opposing the "docking" of dogs' tails). This diversity in interests is mirrored in the expansive repertoire of genres he commanded: fiction, drama, screenplays, poems, and essays. Lord Dunsany's "Little Snow-White" is set in modern times and continues in the vein of social critique with an aristocratic cast of characters that includes Lord and Lady Clink, along with Blanche, Lord Clink's daughter from a first marriage.

Instead of an optical device, Lady Clink consults an acoustic wonder to determine who is the fairest of them all: "Oh gramo, gramo, gramophone, / Which of us is the fairest one?" The huntsman of the Grimms' "Snow White" is replaced by

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a chauffeur named Clutch, who secures the requisite “tongue and heart” by running over a random pedestrian. The trees in the forest are supplanted by lampposts in the tale’s new urban setting. And Blanche is taken in by a group of hardworking miners in exchange for managing their household.

Tragically incapable of exorcising the demon of envy, Blanche’s stepmother, like Snow White’s wicked stepmother, compulsively consults the beauty oracle in order to assure herself that her sexual rival is out of the way. Lord Dunsany’s evil stepmother does not dance to death in red-hot iron shoes. Instead, she confronts social calamity after her daughter marries, losing her standing and the opportunity to be presented at Court. Dunsany takes the traditional pairing of murderously jealous and cold-blooded stepmother with innocently sweet girl trained in the art of good housekeeping, retaining its drama, but draining triumph from the victory of girl over mother by turning both into frivolous creatures devoted, above all, to appearances. This is no infatuated reworking of the Grimms’ tale but a cynical commentary on a culture that has funneled passion into purchasing power and false status symbols.

Anna Gordon Keown disenchants the exotic entertainments of *The Thousand and One Nights* when she turns Aladdin into a retired undertaker living in a Scottish township. A cheerless fellow who once had “a thousand and one subtle devices” for advertising his services, this Aladdin might have devoted his last days to growing cucumbers for the local show but for an “itch.” The desire to “polish” his Gaelic leads

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to incantations that mysteriously coalesce into a spell that conjures a naked demon.

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The uncivilized creature, grotesque and deformed, quickly becomes a society favorite, winning prestige for the undertaker even as he becomes a source of intense anxiety for him. The demon not only has horns and a tail—which are challenging to keep hidden from view—but also a habit of making shocking statements that reflect his true nature. But the passion stirred by the alien and exotic works such magic that the good folk of Drumlochrie applaud when the demon incites them to crime and engage in floor-thumping when he insults them. A shameless entertainer, the demon feels quite at home in bourgeois surroundings, and Mr. Aladdin must strain his resources to find a way to disencumber himself of the otherworldly pest. Anna Gordon Keown, like many of the authors anthologized in Davies' volume, seems fascinated by the ability to resist registering surprise in the face of the outlandish. In any other setting, the demon would not have to show his tail to create shock effects. But in Great Britain, as long as the tail of the demon remains tucked in, out of sight, he can be offensive and abusive, intrusive and unkempt. And rather than being recognized as the scoundrel that he is, he becomes, in a move that reminds us of the modern-day search for re-enchantment, a source of wonder and fascination.

A. G. Macdonell's "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" resituates the celebrated tale from *The Thousand and One Nights* to contemporary London. With the wry wit and gentle sat-

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ire that became his trademark style after the publication of *England, Their England* in 1933, Macdonell makes light of the craving for wealth and power at the heart of fairy-tale passions. His two brothers are descended from a shopkeeper named “Barber,” whose deeply divided loyalties to Ireland and Scotland manifest themselves in the birth of sons who incarnate the stereotypical traits of the two nationalities. Cassim Barber, with all the tough-minded business instincts and “relentless realism of the Irish race,” prospers after investing the wealth inherited from his father. Alastair, by contrast, is a “dreamy, unpractical Scotsman” who writes novels for a living.

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The treasures in caves and the wonders of magical commands are transformed in Macdonell’s tale into the wonders of margins and mergers, with a Sesame Finance Syndicate that is “little better than robbers.” Through “one of those electrical mysteries which are beyond ordinary comprehension,” Alastair makes a fortune in finance, and, with his newfound wealth, basks in the glow of prizes and awards for novels that once languished in bookstores. Like his rich and greedy counterpart in the Arabic tale, Cassim learns of the scheme and attempts unsuccessfully to replicate his brother’s success. In a denouement that replaces the slave-girl Morgiana, the tailor Baba Mustafa, and the jars of oil with J. P. Morgan, Doctor Baba Mustapha, and shares of Samarcand Oil, the Sesame Syndicate collapses and only one of the thieves survives to set himself up in a new firm. Macdonell’s tale of financial intrigue, corporate treachery, and passionate greed

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reads like an allegory of modern times and reminds us that fairy tales, with their focus on primal fears and desires, are easy to tailor to modern socioeconomic conditions. Skillfully demystifying a tale from long ago and far away, Macdonell reveals how deeply the quest for instant wealth in fairy tales is tainted by deception, treachery, and greed. But the hero who wins a fortune, a kingdom, and the hand of a princess manages to succeed without ever becoming implicated in the tale's nexus of greed and guilt. Dumb luck is always on his side. Alastair Barber is Jack, Lucky Hans, Fair Ivan, Tom Thumb, and all the other dreamers and numbskulls who are by nature deserving of good fortune and thereby escape the fate of their rapacious, evil fairy-tale brethren.

Helen Simpson's "Puss in Boots" turns to the Gallic tradition to make a much more subtle point. She too relies on contrasts by pairing the hero, not with a brother who embodies everything the hero is not, but with a feline sidekick who is as shrewd, worldly, and duplicitous as the miller's son of the tale is naïve, artless, and innocent. Puss in Boots, blessed with a master so kind that he spends his last shilling on boots for the cat that is his sole inheritance, shields his master from the predatory forces surrounding him. Jack Millerson may believe that "honesty is the best policy," but Puss knows that engineering satisfaction requires wits, ferocity, patience, and, above all, the ability to bluff.

When Charles Perrault wrote down the tale "Puss in Boots," he appended a lesson for "young people," a message that, once registered, is more like a mugging than a moral.

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By asserting that diligence is worth more than acquired wealth, it contradicts sharply the logic of the plot. When another, equally irrelevant moral about clothes, appearance, and youth is added, there is a sudden shifting in the tectonic plates that support the story. Perrault's story does not, as the first moral insists, celebrate the superiority of "industry, knowledge, and a clever mind" over "mere gifts from others." One could challenge that wisdom in any number of ways, most obviously by arguing that the inherited cat was in fact far more valuable to the miller's son than anything else. Helen Simpson understood clearly that the mysteries of the partnership between miller's son and cat are entertaining rather than enlightening. To be sure, Puss is an expert in survival, and he steers his master toward wealth, power, and a title. But in the end he is little more than a comic *alter ego* to the earnestly honest Jack Millerson, a feline figure who makes possible the idea that luck will always be on the side of the hapless, naïve simpleton of fairy tales.

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Eleanor Smith pays homage to Hans Christian Andersen in her modernized version of "The Little Mermaid." Inspired by the Danish author's "gift for pathos and romance," the well-traveled British writer set her story in the new fairy-tale realm of Hollywood. Mary Domville grows up in Canada, but there is something exotic about her family. Her six elder sisters have the "dark exuberant beauty of gipsy girls" (Smith believed that her paternal great-grandmother belonged to the Romani people), and Mary herself, though "fair-haired," has skin as brown "as an Indian's."

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Andersen's Little Mermaid was an upwardly mobile creature of the sea, striving to acquire, above all else, a soul. Drawn to the sights and sounds of an urban setting, she makes a pact with a Sea Witch, exchanging her voice for legs and the ability to live on land. When she fails to capture the heart of the human whose love could have endowed her with the treasure she sought, she has the chance to kill her rival but instead plunges into the sea. Hers is not a return to nature. Instead she has the opportunity to become a Daughter of the Air, acquiring a soul after three hundred years of good deeds. Andersen, despite the Disney interpretation of the tale, uses romance and courtship as little more than an alibi for writing about salvation.

Retaining Andersen's feverish pathos and just as exactly avoiding real romance, Smith gives us a human longing to return to nature. Never at home in the world of parties, rituals, and ceremony, Mary Domville is "shy as a squirrel" and happiest when roaming the countryside, paddling a canoe, or building a wigwam, a skill she learns from an Indian servant named "Little Moose." When we read that Mary can "swim and dive like a fish," it becomes evident that the profusion of animal metaphors and nicknames reveals not only an alliance between Mary and Little Moose, but also a mutual bond with nature: "They belonged to it."

Mary's encounter with a fortune-teller on the occasion of her social debut translates her from nature into culture. Hollywood beckons, and, despite the risk of pain and suffering prophesied by the fortune-teller, Mary cannot resist its allure

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and travels to the very place where her beloved David Darrell makes his home. Hollywood, as the site of illusion, artifice, and counterfeit fantasies, is the opposite of everything to which Mary had been drawn before the liminal experience of a social debut. And yet her infatuation with Hollywood is prefigured in her devotion to a marble figure of a boy—its art proving more seductive than Little Moose’s lessons in building wigwams. Smith’s Mary, like Andersen’s Little Mermaid, suffers from the tyranny of art over her imagination, and there is not the slightest whiff of the tragic in her return to nature, where human life and marine life merge in a soft tidal flow.

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In her “Little Red Riding-Hood,” the Irish novelist E. E. Somerville puts nature at war with culture, and her Moira Cloca-dearg (another Mary, but this one of the Red Cloak) struggles valiantly to resist the beautiful blandishments of a fairyland. At age ten, Moira is promised a pair of shoes by a Cluricaune, an Irish fairy resembling a leprechaun. Wisely refusing, she understands that she will be bound to follow the Cluricaune wherever he goes, even into a lake. At thirteen, exquisite music draws her into a fairy realm, and she incurs the wrath of the wee folk by kidnapping a pony she names Lusmore.

The cultural distance separating Somerville’s narrative about the dangers of fairies lurking everywhere in nature and the story of Little Red Riding Hood told by Charles Perrault several centuries earlier is not as great as it might first seem. Both Moira and Little Red Riding Hood find it a challenge

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to resist the temptations of beauty and nature, both failing to see peril where there is beauty. Seduced by the “divilment of the fairies,” Moira nearly falls into dark waters so deep that she would never have emerged from them. But it is in the portrayal of the Wolf that the two narratives diverge.

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Cornelius Wolfe, or Curley Brech, is a “wild lad,” and he is widely known as a mischief-maker, the “divil’s own play-boy.” But he is also a convert to love, and he carries out Moira’s errand to grandmother while the girl is captivated by the challenges of the hunt. Masquerading as grandmother, he throws himself on the girl and holds her tight. This encounter, embrace rather than threat, marks the end of Moira’s romance with fairy foxes, those elusive creatures that led her to the magical realm. As a grown-up Red Riding Hood, Moira moves from nature to culture, and the little shoe thrown after Moira and Cornelius Wolfe as they emerge from the Chapel—a shoe that you would not get “the like of in the whole world, no, nor in the globe of Ireland neither”—is a sign of exactly what Moira has lost in abandoning the world of the fairies.

That special shoe returns to haunt Robert Speaight’s story, “Cinderella,” a high-minded attack on the excesses of fairy-tale romance and royalty. Cinderella, in this retrospective narrative of a middle-aged woman’s life story, has grown up, and she is neither widow nor divorcée but what Anglo-American cultures once referred to as a spinster or old maid. The slipper in this Cinderella story was fashioned in silver thread by a holy woman: “For the feet that stumble and the

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heart that does not fail.” And although its history is written upon Cinderella’s brow, her story is put on paper by a narrator who discovers “Cinderella’s secret” in a dream and is compelled to “inscribe her story.”

“Cinderella” is our quintessential rags-to-riches story, an international tale about a modest girl of humble origins whose magnetic beauty and dazzling clothes win her the heart of a prince. Magic traditionally made things happen in her story, whether in the form of a fairy godmother or a tree that showers down a dress of gold and silver. Cinderella has never been aligned with philosophers, but in this story she comes to be compared to Christ, Socrates, and Shakespeare. Her road to sainthood—she becomes a counselor, confidante, and guardian to those in need—begins at sunset, with a journey that culminates in an encounter with the splendors of “dissolution.” There is almost “too much beauty” in the silent mysteries of the night, as she descends into a valley fraught with symbolic meaning.

This Cinderella becomes a martyr, a young woman who seems to make a mad dash from the beautiful mysteries of the physical world to the brutal mysteries of the metaphysical. The awful secret she discovers right near the altar of love has to do with betrayal, suffering, and “eternal crucifixion”: “love’s mystery laid bare.” Her sacrificial atonement for the sins of the King whom she once idealized and idolized takes the form of custodial devotion to the scores of lost souls seeking her advice and care. Although politics are treated with more than a touch of cheerful cynicism, Cinderella is

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declared to have become “the consolation of all her world.” Her role as a mender of souls (she specializes in the resolution of marital disputes), it is solemnly declared, will create for her a happily ever after. Here, the fairies have returned to make real mischief for those who aspire to fairy-tale romance. Compassion and good deeds have replaced passionate melodrama.

22] Christina Stead’s “O, If I Could but Shiver” is anything but an exercise in sublimation and instead takes us on an X-rated odyssey with a hero driven by raw desire. Stead’s source is “A Fairy Tale about One Who Left Home to Learn about Fear” from the *Children’s Stories and Household Tales*. Although the term “fairy tale” appears in the Grimms’ title, the story recorded by the two brothers is more or less an extended anecdote, with a series of self-contained episodes, each taking a burlesque turn. It is the stuff of campfire tales, designed to send chills up the spine of listeners and to inspire the very affect the hero lacks. The Grimms’ hero possesses the loopy innocence associated with fairy-tale numbskulls and simpletons. They can perform heroic feats in large part because fearlessness shades so effortlessly into courage.

If cheerful naïveté and generous goodwill characterize the Grimms’ hero, cynicism, greed, and a voracious sexual appetite distinguish Stead’s protagonist. His first feat leaves no human wreckage behind, but, in the second phase of his odyssey, he becomes the accomplice to a counterfeiter, whom he outrages by seducing his three daughters and sister. Tossed into prison, he tunnels his way out and lives miser-

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ably for a time, “assisting” in murders and druggings and living in a “maze of rotten tenements” described with baroque excess. There is a “foul, green, rotting staircase, covered with rags, cobwebs and filthy emanations of households,” pans filled with “the mingled excreta and spittle of all the families in the house,” and children making “immature love round an open cesspool.” Even this horrific dystopia is incapable of producing shivers in the hero.

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Lludd, Stead’s hero, marries, fathers children, divorces, remarries, fathers twins, and is thrown in jail for failure to pay alimony, all the while carrying on with various young women. The organizing principle for his adventures is reduced to egoistic sexuality, and the inability to shiver becomes secondary in the mind of everyone but Lludd. Yet, shiver he does, and Lludd receives his comeuppance in a forced return to his first wife, who is “much older” now, “wrinkled and wasted,” yet with the “fires of passion” still burning bright. One libidinous fiend meets another. Lludd’s wife has become “a man-eating ogre,” so “savage” in her lovemaking that Lludd finally learns to shiver, and shivers thereafter day and night. The Grimms’ tale of an adventurous innocent who settles down to love and marriage (the cold bucket of minnows that finally gives him the shivers is a metaphor for sexual pleasure) is transformed into an anti-fairy tale about the enduring tortures of love and marriage, a horror story guaranteed to give readers, if not the shivers, then the creeps.

Charles Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty in the Wood” is brought up to date in Gladys Bronwyn Stern’s “The Sleep-

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ing Beauty,” a story that proclaims the defeat of fairy-tale romance even as it brings magic back to a disenchanted world. Beginning with an incantatory “once upon a time” and ending with a “long joyful flight,” it also takes the couple “deep into the dying day.” The old-fashioned mingles with the new when Roy and Queenie (Stern relishes word play, giving us a British “Roi”), who reside in Briar Park, settle down and have a child named Rose. At her christening party, Rose is toasted and endowed by the guests with every virtue: beauty, chastity, courage, good horsemanship, charm, a marvelous figure, a brain for higher mathematics, and so on.

Roy and Queenie have abandoned a life of carousing for the sake of their daughter, whom they raise in the rural delights of Briar Park. They cordon their estate off from the world, and, as “converted rakes,” they ensure that their daughter will grow up in a “crystal vacuum” that is wholesome, unblemished, and “ineffably dull.” Yet Queenie preserves one addiction, and the uninvited guest who startles everyone by appearing at Rose’s christening predicts that the mother’s frailty will be the daughter’s undoing. “If you ask *me*,” he declares, “Queenie’s child won’t be long in her teens before she picks up the use of Queenie’s pretty little needle; the same pretty little needle whose prick has sent so many of our débutantes to cold ruin and a colder death.”

What is strictly forbidden becomes the source of irresistible temptation, and, on her fifteenth birthday, Queenie’s daughter pricks herself with a needle and falls into a deep sleep. It is then that magic happens. A plane crashes near

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the outskirts of Briar Park, and from its wreckage emerges Chalmers Prince. Making his way through the hedges, he finds the drugged Rose, also known as Beauty, and presses a kiss on her lips. The curse of drugs and alcohol is lifted, and a sleeping Beauty is borne aloft into a life of adventure. Pleasure may reside in the ruins of fairy-tale romance—in vintage wines and grains of morphine sulphate—but Chalmers and Beauty lift themselves above and beyond it to soar off “across the hills and far away.”

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“Grimm’s Not the Word” captures perfectly the spirit of Hans Christian Andersen’s “Big Claus and Little Claus,” and R. J. Yeatman and W. C. Sellar use that phrase as the subtitle for their refashioning of the Danish tale. The two authors, who pulled the tale out of the editor’s hat, discover—much to their astonishment—that murder, adultery, brutal beatings, blackmail, and treachery constitute the core of fairy-tale magic in Andersen’s story. Blending the telling of the tale with responses to questions posed by the “kiddies” listening to the story, the authors create a raucously energetic narrative that leaves a trail of corpses, as Little Claus plays trickster to Big Claus and others, outwitting them and turning the tables at a dizzying speed. The hectic pace is ramped up by a sassy and sarcastic conversational style of such expressive intensity that the authors’ proposal to collaborate with MGM to make a horror film does not seem in the least implausible.

Andersen’s unrepentant hero reminds us that folktales were once a way of fighting back against vulnerability and

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powerlessness. It was precisely the tough struggle for survival, with its accompanying sense of defenselessness when it came to poverty and disease, that bred a folklore authorizing its heroes to acquire power at any cost. The passionate attachment to power through violence remains a fact of life in many of the once most popular tales, where the body becomes both object and target of power through ceremonies of torture. The hero is cheerfully in control, and it is he who is charged with disciplining bodies and administering justice.

When tales like “Big Claus and Little Claus” crossed over into the nursery, along with other canonical tales, they produced a form of astonishment that can be divined in nearly every sentence of Yeatman and Sellar’s retelling of the story. Cultural amnesia has made us forget that these stories were once told by adults to multi-generational audiences. The true wonder of the fairy tale, as this collection so potently reveals, is its ability to migrate into new spaces and to transform itself as it moves across cultures, eras, and generations. Stories that were once told around the fireside and read to children from books are refashioned in this volume in ways that require us to develop a form of bifocal vision that keeps our sights trained on the story told but also puts us back in touch with how the story was told in times past. When the fairies return, we see them in double vision.

In this volume, a generation that had lived through World War I and spent over a decade in its shadow revealed its loss of faith in happily ever after. Drawing on traditional tales in

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print collections, the authors represented take on a range of topics that embrace the timeless and universal as well as the topical and local. Creating narratives that reveal the capacity of fairy tales to frame utopian fantasies as well as to expose social realities, their real legacy is encapsulated in the title of one of Ernst Bloch's essays: "The Fairy Tale Moves on in Its Own Time."

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Peter Davies Brings Back the Fairies

On the title page of *The Fairies Return* appears an apology to the memory of Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and to the anonymous authors of *The Thousand and One Nights*. We find there also the name of the collection's godfather, a man schooled in fairy lore. Peter Davies was no ordinary publisher and editor, and to understand exactly why a grown man might find it fascinating to bring the fairies back to England requires a look at his personal, as well as professional, life. For this is the man whose name will be forever associated with J. M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*. This is the man who, with his brothers, served as the model for a character who has become part of our cultural imagination and whose name is nearly synonymous with youth, pleasure, play, and enchantment. However elliptically related the life of Peter Davies may seem to the content of *The Fairies Return*, the stories in that volume were, in the final analysis, commis-

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sioned and made possible by a childhood in which fairies mingle with pirates, dogs and their masters dance in public parks, and birds transform themselves into babies.

Peter Davies may have been a sober businessman, but he also understood just how impoverished the world could become once it was disenchanting, whether by the mere fact of growing up, or by the steady rationalization sped up by the Weberian forces of capitalism and modernity. His imagination may have been intense, but he himself was not unhinged. He was not so naïve as to think that the world could be re-enchanting with *The Fairies Return*. But he did understand that the tales once told to us in childhood had magical qualities that could be revived and rescripted in ways that could reanimate us as reminders of the gap between fairy-tale fantasy and social reality. It was a matter of harnessing their natural energy to the oddities and eccentricities of modern life, and it is no accident that the writers recruited for *The Fairies Return* were all expert observers of modern British manners and mores.

Peter Davies, born in 1897 in London, was one of five sons of barrister Arthur Llewelyn Davies and Sylvia Llewelyn Davies, herself the daughter of the celebrated novelist George du Maurier. He, along with his brothers, was adopted by J. M. Barrie after both parents died within a few years of each other, Arthur in 1906, Sylvia in 1910. Peter Davies was still an infant when J. M. Barrie famously entertained the two older Llewelyn Davies boys, four-year-old George and three-year-old Jack, with antics that included twitching his ears, elevat-

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ing one eyebrow and lowering the other, performing magic tricks, and boxing with his St. Bernard dog Porthos. At the time, Barrie, who hailed from Scotland, was a renowned London journalist, novelist, and playwright, married to the talented actress Mary Ansell, with whom he resided at 133 Gloucester Road, on the south side of Kensington Gardens.

An animated storyteller, Barrie worked magic with children, drawing them into a world of make-believe as he told stories about fairies lurking in Kensington Gardens and setting up household in the roots of trees. All the social awkwardness that Barrie felt around adults mysteriously vanished when he was around children, who were not at all unnerved by the way he alternated between playful expressiveness and concentrated silence. A child who participated in the gatherings recalled Barrie as a “tiny man” with a “pale face and large eyes and shadows round them.” She described the matter and the manner of his interactions with children: “He looked fragile, but he was strong when he wrestled with Porthos, his St. Bernard dog. Mr. Barrie talked a great deal about cricket, but the next moment he was telling us about fairies, as though he knew all about them. He was made of silences, but we did not find these strange, they were so much a part of him . . . his silences spoke loudly.”¹²

In Kensington Gardens, Peter Llewelyn Davies was introduced to a new mythology rooted in the geography of the London park, which Barrie had populated with birds and babies, fairies and flowers that walk on their own, along with an old crow named Solomon Caw and a boy named Peter

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Pan, who rode around the Gardens at night on his goat, “playing sublimely on his pipes.” It is in those stories that Peter Pan, a creature *Betwixt-and-Between*, had his origins. Within a matter of years, he migrated from Kensington Gardens into the pages of a novel named *The Little White Bird* and finally, in 1904, onto the stage as the boy who would not grow up. By then Barrie had befriended the parents, and the two families became close over the years.

Peter Pan bears the Christian name of the Llewelyn Davies’ third son, but he is in many ways a composite character, created over the years through stories told in Kensington Gardens and adventures played out at Black Lake Cottage, where Barrie and his wife spent three summers with Arthur, Sylvia, and, eventually, all five boys. The woods were transformed into a tropical forest in the South Seas; the boys became heroic figures doing battle with redskins and pirates; and Barrie himself played the pirate Captain Swarthy. Barrie took dozens of pictures, added text, and had everything bound together in a book entitled *The Boy Castaways of Black Lake Island, Being a record of the terrible adventures of the brothers Davies in the summer of 1901*. Its author was designated as Peter Llewelyn Davies, and its publisher was J. M. Barrie.

Three years later, *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up* captured the imagination of London when it was performed at the Duke of York’s Theatre. Many of the adventures staged at Black Lake Island entered the script, and, in the dedication to the first printed edition—the play was written in honor of “the five”—Barrie described his work as

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being “streaky with you still, though none may see this save ourselves.” Peter Pan may have been named after #3, as Barrie charmingly put it, but he reveals: “I always knew that I made Peter by rubbing the five of you violently together, as savages with two sticks produce a flame.”¹³

Peter Davies, in later years, referred to the play as that “terrible masterpiece.” In the late 1940s, he wrote: “What’s in a name! My God what isn’t? If that perennially juvenile lead, if that boy so fatally committed to an arrestation of his development, had only been dubbed George, or Jack, or Michael, or Nicholas, what miseries would have been spared me!”¹⁴ Although many believe that Michael was the true inspiration for Peter Pan, it was Peter Davies who was burdened with the emotional baggage attached to being the model for a character who incarnated eternal childhood and performed miracles every year in London theaters. “Peter Pan in Bridal Party,” the *New York Times* trumpeted when he served as best man at his brother Nico’s wedding. “Peter Pan’ Is Named,” that same newspaper proclaimed when he was included in Barrie’s will. The reporter captured just why Peter Davies agonized over the identification with Peter Pan. After describing Davies’ marriage to Margaret Hore-Ruthven in 1932, the article goes on to explain exactly who he was: “Mr. Davies, who, as Peter Pan, was known as a Boy Who Would Never Grow Old, has led almost a double life. Although he is an adult, married man in charge of a business enterprise, the apparently immortal fantasy of Peter Pan has always been associated with him.”¹⁵

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Some might have taken pleasure in the association with the playfully irresponsible Peter Pan, but not Peter Llewelyn Davies. The “miserics” of Peter Pan were dwarfed by the real-life tragedies visited on the Davies family year after year. The last and perhaps the most melodramatic of these events came when the sixty-three-year old Peter Davies hurled himself in the path of an underground train at the Sloan Square Station in London.

Peter Davies was a boy of just nine when his father had surgery for cancer of the jaw. Arthur Llewelyn Davies died a few months after the painful surgery, which left him unable to speak. He was a mere thirteen-year-old when he lost his mother to what was probably stomach cancer. J. M. Barrie adopted the five boys, sending them to the best possible schools and supporting them well into their adult lives. But one calamity followed another. Two of the five boys died young. A stray bullet killed George when he was stationed in Belgium on the Western Front in the early years of World War I. And Michael was drowned, most likely in a suicide pact with another student named Rupert Buxton, while at Oxford.

Peter Davies, like his brother George, volunteered for military service when war broke out, and he shipped to France, where he worked as a signal officer. There he experienced physical hardships and emotional trauma so powerful that his brother Nico wrote, on the day after he committed suicide: “The 1914 War ditched Peter, really.” His brother’s health, both physical and mental, had deteriorated so badly by the time of his death that “he would have lived with hardly a smile.”

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The exact motives for Peter Davies' suicide are far too complex to fathom and will forever elude us. The potent mix of personal tragedies, alcoholism, and general existential despair are impossible to sort out. We do know that Peter Davies returned from war and lived with an artist named Vera Willoughby and that that relationship led to a temporary break with Barrie—Uncle Jim did not approve when they moved in together. When the affair was over, Peter reconciled with Barrie, who arranged for an apprenticeship in publishing with Walter Blaikie in Edinburgh and with Hodder & Stoughton in London. Peter Davies Limited was funded by Barrie and enabled Peter to work with his brother Nico to establish a respected publishing house that flourished for many decades.

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Peter's eldest son Rivvy long ago made the claim—from a nursing home—that Barrie's failure to leave the bulk of his fortune to his adopted boys led to his father's suicide. While it is true that Barrie left most of his fortune to his secretary Cynthia Asquith, who had developed a close personal, nearly familial relationship to her employer, sums were given to the boys as well, both during Barrie's lifetime and at his death. Nonetheless, Rivvy made the following claim: "My childhood was unhappy because of what was happening to my father. I could see that he [Barrie] was ruining everything. From the moment I was old enough I was aware that my father had been exploited by Barrie and was very bitter. . . . My father didn't really like Barrie. He resented the fact that he wasn't well off and that Barrie had to support him. But when

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he was cut out of the will, he was livid and tremendously disappointed. . . . He started drinking heavily.”¹⁶

Rivvy’s words are no doubt an exaggeration, a protective mantle against the actual facts of his father’s illness (he was suffering from emphysema) and depression (his wife had Huntington’s Disease and his three sons were possibly carrying the genes for it). After World War II, Peter had become obsessive about delving into his family’s history, reading thousands of letters and documents inherited from Barrie and consulting family friends about Barrie and his relationship to Arthur and Sylvia. The history came to be known as *The Morgue*, and the documents in it provide not just a family record but also a pathological desire on the part of the family historian to linger obsessively over details—even going so far as to interrogate his nanny—and sift evidence in order to understand unfathomable mysteries of the heart. Peter’s need to get to the bottom of what he saw as a love triangle was doomed, and in 1949 he wrote: “Alas, the more one learns of those sad days, the sadder the tale becomes.”

Peter Davies’ childhood reads in many ways like a fairy tale, not the “happily ever after” variety, but one more like the many chain tales recorded by the Brothers Grimm in which misfortune breeds hard luck which in turn begets misery and finally leads to tragedy. The attraction to fairy tales may have stemmed not only from a childhood filled with stories about fairies, but also from a deep hankering for the gold with which fairy-tale heroes are showered once they emerge from loss, hostility, and conflict. We do not know

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exactly who chose the titles of the tales that were to be transformed, but, in the absence of a named editor, we can assume that Peter Davies himself took on that task. He ranged widely, from *The Thousand and One Nights* and the Brothers Grimm to Charles Perrault and Hans Christian Andersen.

E. Arnot Robertson's "Dick Whittington" could not be included for copyright reasons, but everything else is there, as a testimony to the inventiveness of the British imagination when it comes to making the most of fairy tale wisdom and providing challenges to it. Fairy tales have always had the capacity to puncture bourgeois propriety and speak truth to power even as they fuel our fantasies and fears. In this volume too, they are to double duty bound.

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Notes

1. The connection of satire to "satyr" has long been refuted. I have profited from Gay Sibley's arguments about *satura* in "Satura from Quintilian to Joe Bob Briggs: A New Look at an Old Word," in *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 57–72.

2. Joseph Jacobs, *English Fairy Tales* (London: The Bodley Head, 1968), p. 1.

3. Virginia Woolf made the observation in an essay entitled "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," published in 1924, and the phrase serves as the title for Peter Stansky's book on Bloomsbury: *On or About December 1910: Bloomsbury's Intimate World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

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4. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 84.

5. Claude Bremond, "Les bons récompensés et les méchants punis: Morphologie du conte merveilleux français," in Claude Chabrol, *Sémiotique narrative et textuelle* (Paris: Librarie Larousse, 1973), pp. 96–121.

6. Alvin Kernan. *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 21–22.

7. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Problems of Dostoevski's Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973).

8. See the two essays "The Fairy Tale Moves on Its Own in Time" and "Better Castles in the Sky at the Country Fair and Circus, in Fairy Tales and Colportage," in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996): pp. 163–85.

9. Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 3.

10. Matthew Hodgart, *Satire: Origins and Principles* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969).

11. The volume was reviewed shortly after publication: "The Fairies Fly," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 22, 1934: 818.

12. Pamela Maude, *Worlds Away* (London: John Baker, 1964).

13. J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan and Other Plays*, ed. Peter Hollindale (London: Oxford, 1995), p. 75.

14. Llewelyn Davies Family Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

15. September 18, 1937, p. 21.

16. Andrew Malone, "The Curse of Peter Pan," *Sunday Times* (January 1, 1995).

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