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Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction
Jason Marc Harris

FOLKLORE AND THE FANTASTIC IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH FICTION

For my family

Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction

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Contents

Preface vii
Acknowledgements xi

1 An Introduction to Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century British Literature 1

2 Victorian Literary Fairy Tales: Their Folklore and Function 37

3 Victorian Fairy-Tale Fantasies: MacDonald's Fairyland and Barrie's Neverland 61

4 MacDonald's *Lilith* and *Phantastes*: In Pursuit of the Soul in Fairyland 89

5 James Hogg's Use of Legend: Folk Metaphysics and Narrative Authority 103

6 Ghosts, "Grand Ladies," "The Gentry," and "Good Neighbors": Folkloric Representations of the Spirit World's Intersection with Class and Racial Tensions in Le Fanu 127

7 Robert Louis Stevenson: Folklore and Imperialism 149

8 William Carleton and William Sharp: The Celtic Renaissance and Fantastic Folklore 163

9 Conclusion: Second Sight 193

Bibliography 211
Index 225

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Preface

"Ignorance and superstition, so opposite to the real interests of human society, are the parents of imagination."[1] Thomas Warton describes in *The History of English Poetry* (1790) the influence of "customs, institutions, traditions and religion of the Middle Ages" on "poetry"; however, his observations also capture the tensions between British folklore and fiction in the nineteenth century. Many religious, philosophical, and political voices throughout the nineteenth century railed against the influence of folklore, but anthropologists, antiquarians, painters, psychologists, and writers transformed folk beliefs and motifs for aesthetic, historical, and scientific ends.

This book does not address all forms of folklore in British literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Such a task would be unwieldy if one were to accept the tremendous breadth that constitutes folklore as a field, which like many academic areas of inquiry involves ongoing re-evaluation: "After beginning in the nineteenth century as a broad inquiry covering lower-class tradition, folklore studies [...]. [...] has moved from a societal preoccupation with the past to one with the present and now with the future. [...] folklorists predict the shape of tradition [...]."[2] Limits must be set:

> Folklore is the traditional, unofficial, noninstitutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples. [...] Folklore manifests itself in many oral and verbal forms ("mentifacts"), in kinesiological forms (customary behavior, or "sociofacts"), and in material forms ("artifacts"), but folklore itself is the whole traditional complex of thought, content, and process which ultimately can never be fixed or recorded in its entirety; it lives on in its performance or communication as people interact with one another.[3]

Jan Harold Brunvand's definition of folklore exceeds the margins of the literary text to encompass dances, crafts, and the complicated synchronic dynamics between storytellers and their audience. According to his summation, only a trace of folklore could even exist in a printed record, and folk narrative is simply one of many branches of the exchange of traditions that is the underlying basis of folklore as a whole.

Who are the *folk* in the term *folklore*? While nineteenth-century scholars emphasized the "peasantry," folklorists of our era have broadened the definition of *folk*. Alan Dundes explains that *folk* may "refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. [...] what is important is that a group formed

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1 René Wellek, *The Rise of English Literary History* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1941) 192.

2 Simon J. Bronner, *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1986) 122–128.

3 Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: Norton, 1986) 4.

for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own"; and, folklore comprises, according to Dan Ben-Amos, merely "artistic communication in small groups."[4] For this book, an acknowledgement of the strong role of poor rural laborers in the nineteenth-century imagination is important to a working definition of folklore. Authors imitated, transformed, and condemned what they perceived as "peasant" lore, as well as experimenting with the literary tradition of fairy tales. However, country people (whether "peasants" or not) are not the only tradition bearers, nor are literary texts merely folkloric fossils where dead tales rest forever. Folklore is alive – not dead – in texts of the literary fantastic where traditional beliefs and motifs compete for narrative authority with normative and elite standards.

This book targets the literary dynamics of one form of folklore: the folk narrative, and two genres of folk narrative in particular – *folk legend* (volksagen) and *fairy-tale* (märchen). The selected authors interrogate, synthesize, and transform the dynamics of what I call *folk metaphysics* (folkloric assumptions about how the supernatural engages the material world) into prose narratives. The presentation by many of these texts actually synthesizes – rather than divides – such expected polarities as elite *vs*. folk, literate *vs*. illiterate, oral *vs*. written, upper class *vs*. lower class, English *vs*. Scottish or Irish, into a deeply connected cultural interaction between folklore and literature. The self-consciousness of these writers reveals the uneasy recognition of Britain's own native traditional connection to elements that the Enlightenment had declared barbaric, delusional, and exotic. Narrators who presume rational condescension towards the *folk* belie their own cultural connections to a tradition that enlarges rather than negates bourgeois and upper class perspectives.

This book shows how the tension between folk metaphysics and rationalism produces the literary fantastic, and the analysis demonstrates that narrative and ideological negotiation with folklore was central to the canon, as well as popular in the margins of British literature. In supernatural folkloric literature, the demands of aesthetics, class, morality, superstition, and skepticism compete for authority – producing a dynamic *rhetoric of superstition* characterized by competing cultural voices and intruding moments of interpretative hesitation. This rhetoric of superstition that these authors engage serves as both a communicative tool and a system of cultural interrogation that exerts its own power over these literary works.

Consider the following exchange between a reporter and a current popular voice of literary history. J.K. Rowling is the writer of the record-breaking Harry Potter series: "[Interviewer] 'Why are the English so good at writing fantasy?' [Rowling] [*Chuckles*] 'Britain has the most incredible mix of folklore traditions because we were invaded by so many people.'"[5] Rowling's reply underscores historical reality (international contacts promote the communication of folklore) and the cultural dependency of fantasy writing upon folkloric precedents. Furthermore, the theme of invasion characterizes the intense rhetorical and ideological struggle present within literary texts that involve supernatural folklore. Peasants as plague-like bearers of idle tales; natives as ignorant barbarians grasping at straws of irrational demonism; aristocrats as both morally corrupting to their superstitious feudal charges and

4 Bronner 110–111.

5 Malcolm Jones, "The Return of Harry Potter!" *Newsweek* 10, July. 2000: 57–60.

vulnerable to their diabolic overlords; the British as rational, mystical, fearful, and violent – all are recurring themes throughout the works of folkloric fiction. Dreams and visions of multiple realities, signifying deep social divisions, clash mightily and then coalesce within one dark consciousness lit by the writing of authors whose words are partly reflections of the glowing ghosts of unofficial culture around and within them.

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The majority of chapter seven previously appeared as "Robert Louis Stevenson: Folklore and Imperialism," *English Literature in Transition 1880–1920* 46:3 (Sept 2003). Much of chapter five derives from my article published by the official journal of the James Hogg Society: "National Borders, Contiguous Cultures, and Fantastic Folklore in Hogg's *The Three Perils of Man*," *Studies in Hogg and His World* Vol. 14 (2003).

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Chapter One

An Introduction to Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century British Literature

"Mr Hartright, you surprise me. Whatever women may be, I thought that men, in the nineteenth century, were above superstition."[1] This assertion in Wilkie Collins's mystery novel, *The Woman in White* (1860), appeals to Victorian readers' tacit agreement; however, reason and superstition are not neatly divided between masculinity and femininity, nor was Victorian culture "above superstition." It is no revelation to designate any particular culture as superstitious – to maintain beliefs that have no rational evidence; what's intriguing about people "in the nineteenth century" is what comprised their superstitions: "belief ranged from [...] those who wrote about the fairies [...] those visited by true dreams, premonitions and telepathic encounters, to the sometimes unwilling, sometimes eager belief of Spiritualists and Theosophists and the alternatively enthusiastic and doubtful faith of Christians of all denominations."[2] These beliefs appear frequently in Victorian literature, for while the nineteenth century is famous for the profusion of literary realism, the era also witnessed the proliferation of literature referred to as "fantasy." The collection, revision, and publishing of folk tales – especially European tales from Germany to Ireland – stoked British attention not merely to the motifs that fantasy writers have used and the structural aspects of their narratives but also influenced the metaphysical and moral discourse of both realism and the gothic.

How nineteenth century writers imitate, revise, and transform preternatural folkloric material into narratives of the literary fantastic is the substantive focus of this book. What emerges from these texts of the folkloric fantastic is conflicted rhetoric. Superstition and skepticism emphasize divisions among class, education, national identity, and faith while simultaneously revealing an underlying matrix of communal and contagious folk beliefs and motifs that are fundamental to a deeper understanding of the hybrid cultural consciousness of the writers and audience in England, Scotland, and Ireland.

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1 Before reading *The Woman in White*, I heard this apt quotation from Prof. Joseph Butwin during my Ph.D. defense (61).

2 Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell, *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 1.

Fantasy: cultural dreams

The term *fantasy* often suggests delusion, escapism, and irrelevance. J.R.R. Tolkien defines fantasy in his well-known essay "On Fairy-Stories" as "the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds"(64).[3] A work of literary fantasy presents a "Secondary World", which is not simply a mimetic representation of the "Primary World" or everyday reality, but an articulation of "images of things [...] not to be found in our primary world at all, or are generally believed not to be found there" (69–70). Tolkien's definition combines the "older and higher" use of the word fantasy "as an equivalent of Imagination" ("'the power of giving to ideal creations the inner consistency of reality'") with the idea of the unreal: "unlikeness to the Primary World [...]" (68–69). Literary fantasy is a consistent presentation of the unreal: the unreal becomes the real in the context of the narrative. Fantasy is often perceived as having the significance of dreams: full of psychological and cultural projections of desires and fears, which are not irrelevant. It is especially through folk narratives and beliefs that the Victorians produced fantasies, and through folklore, nineteenth-century psychologists – most notably Sigmund Freud – explored the unconscious mind of humanity.

Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) uses examples from fairy tales. Although Freud wrote before the Indiana folklorist Stith Thompson and Anti Aarne of the Finnish School of folklorists canonized the terms, *tale-type* and *motif*, Freud was generally familiar with *motifs* and *tale-types*. A *motif* is a plot element in a folk tale: if a Fairy Godmother plays a role, that's a motif. A *tale-type* is the narrative pattern that uses particular motifs to form a tale: Cinderella, for example.[4] The motifs and tale-types of folklore are part of the stock of symbols that Carl Jung and his disciples studied, but it was Freud's correlation between dreams and fairy tales that laid the groundwork for psychoanalytic approaches to folk narratives for decades to

3 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966).

4 Katharine Briggs does a similar explanation of tale-types and motifs. Katharine Briggs, *British Folktales* (New York: Dorset, 1970) 6. Unless noted otherwise, all references to specific tale-types and motifs will be from Stith Thompson's works. In folklore studies, the abbreviation "AT" before a tale-type is often used to credit Stith Thompson and Anti Aarne's work: *The Types of the Folk-Tale: A Classification and Bibliography: Anti Aarne's Verzeichnis der Marchentypen*, FF communications No. 184 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961). Motifs begin with a letter followed by a number while tale-types begin with a number (after AT) and may have a letter follow the number to indicate a variant tale-type (AT333B), which is a slight difference in the narrative pattern that is distinct enough to note. I also refer to the motifs catalogued by Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* Indiana University Folklore Series No. 20 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966). Lastly, a Migratory Legend (ML followed by a number) refers to the work of Reidar Christiansen, who has tracked how legends have traveled through multiple regions, much like the urban legends a modern audience is aware of today (like the teenage-harassing Hookman). Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Migratory Legends: A Proposed List of Types With a Systematic Catalogue of the Norwegian Variants*, FF Communications No. 175 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fenica, 1958).

come: "There can be no doubt that the connections between our typical dreams and fairy tales [...] are neither few nor accidental."[5]

In 1897, anthropologist and avid fairy-tale collector Andrew Lang observed parallels between dreams and superstitious claims: "the alleged events of ghostdom [...] are precisely identical with the every-night phenomena of dreaming, except for the avowed element of sleep in dreams."[6] Many theories of fantasy and the fantastic are occupied with "the fantastic as the outlet for the exclusions and taboos, the estrangements and alienation of bourgeois society."[7] Such conceptions of fantasy texts as dreams giving form to cultural repression resemble William Patrick Day's contention that the Gothic serves to "externalize" in general the fears and desires that the "human imagination [...] finds in itself" and that the "Gothic cosmology" of the Victorian age in particular "refers only to [...] the human act of fantasizing" and is essentially then the "imaginative projection of the nineteenth-century."[8]

Some evaluations of folklore have overemphasized assumptions about cultural anxieties and desires. For example, in "The Hook" urban legend, a teenage couple flees a murderous man with a hook for a hand. One analysis has concluded this narrative indicates "adolescent fears about sexuality and anxiety at violating social moral standards."[9] However, one must guard against hasty generalizing about tales; otherwise, all inhabitants of the spiritual world (fairies, demons, ghosts, etc.) become sexually repressive bogeymen like the deformed psychopath in "The Hook." Folklorist Bill Ellis recognizes the danger of reducing responses to a folk narrative. He proposes that legends like "The Hook" "allow participants to experiment with a social taboo; violating, it, respecting it or compromising with it [...]."[10] Ellis clarifies that while the legend seems to be an admonition "as most informants concede, it encourages the proscribed act" because the audience for the tale finds the idea of parking in a remote area all the more intriguing because of the excitement generated by the legend.[11] Therefore, while psychoanalytic approaches may prove revealing, one must avoid reductionism.

The interrogation of dreams, fairy tales, and superstitions that developed in the nineteenth century represented inquiry beyond empiricism; curious minds explored the mysteries of subjective experiences, just as they desired more from narrative than imitations of bourgeois or upper-class standards of reality. Fantasy and folklore presented new frontiers that provoked both enthusiasm and objection from all sides: the stakes were political, religious, and personal.

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5 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (1900; New York: Avon, 1965) 279.

6 Andrew Lang, *The Book of Dreams and Ghosts* (New York: Causeway, 1974) 2.

7 Cornwell 26.

8 William Patrick Day, *In the Circles of Fear and Desire* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985) 41–42.

9 Sue Samuelson, whose interpretation is equated with those of Alan Dundes and Linda Dégh, is qtd. in: Bill Ellis, "Why 'The Hook' is Not a Contemporary Legend," *Folklore Forum* 24.2 (1991): 65.

10 Bill Ellis, "'The Hook' Reconsidered: Problems in Classifying and Interpreting Adolescent Horror Legends," *Folklore Forum* 105 (1994): 70.

11 Ellis 70.

Folk narratives and the supernatural: *fairy tales and legends*

In addition to fantasy, *folklore* is another debated term. Many people today are aware that urban legends are folklore but don't realize jokes are also folklore. Some consider old stories about ghosts and fairies the province of folklore yet would be shocked to learn that educated people still tell tales of personal encounters with the fairies as well as ghosts in this technological age.[12] And what are *fairy tales*? Stories of meeting the fairies that people tell as though they are believable – *folk legends* about fairies – are not the same thing at all as those *fairy tales* that so many heard as children read from books by the brothers Grimm, Andrew Lang, Charles Perrault or Hans Christian Andersen.

The folkloric definition of a *fairy tale*, or what the Germans call *märchen*, is a *folk tale* (traditional prose narrative) that, according to Stith Thompson's canonical work, *The Folktale*, "is a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvelous" (8).[13] Fairies are not a requirement. Folklorists have expanded Thompson's minimalist definition; for example, Linda Dégh defines märchen as "a lengthy and heroic adventurous journey from deprivation to fulfillment, through trial, danger, and suffering, acted out and counteracted with magic helpers and enemies."[14]

Unlike the märchen, legends articulate communal beliefs, as Timothy Tangherlini explains in *Interpreting Legend: Danish Storytellers and Their Repertoires*:

> Legend, typically is a traditional, (mono)episodic, highly ecotypified, localized and historicized narrative of past events told as believable in a conversational mode. Psychologically, legend is a symbolic representation of folk belief and reflects the collective experiences and values of the group to whose tradition it belongs (22).

When folklorists generally speak of *folk legends* they mean those narratives that deal with real people (local heroes or "common folk") encountering supernatural beings or events. The heroic genre of legends is a separate category: those legends are regional – Ireland's Cuchulain or Finn; such legends are glorified and mythic

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12 I have interviewed people – including college students – who have claimed to see fairies as well as ghosts. "Experiences With the Fairies: Tradition, Imagination, and the Media" *Northwest Folklore* 13.7 (Autumn 1999): 10–26. "Shadows of Tradition: 'We Never Really Believed It, But It Was Definitely There' – The Role of Belief and the Mechanics of Legend in Tales of the Spirit World" *Northwest Folklore* 14.1 (Summer 2000): 15–55. Nor does education dispel belief in spiritual beings here in America, as David Hufford notes, "the best empirical data from the past several decades shows that modern education does not eradicate spiritual belief." David Hufford, "Beings Without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits," *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*, ed. Barbara Walker. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995).

13 Folktales have unknown authors and "narrators whose relationship to the tales is both intimate and detached; the folktale is 'extra-individual,' that is, it exists both within and beyond each individual and personalized telling." Stephen Benson, *Cycles of Influence: Fiction, Folktale, Theory* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003) 19.

14 Linda Dégh, *Narratives in Society* 122.

(almost sacred) unlike traditions of local experience. Reidar Christiansen's *The Migratory Legends* indicates many legends spread internationally, as märchen also do, and Tangherlini explains how legends may adapt features particular to a region after migration (they become "ecotypified"), but certain legends are unique to a region and have not migrated.

Just as urban legends today often express people's worries about crimes so the Victorians used legend elements to symbolize their fears. The traditional legend presents to its audience a sense of pervasive and perennial threats:

> The legend tells us we can never be safe because extranormal powers may interfere with our lives at any time. The earth we know as our home is not entirely ours, the logic which guides our thinking may be uncertain or invalid; we cannot trust our senses, and even scientific instruments are unreliable.[15]

Clarifying how folk narratives and beliefs influenced nineteenth and early-twentieth century writings of the literary fantastic entails exploring the conceptual context of folklore in the nineteenth century.

Folk metaphysics *vs.* Enlightenment rationality: shaping the literary fantastic

Nineteenth-century literary representations of fairy tales, folk legends, and superstitions are the culmination of attitudes towards the supernatural in general and folklore in particular. While post-Enlightenment philosophers and scientists claimed to have the power to banish superstition, the attraction of *folk metaphysics* – the rules, behaviors, powers, tendencies, and borders of the spiritual world implied by popular beliefs – persisted in both rural and urban contexts. Besides championing "free-thinking," Anthony Collins's statement from *Discourse of Free Thinking* (1713) reveals the vitality of folkloric perspectives on the Devil (note the myriad of traditional incarnations (old man, corpse, cat), which are not part of religious orthodoxy):

> "The Devil," said Collins, "is entirely banished [in] the United Provinces where free-thinking is in the greatest perfection, whereas all round about that Commonwealth, he appears in various shapes, sometimes in the shape of an old black gentleman, sometimes in that of a dead man, sometimes in that of a cat."[16]

This manifesto of rationality notes the seeds of dissent in the hybrid nature of folk beliefs, which here conjoin unofficial and official perspectives.

Superstitious thinking in folk tales, religious narratives, and literary ghost stories is an attempt to delineate the borders of experiential truth by implying (and sometimes explicating) the effects and tendencies of invisible laws that defy reason but not belief. What Marshall Brown claims for the philosophy of the Gothic also applies to the metaphysics of superstition:

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15 Dégh, *Narratives in Society* 124.

16 Anthony Collins qtd. in Sukumar Dutt, *The Supernatural in English Romantic Poetry 1780–1830* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1938) 13.

> Causality, the core of Kant's epistemology, is just as much a concern of narratives based on the unequal powers of natural and supernatural creatures. At one level, the obsession with the supernatural found in a number of Gothic novels can be understood as an exploration of the philosophical and scientific questions of how nature does and doesn't work.[17]

Deciphering "what does and doesn't work" is the epistemological justification for folk beliefs: the communal consciousness of these traditions offers an aggregate of checks and balances for negotiating with helpful and harmful invisible forces. The knowledge of folk metaphysics is meant to be useful, as Patrick Joyce asserts, "Above all, in industrial England there are clear signs of popular beliefs expressing a kind of animism [...] as in rural England, these submerged aspects of popular belief involved getting things done, an efficacy contrasting with the comparative quietism of Christianity."[18] Folk beliefs arm a believer with practical charms of salt, iron, and silver when faith and prayer might not suffice against the tenacity of known and unknown terrors.[19]

Despite the enduring reference to folk traditions to describe subjective experiences on the popular level, the theories of the likes of Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke shifted literary representations of reality to concentrate on empiricism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is due to the predominance of rationalism that the literary fantastic could be born. Fixed laws of reality needed to be established before a narrative alternative could challenge those principles:

> With the publication of Newton's *Principia* in 1686–1687, a new system of thought came into existence that defined the real as material objects and forces, acting under invariable laws [...]. Indeed, science banished the marvelous and fantastic from reality, and the immeasurable became the unreal. [...] As romance and allegory turned into fantasy, they turned into pure entertainment. Those qualities that made a piece of fiction art in the

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17 Marshall Brown, "Philosophy and the Gothic Novel," *Approaches to Teaching Gothic Fiction: The British and American Traditions* ed. by Diane Long Hoeveler and Tamar Heller (New York: MLA, 2003) 47.

18 Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class 1848–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 162–163.

19 The pervasiveness of folk beliefs should not be underestimated; writing in 1972, Frank Hugget testifies to rural rituals and charms that not only persisted in the nineteenth-century but continued to the twentieth as well:

> Until quite recently in West Sussex the thatcher attached to the last hay rick a straw dolly, which was intended originally not as decoration but as a tribute to the pagan god for the success of the harvest. Women put their shoes in the shape of a cross by their bed at night or carried the right fore-foot of a hare in their pocket in the hope that it would cure rheumatism. A century ago, belief in witchcraft was still so strong in villages that a mother, who believed that a neighbour had bewitched her child scratched the woman's arm with a crooked pin to see if any blood would come. [...] Some villagers continue to believe in witches into the modern times.

Frank Huggett, *A Day in the Life of a Victorian Farm Worker* (London: Allen, 1972) 81.

> nineteenth century – the capacity to tell the truth about the world, to express moral truth – were reserved for realistic fiction.[20]

As Patrick Day asserts, fantasy as a genre derives from the materialist vision of the Enlightenment: art must offer clear and distinct representations of the empirical world – mimesis – rather than cloud the mind with shadows of allegory. Realism entails, in George Levine's words, the artistic and "moral enterprise of truth telling and extending the limits of human sympathy, to make literature appear to be describing [...] reality itself [...]."[21] Yet, realism did not have a monopoly on "moral truth," for besides the Bible, many literary fairy tales and fantasies were understood to offer moral instruction to young and old Victorians alike, and for that reason the morals of these works were scrutinized. [22]

After the Enlightenment, the supernatural obviously persisted in the concept of God. For example, Thomas Hobbes explains in "Of Darknesse from Vain Philosophy and Fabulous Traditions" (Chapter XLVI of *Leviathan*) that "true philosophy" is compatible with spirituality; however, he differentiates between the "light of the Scriptures" and the folly of superstition:

> The Enemy has been here in the Night of our naturall Ignorance, and sown the tares of spirituall Errors [...]. [...] introducing the Daemonology of the Heathen Poets, that is to say, their fabulous Doctrine concerning Daemons, which are but Idols, or Phantasms of the braine, without any reall nature of their own, distinct from human fancy; such as are dead mens Ghosts, and Fairies, and other matter of old Wives Tales. Etc.[23]

Despite Hobbes, neither the "dead mens Ghosts" nor the "Heathen Poets" were obliterated by religious orthodoxy or the Enlightenment's rationalism.

The Romantic poets and prose-writers of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century found new "Daemons" in their combined vision of German philosophy and the rustic sublime: Robert Burns, James Hogg, and Sir Walter Scott incorporated supernatural folklore into literary works that did not altogether dismiss such traditions as "Phantasms of the braine." As for the Victorians (in the model of Hobbes), they aimed to sustain piety alongside science: "one of the primary efforts of Victorian thought was to reconcile empirical science with metaphysical truth."[24] Yet, doctrine

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20 Day 9–10.

21 George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981) 8.

22 One tactic of fantasists was to avoid the supernatural altogether in a fantasy, as Julius Kagarlitski insists in "Realism and Fantasy" that Jules Verne did: "Jules Verne mechanically separated the 'material fantasy' [...] of Edgar Allan Poe and other American romanticists from the sinister and the unknowable, and having made use of the former, he rejected or reinterpreted the latter in a directly realistic spirit." Julius Kagarlitski, "Realism and Fantasy," *SF: The Other Side of Realism*, ed. Thomas D. Clareson (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1971) 31. Verne's avoidance of the "sinister and the unknowable" does not converge with fantasy narratives that depend on supernatural folk motifs and metaphysics that are at issue here; his work became science fiction not supernatural fiction.

23 Hobbes qtd. in Dutt 12.

24 Levine 10.

contended with popular beliefs, as well as scientific evidence. A writer of literary fairy tales or legend-like narratives could not fail to be aware of the legacy of both rational and religious resistance to such material.

Folklore studies and class consciousness

In the dawn of folklore studies, when the field was made up of collectors of ballads and "popular antiquities," a common justification for gathering superstitions, besides historical interest, was to expose and correct the spiritual ignorance of the "peasants."[25] In Richard Dorson's historical compendium, *The British Folklorists*, there are titles such as Henry Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares; or the Antiquities of the Common People. Giving an Account of several of their Opinions and Ceremonie. With proper Reflections upon each of them; shewing which may be retain'd and which ought to be laid aside* [1725] (10–11). Bourne echoes Hobbes's judgment against apparitions as "Phantasms of the braine." According to Bourne it is "Fears and Fancies and weak Brains of Men" which are responsible for the majority of ghosts and such (12).

Most significant is the realization of antiquarians like Bourne that, as Dorson articulates, "the interwoven strands of folk tradition formed a separate culture from the rational, sober, and pious ways of learned men" (12). This alternative culture persisted into the nineteenth century, even in urban districts, which so many folklorists were certain would lose all their traditions to industrial intrusions.[26] Thus,

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25 Recent social historians have clarified that "peasantry" is a misnomer for the rural underclass in the nineteenth century; however, writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century persisted in the term as part of their cultural lexicon. Thus, in my book, putting the term in quotation marks signals its sociolinguistic currency, rather than precise socioeconomic taxonomy: "The English rural poor were not a peasantry. They had no stake in the land, and their overlords had little sense of feudal responsibility towards them. A farmer might hire a man for the summer and turn him into the workhouse for the winter, with as little thought as someone today putting their lawnmower away for the season. [...] in the nineteenth century, farmers and landowners lived outside and apart from the village [...] they were largely irrelevant to the daily concerns of the villagers." Neil Philip, *Victorian Village Life* (Spring Hill: Albion, 1993) 17.

26 Donald McKelvie offers evidence from "Bradford, Halifax and Huddersfield" (81) for how "the urge to tell stories may be as strong in these urban communities as it was in less sophisticated communities in times past, and that folklore may be found in contemporary guise in our cities" (91). McKelvie discovered "still omnipresent [...] the thread of belief in good and bad luck; in the power of amulet and talisman; in divination and omen – an amorphous body of superstitions of all kinds" (92). Donald McKelvie, "Aspects of Oral Tradition and Belief in an Industrial Region," *Folk Life* 1 (1963) 91–92.

McKelvie, as well as Richard Dorson – whose *British Folklorists* mentions both these sources – refers to Henry Mayhew's four-volume ethnographic study (100 years prior to McKelvie) of London's poor as containing urban folklore: *London Labour and the London Poor*. Neither Dorson nor McKelvie specify what they find folkloric in Mayhew's analysis. Mayhew's close attention to the various street occupations does include ballad singers and other kinds of oral performers. However, supernatural folklore is not clearly in evidence in

when Elizabeth Gaskell emphasizes the cultural disparity between rich and poor in *North and South* (as does Benjamin Disraeli in *Sybil or the Two Nations*), she uses a folkloric example. The protagonist, Margaret Hale, encounters "one of the savage country superstitions": burning a cat "compelled (as it were) the powers of darkness to fulfil the wishes of the executioner" (391–392). The discovery of this "practical paganism" serves as an argument for educating the younger generation in rural, as well as urban, environments – to defend them from such follies.

The idea of industrialism as antithetical to folk beliefs became part of folk beliefs; for instance, Elizabeth Gaskell in *Life of Charlotte Brontë* offers the claim of Charlotte's nurse Tabby that the mills had usurped the fairies: "'It wur the factories as had driven 'em away [...].'"[27] Reports of the disappearance of the fairies have been exaggerated for at least 250 years. Furthermore, the notion of the factories being the agent of change is a variable motif that characterizes one of the folk legend themes that folklorists have catalogued (motif F388 *Departure of the Fairies*). Allegedly, James Hogg's grandfather was the last to fraternize with the fairies, and Charlotte Brontë in *Shirley* and Rudyard Kipling in *Puck of Pook's Hill* have both made use of the fairy-departure motif.

Ambivalence rising: the rhetoric of skepticism – class, nation, race, and folk beliefs

Despite the dominant rational discourses of realism in art, utilitarianism in philosophy, and pragmatism in industry, Victorian society revealed a taste for unorthodox forms of spirituality, most evident in a preoccupation with seances and a general fascination with ghosts in general, manifest in its literary productions:

> ghost stories [...] were enormously popular among all classes of readers [...] Dickens' *Household Words*, begun in 1850, and its successor *All the Year Round. The Cornhill Magazine, St James's Magazine, Belgravia, Temple Bar, Saturday Review, Tinsley's, Argosy* and *St Paul's* all contributed their share to a readership addicted to the thrill of momentarily losing rational control over the ordered Victorian world.[28]

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his study, other than the fanciful influence of the märchen on the performance of pantomimes – such fairy-tale characters as Bluebeard, elves, and fairies figure within some of them (vol. 3, 121–127). The closest item to a metaphysical folk belief is implied by the conjurer's self-description; he distinguishes himself – although somewhat ambiguously – from the idea of a "fortune-teller" (vol. 3, 107). In passing, other folkloric material includes the May Day celebration (vol. 2, 371) and, more impressively, there is a striking "strange tale in existence among the shore-workers" concerning "a race of wild hogs inhabiting the sewers in the neighbourhood of Hampstead" that qualifies as an urban legend (vol. 2, 154). Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols. (London: Griffin, 1861) 154.

27 Nicola Bown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 39.

28 Eve M. Lynch, "Spectral Politics: the Victorian Ghost Story and the Domestic Servant", *The Victorian Supernatural* ed. Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 68.

The *Illustrated London News* in 1853 laments that industrial technology was unable to dispel the rising tide of spiritualism:

> Railroads, steam, and electricity, and the indubitable wonders which they have wrought, have not proved powerful enough to supersede and destroy that strong innate love of the supernatural which seems implanted in the human mind. Thousands of people in Europe and America are turning tables, and obstinately refusing to believe that physical and mechanical means are in any way connected in the process.[29]

What emerged in literature was often a rhetoric of skepticism to distance the narrator from the beliefs of the non-elite even though that distance was a pretentious posture unverified by anthropology, which could not reconcile Victorian and Edwardian British interest in ghosts. In fact, as Dorson reports of Andrew Lang, his "original evolutionary thesis [folkloric 'survivals' were analogous to prehistoric relics or fossils in that they represented and preserved the psyche of primitive humanity] tended to fade before the realization that ghost stories seemed more congenial to Englishmen than to savages" (216).

While folklorists collected legends from the rural working class, elite educated men and women engaged in spiritualist activities, generating what one might call "salon lore" from their supposed encounters with rapping, tapping, levitating, and ectoplasmic apparitions. And just as folk beliefs and legends compel a variety of reactions from tradition-bearers and their communities, likewise the culturally elite Victorians reacted variously to spiritualist claims and experiences; the influence of spiritualism should not be underestimated among literary quarters:

> Some were as much affected by it as their contemporaries were by the Oxford Movement within the Church of England, by secularism, rationalism, transcendentalism. Some scoffed; some doubted. All had this in common – they were professional people; they were sensitive, artistic people: the Brownings; the Tennysons; the two Bulwer-Lyttons, father and son; Thackeray; Dickens; Tom Trollope.[30]

Perhaps the most surprising figure to be an enthusiast for spiritualism is Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the modern literary archetype of rationalism: Sherlock Holmes.

It is well known that Doyle was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the alleged fairy photographs taken by Elsie and Francis Wright – the so-called "Cottingley fairies" named after the Cottingley Glen where the girls photographed "fairies modeled from cardboard and supported with hatpins" (Bown 191). Doyle didn't view the photographs until the theosophist Edward Gardner presented them to him in 1920.[31] Evidence that was sufficient for Doyle was disillusioning to the Edwardian public:

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29 Qtd. in Richard Noakes, "Spiritualism, Science, and the Supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain," *The Victorian Supernatural*, ed. Nicola Bown et al. 25–26.

30 Katherine H. Porter, preface, *Through a Glass Darkly: Spiritualism in the Browning Circle* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1959) vii.

31 Madame Helena Blavatsky founded Theosophy in Victorian England; she claimed in *Isis Unveiled* (1877) that: "Under the general designation of fairies and fays, these spirits of

> The fairies which fascinated adults in the nineteenth century were creatures of legend and superstition, numinous beings caught in a liminal twilight between imagination and reality. Fixed, seemingly categorically, in the photographic image, fairies made the bathetic descent to ridicule and parody, to the saccharine illustrations of the Flower Fairy books. [...] By chaining the photographs to the obligation to speak as evidence, Doyle and Gardner effectively destroyed their own case. The "coming of the fairies" they proclaimed turned out to be their departure (196).

Doyle's attraction to spiritualism and theosophy was partly based on his mystical experiences, which he asserted were reconcilable with his critical acumen:

> Conan Doyle had many occult beliefs, and he always claimed that these were based on his own keen powers of observation. He believed in spiritualism and spirit manifestations. "In a fair light I saw my dead mother as clearly as ever I saw her in life," he wrote. "I am a cool observer and I don't make mistakes." The trouble with thinking you are Sherlock Holmes is that you are apt to think you cannot be fooled [...].[32]

Doyle's assertion of possessing infallible perceptions underscores the inextricable tenaciousness of superstitious thinking in the human mind, which the twenty-first century skeptic Michael Shermer clarifies in *Why People Believe Weird Things*:

> We evolved to be skilled, pattern-seeking causal-finding creatures. [...] The problem in seeking and finding patterns is knowing which ones are meaningful [...]. We have magical thinking and superstitions because we need critical thinking and pattern-finding. The two cannot be separated. Magical thinking is a necessary by-product of the evolved mechanism of causal thinking (xxiv–xxv).

Doyle fails to realize that he may have "seen" his mother's form, but the human mind is capable of producing vivid hallucinations to which all may be subject under the influence of grief over the departed.[33]

Emerging from the age of enlightenment to the age of industry, the Victorians epitomize this split between reason and superstition that characterizes the human mind, yet the Victorians did not readily accept such an ambiguous mentality as their own self-portrait, at least not among their bourgeois and elite ranks. The Victorians projected, infantilized, and isolated magical thinking onto other cultures through their anthropological and imperialist assumptions that foreign primitives were

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the elements appear in the myth, fable, tradition, or poetry of all nations [...]" (qtd. in Silver 38).

32 Diane Purkiss, *At The Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 286. There are still enthusiasts who believe the Cottingley fairies were perhaps authentic. Janet Bord, *Fairies: Real Encounters With Little People* (New York: Dell, 1997).

33 Hypnagogic hallucinations, which are experienced shortly before falling asleep and hypnopompic hallucinations, which are undergone upon waking, account for most experiences of ghosts. Carl Sagan recounts his own experience with a waking hallucination (hypnopompic) that his deceased parents were still alive: "Plainly there's something within me that's ready to believe in life after death. And it's not the least bit interested in whether there's any sober evidence for it [...]. This is about humans being human." Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Ballantine, 1996) 203.

struggling – or regressing – through stages of civilized development analogous to children struggling towards maturity: "A number of Victorian scholars, impressed by the striking success of evolutionary theory [...] attempted to reconstruct on the same pattern the earlier and by definition the 'lower' stages of human society."[34] The notion "that peoples became vulnerable to conquest because they had somehow degenerated prior to contact" supported British dominance "over peoples whom they acknowledged as the creators of high cultures, such as the peoples of India."[35] And where the anthropologists discovered traces of savagery in Britain were among the lower orders in both the family and the society at large; children and the poor were the British primitives:

> The equation of the British child with the exotic primitive was a staple of the middle-class culture purveyed in novels and journalism [...] parallel between the characteristics of different orders in the British class hierarchy and the cultures of societies at different stages of evolution. [...] the equation between the urban underclass and primitive peoples was assumed by journalists who undertook investigations of the life-styles of the poor [...]. The structure of the middle-class Victorian family, and its household, represented an environment in which it was easy to see women as children and savages. [...] the bearers of lower-class culture with whom middle-class Victorians had the most regular contact were generally female [...].[36]

Victorian assumptions about the barbarism of its disenfranchised carried over into some Edwardian literature; in *Peter Pan* (first performed as a play in December 1904) the island of lost boys conjoins savagery and childhood before the later modern sequel (in barbarous spirit), *The Lord of the Flies*, offers its more lurid depiction of latent brutality among the young.

Some of the skeptical reactions to spiritualism in fact demonstrated the tenacity of folk beliefs. While spiritualist mediums claimed to communicate with the human spirits of the dead, Alfred, Lord Tennyson believed that table rapping resulted from "Pucks not the spirits of dead men" (Porter 123) and Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton suggested that "brownies or fairies" were being mistaken for "spirits of the dead" (11). Both aristocrats (barons) are familiar enough with folk traditions to advance an alternative to the standard spiritualist metaphysics. However, critics Bown, Burdett, and Thurschwell argue that there was often a class-conscious snobbery that accompanied the perspective of some spiritualists: "the frequent recourse to the language of science [was] [...] due to Spiritualists' need to distinguish their beliefs from what was thought of as the 'superstition' of the uneducated [...]."[37] Catharine Crowe's *The Night-side of Nature* (published in 1848 and "which remained in print for over a century") exemplified, according to Robert F. Geary, "a new synthesis merging science and supernatural" and inaugurated "a major change in the attitude

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34 John Beattie, *Other Cultures: Aims, Methods and Achievements in Social Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1964) 6.

35 Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885–1945*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 263.

36 Kuklick 100–106.

37 Bown et al. 7–8.