



“Come sing ye light fairy things tripping so gay”: Victorian Fairies and the Early Work of J. R. R. Tolkien¹

**by Dimitra Fimi
Cardiff University**

Introduction

One of the most original and memorable creations of J.R.R. Tolkien’s invented world of Middle-earth is his awe-inspiring and sorrowful Elves. They stand higher than all the other Middle-earth creatures and right at the nucleus of Tolkien’s legendarium, something that Tolkien acknowledged himself by calling his mythology “Elf-centred” (Carpenter 1981: 237, 285). When one thinks of Elves in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, images such as that of the Lady Galadriel or Elrond the half-elven are brought to one’s mind as examples par excellence, fitting the depiction of the Elves as a higher race of beings, immortal, with exceeding beauty, wisdom and a strange grief. It is in this way that the Elves have been standardized in Tolkien readers’ minds. However, this typical depiction of the Elves, as found in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, is challenged by the presence of other “elvish” creatures in Tolkien’s earlier works. It seems that his most important creation underwent considerable changes and alteration before it ended up in its standard illustration. This article attempts to present and discuss the very first stage of the evolution of Tolkien’s Elves, mainly represented by his early poems, which can be traced back to the popular fairies of the Victorian era.

Tolkien scholarship hitherto has made a case for the importance of Tolkien’s medieval sources in his fiction, and, indeed, the Elves have been discussed in this context many times. One of the most important such contributions is Tom Shippey’s analysis of Tolkien’s Elves as a “re-construction” of what is known on such creatures in Norse mythology and Old and Middle-English texts (1982: 45-50).² This article, however, will deliberately deviate from this approach, since it will concentrate on the period when Tolkien started composing his legendarium and will examine a few strands of the early image of Tolkien’s Elves (which he back then called “fairies”) that originated not from the medieval literature he knew so well, but from contemporary, late Victorian and Edwardian, “fads” and “fashions”.

Victorian fairies

Victorian culture was overwhelmed with the presence of fairies, even if only as synonyms for “small”, “delicate” or “wonderful”, and the choice of fairyland as a suitable

subject matter for literature, painting, and the stage has been characterized as one of the most remarkable phenomena in nineteenth-century culture (Bown 2001: 4-5; Booth 1981: 36). For anyone familiar with Tolkien's literature, the comparison of Elves to Victorian fairies might seem strange. To those who have ventured to study Tolkien's work in more depth, and are familiar with his biography and letters, it can sound even absurd. The fact that Tolkien despised "flower-fairies and fluttering sprites with antennae" (Tolkien 1983a: 111), a phrase that gives a good, compact description of the popular image of Victorian fairies, is quite well known in Tolkien circles, and there is quite explicit evidence of this in the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*. Commenting on his use of the term "Elf" to translate the word "Quendi", which is the term the Elves use for themselves in their own language, Tolkien notes:

This old word was indeed the only one available, and was once fitted to apply to such memories of this people as Men preserved... But it has been diminished, and to many it may now suggest *fancies either pretty or silly*, as unlike to the Quendi of old as are butterflies to the swift falcon – *not that any of the Quendi ever possessed wings of the body, as unnatural to them as to Men*. They were a race high and beautiful, the older Children of the world. (Tolkien 1993b: 529-30, emphasis added)

The contrast of this standard depiction of Tolkien's Elves and the popular Victorian visualisation of fairies is striking. Bown has recently defined the latter as:

a figure associated with nature, with magic and with romance; it is tiny and beautiful and possesses butterfly wings. This is the kind of fairy which, for the most part, populated the Victorian imagination. (2001: 6)

Indeed, Tolkien's Elves are not at all diminutive, but rather taller than an average Man, and of course not winged. However, in the period between 1910 and 1916, a number of poems with an "elvish" subject-matter were produced by Tolkien, the protagonists of which were little beings that seem much closer to the stereotype of the "fluttering sprites" of Victorian fairy-painting than to the "Quendi of Old".

When one looks at the Victorian period, one is really surprised by how many aspects of its culture are dominated by fairies. Perhaps the most striking case is Victorian fairy painting, which has been characterized as a "peculiar British contribution to the development of Romanticism", and constituted a whole movement in painting, its Golden Age being between 1840 and 1870 (Maas 1997: 11). At the same time, fairies were very much present on stage, not only in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's two plays involving such creatures, but also in the subject matter of the – then newly introduced – Romantic ballet. Indeed the image of ethereal ballerinas dancing on tiptoe has been shown to have influenced the depiction of fairies by major painters of the Victorian era (Maas 1997: 13). The immediate source of this obsession with "fairies" was not only the Shakespeare revival of the late eighteenth century, but also the new academic discipline of folklore, named as such only in 1846, and the preoccupation of folklorists to collect and preserve for posterity stories of folk beliefs in the supernatural (Gere 1997: 67-8). At the same time, during the nineteenth century a great number of fairy tale collections was published in Britain, including some contributions from Germany and France (Beddoe 1997: 25-9). Gradually, Victorian fairies came to be associated with a reaction to modernity and industrialization, and became a way of coping with the rejection of religion and against the omnipotence of pure reason.

Victorian preoccupation with the supernatural, as expressed also in the rise of Spiritualism, made fairies a means of escapism (Bown 2001: 9-11; Maas 1997: 13-4).

Tolkien was writing his first poems at the turn of the twentieth century, marked by the end of the Victorian and the beginning of the Edwardian period. At that time, the fairies of the nineteenth century were very much alive and present, not least in the – then – new theatre genre of late Victorian pantomimes often called “fairy plays”. The fairies were also present in children’s fairy-tale book illustrations, as well as in the infamous controversy over the Cottingley fairies’ photographs that culminated in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Coming of the Fairies*, and which, ironically, marked the end of the domination of fairies in popular culture (Bown 2001: 171; Booth 1981: 37; Silver 1999: 56-7; White Trimpe 1997: 61; Wood 1995: 16). It could be seen, therefore, that Tolkien’s literary production started within a period when fairies were still an integral part of the inventory of artists, poets and playwrights, so the presence of fairies in his writings should not seem so unexpected.

Visions of Joy: “Wood Sunshine”

Tolkien’s official biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, provides the student of Tolkien’s work with one of the first specimens of his early poetry: an extract from “a descriptive piece about a forest scene” which Tolkien wrote in July 1910, when he was eighteen years old, entitled “Wood-Sunshine”. The lines that Carpenter chose are the following:

Come sing ye light fairy things tripping so gay,
Like visions, like glinting reflections of joy
All fashion’d of radiance, careless of grief,
O’er this green and brown carpe; not hasten away.
O! come to me! Dance for me! Sprites of the wood,
O! come to me! Sing to me once ere ye fade!
(Carpenter 1977: 47)

Carpenter is quick to point out that the subject-matter of the poem is a bit strange for a young man “who had a strong taste for Grendel and the dragon Fafnir”, referring to Tolkien’s overtly expressed admiration for *Beowulf* and Norse mythology, and he suggests J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* as a possible source of influence. However, although *Peter Pan* did play a part in the imagery of Tolkien’s fairy poetry, as will be seen below, it is Carpenter’s next suggestion that seems more successful in explaining this poem: the influence of the Catholic mystic poet Francis Thompson (Carpenter 1977: 47-8).

Thompson, who became popular after his early death, caused in part by his addiction to opium,³ shared with Tolkien his devoted Catholicism and it is notable that both men’s parents were Roman Catholic converters (Butter 1982: 439). Thompson’s poetry revolves around the central and pervasive theme of religion, but also focuses on children as images of innocence, on nature, and on his patriotic pride in England (Halladay 1993: 43). The last two subjects were to become central for Tolkien as well, but at this early stage he seemed to have been more impressed by Thompson’s vast imagery, and his visionary faith (Garth 2003: 13). The poem proposed by Carpenter as a model for “Wood-Sunshine” is Thompson’s “Sister Songs” (Carpenter 1977: 48). This very long poem, written for two little girls, could be classified as one of Thompson’s poems on children, but it also encompasses the poet’s attitude to the natural world.

Thompson's descriptions of nature are never precise and detailed, but rather fuzzy and suggestive of what is really there, so that it has been claimed that he seems to be seeing nature "through angel's wings" (Halladay 1993: 48-9). Within this context, a swarm of fairy beings, referred to as elves or sprites, but also including nymphs and dryads,⁴ appears in "Sister Songs", either as an essential part of the scenery description, where these creatures spring out of flowers and seem to infest the air, or as a measure of comparison to the loveliness of one of the young sisters (Thompson 1913: 25-68). Indeed, it appears that for Thompson nature was a manifestation of the spirit of God, and the elves and sprites he described could be interpreted as representations of this spirit.

It has been suggested by Garth that the fairy beings in "Wood-Sunshine" function, on one level, exactly in the same way, as nothing more than wood-sunshine itself, "the imaginative embodiment of light dappling the leaves on tree-branch and forest floor" (2003: 36), which would correspond with Thompson's sprites in "Sister Songs". However, in my view they also function as what Bown has termed "small enchantments": the outcome of the treatment of the fairies as a result of the Victorians turn to escapism and sentimentality. This was itself a reaction to a world that was becoming increasingly rational and industrial at the expense of magic and nature. Enchantments like those offered by fairies always remained in the sphere of fantasy, but at least served as means of dreaming of another world: "small enchantments" were, for the Victorians, better than none (Bown 2001: 9-11). Tolkien seems to have realized this function of the world of fairies, especially in terms of faith and belief. In his essay on Thompson, he claimed that "one must begin with the elfin and delicate and progress to the profound: listen first to the violin and the flute, and then learn to hearken to the organ of being's harmony" (Garth 2003: 36). Indeed, Chesterton had also used the imagery of fairyland to propose a rejection of a world dominated by materialism and lacking in "magic", a world without God's agency, something that could only be reversed by the return to the wonder and enchantment (Bown 2001: 168-9).

The sprites of Tolkien's Wood-Sunshine were only the beginning of his early "fairy" poetry. A few years later, another poem came along, which achieved great popularity and was reprinted many times in various collections of children's poetry: "Goblin Feet".

The Fairy Painting Imagery: "Goblin Feet"

"Goblin Feet" was written in April 1915 and first printed in *Oxford Poetry, 1915* (Tolkien 1983b: 32).⁵ Since the whole poem is not very easily accessible,⁶ I am reproducing it below:

I am off down the road
Where the fairy lanterns glowed
And the little pretty flittermice are flying:
A slender band of grey
It runs creepily away
And the hedges and the grasses are a-sighing.
The air is full of wings,
And of blundering beetle-things
That warn you with their whirring and their humming.

O! I hear the tiny horns
 Of enchanted leprechauns
 And the padding feet of many gnomes a-coming!

O! the lights: O! the gleams: O! the little tinkly sounds:
 O! the rustle of their noiseless little robes:
 O! the echo of their feet – of their little happy feet:
 O! their swinging lamps in little starlit globes.

I must follow in their train
 Down the crooked fairy lane
 Where the coney-rabbits long ago have gone,
 And where silverly they sing
 In a moving moonlit ring
 All a-twinkle with the jewels they have on.
 They are fading round the turn
 Where the glow-worms palely burn
 And the echo of their padding feet is dying!
 O! it's knocking at my heart –
 Let me go! O! let me start!
 For the little magic hours are all a-flying.

O! the warmth! O! the hum! O! the colours in the dark!
 O! the gauzy wings of golden honey-flies!
 O! the music of their feet – of their dancing goblin feet!
 O! the magic O! the sorrow when it dies. (Tolkien 1915: 64-5)

“Goblin Feet” is as close to the Victorian depiction of fairies as it can get. The fairy creatures are called by a variety of names, like “leprechauns” and “gnomes” and there’s references to their “fairy lanterns”, the “fairy lane” they tread, and to their “goblin feet”. The issue of fairy diminutiveness is constantly underlined by the abundant presence of adjectives like “little”, “slender” and “tiny”, and although it is not very explicit, the fairy creatures seem to have acquired insect qualities, possibly associated with their ability to fly, since they are grouped together with “beetle-things” and “honey-flies”. On the whole, the power of the poem is that it relies on a sketchy, enchanted imagery, where little supernatural beings are imagined without concrete detail, as a “slender band of grey”. Following the tradition of “Wood-Sunshine” and Thompson’s elfin swarm, we are given in detail the noises these creatures make, what they wear and what they hold, but no clear description of the creatures themselves.

Bown has argued for a close relation between visual image and written works in Victorian culture, claiming that “though literature and the visual arts have their own traditions and formal properties, in this period they often mirrored each other very closely.... The representation of fairies in both painting and literary and other kinds of texts is shaped by this close association of word and image” (2001: 5). This sounds particularly fitting in Tolkien’s case, since the imagery of “Goblin Feet” is strikingly reminiscent of the visual representations of fairies as expressed in well-known works of Victorian fairy painting. For example, George Cruikshank’s *A Fantasy, The Fairy Ring* (Fig. 1) includes a goblin riding a bat (Tolkien uses the older word “flitter mouse”), and little fairy beings dancing in a “moving moonlit ring”, holding “tiny horns”. In the

painting there is emphasis on the luminescence of the fairies, although it is not clear if they are actually holding “fairy lanterns” as in Tolkien’s poem, something much more explicit in the depiction of the fairies in E.R. Hughes’s *Midsummer Eve*.



Figure 1: George Cruikshank, *A Fantasy, The Fairy Ring*, watercolour over graphite with touches of bodycolour, 37.1 x 50 cm, Cruikshank Collection, c. 1850, The British Museum, London (reproduced with permission of The British Museum)

The “coney-rabbits” seem to have sprung out of Sir Edwin Landseer’s *Scene from “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”*: *Titania and Bottom* (Fig. 2), where the rabbits are ridden by tiny elves or fairies, while the whole buzzing and whirring atmosphere of insect-like fairies can find close counterparts in the fairy paintings of Richard Doyle and John Anster Fitzgerald.

Maybe what is more well-known about “Goblin Feet” is Tolkien’s later rejection of the poem. When asked for permission to have the poem reprinted in yet another anthology in 1971, he is reported to have answered: “I wish the unhappy little thing, representing all that I came (so soon after) to fervently dislike, could be buried for ever” (Tolkien 1983b: 32). Carpenter has claimed that the poem was written “to please Edith [i.e. Tolkien’s wife] who said that she liked ‘spring and flowers and trees and little elfin people’” (Carpenter 1977: 74); however, despite the fact that it was rejected later by Tolkien, the poem does reflect his ideas and influences at the time, and it fits very well with the imagery and subject matter both of “Wood-Sunshine”, and of his next venture, the poem “You and Me / and the Cottage of Lost Play”.



Figure 2: Edwin Landseer, English 1802-1873, *Scene from A Midsummer Night's Dream. Titania and Bottom* 1848-61, oil on canvas, 82.0 x 133.0 cm, Felton Bequest, 1932, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (reproduced with permission of the National Gallery of Victoria)

Peter Pan and the Cottage of Lost Play

The possible influence of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* on Tolkien's early work has been referred to briefly above. *Peter Pan* was one of the "fairy plays" that became popular at the turn of the century, and was destined to become a children's classic. Those "fairy plays" were really the remnant of Victorian pantomimes, where, however, the harlequinade had effectively disappeared and the fairy sequence, which was originally just an opening part, had been extended to become a central part of the performance (Booth 1981: 75). The fairy element in the theatrical version of *Peter Pan*'s was much reduced from that in the novel it came from, Barrie's *The Little White Bird*. Although the play is not about fairies themselves, Tinkerbell, the diminutive friend of Peter, is one of the main characters, even though she was only represented by a flashing light on stage (Lambourne 1997: 53).⁷

Tolkien went to see the play in April 1910 in the Prince of Wales Theatre in Birmingham, where it was presented for six nights and two matinees starting on Monday April 11 (Carpenter 1977: 47; "Peter Pan" Playbill, 11 April 1910). By then, he was eighteen years old, "on the threshold of manhood",⁸ and he had not yet written his first "fairy" poem. The play must have made quite an impression on young Tolkien's mind, since he wrote in his diary after watching it, "Indescribable but shall never forget it as long as I live. Wish E.[dith] had been with me" (Carpenter 1977: 47-8). The performance of *Peter Pan* in these days was very close to the effects of the spectacular theatre, using complicated machinery to make the characters fly, and impressively painted scenery. In the specific play that Tolkien saw the flying machines were provided by G. Kirby, who

worked very hard to improve his system and to make it practical and easy to use for the first performance of *Peter Pan* in London in 1904 (Birkin 1979: 109; “Peter Pan” Playbill, 11 April 1910). Indeed, the Birmingham newspapers that reviewed this specific performance underlined the contribution of both high quality acting, mainly by Pauline Chase (Fig. 3) who played *Peter Pan*, and of scenery and stage effects as well, without which the “magic” of the play could not have been conveyed (Anon 1910a: 6).

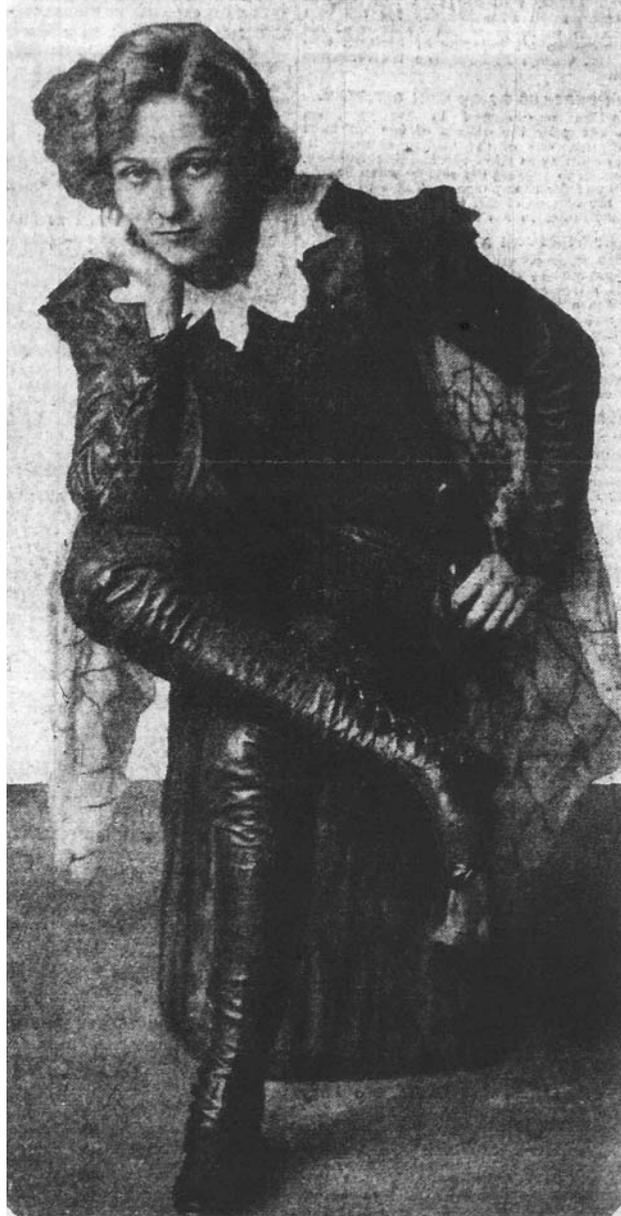


Figure 3: “Miss Pauline Chase,” from *Birmingham Weekly Mercury*, 9 April 1910 (photo: courtesy of the Local Studies and History Service of Birmingham Central Library)

Maybe the most potent scene in the play is the part where Tinkerbell has drunk the poisoned medicine that Captain Hook had intended for Peter, in order to save him. Peter, realising that Tink is dying, turns to the audience asking them to declare their

belief in fairies by clapping their hands, and thus save Tinkerbell. This moment has been reported as being the most powerful scene of the play, and indeed tends to make the adult members of the audience respond as well as children (Bown 2001: 172). Garth has claimed that *Peter Pan* might have appealed to young Tolkien, not least because he might have felt directly addressed by the whole issue of the Lost Boys and Wendy playing their mother, being himself an orphan from the age of twelve (2003: 73).

However, I would suggest that the issue of belief in fairies could have been an equally, if not more, important strand in his appreciation of the play. Bearing in mind Thompson's and Chesterton's use of fairy imagery to refer to spiritual matters as opposed to the mundane and rationalistic world-view that dominated the perspectives of many Victorians, as discussed above, Tolkien could also have linked belief in fairies with this idea. The concept of a lost fairyland accessible only in dreams was to appear in his next "fairy" poem: "You and Me / and the Cottage of Lost Play".

As Christopher Tolkien reports, this poem was written at a date very close to the creation of "Goblin Feet", indeed in the same days of April 1915 (Tolkien 1983b: 32), and it narrates the story of two children, a dark haired girl and a fair haired boy,⁹ getting lost while sleeping and travelling in their dreams in a land where fairies live. The following lines of the poem are illuminating:

And all the paths were full of shapes,
Of tumbling happy white-clad shapes,
And with them You and Me.
And some had silver watering-cans
And watered all their gowns,
Or sprayed each other; some laid plans
To build them houses, fairy towns,
Or dwellings in the trees;
And some were clambering on the roof;
Some crooning lonely and aloof;
And some were dancing fairy-rings
And weaving pearly daisy-strings,
Or chasing golden bees[.] (Tolkien 1983b: 29)

This poem appears to be the combined result of all of the influences already discussed concerning Tolkien's knowledge of Victorian fairies. The theme of *Peter Pan*'s trip to a secret fairyland by children lost in their sleep is taken up and the ethereality and shadowy presence of the fairy creatures as presented in Thompson's "Sister Songs" is reproduced. The main features of the popular image of the Victorian fairy are also kept, like the "fairy-rings" and the creatures' carefreeness and gaiety, which is strengthened by the description of their merry, even foolish, pastimes. However, one more important element is the involvement of children in the poem.

Rose, in her seminal work on *Peter Pan*, has referred to the play as part of a "theatrical cult of the child" (1984: 96). It seems that during Edwardian times fairies became firmly associated with children, which were viewed as the ones capable of dreaming about and of communicating with fairies. Purkiss has underlined the tyranny of this "cult of the child" by claiming that "in the Edwardian era it was almost compulsory [for children] to be so liberated. Children *had* to be dreamy and sensitive, gazing into corners and peopling them with supernatural beings, in order to qualify as appropriately

childlike” (2000: 255). It was partly this atmosphere that led to the events still remembered as the case of the Cottingley fairies, which marked the final degradation and decline of the fairies in contemporary culture. Tolkien in “You and Me / and the Cottage of Lost Play” seems to follow this idea of children’s ability to see the fairies. The last part of the poem includes the following lines:

But why it was there came a time
 When we could take the road no more,
 Though long we looked, and high would climb,
 Or gaze from many a seaward shore
 To find the path between sea and sky
 To those old gardens of delight;
 And how it goes now in that land,
 If there the house and gardens stand,
 Still filled with children clad in white –
 We know not, You and I. (Tolkien 1983b: 29)

The implication is, I think, clear. It is growing up that prevents the two children from finding again “those old gardens of delight”, and this becomes even clearer in the re-writing of this last part to include the lines “And why it was Tomorrow came/ And with his grey hand led us back;/ And why we never found the same/ Old cottage, or the magic track/.../ We know not, You and Me” (Tolkien 1983b: 30). This is indeed the central theme of *Peter Pan*, often subtitled as *or, The Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up*. Its protagonist is a little boy who refuses to grow up, wishing to remain a child forever, the only child in the play that has a permanent access to the fairy world, and the one who leads the other characters of the play to Never-Never land. The “Cottage of Lost Play” is finally lost to the ordinary children of Tolkien’s poems, and so is their contact with fairies and magic. This sense of loss, which eventually became a theme of its own, expressing the Victorian melancholy associated with the “fairies’ farewell” (Bown 2001: 167), is here mainly associated with the loss of childhood, the loss of enchantment that comes with age.

The influence of *Peter Pan* in the concept of the “Cottage of Lost Play” remained significant when Tolkien included it in his “Book of Lost Tales” two years later. In one of the introductory parts of that unfinished work, there are references to children visiting the island of the elves. They arrived there through “the lane called Olórë Mallë or the Path of Dreams”, which “ran by devious routes to the homes of Men” and many of them got enamoured with the island and stayed there for ever, and “great grief [would] fall on their parents” (Tolkien 1983b: 18-19). Many years later, those same children that stayed with the elves were given a different mission. As one of the elves narrates:

Ever and anon our children fare forth again to find the Great Lands, and go about among the lonely children and whisper to them at dusk in early bed by night-light and candle-flame, or comfort those that weep. Some I am told listen to the complaints of those that are punished or chidden, and hear their tales and feign to take their part, and this seems to me a quaint and merry service. (Tolkien 1983b: 20)

These elements seem to parallel Peter Pan as he was described in Barrie’s book deriving from the play, *Peter and Wendy*, where there is reference to Peter Pan “who was said to live with the fairies”, and who, when children died, “went part of the way with them, so

that they should not be frightened”, as well as to “the unhappy parents with all their children flown away” (Barrie 2004: 10, 96). It is not known if Tolkien, after watching the play of *Peter Pan*, went on to read the novel version written by Barry in 1911, but he was definitely familiar with the work of Arthur Rackham, the man who became famous as the illustrator of *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, another of the Peter Pan books, published in 1906 (see Carpenter 1981: 261, 312). In any case, the story of Peter Pan, the boy who lived with the fairies in a paradise island and never grew up, left its mark on Tolkien’s early work.

Flower Fairies and the “Qenya Lexicon”

Tolkien’s early work does not only include poems, but also the creation of what he himself later termed an “invented language” (Tolkien 1983: 206). Early on in his writing career, Tolkien seems to have realized that thematically unassociated poems was not what he wanted to continue doing. Alongside his poems with a purely “fairy” subject-matter, Tolkien also wrote other poems that later on proved to be very important for the development of his mythology. A poem inspired by a line from the Anglo-Saxon poem *Crist*, entitled “The Voyage of Earendel the Evening Star”, about a mariner travelling with a star-ship, was composed in 1914; the funny adventures of a character known as “the Man in the Moon”, taken from the well-known nursery rhyme, are narrated in a poem written during the period 1914-15; and during 1915 “The Shores of Faery” was written as part of a “Lay of Earendel”, which describes the land of Valinor, the “city of gods”, the first time his “Fairyland” is named (Carpenter 1977: 71-1). These poems give the impression of a more structured “story”, or “mythology” that underlies them. Tolkien took the big step and proceeded to write this “story” in 1917, while recovering in the hospital after World War I. At the same time, he had long been working on the composition of a language that the “fairies” of his stories would speak. This language, called back then “Qenya”, later evolved into the High-Elvish tongue “Quenya”.¹⁰ Qenya was composed in the form of a “lexicon”, a dictionary of stems and words of this language and their meaning in English. The “Qenya Lexicon” was not published in its entirety until 1998, when one of the Tolkien fanzines made it accessible to Tolkien students (Gilson et al 1998). The lexicon is essential for any scholar looking at the early work of Tolkien, since it gives clues to a layer of his mythology that he never came to write down. Some of the most intriguing entries are the following:

Ailinóne (ī) a fairy who dwelt in a lily on a pool

Nardi a flower fairy.

telumbe (or **inwetelumbe**) mushroom (i.e. fairy-canopy.)

Tetille a fairy who lived in a poppy (Gilson et al. 1998: 29, 68, 90, 92)

What exactly these entries meant, or rather what kind of story they were connected to, is impossible to say. However, they show that Tolkien’s taste for flower-fairies was definitely present at that period, despite his later rejection of them. This should scarcely sound strange, though, since by the Edwardian era flower-fairies had become an essential part of popular fairy lore. The fashion for flower-fairies might have sprung from various collections on flower-folklore, as well as popular publications on the “language of flowers” (Gere 1997: 71). In particular, Tolkien’s reference to “a fairy who dwelt in a lily on a pool” brings to mind a quite realistic representation of fairyland,

created when the giant water lily *Victoria regia* (Fig. 4) was successfully cultivated in 1849, and a child was depicted standing on one of the leaves in *The Illustrated London News* (Gere 1977: 65).

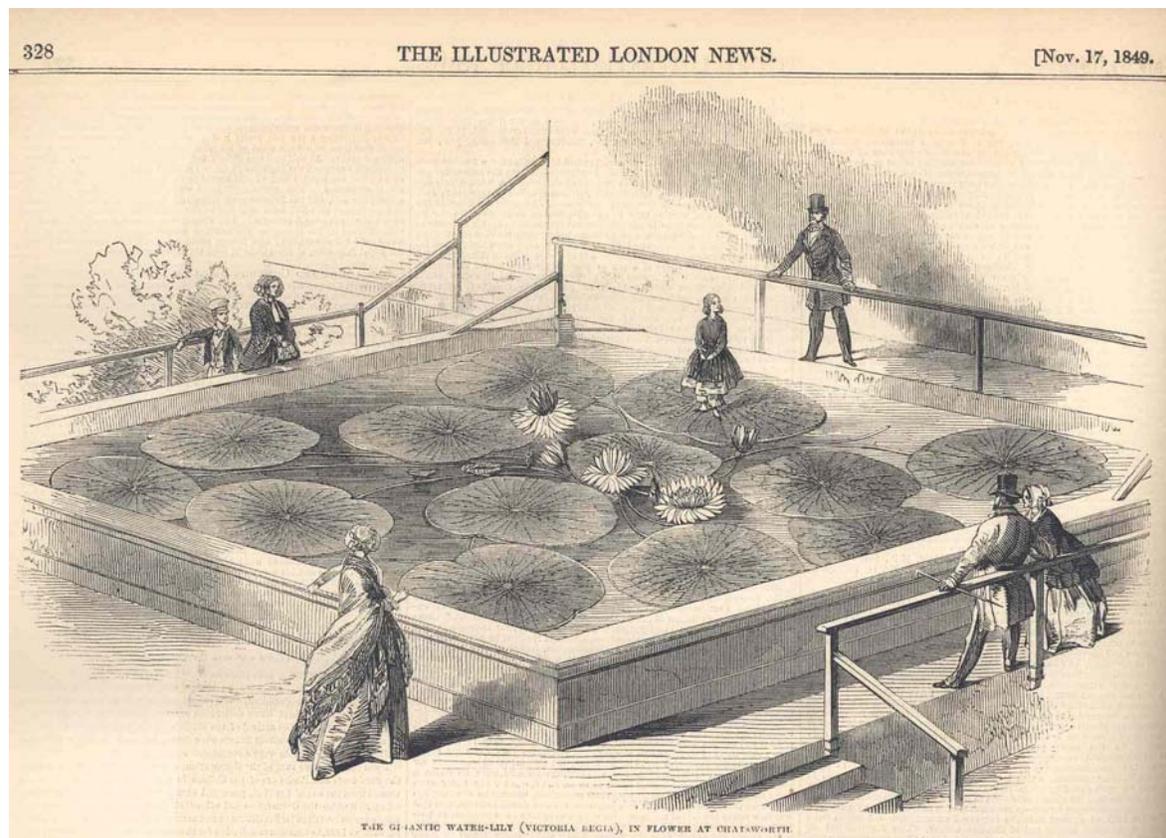


Figure 4: "The Gigantic Water-Lily (Victoria Regia), in Flower at Chatsworth," from *Illustrated London News*, 17 November 1849 (photo: courtesy of the Cardiff University Arts and Social Studies Library)

What Happened Next, and an Afterthought: *Smith of Wooton Major*

Tolkien went on populating his early work with fairies, even when he abandoned writing poetry and started his great prose project, with the intention of creating a "mythology for England" (Carpenter 1977: 89).¹¹ The first version of what later became *The Silmarillion*, the work entitled "The Book of Lost Tales", is occupied with the history of the fairies, or elves, and how they left the land of England to inhabit Tol Eressea, the Lonely Island. Tolkien seemed to consider it perfectly legitimate to maintain both terms to refer to them, while the issue of their diminutiveness is now quite ambiguous, never explicitly treated, and most possibly intended to be associated with a "fading" of the elves and the domination of Men (Tolkien 1983b: 32). However, the whole fairy image of this early period is gradually disappearing. In the "Book of Lost Tales", the elves and fairies are not yet the Elves of *The Silmarillion*, but they do fight the evil Morgoth. They commit the kin slaying, they disregard the advice of the gods and they return to the Hither Lands, where they face death, enthrallment and miseries. Overall, they are much more sinister and serious characters than the jolly, happy fairies of Tolkien's early poems. It seems that in

the early stages of his literary production, Tolkien went along with the all-pervasive fairy-fashion of his era, still searching for his own personal style and themes, but after he was confident of his own ideas and creations he was able to consciously reject all of this imagery and construct what became later the Elves of his standard works.

Subsequently, the term “fairy” totally disappears, as Tolkien finally chose to stick to the term Elves, spelled with a capital E, to refer to his creatures. The issue of terminology may offer one explanation for Tolkien’s final rejection of the “fairies”. It has been claimed that the term Elf was chosen because of its Old English origin and its association with glimpses of a much more native English mythology (Shippey 1982: 43-4). Indeed, as Tolkien noted himself, the term “fairy” is ultimately of French derivation (Tolkien 1983a: 111), and this might have been reason enough for him to reject it. His project for a “mythology for England” would have required a more native term. However, the issue of terminology may be secondary to the issue of the image of the Elves that Tolkien finally chose. The Victorian fairies came to be more and more associated with a spirit of carefreeness, gaiety and whimsy, which could not fit Tolkien’s scheme for a serious mythology with the Elves as the main tragic figures. It might also be significant that the term “fairy” was often charged with sexual connotations, something that would contradict Tolkien’s strict Catholicism. Purkiss notes that Victorian fairies were often sexualised in the theatre and in literature, something that might have originated in their depiction in the visual arts, and she also points out their association with children and sexuality (2000: 231-5, 239-43, 261-2, 310).¹² It is characteristic, in this context, that Tolkien was discouraged by one of his old schoolteachers from using the title *The Trumpets of Faërie* for a collection of poems he submitted for publication, evidently because the term “fairy” was also being used to refer to homosexuality (Garth 2003: 76). Finally, the tragic experience of the Great War contributed to the gradual decline of the popularity of fairies. As Purkiss has noted, “before the war, fairies were what one wrote about if one was going to be a writer.... When the first shell was fired on the Western Front, the cute fairy was doomed” (2000: 278-9).

Tolkien’s last comments on the image of the Victorian fairies come from one of his mature works, the 1967 fairy-tale *Smith of Wootton Major*. In this story, Tolkien is sure about the creatures he has created; he has reached his conclusions and he is using the Elves in a way consistent with their image in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. At the same time, he openly rejects the fanciful fairy diminutiveness present even in his own early works, but in a more mature and lenient way, acknowledging that the popular idea of little fairies might be the point of initiation for the discovery of the real Elves. The scene where Smith sees the Queen of Faery in her majesty and glory, and suddenly thinks in shame of the “little dancing figure with its wand” which is the Fairy Queen as represented by the Cook on top of the Cake, is very characteristic as far as the Queen’s answer is concerned: “Do not be grieved for me.... Better a little doll, maybe, than no memory of Faery at all. For some the only glimpse. For some the awaking...” (Tolkien 1967: 37-8). In this later story, Tolkien might be reflecting upon his own route as a writer, and especially on the evolution of his Elves from the tiny winged creatures of his early poems.¹³ Using the voice of the Queen of Faery, he seems to be fully accepting that the fairy creatures found in his early work are not worthy predecessors of his later Elves, but he also acknowledges that they triggered his interest and eventually led him to discover the real Land of Faery.

Endnotes

¹ This paper was first presented at the ‘Literary Fads and Fashions’ International Postgraduate Conference, held at the University of Nottingham on 26-27 November 2004, and has benefited from the feedback received there. I am also thankful to Ms. Charlotte Tucker, the librarian of the Local Studies and History Service of the Birmingham Central Library, for her help with researching the library’s archives, in an effort to discover more information on the play of *Peter Pan* that Tolkien watched in Birmingham, 1910.

² See also Shippey’s more recent “Light-elves, Dark-elves, and Others: Tolkien’s Elvish Problem” (2004). For Tolkien’s Celtic sources for his Elves see also Burns 2005 and Fimi 2006 (forthcoming).

³ Although Thompson’s addiction to opium and its influence on his literary production has been downplayed by his critics, it should be noted that opium has been associated with fantasies of fairies and famous painters’ depictions of such imaginative creatures when they were under its power. Cf. Maas and Gere.

⁴ It seems that there never was a consistency of terminology in Victorian – or earlier – times to refer to what we now collectively term ‘fairies’. The names of the fairy creatures would be a mishmash of folklore (like pixies and brownies), of classical mythology (like nymphs and dryads), and of medieval romances or Celtic legends (like fays, or sidhe). Tolkien’s own terminology in his early work – as will be seen below – is not consistent either.

⁵ For details on the reprints of the poem see Carpenter 1977: 268.

⁶ Carpenter only quotes the first part of the poem, and, apart from two hard to find collections of children’s poetry of the early 1920s, the poem has not been reprinted in full apart from *The Annotated Hobbit* (Anderson 2003: 113).

⁷ Lambourne notes that “the exciting novelty of electricity was used in creating the fairy Tinker Bell”, which should have added to the theatrical effect of this tiny fairy character (1997: 53).

⁸ Tolkien’s own phrase, referring to his pre-war age (1983a: 135).

⁹ Garth has suggested that the descriptions of the two children fit those of young Tolkien and Edith (2003: 72).

¹⁰ This is the language in which, for example, Galadriel sings her lament in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1993a: 490-1).

¹¹ Tolkien’s early nationalistic project to create a mythology for the English has first been explored by Chance (1979) and has subsequently been taken up by other Tolkien scholars (see, for example, Shippey 2001). Within this context, the presence of fairies in his early work can also be explained in terms of their importance in the contemporary ideas of folklore, which would treat fairies as the remnants of ancient deities, and would perceive them as an integral part of a people’s cultural identity. Opening this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on the Victorian fairy of popular imagination rather than the fairy of folklore. For more on the latter and its importance on Tolkien’s work, see Fimi 2005: 30-83.

¹² The theme of eroticising the child in Victorian culture has been discussed extensively by Kincaid (1992). He points out that the notion of “the child” was a product of Victorian culture, and its construction had a twofold result: the child was invested with purifying symbolism and a mystical angelic innocence; but defining the child as asexual and innocent also led to it being an object of erotic desire, a desire for the unattainable “other”. The notion of the innocent child who can see the fairies is, thus, further complicated by this argument, especially if one takes into account the sexual associations of fairies.

¹³ For an analysis of *Smith of Wootton Major* as an “autobiographical allegory” see Shippey (2001: 296-304).

References

- Anderson, Douglas A (2003). *The Annotated Hobbit: the Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. London: HarperCollins.
- Anonymous. *The Gigantic Water-Lilly (Victoria Regia), in Flower at Chatsworth*. *The Illustrated London News*, 17 November 1849,
- Anonymous contribution 1910a. “‘Peter Pan’ at the Prince of Wales.” *Birmingham Daily Post*, 12 April 1910.
- Anonymous contribution 1910b. “The Return of ‘Peter Pan’”. *Birmingham Weekly Mercury*, 9 April 1910.
- Barrie, J.M. (1902). *The Little White Bird*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Barrie, J. M. (2004). *Peter Pan: Peter and Wendy; Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. Ed. Jack Zipes. New York: Penguin Books.
- Beddoe, Stella (1997). “Fairy Writings and Writers”. *Victorian Fairy Painting*. Ed. Jane Martineau. London: Royal Academy of Arts. 23-31.
- Birkin, Andrew (1979). *J.M. Barrie and the Lost Boys*. London: Constable.
- Booth, Michael R (1981). *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850-1910*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bown, Nicola (2001). *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burns, Marjorie (2005). *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Butter, Peter (1982). “Francis Thompson (1859-1907)”. *British Writers*. Ed. Ian Scott-Kilvert. Vol. 5. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons
- Carpenter, Humphrey (1977). *Tolkien: a Biography*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Carpenter, Humphrey (ed.) (1981). *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Boston: Houghton.
- Chance Nitzsche, Jane (1979). *Tolkien’s Art: “A Mythology for England”*. London: Macmillan.
- Cruikshank’s, George. *A Fantasy, The Fairy Ring*. The British Museum (Cruikshank Collection), London.
- Doyle, Arthur Conan (1922). *The Coming of the Fairies*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Fimi, Dimitra (2005). *The Creative Uses of Scholarly Knowledge in the Writing of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Unpublished PhD Thesis: Cardiff University.
- Fimi, Dimitra (2006). “‘Mad’ Elves and ‘Elusive Beauty’: Some Celtic Strands of Tolkien’s Mythology”. *Folklore*, 117, 2 (forthcoming, August 2006)
- Foulsham & Banfield. *Miss Pauline Chase*. *Birmingham Weekly Mercury*, 9 April 1910.

- Garth, John (2003). *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth*. London: HarperCollins.
- Gere, Charlotte (1997). "In Fairyland". *Victorian Fairy Painting*. Ed. Jane Martineau. London: Royal Academy of Arts. 63-72.
- Gilson, Christopher, et al. (eds) (1998). "Qenyaqetsa: The Qenya Phonology and Lexicon together with The Poetic and Mythologic Words of Eldarissa". *Parma Eldalamberon* 12: 1-112.
- Halladay, Jean R (1993). *Eight Late Victorian Poets Shaping the Artistic Sensibility of an Age: Alice Meynell, John Davidson, Francis Thompson, Mary Coleridge, Katharine Tynan, Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson*. Lewiston, N.Y: E. Mellen Press.
- Hughes, E.R. *Midsummer Eve*. Private Collection.
- Kincaid, James R. (1994). *Child-loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Lambourne, Lionel (1997). "Fairies and the Stage". *Victorian Fairy Painting*. Ed. Jane Martineau. London: Royal Academy of Arts. 47-53.
- Landseer, Sir Edwin. *Scene from "A Midsummer Night's Dream". Titania and Bottom*. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
- Maas, Jeremy. "Victorian Fairy Painting". *Victorian Fairy Painting*. Ed. Jane Martineau. London: Royal Academy of Arts. 11-21.
- Martineau, Jane, ed. (1997). *Victorian Fairy Painting*. London: Royal Academy of Arts.
- "Peter Pan, or, The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up." *Playbill*. 11 April 1910.
- Purkiss, Diane (2000). *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories*. London: The Penguin Press.
- Rose, Jacqueline (1984). *The Case of Peter Pan: or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. London: Macmillan.
- Shippey, T.A. (1982). *The Road to Middle-Earth*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Shippey, T.A. (2001). *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. London: HarperCollins.
- Shippey, T.A. (2004). "Light-elves, Dark-elves, and Others: Tolkien's Elvish Problem". *Tolkien Studies* 1: 1-15.
- Silver, Carole (1999). *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, Francis (1913). *The Works of Francis Thompson*. Vol. 1. London: Burns & Oates.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1915). "Goblin Feet". *Oxford Poetry, 1915*. Ed. G.D.H Cole and T.W. Earp. Oxford: Blackwell. 64-5.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1967). *Smith of Wootton Major*. London: Allen and Unwin.

- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1983a). *The Monsters and the Critics: And Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1983b). *The Book of Lost Tales, Part I*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1993a). *The Fellowship of the Ring, being the First Part of The Lord of the Rings*. London: Harper Collins.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1993b). *The Return of the King, being the Third Part of The Lord of the Rings*. London: Harper Collins.
- White Trimpe, Pamela (1997). "Victorian Fairy Book Illustrations". *Victorian Fairy Painting*. Ed. Jane Martineau. London: Royal Academy of Arts. 55-61.
- Wood, Christopher (1995). *Victorian Painters*. Vol. 2. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club.