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“East of the Sun and West of the Moon”: Victorians and Fairy Brides

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Once upon a time, in a land east of the sun and west of the moon, there lived a race of women who were powerful and free. They dwelt apart from ordinary mortals, for they were of a different stock from humans, standing between them and the angels. And, despite suspicions that these women had no souls, all acknowledged their extraordinary skills: they could lengthen or shorten time, change size and shape, and, when they chose, become invisible. Theirs was the power of “glamour” or illusion; they could see visions and foretell the future. They could bless or curse, cure or destroy humans, animals, and the land itself.

Commanding respect from all who encountered them, these fairy women valued courtesy and deference. Like the natural aristocrats they were, they lived by their own code, outside the morality of men. They were often amorous, caring little for the ordinary laws of marriage or the canons of respectability; they chose love and pleasure rather than monogamy and constancy. Regal rather than nurturing, they were not consistently maternal. They were known both for stealing human children and for bearing fairy or mixed offspring with great difficulty; yet, they were willing to leave children they had borne with their mortal fathers.

Sometimes, one of these creatures of more than human beauty, power, and stature was captured by a mortal and hence became a fairy bride. In the most popular European account of this occurrence, the fairy was depicted as a Swan Maiden. Spied upon while bathing or dancing with her sisters, one of the maidens would find her swanskin plumage stolen. Unable to flee, she would be forced to accept the embraces of her captor. Whether the fairy’s animal disguise was that of a swan, dove, partridge, or other bird, whether she appeared as a seal, a mermaid, or a lamia, her fate was essentially the same. Deprived of her own magic realm, she was obliged to lead a different and less glorious existence in the mortal world. Yet, even in captivity, she kept her separateness and power. Though, in general, she was a tractable wife, she prohibited her husband from certain speech or action and retained the right to leave him—with or without the offspring of the union—if he violated the taboos.¹

These, then, were fairy brides or Swan Maidens (as Victorians frequently called them)—the figures not derived from romance or literary fairy tale—but from English and continental folklore and the works of the numerous Victorian amateur and professional folklorists who collected, chronicled, and analyzed materials about them. For though fairies were of both sexes, Victorian folklorists were particularly drawn to the female of the species.

At the beginning of the period, collectors made available many tales that indicated the nature and power of female fairies, especially in their relations with mortal men. As early as 1828, Thomas Keightley, whose book, *The Fairy Mythology*, was reprinted frequently, retold the tales of fairy brides, ranging from the French “Legend of Melusina” (a famous lamia or serpent-woman) through the Shetland tale of “The Mermaid Wife” to the Welsh account of “The Spirit of the Van” (called by others “The Lady of the Van Pool”).² In the 1850s, Scandinavian accounts of Swan Maidens became widely known in England through such popular works as Benjamin Thorpe’s *Yule-Tide Stories* (1853) and George Webbe Dasent’s *Popular Tales from the Norse* (1859).³ By the 1890s, the author of a popular *Introduction to Folk-Lore* could assume that “some of the many European versions of the swan-skin story are probably familiar to all.”⁴

Throughout the period, fairy brides led at least three connected lives, one in folklore itself, another in literature, and a third in the theoretical studies produced by a burgeoning group of folklorists. Indeed, between the 1840s, when the term “folk-lore” was invented, and the beginning of the First World War, the study of folklore proliferated; the collecting of material, the methodology by which to analyze it, and the theoretical grounds on which to base such study were developed and disseminated. At the end of the 1880s, Victorian folklorists were particularly preoccupied with fairy brides. They focused their concern on the marriage relations of fairies and mortal males found in Swan Maiden tales and on the social and cultural explanations of this phenomenon. That the 1880s should be especially fascinated with the marriage of fairies is not surprising: this was the era of the Married Women’s Property Acts and of the “New Woman,” of the rise of the “Marriage Question” and the fall of Parnell, and especially of the arrival on English shores of Ibsen’s Nora, herself an “elf” who promised to “dance in the moonlight” for her husband.⁵

Although Swan Maiden tales offered other and new perspectives on the questions of marriage, they did present some of the same issues that were plaguing those who read them: the imbalance of power between the sexes, the nature of female sexuality, and the right of females to leave their mates and children. The folklorists’ responses to the tales, the theories they formulated to explain them are more telling than the tales themselves. In effect, they constitute a socio-cultural history of the spectrum of Victorian

attitudes toward women and marriage. As the folklorists first articulated and then deflected or rationalized questions of female power and sexuality and of the rights of females to divorce (all questions implicit in the tales), they exposed some of England's underlying assumptions about gender, race, and social evolution.

Significantly, folklorists ignored part of the material available to them. Only a few argued that all fairies were female or that they existed as a separate, somewhat Amazonian, community of women, although the folk traditions on which to base such speculations—Celtic materials including Conla's voyage to a fairyland entirely composed of women and the rule of Irish fairy hills by queens instead of kings—were widely known. The traits that female fairies shared with Amazons were equally evident: both groups were nonmonogamous, nonmaternal, outdoor creatures who favored hunting, riding, and wandering where and when they would. But the kinship between Amazons and fairies was deemphasized, and the more militant aspects of elfin nature and behavior were carefully neutralized. When a society of solely female fairy power was postulated, it was dismissed, even by the folklore theorist who propounded it, as the result of confusion in the primitive mind.⁶ In the literary world, it formed the stuff of comedy. In W. S. Gilbert's *Iolanthe* (1882), for example, a subversive cabal of Peris yields to the love of Peers, while their proud Fairy Queen must solicit the hand of a lowly but manly sentry. It was still possible to dismiss or defuse through laughter the idea of female separation latent in Gilbert's folklore sources.

Yet, even without the specter of Amazonism, folklorists found the subject of fairy brides wed to mortal men disturbing. Swan Maiden tales, as a genre, suggested the possibility of the superiority of women, thus overturning the prevailing hierarchy of gender. Consciously or unconsciously, Victorian male folklorists rewrote seditious tales by reinterpreting them.⁷

How a given folklorist viewed female fairies depended, in the first place, upon his general view of fairy origins. Most of those interested in the questions of marriage and superiority were historicist-naturalist (euhemerist) and comparativist-anthropological folklorists; both groups agreed that there was a substrate of historical evidence beneath the fiction of fairy existence, that fairies were derived from actual, usually prehistoric, peoples and that, as comparativists argued, traces of fairy belief remained as "survivals" in the primitive cultures known to the nineteenth century.⁸

How a given folklorist saw fairy brides in particular depended, in the second place, on his view of the development of marriage. After 1860, most Victorian folklorists were social Darwinists, intent on tracing the precise evolution of societies and institutions. They placed such institutions as marriage, its stages of development carefully distinguished and categorized,

within an evolutionary scheme of progressive development or regressive decay.

Most believed that at the pinnacle of evolution was Victorian marriage, monogamous, patriarchal, yet not (by the 1880s) excluding the legitimate demands of women for consideration. This form of wedlock was a triumph of cultural order over natural chaos. From 1860 to 1900, as Elizabeth Fee has shown, social anthropologists reevaluated the family and the sexual roles within it.⁹ Folklorists immediately applied the findings of the anthropologists to materials enshrined in folk tales. The more liberal among them tended to follow the theories of J. J. Bachofen in *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) or the similar hypotheses engendered by Lewis Hunt Morgan in *Ancient Society* (1877). Both Bachofen and Morgan argued that monogamous marriage was not a fact of nature but a triumph of evolution. Bachofen believed that the earliest societies were promiscuous and exploitative of women and that, following an Amazonian revolt, women seized power, established a matriarchal society, and forced marriage and monogamy on men. Later, however, a second revolution replaced female fertility with male intellect; patriarchal marriage became the final phase of evolution. While Morgan's developmental scheme was more complex, he too believed in an early period of "primitive promiscuity" and that an era of female social and marital power (a gynocracy) had once existed but had yielded to patriarchal unions. His vision was of a future age of equality between the sexes.¹⁰

Other social anthropologists provided folklore theorists with more conservative views of the history of marriage. John McLennan, in *Primitive Marriage* (1865), insisted that cultures evolved through a period of group marriage ("polyandry") in which descent was reckoned through the female line. This period of matrilineality (rather than of actual female power) occurred because wives were held in common; hence, the sole way of determining the child's lineage was through the mother. Fascinated with the custom called "marriage by capture," McLennan believed that it had been a nearly universal practice and had created modern wedlock. A man who captured his wife held and valued her as individual property; thus, patriarchal succession followed. Sir John Lubbock, the archaeologist and prehistorian, refined McLennan's theory. He too did not believe that a period of matriarchy had ever truly existed—since women were incapable of such self-assertion—but he did accept the concept of matrilineality, caused, he thought, by savages' indifference to their offspring. For him, too, marriage by capture was a source of modern marriage, for the captor was proud of his conquest and such pride was the root of a man's love for his wife. Herbert Spencer, in *Principles of Sociology* (1876), capped these theories by asserting that patriarchal and monogamous marriages were the results of natural selection, the institutions that evolution and civilization ordained.¹¹

These anthropological theories were of immediate consequence to folklorists since they seemed to shed light on the independence or preeminence of the fairy brides depicted in Swan Maiden tales. The tales themselves were often seen as relics or folk memories of a prehistoric period of matriarchy or of matrilineality; the position of women within them was a sign of how ancient they were. But how were folklorists to deal with the culturally sensitive questions that remained, those of female superiority, female sexuality, and the female right to leave her mate?

Of the three major issues, Victorian folklorists could most easily handle that of female superiority. While they might find the idea unpleasant to contemplate and difficult to accept, it was, at least, suitable for public discussion. In some few cases, they accepted the possibility that women, under some conditions, might be the superiors of men, but they considered this phenomenon culturally irrelevant and historically obsolete. In other cases, they neutralized the concept still further; they saw an era of female rule as a relic of savagery, a vestige of a way of life so primitive that it was best forgotten. Still others diminished the idea in a different way; they explored the negative characteristics of the men to whom women could be superior.

Even those who believed in the existence of a period of matriarchy qualified their notions of female power. Charles de Kay, for example, writing on "Women in Early Ireland" (1889), explained that the great power ascribed to the Irish Sidhe (fairies) and Banshees (tutelary fairies who warn of impending death or disaster) resulted from the high status women held in ancient Ireland. De Kay believed that during an early period of colonization women had led the primitive swarms that invaded Ireland; thus, they had been euhemerized into the great Irish war goddesses. In later, though pre-Christian eras, women had been teachers, lawyers, military tacticians, physicians, and poets and had possessed the rights of inheritance and divorce. When, still later, the groups that had empowered women fell, their "clever" females obtained "power over the chiefs of invading and conquering hoards and became legends as supernatural Sidhes."¹² But the early Irish goddesses and Sidhes (and, by implication, the women from whom they were derived) were tainted by promiscuity. Thus, in the name of a higher morality, Christianity opposed the worship of the supernatural beings and disempowered Irish women.

De Kay's simple equation between actual female superiority and powerful female fairies attracted other theorists, including David MacRitchie, England's most famous euhemerist. Citing de Kay's work in his own important book, *The Testimony of Tradition* (1890), MacRitchie agreed that the Swan Maidens originated in folk memories of real and forceful women. He was, however, more interested in their fairy cousins, the Seal Maidens or Selkies of Scotland and the Shetland Islands. MacRitchie argued that these figures

were probably metamorphosed Finnish or Lappish women who, because of their sealskin clothing and kayaks, had been misidentified as Selkies or as mermaids. Captured by Shetlanders and coastal Scots and intermarried with them, these women's presence had given rise to regional tales of fairy brides.¹³ Yet while de Kay's animal brides were pretty Finnish girls with white skins and long, golden braids, MacRitchie's were dark, squat Mongol females. Their intelligence, however, compensated for their lack of beauty. One of the few Victorian folklorists to conceive of alien women as superior in knowledge to their captors, MacRitchie speculated that fairy brides were the civilizers of the early Gaels, teaching them such arts as healing. Their reign had long been superseded, and they had been absorbed into the later patriarchal order.

But the majority of folklorists considered Swan Maidens and female rule the products of far earlier epochs; female superiority was, to them, a vestige of barbarism. On the basis of the prohibition in many Swan Maiden tales against striking the fairy wife with iron, Edwin Sidney Hartland believed that the stories were "survivals" of the Stone Age, generated before the common use of iron.¹⁴ For John Rhÿs, the period in which women had sovereignty was so early in the history of society that their rule was meaningless. His female fairies stem from a period "so low in the scale of civilization" that it failed to understand the male role in conception. This "primitive society where matriarchal ideas rule and where paternity is not reckoned" was comprised of small, poor, ignorant peoples—in Rhÿs's analogy, comparable to the aborigines of Central Australia—easily conquered by the next wave of culturally superior, patriarchal tribes.¹⁵

Although he too placed female power in the remote past, John Stuart Stuart-Glennie made the strongest, most complex case for the superiority of fairy brides; unfortunately, his argument was part of a blatantly racist theory of civilization. According to Stuart-Glennie, civilization arose from the clash and later the mingling of the "Higher White Races" with the "Lower Coloured Races."¹⁶ His "Archaian White Races," as he called them, migrated all over the globe (suspiciously like British colonialists), coming into contact and, at times, into conflict with brown, black, and yellow tribes who were often puny or dwarflike in appearance and frequently savage in behavior. At times, the Archaians gave some of their women in marriage to the men of these lower races. In these unions, women conferred the blessings of culture on their mates and kept their personal power. Hence, matriarchy was born and its characteristics preserved in folklore.

In controversial essays on "The Origin of Matriarchy" and "Incidents of Swan-Maiden Marriage" (1891), Stuart-Glennie made much of the high level of civilization that accompanied the metamorphosis of Archaian women into Swan Maidens. Yet, he too qualified the idea of female power, for

he linked what he described as “matriarchal societies” solely to marriages between civilized white females and savage non-white males. In these matriarchal unions, as he depicted them, the mother or wife is supreme, while the father is secondary or insignificant. Most important, the groom must submit to a series of prohibitions that the bride imposes and that are, at bottom, symbols of his obedience. Under this code, any infringement by the groom will lead to the dissolution of the marriage and the departure of the bride.¹⁷

As a result of these practices, according to Stuart-Glennie, there were vast numbers of stories, worldwide in distribution, about “that Marriage, universal in Folk-Poesy, in which the maiden is represented as of a higher race than, or at least different race from her suitor, and particularly as wearing clothes, and often . . . a feather dress” (p. 523). Stuart-Glennie’s Swan Maidens are Victorian beauties, tall, fair, and golden haired; they use artifacts—combs and mirrors—to enhance their appearance. Unlike their brown or yellow consorts, they wear clothes, the signs of civilization to the Victorians. Superior in power and knowledge to their consorts, they are regarded by them as supernatural beings. Even their consent to cohabit is purposive; it is a tactic used to subdue, civilize, and educate their savage mates.

Perhaps the most culturally revealing element in the responses to Stuart-Glennie’s argument—an argument his contemporaries heatedly discussed—is that, while his racism was not criticized, his theory was dismissed on the grounds that he overestimated the abilities of women. While a few folklorists, among them Andrew Lang, simply poked fun at those “who believe in the white Archaian races who gave their rosy daughters and with them laws, to black, brown, and yellow peoples,”¹⁸ most others were deeply distressed at the implications of female assertiveness and ability presupposed by Stuart-Glennie’s hypothesis. George Laurence Gomme, the ethnological folklorist, said that, although he could believe that there had been a matriarchate somewhere in the history of marriage, the idea of Swan Maidens was just as likely to have come from “women of a conquered race,” feared because they worshipped local deities alien to their masters. He postulated that these subject females would “use that fear . . . to establish a place of power that left a mark on the history of marriage.”¹⁹ In effect, Gomme suggested that the notion of female rule and power was the women’s phantasmatic strategem, used to intimidate their male captors. Other folklorists, while not denying the possibility of Stuart-Glennie’s matriarchate or Swan Maiden hypotheses, stressed that times had changed and cultures had evolved. Alfred Nutt, the distinguished Celticist, remarked (no doubt with Africa and India in mind) that “when of late higher races have come in contact with lower ones, marriage between women of the former and men of the latter has seldom obtained.” Moreover, as he candidly admitted (expressing the view held

covertly by most of his contemporaries), he could not conceive of a society based on "the supremacy of woman."²⁰ For all these commentators, the idea that culturally superior women might transmit the arts, myths, and traditions of a high civilization was essentially untenable.

Victorian folklorists had an even greater problem with the question of the sexuality of fairy brides. To those who traced the genesis of these beings to "savage" women in primitive cultures, Swan Maidens were, as a matter of course, highly sexed. Indeed, folklorists believed that "women among rude tribes" were "usually depraved."²¹ The very words "primitive" and "savage" connoted the opposite of "womanly," for they conjured up images of overt bestiality and blatant sexuality.

In indicating that the original Swan Maidens were actually animals and that tales about them described the union of a man with the animal totem of his clan, Edwin Sidney Hartland perhaps inadvertently strengthened the connection between fairies and bestiality. In Hartland's implicit scheme of progression, man first worshipped (and perhaps consorted with) animals, then, in a slightly higher phase of civilization, with women who represented or were akin to these beasts. Swan Maidens, for all their charm, were therefore closer to "the brute creation" than to more highly evolved masculine qualities of intellect and reason.²² De Kay's belief that Christianity was needed to create morally superior, if socially and legally inferior, Irish women was based on a similar premise. He too suggested that ardent sexuality (outside of procreative marriage) was a vestige of the swamp from which humankind emerged. To help the Celtic race evolve, it was necessary to tame the unbridled passion of its women.

While the resolutely colonial minds of some theorists perceived females, like "natives," as needing control, another point of view assumed that highly evolved women were barely sexual at all. Thus, whenever fairy brides were the "civilizers" of other groups or races, as in the theories of MacRitchie and Stuart-Glennie, they were not seen as libidinous or sexually active. Stuart-Glennie, for example, implied that his Archaian white women consented to intercourse with their colored consorts only to improve the racial stock of their host group. Unlike the ardent, sometimes fickle Swan Maidens of folklore, the Archaians resembled their Victorian counterparts in viewing sexual relations as a duty and a sacrifice.

By depicting fairy brides either as depraved and degraded, akin to female savages, or as idealized and etherealized beyond the realm of physical desire, folklorists brought female sexuality within the realm of Victorian comprehension.

Making the subject of divorce respectable was far more ticklish. That Swan Maidens left their mates for the breaking of a taboo was so outside the pale of convention that most folklore theorists simply ignored the act. When

they did discuss it, they either condemned such behavior or speculated disapprovingly on its consequences. To Hartland, the fate of the children was an important consideration. Since he believed in an era of matrilineality, he could accept and rationalize the tales in which the fairy bride left her husband but took the children with her or returned to visit them. Such stories reflected "an early period of civilization [when] kinship is reckoned exclusively through the mother" (p. 288); hence the children were *hers* and her culture permitted her to dispose of them as she thought best. But Hartland was disturbed by Swan Maidens who, like Ibsen's Nora, left their offspring behind. When, for instance, the Lady of the Van Pool (in a well-known Welsh version of the tale) was struck by her husband three times without cause (in violation of the prohibition upon which the union was based), she left him and their offspring. Discussing the incident, Hartland argued that, since she had legal recourse, the Lady should "not object to the chastisement which the laws of Wales allow a husband to bestow" (wife beating was permitted for several "just" causes); she could collect a fine to compensate her for the "disgrace." In his eyes, that the Lady chose to abandon her children and desert rather than legally sue the mate who beat her "transfers the hearer's sympathy from the wife to the husband" (pp. 311, 321).

Joseph Jacobs, the editor of English folk tales for children, apparently agreed. He too believed that the "eerie wife," in separating from her mate, forfeited the audience's respect; her behavior reinforced the listeners' sympathy with the husband. "Is he not," asked Jacobs, to be "regarded as the superior of the fickle, mysterious maid that leaves him for the break of a taboo?"²³ Although neither Hartland nor Jacobs ever directly verbalized his assumptions about divorce, Hartland hinted at what most folklorists thought when he contrasted the looseness of the marriage bond among "savages" with the "recent . . . sanctity of the marriage tie" (p. 320). Clearly, free and easy separation was associated with primitive societies and savage eras. Complex and difficult divorce, on the other hand, was the hallmark of a highly evolved culture.

By diminishing the claims to superiority of the fairy bride, neutralizing her sexuality, and limiting or denying her right to divorce, Victorian folklorists rendered her acceptable to themselves and their society. Moreover, they further reduced the threat she represented by domesticating her and taming her powers. Thus, they stressed her role as the ancestress or tutelary deity of a line or family. The Lady of the Van Pool, Hartland's "unnatural" wife and mother, became important because she produced a line of famous Welsh physicians, imparting to them her fairy skills in healing.²⁴ Melusina, in earlier tradition an evil or ambiguous lamia, was transformed into a sympathetic mother-wife. A beautiful undine (water spirit) who, once a week,

assumed a serpent form, Melusina left the Count of Lusignan and all their children when the Count entered her chamber on a prohibited day. As Victorian folklorists reiterated her story, they emphasized the importance of her children (the Counts of Lusignan) and of her Banshee visitations to predict the destinies of her descendants and of the Kings of France.²⁵ By the turn of the century, Melusina had become the entirely sympathetic fairy, Oriana, of Vernon Lee's short story, "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady." Mother, tutor, and ultimately ideal mistress to a neglected prince, she is cut to pieces—in the guise of a green garden snake—when the prince refuses marriage with a mortal. An embodiment of beauty, truth, and tender erotic love, Oriana is destroyed by the bigotry and greed of a decadent society.²⁶

Other fairy brides who enjoyed a better fate were nevertheless robbed of primal traits to render them more palatable. In an idealized and domesticated form, they had an impact on the world outside of folklore theory. Indeed, both individuals and families proudly claimed descent from them. Several Irish aristocrats traced their extraordinary good looks to ancestresses who were the fairy wives of local gentlemen.²⁷ The entire MacCodrum clan of the outer Hebrides, known as "The MacCodrums of the Seals," claimed to be the offspring of a union between a Selkie and a fisherman. In this case, the sign of preternatural parentage was not beauty but an hereditary horny growth between the fingers that made MacCodrum hands resemble flip-flops.²⁸ In what may have been the culmination of the fascination with the fairy bride ancestress, the Folk-Lore Society, in 1895, studied magic lantern slides taken of Baubi Urquhart of the Shetland Islands. On the basis of family stories and a seal-like appearance, Baubi claimed to be the great-great-granddaughter of a Selkie captured by her ancestor.²⁹

Yet, long before a Folk-Lore Society was an historical reality, the fairy bride had entered Victorian literature. With Goethe's "The New Melusina," La Motte Fouque's *Undine*, Coleridge's Geraldine, and Keats's "Lamia" among her literary progenitors,³⁰ she made her way into the poetry, romance, and novels of the period. Her impact—first fortified by folk tales and later diffused and rationalized by folklorists' theories—is felt in the works of authors as diverse as Charlotte Brontë, William Morris, and Thomas Hardy.

The strange, "unChristian" Jane Eyre of Charlotte Brontë's novel of 1847 is a fairy bride *manqué*: she needed only to have married Edward Rochester *before* she left him to have been a full-fledged Swan Maiden. However Brontë knew the tale, whether from Keightley's *Fairy Mythology*, from an oral source (such as her old servant, Tabby) or from her favorite *Arabian Nights*, she has endowed Jane, "half fairy, half imp," with the traits and acts of the folklore figure.³¹ Rochester recognizes Jane's preternatural quality from the beginning, commenting:

"No wonder you have rather the look of another world. I marvelled where you had got that sort of face. When you came upon me in Hay Lane last night, I thought unaccountably of fairy tales, and had half a mind to demand whether you witched my horse. I am not sure yet." (p. 107)

He repeatedly, though teasingly, calls her an "elf" or "sprite," perceives the thought that permeates her watercolors as "elfish" (p. 111), and requests that, "fairy" as she is, she make him handsome (p. 215).

Betrothed to Rochester on Midsummer Eve, the night of fairy power and love, Jane's role is to transport him to a remote, enchanted fairy land. As he tells his ward, Adèle:

"It [Jane] was a fairy, and come from Elf-Land, it said; and its errand was to make me happy: I must go with it out of the common world to a lonely place—such as the moon, for instance—and it nodded its head toward her horn, rising over Hay-hill; it told me of the alabaster cave and silver vale where we might live. I said I should like to go; but reminded it . . . that I had no wings to fly." (p. 235)

But Jane, a fairy drawn from folklore, not the consciously literary *conte de fée* that Rochester invents, leaves him when he breaks a prohibition. She both declares and proves herself morally (as well as intellectually) superior to her lover and to Blanche Ingram, the mortal woman who would marry him. In Jane Eyre's otherness and force, in her strong sexual and spiritual passion, she manifests the nature of a formidable fairy bride not yet become a wife.

The fairy bride empowered by Brontë dwindles into a more conventional spouse in William Morris's verse tale, "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," included in *The Earthly Paradise* (1869). Morris, the only Victorian to use the story directly, derives its beginning from Benjamin Thorpe's account and several of its incidents from other folk tales. Yet, while he utilizes the traditional pattern of events and actions, he diminishes and domesticates the fairy bride, transforming her into a tender, vulnerable girl who weeps and flees when her swanskin is stolen. Trembling and naked, she cowers:

low upon the ground,
With wild eyes turned to meet her fate,
E'en as the partridge doth await
With half-dead breast and broken wing
The winged death the hawk doth bring.³²

Though Morris's Swan Maiden fears rape, she need not, for the mortal hero, John, kneels down before her and declares his ardent but respectful passion. Marriage by capture yields to a union of love. However, as a wife superior in wisdom but unwilling to coerce her husband, the fairy bride lets him leave her world to return to the flawed earth. Tempted by his brother's wife, mistrustful of his bride's fidelity, John violates the prohibition when he speaks that fairy's "name unknown to man" and summons her to join him (p. 86). Thus, the Swan Maiden must desert her mate, and when he finds her again, she has become a "Sleeping Beauty." The ending is Morris's own invention, and, in his distillation of the tale, the fairy wife waits in a sorrowful and sleeplike trance until the hero reawakens her to joy.

In part because Morris distanced his tale from its Victorian audience (it is told as the dream of a medieval astrologer-poet who turns its pathos into art) and centered it firmly on the mortal hero rather than on the Swan Maiden, his version, unlike *Jane Eyre*, was publicly acclaimed. In depicting the fairy bride as sexually passive while titillating his readers with the possibility of a rape scene, in rendering her desertion as an unwilling act—performed in sorrow and suffered for by psychic immobility—Morris, temporarily at least, brought the fairy bride within the precincts of respectability.

By the 1890s, however, the fairy bride could not be veiled. Both the Swan Maiden tales and the folklorists' speculations on them had become so integrated in the Victorian world that it is impossible to tell if Thomas Hardy's Sue Bridehead of *Jude the Obscure* (1895) is the child of folklore or of folklore theory. For Hardy, steeped in the lore of his native Dorset, was also clearly acquainted (through his friendships with William Barnes, the expert on local lore, and with Edward Clodd, then President of the Folk-Lore Society) with the theories of contemporary folklorists.³³

Hardy's Sue is a brilliant fusion of the ancient fairy bride with the "New Woman." Jude has, indeed, been "charmed by her as if she were some fairy," as Arabella shrewdly comments:

"See how he looks round at her, and lets his eyes rest on her. I am inclined to think that she don't care for him quite so much as he does for her. She's not a particular warm-hearted creature to my thinking, though she cares for him pretty middling much—as much as she's able to." (p. 231)

When Jude, less "charmed," bitterly reproaches Sue by saying: "You are, upon the whole, a sort of fay or sprite—not a woman," he reveals his problem with her alien nature (p. 280). Sue can no more be blamed than Jude, for this "spirit," this "disembodied creature," this "tantalizing phantom—hardly flesh at all," so insubstantial that she can nearly "pass through" Jude's enfolding arms, has been utterly etherealized and idealized, both by Jude and his

creator (p. 194). Yet Sue remains a folkloric Swan Maiden in both her traits and actions. She is superior to Phillotson and Jude himself in her knowledge and in her power. Her restlessness, rebelliousness, and pagan spirit—encapsulated in her purchase of totemic gods, the statuettes of Venus and Apollo that decorate her room—expose the fairy bride within. Literally and metaphorically married by capture to Phillotson, she flees her husband when, violating her prohibition, he enters her bedroom. The nature of Sue's distaste for Phillotson and affection for Jude suggests the influence of folklore theorists, for she is so evolved that sexual desire has been, in part, bred out of her. Not naturally maternal, Sue is uncomfortable and disenchanted as a mother. Ironically, it is the changeling Father Time's killing of the children whom she bore but cannot love that pushes her into a state of death in life. In leaving Jude, renouncing what the world calls "immorality," and entering a second marriage with Phillotson, she condemns herself to the worst fate of all—humanity. While Jude may die, her fate is to live on, relinquishing her swanskin forever.

Sue Bridehead is not the last of the fairy brides. Submerged, anatomized, transformed to fit the eras and societies in which they play their roles, these folklore figures keep their secret lives. Whether they are sentimentalized or vulgarized, idealized or debased, explained away by theorists or re-transformed by artists, they survive, mysteriously, both as subversive forces in nineteenth-century culture and as archetypes of the ancient worlds from which they come.

NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented to the Nineteenth Century Society of Columbia University in March 1987 as part of a series of lectures in honor of Professor Carl Woodring. This profile of the female fairies is a composite portrait derived from the tales told by the folklorists discussed in this essay (whose works will be cited as they are mentioned), the author's own observations (based on the reading of folklore published in the nineteenth century), and some of the opinions of Katharine Briggs. See, for example, her entries for "Fairy brides" (pp. 135-37), "Seal Maidens" (pp. 349-50), and "Swan Maidens" (pp. 386-87), in *A Dictionary of Fairies: Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies and Other Supernatural Creatures* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

² Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology: Illustrative of the Romance and Superstition of Various Countries* (1850; rpt. New York: AMS, 1968), pp. 480-85, 169-71, 409-11.

³ Benjamin Thorpe, *Yule-Tide Stories: A Collection of Scandinavian and North German Popular Tales and Traditions, from the Swedish, Danish, and German* (London: Bohn, 1853), pp. 158-68; George Webb Dasent, *Popular Tales from the Norse* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1859). Thorpe titles his version of the tale "The Beautiful Palace East of the Sun and North of the Earth" and notes the existence of Norwegian, Danish, German, Slavonian, Hindu, Hebrew, Mongol, and Arabian variants. Dasent's tale, "East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon," is not a Swan Maiden story, but a discussion of Swan Maidens and their descent from Valkyries forms part of his important introduction (xlvi-viv).

⁴ Marion Rolfe Cox, *An Introduction to Folk-Lore* (London: Nutt, 1895), p. 121. Cox, one of the few women among the major folklorists, did not devote her major work to reinterpreting the Swan Maiden tales; instead, she concentrated on the many tales about the Cinderella figure.

⁵ Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, trans. William Archer, in *The Chief European Dramatists*, ed. Brander Matthews (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), p. 748. Archer's translation, used by the late Victorians, calls Nora an "elf." Otto Reinert, in *An Introduction to Literature*, ed. Sylvan Barnet et al., 7th ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1981), substitutes "elfmaid" (p. 851); and Peter Watts's Nora, in *Plays: The League of Youth, A Doll's House, The Lady From the Sea*, trans. Peter Watts (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), is a "fairy" who will "dance on a moonbeam" (p. 187). The implications of the line remain the same. It is worth noting that Nora, like the fairy brides discussed in this essay, is a Swan Maiden who is repeatedly linked to the animal world as a squirrel, a lark, and a number of other birds.

⁶ John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*, 2 vols. (1901; rpt. London: Wildwood House, 1980) II, 662.

⁷ With the exception of Cox and Alice Bertha Gomme, most of the major folklore theorists were male; the great women folklorists, including Charlotte Burne and Mary Henrietta Kingsley, tended to be collectors and transmitters of lore.

⁸ For a fuller explanation of these categories and issues, see Carole Silver, "On the Origin of Fairies: Victorians, Romantics, and Folk Belief," *Browning Institute Studies*, 14 (1986), 141-56.

⁹ Elizabeth Fee, "The Sexual Politics of Victorian Social Anthropology," *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, ed. Mary S. Hartman and Lois Barner (New York: Harper, 1974), pp. 86-102.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Fee's analysis of the arguments of the social anthropologists, pp. 90-100, and to George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), pp. 167-68, for the phrase "primitive promiscuity." Stocking criticizes Fee's contention that the anthropologists defended patriarchy for ulterior motives. Motives aside, the point is (as Stocking himself notes) that social scientists accepted "the culturally pervasive view of women's nature" (p. 206). Later in his important book, he indicates that many of the concepts I find so significant in Victorian folklore theory—marriage by capture, primitive promiscuity, and matriarchy—were "largely a fantasy of the Victorian male anthropological imagination" (p. 315).

¹¹ See John F. McLennan, *Primitive Marriage: An Inquiry into the Origin of the Form of Capture in Marriage Ceremonies* (Edinburgh: Black, 1865), pp. 154-77, 54-55, 92,

and 247-48; for Lubbock, see Fee, p. 100; see Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Appleton, 1915), I, 682-84, 711-12, 734.

¹² Charles de Kay, "Women in Early Ireland," *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, 38, NS 16 (1889), 437.

¹³ David MacRitchie, *The Testimony of Tradition* (London: Kegan Paul, 1890), pp. 1-5.

¹⁴ Edwin Sidney Hartland, *The Science of Fairy Tales: An Inquiry into Fairy Mythology*, (1891; rpt. Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1969), p. 307. Hartland devotes two long chapters to classifying and analyzing six types of Swan Maiden tales, commenting on the dominance of one idea, that "of a man wedding a supernatural maiden and [being] unable to retain her" (p. 283).

¹⁵ Rhÿs, II, 662, 661.

¹⁶ John Stuart Stuart-Glennie, "The Origins of Matriarchy," in *Peasant Customs and Savage Myths: Selections from the British Folklorists*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1968), II, 519.

¹⁷ Stuart-Glennie, "Incidents of Swan-Maiden Marriage," in Dorson, II, 525-28. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁸ Andrew Lang, Introduction, *The International Folk-Lore Congress, 1891: Papers and Transactions*, ed. Joseph Jacobs and Alfred Nutt (London: Nutt, 1892), p. 3.

¹⁹ George Laurence Gomme, "Recent Research on Institutions," *Folk-Lore*, 2 (1891), 493-94.

²⁰ Alfred Nutt and Joseph Jacobs, "Mr. Stuart-Glennie on the Origins of Matriarchy," *Folk-Lore*, 2 (1891), 367-72, rpt. in Dorson, II, 547.

²¹ John McLennan, quoted in Stocking, p. 202.

²² Hartland, p. 298. (Subsequent references to Hartland will be cited parenthetically in the text.) Canon J. A. Macculloch, a follower of Hartland, found the origin of the Swan Maiden tales in the fusion of legends of beast marriages and stories of human women captured by men who stole their garments. He argued that in primitive societies clothes both symbolized and protected human sexuality. Thus, he imagined savage women being cautioned against letting men steal their garments—an act equivalent to letting men gain sexual mastery over them. See Macculloch, *The Childhood of Fiction: A Study of Folk Tales and Primitive Thought* (London: John Murray, 1905), p. 364.

²³ Jacobs, in Dorson, II, 548-49. See note 20.

²⁴ See, for example, Rhÿs, pp. 11-15; Hartland, pp. 325-27.

²⁵ See Hartland, p. 324; Macculloch, p. 329; Keightley, pp. 383-84.

²⁶ Vernon Lee makes clear that even Oriana's metamorphosis into a lamia is not a punishment for sin. The inscription on the fairy sepulcher reads: "Here is imprisoned the Fairy Oriana, most miserable of all fairies, condemned for no fault, but by envious powers, to a dreadful fate" (i.e., transformation into a snake). See *The Snake Lady and Other Stories*, ed. Horace Gregory (New York: Grove, 1954), p. 51.

²⁷ See, for example, William Butler Yeats's comments on the families of Castle Hackett in *Mythologies: The Celtic Twilight*, etc. (1892; rpt. New York: Collier, 1959), p. 74n.

²⁸ See Beatrice Phillpotts, *Mermaids* (New York: Ballantine, 1980), p. 92, and Briggs, p. 349.

²⁹ See Cox, p. 101, and *Folk-Lore*, 6 (1895), 223, for a bare mention of the event I have recorded.

³⁰ Goethe's Melusina is a tiny, delicate fairy bride; Undine is a water spirit tamed and spiritualized by Christian marriage; Geraldine (of Coleridge's "Christabel") is an ambiguous creature whose "hiss" connects her to lamia figures; and Keats's Lamia, though fully serpentine, is more sinned against than sinning.

³¹ The tale is that of "Hasan of Bassorah"; the description of Jane is from *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 11. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³² William Morris, "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," *The Earthly Paradise*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), V, 38. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited in the text.

³³ Barnes was a folklore collector as well as a poet, while Clodd was a major anthropological folklorist with whom Hardy both visited and corresponded. Norman Page, in *Thomas Hardy* (London: Routledge, 1977), states his belief that Hardy had read Edward Westermarck's *History of Human Marriage* (1891) and was influenced by it (p. 62); it is evident to me that Hardy knew the social anthropologists' arguments on marriage quite well. See, for example, the brief comment on matriarchy that emerges from a conversation between Phillotson and his friend Gillingham in *Jude the Obscure*, ed. Irving Howe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), pp. 183-84; subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.