The Impact of British Folklore and Folk Fairy Tales on Victorian Children's Fantasy Literature

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Abstract

This piece examines the deeper impact of British folk tales and folk fairy tales on the evolution of Victorian children's fantasy literature. In the 19th century, folklore existed as both a cultural cache and a source of inspiration for authors who were grappling with a rapidly modernizing world. Authors like George MacDonald, Charles Kingsley, and Lewis Carroll incorporated elements of classic stories like magical changes, enchanted places, and moral allegories into their stories, thereby reinvigorating oral traditions within a literary structure suited for children. By infusing mythic patterns, archetypal figures, and supernatural themes borrowed from British folk culture, these writers created fanciful worlds reflective of Victorian moral values, childhood innocence, and national identity. The paper delves into these literary pieces and borrows the elements of the folk not only to entertain, but rather as tools of cultural continuity, moral consideration, and psychological analysis. This study likewise points out Victorian interest in the fantastic as a means of reversing the bleakness of industrial rationalism and moral conservativism. By close reading of the text, this study focuses on how British folklore, far from being an anachronistic relic of past times, was a central agency in shaping children's literature's imaginative and ideological contours in Victorian times.

Keywords: British Folklore, Children's Fantasy, Cultural Identity, Fairy Tales, Victorian Literature.

Introduction

The Victorian era, which was the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901, was a time of significant social, political, and cultural transformation in Britain. Amidst industrial development, the expansion of the British Empire, and shifting ideas of morality and children, children's literature began to assume new shapes and meanings. One of the most enduring literary achievements of this period was the development of children's fantasy fiction—a genre that combined imagination and instruction, enchantment and wisdom. At the heart of this literary flowering was the powerful undertow of British folklore and folk fairy tales, which powerfully influenced the thematic content, narrative conventions, and aesthetic tastes of Victorian fantasy fiction for children.

English folklore—established on regional legend, fairy lore, ballad, myth, and country superstition—was a rich mine of imaginative material from which Victorian writers could draw. These traditions had accumulated over generations in oral tradition, often based in the shared psyche of regional communities, and peopled with magical animals, enchanted lands, and moral uncertainty. During a time when reason and empiricism were increasingly coming to dominate, folklore represented an access to a mysterious, intuitive past. It was also consistent with the Victorian cult of childhood as a state of innocent, magical moral formation.

Authors such as George MacDonald (The Princess and the Goblin), Charles Kingsley (The Water-Babies), and even Lewis Carroll (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland) wove folklore elements into their stories—not as decoration, but as narrative building blocks that characterized their fictional worlds. Carroll, though less overtly moralistic, imbued his with nonsense and surrealism that evoke the whimsical logic characteristic of folktales. In addition, the increased desire to collect and retain folk traditions throughout the 19th century—most noticeably witnessed on the continent in the work of the Brothers Grimm and in Britain through the efforts of such men as Joseph Jacobs and Sabine Baring-Gould—also supplemented the literary climate of the time. These collections brought folklore more within reach for writers and readers alike, and fostered a literary reinterpretation of stories previously trapped in oral culture.

This essay examines how Victorian children's fantasy fiction was shaped by British folkloric and folk fairy tale traditions. It analyzes how folkloric tropes and archetypes were recontextualized within Victorian literary structures, and how they worked to express conceptions of morality, national identity, childhood, and the human imagination. Through an analysis of the folkloric origins of chosen Victorian fantasy texts, this research highlights the genre's double function as both a cultural preservation and an imaginative reimagining of the same in order to meet the intellectual and affective demands of a transforming society.

The Influence of British Folklore on Victorian Children's Literature

The influence of British folklore and folk fairy tales on Victorian children's fantasy literature is neither superficial nor incidental; it forms the very bedrock of the genre's development in this period. The 19th century marked a time of both remarkable literary experimentation and cultural preservation. As a reaction to the broad impact of industrialization, urbanization, and empirical rationalism, numerous Victorian authors borrowed from the rich reservoir of folk tradition a way of recouping the magic and moral force of a bygone era. British folklore, rich in mythical beings, magical creatures, and legendary heroes, was of particular interest to Victorian children's authors. These traditions offered archetypal characters, familiar storylines, and clear moral lessons, making them an ideal foundation for the growing genre of children's fantasy literature.

British folklore featured dragons, faeries, goblins, elves, and heroic figures whose stories had been passed down through generations. These characters were used as metaphors and literary tools by which Victorian authors could delve into themes of bravery, morality, identity, and change. Dragons, for instance, were representative of both danger and possibilities for heroism. The classic story of St. George and the Dragon, where the hero kills the grotesque monster to rescue a princess, made an indelible impression on later children's fiction. In these stories, dragons tend to be metaphors for young heroes' inner and outer struggles that they need to overcome to grow up and validate their courage. Jack Zipes observes: "The dragon-slaying motif becomes a rite of passage in literature, symbolizing not merely physical confrontation, but spiritual and moral evolution" (Zipes 45).

This folkloric revival was supported by the academic and popular work of folklorists like Joseph Jacobs, who compiled *English Fairy Tales* (1890), and Charlotte Sophia Burne, the first woman president of the Folklore Society. They ensured that oral tradition stories were kept alive that would have otherwise been lost to history. Jacobs believed that "the children of the British Empire have the right to know their own heritage of story" (Jacobs xi), disclosing the cultural imperative to anchor children's fiction in local traditions and not be dependent on imported or classical sources. This view was consonant with Victorian values that identified childhood as a necessary openness to marvel, moral development, and national identity.

George MacDonald was, in this respect, a foundational figure in the development of Victorian children's fantasy. In his book *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), he imbued his novel with folkloric elements that were both literal and allegorical. His goblins in the tale, who live underground and seek revenge against men, took inspiration directly from Celtic and Anglo-Saxon folklores that identified underground beings with chaos and evil-doing. But

MacDonald employs them not so much as villains but as symbolic agents of materialism and spiritual ignorance. The thread of magic which the fairy Princess Irene pursues, which has been bequeathed to her by her mystical grandmother, symbolizes faith and reliance upon the unknown. MacDonald states, "A fairy tale is not an allegory; it is like a flower whose smell is not its explanation" (qtd. in Hein 93). This implies his sense that fairy tales have an instinctive moral sense, one that can't always be accounted for rationally but can be strongly felt, like the intangible suggestiveness of folklore.

Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863) again illustrates the moralizing potential of folk detail. Although Kingsley was a clergyman and social reformer, he opted for fantasy as his vehicle of criticism, drawing on water-spirit mythology and transformation myth. The story is about Tom, an abused chimney-sweep, who drowns and is turned into a 'water-baby', and goes through an underwater odyssey of moral cleansing and development. Kingsley synthesizes fairy-tale themes of magical beasties, tests of morality, and transformation into a story responsive to Victorian issues regarding child labor, hygiene, and Christian redemption. In the view of Humphrey Carpenter, Kingsley "saw fantasy not as an escape from life's problems, but as a means of expressing them more vividly" (Carpenter 167). In fairy-tale terms, Kingsley criticizes industrial exploitation and confirms the possibility of moral regeneration. In the novel, *The Water-Babies*, Charles Kingsley similarly fuses mythic beings like water-sprites and talking animals with intense Christian and social reformist themes. His employment of metamorphosis—Tom's transformation into a water-baby—is reminiscent of folk tales of transformation, but here it represents ethical cleansing and salvation. The underwater passage that Tom experiences is reminiscent of the mythic journey to the otherworld in Celtic legend. As Carpenter explains, "Kingsley exploited fantasy not as diversion, but as moral instruction, using the fairytale form to argue for social justice" (Carpenter 158). Through the vehicle of folklore, he could address problems such as child labor and spiritual development while keeping children enthralled.

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865), MacDonald and Kingsley wrote about folklore allegorically and didactically, offering a different, but equally significant, approach. Carroll's work draws upon the nonsensical and fanciful features of oral tradition, especially English nursery rhymes, riddles, and nonsense poetry. The dreamlike structure of *Wonderland* mirrors the disjointed, often illogical narrative structure of traditional folk stories. The Mad Hatter's tea party, the Queen of Hearts' arbitrary justice, and the Cheshire Cat's vanishing grin all reflect the instability and unpredictability inherent in oral lore. Carroll's line, "We're all mad here," delivered by the Cheshire Cat, highlights a world where logic is subverted and reason is mocked (Carroll 73). As Catherine Robson notes,

"Carroll's tale is a parodic mirror of Victorian society—where the child, like the folkloric hero, navigates absurdity and authority with wit and wonder" (Robson 105). His use of folk motifs is not moralizing but liberating, offering a space were imagination trumps convention.

Beyond individual authors, Victorian fantasy literature as a whole employed folklore to engage in cultural memory-making. In an era of growing imperial reach and cultural fragmentation, turning to indigenous tales helped anchor national identity. Fairy tales and folk narratives became vehicles for conveying Britishness, even as they subtly critiqued the class systems, gender norms, and institutional structures of Victorian society. As Marina Warner argues, "The fairy tale's survival into the modern age is tied to its capacity to transform—by telling old stories in new ways, it speaks to each generation's unique fears and desires" (Warner 127). Victorian fantasy tales were not simple transcriptions of oral stories but rather literary reinterpretations that absorbed the symbolic weight of folklore and adapted it to the spiritual, psychological, and sociopolitical concerns of the time.

This narrative tradition was taken up and transformed by Victorian authors like George MacDonald, whose *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) is deeply indebted to British fairy lore. The subterranean goblins in the novel, while comic and grotesque, also reflect older folk fears of what lies beneath the surface, both literally and psychologically. MacDonald does not merely replicate folklore; he infuses it with Christian allegory and philosophical depth. The magical thread that Princess Irene must follow, given by her ethereal grandmother, becomes a symbol of spiritual faith and inner guidance like: "a fairy tale is like a vision of truth, only not true; and yet it must be true in the sense that it awakens truth" (qtd. in Hein 91).

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) engages with the more whimsical, nonsensical aspects of British oral tradition. Nursery rhymes, riddles, and traditional nonsense verse provide the scaffolding for a dream-like journey through a surreal world that both reflects and parodies Victorian society. The presence of the White Rabbit, the Cheshire Cat, and the Mad Hatter echoes folkloric archetypes: the trickster, the shape-shifter, and the lunatic sage. Carroll's world is not governed by logic, but by dream-logic, evoking the illogical progression of oral tales. Catherine Robson observes that "Wonderland is a realm where the absurd becomes instructional, and folklore becomes a lens through which reality is distorted but also clarified" (Robson 104).

Another way in which folklore influenced Victorian fantasy literature is through its inherent moral framework. Folktales were often didactic, presenting stark divisions between good and evil, and rewarding or punishing the characters accordingly. This was especially attractive to Victorian moralists, who viewed children's literature as a vehicle for moral

teaching. In tales like Jack and the Beanstalk, the thrill of fantastical adventure is joined to a covert lesson about avarice, courage, and resourcefulness. As Ruth Bottigheimer describes, "Jack's upward journey is both a literal and symbolic ascent from poverty to virtue through cleverness and courage" (Bottigheimer 74). Likewise, the stories of Robin Hood, in English folklore, were reshaped in the Victorian era to introduce Robin not just as an outlaw but as a moral ideal—someone who defies unjust authority, defends the weak, and adheres to a higher code of justice and bravery.

The continued existence of magical beings like fairies, elves, and goblins added richness to Victorian fantasy fiction. These creatures, ubiquitous in Celtic and English folklore, were usually guides, enemies, or mysterious barriers along a child's path. Their morally ambiguous nature—nowhere angelic, sometimes wicked—enabled writers to discuss the nature of human action and ethical choice. This impact continued into the British fantasy authors of the following generation, including C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Written in the 20th century, their novels—*The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Hobbit*, respectively—take significant inspiration from British folklore, showcasing the enduring influence of Victorian exposure to folk culture. Tolkien's goblins and dragons, Lewis's magical portals and talking animals, all owe a debt of origin to the stories that Victorian authors compiled, retained, and rewritten.

Marina Warner correctly describes this symbiosis between literature and folklore by saying, "Fairy tales continue to survive because they are capable of infinite reinvention. They mirror the anxieties and hope of the cultures that tell them" (Warner 127). In Victorian times, the reinvention was both ideological and imaginative: it testified to Christian values, condemned social injustice, and was a celebration of the child's inner world. By tapping into folklore, Victorian fantasy authors gained entry into a collective cultural memory while at the same time testing the limits of narrative, morality, and imagination.

Conclusion

British folk tales and folk fairy stories have exerted a deep influence on children's literature, with rich story resources that combine magical beings, moral instructions, and imaginary exploits. The Victorian period, above all, was a period of radical change during which folk cultures emerged transmuted and reimagined, and spawned a wealth of literary creations that continue to fascinate readers today. With the fusion of folklore and Victorian imagination, writers filled these very old stories with new life so that they remained relevant and popular for generations of children's readers.

With the growth of children's literature, the presence of British folk tradition is always there, providing an eternal link to myth, magic, and morality that continues to

influence fantasy literature development. Therefore, the deep well of British folklore did not just inspire Victorian fantasy literature—it determined its form, themes, and moral ideology. Whether in the shape of dragons that test, fairies that direct, or tricksters that mystify, such folkloric material enabled Victorian writers to create significant narratives that have remained effective for their readers. This heritage is not merely visible in Victorian writing, but in the enduring fantasy conventions that arrived afterwards.

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