



Mid-19th-century 'Seated Fairy', by Thomas Heatherley



'Scene from Undine', c 1843, by Daniel Maclise



'Oberon and Titania', 1847, by Sir Joseph Noel Paton

SEX IN FAIRYLAND

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Nymphs and fairies exercised a peculiar fascination for the 19th-century painters whose work is now on show at the Brighton Museum. They are part of the first serious exhibition to explore the fairy world and its deep associations with human myth and dreams. HILARY SPURLING writes about the exhibition, which includes work by illustrators like Rackham and Dulac

Towards the end of the 18th century Henry Fuseli painted a night scene called 'Belinda's Awakening': it shows a lusty fairy lover stealing away at dawn from his human mistress who lies back, evidently exhausted, while Queen Mab and the moon goddess Diana squat in the shadows like a couple of elderly madams watching a satisfied customer depart.

Fertility and its attendant eroticism have traditionally been the fairies' business. The catalogue to the Brighton exhibition quotes an Elizabethan fairy called Little Pricke in 'The Maydes Metamorphosis':

'When I feele a girle asleepe
Underneath her frock I peepe
There to sport, and there I play
Then I byte her like a flea. . .'

Nearly two and a half centuries later much the same thing was still going on - so far as one can judge from the smug look of the tiny goblin in the petal hat, strategically

placed beside the luscious girl tambourine player in 'The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania' by that eminently respectable Victorian, Sir Joseph Noel Paton. When this painting was exhibited at the Scottish Academy in 1850 extra attendants had to be posted to control the crowds. Paton was a favourite with Queen Victoria, who made him Her Majesty's Limner for Scotland in 1865: by then he had moved on from fairies to colossal religious paintings which toured the country with footlights, a lecturer and huge subscription lists.

But 'The Reconciliation' and its companion piece, 'The Quarrel' (in which Lewis Carroll counted 165 fairies), were painted when Paton was still in his 20s and clearly fizzing over with physical excitement. Both paintings teem with grappling couples in all stages from rape to enthusiastic mutual experiment. Satyrs pounce, nymphs flee, every weed, pebble and tree stub



'Titania Flying', c 1866, by John Simmons

conceals its appreciative Peeping Tom. 'The Quarrel' has a diminutive maiden enticing a lizard between her thighs and two others massaging – or perhaps drowning – an old man in a puddle. Everywhere memories of Rubens and Ingres have been, as it were, rinsed in a thoroughly British boyishness: the airborne lady gymnasts, the water wrestlers, the tussling, toppling, somersaulting couples, the general air of healthy open-air enjoyment suggest not so much an orgy as a picnic-cum-sports-outing grown a trifle out of hand.

Paton had taken over the role of Britain's foremost fairy painter from Richard Dadd, who had run mad, murdered his father and been locked up for good in a lunatic asylum in 1843. The two strange, fierce, fairy masterpieces Dadd painted in Bedlam remained unknown to his contemporaries, who settled by and large for the kind of sweet dreams embodied in

Paton's two Titianas: pillowy fairy queens whose doll-like faces and pneumatic bodies have less in common with the classical nude than with the inert acquiescence of modern rubber blow-ups. Generally a pace or two behind these royal ladies stand the fairy lovers, an innocuous tribe again well represented by Paton's plump, girlish, white-skinned Oberons dressed in nothing but a see-through tunic or a pink silk scarf.

Other Victorian painters show male fairies as voyeurs in the shadows, absorbed like the person looking at the picture of a sleeping Titania. Often men are absent altogether, or so nearly androgynous that it is not always easy to tell an Iris from an Ariel: J. A. Fitzgerald's virginal 'Ariel' in the Walker Art Gallery, sheathed in a sort of flowery white wedding dress from the waist down, is a case in point. Nearly a hundred years after Fuseli's 'Belinda', John Simmons

Painted his wonderfully genteel 'Titania Flying', naked but plainly still a perfect lady in every detail from her billowing bridal veil to her daintily crooked little finger: there is no fairy lover in this painting unless you count the artful dodger seated on the outer petals of the pink rosebud placed in the foreground, where Fuseli put a pair of mating butterflies.

Fairy painting seems to have been an almost entirely British phenomenon, prompted initially by attempts to illustrate Shakespearian fairies and flourishing from the 1790s for something less than a century. Painters as different as Reynolds, Turner, Landseer and Millais tried their hands at it; others, like Paton and Daniel Maclise, made their names with fairies before moving on to higher things.

But a school at once so ingenuous and so uninhibited in its approach to dreams has not appealed greatly to posterity so far; and practitioners

like Simmons, Robert Huskisson, Thomas Heatherley and 'Fairy' Fitzgerald have remained, until this Brighton showing, exceedingly obscure.

Practically nothing is recorded about Fitzgerald except that Byron knew his father; he had an Irish brogue; and was a member of the Savage and the Langham Sketching Clubs. He specialised in dreams and dreamers – large, solid, modern-dress Victorians, not just the usual complement of Midsummer Night sleepers – and once actually painted himself asleep at the easel, dreaming of a fairy-queen-type sitter who would make him rich, and surrounded by the whiskery shrimp-like creatures with bulging eyes, forked beards and tapering limbs, who people nearly all his paintings. Not much more than a dozen of his oils are known to survive, and of these among the strangest is the 'Fairies in a Birds' Nest', which somehow produces the impression



'Midsummer Night's Dream', 1832, by Francis Danby



'Ariel', c 1860, by John Anster Fitzgerald

that almost any hedgerow, if you looked closely enough, might turn out to be crawling with leathery, fragile things, half insect, half embryo.

It seems as though Bosch must have been familiar to Fitzgerald, though what interested him was not so much suffering and self-laceration as the naturalist's matter-of-fact, if not exactly reassuring, view of the supernatural. His fairies' cruelties are straightforward enough, a matter of threatening to blind a bird or goad a cornered mouse with thorns. Other painters commonly show moths, butterflies and caterpillars being beaten or stabbed by more orthodox fairies. A frog is tortured, an owl hunted down and clubbed to death in Paton's two 'Dream' pictures. In Huskisson's glimmering, moonlit 'Midsummer Night's Fairies' in the Tate, a tiny knight defends himself against a spider, while a huge snail rolls forward like a tank towards a

group of fleeing fairy warriors, helpless as the human victim in Patricia Highsmith's story about the murderous giant snails.

Part of the appeal of fairy paintings was this minute, obsessive rendering of natural phenomena from bugs and beetles to daisy florets, grass-stem climbing poles and fleets of dry leaf boatlets: a passion for nature study being one of several traits shared with the Pre-Raphaelites, along with the dramatic lighting, jewelled colours and unmistakable staginess of so many fairy scenes. But if the erotic nature, ancestral malevolence and diminutive scale of traditional folklore fairies strengthened their attraction, there is also much to be said for these Victorian goblins, satyrs and creepy crawlies as so many phobias roaming free in the newly discovered and as yet virtually unexplored undergrowth of the subconscious.

Paintings like Simmons's dis-

creetly salacious Titania series or Heatherley's much more explicit 'Fairy Seated on a Mushroom', with its uncomfortable combination of fleshly and religious symbolism, went perhaps as far as it was possible to go without actually stubbing a toe on obstacles too prominent to miss even before Freud posted danger signals. Certainly, adult fairy paintings were early paralleled by and intertwined with the nursery tradition which eventually survived in a long line of 20th-century illustrations, ranging from the spectral delicacy, clarity and occasional insipidity of Arthur Rackham and Edmund Dulac to the downright degeneracy of Mabel Lucie Attwell.

The tradition of pink-and-silver tinsel fairies with wand and wings (the latter a comparatively recent technological innovation, replacing the ragwort stalks on which earlier fairies flew) is also lavishly represented at Brighton in a section on 19th-century ballet and theatre

spectacles. Flower fairies have a perfectly respectable lineage, going back at least to Shakespeare, though they don't seem to have materialised until the famous Cottingley photographs of 1917, taken by two small girls and widely publicised by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. But 1917 was also just about the time when a Somerset policeman ran into an older and more baleful phantom called Boneless on the Minehead-Bridgwater road: 'It were alive - kind of woolly like a cloud or a wet sheep - and it slid up and all over him on his bike, and was gone rolling and bowling and stretching out and in up the Perry Farm Road.'

Encounters of this kind with Boneless would nowadays be put down to science fiction; and one can't help feeling that, instead of dwindling away with Mabel Lucie Attwell's Boo Boos, the pioneering and otherwise comprehensive Brighton show might have ended with a sci-fi section surveying the whole field, back to Boneless and the Apparition recorded by John Aubrey near Cirencester in 1670: 'Being demanded, whether a good Spirit, or a bad? returned no answer, but disappeared with a curious Perfume and most melodious Twang. Mr W. Lilly believes it was a Farie.'

The 'Fairies' exhibition continues at Brighton Museum until 13 July. A catalogue (£3.75) is available at the exhibition and a hardback version, 'Fairies in Legend and the Arts', by Alison Packer, Stella Beddoe and Lianne Jarrett, has been published by Cameron & Tayleur/David & Charles (£8.95).

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Schoolgirls Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths (left) claimed to have photographed real fairies at Cottingley, Yorkshire in 1917. Right: a contemporary 'fairy' photograph faked by Dorothy Inman

