

Kevin Pask. *The Fairy Way of Writing: Shakespeare to Tolkien*.

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. viii + 178 pp. \$39.95. ISBN: 978-1-4214-0982-5.

In his new book, Kevin Pask rereads the British canon from Shakespeare to Tolkien through the lens of the “fairy way of writing.” The term is Jeremy Collier’s emendation (popularized by Joseph Addison) of John Dryden’s “Fairy kind of writing, which depends only upon the Force of Imagination” (quoted on 5). As a conceptualization, it can animate various forms that may or may not include actual fairies; however, it consistently draws from old tales, ballads, popular beliefs, and superstitions in order to engage the imagination with the supernatural and sometimes the sexual. Pask argues that by incorporating such oral materials, Shakespeare’s plays became a source for the creation of a national literature based on oral popular culture. “The aim of this book,” he writes, “is to restore the centrality that Addison assigned to the fairy way of writing in the English construction of a national literary canon” (2). *The Fairy Way of Writing* thus diverges from previous criticism, which diminishes the oral tradition and the sexual aspect of fantasy.

The book begins with two chapters on Shakespeare. The first, centered on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Winter’s Tale*, argues that Shakespeare uses folktale, fantasy, and Catholic practice to create theatrical magic that served as a hinge between medieval-Elizabethan popular superstition and the fairy way of writing. The second locates in *The Tempest*, and especially in Caliban, the seeds of the romantic period’s integration of sexuality, fantasy, and the creative imagination; the chapter also discusses how Jonson and other playwrights engage with Shakespeare.

The middle chapters center on developments in the eighteenth century. The third uses the fairy way of writing to chart the rise of the creative imagination and its linkage to fantasy. Superstitions and ballads, which were paradoxically in sync with empiricism because they were part of everyday reality, became “nationalized as the source of English literary preeminence” (68). Chapter 4 demonstrates how eighteenth-century painting, more so than the stage, responded to Shakespeare’s fairies, touching off modern conceptualizations of fantasy and the fantastic in various genres, including the gothic novel. There are fine discussions here of fairy sexuality in depictions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by Henry Fuseli, Sir Joshua Reynolds, George Romney, and Richard Dadd. Blake, in contrast, depicts the fairy realm in connection with imaginative vision and revolutionary nationalism.

The book’s final third, which opens with chapter 5’s discussion of the first generation of romantic poets, shows how Keats’s version of fairy sexuality is mediated through Spenser’s Bower of Bliss, the gothic novel, and Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*. In particular, *The Eve of St. Agnes* illustrates the convergence of folktale and the impact of Shakespearean tragedy. The author concludes that “Keats has effectively plundered the medieval romance in order to revise and

revivify its essential ingredients in a new poetic form, if one that remains recognizably indebted to the fairy way of writing” (121). After a discussion of Christian fantasy in C. S. Lewis, Pask emphasizes Tolkien’s hostility to Shakespearean theatrical magic and fairy paintings versus his emphasis in *The Lord of the Rings* on conveying historical material through old tales and songs. Tolkien draws the elves (not fairies) from European literature that predates the medieval romance.

Pask is an astute reader of Shakespeare, and his book is an excellent resource for an audience of undergraduates to professional scholars. Its brevity, however, means lost opportunities. There is no consideration of how Shakespeare’s exposure to folk material during his youth in Stratford might inform details in the plays. Nor does the author mention examples of the romantic quest poem other than “La Belle Dame” — those by Shelley and Yeats are not present. The marginalization of Spenser is a potentially more serious matter. Although *The Faerie Queene* includes little that deals directly with fairies, the poem significantly instantiates the fairy way of writing through the inclusion of Catholic practice, witchcraft, the imagination, and the national character. How, for example, does Merlin’s magic mirror, which “seemed a world of glas” (*FQ* 3.2.19), inform Galadriel’s mirror? As this missed parallel suggests, perhaps Spenser’s impact on the fairy way of writing is worthy of further study.

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