The Swan-Maiden in Late-Victorian Folkloristics

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Joseph Jacobs’ *European Folk and Fairy Tales* (1916) aimed to reconstruct “the original form of the fairy tales common to all Europe”. [[1]](#footnote-1) He compares his method to restoring “*Ur-*texts” from manuscripts.[[2]](#footnote-2) One of his most successful reconstructions was ‘The Swan Maidens’.[[3]](#footnote-3) A hunter encountered seven maidens all clad in feathered robes which they removed when bathing in a lake. Stealing the youngest maiden’s plumage he manages to keep her captive, marrying her and hiding her feathers so she cannot escape.[[4]](#footnote-4) After several years of marriage the swan maiden’s daughter is playing and finds the plumage, thus her mother escapes. The hunter goes on a quest to find the “Land East o’ the Sun and West o’ Moon”, eventually retrieving his errant wife. At the beginning of John Rhys’ *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx* (1901) a similar tale of the Lady of ILyny Fan Fach in Carmarthenshire, taken from William Rees of Tonn in 1841,[[5]](#footnote-5) acts as a departure point for Rhys’ discussions. In the tale a young lad encounters the lake maiden sitting on the water whilst grazing his widowed mother’s cattle.[[6]](#footnote-6) On subsequent visits he offers her bread, until eventually she agrees to marry him, providing a large dowry of farm animals, on the condition he must not strike her three times without a cause. Eventually after having children the husband strikes the wife for the third and final time. She immediately leaves home with her dowry of animals following her back into the lake.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, the lady gifts her sons with the knowledge to become ‘most skilful physicians in the country.’[[8]](#footnote-8) Similar tales of fairy-brides leaving their families, or subverting Victorian marital norms, run as a thematic arc through late nineteenth and early twentieth century folkloristics, fascinating male scholars. This article discusses some examples of this expansive and under considered topic.

Consideration of the swan-maiden tales are some of the most striking motifs in Edwin Sidney Hartland’s *The Science of Fairy Tales* (1891), and other folk-tale collections of the era. Carole Silver identifies that the fascination scholars held with swan-maidens coincides with 1880-1890s debates on women’s issues, such as property rights and divorce rights.[[9]](#footnote-9) The adult female fairy’s role in these stories acts as a metonymy for exploring the changing relationship of adult women towards the Victorian patriarchal model of the family. In this era “[a]ll aspects of women’s life – economic, political, social, educational, sexual- came under scrutiny, revealing deep-seated discontents and resentments on the one hand and male fears and prejudices on the other.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Nicola Bown highlights that fairies of the more whimsical type represent the “perfect epithet for that ideal of Victorian femininity”, of “delicate constitution, playful rather than earnest” and “diminutive” to men.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, the swan-maidens were perhaps so interesting for male folklorists as they represented a deviant type of female, away from this softer gender stereotype vocalising many late Victorian gender issues. The swan-maiden represented a “natural aristocrat, she lived by her own code, valuing courtesy, deference, and independence”, defying the normative rules regulating Victorian family life.[[12]](#footnote-12) Silver notes swan-maiden tales “as a genre, were dangerous” suggesting “the equality of women, thus overturning the prevailing hierarchy of gender.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Harte notes the folklorists were “profoundly concerned with the issues it raised about female independence”.[[14]](#footnote-14) The swan-maidens, like ‘New Women’, challenged established expectations of women and especially mothers.

Deviant female fairies in folk-tales are seen to present the wrong kind of femininity. Diane Purkiss notes that the fairy “seemed the epitome of frightening female sexuality, mostly in the context of Arthurian legend”.[[15]](#footnote-15) Silver similarly argues they “embody a fusion of the erotic, the parasitic, and the anarchic”, men’s fearful image of women that had gained power.[[16]](#footnote-16) Silver describes fairy brides as “the natural aristocrats” who “lived by their own code, outside the morality of men” and cared “little for the ordinary laws of marriage”, choosing “love and pleasure rather than monogamy”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Alfred Nutt in *The Holy Grail* (1888) draws a parallel between the Teutonic fairy mistress, wooed by the hero, who looks after his hearth and is “nothing loth” and the Celtic fairy mistress who lives in her own dominion and compels the Celtic Heroes such as Connla, Bran and Oisin to “leave this earth” in order to “re-join their lady love”.[[18]](#footnote-18) This fairy mistress is “no man’s slave”, refusing to abandon her “liberty or divine nature”.[[19]](#footnote-19) Nutt lists this type of “womanhood” as “capricious, independent, severed from ordinary domestic life”.[[20]](#footnote-20) They are also connected to the "*dame d'amour*" temptresses of “medieval romantic love”, who were “as a rule another man’s wife” yet raised in the heroes mind “no thought of home or child”.[[21]](#footnote-21) For Nutt these temptresses subverted normal womanly virtues, breaking down families and challenging domesticity. This kind of female power is seen as destructive and something to be feared. Like William Waterhouse’s painting *La Belle dame sans Merci* (1893) based on Keats’s poem of a knight falling in love with a fairy with “wild, wild eyes”, the swan-maiden fairy temptress is both titillating and frightening. As the ‘New Woman’ gained her freedom, going to work and cycling,[[22]](#footnote-22) the swan-maiden posed questions about the threat of women’s newly found independence.

The swan-maidens for male Victorian folklorists were curious, beautiful, represented a lost savage age, but also a debased female power. Silver argues that by depicting fairy brides as “etherealized beyond the realm of physical desire” or “depraved” folklorists attempted to bring folk accounts of female sexuality within the realm of Victorian comprehension”.[[23]](#footnote-23) The swan-maiden becomes a male fantasy figure, leading them in some cases to theoretical abandon. Hartland notes in Europe the swan was an emblem of “beauty and grace and purity” and the most important variants of the story have “naturally appropriated that majestic form to the heroine”.[[24]](#footnote-24) As the swan was beautiful, so was the fairy maiden whose form she took. Hartland also highlights the act of looking or spying upon these maidens. In a Swedish variant a man watches the “damsels of dazzling whiteness” who were “swimming in the waves”.[[25]](#footnote-25) Here the damsels are unconsciously watched, perhaps voyeuristically, by the man. Earlier Hartland had spent many pages tracing theme of Peeping Tom looking at Lady Godiva as “so obvious a corollary to the central thought of Lady Godiva's adventure”.[[26]](#footnote-26) This act of forbidden gaze, the taboo of seeing what one should not fascinates Hartland. This gazing reflects earlier Victorian theatrical fairies. Elizabeth Vetris, who played Oberon during the 1840s, was famous for her “erotic allure” and prints of her “emphasise that for the Victorians fairies were sex symbols.”[[27]](#footnote-27) During mid-19th century John Simmons also painted several “erotic” fairies.[[28]](#footnote-28) Fairies in the late Victorian era were still curiously sexualised adult women, an image very different from the diminutive flower fairy.

Swan-maidens also represented cultural remnants of a barbarous past, especially for anthropological folklorists. Many of these discussions seem inappropriate to modern readers, but were based on Edward Burnett Tylor’s concepts of cultural hierarchies.[[29]](#footnote-29) Hartland asserts that “among the more backward races” “the marriage bonds are of the loosest description” making the swan-maiden’s leaving her husband “nothing very remarkable”.[[30]](#footnote-30) For Hartland more savage societies, in terms of Tylorian evolutionary development, were matriarchal, it was only more developed societies that became patriarchal.[[31]](#footnote-31) Swan-maiden stories, such as the Marquis of the Sun, where the father’s supreme position is recognised, represented a later stage in cultural development.[[32]](#footnote-32) Likewise, the Victorian monogamous patriarchal marriage was considered a “triumph of cultural order over natural chaos”, a cornerstone of a civilised society.[[33]](#footnote-33) Hartland also proposes that the stories where the couple do not re-unite are more primitive. Due to “loose” marriage bonds amongst ‘savages’ the wife’s excuse for leaving was often “simpler” or even an “arbitrary exercise of will.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Stories where women left their husband’s due to a taboo of being struck with iron is “representative of the stone age”.[[35]](#footnote-35) Hartland describes how the lady of Van Pool had “relics of old-fashioned wifely duty” in that she did not “object to the chastisement which the laws of Wales allowed a husband to bestow”. A man could beat his wife three times before having to pay a *sarâd*, or fine. Hartland notes that the *sarâd* “would not satisfy this proud lady; nothing less than a divorce would meet the case.”[[36]](#footnote-36) In another story a Partridge’s wife is “exacting” when “declined to be struck at all”.[[37]](#footnote-37) Wife beating and marital cruelty were particularly pertinent issues, featuring in debates surrounding the Maintenance of Wives acts of 1878 and 1886.[[38]](#footnote-38) Harte, notes that out of the numerous instances where the swan-maiden leaves after being beaten, chastised or struck Hartland “fails to draw what might seem an obvious conclusion.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Hartland’s conclusions implicate his disturbing objection to divorce even in instance of violence. Silver notes that whilst folklorists’ opinions on divorce were implicit; “free and easy separation was associated with primitive societies and savage eras”.[[40]](#footnote-40) Hartland held very traditional views and considered that anthropology was “not a subject for women” and disapproved of women attending his lecturers or becoming doctors.[[41]](#footnote-41) Hartland would have felt keenly that the independent swan-maiden was a challenge to Victorian models of marriage.

The desertion of children in swan-maiden tales raised even more “ticklish questions”.[[42]](#footnote-42) Silver notes that it was almost “inconceivable” and “abnormal” to the Victorians that even a fairy woman could “sacrifice a child to her own search for self-satisfaction”.[[43]](#footnote-43) Folklorists were keen to stress that the swan-maiden had not abandoned her children. Hartland stressed the fairy of Van Pool, mother of the Physicians of the Myddvai, “was drawn back to earth by the care of her three sons, who, by means of her instructions, became celebrated physicians.”[[44]](#footnote-44) She remains cast in the maternal role, somewhat neutralising the dangerous anti-maternal precedent set by her leaving home. Hartland in another tale, highlights a “mother's visits to her children” are a “tie which compels her to return”.[[45]](#footnote-45) Even the “Nightmare type” of fairy who slips through key holes and leaves her husband for the trivial reason that he reproached her for telling their children that her homeland was Engelland is maternal.[[46]](#footnote-46) Hartland points out that “she could not quite forsake her husband and little ones”, on Saturday she secretly laid out clean clothes and every night took the “baby out of the cradle”.[[47]](#footnote-47) The Caernarvonshire fairies are also “recalled by maternal love to the scenes of their wedded life”.[[48]](#footnote-48) They chant “pathetically” at the window:

“If my son should feel it cold,

Let him wear his father’s coat;

If the fair one feel the cold,

Let her wear my petticoat.” [[49]](#footnote-49)

Silver notes Hartland believed in an “era of matrilineality”,[[50]](#footnote-50) that mothers would simply abandon their children for independence could not easily fit into the model of even a ‘savage’ matriarchal culture. Leavy argues the swan-maiden stories are “*about* the freedom from cultural necessity as well as about the requirement that such necessity eventually prevail.”[[51]](#footnote-51) She argues that the swan-maidens tale in some ways captures the plight of subjugated woman, acting to question prevailing assumptions. The swan-maiden for folklorist was arguably the non-human reflection of the more liberated new woman. But ultimately Silver argues that folklorists rendered the fairy bride acceptable by “diminishing the claims to superiority”, “neutralizing her sexuality” and “limiting, denying or refusing to discuss her right to divorce”.[[52]](#footnote-52) The swan-maiden ultimately remains bound by her biological maternal feelings to remain a nurturing and caring mother.

The swan-maiden reflects questions surrounding late-Victorian marriage and aspects of the independent ‘New Woman’. Women riding bicycles round London, studying at university and leaving the family home to work, were like the swan-maidens willing to spurn marital and domestic responsibilities by leaving the home. Women who did not fit into the category of “Victorian lady”, a devoted wife and mother, could be cast as a threatening supernatural “Other” as a result.[[53]](#footnote-53) Wakefield underlines the important underlying tension in “folk-lore naming”. Calling a woman a “fairy” or a “witch” is far from “innocuous”, it is a “linguistic displacement” revealing underling British anxieties of “the lines between “us” and “them,” the class, racial and national Others, especially women.”[[54]](#footnote-54) She argues that folklore could be “directed at females as a means of dealing with contemporary fears.”[[55]](#footnote-55) The folklorist naming the swan-maidens, might fashion this female Other as “imaginary and dangerously unpredictable: an elusive, desirable, dream-world inhabitant.”[[56]](#footnote-56) The swan-maiden during the 1880-1890s seemed a pertinent model for examining women’s changing role. However, from 1909 the votes for women campaign intensified into violence.[[57]](#footnote-57) These women did not characterise the “frailty, passivity, submissiveness, silence, and desexualized affection” of the Victorian image of female nature.[[58]](#footnote-58) By the early 20th century the independent fairy-maidens of tales seemed less fascinating when real women were working in munitions factories or as nurses in WW1 and holding certain positions of power outside the domestic environment. The role of women vastly shifted and the fairy, as her reflection, demonstrates this fluctuating position. The swan-maiden no longer fascinated folk-tale scholarship. Fairies continued their diminution, becoming increasingly child-like and less powerful.

1. J. Jacobs, *European Folk and Fairy Tales* (New York, 1916), p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jacobs, *European Folk,* p. vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jacobs, *European Folk,* pp. 98-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jacobs, *European Folk,* pp. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. W. Rees of Tonn, ‘Legend of Llyn-Van-Vach or the Origin of the Meddygon Myddfai’, J. Pughe (trans.) J. Williams (ed.) *The Physicians of Myddvai* (London, 1861), pp. xxi-xxx. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J. Rhŷs, *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx,* Vol. 1. (Oxford, 1901), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rhŷs, *Celtic Folklore,* Vol. 1, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rhŷs, *Celtic Folklore,* Vol. 1, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. C.G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford, 1999), p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. J.F.C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain 1875-1901* (London, 1991), p. 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. N. Bown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p.90. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. J. Harte, *Explore Fairy Traditions* (Marlborough, 2004), p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. D. Purkiss, *Fairies and Fairy Stories: A History* (Stroud, 2007), p. 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. C.G. Silver, ‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon’: Victorians and Fairy Brides’, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 6 (1987), 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Nutt, *Holy Grail,* p. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Nutt, *Holy Grail,* p. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nutt, *Holy Grail,* p. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Nutt, *Holy Grail,* p. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain,* p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. E.S. Hartland, *The Science of Fairy Tales: an Inquiry into Fairy Mythology* (London, 1891), p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. C. Wood, *Fairies in Victorian Art* (Woodbridge, 2001), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Wood, *Victorian Art,* p.128. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture,* 2 vols. (London, 1903). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 320. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, pp. 290-291. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Harte, *Explore Fairy Traditions*, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p.104. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. M.A. Murray, *My First Hundred Years* (London, 1963), pp. 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 325; Jacobs also gives her a maternal role stressing that she was a “local divinity”, who in the story returns as “a Guardian Spirit to her descendants”, a “supernatural ancestress, who taught them their craft”. J. Jacobs, (ed.) *Celtic Fairy Tales* (London, 1892), p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Hartland, *Fairy Tales*, p. 327; Rhŷs includes a similar example in *Celtic Folklore* of the fairy Belenë who leaves her husband after he strikes her with iron but is drawn by “the feelings of a mother” to come to the window and chant the same verse. Rhŷs, *Celtic Folklore,* Vol. 1, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. B. F. Leavy, *In Search of the Swan Maiden*: *A Narrative on Folklore and Gender* (New York, 1994), p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Silver, *Secret Peoples*, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. S. R. Wakefield, *Folklore in British Literature: Naming and Narrating in Women's Fiction, 1750-1880* (New York, 2006), p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Wakefield, *Folklore in British Literature,* p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Wakefield, *Folklore in British Literature,* p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Wakefield, *Folklore in British Literature,* p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain,* p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain,* p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)