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‘Vagary wild and mental aberration styled’;¹ liminality in the fantasmatic spaces of Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1862) and Richard Dadd’s *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke* (1864)

Through a comparison of this painting and poem, I will examine how the motif of the public forum functions as a liminal space within the fantastic setting. Engaging with structuralist critics such as Tsvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson, I will conclude that the effect of this motif on the narrative mirrors the effect which the fantasy genre itself has on the wider literary or artistic experience, thereby enacting a microcosmic experience of the fantastic mode. Within the fairy forum, action is stimulated by situating multiple races within a local space. The liminal space of the fantastic forum therefore becomes a veritable ‘world between worlds’ in which desire is explored and, paradoxically, rationalized. Through interrogating the relationship that these works have with the themes of psychoanalysis and sexual desire, I will conclude my argument with the assertion that writers and authors of Victorian Britain used fantasy as a means of exploring the unconscious through an engagement with supernatural forms.

Within the cavernous space of the Tate Britain’s renowned 1840 room hangs Richard Dadd’s (1817-1886) unobtrusive and dimly-lit masterpiece. Recognized as being an important contribution to Victorian art, *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke* (1864) nonetheless sits somewhat incongruously next to more popular contemporary paintings such as the *Ophelia* (1851-1852) and *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (1885-1886).² In contrast to the light and formulaic paintings that surround it, Dadd’s creation is convoluted and chaotic, a hotchpotch of fantastic shapes that appear and disappear through the great, spidery strands of grass that sheath the fairy world from our view. But there is a place for this work within the Victorian tradition. In the same way that *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke* is most representative of Dadd’s career, so too can *Goblin Market* (1862) be identified as Christina Rossetti’s (1839-1894) foremost work for its technique, narrative genius, and popularity. Rossetti is perhaps best known for her proximity to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which formed around the charismatic founding figure of her brother, Dante Gabriel (1828-1882). However, she stands as one of the great writers of the Victorian era in her own right,

¹ Richard Dadd, ‘Elimination of a Picture and its Subject – called The Feller’s Master-Stroke’ in *Richard Dadd: The Artist and the Asylum*, by Nicholas Tromans (London, Tate Publishing, 2011), pp. 186-193 (p. 193).

² *Ophelia* (1851-1852) by John Everett Millais and *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (1885-1886) by John Singer Sargent.

named as the greatest pre-twentieth century female poet by Sir Roy Strong.³ In *Goblin Market*, Rossetti's tale of sisterly love, the poet explores the significant contemporary themes of female sexuality and morality. But it is the setting of the poem, the titular goblin market, that is the focus of this essay. Through a juxtaposition of this painting and this poem, a coherent argument for the function of the motif of the public forum within the fantastic landscape emerges.

The fairy kingdom is a place of danger and delight, of commerce and community, of the familiar and the strange, and it functions as a liminal space within the already uncertain boundaries of fantasy. Before engaging with the painting and poem directly, we must establish what is meant, first, by fantasy and, second, by the liminal space. In his seminal study of the fantasy genre (1973), Tzvetan Todorov explains that the fantastic is underpinned by a deep-rooted uncertainty within the viewer or the reader as to whether the inferences of the supernatural are harmonious or discordant with reality and that this 'ambiguity is sustained to the very end of the adventure: reality or dream? truth or illusion?'⁴ Subsequent methodological enquiry into the nature of the fantasy genre has built on this original study and augmented aspects of Todorov's initial enquiry, most notably by Rosemary Jackson in her study *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (1981). Central to Jackson's line of research is that fantasy is a product of the social environs in which it is constructed. Taking a psychoanalytical approach, she rightly exposes how and in what ways fantasy articulates desire. She writes that 'in expressing desire, fantasy can operate in two ways (according to the different meanings of 'express'): it can *tell of*, manifest or show desire [...] or it can *expel* desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity'.⁵ It can therefore be said that fantasy is an embodiment of desire (conscious and unconscious, individual and communal), which is articulated through a landscape of uncertainty and ambiguity. This leads to the assertion that a precept of the fantastic is that it inhabits, or indeed *is* or creates, a liminal space. Farah Mendelsohn examines this phenomenon thus:

In the liminal fantasy we are given to understand, through cues to the familiar, that this is our world. When the fantastic appears, it *should* be intrusive, disruptive of expectation; instead, while the events themselves might be noteworthy and/or disruptive, their magical origins barely raise an eyebrow. We are disorientated.⁶

The motif of the public forum within fairyland performs the same function on a microcosmic scale. As a gathering place, it is within and outside the bounds of the familiar. It exists as a part of the community, being the place where goods are bought and sold and ideas are traded, but it also provides a rare opportunity for the alien

³ Roy Strong, *The Arts in Britain* (London, Pimlico, 2000), p. 500.

⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 25.

⁵ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York, Routledge, 1986), pp. 3-4.

⁶ Farah Mendelsohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. xxiii.

to advance into the ordinarily closed and regulated environs of the everyday. In his mock-Victorian fairy tale *Stardust* (1999), Neil Gaiman describes the fairy marketplace at the fictional English town of Wall: ‘for every nine years, the folk from Beyond the Wall and over the hill set up their stalls, and for a day and a night the meadow played host to the Faerie Market; and there was, for one day and one night in nine years, commerce between the nations.’⁷ This excerpt serves to highlight the essential quality of the fairy marketplace as a convergence of two discrete societies through the erection of a temporary place of commerce. This is truly the most liminal of all fantastic spaces, existing as it does at the boundary between fantasy and the real world. Nicholas Tromans, in his recent study on Dadd (2011), indicates that even after the inklings of a modern multifacetedness began to creep into the genre as early as 1840, the essence of fairyland ‘remained that of a world within a world’.⁸ Within this space, the unexpected is all that can be anticipated, for the rules of engagement are automatically subverted given that the characters inhabiting the space of fairyland do not operate according to a common culture. Moreover, and perhaps more ostensibly, the essential supernatural aspect of the landscape is disorientating: is this ‘reality or dream? truth or illusion?’.

Helpfully, Gaiman recalls to us the most important rule when dealing with the inhabitants of fairyland, writing that the villagers of Wall in the real England ‘were often tempted by the foods being sold by the folk from Beyond the Wall but had been told by their grandparents, who had got it from their grandparents, that it was deeply, utterly wrong to eat fairy food, to eat fairy fruit, to drink fairy water and sip fairy wine.’⁹ This is the essential rule of Rossetti’s poem also. Speaking to her sister Laura, Lizzie admonishes her for staying out so late, recounting to her the story of a neighbourhood friend:

Do you not remember Jeanie,
How she met them in the moonlight,
Took their gifts both choice and many,
Ate their fruits and wore their flowers
Plucked from bowers
Where summer ripens at all hours?
But ever in the noonlight
She pined and pined away;
Sought them by night and day,
Found them no more but dwindled and grew grey;
Then fell with the first snow,
While to this day no grass will grow

⁷ Neil Gaiman, *Stardust* (Croydon, Headline, 1999), p. 13.

⁸ Tromans, p. 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Where she lies low:
 I planted daisies there a year ago
 That never blow.¹⁰

This cautionary tale is characterized by marked oddities. The action takes place at night, when Jeanie had congregated with the goblins ‘in the moonlight’, as opposed to in the day when most marketplaces are held. From the outset, the ‘space’ in which the story functions does not correspond with our expectations of the familiar and we are immediately thrust into a fantasy landscape by becoming aware that the rules of normal behavior have broken down. The fantasy proceeds. Unlike normal fruits which are healthy and vitalizing to eat, the fruits of the goblin market are deadly, causing Jeanie to pine away and die. Lastly, we are notified in no uncertain terms of the peculiarity of this phenomenon by the fact that the daisies planted over Jeanie’s grave do not blow as normal daisies do. Within the metanarrative, the events surrounding Jeanie’s death are therefore markedly unnatural, yet situated in a landscape familiar to the protagonists, for Jeanie was a member of their community: ‘do you not remember Jeanie’?, Lizzie asks. In conjunction with the moral discourses that are at the heart of *Goblin Market*, Rossetti’s poem is essentially the most human of all stories, of life and death, which is only made fantastic by the interruption of the supernatural. Therefore, Rossetti’s poem illustrates the tenets of fantasy set out by Todorov, Jackson and Mendelsohn by envisaging a familiar scenario that is made unfamiliar through the subversion of natural laws and customs.

The Fairy Feller depicts a public scene. It could be a marketplace, though there is no ostensible sign of any commercial activity. The creatures of fairyland are attired for a day out, Oberon and Titania are in their finery, and at the top of the painting, there is an indication of some agrarian activity. One fairy-man operates a wheeled machine and another appears to be working with some hay. The location of these groups within the painting is not indicative of any kind of hierarchy: rather, there is a cacophony of diverse socio-economic backgrounds and races who inhabit the same space in a seemingly random fashion. It is neither an elite society nor a parochial one, but rather evokes a vision of the whole of fairyland brought together for a public event or activity. In this work, the ‘queues to the familiar’ are wholly constructed through form, rather than through allusion, like the device of Jeanie’s story in *Goblin Market*. Both the shape of the natural objects and the design of the fairy clothes are familiar, common to our world and theirs, and most of the faces which peek out at us are human, their expressions more so. However, through the scale of the world before us as well as the minutiae of the painting, we are made aware that this world is a supernatural one. In the same way that the lingering, solitary image of the unmoving daisies points us towards the fantasy of Rossetti’s landscape, the enormous, larger than life daisy heads of Dadd’s painting alert us to the fact that this is an unnatural image. On closer inspection, we perceive how the unnatural elements of the painting

¹⁰ Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market* (London, Penguin Books, 2015), p. 6.

proliferate across the canvas: a cricket plays the trumpet, a host of faeries dance across the brim of the old man at the centre of the painting, before whom a family of squat faced faeries cluster, and all about the painting flutter gossamer wings. It is truly a fantastic painting, yet the forms are rooted in natural imagery. Because of the realistic garments and the familiar natural elements, we can assuredly state that this painting is fantastic, as opposed to marvellous, uncanny, or abstract. It is a fantasy world because it envisages the liminal space between the natural and the unnatural in the same way that Rossetti's fantasy world is evoked through literary description of the supernatural aspects of the goblin market. Dadd's binary vision, called 'the sublime and the sexual, the natural and the fantastic' by Tromans,¹¹ foments a feeling of deep unease in the viewer that serves to evidence that central quality of fantasy as identified by the likes of Todorov and Mendelsohn.

As evidenced, the effect of the fantasy world on the viewer or reader is principally to cause uncertainty. This tends towards wonder (the positive experience) or towards anxiety (the negative), according to the function of the fantasy. Both in Dadd's painting and Rossetti's poem, the representation of the fairy world imparts a profound sense of danger on the observer through the evocation of a chaos state. One critic comments on Dadd's painting that it 'is certainly filled with all the frozen terror of his own patricidal insanity'.¹² Indeed, it is a claustrophobic painting, furthered by the sheaths of grass and random spirals across the top left quarter of the painting that serve to create a sense of tension. We cannot be sure that what we are seeing is really the full picture, because the full picture is obscured from us. This speaks to the artist's insanity: *The Fairy Feller* is a schizophrenic rendition of an unreal world, in which forms are half remembered but embellished upon through the imagination. Dadd's infamous descent into madness, which led to the murder of his father and his subsequent confinement to Broadmoor, has coloured criticism of his artwork. In contrast, whilst biographers have made attempts to explain Christina Rossetti's sudden decline in health during 1845, the evidence that she also suffered from a mental illness is less concrete than in the case of Dadd, and the poet's ailments were certainly never as acute nor as violent. However, we can read that same madness and claustrophobia in Rossetti's poem. The danger of fairyland is most acute at the zenith of the poem's action, when Lizzie returns to the market in a last attempt to save her sister:

Laughed every goblin
 When they spied her peeping:
 Came towards her hobbling,
 Flying, running, leaping,
 Puffing and blowing,

¹¹ Tromans, p. 34.

¹² Peter Fuller, 'Fine Arts' in *Victorian Britain: the Cambridge Cultural History*, ed. By Boris Ford (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1992) pp. 162-207 (p. 167).

Chuckling, clapping, crowing,
 Clucking and gobbling,
 Mopping and mowing,
 Full of airs and graces,
 Pulling wry faces,
 Demure grimaces,
 Cat-like and rat-like,
 Ratel- and wombat-like,
 Snail-paced in a hurry,
 Parrot-voiced and whistler,
 Helter skelter, hurry skurry,
 Chattering like magpies,
 Fluttering like pigeons,
 Gliding like fishes, -
 Hugged her and kissed her,
 Squeezed and caressed her¹³

So the stanza continues as a breathless, unbreaking sentence filled with a relentless tide of imagery of the strange goblin folk, appropriately identified by Kathleen Jones as ‘a metrical helter skelter sweeping its ambiguous subject matter headlong from page to page’.¹⁴ As well as being replete with swathes of vibrant visual imagery, the poem is noisy and full of movement. The effect is overwhelming, the sights and sounds of the fairy world overpower and overwhelm the page in the same way that they do in Dadd’s painting. It is discomfiting, and both Rossetti’s poem and Dadd’s painting impress a sense of danger on the reader and viewer respectively. But in that strange sublime there is a seductiveness to the landscape. For Rossetti’s fruits are more delectable and Dadd’s vegetation more lush than that of our own world. Uncertainty abounds.

If desire is the tenet which drives the design and the plot of the fantastic, articulated through the liminal space, for what purpose would the motif of the fairy forum recur? It follows that as a repeated motif, the desire that constitutes its construction within the Victorian tradition and the wider fantasy genre, as we have seen in Gaiman, is a communal one. Jackson comments on the way that ‘fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems.’¹⁵ Within the context of *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke* and *Goblin Market*, this statement is certainly true. The fairy forum is an opportunity for the fantasy world to engage fully with our own. It is a moment in time which allows for the coming together of people of disparate backgrounds, by which a

¹³ Rossetti, pp. 12-13.

¹⁴ Kathleen Jones, *Learning Not to be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti* (Gloucestershire, the Windrush Press, 1991) p. 92.

¹⁵ Jackson, p. 3.

liminal space is created in which action can take place at an accelerated rate. So, the function is foremostly one of artistic convenience. The fairy forum allows for action by virtue of it's being a setting full of characters who are not limited by real world social constraints or natural laws.

The employment of the fairy forum is also, as Jackson alludes to, an opportunity for these authors to engage with notions of lawfulness and order.¹⁶ The violent, salacious imagery that concludes Lizzie's visit to the goblin marketplace is a particularly poignant reckoning of the dangers of an 'other world' that is unregulated:

They trod and hustled her,
Elbowed and jostled her,
Clawed with their nails,
Barking, mewling, hissing, mocking,
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,
Twitched her hair out by the roots,
Stamped upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat.¹⁷

The entrance of the Other is markedly dangerous in Rossetti's poem. In the same way that the story of Jeanie is instructive, so too is the tone of the poem as a whole didactic. The message of Dadd's painting is not so clear. Nicholas Tromans attempts to write meaning into the painting by suggesting that the premature postulation of the Fairy Feller himself, who has as of yet not split the seed that will become Mab's carriage, is emblematic of a repressed or unconsummated action.¹⁸ Mab, who will carry dreams through human memory, is representative of imagination. But without her carriage that power of creativity is castrated. If *Goblin Market* is a warning against wanton female sexuality, perhaps *The Fairy Feller* is Dadd's lament against disbarred creativity. The closeted nature of the painting, the tightness of the composition, the madness that emerges from the wildness, combines to afford the painting a sense of confinement that is perhaps in direct response to Dadd's own incarceration.

In sum, whilst the pictures of fairyland created by Rossetti and Dadd are harmonious in their architecture, the desires that drive the fantasies are pronouncedly opposite. In form they replicate the tension and abstraction of one another, but in theme they diverge. This returns us to Jackson's assertion that fantasy is a product of the social environs in which it is made manifest. Like the larger fantastical framework, the liminal space of fairyland allows for the exploration and exposition of all manner of ideologies, by virtue of its being on the fringes of belief. The impossible scenarios of

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Rossetti, p. 15.

¹⁸ Tromans, pp. 146-147.

a fantasy world, which are the product of its supernatural furnishings, allow for us to reflect on our own humanity in the same way that Lizzie and Laura do upon the story of poor Jeanie. In this manner, Dadd the madman and the spinster Rossetti have influenced generations through the prism of their fairy worlds.

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Figure 1. Richard Dadd, *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke*, oil paint on canvas, 1855-1864, support: 540 x 394 mm; frame: 670 x 525 x 65 mm, Tate Britain.