

FROM ELPHAME TO OTHERWHERE: Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Kingdoms of Elfin* *Helen Sutherland*

There are two striking features about traditional fairy tales. The first is how rarely fairies actually appear in them, and the second is the ubiquity of happy endings, and W.H. Auden embodies both these points in his definition of a fairy tale: a fairy tale, he says, is a 'serious tale with a human hero and a happy ending'¹. In his seminal essay, 'On Fairy-Stories', J.R.R. Tolkien gives a more detailed description of fairy tales but he, too, focuses on happy endings, for he claims that fairy tales are characterised by recovery (the regaining of clear sight by means of a defamiliarisation process activated by the tale), escape (which he sees in positive terms) and consolation, arguing that 'all complete fairy stories must have the consolation of a happy ending' which he calls 'eucatastrophe'². 'The eucatastrophic tale', he argues, 'is the true form of the fairy-tale, and its highest function'³ and he suggests it is characterised by joy.

These definitions throw into relief the radical quality of Sylvia Townsend Warner's fairy tales, originally published in the *New Yorker* and collected together in *Kingdoms of Elfin* (Chatto & Windus, 1977), for her heroes aren't human and her endings aren't happy (at least not in the conventional sense). In contrast to traditional tales, peopled as they are with woodcutters' sons, kings' daughters and worthy princes, she really did write fairy tales: tales, that is, which have fairies or elves at their centre and are set in one of the various worlds of

faery, which are coterminous with parts of our world.

Nevertheless, Tolkien does shed some light on Warner's construction of faery, for elsewhere in that essay he argues that the story-teller's role is that of the sub-creator of a secondary world, within which all that is related is true because it accords with the laws of that world.⁴ This is of course true of all successful works of literature, including realist novels, but is taken to its furthest extent in works of fantasy where the author is not subservient to observed fact, but is free to make a world unlike the Primary world in which we live, provided only that that world plays to its own rules and obeys its own logic.

One of Warner's most important strategies in creating such Secondary worlds is the specificity of location, which stands in stark contrast to the formulaic 'once upon a time in a land far away' of traditional fairy tales. Elfhame, the location of the linked stories, 'The One and the Other' and 'The Five Black Swans', as well as 'The Occupation', is not just in Scotland, but specifically in the Ettrick Valley in the Scottish Borders. The other Scottish kingdoms are the Court of Rings (the setting for 'The Late Sir Glamie'), which is found in Galloway, and Foxcastle, the setting of the story of the same name, which is located in Peebleshire. Brocéliande, the setting for 'The Revolt at Brocéliande', 'The Mortal Milk' and 'Beliard', is located in Brittany; Zuy (the background to 'Elpheanor and Weasel' and 'The Search for an Ancestress' is to be found in the Low Countries; Wirre Gedanken, the setting for 'The Blameless Triangle' is in Austria, while Schloss Dreiviertelstein, the location of 'The Power of Cookery' is even more precisely located in Styria in Austria, while Castle Ash Grove, the setting of 'Visitors to a Castle', Catmere, the location of 'The Climate of Exile' and Pomace, the setting for 'Castor and Pollux' are located in Wales, Northumberland and Hertfordshire respectively.

The kingdoms are given some 'national characteristics' which mark them off from each other. 'The Elfin court of Zuy in the Low Countries', we learn, 'was wealthy and orderly' and in comparison to the unique cultural heritage of Brocéliande could be seen as nothing other than a 'gilded

grocery shop'⁵. Brocéliande itself was the 'foremost elfin court in all western Europe, the proudest and most elegant...It had preserved the pure tradition of ancient Persia where the elfin race had originated...and a belief in a supernatural world'⁶. The national characteristics granted to the elfin kingdoms are similar to those of the actual countries in our Primary world, with Holland, for example, being noted as a trading nation since the sixteenth century at least, and France priding itself on its place as European cultural leader, and so we are led into accepting the existence of the elfin courts as easily and as unquestioningly as we accept the reality of Holland and France themselves.

Warner's second strategy in creating convincing Secondary worlds is to provide touchstones of familiarity, such as structures of authority, social practices or historical personages, which we can recognise from our Primary world experience. The kingdoms of elfin, for example, are governed by a monarchy supported by an aristocracy and based at court – a very familiar structure of authority in 'this' world. Even where the Secondary world differs in detail from our Primary world experience, it can still be related to it. Keeping a Royal Pack of Werewolves, for example, is impossible in our Primary world (and is unique in werewolf literature), but it is sufficiently close to the idea of keeping a pack of hounds under the care of a Master of Hounds, to be familiar to us and induce belief in this particular Secondary world⁷. Likewise, when Tiphaine, queen of Elfhame is dying we are told that Elfhame inverts Salic law, with Salic law⁸, if not its inversion, having historical reality in the Primary world.

Historical and cultural events, trends and personages are pressed into service too. The dying Tiphaine drifts back in memory to her meeting and subsequent affair with Thomas of Ercildoune⁹, better known as True Thomas or Thomas the Rhymer (1220-1297), and Warner is here picking up on a Scottish legend from an area geographically close to her Elfhame, to lend verisimilitude to her tale of elves. Other examples of Primary world history can be found throughout the pages of *Kingdoms of Elfin*: Wace, referred to in 'The Revolt at Brocéliande', was a Norman-French poet of the

mid-twelfth century¹⁰; Hadrian's Wall was built between the North Sea and the Solway Firth¹¹ - a point which arises in 'The Climate of Exile'; and the reference in 'The Occupation' to 'Master Thomas Boston, Minister of Ettrick'¹² is to the Scottish theologian of that name who lived from 1676-1732 and was minister at Ettrick from 1707.

While all these references help give the elfin worlds a convincing solidity, two of them, both occurring in 'The Occupation', are particularly intriguing. The first of these is a quotation from *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* by Robert Kirk (?1641-1692), a minister at Aberfoyle in central Scotland¹³. This is an actual historical document, written by Kirk as a sort of natural history of Scottish fairies, and it is used by Warner's fictive minister to identify the curious happenings in his house as an occupation by elves. Fact and fiction interact to create an entirely convincing Secondary world.

This story also carries a reference to 'Jamie Hogg the shepherd'¹⁴. James Hogg (1770-1835) was a shepherd and poet known to the reading public as 'The Ettrick Shepherd' and to his contemporaries in the Ettrick Valley as 'Jamie the Poeter'. Now recognised as a sophisticated writer associated with the long-running Tory periodical, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Hogg claimed that his 'kingdom was that of the mountain and the fairy', which he believed was a higher kingdom than his friend Walter Scott's realm of romanticised ballads and tales of chivalry.

What is intriguing here is the extent and sources of Warner's knowledge of Hogg, for in the early 1970s when she was writing the elfin stories for the *New Yorker*, Hogg was only beginning to receive serious critical attention, although there had been interest sparked by the 1947¹⁵ edition of his *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, introduced and extolled by André Gide. Warner's reference to a kelpie called the brownie of Bodsbeck¹⁶ suggests an awareness of Hogg's early novel of that name, but it is also possible that she simply picked up on local legend and the knowledge of Hogg as a famous local man during childhood holidays in Ettrick. However, as it seems unlikely that Warner

could rely on widespread knowledge of Hogg (regardless of the extent of her own knowledge) these references are perhaps best seen as a species of self-amusement or play which nevertheless adds richness to the broth for those who were aware of this writer.

There are other points of similarity between the kingdoms of elfin and our world. Social distinctions, for example, are jealously guarded in Elfindom, with the aristocracy being marked out from the servant class by their relative infertility and by their unwillingness to fly, and although this detail does not apply to our Primary world, the mechanisms for creating and maintaining social distinctions are all too familiar. Like the paperless office, the classless society has frequently been promised but has failed to materialise.

The effectiveness of these two strategies in creating Secondary worlds with what Tolkien calls the 'inner consistency of reality'¹⁷ is underpinned by the accumulation of circumstantial detail, which is related to Warner's linguistically precise style. In the Elfin stories, however, the accumulation of detail performs the additional function of convincing us that what is described has been seen and therefore exists. The list of dishes cooked by Ludla in 'The Power of Cookery' is a case in point:

'Nowhere else was stuffed goose such a fulfilling experience, eel soup so exhilarating, haunches of venison of such a texture, substantial yet yielding, game pies so autumnally fragrant, dumplings in such variety of modest perfection, apple strudel so beguiling, though whether Ludla's brandied plums in marzipan jackets did or did not surpass her apple strudel was a pious debate.'¹⁸

We are here a long way from the notion that fairies live off flowers and morning dew, but we can believe in the fairy kitchen that produced the goose, the venison and the game pies in a way that we cannot believe in fairies who are nourished by the occasional nibble of rose petal and sip of rainwater.

The type of detail is important, too, for it is not about fairy wings or esoteric elfin lore, but is mundane in nature, being concerned with what fairies eat and drink, how they live their

lives and what they look like. Warner rejects, for example, the miniaturization so often associated with fairies, explaining instead that they are 'about four-fifths of ordinary human stature, fly or don't fly according to their station in life, and after a span of centuries die like other people – except that as they do not believe in immortality they die unperturbed'¹⁹. Sometimes the mundane detail is edged with the unexpected: when the master of the Royal Pack of Werewolves informs his cousin that all the werewolves are dying, for example, the immediate response is not sympathy or interest but a bet on the survival of old Duke Billy²⁰ which is immediately accepted, as to do otherwise would be ill-mannered. The fairy race, it seems, includes betting in its court etiquette. So again we have the familiar and the strange coalescing in a detail which helps construct a convincing fairy world.

As a result of these strategies Warner creates faery lands with 'the inner consistency of reality', which engage us intellectually and emotionally: we are interested in what goes on and care about what happens. Their familiar components give us a foothold in these realms, without which the fantasy would edge towards the merely bizarre where meaning can be lost. In Warner's construction of faery, however, the familiar opens up into the fantastic and is made strange to us, forcing us to look back at what is familiar in our Primary world: the effect is like that of suddenly seeing an intimately known landscape in a mirror where the strangeness of the vision makes us turn back from reflection to landscape once more. We see it afresh in the process that Tolkien called 'recovery'. This process changes the nature of our vision from the passive acceptance of a familiar sight to an active probing of the familiar-made-strange and constitutes a major justification of the fantastic either as a genre or more widely as a mode of imagination: it re-engages us with our own world from a slightly different perspective. Fantasy is not escapism, then, but a way of viewing our world and a means of exploring or articulating ideas, themes or conflicts.

The first of the ideas Warner explores through the faery world in *Kingdoms of Elfin* is the notion of exile, whether self-imposed as a form of escape, as in 'The Blameless

'Triangle' or enforced as in 'The Climate of Exile'. Both these stories seem, however, to explore the idea of exile as a process of the strange, the unknown, gradually becoming familiar. In 'The Blameless Triangle' the life they originally rejected is reclaimed by two of the elves, while the third elf, Ludo, converts the place of exile to home, explaining to his host, Mustapha, that there 'for the first time in [his] life [he] has lived without fearing and scheming'²¹. This suggests a feeling of secure acceptance which Mustapha at least regards as friendship, so we could perhaps argue that home is not so much a place but, for this elf anyway, a place of emotional reciprocity. However, twitching the carpet from beneath her readers' feet being part of Warner's stock-in-trade as a writer, she immediately qualifies this by using the lack of prejudice in Ludo's biography of Mustapha to suggest a lack of emotional engagement, which retrospectively undermines his criticisms of the other elves' 'heartless excitement' prompted by their imminent return to their 'dear Homeland'²², made possible by the death of their queen.

Although 'The Climate of Exile' deals with exile as punishment, not escape, in both stories the place of exile is indeterminate, for as one elf suggests, 'Not to know where they were going was a positive advantage. One cannot be brought back from the indeterminate'²³. In 'The Climate of Exile' the exiles are drugged in their homeland to keep them oblivious of their destination, making the shock of the unknown almost unbearable for the exile on awakening: '"Where am I"?' asked Snipe. "Here", replied the attendant'²⁴. Warner thus creates a tautological definition of place which defies determinacy and as 'one cannot be brought back from the indeterminate' a sense of exile as irrevocable is enforced.

The story outlines the process by which the unknown becomes familiar, or as Warner explains with her usual dry crispness, 'By the morning the unbearable was twelve hours advanced toward becoming the accustomed'²⁵. In this bleak story, the country of exile and home change places, for 'as the years of his sentence ran on, listening to the wind and the baaing of sheep, being punctual at meals, [Snipe] knew the final intimidation of exile: he was afraid to go home'²⁶. Afraid to go

home, rootless where he lives, Snipe endures a radical form of exile from which there is no escape.

Changelings, of course, represent a special case of exile, for theirs is an exile from mortal to fairy worlds, involving some necessary physical adaptations to new conditions, such as the 'seven weasels ceremonies' described in 'The One and the Other'. On growing old, however, they are cast out of the fairy world, so that what should be a return home becomes a heartlessly imposed exile. Tiffany, for example, was ritualistically handed a 'lock of grizzled wool, a large pair of spectacles, and a miniature pair of crutches' before being 'led to the door in the hillside and put out, to make the rest of his way through the mortal world'²⁷ while James Sutherland is cast off in a double sense, for the queen of Foxcastle draws a ball of wool and needles from her knitting bag:

"Attend," she said. "This concerns you. I cast on seven stitches. Two plain, two purl, two plain, one purl. And reverse. One plain, two purl, two plain, two purl. And reverse. Two plain, two purl, two plain..." She knitted slowly and firmly. Already he saw the rib emerging. "And one purl. And break off." She bit through the thread. A squadron of flying fairies swooped down seized hold of him, bore him up and away. He was shoved and squeezed through a twisting crevice into the outer world.'²⁸

Cast on, cast off, James Sutherland's thread of life with the fairies is broken off by this ritual which is emphasised by the patterning and repetition of language and by Warner's short sentences, and his re-emergence into mortal life is as an old man who has forgotten even his native speech. What should be a return is in effect an exile, the completeness of which is sealed by irony, for it is a man of words, a professor of Rhetoric who is thus bereft of language, and who must therefore remain forever an outsider. Loss of language cuts off the very possibility of society.

Warner, it seems, is interested not just in the notion of exile, but in the heartlessness the fairies display in imposing exile. Picking up on Primary world fairy lore, she suggests that an elfin is a 'soulless being between Heaven and Hell and of no interest to either'²⁹, and because elfins are soulless they have

no conscience, no awareness of obligation and no possibility of regret. According to Warner, they rarely love ...'un amour de convenance is more their line'³⁰ but when placed in relation to mortals their lovelessness can be used as a means of exploring human love. In 'Winged Creatures', for example, the changeling Gobelet is kept in thrall, not by magic spells, but by his love for the elfin, Grive, whose indifference to him changes nothing so when Grive is pecked to death by seagulls, Gobelet's life seems to lose meaning and direction - a loss made manifest in the image of gold thrown into dirty water: 'The onlookers saw the old man who had stood a stranger among them pull something bright from his pocket, drop it into the dirty clucking water, and turn weeping away'.³¹

The soullessness of fairies accounts for Warner's interest in relating them to manifestations of orthodox religion. In 'The One and the Other', for example, the elfin baby left in exchange for the mortal taken by the fairies is baptised by the minister, albeit ineffectually; Elpheanor and Weasel in the story of that name, make their winter home in a church and the fairies in exile in 'A Blameless Triangle' live in a chapel until forced out not by a priest's act of exorcism, but by his decomposing body after his death at the hands of one of the elves. Similar juxtapositions are found in 'The Climate of Exile' for Sir Bodach is exiled for his heresy of believing he has an immortal soul, while Sir Glamie in 'The Late Sir Glamie' is that impossible thing, a fairy ghost; the half mortal, half elfin brothers, Castor and Pollox in the story of that title, become bishops, and 'The Occupation' is an occupation of a manse by fairies whose attention to the Sunday sermon is greater and more palpable than that of the human congregation.

Warner's interest in the conjunction of the soulless and the spiritual reflects her awareness of a spiritual dimension to life, coupled with her rejection of, not to say disdain for, orthodox, organised religion. It is this which grounds the morality of her writing, described by Warner herself as 'shining out like a bad fish in a dark larder'³². William Maxwell countered this by replying, 'The thing is you are moral but not didactic; you call the shots and add up the score but never say how things ought to be, so I am not sure you can

be said to have a moral purpose at all. You have a moral *tone*³³. A moral purpose, it might be argued, lays one open to the charge of hypocrisy since the person with the purpose must believe that he or she is a fit and proper person to direct the morality of others and such self-assumed superiority is a dubious claim. A moral tone, however, - and especially such a tart moral tone which kills any tendency to sentimentalise - suggests the assumption of moral values which are shared but not imposed.'

Clearly Warner saw these stories as a new departure, for in a letter to David Garnett she wrote, 'I would like to send you specimens of how I am writing now - a new vein which has possessed me during the past year...they are factual about the unreal. I grew tired of the human heart'³⁴. Yet the themes she explores in these elfin tales - exile, heartlessness, love and spirituality - are those which figure throughout her fiction. *The True Heart*, for example, is not just a reworking of the Cupid and Psyche legend, but a story of the unloved finding love, despite social and class barriers; *Mr Fortune's Maggot* explores different forms of spirituality and types of love; 'A Love Match' is a story of broken taboos in which sibling love gives way to a fully consummated sexual love. As David Garnett had remarked in a letter to Warner many years before, 'really the subject you treat best and know about is love.'³⁵

Such shared concerns weave these late fantasy stories into Warner's *oeuvre* and suggest that she is not so much doing something new, as doing in a new way something she had done throughout her life as a writer. At the same time the sense in all these stories of raising alternative possibilities ties them to the fairy tale tradition, for as the critic Marina Warner argues, 'the marvels and prodigies...all the wonders that create the atmosphere of fairy tale disrupt the apprehensible world in order to open spaces for dreaming alternatives'³⁶.

1 W.H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords*. Selected by Edward Mendelson. London: Faber and Faber, 1973 p.201.

2 J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', *Tree and Leaf* (1964) London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975, p.68.

3 *Ibid.*, p.68.

- 4 Ibid., p.41.
- 5 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'The Search for an Ancestress', *Kingdoms of Elfin* London: Chatto and Windus, 1977, p.138.
- 6 Warner, 'Revolt at Brocéliande', *ibid.*, pp.56-7.
- 7 Warner, 'The Mortal Milk', *ibid.*, p.67.
- 8 Warner, 'The Five Black Swans', *ibid.*, p.17.
- 9 Warner, *ibid.*, p.19.
- 10 Warner, 'The Revolt at Brocéliande', *ibid.*, p.56.
- 11 Warner, 'The Climate of Exile', *ibid.*, p.152.
- 12 Warner, 'The Occupation', *ibid.*, p.199.
- 13 Warner, *ibid.*, p.203-204.
- 14 Warner, *ibid.*, p.194.
- 15 Textually this was derived from the 1924 edition based on the first edition, rather than later bowlderised versions.
- 16 Warner, 'The Occupation', *ibid.*, p.194.
- 17 Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', p.49.
- 18 Warner, 'The Power of Cookery', *Kingdoms of Elfin*, p.103.
- 19 Warner, 'The Mortal Milk' *ibid.*, p.66.
- 20 Warner, *ibid.*, p.68.
- 21 Warner, 'The Blameless Triangle', *ibid.*, p.55.
- 22 Warner, *ibid.*, p.54.
- 23 Warner, *ibid.*, p.40.
- 24 Warner, 'The Climate of Exile', *ibid.*, p.153.
- 25 Warner, *ibid.*, p.154.
- 26 Warner, *ibid.*, p.168.
- 27 Warner, 'The One and the Other', *ibid.*, pp.9-10.
- 28 Warner, 'Foxcastle', *ibid.*, pp.220-221.
- 29 Warner, 'The One and the Other', *ibid.*, pp.2-3.
- 30 Warner to Garnett, 31st May 1977, *Sylvia and David. The Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters* (ed. Richard Garnett). London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994, p.229.
- 31 Warner, 'Winged Creatures', *Kingdoms of Elfin*, p.137.
- 32 Warner to Maxwell 16th September 1962, *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell 1938-1978* (ed. Michael Steinman) Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 2001, p.121.
- 33 Maxwell to Warner, 2nd October 1962, *ibid.*, p.121.
- 34 Warner to Garnett 1st February 1974, *Sylvia and David* p.189.
- 35 Garnett to Warner, 27th November 1955, *ibid.*, p.57.
- 36 Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde. On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*. London: Vintage, 1995, Introduction, p.x.



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